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UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

GENDER, PASSAGE CONTENT AND TEXT TYPES IN READING COMPREHENSION AMONG ESL LEARNERS

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MASTER OF ARTS
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GENDER, PASSAGE CONTENT AND TEXT TYPES IN READING COMPREHENSION AMONG ESL LEARNERS

By

FUNG PAU LING

Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies Universiti Putra Malaysia in Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts

AUGUST 2008

DEDICATION

To my beloved father, mother
and
my siblings

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Masters of Arts

GENDER, PASSAGE CONTENT AND TEXT TYPE IN READING COMPREHENSION AMONG ESL LEARNERS

By

FUNG PAU LING

November 2007

Chairman: Associate Professor Shameem Rafik-Galea, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

This study examined the comprehension performance among ESL learners. The aim was to examine whether gender, passage content and text types affect reading comprehension of upper secondary school students in Malaysia. The study also investigated gender differences of students' reading habits. Their favourite reading topics, reading materials and reading comprehension performances (in terms of passage content and text types) were also explored in relation to gender. The samples comprised 162 Upper Six students. Four reading passages of different contents and text types – female-oriented narrative text, male-oriented narrative text, female-expository narrative text and male-expository text, were used. They completed reading comprehension tasks (written recall tasks and multiple-choice questions) after reading each of the passages. Both reading comprehension tasks were analyzed to investigate if there were gender differences in reading comprehension performance with respect to passage content and text types. The written recall tasks were also

analyzed in order to seek if there were gender differences in terms of quantity of ideas and types of ideas recalled. The respondents were also asked to complete a questionnaire.

The study revealed gender differences in reading habits, favourite reading topics and reading comprehension scores, especially in the written recall tasks. The Chi-square statistics found that reading topics were gender-oriented, whereby certain topics preferred by males and certain topics were mostly chosen by females. Furthermore, there were significant differences in reading comprehension test scores in all the reading passages except for the male-oriented narrative text. There were also significant differences in reading comprehension performance in relation to passage content. However, there was no significant difference in reading comprehension scores in text types.

The findings of this study suggested that educators need to select reading materials that are appropriate to both gender groups in terms of passage content to enhance their students' reading comprehension performance. In addition, the reading comprehension passages used to evaluate students' reading skills should be of different contents to avoid gender bias. The types of reading materials chose by the respondents also revealed that they prefer reading authentic materials. Therefore, educators should use authentic materials in the teaching and learning process in classrooms.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

JANTINA, KANDUNGAN PETIKAN DAN JENIS TEKS DALAM KEFAHAMAN MEMBACA DI ANTARA PELAJAR-PELAJAR BELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA

By

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Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menyelidik tentang pencapaian kefahaman membaca di antara pelajar-pelajar yang belajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Tujuan kajian ini adalah meneliti sama ada jantina, kandungan petikan dan jenis teks mempengaruhi kefahaman membaca para pelajar menengah atas di Malaysia. Kajian ini juga menyelidik sama ada sikap membaca di kalangan pelajar berbeza dari segi jantina. Kesukaan kandugan petikan, jenis bahan bacaan dan pencapaian kefahaman membaca juga dikaji dari aspek jantina. Para responden yang terlibat di dalam kajian ini adalah terdiri daripada 162 pelajar Tingkatan Enam Atas. Empat petikan digunakan dalam kajian ini. Mereka dikehendaki melakukan *written recall task* dan menjawab soalan aneka pilihan setelah membaca setiap empat petikan. Keempat-empat petikan adalah berbeza dari segi kandungan dan jenis texts – *female-oriented narrative text, male-oriented narrative text, female-expository narrative text and male-expository text*.

Written recall task dan soalan aneka pilihan dianalisa untuk menyelidik sama ada kefahaman membaca dipengaruhi oleh kandungan petikan dan jenis teks. *Written recall task* juga di analisa untuk menentukan sama ada quantiti dan jenis idea yang ditulis oleh pelajar adalah berbeza dari segi jantina. Akhirnya, para responden juga dikehendaki menjawab satu soal-selidik.

Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan terdapat perbezaan dari aspek jantian dalam sikap membaca, kesukaan tajuk bacaan dan markah kefahaman membaca, terutamanya dalam *written recall tasks*. Chi-square Statistik juga menunjukkan perbezaan dari segi pemilihan tajuk bacaan yang diminati oleh jantina yang berbeza. Di samping itu, didapati bahawa terdapat perbezaan pencapaian kefahaman membaca dalam semua petikan, kecuali *male-oriented narrative*. Perbezaan markah juga didapati dalam kandungan petikan yang berbeza. Walau bagaimanapun, didapati tiada perbezaan yang ketara dalam pencapaian kefahaman membaca dari segi jenis teks.

Dapatan kajian ini mencadangkan agar para pendidik memilih bahan bacaan yang sesuai untuk kedua-dua jantina dari segi kandungan petikan dan jenis teks untuk mencapai kefahaman bacaan yang maksimum. Kandungan petikan yang digunakan untuk ujian / peperiksaan mestilah sesuai untuk kedua-dua jantina. Para pendidik juga boleh menggunakan bahan autentik dalam proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran berdasarkan dapatan kajian ini.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 08 August 2008 to conduct the final examination of Fung Pau Ling on her thesis entitled "Gender, Passage Content and Text Type among ESL Learners" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitutuion of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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Date: 15 January 2009

DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or at any other institutions.

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FUNG PAU LING

Date: 14 November 2008

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation		Page
1	ERAS (The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey)	42
2	IEA (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement)	37
3	MASTIC (Malaysian Science and Technology Information Centre)	8
4	MUET (Malaysian University English Test)	5
5	NILAM (Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca)	2
6	NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress)	57
7	PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment)	37
8	PMR (Penilaian Menengah Rendah)	5
9	SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia)	5
10	TAL (Test of Academic Lexicon)	46
11	TOEFL (Teaching of English to Foreign Learners)	36

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a discussion of the background to the study, problem statement, research objectives, research questions, purpose statement, significancet of the study and the definitions of key terms. It sets the parameters for the findings by stating the scope and limitations of the study.

1.1 Background of the study

Reading is not a habit amongof most Malaysians. Based on a National Literacy Survey carried out in 1996 by the National Library of Malaysia, Malaysians read only two books a year (Reading Profiles of Malaysians 1996, 1998). . Besides, iIt was further also reported that the proportion of Malaysians who can read well in the English language is relatively low compared to reading in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, and other vernacular languages such as MandarinChinese and Tamil. Hence, reading in the English language (second language) is less not a favourable among choice for most Malaysians.

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The prominence of the English language cannot be sidelined in this era of globalization and information technology. It is the language of global communication. English as a second language has been taught in all primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. It is a compulsory subject in the curricula. However, the English language is seen as a difficult subject by

most Malaysian students. Pandian (2000) reported that 80.1% out of 674 university students and 76.2% out of 975 Form Four students in Malaysian public ~~government~~ school~~s~~ ~~students~~ were reluctant to read materials in English. He points out that Malaysian students read in order to complete academic tasks but not for knowledge or pleasure. In addition, Lee (2004) laments that students do not use ~~have been using~~ the English language for the purpose of daily ~~not to~~ communicatio~~ne in their daily activities~~ but for the purpose of ~~to take their~~ examinations. Due to a lack of interest in reading among Malaysian students, the government has tried to overcome this problem by instituting several measures. For example, NILAM (Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca) or the Sapphire programme for both the primary and secondary levels was introduced in 1998 in order to inculcate good reading habits among~~in the~~ primary and secondary school students; and the literature components for the secondary level were introduced in 2000, with the hope of promoting the reading skill among students. ~~As~~ Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) point out ~~that~~ that reading volume is an independent variable that would determine the acquisition of vocabulary and knowledge of an individual. ~~"reading volume is a very powerful predictor of vocabulary and knowledge differences… it is actually a potentially separable, independent source of cognitive differences."~~ Since reading is part of academic literacy, students are expected to possess an ability to cope with the demands of reading in English particularly now with ~~due to~~ the demands of

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globalization and developments in ~~exposure to~~ the information age ~~environment~~.

Reading, a complex cognitive process, is one of the essential four skills in language acquisition. It is not a passive activity, which is merely decoding printed materials or deriving meanings from written text. Its process is complicated as it involves cognition, and many other factors interact to facilitate or impede the comprehension of texts. Numerous research has been done to study and describe the reading process, especially involving reading comprehension because "without reading comprehension, there would be no reading" (Rubin, 1993, p.194).

RAND Reading Study Group (2002) lists three elements involved in reading, which are the reader, the text and the activity of reading. According to Alderson (2000), it has been a common practice for researchers who study factors affecting reading to divide the variables into two important groups, ~~which are~~ reader variables and text variables. In the nineteen century, it was believed that meaning resided in texts and readers played a passive role in extracting meaning from texts. However, this traditional view changed to that of an interactive view in the late 1970s which places more emphasis on readers as active participants who derive and construct meaning from texts based on their background knowledge. Hence, a text might be interpreted differently by different readers as they have dissimilar experiences and

background knowledge because meaning does not reside in the different components of language (Spiro, 1980). Leahey and Harries (1993) suggest that the term "interactionist" could be used when different individuals construct and interpret different meanings from the same stimulus. It is through interaction between reader and text that meanings are made. RAND Reading Study Group (2002) listed knowledge and experiences as other factors that can be categorized as background knowledge of readers.

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Schema theory has been used extensively to describe the relationship between background knowledge of the readers and reading comprehension. One fundamental assumption of schema theory is that a text does not carry meaning but it provides directions for readers to retrieve stored knowledge in their long term memory to construct meaning (Adams and Collins, 1979). Prior knowledge, background knowledge and schemata are often used interchangeably in second language research (Carrell, 1985, Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). According to Kalai (2004), prior knowledge and background knowledge are "… parent terms for many more specific knowledge dimensions such as conceptual knowledge and metacognitive knowledge, subject matter knowledge, content knowledge, strategy knowledge, personal knowledge and self-knowledge are all specialized forms of prior knowledge or background knowledge" (p. 24). Alderson (2000) contends that background knowledge includes content, subject matter, world knowledge and cultural knowledge. Researchers such as Baldwin et

al. (1985), Leahey and Harries (1993), and Sasaki (2000) strongly support the notion ~~strongly~~ that prior knowledge had a significant effect on reading comprehension. This is because prior knowledge serves as a frame which enables interpretation of meaning. Chandler (1995) suggests that prior knowledge, which is stored in the form of schemata would "lead us so strongly to see only what we expect to see (or what we feel we ought to be seeing) that we do not see what is actually there" (p.15). He also stresses that gender is a key factor to determine how texts are interpreted. ~~Furthermore,~~ B~~b~~oth males and females have different attitudes towards reading in terms of reading habits and reading interest (McKenna and Kear, 1990; McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth, 1995; Maynard, 2002). Therefore, 'reader' is an important nonlinguistic factor which could affect ~~the~~ reading comprehension performance.

The importance of reading is reflected in reading comprehension tested in all ~~the~~ public examinations in Malaysia. A study on public examination papers in Malaysia from 2005 to 2007 was carried out by the author. The analysis showed that in the secondary three examination, Penilaian Menengah Rendah (P~~R~~MR), the students were tested with two reading passages written in discourse structures such as narrative and expository. Similarly, all the Form five students were tested on reading comprehension in the Secondary Five exit examination, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). The students are required to complete 10 questions which consist of limited structured

response and open response items before writing a summary of a reading passage. Likewise, the weightage given to reading comprehension in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is 45% of the total marks. Therefore, reading comprehension is a crucial test component to assess the language proficiency and understanding of students in Malaysian schools and ~~higher~~ institutions of higher learning.