

A Preliminary Study of Creative Buddy Reading Program

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Abstract

Reading is one of the main literacy skills for second or foreign language learners to obtain knowledge. Acknowledging the importance of reading, this paper attempts to demonstrate that Creative Buddy Reading Program (CBRP) is a viable method to improve students' English reading habits at initial stage. This study examined 79 Year 4 students' reading preferences and their responses towards the program as two criteria. A questionnaire and a structured interview were used for collecting data. The results indicated that majority of the participants disliked reading school textbooks and non-fictional reading materials. They preferred reading fictional reading materials. They also showed positive responses towards CBRP. An optimistic outcome was that students expected the program could help them enhance their passion towards reading. The findings also encourage educators to obtain a general profile about primary school students' reading preferences in selecting reading materials and their willingness to involve in the program.

Keywords: Reading, Reading Habit, CBRP, Reading Preference, ESL Learner

1. Introduction

Ability to read is important in literate society (Burns, Roe & Smith, 2002). However one must not only be able to read, but one must also have good reading habits. As suggested by Asraf and Ahmad (2003), encouraging students to read extensively is effective to improve students' language proficiency. In other words, students' language ability is parallel with their reading habits. However the latest National Literacy Survey in 2005 revealed that Malaysians only read two books yearly. In addition, Kaur and Thiyagarajah (2000) found that most of the undergraduate university students read very little. It proved that less concern is given on students' reading habits in schools. Besides, NILAM (Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca) Program which was introduced by the Ministry of Education in year 1998 with the aim to nurture reading habits among students was considered unsuccessful as students are not engaged in it actively (Kaur & Thiyagarajah, 2000). Thus, Creative Buddy Reading Program (CBRP) acts as an alternative to enhance students' good English reading habits. Students' reading preferences and their responses towards the program are identified in this preliminary study. Specifically, the study intended to investigate:

- 1) Students' reading preferences, and
- 2) Students' responses to be involved in CBRP

The following research questions were formulated to achieve the above objectives:

- 1) What are the genres of reading materials that students prefer to read?
- 2) What are students' responses to be involved in CBRP?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reading and Reading Habits

Mokatsi (2005) stated that reading is the basic tool of education. Reading is an extremely important input for second and other language acquisition (Dupuy, Tse, & Cook, 1996; Kim & Krashen, 1997 & Krashen, 1993 cited in Gee, 1999). Krashen (1984) emphasized that one's ability to read could help to improve one's language ability. Ögeyik & Akyay (2009) defined reading as a long term habit which helps readers to acquire creativeness and critical thinking. Reading habits develop personalities and mental capacities of individuals (Ögeyik & Akyay, 2009). Ögeyik & Akyay (2009) also stated that helping students to gain reading habits in education process is necessary as individual improvement can be fulfilled. Dent (2005) stated that students who are developed in reading habits show profound impact on their academic performance. Reading habits should be highlighted in our education system as it is beneficial for students in terms of personality, mentality and academic performance. However, Agee (2005) mentioned that today's society does not nurture reading as it has in the past. This issue has to be resolved. Tella (2007) pointed out that reading for pleasure symbolizes lifelong learning. Besides, Krashen (2004) agreed by saying that second language acquirers are potential to use the language for more demanding purposes if they read for pleasure. Hence, efforts should be made in the reading process to ensure students enjoy reading.

2.2 CBRP

Buddy reading has been found to benefit tutors and reading buddies in several previous studies (Mak, Coniam & Chan, 2008; Shegar, 2009). Wheldall, Merrett and Colmar (1987) pointed out that tutors of buddy reading can learn valuable social skills. Griffin (2002) added that they have been found to demonstrate co-operation and leadership. For the reading buddies, Topping (1989) stated that buddy reading helps them to acquire positive attitudes towards reading. Hence, the researchers are interested to investigate the effectiveness of buddy reading to enhance students' reading habits. Shegar (2009) stated that buddy reading approach has many variations. Burns (2006) introduced two of the common approaches which include pairing of a student and an elder student (cross-age tutoring) as well as pairing of children of similar ages (peer tutoring). Shegar (2009) also pointed out that buddy reading does not require any fixed procedure but the only common characteristic of buddy reading is students sitting together in pairs with printed texts. Many previous buddy reading studies were conducted in pairing form. The CBRP that this study refers to will be conducted in small a group, involving two tutors (Form 1 students) and three reading buddies (Year 4 students).

It is believed that in cooperative learning students are given chances to acquire the generic skills in order to interact more effectively with group members (Ballantine & Larres, 2007). One of the characteristics in CBRP is similar to buddy reading study by Mak et al. (2007) in which writing skill is integrated although it is a reading program. The CBRP that this study refers to is different from the previous buddy reading studies as creative elements are incorporated in it. Tutors will also be required to produce their own reading materials and reading activities for the reading buddies based on their creativity. These creative reading materials will be used as the main reading materials during buddy reading sessions. The reading materials are creatively designed and written in order to provide new reading experience for the reading buddies. Tutors' self-designed reading activities will be used before and after the reading sessions in order to create interest in reading and learning among the reading buddies. However, the objectives and findings are totally different. Students' attitudes towards the participation in buddy reading are the gist of the study by Mak et al. (2007) while the objective of CBRP that will be implemented as continuous effort of this paper is to enhance students' English reading habits.

3. Methodology

Survey and structured interview methods were employed for data collection. The survey was done to examine Year 4 students' reading preferences and their responses towards CBRP. Structured interview were adopted as the researcher can ask the same series of questions from the participants (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). In structured interview, the selected participants were asked regarding their responses to be involved in CBRP. It was carried out after the completion of the survey.

3.1 Participants

All 79 Year 4 students from a national type primary school in Penang Island, Malaysia were involved as the participants of this study while a representative from each class was selected randomly to be involved in the structured interview. They were both male and female students with the age of 10.

Students in Malaysian primary schools can be grouped into 2 levels. Years 1, 2 and 3 are categorized as level 1 while Years 4, 5, and 6 are grouped as level 2. Students in level 1 were not chosen for the sake of this study as they are still in the beginning stage of their school learning. This study focused on Year 4 students mainly because they are the elementary group in level 2 and it is believed that the aim of CBRP to enhance students' English reading habits is beneficial in preparing them to face the official primary school assessment test in Year 6. Good English reading habits are also important to equip them in life-long learning.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire with 10 items was developed for data collection. The items were designed to evaluate the participants' reading preferences and their responses towards CBRP. 5 items were designed to search for their reading preferences and another 5 items to investigate the participants' responses towards the program. Each item was designed by using simple English words to allow the participants' easy understanding. The researchers gave a detail explanation regarding CBRP in each class before questionnaires were distributed. This is to ensure that the participants were clear about the program in answering the questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by the participants within 10 minutes. Computation through SPSS 17.0 software program was employed for the statistical analysis of the data. Each item was analyzed using simple percentage and frequency count. Besides, qualitative data was collected by using structured interview. A representative was selected from each Year 4 class (total of 4 selected participants) to take part in the interview. The researchers repeated the detail explanation regarding the program to the selected participants before the interview sessions were conducted. This is to obtain their sincere answers for the interview questions. 8 interview questions focusing on the participants' responses to be involved in CBRP were designed. The interview data were transcribed and a few themes were emerged for data analysis. (see the Appendix)

4. Findings

4.1 Survey

The results have been analyzed and displayed in the tables below.

The first research question was:

Question 1: What are the genres of reading materials that students prefer to read?

As table 1 indicates, the participants' most favorite type of reading materials is fictional reading materials (63.3%). They have less preference on school textbooks (12.7%) and non-fictional reading materials (12.7%). Only 8.8% of them like both fiction and non-fiction. But there are 2.5% of them who like neither fiction nor non-fiction.

The second research question was:

Question 2: What are students' responses to be involved in CBRP?

Table 2 reveals that the majority of the participants (69.6%) are interested to be involved in CBRP. It is also very encouraging that 12.7% of them are extremely interested in it. Only 6.3% of them dislike being involved in the program.

4.2 Structured Interview

The structured interview was basically to collect data regarding the 2nd research question. The data were categorized into a few themes as below:

4.2.1 Participants' Reasons for Involvement

As table 3 discloses, there are some similarities in the participants' given reasons for willingly taking part in the program. Participants 1 and 3 stated that the program is a new experience to them. Besides, participants 2 and 4 perceived that learning with elder students would be enjoyable. Participants 1 and 4 also mentioned that they wanted to learn more about reading in the program as they were not good in reading. Another reason for participant 2 to join in the program was due to her passion towards reading. It is surprising that another reason for participant 3 to take part in the program was because of her dull weekends.

4.2.2 Participants' Expectations

Participants expected to experience peer group reading and learning in the program (table 4). It is also clearly shown that the participants expected to read many different genres of interesting pictorial reading materials. Besides, they expected for a relaxing learning environment without the presence of teachers as well as the use of school textbooks. Two participants (1 and 4) expected to develop their passion towards reading in the program.

5. Discussion

Regarding the participants' reading preferences, most of the participants prefer reading fictional reading materials than non-fictional reading materials and school textbooks. Thus, efforts should be done to deal with the problem. Modification of the content of school textbooks can be one of the solutions. However, it may take years to do it right. It might be more practical if more varied reading materials are introduced to students in schools in order to evoke their passion towards reading. Besides, types of reading materials that will be used in CBRP should be referred to students' reading preferences as what have been shown in the findings. Students' motivation and interest towards reading will increase if they are exposed to more fictional reading materials as most of the participants in this study indicated they liked to read fictional reading materials. However, concern should also be given to genres of reading materials which students less preferred. Although non-fictional reading materials are less preferred, students should be given the opportunity to expose to non-fictional reading materials in the program. By exposing the participants to non-fictional reading materials via collaborative and cooperative learning in CBRP, the researchers hope to change their negative perspectives towards non-fictional reading materials.

Discussion of the participants' responses to be involved in CBRP is based on the findings of survey and structured interview. The data statistically revealed that most of the participants were eager to be involved in CBRP. It is a good sign for the researchers to step forward implementing the program. They looked forward to take part in the program because it is new to them. In Malaysian schools, buddy reading is not commonly implemented. Hence, it is beneficial to implement the program as new experience creates students' engrossment in learning. Besides, in this study the participants were interested to be involved in the program because they were interested to learn together with elder students who would act as their tutors in the program. This is reasonable as some of them stated in their expectations that they expected a learning environment without teachers and school textbooks. This indicates that they demanded a learning environment which was different from their usual classroom environment in schools.

The participants also expected to read with friends and to experience active group learning in the program. Furthermore, they preferred group learning instead of individual learning. Thus, group learning should be incorporated in the program in order to maximize students' learning outcomes. In addition, one of the participants was interested to join the program due to her passion towards reading. This is very encouraging because that participant realized that joining this program was very beneficial to those who love reading as they would be exposed to many kinds of reading materials. On the other hand, a few participants wished to join the program because they were not good in reading and they wanted to learn more about it. They also mentioned in their expectations that they wished the program would help them to develop passion towards reading. It is clear that the participants knew this program was very helpful in developing them into active readers even though they were not book lovers. Some expectations of the participants were concerned about the elements of reading materials. They expected to read reading materials with colourful pictures as well as interesting stories. Hence, this should be highlighted later in the process of producing own reading materials by the tutors as well as in the selection of reading materials for students' home-reading.

6. Conclusion

Both quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study provide a comprehensive understanding concerning the CBRP for further implementing of the program. The data of the participants' reading preferences is useful for the researchers to select suitable reading materials during the actual CBRP. In addition, the researchers are given the confidence to implement the program as the students are very clear about the program and they believe that this program can help them to enhance their passion towards reading. This implies that the program is potential to help them enhance their reading habits. Thus, continuous effort can be done to carry out the actual CBRP through considering students' expectations towards the learning in CBRP.

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Tables

Table 1: Students' favorite type of reading materials

Type of Reading Materials	Frequency	%
School textbooks	10	12.7
Fiction	50	63.3
Non-fiction	10	12.7
Both fiction and non-fiction	7	8.8
Not at all	2	2.5

Table 2: Students' responses towards CBRP

Responses	Frequency	%
I am not interested at all	5	6.3
Neutral feeling	9	11.4
I am interested in it	55	69.6
I am extremely interested in it	10	12.7

Table 3: Students' reasons to take part in CBRP

Students	Reasons
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I never experienced it before. • I am not good in reading.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning with elder friends sounds fun. • I like reading.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have nothing to do during weekends. • It is new to me.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can make friends with elder students. • I want to learn more about reading.

Table 4: Students' expectations for CBRP

Students	Expectations
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To read more interesting stories • To enjoy a class without teachers • To love reading
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To learn together with elder students • To read different kinds of books
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To experience active group activities • To read books with colorful pictures
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To read with friends • To experience learning without school textbooks and stress • To be in love with reading

Appendix

List of questions for the interview:

- 1) After listening to the explanation, can you simply describe what creative buddy reading is?
- 2) Do you like to participate in Creative Buddy Reading Program (CBRP)?
- 3) Please give your reasons why you like or do not like to participate in CBRP.
- 4) Do you prefer the tutor student in this program to be elder than or as old as you?
- 5) Do you think it is possible to carry out the program during weekends?
- 6) What do you expect the program to be?
- 7) What do you expect to learn from the program?
- 8) In your opinion, how will CBRP help you to learn?