The Malaysian Class Reader Programme

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Ministry of Education, Malaysia

This paper briefly describes reading standards in Malaysian schools, outlines a Class Reader programme, and provides samples of teaching files designed to help teachers implement the programme.

INTRODUCTION

In a second language situation, but particularly in a foreign language situation, reading is, arguably, the most useful and important language skill. Armed with a reading competency, second or foreign language learners have access to scientific, technical or educational journals which may take some time to be translated into the learners' first language. This article outlines school reading programmes in Malaysia and describes a class reader programme for secondary schools.

THE CURRENT SITUATION FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

Government policy decreed that secondary education would be carried out in Bahasa Malaysia from 1969 – beginning with Form I and progressing through to Form V. Tertiary educational institutions followed progressively, beginning with a few selected subjects and continuing until teaching in all subjects was in Bahasa Malaysia. However, the Government acknowledged and stressed the importance of English by making it a compulsory subject for study at all levels of the education system.

Following the changeover of the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia, there is a body of public opinion which feels that standards of English have declined. One of the ways in which the Ministry of Education has responded to this situation has been to emphasise and support reading programmes in schools.

READING HABITS OF MALAYSIANS

Leading figures from the political and academic spheres have expressed concern about the scanty reading habits of Malaysians – both young and old.

A survey (with a sample population of 15,054) conducted by academics from a

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range of Malaysian universities under the chairmanship of Professor Atan bin Long found that Malaysians spend a mean monthly expenditure of M$10.00 or below on books and magazines (bin Long et al 1984: 129). The survey further reported that while 42% of the subjects said that they had read books in the past six months, only half of them were able to supply the titles of the books they had read (ibid, p.129).

Such was the concern that 1988 was officially designated 'Reading Year' (Tahun Membaca) by the Ministry of Education, which organised public events to promote reading.

DEVELOPING READING HABITS IN SCHOOLS

Every Primary School in Malaysia was provided with a class set of class reader books for its classes at lower primary level (the first three years of schooling) following the introduction of the New Primary English Syllabus in 1981. In 1986 a World Bank loan enabled this programme to be extended with the purchase of additional books to cover classes in each year of primary school. These books were at a wider range of ability levels and in each of the four languages in use in Malaysia: Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese, Tamil.

In Secondary Schools an extensive reading programme (ELRP) has been in existence since 1976. However, as books for this programme are purchased from school funds, only about one third of schools participate.

THE CLASS READER PROGRAMME

In Secondary Schools, beginning from the 1989 academic year, one of the five forty-minute class periods allocated to English is to be used for class reader work. A programme of class readers is not new to Malaysian Secondary education but in the past it has been implemented only in residential schools. From the start, the class reader programme has included every secondary school in the country.

In Malaysia children from lower income families qualify for free textbooks under the government’s textbook loan scheme. The books for the class reader programme are funded under this scheme.

The aims of the class reader programme are fourfold:
- to expose students to material written in English
- to motivate students to read and inculcate in them the reading habit
- to help students develop their language proficiency through teaching materials that can enrich and consolidate learning
- to introduce elements of literature into language teaching.

It is anticipated that through the class reader programme students will be helped to read a minimum of 3 books a year, supported and consolidated by the class reader teaching
files (files of pre-prepared activities for teachers to use in class).

SETTING UP THE CLASS READER PROGRAMME

Guidelines were drawn up for publishers inviting them to submit books for inclusion in the programme beginning with Form I. Publishers’ attention was drawn to the aims of the programme, students’ interests, range of language proficiencies, appeal to both sexes.

Both local and foreign publishers submitted titles for consideration.

The titles of the books in either simplified form or specially written for young people cover a range of topics: fiction and non-fiction, foreign and local authors, modern and traditional stories. Examples include Malaysian Tales by Adiba Amin, (a compilation of traditional Malaysian folk tales); Man of Everest, (the story of the Everest Conquest); Wuthering Heights, King Solomon’s Mines.

The books fall into two levels of reading proficiency: elementary and intermediate.

HELPING TEACHERS IMPLEMENT THE CLASS READER PROGRAMME

A large number of English Language teachers at lower secondary school have no formal qualification in teaching English as a second or foreign language or in teaching literature. Indeed, the only English language qualification held by a substantial percentage of these teachers is a credit in English in the national examination taken at the end of their secondary schooling. As may be expected, some of these teachers have reservations about their abilities in this aspect of their work. At the same time a large number of teachers have ELT training and qualifications and a number of them have attended intensive TESL courses either locally or overseas. Busy teaching schedules do not allow teachers much time for materials preparation.

To assist teachers implement the class reader programme, the Schools Division of the Ministry of Education has produced teaching files to accompany the class reader books. These are resource booklets containing background information, suggested lesson outlines and a range of exercises and activities related to each class reader book.

THE TEACHING FILES

The teaching files were written by 24 qualified and experienced teachers with a background in literature.

Each teaching file consists of several sections:

i. General instructions about the implementation of the class reader programme and how to make effective use of the prepared contents of the teaching files.
Background information on the text, the author and, if necessary, contemporary life.

Suggested introductory lesson.

Ideas and activities for lessons over a term’s teaching.

Ideas and suggestions for work to follow up the completion of the text.

Guidelines for making a record in the student’s notebook.

Since using a class reader book will require most teachers to use new techniques and strategies, a detailed introductory lesson has been prepared, together with suggestions for subsequent lessons. We hope that this will wean teachers away from the idea that using a class reader book is merely another opportunity for comprehension exercises conducted orally with the whole class.

To encourage students to respond to the texts, they are encouraged to keep a notebook solely for class reader work. At the back of this notebook they record details about each book and their impressions about it.

SAMPLE

Title: Treasure Island
Author Robert Louis Stevenson

1 What did you like about the story?
   The adventures that Jim and his friends had to go through to get the treasure.

2 Would you recommend this book to your friend?
   The story is entertaining

3 Would you read more books by the same author?
   Yes

4 Name three factual things you learnt from the book
   a. The different faces of human nature
   b. The culture of the pirates
   c. Life on a ship

5 Main characters
   a. Jim Hawkins
   b. Long John Silver
   c. Dr Livesey
   d. Squire Trelawney

Teaching file prepared by Maradziah bte Abdul Jalil.

EXAMPLES OF CLASS ACTIVITIES

Writers of the teaching files were allowed a free hand in the tasks and activities that they produced with the proviso that these should allow students to work with their class reader book open. Additionally, tasks and activities should cater for three ability levels so that teachers can more readily use them in mixed ability classes.

The resulting teaching files contain a wide variety of activities, some examples of which are reproduced below:

1 Picture Puzzles

Rewrite the story guided by the pictures.

One day a was very thirsty.

It was a long way to the

Suddenly she a big outside a She reach the

at the of the jug. She tried to

the jug. Finally, she put some into the

jug. The now came up to the

of the jug. The was very
(Teacher’s Answer Key)

One hot day a crow was very thirsty. It was a long way to the river. Suddenly she saw a big jug outside a house. She could not reach the water at the bottom of the jug. She tried to break the jug. Finally, she put some stones into the jug. The water came up to the top of the jug. The crow was very happy.

2  Sentence Completion

Join each statement to the correct box. Use a different colour each time.

The river was too far away

The jug was too heavy

There was too little water in the jug

The bird was too tired

The jug was too strong

She could not reach it

It would not break

She could not fly there

It would not fall over

She could not fly

3  Grammar Exercises

Read the following statements:

Decide if the crow:  a may be successful  
b will be successful  
c will not be successful

Write the letter next to the sentence

1  There was a little water at the bottom of the jug.
2  She could not reach the water with her beak.
3  She climbed onto the jug.
4  She could not put her beak into the water.
5  She tried to break it with her beak.
6  The jug was too strong, it would not break.
7  She tried to knock it over so the water would run out.
8  The jug was too heavy to fall over.
9  The crow was too tired to fly.
10 When she saw the stones, she had an idea.
11 Every time she dropped a stone into the jug, the water rose higher.
12 The water came to the top.
13 At last she had a drink.

Activities 1, 2 and 3 taken from the Teaching File for ‘Stories from Aesop’ (Oxford University Press, 1964). Teaching File prepared by Satrina Abdullah.

4 Matching

On his final climb up Everest, Tenzing wore clothes that came from ‘many places’. Where did they come from? Match the source to the item of clothing.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>boots</td>
<td>a. Britain</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>windjacket</td>
<td>b. made by his wife</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>socks</td>
<td>c. present from Himalayas Club</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>sweater</td>
<td>d. belonged to Lambert</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>red scarf</td>
<td>e. Swiss</td>
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</table>

(Teacher’s Answer Key)
1(e) 2(a) 3(b) 4(c) 5(d)

5 Problem Solving

Put the following in the order of importance that you think makes an Everest expedition successful:

1 good weather
2 plenty of supplies
3 good leadership
4 Sherpas
5 oxygen
6 luck
7 helping one another
8 the climbers getting enough rest
9 choosing the strongest climbers
10 having the right food
Note. There is no one correct order. The teacher may suggest one ordering. Students may suggest various orderings. What is important here is that students are able to defend their suggestions. This can form the basis of a very lively discussion – if students work in groups, reach a consensus and then present their ideas to other groups.

6 Rearranging

Arrange the events in Tenzing’s life in chronological order. Refer to the Class Reader book for help.

a. Wife died.

b. Climbed Everest with Eric Shipton.

c. Climbed Tirich Mir.

d. Travelled with Tilman to explore Nepal.

e. Travelled around Lhasa with an Italian professor.

f. Climbed Bandar Punch – ‘The Monkey’s Tail’.

g. Climbed Mount Everest with Earl Denman.

h. Married Ang Lahman.

i. Climbed Everest with Hugh Rutledge.

j. Climbed Everest with Tilman.

k. Left home for Darjeeling.

l. Climbed Nanga Parbat.

m. Climbed Everest with Swiss Aubert, Flory and Lambert.

n. Climbed Kedarnath and became a Sirdar.

o. Explored base of Kangchenjunga with Major Reed.

p. Climbed Everest with Swiss and established Camp 8.

q. Climbed Nanda Devi.

r. His son died.

7 True/False Exercises

Mark T (True) and F (False) against the following statements:

1. The Sultan’s daughter was called Princess Badlishah al Buldoor.

2. Aladdin was curious to see the princess because it was said she was the richest woman in the world.

3. Aladdin saw her face when the wind blew aside her veil.

4. Aladdin’s mother went to see the Sultan with a tray of precious stones.

5. The Sultan asked for thirty trays of jewels and forty young maids to serve the princess.

Where the answer is F (False), ask the students:

a. to identify the detail which is incorrect

b. to rewrite the sentence showing the correct answer

8. Games

SNAKES AND LADDERS GAME ON CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK

From the Teaching File from ‘Tales from the Arabian Nights’ (Oxford University Press, 1983). Teaching file prepared by Susheela Nair.
9. Personal Responses to the Text

i. Pick out details from the text that show Jody’s anxiety over Nellie.

ANXIETY

ii. Tension mounts in the last few pages of the book as Jody awaits the birth of the colt. Students fill in the steps to show increasing tension.

(NB: One or two steps may be filled by the teacher to help weak pupils; more able readers locate the steps from the text)

1. Billy kills Nellie.
2. Jody feels the colt moving in Nellie’s stomach.
3. Delay in birth.
4. Something is wrong.

EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

As the Class Reader Programme is intended to move progressively from Forms I to V in secondary schools, the Ministry of Education is keen to receive feedback from teachers using the Teaching Files, so that future Teaching Files may be more sensitive to classroom needs. The last section of every Teaching File contains a feedback report form to be completed by teachers as they work through the Teaching File activities with their classes.

The evaluation feedback form is shown below:

Title of Book: __________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Suggestions for the teacher relating to:</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Needs improvement</th>
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<td>Additional exercises</td>
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<td>Scheme of work</td>
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<td>Student's reading notebook</td>
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Your comments and suggestions


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>2</th>
<th>Teacher's introduction</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Needs improvement</th>
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<td>The Story</td>
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<td>Time and Setting</td>
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<td>Background notes</td>
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<td>Students' appeal (suitability)</td>
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<td>The author</td>
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## Classwork

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<th>Vocabulary/pronunciation</th>
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<td>Points needing special attention</td>
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<td>Division of the book</td>
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Your comments and suggestions

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### Work for Students:

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<th>Introductory lesson</th>
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<td>Weekly lessons</td>
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<td>Division of the book</td>
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<td>Comprehensive questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities and exercises</td>
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Your comments and suggestions

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### Support (for Student)

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<th>Needs improvement</th>
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<th>Visuals (pictures, charts, tables)</th>
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<td>Linguistics (word lists)</td>
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Your comments and suggestions

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### Language

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<th>Language level</th>
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<td>Range</td>
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<td>Suitability</td>
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Your comments and suggestions
SUMMARY

The approach taken by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to the Class Reader Programme has been to involve teachers in the various stages: text selection, materials production, materials editing, as well as offering comment and constructive criticism.

We feel that this approach additionally supports the Malaysian Education system by establishing a network of personnel with particular experience and expertise within the class reader programme.

We are keen to hear from institutions who are planning or who are engaged in similar programmes.

REFERENCE