



## Motivation to Read Authentic Narrative Texts: A Focus on Pre-University Students in an ESL Class

**Keezrawati Mujan Yusuf**

Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia.

### ABSTRACT

Second Language (L2) instructors often use authentic text, although it is designed for real-world communication among speakers of a target language. However, it is criticised for being too complex for L2 learners. This study explores the level of acceptance of 85 pre-university students of authentic narrative text in their ESL lessons and the factors that influence their reading motivation. The quantitative data were collected using a 9-item questionnaire. The findings show that the students had a high acceptance of reading authentic narrative texts in the classroom. Their motivation was positively correlated with the length of the text, level of interest, relevance and appropriateness of the storyline. This study supports the use of authentic narrative texts in ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** authentic text, narrative text, ESL, reading motivation

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Email address: [ykeezrawati@unimas.my](mailto:ykeezrawati@unimas.my) (Keezrawati Mujan Yusuf)

\*Corresponding author

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Reading exposes students to the second language (L2) features such as vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure, which will ideally be noticed and modelled in their L2 production. Moreover, reading is helpful in introducing exciting topics, which will stimulate discussion and excite fascinating responses in the classroom. Some scholars regard reading as an integral component of language learning and essential for lifelong learning (Pandian, 1997).

English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors are encouraged to use various texts to teach reading skills. It will enrich students with vocabulary and language structure and, simultaneously, train them to apply reading skills for various purposes. It includes authentic texts, texts not explicitly designed for language learners. They were initially created to fulfil a social purpose in a first language community, such as articles from magazines or newspapers, menus, advertisements and websites (Little, 2014). It should be highlighted that authentic texts are not limited to texts written by native speakers of a language. They are texts produced for the native or proficient speakers of a language. Hence, authentic texts offer various styles, genres and formalities (Dewi, 2018). Unlike adapted texts or texts developed particularly for language learning purposes, authentic texts use more advanced linguistic features where unfamiliar words and complex sentences are featured (Harmer, 2014).

Proponents of authentic texts in L2 classrooms argue that authentic texts are more meaningful to learners as they can link the school and the natural world (Seunariningsih, 2010). It is proposed that this increases students' reading motivation as the topics are usually more interesting than the dull and often repetitive topics of inauthentic texts typically found in textbooks. It is suggested that the appealing content increases the eagerness of students to read for learning as well as leisure purposes. However, some scholars argue that authentic texts can be a de-motivator for students unfamiliar with the context or worldview presented in the texts (Nematollahi & Maghsoudi, 2015). Contexts that are too foreign for the students may hinder comprehension, thus decreasing their engagement with the text.

The use of authentic texts in L2 classrooms is also encouraged by its supporters as it provides high exposure to the "real language" (Dewi, 2018). According to Daskalovska (2014), exposing students to only adapted texts reduce their opportunity to expand their lexical repository in the target language. Those texts typically end at around a 3000-word level which is inadequate for effective use of the language in real-life contexts. On the other hand, authentic texts are lexically richer and therefore are regarded as excellent resources for vocabulary acquisition. It increases the tendency of incidental vocabulary learning (Shakibaei et al., 2019). It is suggested that students acquire new vocabulary when exposed to unfamiliar words in contexts when reading an authentic text. It is claimed that this compensates for the impracticality of teaching every word explicitly in the classroom (Shakibaei et al., 2019). It is paralleled with the findings of prior research that showed learners' exposure to English media, such as video games, websites, and TV series is a better predictor of their vocabulary size than formal schooling (Cetinkaya, 2021). It supports the notion that authentic materials are beneficial for second language acquisition.

Teaching authentic language helps students understand and produce the target language beyond the classroom context. Authentic texts also allow students to practice their skills with the types of texts they encounter outside the classroom. Exposing students to authentic English language usage aligns with the Malaysia Education Blueprint. It highlights mastering the English language as a critical aspect of the Malaysian public schooling system. One of the goals of public education in Malaysia is for every student to be "operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and language of unity, and in English as the international language of communication" (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 10). After completing their compulsory primary and secondary education, the students are hoped to thrive in English and Malay language environments.

However, the opponents of authentic texts claim that the "real language" used in the texts is often too difficult for the students, especially those of lower proficiency (Harmer, 2014). Authentic texts are less comprehensible for L2 learners due to sophisticated words and chunks, syntactic complexity and lack of explicit cohesive devices (Crossley & McNamara, 2016). Because of this, many teachers opt for simplified or inauthentic texts as they appear to be easier to process and understand due to the manipulation of linguistic features (Crossley et al., 2014).

In Malaysia, authentic texts are rarely used in the language classroom. It is the case for compulsory language subjects, Bahasa Melayu and English. The English curriculum's literature component includes studying novels by Western authors. Past novels included in the national English curriculums are literary classics such as Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe and The Phantom of the Opera by Gaston Leroux. However, the students are given the graded reader or simplified version of these novels instead of the authentic version, most probably due to its length and level of difficulty.

ESL (English as a Second Language) classes focus on academic English at the university level to equip students with the necessary language skills in the tertiary learning context. For this purpose, students are exposed to more authentic academic texts such as journal articles. In contrast, authentic narrative texts are not as widely used in university ESL classes. It is rather unfortunate as narrative texts provide rich language input for students. Unlike academic texts, narrative texts include many literary devices, such as metaphors. Kaal and Donszelmann (2018) say that a good grasp of metaphoric languages helps speakers make complex ideas more tangible. The practice can improve language learners' ability to interact in the target language.

Hence, this study aims to study the pre-university students' perception of authentic narrative text in their ESL class. The study also explores their reading motivation and the factors contributing to their motivation to read the prescribed text. The findings of this study are hoped to guide ESL instructors in choosing reading texts for their lessons. To achieve that, this study seeks to answer the following research questions;

- i. What is the level of acceptance of pre-university students towards using authentic narrative texts in an ESL class?

- ii. What are the contributing factors toward the motivation of pre-university students to read authentic narrative texts in an online ESL class?

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Participants**

The study was conducted on pre-university students in a public university in Sarawak (N=85). The students were enrolled in a Foundation in Sciences programme, a university preparatory programme, with the prospect of pursuing undergraduate programmes in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) at the same university. The students have had English classes for three hours each week. Due to the Movement Control Order (MCO) following the COVID-19 pandemic, all classes were conducted online. The focus of the English course was to enhance their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills to prepare them for Malaysian University English Test (MUET). All students who have scored at least a C in English in the Malaysian Certificate of Education, i.e., Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), are required to enter the pre-university programme. Out of 85 respondents, 67 students scored A for English in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), 14 scored B and 4 scored C. In their first semester of pre-university studies, 34 students achieved A, 48 scored B and three scored C in English. The result shows that most of the students have good proficiency in English.

### **2.2 Instrument**

A questionnaire consisting of 9 items was distributed to the students via Google Form. Out of the nine items, 1 was a closed question to collect the students' SPM results data, and seven items were on a Likert scale. The questionnaire was adapted from Guthrie et al. (2005). The original questionnaire was designed for younger children's logbooks to study their situational reading motivation in an extended reading program. In the current study, the sentences were paraphrased to make them suitable for older students. As this is an online questionnaire, several items from the original logbook were removed as a lengthier questionnaire may increase the tendency for careless responding (Gibson & Bowling, 2019). The questionnaire was divided into three parts; the first part asked for the students' English results in SPM and their first semester of pre-university studies, while the second part consisted of seven items that measured various aspects of the students' perception of the text which include its length and content appropriateness, language comprehensibility, interestingness and relevance. The third part consists of one item to measure the students' level of motivation to complete the reading task. Only 85 out of 662 students responded to the questionnaires. The close-question and Likert scale items were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v.25.

### **2.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

The students were given a short story titled Yesterday, initially written in Japanese by Haruki Murakami and translated into English by Jay Rubin. Although the text is translated, it is considered an authentic text because the English translation of the short story is intended for native or

proficient speakers of English. The short story tells the story of three college students in Tokyo. The students were given 10 MCQs (Multiple Choice Questions) and five open-ended questions related to the short story's storyline, characterisations, and themes. The students were also required to write an alternate ending for the story. The students were given one week to submit their answers. This activity was conducted in full online mode, where the students accessed the text and questions and offered their answers via the course' Learning Management System (LMS). After completing the activity, the students were asked to fill in the survey through Google Forms.

### **3 RESULTS**

The results show that 55.2% of the students chose Strongly Agree for Item 2, "Short stories like this should be included in the English class", followed by Agree (24.7%), Neutral (17.6%) and Disagree (2.4%). None of the students chose "Strongly Disagree". The finding shows that most students agreed that authentic narrative texts should be used in their English class. Since the students took the English course to prepare them for MUET and STEM undergraduate programs, it was assumed that they would want to focus on MUET practice and academic texts. Contrary to the earlier prediction at the start of the study, this finding shows that the students have a highly positive attitude towards using narrative texts in their lessons.

Analysis of items in Part C shows that 49.4% of the students chose Strongly Agree for Item 2, "I am motivated to finish reading the text.", followed by Agree (35.3%), Neutral (11.8%), Disagree (1.2%) and Strongly Disagree (2.4%). The result means that most of the students were highly motivated to read the given short story even without the supervision of an instructor, as the online reading activity was conducted in an asynchronous mode. Their high level of motivation in this reading activity could explain their willingness to include narrative texts in future English classes.

The correlation analysis of the items in Part C of the questionnaire shows that there were statistically significant correlations between motivation to read with the level of interest ( $r=.65$ ), appropriateness of storyline ( $r=.50$ ), appropriateness of the length of the text ( $r=.41$ ) and relevance of storyline ( $r=.30$ ). There was no statistically significant correlation between the motivation to read and the perceived level of difficulty of the text.

### **4 DISCUSSION**

The study sought to measure the level of acceptance of pre-university students towards using authentic narrative texts in an ESL class. The findings suggest that the pre-university students involved in the study had a high acceptance of using authentic short stories in their English class. The finding supports Kasuma and Tan (2019)'s research on university students' text preference in an online task. According to the study, the students were more interested in non-academic texts, especially creative texts such as short stories and extracts from popular novels and poems. Apart from improving the reading interest of the respondents, the study also discovered that the respondents perceived literature texts to be helpful in improving their reading skills which could explain their openness to incorporate literary texts in their English class. A similar analysis was iterated by Baba (2008), who mentioned that students appreciate the use of literary texts in ESL

classrooms. They were perceived to be useful mainly in language development, grammatical acquisition and lexical growth.

While the current study suggests that students highly accept authentic narrative texts, their acceptance may be enhanced by other factors such as pedagogical approaches. Previous research proposes that dull literature lessons cause a poor appreciation of literature among Malaysian students (Hashim & Abd Talib, 2019). On the other hand, exciting task design has been found to play a critical role in improving ESL students' attitudes towards using narrative texts in the classroom (Mara & Mohamed, 2021). Therefore, this proposes that authentic narrative texts should be integrated into a well-designed task to be positively accepted by the students.

The correlation analysis indicates that interest in the storyline is the most substantial contributing factor to the reading motivation of the respondents. This finding is unsurprising as authentic narrative texts are often more interesting than ESL coursebooks because the latter is limited to politically correct themes and avoids politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, -isms and pork (PARSNIPs) (Gray, 2002). In contrast, authentic short stories include a more comprehensive range of themes, making the text more creative and exciting. Interesting texts enhance the students' situational motivation to read, which is usually incited by the enjoyment of participating in the activity (Locher et al., 2019). Although situational basis is typically limited within the duration of the activity, Locher et al. (2019) mention that constant exposure to enjoyable reading activities could develop habitual motivation. Thus, exposure to exciting texts such as short stories can nurture students' reading habits and eventually improve their target language proficiency.

Appropriateness of the content and relevance are also positively correlated with reading motivation. Prior studies have noted that appropriate content is crucial in the classroom as insensitive topics may lead to disengagement (Buskist et al., 2018). The reading process may be interrupted and even stopped when the reader encounters inappropriate content. Similarly, narrative texts that are irrelevant or culturally distant from the readers are less comprehensible, leading to reading demotivation (Kim, 2018). These factors cannot be side-lined because reading is a mental process beyond decoding alphabetical symbols. Reading entails comprehension beyond the literal level, with readers actively analysing and critically responding to the material based on their prior knowledge of the subject (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Without this knowledge, the students may not relate and respond to the text, which lowers reading motivation. Hence, Chitravelu et al. (2005) emphasise that ESL instructors need to find readers with sufficient world experience and knowledge to engage with the texts.

The current study also revealed that reading motivation is affected by the length of the text. This finding supports prior research that text length is a barrier to reading as lengthier texts are often perceived as complex and associated with an unenjoyable reading experience (Yusuf et al., 2019). Eccles (1983) explains that the cost of a task, which refers to what has to be endured or given up due to participating in the activity, influences an individual's motivation. Longer texts may be seen

as costlier in terms of time and effort, which decreases the readers' motivation. On the other hand, shorter texts may be less demanding in terms of time and effort, increasing reading motivation.

Out of all factors being studied, the perceived difficulty of the text is the only factor found to have no statistically significant correlation with reading motivation. The finding contrasts with prior research findings that a text's comprehensibility correlates with reading motivation, as readers are likelier to give up when reading a difficult text (Tisa et al., 2021). It should be noted that the current study is conducted among high proficiency students, where nearly 80% of the respondents scored A for their English subject in SPM. Hence, most students may find the text to be easy to read. It creates a limitation when comparing the level of motivation of readers of various perceived levels of text difficulties.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study explored pre-university students' perception of an authentic narrative text in an online ESL classroom. The findings show that the students' acceptance of the authentic narrative text was high. This high level of acceptance may be contributed by several factors that have positively influenced their reading motivation: the exciting storyline, appropriateness, relevance, and text length. Their positive experience in this specific reading activity may have contributed to their positive attitude toward authentic narrative texts. Therefore, they were willing to incorporate similar texts in the future.

Therefore, ESL instructors are encouraged to incorporate authentic narrative text in their lessons. However, this must be coupled with creative and effective teaching approaches encouraging students to explore, reflect and respond to the text. Instructors should consider the factors that increase reading motivation and select a suitable text for their students.

There are several limitations to this study. The class was conducted asynchronously due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a huge factor that can severely affect the students' reading motivation, but it was not studied in the current research. Therefore, future studies should explore the effect of the mode of study on the students' motivation to read short stories by comparing students attending online and face-to-face classes. Moreover, the study was conducted among mostly high proficiency students, which was not a representative population sample. It enables the researcher to make a comparison between students of different proficiency. Thus, in future research, the model should include participants with various levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, the current study used self-reported data where the students may respond according to what is considered socially desirable, especially since the researcher is their teacher. Hence, researchers who aim to explore similar topics in the future can consider adding qualitative components to the study, such as through interviews, to obtain rich data.

The study would provide an elaboration on the effect of genre on the students' acceptance and reading motivation. Apart from that, this study focuses only on one type of authentic narrative text: short stories. Similar studies can be conducted on other literary text types, such as poems and plays.

The usage of texts from other authentic sources, such as newspapers and magazine articles, may also be studied.

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