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## Literacy: State of the Art at the Tertiary Level

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Malaysia is rapidly moving into an information-technology age in which full participation in education, science, business, industry and the professions is necessary and inevitable. The steady increase in the standards of literacy in the dynamic, socio-economic environment must be met with. What seemed an adequate level of literacy in the 1980s seems marginal now. Hence, it is essential that tertiary-level students attain a reasonable if not an excellent standard of literacy – literacy in English in particular, to meet the demands of the information era.

It is imperative that students in higher institutions of learning keep abreast of the surge of information. Despite other powerful mediums that disseminate information, the print remains, whether it be on the screen of the computer or otherwise, the main source of information at the tertiary level for academic learning. The dire need is to produce independent readers who have the capacity to discriminate the overwhelming flow of information; readers who are aware of their own thinking and, therefore critical. readers who are empowered by literacy.

Pugh and Pawan (1994) support *The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Report* (1989) which contends that college and university faculties are overwhelmingly critical of the type of students they are getting. While Arons (1979) regrets the lack of metacognitive awareness in tertiary level students, Clifford (1984) posits that, they do not fit the definition set by Western academic institutions which purport that literate individuals are those who are able to synthesize, organize and interpret ideas as well as apply information gained from reading to new situations. High literacy abilities of the kind, is viewed as the means by which individuals become informed readers, "that is, readers guided by awareness of their own prior knowledge and its contributions to the new meanings they construct from texts" (Fish, 1980 in Pugh:18, 1994).

In Malaysia, Osman Bakar - ex-deputy vice-chancellor of a university regrets that, "The students are extending their spoon-fed learning through university They depend too much on lecture notes. This cannot be" (Silverman, 1996:25). Ungku Aziz - ex-vice-chancellor and a veteran educator shares the same sentiment: "You can learn how to design drainpipes, but at the same time you should be able to think" He believes this truth is getting lost "while people go madly on this paper chase. It's a pity" (Silverman, 1996:25). Likewise, Bizell (1987) suggests that it is not enough to be able to apply the knowledge one has derived from print "for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (p:129). Rustam Sani (1988) of the *Institute of Strategic and International Studies* perceives that our system of education is able to produce an intelligent generation i.e. a formally educated group who have specific knowledge, but is not able to produce intellectuals.

A local professor has an unusual complaint: He says that he gets too much respect because people who listen to him hang on his every word, agree with him and repeat his statement virtually verbatim months later and that makes him nervous. Khoo Kay Kim, *The Far Eastern Economic Review* states, is haunted by the silence in the classroom, "I don't know how to handle the students - they are too obedient We look for some spark. But they don't know how not to conform. And if all you do is conform, how can you achieve a breakthrough?" It is a question, Silverman (1996) feels, Malaysia has yet to answer - but must. Like other countries across developing Asia, Malaysia is facing a new economic era. Malaysia will need more educated and better-educated people, young men and women who are not just compliant but creative.

The urgency is for a critical mind-set, among tertiary level students. Marzano and Arredondo (1986) offer some very basic reasons why thinking should be taught to be successful in the information age and the rapidly changing environment in which knowledge of the world increases 8-15% every year, it is imperative that thinking skills be overtly taught. Glaser (1984) says, a changed environment in which a new relationship between students and their subject matter, in which knowledge and skill become objects of interrogation, inquiry, and extrapolation is necessary. Namaddu (1989) extends literacy further to include notions of self-organization or the abilities to direct one's thinking, to develop one's thought and actions. In other words, literacy is expected not only to develop one's cognitive abilities but also intellectual abilities (Kim, 1992).

### The Problem

In Malaysia, "reading, or rather not reading, became a problem to be reckoned with, in the early eighties. It is only from then, that concerted effort has been taken by all those concerned with the literate-but-not-reading public" (Ramaiah, 1994: 79). In a nation-wide survey conducted by Atan bin Loug, in 1982, it was found that 97% of the 15,054 respondents read newspapers, 67% read magazines, 42% read books and that 58% did not read any kind of books at all. A small number of the respondents (0.028) had library membership. Statistics of this kind clearly shows that serious reading is generally shunned.

Kibat (1991) feels that this may be so because, the development of reading interests in Malaysia has always been hampered by various problems and constraints including an insufficient number of books published in the country, ineffective library services and probably by a phenomena called "bibliophobia" (p. 9).

Apart from these problems, it can be said that, culturally, reading is taken for granted and viewed as a skill that is 'picked up' naturally as one is exposed to more and more print. This is substantiated by those in the surrounding who are not 'educated' in the formal sense but are highly literate. They read newspapers, magazines and the like with no obvious difficulty and function on that basis. Transfer of information or information-gathering for practical purposes is seen as the primary purpose of reading. This thought has led not only the lay-man but also the educationists to believe that reading is a skill that is easily

acquired and inadvertently learnt. Hence, the need to formally teach reading is rarely felt or understood.

Another serious shortcoming of the culture and the education system is the notion that, when one reads one understands. In other words, reading is taken to mean comprehension. Although, ideally, reading should mean comprehension, and it seems irrational to dichotomize reading from understanding, in practice, however, it is evident that it is possible to decode with very little or superficial understanding.

Abdul Razak (1989) attributes other factors to the poor reading standards: the poor command of the English language, he feels, makes it much more difficult for these students to read academic textbooks. This is attested by a fourth-year university student who frankly admits: "I study the lecture notes; seldom read other things. Some of the books are written in English. I find difficulty with the reading" (Silverman:26, 1996). Abdul Razak also contends that

.. a vast majority of our university students are not adequately prepared with the necessary knowledge, skills and reading strategies particularly in reading comprehension activities, while they are in secondary school. (p.2).

Abdul Razak's observations show that the problem is compounded. Tertiary level students do not read not only due to a lack of proficiency in the English language but also because they have not been trained in the strategies that are imperative to reading. Barnett (1989) too attributes this shortfall to the method in which reading is taught in schools:

Traditional EFL/ESL comprehension courses seem to teach to the level of competence, without taking into account the specific needs of the reader course work often focuses on specific sub-skills such as word or sentence recognition, that is, literal comprehension skills. As a consequence, many students learn to answer not by understanding the text well, but by looking progressively through a text, following the questions as they go. (In Ponniah:36, 1993)

Reeve et. al. (1985) contend that :

Some students' comprehension problems may be due, at least in part, to the mistaken assumption that their "everyday" thinking skills are sufficient for academic success. Academic success, on the other hand, requires deliberate, effortful thinking, which places a far greater emphasis than does "everyday thinking on precision, accurate comprehension, and monitoring of performance. Opting to read passively, in the hope that learning will occur as easily as it does in daily functioning, is likely to lead to difficulties. It also requires readers to determine if they are employing the mental operations that will produce learning. (p:625)

Undergraduates appear to not only take texts for granted as Gospel Truth but also fail to see text as a whole they seem to decode in fragments, extracting meaning from parts that they think they understand and ignore the rest (Ramaiah and Nambiar, 1993). As evidenced in the full quote from the study on the comprehension monitoring of the B.Ed TESL undergraduates, it appears that students focus on micro level issues, not on macro level messages.

Students have been so oriented towards reading basically for information, such that, even after being alerted to the fact that there are errors in the text, the majority (including the higher level proficiency students) were not able to pick out obvious logical discrepancies. . . Students seemed to focus on intra sentential rather than on inter sentential consistency. It can be said that students are so steeped in searching for information, that they fail to notice structural and logical anomalies that should have been obvious to an average reader (1993:104, Ramaiah and Nambiar).

Broadly, five main factors affect reading in the schools in Malaysia: the education system, instructional methods, teacher beliefs and attitudes, instructional materials, and student attitudes and mind-set. These factors have, as their focus, the acquisition of information or the product at the expense of process. This has led to the development of a literacy that goes little beyond the simplistic notion of literally knowing how to read and write.

In spite of the print culture that is overpowering by its mere size, there seems to be a loophole in the Malaysian education system that allows uncritical absorption of information, that allows an unquestioning state of mind, and complacency. The discriminating power which is imperative in the wake of information explosion is distinctly lacking.

Examinations held at the school and tertiary levels alike, focus on information-getting. To accommodate large-scale marking in common government examinations administered across the country, the system has resorted to objective and short-answer type questions focused on micro level information processing. This has led teachers to not only set such question types in their school examinations (so that the format of the question paper in itself will not be a problem to students) but has also encouraged students to read text just enough to get the information and tick answers. The nature of the questions are also of the type that requires literal level and not deep level processing of text. Thus, it could be safely said that reading is for fact-crunching rather than for involving students in the “macro logical” (Paul, 1987) sense of academic literacy which involves inquiry and critical thinking.

Both in the school system as well as at the tertiary level the traditional method of teaching reading prevails (Ng, 1992; Ramaiah and Nambiar, 1994; Kaur, 1996). The general characteristics are that: it is teacher-centered; it follows strictly the classic triad of teacher-questioning, student-response, and teacher feedback; it focuses mainly on literal level questioning and accommodates short answers; it relies heavily on text-book instructions.

At the tertiary level, however, a new dimension is added to the way reading is taught. Discrete skills or sub-skills like skimming, scanning, finding main points, generalizing, inferring, and many others are commonly taught. Although many teachers may believe that these are reading strategies, Brown, Armbruster and Baker (1985) point out that research increasingly reveals that metacognition plays a vital role in reading, and strategies, therefore, must include a discussion of metacognitive knowledge and skills and their implications for effective reading. Garcia and Pearson (1990) say “current theoretical views of reading comprehension do not support a discrete skills perspective . . . but rather strategies which connote a flexible plan that is under the conscious control of the reader” (p: 2.4).

Predominantly, teaching of reading is not envisaged as a, “metacognitive skills training program which includes practice in appropriate strategies, explicit instruction in the orchestration, overseeing and monitoring of these skills (self – regulation training) and their range of utility (awareness training)” (Palinscar & Brown, 1983:7)

It is, on the other hand, seen as sub-skill development, or at best, seen as providing different permutations of the discreet skills.

Materials that teach these skills are also often seen to deal with one particular skill at a time. Teaching reading skills on a piecemeal, fragmented fashion does not help very much because it is difficult to summon the warranted skills (by the task at hand) accordingly and on time. Teaching discreet skills in isolation, without metacognitive commitment seems to be an unnatural approach to the teaching of reading, because as Shih (1992) propounds,

. . . just because students can select a main idea or make an inference from a brief passage does not necessarily mean that they can extract the major concepts from a complete chapter or critically analyze a theory. One of the major reasons that reading classes are unsuccessful is that they teach students how to break reading into small, isolated fragments but do not teach them how to put them back together again (p. 299).

Generally there is too much emphasis on the product rather than the process of reading comprehension in the Malaysian education system. Teachers of reading are very much concerned with rights and wrongs as end products of comprehension exercises rather than with the actual process of reading.

Although it seems logical to expect students to understand texts thoroughly before attempting to answer comprehension questions, in practice, a superficial reading of text and an emphasis on answering comprehension questions is seen. As teachers believe that reading is a skill that is acquired naturally over time, there is very little emphasis laid on direct instruction of reading strategies. Rather, students are unwittingly encouraged to read well enough to find right answers for comprehension questions and are led to believe that the higher the mark the better the understanding. Also, students are led back to scrutinize the text only when answers go wrong. Reading, in other words, is seen as a skill that is dictated and directed by the task rather than as an activity that ensues from the cognitive faculties of the reader, enabling him to understand text holistically with or without the task.

When one examines what could have led to this state of affairs, a striking factor seems to be the reigning behavioristic school of thought in the education system. A curriculum that expects a statement of what a learner is expected to know or able to do after completing an educational program – a curriculum

that functions on the premise that "behavior can and should be studied in terms of physical processes only" (Richards, 1985: 27), has been shaping the teaching methodologies used in schools and at the tertiary level.

With a theory of psychology that stresses on physical behavior rather than on "concepts like mind or ideas, or any kind of mental behavior" (Richards, 1985:27) as a guiding principle, the education system has evolved into an institution that lays emphasis on assessment. Since a criterion is set and students have to perform to that standard, there is very little scope for "training the mind or in current terms, teaching children to learn to learn" (Blagg, 1991:1). Behaviorism, Blagg reinforces,

has been responsible for learning, task and curriculum analysis, precision teaching, behavioral objectives approaches, and a shift from normative assessment procedures to criterion referenced approaches. However, although behaviorism has made significant contributions to the teaching of basic skill hierarchies and the management of certain kinds of behavioral difficulties, it has not been able to tackle more complex behavior. (1991:4)

Pursuing the same line of thought, Blagg (1991) states that although the idea of teaching children to become better learners through self-questioning has been in existence since Socrates and Plato, "teaching children how to become better learners has been rarely featured as a central, coordinated, curricular aim in our schools" (p.1).

One other factor that works against the teaching of learning strategies is the teacher factor. Ng (1992) purports that teachers are afraid to teach learning strategies lest students learn independent thinking and as a result challenge their authority in the classroom. Teachers are also seen to be afraid of the consequence of thinking and the use of learning strategies.

Ng (1992) also deduces that the lack of interest among teachers in teaching learning strategies is due to the fact that they have not been trained in it. She says, "an over-whelming majority of them have indicated that their university or college teacher-education prepared them inadequately for appraising and encouraging the use of learning strategies". (p.10)

Kim (1992), in her discussion on the value system of teachers, posits that in most Malaysian schools, full control of the teachers in the teaching and

learning is greatly emphasized. She further adds that “pupils are rarely guided through self-direction and self-regulation to improve their own performance” (p:201).

Kim also attributes the strain that teachers undergo in their multifarious roles in various activities in and outside school” (p. 206) as one of the reasons for the narrow conceptions of literacy. The other reasons are:

There are specific time frames for teachers to complete syllabus items, to carry out the routine of testing and assessing pupils and present reports to parents. In situations where teachers have to deal with classes of more than forty pupils in class, there is a need for teachers to be pertinent (p. 206).

A fourth factor that does not lend itself to the propagation of learning strategies is the instructional materials. They are deficient in engaging students in learning strategies. Although the philosophy, the aims and objectives of the Ministry of Education, are not met by textbook writers and principles like the integration of skills, content and values are attended to, what is clearly left out when one examines the text books from cover to cover is the conscious effort to teach learning strategies (Ng, 1992:12)

Apart from the constraints of the system, teacher inadequacies and material deficiencies, one needs to also consider the attitudes and the mind set of the students as well, for if the receiver is not receptive, even the most viable and effective method can fall apart. The de facto mind set that students at the tertiary level have has actually compounded the problem of passive reading. Rath et.al. (1967) posit eight common behavioral syndromes related to the habitual disregard for the application of learning strategies. They are: (1) impulsiveness to finish the task at hand; (2) overdependence on the teacher; (3) lack of concentration or concerted effort; (4) rigidity or inflexibility in thinking; (5) dogmatic and assertive behavior that will not tolerate critical scrutiny; (6) extreme lack of self-confidence because of lack of opportunities to share their thinking without being ridiculed; (7) missing and misinterpreting the purpose of a task; (8) unwillingness to carry out independent thinking operations. Ng (1992) attests to the above and regrets that teachers have not done anything to correct the situation.

To sum up, the lack of interest in reading as a part of culture, constraints in the environment, conventional schools of thought of what learning ought to be and ensuing concepts of literacy, and the practice in schools, have led to the propagation of mediocre students with inadequate intellectual capacity. It seems that the entire system of education and what it ought to be, is coordinated by one guiding principle, that is, the acquisition of information. How it is acquired and the quality of the acquisition and thereby, the quality of the product, seems to have been overlooked.

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