

Methods of EFL Secondary Reading Instruction: Preparation for Higher Education

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Abstract

This case study examined how well the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum prepares students for tertiary reading in English. This explorative study used document reviews as the primary data collection and analysis method. The Malaysian EFL Curriculum Specifications and the EFL secondary textbook were analyzed using a revision of Richards and Rodgers's (2001) framework for analyzing language teaching. The findings on emphasis on reading, types of reading task, and the levels of cognitive demands of reading tasks indicate that the curriculum only partially prepares secondary school students for tertiary reading in the EFL. Suggestions for curriculum revision as the next steps in enhancing the effectiveness of EFL secondary reading instruction with the implications on EFL literacy at institutions of higher learning were included in the discussion.

Keywords: Curriculum, Second Language, Reading Comprehension, Secondary Education

Currently, the majority of printed academic references such as journals and books as well as textbooks for content areas are mainly offered in the English language. Graddol (1997) found that 28 percent of the world's yearly book production is in the English language; this suggests that a major portion of academic references, as well as textbooks are offered in the English language. In addition, literacy in the English language is also needed to obtain information on the Internet. According to a survey by the Netcraft Web Server Survey (2009), there are approximately 108 million websites. In February 2007, a count of web pages by Netcraft indicated that there were 29.7 billion web pages on the World Wide Web. According to Internet World Statistics (2009), English is ranked first in the top ten languages used on the Internet with 478 million out of 1.7 billion worldwide Internet users with a growth of approximately 237.2 percent from 2000 to 2009. Internet World Statistics (2009) also reported that approximately 1.3 billion out of 6.8 billion of world population uses English. Graddol (1997) found that 28 percent of the world's yearly book production is in the English language; this suggests that a major portion of academic references, as well as textbooks are offered in the English language.

Thus, having the ability to read and understand and achieving information literacy in the English language allows university students global access to information via printed materials as well as hypertexts to assist them in meeting their academic demands. Stoyhoff (1997) contends that academic success at higher education institutions is contingent on many factors, one of which is language proficiency. This contention is supported by Songy (2007) whose study revealed that the level of English language proficiency students possess may predict their success in academic achievement at the tertiary level. Nonetheless, there have been reports that many EFL university students lack EFL reading proficiency and thus are not able to read and understand well materials in the English language. Studies have found that readers' language proficiency in a foreign language is directly correlated with their ability to generate inferences in foreign language reading (e.g., Barry & Lazarte, 1998; Hammadou, 1991), which reading skill if without may result in comprehension difficulties.

In another study among college Chinese EFL readers, Lu (1999) found that linguistic proficiency in EFL played a decisive role in determining EFL readers' ability to generate inferences as well as to process text meaning at the sentence and discourse levels. Within tertiary academic contexts, reading is an important part of language proficiency that affects academic literacy and success. 'The ability to read academic texts is considered one of the most important skills that university students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign language (EFL) need to acquire' (Levine, Ferenz, & Revez, 2000: <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/past-issues/volume4/ej16/ej16a1/>). Therefore, students' ability to read well becomes imperative for academic success. Considering that EFL literacy is fundamental to academic success at the university level, the impact of English language literacy on academic success deserves further exploration.

EFL Reading Issues in Malaysia

Enrollment in Malaysian institutions of higher learning has increased within the past two decades. However, approximately 60% to 70% of the school-going population in Malaysia is from the rural areas where English is at least the third language taught to students (David & Govindasamy, 2003) and is a foreign language with which they least frequently associate. Hence, many secondary school graduates who obtain a good score in English on the national standardized test known as the Malaysian School Certificate (SPM) ‘are not able to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate information available only in the English language...in their respective subjects,’ (David & Govindasamy, 2006, p. 58-59) at the university level. Pandian (2000) found that in Malaysia, 76.2 percent of secondary school students and 80.1 percent of university students are reluctant readers of English. As a result, as in other EFL countries such as China (e.g., Chen, 1998) and Japan (e.g., Day & Bamford, 2005), Malaysia currently has many students who lack EFL literacy skills to cope with rigorous academic demands at the university level (Pandian, 2000). The findings of previous EFL literacy studies in Malaysia indicate that college students are facing literacy problems in EFL which subsequently affect their academic performance (David & Govindasamy, 2006). Despite the long term exposure to EFL education, students still face comprehension problems when reading in English at the university level. Studies in Malaysia have reported that the majority of university students in Malaysia possess poor EFL reading proficiency (David, 2004).

Students’ poor EFL literacy at the university level might be related to many factors; one of which is the effectiveness of EFL literacy training at the secondary level. From the researcher’s personal experience as an EFL teacher at the Malaysian public secondary schools, instructional practice for EFL reading is often in the initiation-response-evaluation format (i.e. students read silently, teacher asks questions, students response and the teacher evaluates either the response is right or wrong). Ponniah (1993) contended that the teaching of reading in Malaysian schools often focuses on literal comprehension skills at the sentence level such as word recognition, which tasks require low cognitive demand. According to Nambiar (2005), such practice implies that when teaching EFL reading students are trained to fulfill comprehension tasks without having the appropriate understanding of the entire text. Nambiar (2005) also added that it is customary in the Malaysian EFL reading classrooms that teachers’ instructional focus is primarily on teaching students strategies to answer comprehension questions to prepare them for examinations, which are comprehension-based in nature. Oftentimes, the main aims are for students to get the right answers. The following is a typical EFL reading instruction in Malaysian classrooms as described by Nambiar (2005):

Reading lessons are often conducted in a mechanistic manner with learners having to read a text first, underline difficult words and then use a dictionary to source the meaning of each word. Then the comprehension questions are used to identify the important ideas in the text. A very popular method employed in school is to get learners to identify main ideas in each paragraph and more often than not these main ideas are usually in the first few lines of each paragraph.

([http://www.google.com /search?hl=en&q=radha+nambiar-gopal](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=radha+nambiar-gopal))

Reading tasks such as described above show lack of cognitive demand in the training of EFL reading skills at the secondary school level in contrast to the cognitive demand in reading tasks that students are expected to engage in at the tertiary level. In addition, students are often taught to break the text into simpler segments to make it easier for them to understand the information without any instruction on how they should connect the dissected information into an integrated whole (Shih, 1992). According to LeVasan (1983), EFL reading instructional practices within the Malaysian context is highly influenced by the EFL reading assessments in which 70 percent of EFL comprehension assessments comprises direct reference type which influence the EFL reading teachers to be inclined toward such a teaching approach. Again, based on the researcher’s personal experience as an EFL teacher at Malaysian secondary schools for thirteen years, this is the prevalent instructional practice in the teaching of EFL reading. In fact, the researcher was trained to teach EFL reading using the same method when she attended an intensive teacher training for EFL teaching in 1989-1990.

Teaching students to merely get “the right answer” conforms to the Initiation-Response-Evaluation or IRE format, a method that has been argued to be less effective in assisting students to build understanding from texts (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2006; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). As a result of such training, students are merely able to perform short-answer questions and literal recalls, but fail to demonstrate the ability to infer and make connections among text ideas, a skill that is required in content area reading (Kanagasabai, 1996; Nambiar, 2007; Ponniah, 1993). Students’ inability in EFL reading becomes a more crucial issue especially for those studying at institutions where English is the medium of instruction. Not only do students not perform well on their EFL assessments, but their overall academic performance is also affected by their EFL reading ability (Ramaiah & Nambiar, 1993; Ramaiah, 1996; Faizah, Zalizan, & Norzaini, 2002).

At the tertiary level, students need to have the required level of reading skills that will enable them to achieve information literacy for academic success (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 2002). A study by Kaur and Thiyagarah (1999) among EFL students at a public higher institution indicated that 48.6 percent of the respondents in the English Language and Literature Studies program rated their EFL reading comprehension ability as not being very efficient when reading materials in English in general as well as literary works. Based on the data in this study, it was concluded that students' enrolling at Malaysian universities merely have developing academic readiness due to lack of EFL reading comprehension ability. As contended by Kaur and Thiyagarah (1999), reading in English plays a substantial role in meeting the academic demand at higher institution level in Malaysia. Therefore, academic literacy and achievements at the university level could be directly affected by students' ability to read and comprehend printed materials in English.

In another current study conducted by Sidek (2009) on EFL reading attitudes among students at a Malaysian public university in which one of its mediums of instruction is English. Among the popular students' responses are such as, 'Reading in English is a daunting task for me', 'Every time I tried to read in English I easily give up because I don't understand most of the words in the text', 'I would be very proud if I could finish reading an English text and be able to understand what I read.' The majority of the respondents admitted that being able to read and understand well in English is important and the students also reported that they do not have the required EFL reading comprehension skills that they need. Zaliha Mustapha, an EFL professor at the National University of Malaysia who has taught EFL reading to university students for 14 years, contended based on her experience that at the university level, 'many of the so-called "fluent" readers are still incapable of reading for comprehension. The problems become more prominent when they have to read for information and without the teacher close at hand to help them' (Mustapha 1995, p. 28). This situation indicates that Malaysian university students are not self-regulated readers, a required condition for successful academic reading activities.

EFL instructors at the university level in Malaysia often argue about being able to equip their students with the required EFL literacy skills while these students simultaneously struggle with English in their content areas. Students with low English language proficiency are often faced with literacy issues in the content areas when the language of print is in English (Buly & Valencia, 2002; Valencia & Buly, 2004). This situation creates an imbalance between acquiring language and content learning. In a condition where literacy skills in the foreign language should be used as vehicles to acquire content knowledge, students often have to struggle with language learning at the expense of content acquisition. It is questionable whether these students have been provided with appropriate training in EFL literacy at the secondary school level as preparation to meet the more rigorous challenges in the world of academia. In response to the EFL reading problems, this study attempted to understand how the EFL secondary reading curriculum prepares secondary school students in Malaysia with EFL reading skills to meet the academic demands at the tertiary level involving EFL literacy.

Previous studies (Faizah, Zalizan, & Norzaini, 2002; Krishnan, Rahim, Marimuthu, Abdullah, Mohamad, & Jusoff, 2009; Ponniah, 1993) in the Malaysian context often focused on the issues concerning university students' poor EFL reading proficiency and how these problems affect their academic achievement without looking at the impact of secondary school students' EFL literacy training and the academic demands at the university level. Although some implicit connections have been made between secondary school EFL literacy ability and university academic demands in the Malaysian context, these connections have not been systematically analyzed by studying the EFL reading curriculum at the secondary school level. Hence, this situation calls for an investigation of how secondary school students in Malaysia are being prepared for EFL literacy as an important skill especially to meet academic demands at institutions of higher learning, which is one of the primary goals of the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum. Unlike past studies in the Malaysian context, this study compared the EFL reading preparation at the secondary school level and the EFL reading skills that students are expected to have at the tertiary level. Therefore, the findings of this study will provide insights into why Malaysian university students are currently lacking the required EFL reading skills at the tertiary level despite the longitudinal EFL reading preparation that the students receive beginning from the elementary until the end of the secondary school.

The Study

Research Approach and Design

This study is considered explorative research (e.g., Gatbonton, 1999; Hedgcock, 2002) because it was not seeking to prove a hypothesis or to implement an intervention; rather the purpose of this study was to explore the design of the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum in order to offer suggestions for how the Malaysian education system prepares secondary school students for the English language literacy demands they will encounter in institutions of higher education.

The method of analyzing the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum in this study is substantially influenced by the language teaching model of Richards and Rodgers (2001), a revision of Edward Anthony's (1963) model. This model presents a conceptual framework for language instruction proposing that at the fundamental level, language instruction can be analyzed in terms of *Approach* (foundational theory), *Design* (e.g., selected language skills, learning tasks), and *Procedure* (e.g., classroom techniques, classroom observation, teacher interviews). Nonetheless, the study does not use the entire original framework of these researchers because some of the components in the framework are not relevant to the current study and some other components that were examined in the study are not part of Richards and Rodgers' (2001) model. For example, Richards and Rodgers's (2001) *Procedure* level was excluded because the study did not examine actual classroom teaching or interviews with teachers.

Since the purpose of this study was to examine how well the method of EFL reading instruction that is reflected in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum prepares students for EFL reading at the tertiary level, only elements at the *Design* level of Richards and Rodgers' (2001) language instruction conceptual frameworks are applicable to the study, although with modifications. Some components at the *Design* level in Richards and Rodgers's (2001) model can be used to analyze the frequency of EFL reading skills used as a primary means to achieve the listed learning outcomes in the EFL Secondary Curriculum and the types of reading tasks in the EFL secondary reading curriculum. This study also adds to Richards and Rodgers's model an analysis of the levels of cognitive demands of the reading tasks. Past studies on foreign language instruction have indicated the significance of analyzing the cognitive levels of language skills as an important aspect for language mastery (e.g., Lee & Sawaki 2009; Sawaki, Kim, & Gentile 2009).

Significance of Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine how well The Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum prepares secondary school students for the university-level EFL reading skills they will need in their content areas involving reading in EFL. This research used an explorative case study method (Yin, 1993) because the current study examined only one EFL curriculum in a selected country or a single-case (Pyecha, 1988). On the international level, the study may serve as an impetus for larger and more comprehensive studies of a similar nature in the future. On the national level, the importance of this study is even greater for institutions where the English language is the medium of instruction. In Malaysia, the secondary EFL curriculum does not seem to adequately prepare students for such institutions. David and Govindasamy (2006, p. 59) wrote, 'the lack of academic language skills is most strongly felt among undergraduates who are pursuing their studies in institutions in which English is the medium of instruction'.

Rationale of Research Setting

The Malaysian setting was chosen for several reasons. Malaysia has had a history of valuing EFL instruction since the British occupation from the 18th to the 20th century (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Malaya). Due to the importance of English language at the local and international level, the Malaysian educational system values the acquisition of the English language among students at all school levels, especially at the university level. It is compulsory for university students in Malaysia to attain a required level of EFL proficiency in order to graduate. In fact, the major emphasis of this entrance test is primarily on EFL reading comprehension, which counts for 40% of the entire test (<http://www.malaysia-students.Com/2007/03/muet.html>), a language policy which translates to the significance of EFL reading comprehension as an important skill for academic preparation at the university level. The Malaysian setting is also important to study because the similarity of its EFL learning status with other EFL countries such as Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, and China in which many school-going students have English as the third language learned due to the existence of many other spoken dialects besides the native language. In addition, Malaysia is also currently facing a similar EFL literacy issue at the university level as in other EFL countries (e.g., Chen, 1998--China; Day & Bamford, 2005--Japan; Vlack, 2009--Korea). Hence, Malaysia may reflect the EFL situation in other non-English speaking countries. Therefore, the findings from this study may implications for other EFL settings.

Research Questions

- (1) How frequently is the reading skill mentioned as a primary means to achieve the listed learning outcomes in the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum?
- (2) What types of reading tasks are reflected in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum?
- (3) What levels of cognitive demand of the reading tasks are reflected in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum?

Data Collection

The practices underlying a foreign language curriculum can be analyzed by examining curriculum documents such as textbooks and teaching practices (e.g., Shohamy, 2006).

Therefore, in order to answer the research questions in this study, the Malaysian Form Five Curriculum Specifications document (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003) and the Malaysian Integrated Curriculum English Form Five textbook were examined. The Malaysian English Language Secondary Curriculum is a centralized curriculum which is implemented in all public schools in Malaysia. It is important to note that this study only examined the curriculum at the design level based on the revised Richards and Rodgers's (2001) model. Henceforth, the Malaysian Form Five Curriculum Specifications document will be referred to as the EFL Curriculum Specifications and the Integrated Curriculum English Form Five textbook will be referred to as the EFL textbook.

Data Analysis

In order to find out the degree of emphasis on EFL reading in the EFL Secondary Curriculum, the frequency of each explicit EFL language task (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and the EFL textbook was counted. For example, if students are asked to read a passage to do a writing activity, this reading task was considered an implicit reading task and therefore, this task will be counted as writing instead of reading. The frequency of explicit reading tasks in the EFL Secondary Curriculum was used to infer the extent to which EFL reading is being emphasized in the curriculum. The types of reading tasks found in EFL Curriculum Specifications document and the EFL textbook were analyzed because past studies in L1 and L2 reading have shown that the types of reading tasks assigned to students influence their reading abilities (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 2001; Koda, 2005). Reading task coding used in this study was the one employed in Anderson, Bachman, Perkin, and Cohen's (1991) study which categorizes reading tasks into three categories; Identifying of Main ideas, Identifying Details, and Making Inferences. This reading task coding scheme was used because based on the researcher's preliminary examination of the selected documents the majority of the reading tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and the EFL textbook seem to fall into these categories. However, for reading tasks that did not fall into Anderson et al.'s (1991) coding category, new categories were created based on the nature of the reading tasks.

Examples of statements in the Identifying Main Ideas category are such as *process information by extracting main ideas, process information by making short notes and mapping out ideas, and skimming for the gist of the text read*. Examples of statements in the Identifying Details category are such as *making enquiries after reading the adverts column in the newspaper/yellow pages and identifying a number of similar services and products orally and in writing, process(ing) information in a reading text by skimming and scanning for specific information and ideas, and filling in a form or writing a short note stating precisely what is required based on a reading text*. Examples of statements in the Making Inferences category are such as *giving opinions on articles read, process information by getting the implicit meaning of text, and process information by predicting outcomes*. Statements in the selected documents that did not fall into the above three categories were assigned to other reading task categories. For example, statements such as *listening to, repeating and knowing the difference between consonants, vowels, diphthongs, consonant clusters, homophones, homographs, and words borrowed from other languages in a text, and pronouncing words in a text clearly and correctly and asking questions and making statements with the correct intonation, word stress and sentence rhythm* were coded as in the Reading Fluency Skill category.

Table 1 Examples of the Analysis of Levels of Cognitive Demand for EFL Reading Tasks in the EFL Secondary Reading Curriculum

READING-RELATED STATEMENTS IN THE EFL SECONDARY READING CURRICULUM	MARZANO'S TAXONOMY
Relating personal experiences	Applying
Giving opinions on articles read or accounts heard	Evaluating
Compare and contrast the information obtained in a text and deciding on a choice via a discussion	Organizing
Making inferences from a reading passage	Generating
Read a newspaper extracts and answer open-ended questions on main ideas.	Analyzing
Read sentences aloud to practice the selected sounds.	Focusing
Read a newspaper extracts and select relevant points to do a summary.	Integrating
Read extract and discuss related schemata in group	Applying
Drawing conclusions based on a text read	Synthesizing
Obtain information for different purpose by reading materials in print such as reports and articles and using other electronic media such as the internet	Information gathering

Past studies (e.g., Alderson, 1990; Whalley et al., 2006) examined the cognitive demand of reading comprehension tasks because it identifies students' "internal mental processes" (Chamot, 1983, p. 463). Past studies on foreign language instruction have also indicated the importance of analyzing the cognitive level of language skills as an important aspect for language mastery (e.g., Lee & Sawaki, 2009; Sawaki, Kim, & Gentile, 2009). In determining the cognitive levels of the reading tasks, Marzano et al.'s Core Thinking Skills taxonomy (1988) and Marzano's Cognitive System taxonomy (2000) were combined into ten types of cognitive skills which are grouped into two cognitive levels: Lower level: Focusing, recalling/remembering & organizing; Higher level: Organizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, generating, integrating, & evaluating). Table 1 presents the examples of reading-related statements in the EFL secondary reading curriculum used in analyzing the cognitive levels of the reading tasks in the current study.

Findings

EFL Reading Emphasis

In general, as shown in Table 2, reading is the EFL skill most frequently used as a primary means to achieve the listed learning outcomes in the EFL Secondary Curriculum at 47.4% of the total. This finding suggests that the EFL Secondary Curriculum considers reading the most important EFL skill and appropriately emphasizes it as a language skill necessary for the kind of English language tasks students will be regularly asked to complete at the university level.

Table 2 : EFL Skills Analysis in the EFL Secondary Curriculum

Document/Language Skill	Listening (%)	Speaking (%)	Reading (%)	Writing (%)
Language Tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications	19.0	28.0	37.0	16.0
Language Tasks in the EFL Textbook	11.4	19.2	54.6	14.8
Overall Percentage	14.6	22.8	47.4	15.2

Types of Reading Tasks

As shown in Table 3, important reading tasks such as identifying main ideas, identifying details and, making inference carry 72.2% of the types of reading tasks in the EFL secondary reading curriculum. This evidence suggests that the EFL secondary reading curriculum sets a priority for reading tasks such as identifying main ideas, making inference, and identifying details to be the most important reading tasks which should be emphasized in EFL secondary reading instruction. The use of reading in Other Reading Tasks category as demonstrated in Table 4 indicates that reading skill is also used as a vehicle for learning areas such as vocabulary, writing, and grammar. In addition, the EFL secondary reading curriculum also addresses other reading skills such as fluency and schemata use – skills that are also deemed important for L2 reading comprehension (e.g., Wilson and Anderson 1986--schemata; Cunningham, Stanovich, and Wilson 1990--fluency). These findings suggest that the EFL secondary reading curriculum addresses primary and secondary reading skills that students need in order to comprehend difficult texts. As such, in terms of types of reading tasks, the EFL secondary reading curriculum seems to be designed to prepare students for EFL reading at higher education level.

Table 3 Analysis of Types of Reading Tasks

Document / Types of Reading Tasks	Identifying Details (%)	Identifying Main Ideas (%)	Making Inference (%)	*Others (%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	22.4	35.3	23.5	18.8
EFL Textbook	24.1	22.0	22.0	31.9
Overall Percentage	23.6	26.1	22.5	27.9
Primary Reading Tasks Types (identifying details, identifying main ideas, & making inference): 72.2% *Others—Vocabulary, Grammar, Writing, Schemata, Fluency				

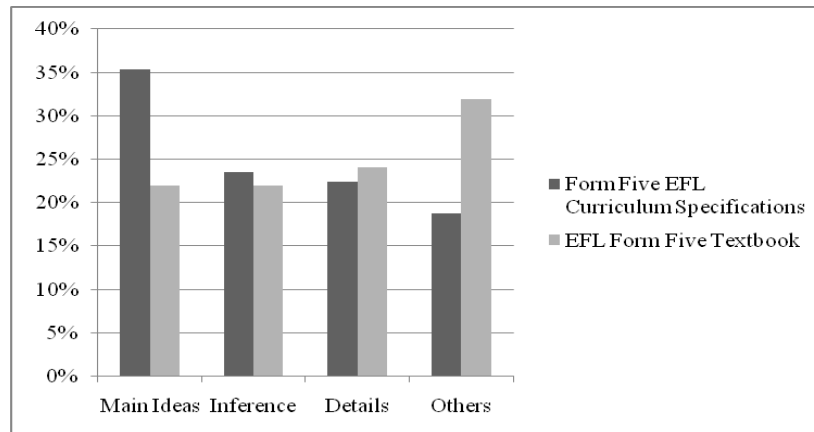
Table 4 Analysis of Other Types of Reading Tasks

Documents/Other Types of Reading Tasks	Vocabulary (%)	Grammar (%)	Writing (%)	Schemata (%)	Fluency (%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	4.7	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5
EFL Textbook	8.4	11.0	6.3	3.1	3.1
Overall Percentage	6.9	8.7	5.4	3.3	3.3

Key: % = Percentage of other types of reading tasks

However, as shown in Figure 1, there is a significant misalignment in Identifying Main Ideas reading tasks types between the amount suggested in the EFL Curriculum and the amount presented in the EFL textbook.

Figure 1 : Distribution of Types of Reading Tasks



Cognitive Level of Reading Task

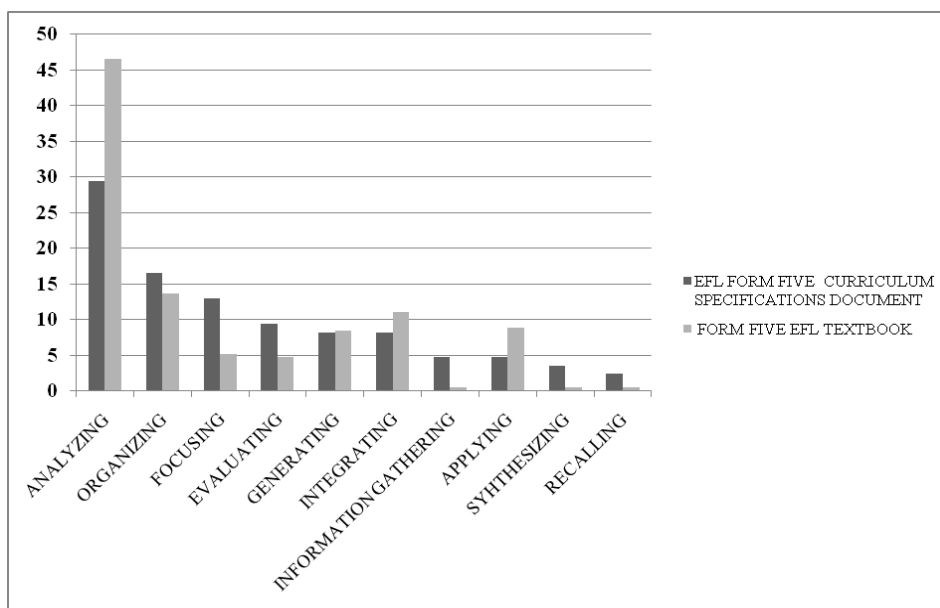
In general, Table 5 shows that approximately 90% of the reading tasks in the EFL secondary reading curriculum require high cognitive demand. About 11% of the reading tasks involve low cognitive demand, a reflection that the curriculum does not completely disregard training students on low cognitive skills such as focusing, recalling, and information gathering. However, 46% of high cognitive demand reading tasks is concentrated on training students on analyzing skill while the other six high cognitive demand reading tasks merely carry about 9% share of the remaining portion in the high cognitive demand reading tasks category. This finding suggests unbalanced distribution among high level cognitive demand tasks.

Table 5 : Analysis of Levels of Cognitive Demand

Documents / Cognitive Demand	Low Cognitive Demand			High Cognitive Demand						
	FOCUSING (%)	RECALLING (%)	INFORMATION GATHERING (%)	ORGANIZING (%)	APPLYING (%)	ANALYZING (%)	SYNTHESIZING (%)	GENERATING (%)	INTEGRATING (%)	EVALUATING (%)
EFL Curriculum Specifications	12.9	2.4	4.7	16.5	4.7	29.4	3.5	8.2	8.2	9.4
EFL Textbook	5.2	0.5	0.5	13.6	8.9	46.6	0.5	8.4	11.0	4.7
Overall Individual Cognitive Level	7.6	1.1	1.8	14.5	7.6	41.3	1.5	8.3	10.1	6.2
Overall High & Low Cognitive Demand Category	10.5			89.5						

Key: % = Percentage of each level of cognitive demand reflected in reading tasks

Further analysis was also conducted to find out the extent to which the cognitive demands of the reading tasks in the EFL textbook and those in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document are in alignment because reading tasks and the types of cognitive demands that the reading tasks require as presented in the EFL textbook are the ones that the EFL teachers normally implemented in classroom instruction. Within the Malaysian context, the textbooks often serve as instructional guidelines (e.g., Noordin & Samad, 2003). Therefore, in order to achieve the EFL Secondary Curriculum goal that is to prepare students with the necessary cognitive skills for EFL reading at institutions of higher learning, it is necessary that the cognitive demands of reading tasks in the textbook are in alignment with those presented in the EFL Curriculum Specifications.

Figure 2 Training Trends of Core Cognitive Skills in EFL Curriculum Specifications Document and the EFL Textbook

As shown in Figure 2, in general, a similar pattern of emphasis of the cognitive demand for reading tasks is reflected in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and in the EFL textbook. In line with the EFL Curriculum Specifications document, the EFL textbook primarily stresses on reading tasks that require high cognitive demands such as analyzing, organizing, evaluating, generating, applying and integrating.

Discussion

This study's analyses of emphasis on reading, types of reading tasks, and cognitive demands for reading tasks provide evidence for the extent to which secondary students are prepared to read effectively in the EFL at the university level. At the surface level, the findings on emphasis on reading indicate that reading skill is highly emphasized throughout the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum. However, emphasis on EFL reading solely might not guarantee the success of EFL reading instruction in preparing students for university reading involving the EFL without the curriculum appropriately addressing other instructional elements at its design level. In terms of the types of reading tasks in the EFL secondary reading curriculum, in general, the findings suggest that the EFL secondary reading curriculum emphasizes important primary reading tasks such as identifying main ideas, identifying details, and making inferences, tasks that are important for effective reading comprehension.

University level content area texts which are often highly condensed with information require students to have information literacy, part of which is the ability to analyze such texts (e.g., Rockman 2004). Therefore, particularly at the university level, when reading in the content areas, students are expected to be able to analyze reading texts by identifying details, identifying main ideas, and making inferences for implied text information. In addition to the primary reading tasks, the EFL secondary reading curriculum also reflects the inclusion of reading sub-skills such as fluency, the use of schemata, and vocabulary. The incorporation of these primary and secondary types of reading tasks can be considered as one of the strengths of the EFL secondary reading curriculum because an effective reading curriculum should include the training of not only major skills of reading, but also subordinate skills (e.g., Duffy, 2009).

However, this study's findings concerning types of reading task in the EFL textbook show that there was a misalignment between the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and the EFL textbook in terms of the distribution of types of reading tasks related to *identifying main ideas*. This misalignment needs to be addressed because oftentimes students struggle to get the main text ideas especially when reading texts that are highly condensed with information (e.g., Kanagasabai, 1996; Nambiar, 2007) which texts are often the types found in the content areas. The importance of identifying main text ideas is further supported by Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) who contended that the ability to identify main ideas is crucial for reading comprehension. Past studies have also found that teaching students with major reading skills such as identifying main ideas impacts the efficiency of L2 reading comprehension process (Ghaith & El-Malak, 2004; Koda, 2005; Oh, 2001; Shaaban, 2006). Hence, such ability may affect students' academic performance in the content areas involving EFL reading.

In relation to EFL reading at the university level, particularly in the content areas, lack of training in identifying main ideas may cause reading comprehension difficulties which situation may adversely affect students' academic performance (Ramaiah, 1996; Ramaiah & Nambiar, 1993; Faizah, Zalizan, & Norzaini, 2002). Thus, the instructional design and balance of reading tasks in the EFL textbook should be in better alignment with the instructional design and balance proposed in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document. As such, curriculum goals and classroom instructional goals can be implemented hand in hand. Besides incorporating various important types of reading tasks in the curriculum, the level of cognitive demand that the reading tasks require is an equally important element of effective EFL reading instruction. The goal of a reading curriculum should be to develop students' ability to deal with reading tasks of various levels of cognitive demands especially those that require high cognitive demands. In order for students to meet high academic demands, they need to be engaged in challenging literacy tasks (e.g., Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). To develop cognitive capacity, students should be given tasks which require high cognitive demand (e.g., Paas & van Gog, 2009).

Therefore, teaching learners with core cognitive skills is considered crucial in order for them to function in content area reading (e.g., Crano & Johnson, 1991; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 1998). The findings on levels of cognitive demand analysis for reading tasks show that the reading tasks are primarily designed to require high cognitive demands. There is also a coherent alignment in core cognitive skill emphasis between those in the EFL Curriculum Specifications and the EFL textbook. This finding suggests that the cognitive demands of reading tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and those in the EFL textbook are in alignment and therefore reflecting a coherent design and effort in preparing students for EFL reading at the tertiary education level. Nonetheless, although the curriculum emphasizes on high cognitive demand reading tasks, a significant emphasis seems to be highly placed on reading tasks that require students to analyze text information. Relating the analyzing skill to Marzano et al.'s (1988) core cognitive skills definitions, by prioritizing the analyzing skill, the EFL secondary reading curriculum stresses the importance of learners' acquiring cognitive skills such as identifying details and identifying main ideas.

These cognitive skills map onto the types of reading tasks of identifying details and identifying main ideas in the EFL secondary reading curriculum. This mapping might be an explanation for the concentrated emphasis on analyzing skill which is related to the important reading tasks types which the curriculum primarily emphasizes on. However, unequal distribution of reading tasks requiring high level of cognitive demands in the EFL secondary reading curriculum is an area of the EFL Secondary Curriculum that needs to be appropriately redressed. Thus, a balanced EFL secondary reading curriculum which appropriately incorporates reading tasks of various high cognitive demands is called for in order to equip students with the ability to perform reading tasks of various cognitive demands in English at the university level.

Conclusion

The present study set out to find how well the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum prepares secondary schools students for EFL reading at the tertiary level. Based on the findings of the present study, the EFL secondary reading curriculum only partially prepares students for EFL reading skills that they may need at the tertiary level. The findings of the current study also provide insights into how the issues in the EFL secondary reading curriculum might be one of the causes of the persisting EFL reading flaws at the university level as indicated by many past studies particularly within the Malaysian setting (e.g., Faizah, Zalizan, & Norzaini, 2002; Kanagasabai, 1996; Nambiar, 2005; 2007; Ponniah, 1993). Therefore, a revision is called for the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum as a step toward enhancing secondary students' EFL reading skills with the implications for academic preparation at the university level involving EFL reading.

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