

A Collaborative Approach To Promote Reading Among Youths

Safiah Osman

*Faculty of Education,
University of Malaya*

Introduction

Reading has always been regarded as a desirable activity. Efforts are being made to promote reading not only among youths, but the general public as well. How do we go about promoting reading? Unfortunately many people only lament the fact that children and young people spend more of their time viewing television instead of reading. We know that viewing television produces different effects compared to reading and yet we cannot simply tell the youths today that reading, in abstract terms, is better than viewing television. Also, we cannot merely continue to highlight the need to inculcate and foster the reading habit and interests of young people. Something more than that has to be done. We cannot but notice that while people often speak about promoting the reading habit, very little has been mentioned about how to actually help youths develop and enhance their reading and information gathering skills.

As perceived by those who were and are involved in the PPM (Library Association of Malaysia) project to promote reading among youths, one way to go about doing it was to help the youths learn how to read more effectively. Basic reading skills may not be sufficient to help an individual realise his full potential. Hence, helping the youths develop and enhance their reading skills was thought to be important, because as we all know, a well-read and a well-informed person is the most valuable resource that a society can have. The main objective then was to help every individual in the project develop and enhance his or her reading skills. Only when readers have the various skills needed for successful reading comprehension, will they be more inclined to read. At this point it is necessary to mention that reading and comprehension are synonymous. Without comprehension there is no true reading. Those involved in the project firmly believed that good reading and information gathering skills will go a long way in helping youths. In short, we believe that there is a strong association between reading and information gathering skills and actual, profitable time spent in libraries. Reading, information gathering skills and knowledge of library use were seen as being able to enhance one another.

In this respect, there was a clear need for co-operation among all those concerned about promoting reading among youths. The general opinion was that educators, reading specialists, and librarians should be able to work together with the participants of the project, the youths themselves. The

whole project was to be based on cooperative effort. As a start, there was to be no doubt in every one's minds that one of the most important tasks was how to increase both the amount and range of voluntary reading among youths. Also, it was agreed that there should be no division of labour. All concerned hold the key to an improvement of reading skills, to the inculcation of reading habits and to knowledge of library use.

The PPM Project

Briefly stated, the PPM project to promote reading through library use among youths in the Federal Territory is one success story of national co-ordination of resources. Many parties were responsible for the planning, implementation and assessment of the project. Jointly organized by the Library Association of Malaysia (PPM) and the Federal Territory Reading Campaign Committee, in co-operation with the Department of Culture, Youth and Sports and the National Library of Malaysia, the project was officially launched on 1 5th February 1986 by the then, Deputy Minister of the Federal Territory as one of the activities in a month long programme to celebrate Federal Territory day on 2nd February 1986. The project was run by professional members of the Library Association of Malaysia in a voluntary capacity and extended over a period of 9 months culminating in the official closing ceremony by the PPM President on 9th November 1986. This pilot project is now being implemented in all the other states of Malaysia.

At the outset, 100 youths from 10 youth associations in the Federal Territory were selected to participate in the project. The criteria for selection were that:

- i. the youths had to be between 18-25 years;
- ii. they were not enrolled in a tertiary institution, (to ensure that only those without access to school libraries were given the opportunity of acquiring these skills;
- iii. youths belonged to a youth association (to facilitate easier communication and ensure continuity of participation)

To prepare the participants for the project, a Workshop on Reading and Reference Skills was organized. From the very start, the youths were made to understand that their participation in the project would enable them to develop their reading and information gathering skills more systematically, skills which would be relevant and useful to them. Fortunately the youths themselves were eager to develop their skills. To achieve this goal, several training sessions were held. Again this was a case of collaboration and resource sharing in terms of both expertise and facilities. While a reading specialist introduced the participants to reading skills, suitably qualified and experienced librarians served as facilitators to provide them with information gathering skills. The youths were taught how to develop reading skills as well as how to locate and use various types of reference materials, eg. encyclopedias, yearbooks, maps and dictionaries.

The youths were divided into groups. After the training sessions on reading and information gathering skills, there was a brainstorming session in which the youths generated a list of topics in which they were interested. Each group then selected a topic for investigation or a project to work on, drawn from the list of topics generated by them together with the facilitators. At the end of the project, each group made a presentation to show they had in fact read and gathered information from the library. One or two professional librarians would help a particular group. In this way the youths were able to identify the person or persons whom they could consult if they had questions. It was heartening to note that at the end of the pilot project implemented in the Federal Territory, the youths

were able to show through their performance in debates and dramas, that they had gained a wealth of ideas on the selected topics.

The debates were carried out on a league basis involving all the groups. Topics were chosen by the participants from a list of topics prepared by the facilitators. An interesting feature of the debate sessions was the requirement that participants provide the judges with a reading list of all books and reference materials which had helped them gain new insights into the topic. The debates were judged by a panel of judges comprising of librarians, educators, concerned parents and others.

It is also worth mentioning at this point that a one day drama workshop was arranged for the participants. Two very prominent film producers/directors served as resource persons. The drama competition at the end of the project involved all of the participants. The groups had to read, decide on the plays to be staged, write scripts and present them using the following guidelines: -

- i. It had to be Original. No published plays or those which had been previously staged were to be used;
- ii. The source on which the play was based had to be identified.

The participants displayed initiative, talent and creativity in staging the plays.

Briefly summarized at this point, the debates, dramas and other activities were not merely means of assessing the reading and information skills of the youths, but more of knowing whether those who had "learned to read" could then "read to learn". Equally important was the fact that in planning and organizing the dramas, debates and other activities, the participants were able to share experiences creatively.

One of the reasons why the PPM Project to promote reading through library use among youths in Malaysia has been successful is because it was planned with the youths in mind. It was not a fight against illiteracy, nor was it aimed at providing only basic reading skills. There were no non-readers or unskilled readers. The pilot as well as the on-going project is dedicated to the cause of helping the youths to further develop their reading and information gathering, skills so that they could read more effectively and more extensively and would also be able to utilize libraries more profitably. Those involved in both projects felt that they owed it to the youths to be equipped with these skills. Most importantly, we wanted the participants to feel that the time that they spent on the project was indeed worthwhile and that it was a whole learning experience for them. We wanted them to be convinced that good reading and information gathering skills together with an' adequate grasp of library facilities and resources are vital if they are to become skilled, matured and independent readers as well as competent users of libraries.

Promoting reading and study skills

Understanding the process of reading:

The first step in developing and enhancing the reading skills of the youths was to explain to them, in the language that they understand, what reading is all about and why it is seen as a process. An attempt was made to help them understand that the reading process is more complex than it is generally assumed to be. It was pointed out to them that reading is a cognitive process, involving

much more than saying out the words or merely extracting information from the text that is read. In other words, the ability to decode or recognize words are not skills sufficient to enable a person to acquire meaning from the text that is read. Effective reading, on the other hand, is the process of being able to integrate the information in the text with the background of experiences of the reader. This bridging of new information as found in the text with relevant background or prior knowledge makes reading not only a cognitive but also an active and reconstructive process. The participants were made to understand that many comprehension problems result from a poor match between the author's message and the reader's background experiences.

Understanding levels of reading comprehension:

The second step was to help them understand that there are various levels of reading comprehension. There are at least four basic levels of reading comprehension: literal, inferential, critical and affective. These levels overlap with each other and share common features of the comprehension process, already mentioned. All of them would require focusing on ideas, forming representations of ideas, identifying important text elements, elaborating or abstracting information and integrating information. In short, the youths were told that they should not rely on the literal content of the text or passage when reading.

Practice of reading:

The third step was to introduce a number of reading passages in order to provide the youths with the practice of reading. A package of reading passages was prepared earlier. What should be noted is that the passages were all examples of contemporary Bahasa Malaysia taken from a variety of sources such as newspapers, magazines and novels. The poetry selections were read as well as listened to on tapes. The idea was to introduce the participants to different types of reading passages. While some of the passages were expository in nature, others were narrative, descriptive or argumentative. In other words, the passages differed in length, content and style. Scientific and technical texts were not included. Thus, the selection was, of necessity, limited. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to carefully select the passages so as to cater to the varied interests of the youths. They were thought to be lively and motivating so as to provide the youths with a real purpose to reading.

As far as possible the theme of the passages that the youths were guided along in their reading matched the theme of the supplementary materials suggested by the professional librarians. In this way each of the passages was seen as a resource for learning and not an end in itself. In other words, the passages were later backed up by a comprehensive range of books, cassettes, maps and encyclopedias, suggested by the librarians. Thus, the youths have some kind of focus for their reading - an aim, a purpose, a goal. This procedure was seen as a means of maximizing opportunities for learning and as an exercise in resource sharing of both expertise and facilities among reading specialists and professional librarians. Stated in other words, the coordination and resource sharing among the professional groups concerned insured that the participants were able to discuss themes and plan for related activities sequentially and in a meaningful way.

Vocabulary and concept development did not precede the reading of each passage. There was little reason to suppose that the youths who were in the 18-25 age group could not get the most out of their reading experience without prior discussion on the words and ideas in the passages. Careful thought

was given, however, to the question of pacing. The reading passages were not handled so slowly as to put the participants to sleep or so fast as to give them nightmares. The fact that the youths were not submitted to a specific number of hours of reading meant that they were able to progress through the reading passages confidently and comfortably. Worthy of note is that throughout the practice in reading sessions, the youths were taught to develop a meaning-detection rather than a word-recognition orientation to the process of reading. The emphasis throughout was on higher-level reading and thinking skills. Basically this means that the participants were encouraged to directly challenge the author while reading. They were encouraged to ask questions, to react or to disagree. They were told that if they engage the author's ideas, they could read more effectively and more alertly. With these skills they could also better remember what they had read.

Developing study skills:

Practice in study skills can be valuable learning to the youths and for the purposes of this project was seen as a means of enhancing their reading and information gathering skills. The first step to improving study skills was to establish a purpose. The youths were told that there were no approaches to reading or studying that serve as "magic pills" to be taken in order to avoid serious work.

As part of study skills, the youths were helped to understand the importance of sequence or the order of organization in writing. It was felt that once they develop organizational skills, they would be better able to see relationships among ideas put forth by writers. They were then taught additional skills of 1) summarizing, 2) outlining and 3) note-taking.

At this stage then, the purpose was to (1) stimulate the thinking of the youths and, thereby, help them to broaden their understanding of the reading process; (2) help the youths gain some insights into levels of reading comprehension; (3) help them focus their attention on different styles and rate of reading to suit the purpose and the material at hand; (4) permit practice in reading different types of selected passages; (5) develop study skills; (6) come to grips with higher level reading skills.

Guidelines for teaching reading skills

A number of specific reading skills were taught. For example the youths were taught how to identify and extract the main ideas from the text. It was also brought to their attention that while there were also times when the main ideas were clearly stated, there were also times when the main ideas were implicitly stated. For this reason the participants were required to pinpoint the main idea of each paragraph and of the whole passage that they were reading. They were later encouraged to put the main ideas in their own words. By providing questions, the youths were closely guided in their reading.

An attempt was made to encourage the youths to infer from what is read. Good inferencing skills enable a reader to grasp what is implicitly stated by the writer.

The participants were also helped to see how each passage was organized. They were helped in recognizing how sentences are joined together to make paragraphs, how paragraphs form the passage and how this organization is signaled.

A good reader is also a critical reader. The youths were told how to evaluate and react to what is in the text. They were encouraged to think for themselves as to the particular reason or reasons the author wrote the passage. Did the writer write with the sole purpose of influencing his readers. Did he make useful suggestions? Did he present facts which could be substantiated or did he merely express his own opinions and biases?

A good reader reads with some kind of purpose in mind. Throughout the training sessions the youths were told to identify their purpose for reading. It could be to enjoy oneself or to obtain information of some kind. They were also taught how to vary the rate and the depth of their reading to suit the purpose of reading, and the material at hand. Depending on his purpose, a reader should know when it is appropriate to skim, to scan, to read closely, to read with the intention of remembering, to read rapidly. If his purpose is to locate a piece of information he should merely scan the page in front of him. At times his purpose may be to determine whether the text is relevant to his needs or not. He should then skim the page or the text. If, on the other hand, his purpose is to remember as much of the information in the text, he should read very closely. All these points, though generally taken for granted, were communicated to the youths.

Developing information gathering skills

It is generally assumed that library users know how to locate and make use of reference resources. For the purposes of the project no such assumption was made. It has been brought to our attention that most library users are not able to research independently. This is rather unfortunate because as we all know, independent research is an activity that greatly contributes to reading success. Before the introduction of information gathering skills by the professional librarians, the youths were taken to either a national or a state library in order to familiarise them with the environment and the facilities. Even if the youths had been to the library previously, the trip organized by the librarians was to reacquaint them with the reference materials that are available.

Different groups of professional librarians were involved in training the youths to acquire information gathering skills. A more integrated and collaborative approach was adopted in the sense that the various groups were guided in the same skills, i.e., map reading, locating information from encyclopedias and magazine articles, using a dictionary, etc. The purpose of developing dictionary skills, for example, was to help the youths discover how to use a dictionary more effectively. Additionally, the youths were taught how to locate and make use such references as the a) Bibliografi Negara Malaysia, b) Indeks Majalah Malaysia, C) Indeks Surat Khabar Bahasa Inggeris, d) Indeks Suratkhabar Bahasa Malaysia, e) Bibliografi Buku-Buku Dalam Bahasa Malaysia and f) Indeks Persidangan Malaysia. They were also briefed about card catalogues, alphabetical order, fiction and non-fiction. The youths were then expected to apply their reading and information gathering skills to plan for their project.

Some limitations

No attempt was made to categorize the participants into high, medium and low proficiency levels according to the results of a standardized reading test. Thus from the start, it was not possible to identify those who could already read well and have adequate library skills and those who, had difficulty. Furthermore, no information was secured about the attitude of the participants toward

reading or toward the project in general. While these, in a sense, appear to be limitations, they were not considered as factors which may affect the success of the project. What was deemed to be of more importance was the need to develop esprit de corps among the participants. Those involved in the planning and implementation of the project felt that what was really important was the fact that the youths were able to participate equally.

It is reasonable to believe that how readers comprehend is partly determined by the relative ease or difficulty of the passage or text. No attempt was made to grade the comprehension passages used in the package according to any readability formula. As a result we did not know whether the reading passages were too difficult for some of the youths to handle or in fact too easily manageable. However, it must be stressed again that from the start, it was not the intention to divide the participants into different reading ability groups.

Although actual instruction was provided to the youths on how to develop study skills, specifically in terms of how to do outlines and how to summarize, time was a major constraint. More time should have been spent on trying to develop these skills. As we know, textbooks provide little on the subject and classroom teachers generally fail to realize that the development of study skills will considerably aid learners in acquiring, storing and retrieving information.

No attempt was made to measure any statistical difference between how the youths read before the start of the project and after extensive practice in reading. This was partly due to the fact that the sample size was somewhat reduced towards the end of the project. Some of the youths found out-of-town employment, and transport to the libraries and elsewhere was seen as a problem.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this paper an attempt was made to describe the organization, the instructional methods and the materials used in the pilot project which was aimed at promoting reading among youths through libraries. Though the methods described were not in any way unique, insofar as the youths were concerned, the methods were found to be effective. The feedback, mainly in the form of informal evaluation, from the youths who participated in the project, was that they felt encouraged to read and to utilize the library. Many felt that they made large gains with a great deal of practice in reading and adequate training in library use. If someone should ask any of those directly involved in the planning and implementation of the project "What is the single most important lesson you have learnt from the project?" the answer would invariably be that we have learnt that youths can be taught to read effectively, through instruction in reading and through practice in reading. They can be taught to utilize the library more profitably through instruction in information gathering skills and through practice in information gathering skills. We hope that many of the youths involved in the project would continue to set aside time for reading. We hope that they would sift through the newest books, documents and periodical articles to find significant and interesting materials for their use.

References:

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