

The Relationships between ‘The San Diego Quick Reading Assessment’ and Students’ Perception on Second Language Reading Ability

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ABSTRACT: *Reading is a key for success in any learning process. This exploratory study was carried out in order to investigate student’s ability in second language reading by using a special assessment called the San Diego Quick Reading Assessment. The assessment was used to measure student’s ability in uttering and understanding the meaning of the words. At the same time, the objective of the research is also to investigate student’s perception on their reading ability. Therefore, the correlation or relationships of both instruments were used to get the findings. Overall findings show that the students did not score good grades in the assessment and similarly, they perceived that they did not have second language reading ability. The findings are important to be relied on for the future reading intervention programs to teachers, parents and educational bodies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The value of education, in general, is associated with the experiences of the child, the importance of education in the home environment and the relevance to the child’s personal development related to reading. Children often inherit values presented to them in their environment. If reading is neither considered a valuable asset, nor has any connection with the child’s world, it may not be a priority for the child.

This study involves a group of primary school students who regard English as their second language and English is also a major subject taught in Malaysian schools. Students learn English language more or less about eleven years before entering tertiary level. The purpose of the study is to determine whether students’ perception on their reading ability is in line or not with the result of an established reading assessment called ‘The San Diego Quick Reading Assessment’ (SDQRA). By knowing this result, the researcher hopes that it will enable the teachers and school managers to plan for remedial programs to improve and enhance their student’s second language reading ability.

The study is aimed to investigate the correlation between an established test called ‘The San Diego Quick Reading Assessment’ (SDQRA) and students’ perception on their English language reading ability. At the same time, the researcher would also want to know the contributing factors of students’ perception if the correlation shows similarity trends or findings.

The SDQRA is an internationally recognized reading assessment instrument, first introduced by La Pray and Ross in 1969. It is a standard word list and has been extensively used in assessing students’ reading levels (Gunderson, 1991). The words are grouped from the Pre-primer level to the 11th level. This set of words was typed on individual five-by-seven cards for use with the students as suggested by the inventor. The assessment provided the following criteria to check the performance of the students: independent level (99% or higher accuracy), instructional level (95-98% accuracy), and frustration level (90-94% accuracy). The main purpose of this assessment is to investigate the current status of student’s reading ability.

All of the students who answered the questionnaires were involved in the assessment which was carried out individually. Students were asked to pronounce the words from the lowest level to the highest level, and they were asked to stop pronouncing the words if they committed three errors in pronunciation. The assessment was recorded in ‘level form’ and overall average was taken to represent district and state performances.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading in a second language is not a monolingual event; second language readers have access to their first language as they read and many use it as a strategy to help comprehend a second language text. Developing literacy in a second language follows the same principles as the development of literacy in a first language (Young & Hadaway, 2006).

A student learning to read and write in English as a Second Language (ESL) needs to be introduced to literacy in a meaningful way, to make the link between oral languages and print as naturally as possible, and to be given the opportunity to enjoy reading and writing (Fitzgerald & Graves, 2004). However, two additional factors may play a significant role in the development of reading or literacy in a second language: age and level

of native language literacy. Age makes a difference in how literacy develops whereby older students, particularly those who are able to think logically about abstract notions (ages 11-15) are better prepared to focus on the form of language analytically, and as such, are better able to benefit from explanations of language rules and tasks that promote reading and writing simply for the sake of reading and writing. Moreover, Carlisle, & Rice, (2002) stressed that younger students who are unable to benefit from such instruction may actually be turned off by literacy and may develop negative attitudes toward reading and writing resulting in bad reading or literacy habits.

Native language also makes a difference in the way second language literacy develops (Baghban, 1989). Despite the similarities between reading in the first language and reading in the second language, a number of complex variables make the process of the first language different from second language. He added that whether reading in a first or second language, one can assume that both native and non-native readers will understand more of a text when they are familiar with content, formal, and linguistic schema. He further added that a second language reader, however, who does not possess such knowledge can experience schema interference, or lack of comprehension.

Students who are already literate in their first language are able to transfer many of the skills they have attained through native language reading to the second language (August and Shanahan, 2006). They may not need to be led through the initial stages of literacy in which the awareness of the connection between oral language and print emerges; they would have already achieved this awareness in their native language and would transfer those skills, along with many others, to learning to read in the second language. August and Shanahan believed that with non-literate students, however, even for those who are older, literacy must be allowed to emerge in the natural stages. Thus, with the exception of older literate students, teaching reading and writing in a second language must be based on the same principles that underlie the development of literacy in young children.

Most children in literate societies are involved in pre-reading activities very early in their lives (Kim, 2000). They are surrounded by print; they observe their siblings, parents and caregivers reading, they are involved in interactive language games and they are given educational toys that emphasize early literacy development. These experiences prepare children for the point at which reading-related development crosses over from the knowledge of the parts to achieving a functional knowledge of the principles of the culture's writing system and details of its orthography (Snow et al., 1998).

This is the point at which 'real reading' begins, when children read unfamiliar texts without help, relying on print and drawing meaning from it (Reyhan, 2002). However, there is no precise age at which all children are ready to make this transition since "the capacity to learn to read and write is guided by the child's individual developmental timetable" (Proctor, 2005).

Recent research has shown that, for second language learners, phonological awareness in the native language predicts successful literacy acquisition in both first language and second language (August & Hakuta, 1997; Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Gottardo, 2002; Quiroga, Lemos-Britton, Mostafapour, Abbott, & Berninger, 2001). In other words, phonological awareness skills developed in first language transfer to second language and facilitate second language literacy development. In addition, phonological awareness skills are known to develop in a predictable pattern, which is the same from one language to another (i.e., from larger to smaller units of sound - from word to syllable to onset-rime to phoneme). Phonological awareness skills developed in one language can transfer to another language, even while those skills are still in the process of being developed (Cisero & Royer, 1995).

Gottardo explored this connection between native language phonological skills and second language reading in a 2002 study with 92 Spanish-speaking first graders. She found that the strongest predictors of English word reading ability were first language and second language phonological processing, first language reading, and second language vocabulary (Gottardo, 2002).

The ability of phonological awareness skills to transfer from one language to another presents advantages that are readily apparent; however, transfer can also bring disadvantages. Sometimes second language learners inappropriately generalize their first language's rules of syntax, spelling, phonology, or pragmatics to their second language. This tendency commonly referred to as negative transfer, or interference, can have an adverse effect on second language literacy acquisition (Bialystok, 2002; Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001; Francis, 1998).

On the question of overall literacy instruction, there is not enough evidence to recommend definitively instruction should be confined to either the first language or second language (Pandian, 2003). Nevertheless, Slavin and Cheung (2004) believed in the strong link between first language phonological awareness and second language reading success, and suggested that efforts to develop literacy skills in first language will translate into facility with second language literacy development and children will benefit from native language scaffolding as they learn to read in a second language.

Schools or teachers can play an important role in encouraging families of students with low English proficiency (LEP) to provide first language literacy experiences at home. Many English language learners come from homes or cultures where literacy activities such as storybook reading are not common practice (Meier, 2003; Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio & Manlove, 2002). Parents may not know that literacy experiences in the child's first language will contribute to literacy development in English. There is also an unfortunate literacy situation in homes with low literacy-families often cannot find or afford children's books in their language.

III. METHODOLOGY

1820 primary school students were involved in this research. They were gathered from seven districts of Terengganu, Malaysia, namely Kemaman, Dungun, Marang, Kuala Terengganu, Hulu Terengganu, Setiu and Besut. The locality was well-known for a slow developed side of Malaysia where English language was treated as a second or foreign language. On the first meeting, the students were asked to sit for the test and on the next day they were asked to answer a questionnaire.

The test was to measure their reading ability and to know the reading level of the students, while the questionnaire was to gather important information pertaining to their perception on second language reading. All of them were eleven-year-old school students who came from good classes, meaning that they were regarded brilliant group of primary school students based on academic performance. The reason in choosing the groups was because to ensure that the data would be valid and reliable.

IV. FINDINGS

The results of the San Diego Quick Reading (SDQR) assessment

In order to know the reading culture among the students, the researcher investigated the current status of English reading ability among primary school students. Therefore, the San Diego Quick Reading Assessment (SDQRA) and the questionnaire were used to investigate the reading levels of the 1820 students. The SDQR has been extensively and internationally used in assessing students' reading levels. It consists of a standard word list; the words are grouped in ascending grades from the Pre-primer Level to the 11th Level.

To reiterate, the Pre-primer is the lowest grade and students at this level show tremendous weakness in pronouncing the listed words; this is followed by the Primer, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4, Level 5, Level 6, Level 7, Level 8, Level 9, Level 10 and Level 11. Level 11 is regarded as the highest grade indicating a superior level of reading. The assessment provided the following criteria to check the performance of the students: independent level (99% or higher accuracy), instructional level (95-98% accuracy), and frustration level (90-94% accuracy).

Basically, this classic and well-established assessment is conducted by asking the students to pronounce the words correctly. Their performance allowed grading of their reading ability. The lowest grade is called 'Pre-premier' which means that the students are having the highest degree of reading problem and Level 11 is the highest grade which refers to the best grade, that is, they are not having any reading problem. The students can be divided to 'Weak Category (Frustration Level)' if they score from 'Pre-premier' to Level 4, 'Average Category (Instructional Level)' if they score Level 5 to Level 8 and 'Good Category (Independent Level)' ranging from Level 9 to Level 11.

All students were asked to start reading from the 'Pre-premier' card and they were given three opportunities to pronounce a specific word correctly; if they could not pronounce the word, they were asked to stop reading and the grade of the card read were considered the students' grade in SDQR. The summary of the SDQR results of each district and state are shown in table below.

The overall result of the San Diego Quick Reading Assessment (SDQRA) assessment shows that Kemaman had the highest mean, 7.02; while Setiu had the lowest mean, 4.70 based on the assessment tool. After Kemaman, the second highest mean was secured by Kuala Terengganu followed by Marang (5.82). The mean scores of Dungun (5.69) and Besut (5.66) were almost similar. The State mean found was 5.76, that is, the average performance of all 1820 students was at Level 5.76. This score at 5.76 has to be considered as a low-average level which is even less than that of the frustration level. In other words, more than half of the students were having trouble in reading.

Invariably, a majority of the students from almost all of the districts were in the 'Weak Category' except Kemaman which had quite a number in the 'Good Category'. Likewise, Kemaman scored the best average results in SDQR. Most students are bunched together at Level 4, which is considered as the 'Weak Category' or 'Frustration Level'. In a nutshell, this finding signals that a majority of the students were averagely poor in reading. Table 1 below shows the findings.

Table 1: the Level of Category Scored in SDQRA according to Districts

Districts	Category (%)		
	Weak	Average	Good
Kemaman	31.84	32.88	35.51
Dungun	58.77	15.51	25.71
Marang	46.53	33.46	20.00
Hulu Trg	50.61	32.65	16.73
Setiu	67.75	18.77	13.46
Besut	60.81	14.28	24.83
K Trg	47.71	21.42	30.85

Students' Perceptions on their Second Language Reading Ability

After taking the test, the same groups of students were asked to answer a questionnaire which was used to investigate their perception on their own reading ability. Teachers were assigned to guide the students so that the validity of the findings would be unquestionable. Teachers read the questions one by one but a vast freedom to the students to choose their own answers. The distribution of students is as follows:

Table 2: Distribution of students by districts

Districts	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Kuala Terengganu	350	19.2	19.2
Setiu	245	13.5	32.7
Hulu Terengganu	245	13.5	46.2
Dungun	245	13.5	59.6
Kemaman	245	13.5	73.1
Besut	245	13.5	86.5
Marang	245	13.5	100
Total	1820	100	

Based on Table 2, the sample of 1820 students came from Setiu, Hulu Terengganu, Dungun, Kemaman, Besut, Kuala Terengganu and Marang. Each district represented by 245 respondents except for Kuala Terengganu, which was represented by 350 respondents.

Firstly, students were asked to grade themselves based on their English performance. This question is important in order to know students' perceptions of their own competence and then the researcher compared them with teachers' perceptions on their students' performance. The findings would reflect students' role in learning English language and their performance. The findings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' perception of their English language competence

Students' Grades	Frequency	%
GRADE A	460	25.3
GRADE B	962	52.9
GRADE C	349	19.2
GRADE D	41	2.3
GRADE E	8	0.4
Total	1820	100

Based on the questionnaire, the respondents graded themselves in terms of English performance which is again based on the overall grades that they obtained from Year 1 until Year 5. The data shows that 460 respondents (25.3%) perceived themselves as 'A' students, 962 respondents (52.9%) as 'B' students, 349 respondents (19.2%) claimed to be average students (Grade C), 41 respondents (2.3%) felt that they were in 'D' category and 8 respondents (0.4%) perceived that they were in the lowest 'E' category. The grades are based on students' perception of their overall performances for the duration of the years in primary school and also their current standing. It must be noted that the students were also reminded that their perceptions should take into consideration their present and also future targeted final examination performances.

Then, the sample of 1820 students were asked to indicate the language(s) used at home. It is not surprising that some students use more than one language at home. The findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Languages spoken at home

Languages	Yes	
	Frequency	Percent
Standard Malay	576	31.6
Tamil	7	0.4
Chinese	9	0.5
English	396	21.8
Terengganu (local) Dialect	1630	89.6
Others	46	2.5

Table 4 shows that the Terengganu dialect is the most popular medium used by 89.6% of the students; this is followed by standard Malay (n=576, 31.6%). Surprisingly, English is also spoken at home in the urban areas (n=396, 21.8%). Nevertheless, the huge percentage in the use of the local dialect is convincing enough to show that the students in the study were surrounded by the local language environment. It is also found that most of the respondents spoke more than one language at home. The use of the Terengganu dialect supersedes that of the rest of the other languages. Almost 90% of the respondents use it as the home language. One must understand that Terengganu (local) dialect has some similarities with standard Malay but it stands apart in terms of intonations and rhythm, as well as vocabulary with a high concentration of contracted forms.

The students were asked about the extent of their enjoyment of reading English materials. This is because the finding would reflect the degree of preference in reading English as well. The findings on student enjoyment of reading materials are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Enjoyment of reading English materials

Enjoy reading English materials	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Not at all	13	0.7	0.7
A bit	553	30.4	31.1
Quite a lot	987	54.2	85.3
Very much	267	14.7	100
Total	1820	100	

Table 5 shows that more than half of the respondents (n=987, 54.2%) read 'quite a lot' of English materials, compared to 30.4% (n=553) who liked 'a bit' of reading. Some of the respondents (n=267, 14.7%) mentioned that they loved reading 'very much' while a few (0.7%, n=13) stated that they did not like reading in English at all. Since 54.2% of the students admitted that they read 'quite a lot', while only 0.7% did not enjoy it at all, the findings showed that although reading in English may appear to be not an extremely enjoyable activity, it still had its own attraction to half of the students. The finding which shows that 31.1% of the students who did not like reading may not surprise most educationists due to the fact that reading process is not simple in its nature (Pandian, 2007). Moreover, many of them may not have the joyful experiences of being readers as their up-bringing may not include reading habit formation (Bullock, 1975).

The 1820 students were also asked to evaluate their perception of themselves as English readers. Their perception is very important in knowing the internal motivation and confidence of the students. On analysis, the following perceptions (Table 6) were found.

Table 6: Students' perception as good readers of materials in English

English Readers?	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Not Good	22	1.2	1.2
Average	1282	70.4	71.6
Good	458	25.2	96.8
Very Good	58	3.2	100
Total	1820	100	

Table 6 shows that 70.4% (n=1282) of the respondents considered themselves as average readers, followed by 25.2% (n=458) respondents considering themselves as good, 3.2% (n=58) as very good and only 1.2% (n=22) as 'not good' readers in English.

In evaluating themselves as readers in English, most of the students seem less confident in understanding the reading materials. This is understandable as learning to read in a second language is perhaps a complex, and therefore, challenging developmental process influenced by a multiplicity of factors with many prerequisites. The findings reflect a similarity with Pandian's study (2004) where he carried out two studies to investigate reading behaviour of university and secondary school students. He found that in the university

students' category, students from urban areas tend to have more English materials at home, whereas for secondary school students, it was found that 76.2% of the students under study were reluctant readers of English-language materials while 61.4% were reluctant readers of Malay-language materials.

The question of knowing the students' perception on whether or not they read enough is to countercheck the previous question (see Table 7) on students' perception on their English grades and the results of the San Diego Quick Reading assessment as well. Here, the responses also reflect the findings of their reading outside school. Table 7 illustrates the findings of this question.

Table 7 – Students' perception on reading sufficiency

Do you think you read enough?	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Strongly disagree	439	24.1	24.1
Disagree	1051	57.7	81.9
Agree	174	9.6	91.4
Strongly agree	156	8.6	100
Total	1820	100	

Table 7 illustrates that only 8.6% (n=156) of the respondents felt that they read enough, while 9.6% (n=174) of them agreed that they did. On the contrary, more than half of the respondents (n=1051, 57.7%) belong to the 'less disagree' category, that is, they do not read enough. Another section of the sample (n= 439, 24.1%) felt that they really do not read enough. The findings show that a majority of the students felt that they did not do enough reading and this finding is interrelated to the earlier finding (Table 7) that they seldom read outside of class. So, students' lack of confidence in reading may be an important reason as to why a majority of them are considered as 'reluctant readers'. They appear to be affected by poor strategic reading at lexical and word-recognition level and pre-reading skills (Sarricoban, 2002 and Slavin, 2004).

The analysis of how students perceive the reading materials is aimed at knowing the students' overall attitude towards English materials. By knowing the students' perceptions, the researcher can understand students' attitude and ideological stance towards the practice of reading materials in English. Table 8 shows the findings.

Table 8: Perceptions on reading English materials

Reading English materials	Strongly Disagree	%	Disagree	%	Agree	%	Strongly Agree	%
Reading is more for girls	444	24.4	948	52.1	292	16.0	136	7.5
Reading is boring	1003	55.1	739	40.6	65	3.6	13	.7
Reading is hard for me	719	39.5	887	48.7	162	8.9	52	2.9
Helps me to learn Mathematics and Science	41	2.3	99	5.4	743	40.8	937	51.5
I can't find books that interest me	192	10.5	864	47.5	655	36.0	109	6.0
I read outside of school	98	5.4	683	37.5	876	48.1	163	9.0
I only read English materials in English	273	15.0	1118	61.4	338	18.6	91	5.0
I like going to the library	31	1.7	264	14.5	1072	58.9	453	24.9
I would be happy if someone gave me an English book as a	80	4.4	277	15.2	922	50.7	541	29.7

present								
I do not read as well as other students in my class	937	51.5	714	39.2	124	6.8	45	2.5

Table 8 shows the attitudes towards reading English materials. On the question of whether or not reading is for girls only, 7.5% (n=136) strongly felt that reading is more for girls and 16% (n=292) affirmed it. On the other hand, 52.1% (n=948) disagreed and 24.4% (n=444) strongly disagreed saying that is for all. Similarly, Pandian (2004) also found that female students possess much stronger positive home reading influence than male students.

To the question of whether or not reading is boring, 0.7% (n=13) strongly accepted that statement and 3.6% (n=65) agreed with it. Meanwhile, 40.6% (n=739) disagreed and 55.1% (n=1003) strongly disagreed, saying that reading is not a boring activity. As reading involves drawing information from both the message and the internal schemata, the process needs concentration and effective strategies; therefore, students need to select appropriate reading materials and be fully ready to indulge in reading activities, if not boredom is unavoidable (Swan, 1997). The statement that 'reading is hard' was strongly agreed by 2.9% (n=52) of the respondents and 8.9% (n=162) agreed with it as well. In contrast, 48.7% (n=887) disagreed and 39.5% (n=719) strongly disagreed, saying that reading is not hard. This finding is a positive sign; it also reflects the same understanding with the previous question, in which reading readiness should be set up before the reading takes place (Swan, 1997) and reading difficulty is immeasurably reduced.

To the question of whether or not reading English materials helps to learn Mathematics and Science, 51.5% (n=937) of the respondents felt it helped and 40.8% (n=743) affirmed the statement; however, 5.4% (n=99) disagreed and 2.3% (n=41) strongly disagreed that reading English materials helped them to learn Science and Mathematics. The purpose of reading should be very clear and focused, therefore, since a majority of the students agreed that English is helpful in learning other subjects, it shows that the strategies carried out by teachers were not isolated language from the content of the lesson (Anthony and Lonigan, 2004). Out of 1820 respondents, 6% (n=109) strongly agreed that they cannot find books that interest them and 36% (n=655) agreed with the opinion, whereas, 47.5% (n=864) disagreed and 10.5% (n=192) strongly disagreed, saying that they could find books that interest them. Next, 9% (n=163) of the respondents strongly agreed that they read outside of school and 48.1% (n=867) agreed, but 37.5% (n=683) disagreed and 5.4% (n=98) strongly disagreed that they read outside of the school. A substantial number appear to do very little reading outside the classroom which is not a good sign for developing a reading culture. To the question of whether or not they only read English materials in English and not bilingual or translated works, 5% (n=91) expressed strong agreement and 18.6% (n=338) agreed. In contrast, 61.4% (n=1118) disagreed and 15% (n=273) strongly disagreed, saying that they read all types of English materials. It clearly indicates that a majority of the respondents (76.4%) prefer to read bilingual reading materials or translated works, so teachers and parents should monitor and try to fulfill students' need in this matter because the development of early English proficiency is also related to their first language (Easingwood, 2001).

To the statement of liking to go to the library, 24.9% (n=453) strongly agreed with the statement and 58.9% (n=1072) affirmed. However, 14.5% (n=264) did not like to go to the library and 1.7% (n=31) strongly agreed that they did not like to go there at all. Next, 29.7% (n=541) of the respondents strongly agreed that they would be happy if someone gave them English books as presents and 50.7% (n=922) agreed with the statement. But, 15.2% (n=277) disagreed and 4.4% (n=80) strongly disagreed, saying that they would not like to receive English books as presents.

Lastly, to the question of whether or not their performance in reading as good as that of the other students, 2.5% (n=45) of the respondents strongly felt that way and another 6.8% (n=124) agreed. On the other hand, 39.2% (n=714) disagreed and 51.5% (n=937) strongly disagreed that they felt that they read as much as or more than their friends.

All in all, based on the above findings, students agreed that reading was not gender-biased (76.5%) or a boring activity (95.7%). They also agreed that English was not hard for them (88.2%) and it helped them to learn Mathematics and Science (92.3%). Interestingly, most of the respondents liked going to the library (83.6%) and would be happy if someone gave them an English book as a present (80.4%). At the same time, a majority of them admitted that that they read as well as other students in their class (90.7%).

Based on the overall findings, it is evidently clear that students have a significant interest in learning English; however they did not put much effort in learning English due of some contributing factors. Eventually, they ended up not to possess good understanding on the importance of the language. Hence, their perception towards the language is still low and nor promising.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The result of SDQR assessment reflects the students' reading ability. Based on the result (Table 1), almost all districts have similarity in their scores in which half of the students bunched together at the 'weak category' except Kemaman. It shows that the results of the SDQR and findings from the answered questionnaire show huge correlation and similarities. Based on these results, it can be said that the reading ability of the students is hovering around the 'average-poor' level. Reading ability and learning strategies are closely related to students' academic performance which also can be affected by surrounding as well (International Reading Association, 2000). To conclude, it can be said that the findings of SDQRA are parallel with the students' perception on second language reading ability. Hopefully, both students and teachers took and shared the findings for their future planning in improving student's second language reading ability, not only to improve their reading skills but also to build reading culture among the students. Actually, that is the hidden agenda of carrying out this research.

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