

“I always need a translation to read”: Malay-English Bilingual Children’s Reading Preferences

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Keywords: *Bilingual reading, reading habits and preferences, school libraries, book collections, primary school, Singapore*

Abstract

Bilingual reading enhances children’s cognitive skills and nurtures them to be proficient bilinguals. This paper examines Malay-English bilingual students’ reading habits and preference in both Malay and English reading and the Malay collection in school libraries to identify ways to increase bilingual children’s reading engagement. Data collection from two Singapore primary schools consists of surveys, interviews, focus groups and library observations. It was found that students’ reading preferences are influenced by their struggle to comprehend the Malay text and consequently, they find Malay books less appealing. In terms of relevance and visibility, the quality of the book collection is vital to encourage students’ reading engagement. Finally, this paper discusses suggestions and strategies in promoting primary school students’ bilingual reading.

Introduction

Reading achievement is critical for academic success and research studies have shown that it correlates with engaged reading (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Reading achievement is also dependent on reading skills (Mol & Bus, 2011) which have been associated with children’s reading preferences (Moss, 2007). Research has shown that reading in different languages enhances cognitive skills in terms of concentration, memory and information-processing (Friesen et al., 2015; Blom et al., 2014; Blumenfeld & Marian, 2014). In other words, bilingual reading leads to increased proficiencies in different languages (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011).

In the context of Singapore’s bilingual education, students are required to study English language as their first language and their respective Mother Tongue (MT) languages as a second language; Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay language for the Malays and Tamil language for the Indians (Wee, 2005). Singapore’s bilingual policy in education has warranted English Language as the main medium of instruction in schools and across all subjects except for MTs. As a result, English Language serves as Singaporeans’ first language and working language. Its’ importance is attributed to its’ synonymy with economic gains, advancements, technology and higher education (Ng, 2014). At the same time, the MT languages was to act as cultural ballast, necessary for the transmission of cultural values and preservation of heritage (Pakir, 1992; Wee, 2003).

Hence, bilingual reading is important for Singapore Malay-English bilinguals, not only due to the gains in cognitive skills, but also because proficiency in both English and Malay allows them to better understand their heritage and connect with communities in a globalised world (Ang, 2018; Teng, 2019). However, the emphasis on English as the official school and working language has led to the perception that English language has a much higher status than the MTs. As a result, there is an increased use of English as home language and a decline in the use of Malay language among children (Ministry Of Education, 2011).

There are local studies that focused on the bilingual reading habits of Singapore adults (National Library Board, 2017) and the bilingual reading habits of female secondary school students in Singapore (Majid, Ng & Su, 2017), but there has not been any research on the reading habits and preferences of bilingual Malay-English students in primary schools. This study aims to fill the gap by examining primary school students' reading habits and preferences in both Malay and English reading, and the Malay book collection in school libraries to identify ways to increase bilingual children's reading engagement. The following questions guided the study:

- (1) What are the reading habits and preferences of 9 to 11-year-old Malay Language students in two primary schools for English and Malay reading?
- (2) How does the Malay collection in school libraries influence their reading preference?

Literature Review

Reading Habits and Preferences

Reading has been shown to contribute to student achievement (Krashen, 2004), which is why schools, librarians and educators are concerned with increasing students' reading engagement. Research has shown that there is a decline in reading attitude and reading frequency as children grow older (Hall & Coles, 1999; Bokhorst-Heng & Pereira, 2008; McKenna et al., 2012). In fact, in a study by Scholastic (2019), the downward trend starts at the age of nine. Students revealed that they would read more books if they had more time and if they enjoyed it more (Majid, 2018; Clark & Foster, 2005). Additionally, Singapore students from both primary and secondary schools reported to have the same major reasons for reading. They mostly read English books for academically-related or functional reasons such as for better grades and to improve language (Loh, 2015; Majid & Tan, 2007).

Earlier studies on English reading preferences showed that children enjoy reading books on diverse topics but the most popular fiction genre is adventure followed by comedy, horror and mystery as other favourites (Clark & Foster, 2005; Majid & Tan, 2007; Majid, 2018; Choo & Loh, 2018). As for non-fiction books, Majid & Tan (2007) found that students aged 9 to 12 from three primary schools indicated handicraft, sports as well as animals and plants as their top three popular choices. In a recent study by Choo & Loh (2018), students from Primary 2 to Primary 6 revealed that animals, science, history as well as art and crafts were their popular choices.

Bilingual Reading Habits and Preferences

There is limited literature on the reading habits and preferences of Singapore Malay bilinguals for both English and Malay reading. Amongst them is a sociolinguistic study in Singapore by Norhaida (2009) which investigated linguistic choices made by Singapore bilingual 10-year-old students. The study found that the majority of the students rated themselves as having high levels of proficiency in reading in both English and Malay Language. However, they "generally read English books more frequently than they do books in Malay" (p. 58). This issue was also observed in a Singapore study by Bibi Jan (2011) on reading motivation. In a pre-test, 23.1% of 14 to 16-year-old students indicated a preference to read in English,

rather than their own MT Languages. Additionally, 80% of them reported that reading is important and 29.3% claims to read only for academic purposes.

A survey of 163 student teachers aged 22-years-old revealed that they preferred English reading to MT because they perceived themselves to be more proficient in English and had more access to a variety of English reading materials (Hsui, 1996). In Majid, Ng & Su's (2017) study, secondary school students preferred reading books in English language despite using two or more languages at home. The literature suggests that language proficiency could be a contributing factor for the preference of English language in students' reading activities.

School Libraries, Book Collections and Reading

School libraries are positively linked to students' academic achievement (Williams et al., 2013) and this is attributed to the presence of qualified librarians (Ofsted, 2006) and their book collection that supports reading (Adkins & Brendler, 2015). In New York, Small, Shanahan and Stanak's study (2010) found that librarians play a vital role in the development of student's reading skills and in supporting students' reading interest. Furthermore, Teravainen and Clark (2017) reported that school library users have more positive reading attitudes than non-users in which they have an increased confidence in reading, increasing motivation to read and as a result, they participate more in reading.

An increased access to books, as provided by school libraries, increases students' motivation to engage in reading (McQuillan & Au, 2001). While having a large book collection is linked to better reading (Lance & Schwarz, 2012), having access to a broad range of books is found to support students' positive reading attitude, increase reading frequency (Merga, 2015) and subsequently, reading achievement (Kirsch et al., 2002).

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA School Libraries Section Standing Committee, 2015) recommends that book collections in school libraries reflects "the national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, indigenous and other unique population identities of members of the school community" (p. 8). There is evidence that a quality and diverse book collection which appeals to students' reading interests contributes to positive learning (Williams, Coles & Wavell, 2002).

In a study by Loh et al. (2017), a secondary school library updated their book collection with many new titles and formats of books such as comics and magazines. Although the refreshed collection was smaller than before, there was an upward trend of book loans because there was a wider variety of books and they were advertised on physical displays and on social media platforms. With the new collection, quality books were made available for all readers, even for the weaker readers. By having a wider range of quality books that were strategically displayed and advertised, students were drawn to read or borrow books at the school library (Makatche and Oberline, 2011).

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods case study approach to examine the reading habits and preferences of Malay bilingual students aged 9 to 11 year-old in two Singapore primary schools; Pristine Primary School and Wonder Primary School (pseudonyms are used throughout the paper). Data collection consists of surveys, interviews, focus groups and observations. Bilingual reading surveys, consisting of both closed and open-ended questions, were administered online to two classes each from three levels (Primary 3=49, Primary 4=51 and Primary 5=43) and a total of 145 responses were recorded (81 from Pristine Primary School, 64 from Wonder Primary School).

An interview with the Malay Language teacher was conducted to find out more about the school's reading culture and the Malay book collection in the school library. The focus groups were conducted with Primary 4 and Primary 5 students, with four boys and four girls from each level to provide insights into the students' reading habits and preferences in both Malay and English. The interview and the focus groups were guided by semi-structured questions and were transcribed for analysis. The observations in the two school libraries were conducted for two days, each lasting for three hours. Besides making notes of the students' behaviour and selection of books, there were informal conversations with the librarian to find out more about the library environment.

Finally, the Malay book collection in the two school libraries were evaluated based on five characteristics of quality children's literature, compiled and adapted from *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction* by Russell (2015), *Children's Literature, Briefly* by Tunnell et al. (2012) and *The Book Matters! Choosing Complex Narrative Texts to Support Literary Discussion* by Hoffman et al. (2015);

- (1) Positive and rich language – each word and sentence is carefully selected and structured by the author to provide readers with complex meaning and imagery;
- (2) Pictures and illustrations that strengthens the text and increases children's depth of comprehension and enjoyment;
- (3) Physical features of the book is appropriate for the child, in terms of thickness, weight, font type and size;
- (4) Possess a convincing plot with believable and well-developed characters; and
- (5) Elicits a positive response from children – encourage them to inculcate values and inspire them to be a better person.

It is important to note that these characteristics should be appropriate to the different stages and aspects of a child's development (cognitive, social and moral development).

The Context

This study is set in two co-educational Singapore primary schools; Pristine Primary School and Wonder Primary School.

Pristine Primary School have won awards for effective practices and systems that contributes to desirable educational outcomes. As part of the extensive reading initiative, the school practices a DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) program every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday which takes place during curriculum hours for 30 minutes. English and MT reading are scheduled on specific weekdays (English reading every Tuesday and Wednesday, MT reading every Thursday). In addition, the school's Malay Language department have their own Malay book collection for students. Different short story compilation books are loaned to students every month. The school library was last renovated in 2017 and a stage, which serves as a performance space, as well as media equipment was added. The library is managed by the school's head of ICT (Info-Communication and Technology) department and supported by a Library Coordinator who is a Malay Language teacher.

Wonder Primary School practices a Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program which takes place daily during the weekdays before curriculum hours. Students will read silently for an average of 10 minutes depending on the time they arrive in school. English and MT reading are also scheduled on specific weekdays (three days for English reading and two days for MT reading). The school's Malay Language

department has their own collection of Malay books that are made available to students in the classroom. The students are able to browse and read them during their free time during Malay Language lessons. In 2017, Wonder Primary School started a MakerSpace – a space within the school library – to provide students opportunities to explore new areas, to create new products and to innovate through activities such as coding and STEM projects. The MRL (Media Resource Library) committee is led by the school’s head of ICT (Info-Communication and Technology) department and assisted by two Chinese language teachers as library coordinator and teacher.

The Findings

Malay-English Bilingual Students’ Reading Habits and Preferences

Importance of Reading.

In this study, a larger proportion of students value reading in English (96.6%) than in Malay (87.6%) (Figure 1). Students from the focus group sessions associated the importance of reading in both English and Malay with the ability to communicate effectively in a multilingual society, to excel in their examinations, to gain better career prospects and to succeed in life;

Because you need to speak English with friends of other races. (Rilla)

We have to do good in both English and Malay exams. (Anis)

If you want to become a good doctor or scientist, you need to know a lot of languages to travel or to talk to patients. (Rahim)

I think we need both languages to carry us far in life. (Elly)

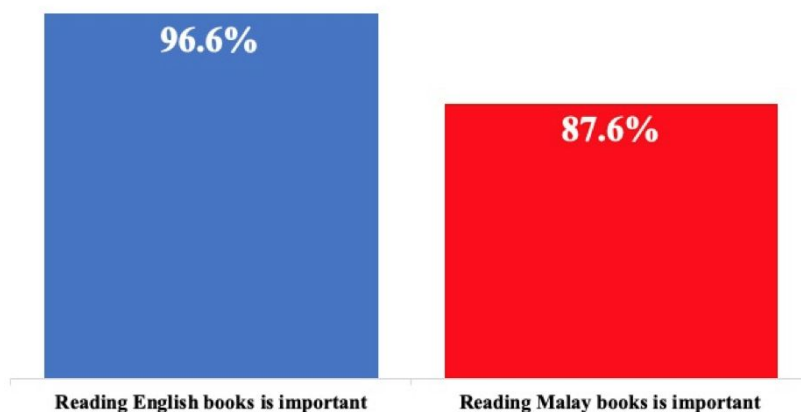


Figure 1. Percentage of students who value reading in English and Malay.

There were also students who disagreed that reading in English is equally important to reading in Malay. For example, Sammy believed that English reading is more important because English is the language of instruction for majority of the school subjects whereas Malay is the language of instruction for only one school subject. On the other hand, Razif believed that Malay reading is more important because it would help preserve the Malay identity and culture;

Malay is getting less known. English is taking over and I think we should read Malay so that our Malay tradition and language will stay with us. After all, we are Malay. (Razif)

The responses from Sammy and Razif are most likely the consequence of the bilingual policy in which English is known to be the common language whereas Malay language acts as a cultural repository (Curd-Christiansen & Sun, 2016; Subhan, 2018).

Students' reading competency and reading enjoyment.

As shown in Figure 2, it was found that more students perceived themselves as competent English readers (95.9%) as compared to competent Malay readers (75.8%). Also, there was a larger proportion of students who enjoyed reading in English (97.9%) than in Malay (88.7%) (Figure 3). This suggests that students' reading competency, as perceived by themselves, correlates with their reading enjoyment (Bokhorst-Heng & Pereira, 2008).

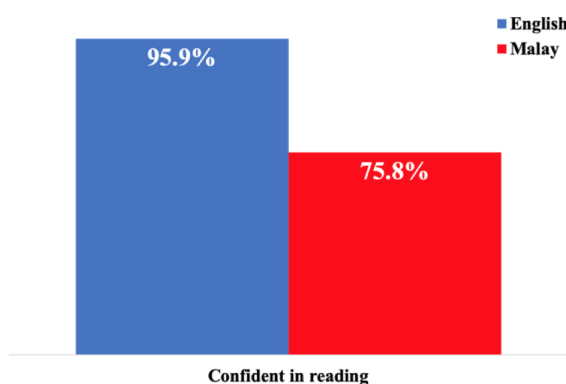


Figure 2. Percentage of students who perceived themselves as competent readers in English and Malay.

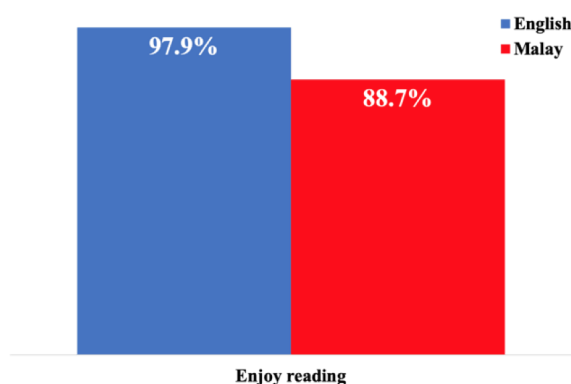


Figure 3. Percentage of students who enjoy reading in English and Malay.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of students who perceived themselves as competent English and Malay readers across all levels. As compared to the Primary 4 cohort, lesser students in the Primary 5 cohort are confident in both English and Malay reading. 98% of Primary 4 students and 95.4% of Primary 5 students considered themselves as competent English readers, whereas 78.4% of Primary 4 students and 72.1% of Primary 5 students considered themselves as competent Malay readers.

Additionally, the Primary 4 cohort reported the highest percentage of students who enjoy reading in English (100%) and in Malay (94%) (Figure 5). In comparison, the lowest percentage of students who enjoy reading came from the Primary 5 cohort (95.4% for English and 83.7% for Malay).

During the focus group sessions, students revealed that they have difficulty comprehending the Malay text, which in turn, impedes their Malay reading enjoyment and simultaneously, motivates their preference for English books. This can be seen from the following responses:

I understand most of the words in English but in the Malay books, more than twenty, I don't understand. (Hadi)

I think I prefer English because I understand more of the words and normally the books that I like, they don't make it in Malay. (Elly)

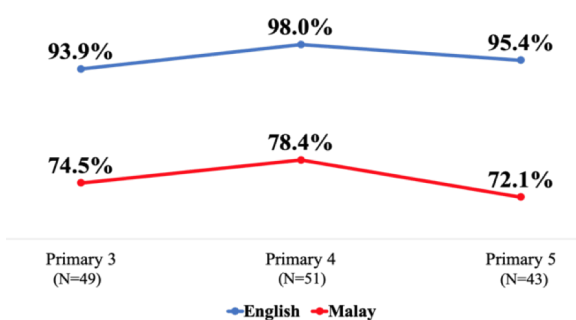


Figure 4. Percentage of students who perceived themselves as competent English and Malay readers across levels.

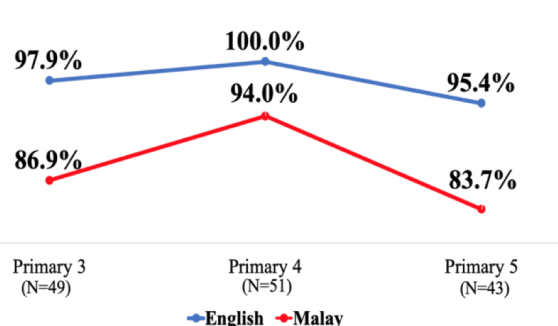


Figure 5. Percentage of students who enjoy English and Malay reading across levels.

In the survey, students were asked to rank their reasons for reading English and Malay books on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was their “most preferred reason” and 5 “least preferred reason”. The responses illustrate that students have different reasons for reading in English and in Malay as presented in Table 1.

Overall, students’ top reason to read in English is “for enjoyment” (mean: 2.78) whereas for Malay reading, they indicated “for better grades” (mean: 2.69). This suggests that students are intrinsically motivated for English reading since they read for pleasure and, at the same time, extrinsically motivated for Malay reading as they read for functional purposes.

Table 1

Reasons for English and Malay Reading

| Rank | Reasons for English reading | Mean (1~5) | Reasons for Malay reading | Mean (1~5) |
|------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|------------|
| 1 | For enjoyment | 2.78 | For better grades | 2.69 |
| 2 | For better grades | 2.99 | For learning | 3.01 |
| 3 | For learning | 3.00 | For enjoyment | 3.05 |
| 4 | To relax | 3.01 | To improve language | 3.06 |
| 5 | To improve language | 3.21 | To relax | 3.19 |

Across all levels, there were clear differences in students’ reasons for reading enjoyment in English and in Malay as summarized in Table 2. For English reading, the top reason indicated by the Primary 3 cohort is

“for enjoyment” (mean: 2.51), Primary 4 “for learning” (mean: 2.8) and Primary 5 “for better grades” (mean: 2.74).

On the other hand, for Malay reading, the most popular reason among the Primary 3 cohort is “to relax” (mean: 2.76) whereas “for better grades” appears to be the most popular among the Primary 4 (mean: 2.74) and Primary 5 (mean: 2.63) cohort. The survey data suggests that Primary 3 students engage in English and Malay reading primarily for pleasure while Primary 4 and Primary 5 students read for functional purposes such as “for better grades” and “for learning”.

Table 2

Top three reasons for English and Malay reading enjoyment across levels

| Rank | Reasons for English reading enjoyment | Mean (1~5) | Reasons for Malay reading enjoyment | Mean (1~5) |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| <i>Primary 3</i> | | | | |
| 1 | For enjoyment | 2.51 | To relax | 2.76 |
| 2 | To relax | 2.80 | For better grades | 2.78 |
| 3 | For better grades | 2.88 | For enjoyment | 2.91 |
| <i>Primary 4</i> | | | | |
| 1 | For learning | 2.80 | For better grades | 2.74 |
| 2 | To improve language | 2.92 | To improve language | 2.84 |
| 3 | For enjoyment | 2.96 | For learning | 2.94 |
| <i>Primary 5</i> | | | | |
| 1 | For better grades | 2.74 | For better grades | 2.63 |
| 2 | For enjoyment | 2.90 | For learning | 2.84 |
| 3 | For learning | 2.93 | To improve language | 3.00 |

Students’ Reading Engagement.

Reading engagement refers to behavioural acts of effort, time and persistence in reading (Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012). Quantitative data shows that students are more engaged in English reading than in Malay. Almost daily, 31% of students in both schools participate in English reading whereas only 9.4% of students participate in Malay reading (Figure 6). Besides that, as shown in Figure 7, a larger proportion of students can read longer than 15 minutes for English books (69.8%) than for Malay books (50.6%). This suggests that more students are able to engage in English reading than Malay reading.

Additionally, in both schools, there are students who do not read English and Malay books (Figure 8 and Figure 9) despite the SSR programs. We observed that a larger proportion of students do not read Malay books as compared to those who do not read in English. However, as shown in Figure 9, the same pattern was not observed for the Primary 5 students at Wonder Primary (28% of students do not read English books whereas 12% do not read in Malay).

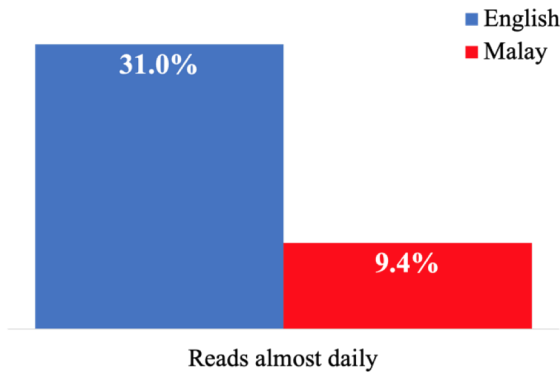


Figure 6. Percentage of students who read English and Malay books almost daily.

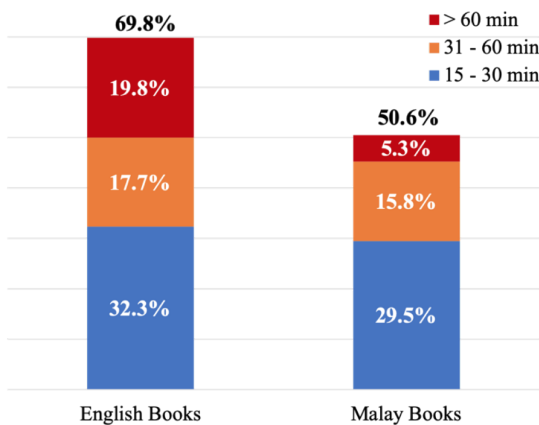


Figure 7. Period of time students can read English and Malay books.

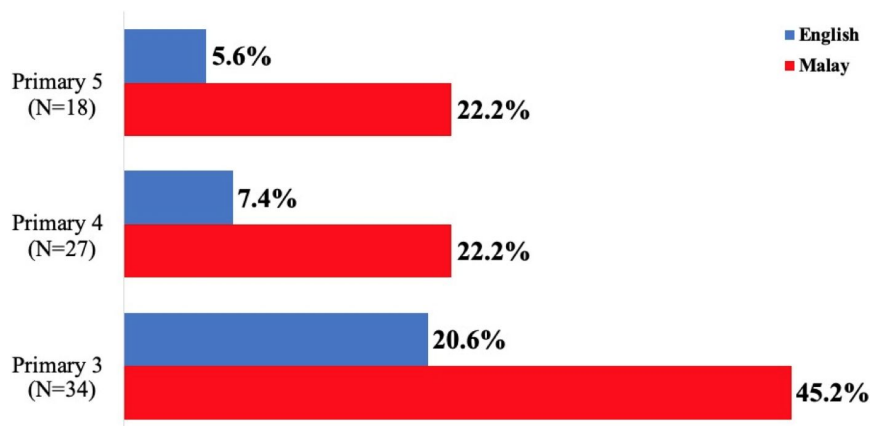
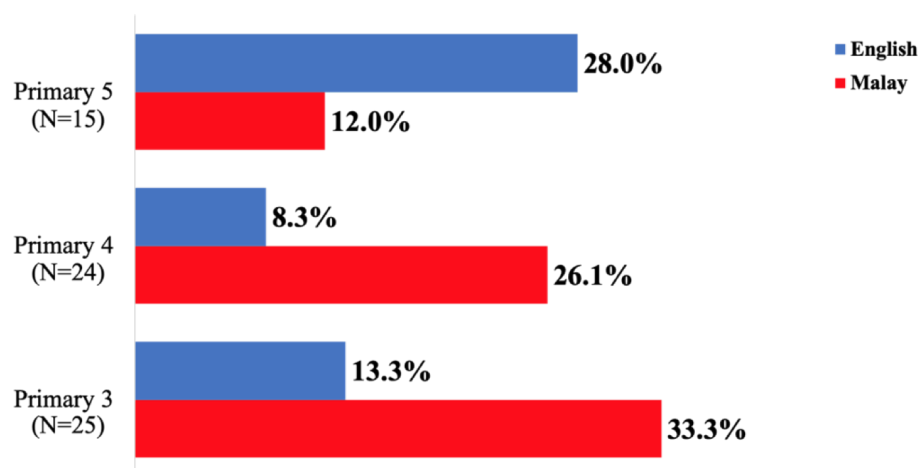


Figure 8. Pristine Primary School students who do not read English and Malay books.**Figure 9. Wonder Primary School students who do not read English and Malay books.*****Students' Reading List and Sources of Reading Materials.***

In the survey, students were asked to list down two to four English and Malay reading materials that they have read in the last six months. The list of English and Malay titles that students have contributed are presented in Table 3 and Table 4 respectively. In general, it was much easier for students to list English titles they have read, as compared to Malay titles.

For English reading, most of the titles were fiction books and series titles, including *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, *Harry Potter* series, *Percy Jackson and The Olympian* series and *Geronimo Stilton* series. In comparison, the titles listed for Malay reading comprise of folklore and fables, comic magazines based on popular Malaysian animated series such as *Upin dan Ipin*, books on religion and spirituality, as well as short story compilation books that have been allocated for school readings.

Students from the focus group sessions had difficulties recalling any Malay book or author read. After much probing, students at Pristine revealed that they could only remember reading the books provided by their Malay Language teacher and those that were bought by their parents when they were younger;

For me, it's the books the school provided me and the books from previous years that I got from school and the one my parents got for me when I was younger. (Rahim)

The school gave me one book where in one book there are multiple stories...they change every month. (Elly)

These responses suggest that parents and teachers play important roles to encourage students' reading of Malay language books.

On the other hand, students from Wonder Primary School reported that they read more non-fiction and enrichment books on Malay proverbs;

I tend to read more non-fiction, like science, because my mom say I get to learn more Malay vocabulary and grammar. Another thing is, I get to learn things and explain them in Malay. (Razif)

I will always read the book that has a lot of peribahasa (Malay proverbs) also. (Aliyah)

These responses illustrate that most Malay Language students engage in Malay reading for academic purposes, and provides further evidence that English reading is preferred over Malay.

Table 3

English Reading Materials Students Have Read in the Last Six Months

| Popular English Titles | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series | 11 | Captain Underpants Series |
| 2 | Harry Potter Series | 12 | Horrible Science Series |
| 3 | Geronimo Stilton Series | 13 | Dog Man Series |
| 4 | Matilda | 14 | Oliver Twist |
| 5 | Dork Diaries Series | 15 | Great Expectations |
| 6 | Cupcake Diaries Series | 16 | True Singapore Ghost Stories Series |
| 7 | Charlie and the Chocolate Factory | 17 | A Tale of Two Cities |
| 8 | Percy Jackson & the Olympian Series | 18 | Beast Quest |
| 9 | Tom Gates Series | 19 | Sherlock Holmes |
| 10 | Mr Midnight Series | 20 | The Secret Garden |

Table 4

Malay Reading Materials Students Have Read in the Last Six Months

| Popular Malay Titles | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>Comic Magazine</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Ana Muslim · Upin dan Ipin · Boboiboy · Doraemon · Aku, Kau, Hantu |

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Folklore / Classics</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Bawang Putih dan Bawang Merah · Sang Kancil · Arnab & Singa · Badang |
| <i>Novel</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Novel Teladan Ana Muslim · Along Hilang · Instafamous |
| <i>Religion / Spiritual</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 10 Kisah Haiwan dalam Al-Quran · Kisah Nabi · 25 Nabi |
| <i>Short Story Compilation</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mari Berkasih Sayang · Kerana Kasut Ajaib |

Students were also asked to indicate and rank the source of their English and Malay reading materials on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 was their “most likely place” and 5 “least likely place”. As shown in Table 5, the ‘bookstore’ appears to be the most likely place for students to get their English and Malay reading materials. The second most popular source for Malay books is the “school library” (mean:2.87) followed by the “public libraries” (mean:2.98). However, based on the data in Table 6, more students tend to borrow English and Malay books from the public libraries as compared to the school library. Furthermore, the percentage of students who do not borrow Malay books from the school library is greater than those who do not borrow from the public libraries.

Table 5

Top Three Sources of English and Malay Reading Materials

| Rank | Source of English reading materials | Mean (1~5) | Source of Malay reading materials | Mean (1~5) |
|-------------|--|-------------------|--|-------------------|
| 1 | Bookstore | 2.74 | Bookstore | 2.63 |
| 2 | Public libraries | 2.89 | School library | 2.87 |
| 3 | School library | 2.92 | Public libraries | 2.98 |

Table 6

Students’ Borrowing Rates in Public Libraries and the School Library

| English Books | | Malay Books | |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Public Library | School Library | Public Library | School Library |
| | | | |

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| At least once a week | 22.1% | 17.9% | 15.0% | 16.4% |
| At least once a month | 21.4% | 22.1% | 13.6% | 12.9% |
| Once every 2-3 months | 15.9% | 11.0% | 12.9% | 14.3% |
| During school holidays only | 17.2% | 7.6% | 14.3% | 5.0% |
| No more than 2 times a year | 13.8% | 26.2% | 8.6% | 9.3% |
| Do not have a library card | 9.7% | 15.2% | 5.7% | 5.0% |
| Do not borrow Malay books | - | - | 30.0% | 37.1% |

A majority of the students from the focus group discussion do not borrow Malay books from the public libraries and school library. According to Afnan, he does not borrow books from libraries because he finds it inconvenient to travel to return the books he borrowed. Additionally, he is concerned that he will be fined should he forget to return the books by the stipulated due date. Adam, on the other hand, reported that he is only allowed to borrow books after he has finished reading the ones he already has at home. As such, most of the students including Afnan and Adam reported that most of their reading materials are purchased from the bookstore, with the assistance of their parents.

Students' Motivational Factors.

Overall, students indicated that the same factors would motivate them to read both English and Malay books more. The most important motivational factor is if they “enjoyed it more”, followed by if they “had more time” and lastly, if “books had more pictures”.

Students also revealed different genre preferences based on the school they were in as summarized in Table 7. There are similarities and differences in students' genre preferences between the two schools. For example, “Sports” is the most popular genre for English non-fiction in both schools. However, the most popular fiction genre for English and Malay in Pristine Primary is “Adventure” whereas “Horror” is most popular for the students at Wonder Primary. This may be a consequence of differences in school profile and culture.

Pertaining to Malay reading, the qualitative data reveals that students would read Malay books more if they knew what to read, if books are catered to their level of language proficiency and if books appeal to their reading interests;

Display more Malay books at the (library) entrance or a Malay corner. Then can see the books. Then can read the first chapter and if it is okay, I will borrow. (Hazim)

Make the words in the book simpler to understand, like not so hard. (Anis)

Maybe at the end of the book, you could have an English meaning also. (Rahim)

Translate English books to Malay...because English books more interesting. (Adam)

Maybe if there's a show, then there is a book, I would read the book. (Elly)

From these comments, it is apparent that students' language proficiency strongly influences students' reading habits and preferences. Besides that, popular media and display of book collection may be a contributing factor in students' reading practices.

Table 7
Students' Genre Preferences

| Pristine Primary School (N=81) | | | Wonder Primary School (N=64) | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|---------|------------------------------|--------------------|---------|
| <i>Rank</i> | <i>Genre</i> | | <i>Rank</i> | <i>Genre</i> | |
| <i>English Fiction</i> | | | <i>English Fiction</i> | | |
| 1 | Adventure | (70.4%) | 1 | Horror | (71.8%) |
| 2 | Horror | (50.6%) | 2 | Adventure | (51.6%) |
| 3 | Comedy | (46.9%) | 3 | Crime | (40.6%) |
| <i>English Non-Fiction</i> | | | <i>English Non-Fiction</i> | | |
| 1 | Sports | (35.8%) | 1 | Sports | (36.0%) |
| 2 | Science | (34.6%) | 2 | Travel | (35.0%) |
| 3 | History | (34.5%) | 3 | History | (28.0%) |
| <i>Malay Fiction</i> | | | <i>Malay Fiction</i> | | |
| 1 | Adventure | (61.5%) | 1 | Horror | (69.4%) |
| 2 | Horror | (49.0%) | 2 | Adventure | (53.2%) |
| 3 | Comedy | (48.7%) | 3 | Comedy | (45.1%) |
| <i>Malay Non-Fiction</i> | | | <i>Malay Non-Fiction</i> | | |
| 1 | Sports | (33.3%) | 1 | Travel | (35.4%) |
| 2 | Hobbies | (30.7%) | 2 | History | (29.0%) |
| 3 | Animals and Plants | (28.2%) | 3 | Animals and Plants | (27.4%) |

School Libraries and The Malay Collection

In Pristine Primary School, the Malay collection is located in a corner of the school library and books were arranged on a 4-tier shelf. There was also a special display for new Malay books which were placed on the table with their cover pages facing up. Although the display seemed slightly cluttered, it is prominently displayed. It is placed at a height which enables students to reach and conveniently browse the collection.

In Wonder Primary School, the Malay collection is located in the MakerSpace and takes up six 4-tier shelves. The books are organized into "Easy fiction", "Fiction" and "Non-fiction" from left to right with

the book spine facing out. Due to its' location, which is separate from the main area, the Malay collection is not particularly noticeable.

For both schools, most of the books that are on the shelves are a mix of worn books and books with slight wear and tear. Books of different types – picture books, graphic novels, translated novels and folklore – were selected at random from the shelves for analysis. The analysis suggests that both school libraries provides access to a comprehensive range of books. Overall, most of the books are appropriate for 7 to 12-year-olds except for a few.

Picture books such as *Si Raja Rimba* (King of the Jungle) by Zulina Hassan and *Dr Bubbles dan Anak Dinosaur* (Dr Bubbles and the Baby Dinosaur) by Latfy Anuar Latif are part of a book series. They have colourful illustrations that fills up the whole page and are appropriate as they enhance the text. In addition, the plot has both elements of fantasy and didacticism.

The school libraries are stocked with graphic novels with visuals that are actual representations of the text. Although there were a few novels that use both Malay and English Language in the dialogue, the English used is grammatically correct. Furthermore, there were graphic novels from the *Penulis Tunas Super* series such as *S.P.Y Junior* and *Kpop Boys Lawan Band Rock* that has various genre of texts such as chat conversations, emails and advertisements, which could enhance students' language development such as their written interaction skills. The plot and characters also encourages the development of social-emotional aspects such as self-awareness, social-awareness and relationship management and aims to instil values such as respect and empathy.

In terms of plot, characters and context, there were also other novels that can be considered Young Adult Fiction. There were a few that could be appropriate for 11 and 12-year-olds but there were also novels that are not appropriate for students below 12. For example, *Dibah Debab* by Mia Bevina which is set in a secondary school setting with friendship as its' theme is appropriate for 11 and 12-year-olds. In contrast, *Mencari Sofea Jane* by Ney Jeehan is an example of an inappropriate reading material for readers below 13 because most of the characters are undergraduates and the theme of the book is romance and relationship. It explores the concepts of marriage and career which may not be in line with the primary school children's current stage of development.

Overall, there is quite a range of Malay books in both school libraries. The books use positive language and they have significant plots, well-developed characters, and illustrations that enhances the text.

Despite this, almost half of the students (43.2%) reported that there are insufficient Malay books in their school libraries. In contrast, only 9.5% of the students reported that the English books in the school libraries are not enough. Besides that, 56.4% of students reported that they could not find interesting Malay books in the school libraries.

When asked whether English books and Malay books are more interesting than the other, a student from the focus groups felt that both English and Malay books are interesting but in different ways;

I think you cannot compare the English books to the Malay books here because it is not fair. English books...and Malay books...have different stories. So they are interesting in different ways. (Elly)

On the other hand, majority of the students who claimed that English books are more interesting attributed it to the ease in understanding what they read;

I would say English is more interesting because...Malay is so confusing, I don't know how to imagine the picture and English is easier to imagine the picture. (Afnan)

Hence, these responses suggest that students' lack of proficiency in Malay Language causes them to perceive the existing Malay collection as not appealing.

Discussion

The pragmatic implementation of Singapore's bilingual policy has led to the perception that English has a much higher status than the Malay language. This has resulted in a higher proportion of students who perceived English reading as important, compared to Malay reading. The interview data from the students suggested that they considered English to be more valuable than Malay language in Singapore. This is likely because it is used for most of the learning in schools and it is the language to be used in future careers (Ng, 2014; Wee, 2003).

Students in the study also listed more English titles than Malay titles. Based on the observation that students struggled to list Malay titles during the focus group sessions, it is also clear that there have not been an ongoing reading practice for Malay language. The "expectancy-value" theory of motivation states that one's expectation of success or failure at a task, as well as the "value" the individual places on the task, strongly influences motivation and task-engagement (Gambrell et al., 1996). Based on this theory, it can be said that students who perceive English reading as more important will engage in English reading than in Malay reading.

Another factor contributing to the preference of English reading is self-perceived competence. Similar to the observations recorded in Norhaida's (2009) and Hsui's (1996) research, students perceived themselves to be more competent in English than in Malay. At the same time, they reported enjoying English books more than Malay books. This suggests that reading confidence correlates with reading enjoyment (Bokhorst-Heng & Pereira, 2008). The finding also explains how students' Malay reading enjoyment is affected by their struggle to comprehend the Malay text, which in turn, motivated their preference for English books.

The study illustrates that students read for different reasons across languages. Students read in English for enjoyment and in Malay for better grades. In relation to students' self-perceived competence, we can now understand why students read for those reasons. Additionally, it also explains why enrichment books on Malay proverbs and model compositions are some of the popular reads of the students at Wonder Primary School since the two are language components that will be assessed during examinations.

Overall, both school libraries have quite a variety of English and Malay books such as picture books, graphic novels and young adult fiction that are of quality. However, there are students who have reported that the English and Malay collection is insufficient and not interesting. As a result, a majority of the students purchase English and Malay books instead of borrowing them from the libraries. However, there are other various possible reasons for this behaviour. Firstly, it could be that students from both schools are affluent. Secondly, it is possible that students do not know what they should read, and consequently, they rely on their parents to make the selection. Lastly, their parents believe that they should have a personal book collection in order to create a literacy-rich home environment.

Nevertheless, the concern remains; the lack of appeal of book collections in school libraries. As observed in Loh et al. (2017), a wider range of quality books that were strategically displayed and advertised have increased borrowing rates and motivated students to visit the library to borrow books or read. As such, this study suggests a few strategies that could encourage bilingual reading.

Firstly, both the English and Malay collection could be improved by stocking up on genres and titles that are popular with students, as well as different types of books such as comics and magazines. This ensures the school library provides all readers with access to a wide variety of books that are current and relevant.

Secondly, book collections could be displayed and advertised in the school library and throughout the school as this would increase the visibility of the books. Schools with media equipment such as televisions in the canteen or study areas could advertise new arrivals or popular books on screen throughout the day. This way, students will always be informed of the current reading trend in their school. Book discussions can also be conducted to advertise new books in the libraries.

Finally, school libraries and educators could reposition students with low language proficiency in both Malay and English language as active and engaged readers by introducing a variety of dual language books that are of interest and cultural relevance to them. In addition, having sessions with local Malay authors and storytelling sessions could be conducted to see if such events will encourage reading of Malay books and boosts the students' reading confidence.

Conclusion

While the study which involved 161 students from two primary schools may not be representative of the situation in all Singapore primary schools, the findings show that students' bilingual reading preferences are influenced by the value they place on reading in the different languages. In addition, students' reading enjoyment and engagement is also affected by their level of comprehension of text. In terms of relevance and visibility, book collection is vital in increasing students' reading engagement. In order to increase and sustain students' reading achievement for both English and Malay reading, students require effective qualified librarians and educators to regulate the reading culture and provide them access to a comprehensive range of book collection that is geared to their level of proficiency and interest. For future research, a school with a good repertoire of Malay books could be involve to verify the reading confidence and positive learning in their students.

Acknowledgement

This research was completed under the supervision of Assistant Professor Loh Chin Ee in the English Language and Literature Academic Group through the Office of Educational Research, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

I wish to acknowledge the funding support for this project from Nanyang Technological University under the Undergraduate Research Experience on CAmpus (URECA) programme.

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