

Making Reading Engaging Through Experiential Learning: A Teaching Module

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ABSTRACT

Reading is often viewed as a stagnant and uninteresting process. Students perceive the reading process as a task to lift specific information in the text and to fill in the questions at the end of the text. The process has deterred the students' interest to engage with the text meaningfully. Students need to be engaged with the text in order to become effective readers. This article discusses ways in making reading engaging and to facilitate student's reading skill. The aim of this paper is to provide techniques in making reading interesting and meaningful as well as providing reading motivation to students. A framework to teach reading through experiential learning is discussed. Students are engaged in the process of learning through fun and meaningful tasks. To reinforce the students' understanding of the text, reinforcement such as through speaking and writing activities are employed. The tasks permit the students to discover and strengthen their understanding of the reading material. Engaging students in experiential learning implicates that students will be able to explore and discover the meaning of the text in an engaging and meaningful manner during the act of reading. Thus, the pedagogical approach using experiential learning permits students to progress gradually as engaged readers when they are given the opportunities to have personal experience, reflection, conceptualization, application and involvement throughout the act of reading.

KEYWORDS: second language reading, reading engagement, experiential learning, ESL students

Introduction

Reading has been taught as a solitary process. This has hindered students from experiencing reading in a significant manner. Students are lack of opportunity to engage in their reading. Birch (2014), Fan-Wei Kung (2019) and Nambiar (2005) argue on the effects of reading instruction on learners' reading ability. They believe that teachers' instructions for students to retrieve specific information in order to fill in the answers at the end of the reading passage are far from satisfactory, particularly in many Asian EFL contexts. When the process of teaching reading is

limited to answer questions, it dampens students' perspective in viewing reading as a meaningful and engaging process. They begin to view reading as a chore only to fill in the answer for the questions set at the end of the reading passage. Thus, the role of teacher or instructor is to provide appropriate social interactional framework and to scaffold the learning process because according to Mezirow (1997), students' learning will be able to transform fully through structured interplay between teacher and students.

Bernhardt (2011) states that a substantial number of students, particularly L2 learners, deal with problems in understanding the texts they read. Unless this issue is addressed, a considerable number of L2 students will continue to struggle in reading because they are unable to handle academic text (Bernhardt, 2011; Fan-Wei Kung, 2019; Hodges, 2016; Isarji & Ainul Madziah, 2008; Schmidt, 2017; Wallace, 2007). A report by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2004) stated that past research on students' reading comprehension has shown that the average reading level of students fail to meet the academic literacy demands in their postsecondary level. According to Bosley (2008), Fan-Wei Kung (2019), Isarji and Ainul Madziah (2008), university students' performance in reading is poor. In a study by the American Institutes for Research found that 50% of university students lack the skills to function as proficient and effective readers (Baldi, 2006). Reading efficacy may be increased in a class where the instructor includes interaction to develop both the cognitive, through the use of reading strategies (Fan-Wei Kung, 2019; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004; Hodges, 2016; Koda, 2005; Trawick, 2009).

Researchers have pointed on the importance of pedagogical approaches and instruction in helping students better comprehend, critically examine, and respond thoughtfully to the plethora of reading materials found in the content areas and beyond (Bernhardt, 2011; Grabe, 2010; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004; Hodges, 2016; Pirih, 2015; Tahir Jahar Khan, Azlina Murad Sani, Sarimah Shaikh-Abdullah, 2017), because as posited by Daniels (2016), and Van Manen (2016) and pedagogy is at the heart of literacy and learning instruction.

The main aim of carrying out this teaching approach is to identify activities that may facilitate students' reading comprehension skill and making students engaged with the reading task.

Literature review

In the past, approaches to language teaching were based on skill-building (Krashen, 2008). According to Krashen (2008), the skill-building hypothesis emphasizes studying rules and learning vocabulary of the English language first. The assumption of this hypothesis is that acquisition of language will come automatically once a learner applies and uses the skills over time. However, Krashen (2008) and Daniels (2016) asserted that the skill-building should not be the main means of producing competence in language as language development is a complex process.

The resurgence of fulfilling learner needs in the 1990s has paved a way for many new approaches such as Content-Based Instruction, Cooperative Language Learning, and Task-Based Instruction (Anderson, 1999; Daniels, 2016; Hodges, 2016; Van Manen, 2016). Many scholars in reading (e.g., Bernhardt, 2003, 2005, 2011; Fan-Wei Kung, 2019; Grabe & Stoller, 2002;

Hodges, 2016; Pressley, 2000, 2002) recognize the importance of pedagogical approach and instruction in teaching reading. Hodges (2016) and Richards (2002) noted that currently most teachers ascribe to certain methods to teach. Nevertheless, a considerable number of teachers have moved away from the search for a perfect method, they have shifted their attention to how teachers can facilitate and scaffold the students in their learning (Richards, 2002; Sha Huang, 2018; Tahir Jahan Khan, Azlina Murad Sani & Sarimah Shaikh-Abdullah, 2017).

The English language is highly valued in Malaysia. Thus, the English language subject is made as a required subject from pre-school to tertiary level. Nevertheless, according to Harrison (2010), in Malaysia, the secondary EFL curriculum has yet to prepare students for their academic reading adequately. Subsequently, the lack of academic reading skills among students in the higher institutions of learning is prevalent as the medium of instruction is in English (David & Govindasamy, 2006; Fan-Wei Kung, 2019). Additionally, the current pedagogical approach in teaching reading in Malaysia has also hindered the students' development from being engaged readers. As aptly put by Nambiar (2005) and Fan-Wei Kung (2019), L2 reading classrooms teachers' instructional focus is to teach students the strategies to answer comprehension questions because they want to assist students to prepare them for examinations.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning as referred by Kolb (1984) concerns learning which involves action, learning by doing or acting or experiencing it by the students. In other word students need to explore and discover certain learning points and messages. The word experiential basically means that students learn and develop some ideas through personal experience and involvement, rather than through teaching or formal training in class, observation, learning of theory or, some other common ways of teaching. Since it emphasizes the learner's perception which is crucial to the experiential learning concept, thus making learning more significant and engaging is deemed necessary. In the context of reading, through the use of pedagogy of experiential learning students are given the opportunities to explore the meaning of the text by discovering through personal experience and involvement. As aptly put by Kolb (1984), students' knowledge is created when they experience transformation in understanding and their identity as readers.

When students are able to discover that learning itself can be fun and satisfying, they would enjoy the learning development in the future (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2016; Daniels, 2016; Hodges, 2016; Van Manen, 2016). On the contrary, when we put students in a very dull teaching or training session, which does not suit their learning style, we will hinder their learning and development (Hodges, 2016; Van Manen, 2016).

In addition, the experiential learning pedagogical approach enforces students to practise soft skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and decision making which are pertinent and relevant to them in their academic pursuit. This approach to learning also involves providing opportunities for questioning and consolidation of ideas and skills through feedback, reflection, and the application of the ideas and skills to new situations (Daniels, 2016). As a result, their critical thinking is strengthened (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2016; Chermahini, Ghanbari, & Talab, 2013).

Among the objectives of experiential learning include to appreciate student-centeredness values, as well as to analyse the elements of experiential learning. The next objectives are to develop guidelines for teaching through experiential approaches, and to relate experiential learning to education for sustainable future. In this context, the teacher or instructor needs to play an important role to ensure smooth transformation of learning by the students. This can be achieved by taking into consideration all the four aspects mentioned earlier throughout the process of teaching and learning (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2016).

According to Kolb (1984), there are four phases in the experiential learning cycle which are concrete experience, reflective observation or processing the experience, abstract conceptualization or generalizing, and applying. To ensure a successful learning, students should actively be involved in all these four phases. The first phase is concrete experience where the students are required to be open-minded for and fully immersed in new experience. The second phase is reflective observation which permits students to reflect, observe and process the learning experience from various perspectives. This will be followed by abstract conceptualization phase where the knowledge gained from the current experience is integrated with the past knowledge. The fourth phase is application, in which students apply and transform the new knowledge gained from their observation and reflection in what they have learned in new situations through decision making and problem solving.

Teaching and Learning Activities using the Four Phases of Experiential Learning

A few suitable reading articles were selected. The selection was based on language proficiency and level of vocabulary and comprehension mastery of the students. From the selection, a reading text that enables the instructor to design lesson using Kolb's (1984) four phases was used after consulted a reading expert on the appropriate reading materials for the group of students. The text used was on monkeys and how the monkeys have created chaos to some communities in Malaysia. Before the article was given to the students, the instructor provided a simulation for the students to understand the problem faced. This is a set induction to prepare students for their new learning experience. The lesson plan using the article was prepared based on the four phases of Kolb's experiential learning which are concrete experience, reflective observation or processing the experience, abstract conceptualization or generalizing, and applying.

The first phase exposed students to the reading material content using pre-reading activity that was referred to as the Monkey Battle. This was then followed by a second phase which included a reflective observation, where students were given a speaking activity to participate in and reflect on their learning experience. The third phase was abstract conceptualization. In this phase, the students integrated what they have learned and connected it to their past experiences. The instructors provided the reading text and the students were instructed to go through the text, discuss and answer the questions in the text. The following phase was applying the knowledge. This was done by giving students a similar situation but of different animal contexts. Finally, the last phase which is not included in Kolb's four phases of experiential learning is internalization. The inclusion of internalization to a second language learner involves several processes of transformation and construction of new meaning or knowledge.

As aptly put by Negueruela-Azarola (2013; 2016), this continuous transformation of new meanings explains the complexity and richness of the process which second language learners will experience throughout the learning process. The final stage is a new inclusion that is internalization in the experiential learning. Internalization phase covers the aspect of how it is necessary for instructors to understand and include this phase in the teaching and learning process as this process permits students to internalize what they have learned, enabling them to progress gradually as independent learners. Consequently, by understanding and including internalization in the experiential learning pedagogical approach, the instructor will be able to properly organize suitable teaching efforts to scaffold the students' learning.

Pre-reading

Activity 1: Speaking, listening, and thinking skills

This activity is called 'Monkey Battle'. The game has been planned to illustrate the relationship between experience and reflection in the experiential learning process. The example in this game comes from the real situation faced by Malaysians whereby monkeys have become a big problem not only to Malaysian farmers but also villagers and urban people.

“In recent years, Malaysia’s Department of Wildlife and National Parks has killed almost 250,000 monkeys in every state in peninsular Malaysia. The monkeys have been deemed pests because of their large numbers and their ability to easily adapt to any urban environment. Their diet consists mostly of fruit, but these monkeys will also eat seeds, leaves, insects, fungus and even dirt. Some types of monkeys often live and travel in large groups and frequently raid farmers' fields in Malaysia. Besides, they commonly beg for food from tourists and sneak into open homes and gardens to steal food. This species of monkey is not endangered, but it has been considered threatened since 1996 because of habitat destruction. They are growing wild leaving the forests and attacking farmers’ crops and millions and are considered a major environmental pest.”

(article is extracted from:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/08/world/la-fg-wn-alarm-monkeys-killed-malaysia-20130503>)

The Monkey Battle game is a simulation of the impact of monkeys in Malaysian forests but now they have invaded people’s workplace and housing areas. It is an educational game that students can play to understand some of the problems caused by monkeys.

The Monkey Battle Game

Facilitator draws boundary areas using marker pens (a normal class size).

Two students are assigned as monkeys. Other students act as fruit trees and crops, free to run anywhere they like to escape the monkeys – but they need to stay inside the marked borders.

1. Playing the Game

The two monkeys are set free among the trees and, holding hands, start moving around tagging trees and plants with their hands stretched out. The trees that have been tagged will then ‘die’ and they will join the monkeys. By holding hands in one big line, the monkey group runs around to catch the rest of the trees. Only the two students (monkeys) at the end of the line are allowed to tag trees. The line will keep growing larger and covers a bigger area then the trees will decrease until none are left.

2. Processing the Experience (First Phase)

Ask the group to discuss:

1. The reasons why monkeys are so harmful.
2. The possibilities if monkeys are not controlled?

The members of the group will be asked about their opinion on how to control the monkeys. Possible suggestions are:

- Trap the monkeys (trapper)
- Shoot them (shooter)
- Use poison bait (poisoner)
- Strategies to have plant protection

Play the Game for the Second Time

Play the game once more but this time the above strategies should be introduced.

In this game the student who is assigned as one of the above control measures is to run around the boundary markers. At a certain point of time, he enters the playing area and tries to reduce the monkey numbers in the several ways:

1. If the “trapper” tags a monkey, he/she ‘dies’ and will join again the game as a tree.
2. The “poisoner” puts talc powder (as bait) in the playing space. If monkeys step on or over the 'bait', they ‘die’ and will join the game as trees.
3. The “shooter” flings a small ball (shoot) at a monkey. If it hits the monkey, he/she ‘dies’ and will join again the game as a tree.
4. The “farmer” throws a round band on a tree’s arm. Thus, the monkeys will not be able to catch it as it is already protected.

5. Take a break for a while to see the effectiveness of the measures taken. Start the game again by introducing a second measure. Then, stop again, process (to understand their actions during the process) and later begin the third measure and so on.

3. Reflecting on the Learning Experience (Second Phase)

Reflection on the game is another significant step to learning. This will assist students to process the learning and transform the learning into a more meaningful and engaging experience. The students can analyze their experiences and conclude from their learning during 'Monkey Battle' with the help of the facilitator. The facilitator may ask the students to discuss:

- How they feel when they play the role as the monkeys, trappers, shooters, poisoners and the farmer who places bait for the monkeys?
- Is the action necessary? Why?
- What makes monkeys attack farmers' plants and break into human areas like our neighborhoods?
- What are the challenges we face with monkey species?
- How could we protect Malaysian forests, farmers' plants and people's belongings from the monkey attack?

The activity may allow students to reinforce their understanding of the situation.

4. Abstract Conceptualization (Third Phase)

Activity 2: Reading Comprehension Skill

For the next activity, students are given the full text of an article on monkey. By now their background knowledge of the situation has been stirred. The students are put into groups. The simulation earlier enhances the students' understanding of the text. They are now required to discuss and answer questions from the text (refer to Appendix 1)

While reading: Reading, Speaking and Thinking Skills

Reading comprehension questions

1. Find words in the text which have similar meaning:
 - i. love (paragraph I)
 - ii. naughty (paragraph II)
 - iii. protect (paragraph III)
 - iv. transfer (paragraph IV)
 - v. serious (paragraph V)
2. Read the excerpt and state what you understand from it. Why was killing the monkey a difficult decision to be made?

“It is a hard decision, but in order to safeguard the well-being of people and to maintain a stable macaques population ... it might be the best option in a short run,” the department said in an email to *The Times*. The monkeys were killed because the government “thought it was easier than teaching people how to properly lock their houses and protect fruit trees,” said conservationist and primatologist Ardith Eudey, part of the Primate Specialist Group network”

(article extract from:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/08/world/la-fg-wn-alarm-monkeys-killed-malaysia-20130503>)

3. What does the writer mean by this statement ‘Relocating the monkeys didn’t work, it said’?
4. Based on the passage, what do you think is the best option to overcome this problem?

The purpose of doing this activity is to enhance students’ vocabulary and to reinforce students’ understanding of the text.

5. Applying the Knowledge to a New Situation (Fourth Phase)

The instructor or the teacher can help students to apply the knowledge learned from ‘Monkey Battle’ to another topic by giving a similar situation to other type of animal that has the same effects towards our environment to inculcate sensitivity towards problems faced by our country.

Post-reading: Speaking and writing

Activity 3: Speaking

The students may start a forum or debate on this issue and suggest ways to overcome this problem.

Activity 4: Writing

Next, the lecturer or teacher may ask students to **write an essay** based on the topics discussed. For example, the topic can be taken from the issues based on all the questions during the reflection session. Unlike common discussion, in this activity (reflection) the lecturer or teacher actually enhances critical thinking among students through their opinions from their experience playing the games such as:

- Do monkeys bring negative effects into the eco-system?
- What are possible effects if we try to protect the environment?
- How should we preserve the future of our ecological balance?

Other relevant questions can be used to promote critical thinking among students when they are asked to analyze and evaluate some ideas or actions from the issue such as:

- Do you think that the shooting of monkeys in Malaysia is appropriate?
- How can we solve the problems of monkeys in our neighborhood and workplaces?
- What should be done so as not to be cruel to the monkeys?

6. *Internalization (Fifth Phase)*

As the students experience all of these during the learning process, the learning becomes internalized. The students will be able to get new information from the experience gained and elevate the information through a set of criteria, an active process which involved thoughts, feelings, and dispositions they acquired throughout their life experiences with the help of the educator (Mezirow, 1997; Negueruela-Azarola, 2016). Hence, the task for the facilitator is to strengthen the foundation that the students have acquired. This is achievable when the facilitator teaches students to be more aware and critical in assessing assumptions, able to distinguish forms of references obtained from their life experiences, be responsible and able to work cooperatively with others.

Internalization (Strengthening understanding and thinking skills)

Students can express their ideas and opinions in the form of essay or a newspaper column (editorial)

1. As a concerned public, write to the Facebook apage of Malaysian Wildlife Association to protest the shooting and killing of monkeys in Malaysia.
2. As the Minister of Natural Resources, Department of Wildlife and National Parks, write to the Prime Minister of Malaysia to ask better actions than shooting of monkeys in Malaysia be taken.
3. In a group, draw a poster to reflect the situation.

Discussion

The stages planned for the lesson were based on the four phases of Kolb's experiential learning and the inclusion of the fifth phase that is internalization. The stages arranged allow the students to have a concrete learning experience and enabled them to shift from the normal stigma of reading lesson only to lift specific information required at the end of the text.

For instance, in the first stage of the lesson plan, the students were required to do an activity that called 'The Monkey Battle'. In this activity the students were assigned on the role they had to carry out such as being a monkey, tree, fruits and so forth. The concrete learning experience permits them to understand and digest how the lives of monkeys are. The activity allows students to engage actively in the learning process. When students are given opportunities with tools to explore their preferences to learning styles and strategies, they would be able to select strategies that are suitable for specific tasks (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2016).

In the following stage, students reflected on their learning experience with their friends. The process of understanding is enhanced when they began to reflect, discuss and exchange ideas with their peers. As they reflected on the experience and they may observe any meaningful knowledge from various perspectives, subsequently they began to see their areas of weaknesses, they can make connections between their reading, observation and real-life situations, and consequently they are able to think critically (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2016; Hodges, 2016; Kolb, 1984).

The third stage is where the students were given the reading article on monkey. The simulation earlier enhances the students' understanding of the text. At this phase they begin to integrate their current understanding through the previous two stages which are concrete learning experience and reflection phase as well as with their previous background knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

The next stage is applying the knowledge. The instructor will give a similar situation to other type of animal to the students. The students are required to discuss and write on this issue and suggest ways to overcome problem pertaining to this animal. This process permits students to transform the new knowledge gained from their learning experience in the first three stages and apply the knowledge gained in making decisions and problem solving (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2016; Hodges, 2016; Kolb, 1984).

Finally, internalization. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle encourages students to apply various learning strategies at every stage of the learning process. Thus, the process of internalization enables the students to strengthen their understanding with the help of the instructor. The instructor plays the key role in facilitating students' attention to their own feelings and identity as learners. When the process of internalization occurs, the students begin to internalize the learning experience and gradually begin to take charge of their learning. The figure below depicts how Kolb's (1984) four phases and the internalization phase is illustrated in the Experiential learning.

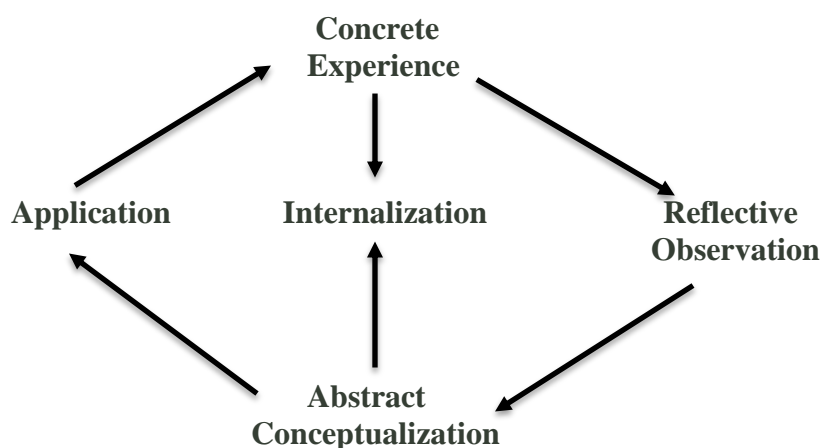


Figure 1. Diagram on four phases of Experiential Learning adapted from Kolb (1984) and the inclusion of Internalization as the fifth phase

Conclusion

It can be deduced that experiential learning is a process that develops students' potentials in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes based on what they encountered in the activities they participated in. Thus, it engages direct and active personal experience, as well as reflection and feedback. The discussions have encouraged students to talk and share their feelings and opinions. Therefore, this activity may develop students' skills to communicate in discussions, share their views in more interesting ways compared to normal class which might be mundane for students.

From the discussion, the language skills involved were listening and speaking. In addition, the questions can stimulate students' thinking about the topic discussed. They may have some ideas from the simulation done earlier. Their involvement in the games would enable them to understand the situation better. Moreover, the simulation enables the students to experience learning in a more meaningful way. Subsequently their understanding of the text is strengthened and reinforced.

The use of experiential learning as a pedagogical approach in teaching second language learners has the potential for ownership and responsibility for students by empowering and giving voice to them as the students begin to progress and grow as independent learners. The instructors or teachers have an important role to play in this pedagogical approach. Only when they are willing to be a part of the whole teaching and learning process will only the teaching and learning process be successful. The instructors need to carefully select appropriate instructional methods, material and design and approaches to learning. Also, they need to create activities that provide opportunities for students to receive a concrete learning experience and provide an avenue for them to reflect the learning process.

In addition, through this pedagogical approach, the instructor can scaffold the learning and assist the students to form positive identities as second language learners. In conclusion, teaching

reading through experiential learning permits students to experience learning through fun and creative activities. This indicates the importance for teachers or instructors of reading to create ways and platforms for students to experience learning in a more attractive and interactive manner.

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Appendix 1

- I Tourists adore them. Homeowners bemoan them. And the Malaysian government has killed them by the tens of thousands. Tourists and many Malaysians gather near jungle edges to watch the monkeys, snap photos of them and feed them peanuts and bananas. But the wildlife department, also known as *Perhilitan*, says the extensive culling was necessary to curb a “pest species” that breeds prolifically, adapts with ease, and ransacks homes for food.
- II They are *macaca fascicularis*, mischievous monkeys with unusually long tails that give them their common name: long-tailed macaque. Malaysian wildlife officials killed more than 97,000 of them last year. Nearly 88,000 were culled the year before, according to the nation's wildlife department.
- III “It is a hard decision, but in order to safeguard the well-being of people and to maintain a stable macaques population ... it might be the best option in a short run,” the department said in an email to The Times. The monkeys were killed because the government “thought it was easier than teaching people how to properly lock their houses and protect fruit trees,” said conservationist and primatologist Ardith Eudey, part of the Primate Specialist Group network.
- IV They had tried chemical castration at five locations, but that approach worked best with small, localized macaque populations. The tactic also requires veterinarians, “and this department is in shortage of such specialized expertise,” it wrote. Relocating the monkeys didn’t work, it said. Scientists and activists say Malaysian officials could have educated people to stop feeding the macaques and to better protect their food instead of killing so many animals. Government figures shared by activists show macaques injured four people between January and September last year. Three years ago, a Malaysian newborn died after a macaque seized her and dropped her from a rooftop, according to [the Star newspaper](#).
- V More common problems are much less grave. Macaques root through garbage bins and scatter trash, and damage rooftops and lampposts, according to [one recent study](#) near Kuala Selangor Nature Park. Resident, Salima Ibrahim said that if she cracked open a window on an especially hot day in Kuala Lumpur, monkeys would come in and grab bananas and feast on rice left in the cooker.
- VI “They scared the life out of my mom and my children. They have been running helter-skelter all over the house,” Ibrahim said, recalling the run-ins with macaques in the bungalow she once lived in. “They took clothes from the clothesline. Sometimes, when you are driving down the lane and suddenly see ‘That shirt looks familiar. What’s it doing up that tree?’” “But for all the trouble they caused, “I don’t believe in culling them,” Ibrahim said. “The animals have a right to live in this climate.... You just have to live with it I guess.”
- VII Killing such vast numbers of monkeys has also troubled some primatologists, who say the

animals, long assumed to be safe, have not been rigorously counted and could be at risk if mass culling continues. Some people say that alternative strategies such as locking up trash could address the problems without killing.

(Source taken from:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/08/world/la-fg-wn-alarm-monkeys-killed-malaysia-20130503>)