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# Reading Habit and Attitude among Malaysian Polytechnic Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study on the reading habit and attitude of the students in a Malaysian Polytechnic. A survey questionnaire adapted from Smith's (1991) Adult Survey of Reading Attitude (ASRA) and Pandian's (1997) Reading Habit questionnaire was used for this study. The questionnaire was distributed to 119 polytechnic students from Engineering and Business department in the selected Polytechnic. Results of the study revealed that; (i) the polytechnics students have low interest in reading; (ii) students do not enjoy reading as much as they enjoy doing other technology related activities. Finally, the paper will discuss the implications of the findings in terms of instructional material development within reading context.

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Keywords:
Reading habit, reading attitude, Polytechnic students

## Introduction

Reading is a way to get better knowledge of one's own experiences and it can be an exciting journey to self-discovery. Reading transfers experiences to the individual so that the reader may expand one's horizons, identify, extend and intensify his or her interest and gain deeper understanding of the world (Green, 2002). In simple words, it is a process of interpreting printed and written words. In depth, it is an effective process of conscious learning that influences the accuracy of information, attitudes, morals, beliefs, judgments and action of readers (Panigrahib & Panda, 1996; Eyre, 2005). Reading is regarded as one of the most important components in learning language and it is an essential tool for lifelong learning for all learners (Pandian, 1997; Mokatsi, 2005). This view supported Krashen (1993), who states that through reading, readers develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary and advanced grammar and becomes excellent spellers. This improves the language proficiency and makes the reader to a better speaker. In their study with adult readers, Kirsch and Guthrie (1984) found that reading contributes significantly to job success, career development, and ability to respond to change.

The definition of reading has undergone through many improvements. In the past, reading was meant to interpret visual information of any given codes or systems (Lone, 2011). However, after that, reading became more complex and involved the understanding process of a whole text composed of written signs (Fisher, 2004). Smith and Robinson (1980) define reading as a process for reader to understand a writer's message. Additionally, Toit (2001) suggests reading as a process of thinking, recalling and relating concepts under the functioning of written words. Irvin (1998) describes the reading process as interaction between the writer's mind with what is on the page within a particular context that causes readers to comprehend what they read. Furthermore, Williams (1984) defines reading as a process in which a reader looks at a text and understands what has been written. He further states that reading does not mean a person needs to understand everything he reads because people read for different reasons and purposes. Thus, reading can

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define as ability to recognize, examine the meaning of written or printed characters, words or sentences and understand the information within (Lone, 2011).

According to Ponnusamy (1997), the first description of reading and its process can be traced back to Thorndike (1971), who claimed reading as a process of reasoning. Thorndike (1917) as cited in Ponnusamy (1997) described the reading process as:

> *"…understanding a paragraph is like solving mathematics. It consists of selecting the right element of situation and putting them together in the right relations, and also within the right amount of weight or influence or force for each. The mind is assailed as it was bothered by every word in the paragraph. It must select, repress, soften, emphasize, correlate organize all under the influence of the right mental shape or purpose or demand. Thus, it appears that reading an explanatory or argumentative paragraph involves the same sort of organization and analytic action of ideas as those that occur in thinking supposedly higher sorts"* (pg. 21).

The purpose of this study is to describe the reading habit and reading attitude of a group of students in a national Polytechnic in Malaysia. Findings from this study will provide insights into the reading behaviours of these students. More importantly, constant reading will help students in academic achievement.

**Reading Habit**

Reading habit refers to the behaviour, which expresses the likeness of reading and tastes of reading (Sangkaeo, 1999). It is a way of how the reader organizes his or her reading. Similarly, Shen (2006) identifies reading habits, as how often, how much, and what the readers read. Researchers in the past have devoted efforts to examining learners' reading habits (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 1994). With their efforts, these researchers have discovered that reading habits are correlated with gender, age, educational background, academic performance and professional growth.

Reading is generally accepted as a way of acquiring new information and new knowledge. It is not only to increase knowledge but also to build maturity and widen awareness of contemporary issues (Kim & Anderson, 2011). A good reading habit is important for the development of personalities and mental capacities. This habit is necessary for a healthy intellectual growth and plays a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve language proficiency (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Furthermore, an individual's interest to read is determined by the considerable extent of the amount and intensity of pursuing the reading activity (Cleary, 1972). By reading books frequently and having a good reading habit, the reader is able analyze other's idea, which makes one think more critically (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). Reading provides readers with great knowledge, understanding and a sense of values, which enable them gradually to develop the greatest of all virtues and the ability to understand other people beliefs (Cook, Halleran & O'Brien, 1998).

Studies on reading habits revealed a number of findings. Caverly and Peterson (2000) notes that research on the effect of technology on reading achievements demonstrated mixed results. On the one hand, Sheorey and Mokhtari (1994) indicate that there is no significant difference between high and low-proficient readers with regard to amount of time spent reading academic or non-academic materials. However, Gallik (1999) finds that there is a significant and positive relationship between students' cumulative grade-point average and time spent reading for pleasure during vacations.

**Reading Attitude**

Attitudes toward reading are defined as an individual's feeling about reading. It causes learners to adopt or avoid a reading situation (Alexander & Filler, 1976). Attitude and interest toward reading can be related to feeling and their willingness to read. Reading attitude is defined by McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1996) as a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation.

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) define attitude as a learned disposition on how to behave, either negative or positive; and the reading attitude refers to the person's nature towards reading as an activity. McKenna Model of Reading Attitude Acquisition (McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1996) suggests that the individual's reading attitude develops over time as a result of three factors: (i) normative beliefs (how one's friends view about reading); (ii) beliefs about outcomes of reading (whether reading is likely to be pleasurable, useful, frustrating or boring) and beliefs about outcomes of competing activities; and (iii) specific reading experiences. The degree of positive or negative attitudes towards reading differs according to the kind of reading to be performed and the purpose of reading (McKenna et al., 1996). Thus, it is more meaningful and practical to discuss reading attitudes with reference to a particular type or use of reading (Taylor, Harris & Pearson, 1988).

Positive reading attitudes inspire positive reading experiences. This creates the possibilities to encourage higher academic performances. Some studies focused on the influences of positive attitudes toward reading in secondary school students (Bintz, 1993; Walberg & Tsai, 1985). Walberg and Tsai (1985) reasoned that a positive attitude toward reading is one of the strongest correlates of reading achievement. They (Walberg & Tsai, 1985) stated that factors contributing to a positive attitude among adolescents included;

i) believing that reading is important;
ii) enjoying reading;
iii) having a high self-concept as a reader; and
iv) having a home environment where verbal interaction takes place regularly.

A study conducted by Kubis (1996) reports that students attribute their positive attitudes toward reading as related to a significant event or person. Kubis (1996) justifies that students who were read to when they were children have more positive attitudes toward reading than those who were not. Partin (2002) conducted a study on the relationship between attitudes toward reading and its relationship with home environments, reported that a positive reading attitude of students is significantly related to and fostered by the following literary environment such as being read to as a child, parental interest in their child's reading, having books around the home, receiving books as gifts, and possessing a library card. Positive reading attitudes is also correlated significantly with having friends who like to read and with whom they can discuss and recommend books.

**Malaysian's Reading Habit and Attitude**

Statistical data from the National Literacy Survey conducted by the National Library of Malaysia revealed that Malaysians read at average of two pages a year in 1982 and progressed to two books a year in 1996. Recent findings reveal that the civil engineering students in the Malaysian Polytechnic indicate low frequency or ability of using the English language among the students irrespective of their type of workplace or level of study (Mohd Yasin, Wan Mohd Shaupil, Mukhtar, Abd Ghani & Rashid, 2010).

Malaysian educators have often complained about the poor reading habits among their students. Based on the study by Kaur and Thiyagarajah (1999), Malaysian students read very little. They prefer to watch television and video compared to reading for information or leisure. Similar results are also found by Pandian (1997), Frank Small and Associates (1996) and the Malaysian National Library (2006). In the survey by Malaysian National Library (2006) with a sample of 60,441 respondents, it was found that the literacy rate has slightly decreased to 92% from 93% in 1996.

A study by Pandian (1997) on the reading habits of students in Malaysia reported that 80.1% of university students were reluctant readers of English language materials. The study by Mohd Yasin et al., (2010) also supports and justifies the findings by Pandian (2000). Pandian (2000) reports the factors related to students' background, home and school have an impact on their reading behaviours. He mentioned that the process of developing reading habits is influenced by a range of factors like exposure to media and computers. With the advancement of the electronic media, it may be said that students now read even less as they get more involved in watching TV and playing electronic games in their spare time. Researchers have

found many changes in the reading habits of college students due to the impact of digital media made available through the Internet (Liu, 2005).

Kaur and Thiyagarajah (1999) reveal that while many students prefer spending as much as 3-5 hours per week in reading, but the breakdown of the responses indicate that (69.8%) of them spend this amount of time on literary works, (28.6%) on newspapers and (25.4%) on novels. This result indicates that the students are reading for leisure and not for educational purposes. Nor Shahriza and Amelia (2007) identify that the students spend about 7 to 9 hours per week on average to read. This is due to the academic work that they have to do. Their study also focused on gender and choice of reading materials by the students, which revealed that students spend a significant amount of time reading newspapers, academic books and websites. Again, this result indicates that the students are reading for leisure and not for educational purposes. Not surprisingly, they also reported that students tend to use electronic and IT resources more.

**Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the reading habit of the polytechnics students in terms of the following;
1a. Types of reading material they read?
1b. Time spend on reading?
1c. Activities during their leisure time?
RQ2: What are the students' attitudes toward reading?

## Research Methodology

This study is a descriptive study in which the sample was elected by means of random sampling. A survey was used as a method of collecting the data. The data analysis is descriptive in nature. A total of 119 respondents took part in this study. They were Polytechnics students from a northern state Malaysia. The Polytechnic has Engineering and Business students who are from the same level of education background. All of them have finished their Form 5 public examination level before entering Polytechnic. Among the respondents, 58 students (48.7%) were males and the remaining 61 students (51.3%) were females.

**Instrument**

The study adopted the Adult Survey of Reading Attitude (ASRA) from the work of Smith (1991).The respondents answered based on a four-point Likert-type scale (4 = "strongly agree"; 1 = "strongly disagree"). The three dimensions of reading attitude are stated below.

i. Reading activity and enjoyment (eight items) measured the extent to which the person reads for pleasure.
ii. Anxiety and difficulty (five items) measured the extent to which the person experience problems or becomes upset when reading.
iii. Modality (two items) measured extent to which the individual prefers to use sources other than reading when faced with a learning task.

As for the reading habits, six questions were asked:

a. Why do they read?
b. What activity do they like to do during their leisure time?
c. In what language they prefer to read?
d. How often do they read leisurely?
e. How long do they surf internet in a day?
f. How long do they play computer/mobile games in a day?

Respondents were also asked to respond on the types of reading materials they like to read and how long they read in a day.

## Findings and Discussions

### Demographic

A total of 119 respondents took part in this study. Among the respondents, 58 of them (48.7%) were males and the remaining 61 respondents (51.3%) were females. It is reported that 36 (30.3%) of them were from Science stream when they were in Secondary School, 39 respondents (32.8%) were from Commerce, 18 respondents (15.1%) were from Arts and 26 (21.8%) of them were from Technical stream.

**Table 1.** Demography of respondents

| | | Number of students | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total | Male | 58 | 48.7 |
| | Female | 61 | 51.3 |
| Streaming | Science | 36 | 30.3 |
| | Commerce | 39 | 32.8 |
| | Arts | 18 | 15.1 |
| | Technical | 26 | 21.8 |

### Reading Habit

Findings on reading habits were analyzed through the types of reading materials read, amount of time spent on reading per day, their preferences on their leisure time activities, the language they prefer to read, amount of time spent on surfing internet and computer/ mobile games.

**Types of reading materials.** Table 2 illustrates the distribution of seven types of reading materials, i.e. newspaper, academic book, website, magazine, novel, journals and comic. The majority of the students read newspaper everyday for at least a few times a week (68.9%). This is followed by magazines (57.1%), websites (56.3%), novels (44.5%), academic books (27.1%), comic and journals. The results pointed to the high rate of newspapers and magazines as this may explain why Polytechnics students were found reading for entertainment only, and not for academic purposes.

**Table 2.** Types of reading materials

| Reading material | Number of respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Newspaper | 82 | 68.9 |
| Academic | 33 | 27.7 |
| Website | 67 | 56.3 |
| Magazine | 68 | 57.1 |
| Novel | 53 | 44.5 |
| Journal | 4 | 3.4 |
| Comic | 12 | 10.1 |

**Time spent on reading (per day).** Table 3 shows the distribution of amount of time spent on reading per day by the respondents.

**Table 3.** Amount of time spent on reading per day.

| Hours | Number of respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Less than 1 hour | 35 | 29.9 |
| 1 to 2 hours | 56 | 46.6 |
| 2 to 3 hours | 16 | 13.4 |
| 3 to 4 hours | 8 | 6.7 |
| More than 4 hours | 4 | 3.4 |

The result indicates that polytechnic students spent significant amount of time on reading per day. A total of 46.6% of the students read between one to two hours per day. This result is somewhat expected due to academic activities that require a significant amount of reading time in order to succeed academically. However, the amount of time spent on reading should be attributed to reading academic books rather than other materials such as newspapers or fictions. The result is slightly higher than the study conducted by Mokhtari and Sheorey (1994) on university students in the USA, where the average reading time per week was 4.75 hours.

**Favourite leisure time activity.** Respondents were also asked about the types of activities that they like to do during leisure time. Table 4 provides the list of activities in a descending order. A majority of the respondents were found to choose surfing Internet as their main activity during leisure time (50.5%) which also includes Facebooking. This is followed by listening to the music, playing computer games, and watching television/movies. This indicates that the students don't prefer to read during their free time. Similar to earlier research, the results of this survey showed that many students do not read as only 8 respondents prefer to read in their spare time. Around 6.7% of the respondents said that they read in their spare time (Table 4). This is supported by Pandian (2000) who also found that with the advancement of the technologies and electronic media, it may be said that students now read even less as they get more involved with Internet, watching TV and playing electronic games in their spare time.

**Table 4.** Preferred leisure time activities

| Activities | Number of respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Reading | 8 | 6.7 |
| Surfing Internet | 60 | 50.5 |
| Music | 25 | 21.0 |
| Movies | 12 | 10.1 |
| Games | 13 | 10.9 |
| Others | 1 | 0.8 |

**Preferred language for reading.** This survey showed that 99 (83.2%) of the respondents said that they prefer to read in Bahasa Melayu compared to other languages. The possible reason for such findings could be due to the use of Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction As a result, very few students choose to read materials in English. There were only 12 students who prefer to read in English. The distribution of students' preferred language for reading is illustrated in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Preferred language for reading

| Language | Number of respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Bahasa Melayu | 99 | 83.2 |
| English | 12 | 10.1 |
| Tamil | 5 | 4.2 |
| Chinese | 3 | 2.5 |
| Others | 0 | 0.0 |

**Amount of time spent on surfing internet.** Table 6 shows the distribution of time spent on surfing Internet per day by the respondents.

**Table 6.** Amount of time spent on surfing Internet

| Hours | Number of respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Less than 1 hour | 30 | 25.1 |
| 1 to 2 hours | 34 | 28.6 |
| 2 to 3 hours | 31 | 26.1 |
| 3 to 4 hours | 7 | 5.9 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| More than 4 hours | 17 | 14.3 |

The result indicates that polytechnic students spent considerable amount of time on surfing internet per day. A total of 28.6%of the students surf between one to two hours per day, meanwhile 25.2% of the respondents surf less than one hour and 26.1% surf for two to three hours.

**Amount of time spent on computer/ mobile games.** A total of 53 of the respondents (44.6%) spent lesser than one hour on computer and mobile games. 26.9% of the respondents spent one to two hours and 13.4% spend two to three hours playing computer or mobile games. The respondents were not willing to spend more time on computer and mobile games as they have other academic activities that they have to attend such as classes, extra co-curricular activities and assignments.

**Table 7.** Amount of time spent on computer/ mobile games

| Hours | Number of respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Less than 1 hour | 53 | 44.6 |
| 1 to 2 hours | 32 | 26.9 |
| 2 to 3 hours | 16 | 13.4 |
| 3 to 4 hours | 5 | 4.2 |
| More than 4 hours | 13 | 10.9 |

**Reading Attitude**

Reading attitude is a construct comprising of 15 items adopted from the Adult Survey of Reading Attitude (ASRA) (Smith, 1991). The construct was categorized into three variables namely (i) Reading activity and enjoyment (eight items) (ii) Anxiety and difficulty (five items) and (iii) Modality (two items). The descriptions of the three variables are provided in Table 8.

**Table 8.** Reading attitude variables

| Variables | Questions |
|---|---|
| Reading activity and enjoyment | Reading is one of my favourite activities. |
| | I read when I have the time to enjoy it. |
| | I get a lot of enjoyment from reading. |
| | I spend a lot of my spare time reading. |
| | When I am at home I read a lot. |
| | I want to have more books of my own. |
| | I quickly forget what I have read even if I have just read it. |
| | I try very hard, but I just can't read very well. |
| Anxiety and difficulty | I get upset when I think about having to read. |
| | Encountering unfamiliar words is the hardest part of reading. |
| | When I read I usually get tired and sleepy. |
| | I often feel anxious when I have a lot of reading to do. |
| | I need a lot of help in reading. |
| Modality | Reading is one of the best ways for me to learn things. |
| | There are better ways to learn new things than by reading a book. |

Prior to the descriptive analysis of the construct, the reliability analyses of the variables used in the study were conducted. The Cronbach alpha value is 0.76 and it is acceptable based on the suggestion made by Bryman and Craemer (2001).

For the measure of reading attitude, the study adopted the Adult Survey of Reading Attitude (ASRA) from the work of Smith (1991) with three variables and respondents responded to the statements on a four-point Likert-type scale (4 = "strongly agree"; 1 = "strongly disagree"). The result indicates that the average score for enjoyment is not high (mean value 2.76), sending a message that the majority of the respondents don't agree that reading is an enjoyable activity. This low value of enjoyment subsequently resulted with the

high value of anxiety towards reading (mean value 3.21). This means that the respondents agree that they find reading as difficult and causing reading anxieties. The modality variable has mean value of 3.30 which indicated that the respondents feel that there are other ways to learn new things than by reading. This indicates that the reading attitude among Polytechnic students is low with mean value of 2.83. The descriptive statistics of the Polytechnic students, reading attitude is structured in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Descriptive statistics of reading attitude

| Variable | *n* | Mean |
|---|---|---|
| Modality | 119 | 3.30 |
| Reading activity and enjoyment | 119 | 2.76 |
| Anxiety and difficulty | 119 | 3.21 |
| Attitude overall | 119 | 2.83 |

## Conclusion and Recommendation

This study was conducted in an attempt to enhance our understanding about reading habit and attitude of a particular polytechnic in the northern region of Malaysia. In this effort, 119 students from Engineering and Business departments were chosen randomly as the respondents. The overall result indicates that these polytechnic students spend quite a significant amount of time surfing the Internet, playing computer/mobile games and other technology-related activities compared to reading. Reading is only regarded as a minor activity during their leisure time. The amount of time spent on reading by the polytechnic students is seen to be similar to the average individual surveyed in the past. This group was expected to read more due to their engagement in the academic process that requires them to read but in contrary, they prefer to do other things.

The reading attitude findings of this study revealed that the polytechnic students do not enjoy reading as much as other activities that involve technologies. They find reading as difficult and causing reading anxiety. They also felt that there are other ways to learn new things than by reading as they find reading boring and not motivating.

Several limitations can be found in the conduct of this study. Among them are the small sample size, the inclusion of only one polytechnic, and the limited amount of variables studied. A bigger scale study needs to be conducted for more reliable results, and with the inclusion of more variables such as family background, reading exposure and availability of reading materials, and variables that are related specifically with reading in the digital environment. Future studies should focus more on how reading can actually take place using computers and digital devices. Using technology for reading will encourage the students to explore the process in an alternative medium other than conventional books. This technology-based reading will motivate them to read more as the students, who are digital-natives, are more keen to use computers for and technologies for learning. By increasing their motivation to read, the students will be reading more, which will lead to improvement in their language proficiency.

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