

IT'S TIME TO READ: STUDENTS AND TEACHERS TALK ABOUT THE D.E.A.R. PROGRAMME

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Abstract

This study investigated students' and teachers' perceptions of the DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) Programme that was implemented in a secondary school in the northern region of Malaysia. Their views on the factors affecting the implementation of the programme were also studied. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten teachers and twenty-two students. Data analysis revealed the following themes: reading related concerns (i.e. freedom to choose what to read, reading environment, reading time), and also teachers' role. The students and teachers perceived the programme positively and affirmed to its potential in cultivating positive reading habits.

Keywords: DEAR Programme; reading habit; programme implementation

Introduction

The inadequacy of reading behaviour (Harris & Hedges, 1995 as cited in Yoon, 2002) has been a serious concern for children in many countries when most education systems should emphasize on a high level of reading and a love for reading as an important educational objective (Elley, 1994 as cited in Yoon, 2002). Mohd Asraf & Sheikh Ahmad (2003, p. 85) found that poor reading habit among students could be the result of "failure to develop a love for reading, unavailability of appropriate reading materials, insufficient time, and lack of motivation to read extensively."

Research suggests that one of the best ways to help students increase their language proficiency is to encourage them to read extensively (Mohd Asraf & Sheikh Ahmad, 2003; Krashen, 1993). In developing good reading habit among students, many reading programmes are implemented in schools, such as the Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) Programme. Although the DEAR Programme is now being implemented in schools throughout Malaysia, to the best of our knowledge, studies on teachers' and students' perception of the programme are lacking.

DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) Programme

The DEAR Programme is a version of sustained silent reading (SSR). SSR is

one type of free voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993). The practices of SSR can vary widely, however, some common characteristics of SSR are as follow: 1) it uses various types of reading materials which cater for the students' interest and ability where students are permitted to choose their own reading materials, 2) teachers and staff members play their parts as role models, 3) the atmosphere should be conducive, quiet, and uninterrupted (Nichols, 2009), and 4) it should include scheduled activity, carried out for a predetermined period of time, on a regular basis (McCracken, 1971 as cited in Ermitage & Sluys, 2007).

According to Douglas (2009), SSR has been widely used in the U.S. for many years to improve students' comprehension and to build motivation to read. Overall, there have been generally positive impacts of SSR. Chua (2008), for instance, found that SSR programme has an important effect on cultivating students' reading habits. SSR has also been found to promote reading enjoyment, independent reading (Nichols, 2009) and in the long run, lifelong reading habit (Gardiner, 2007; Nagy, Campenni & Shaw, 2000; Hopkins, 1997); and, develop positive attitude towards reading (Nagy, Campenni & Shaw, 2000; Yoon, 2002; Valerie-Gold, 1995 as cited in Chua, 2008; Chow & Chou, 2000; Ermitage & Sluys, 2007). Further, it was also found that the amount of time spent on reading correlates with the overall reading achievement, broadens vocabulary (Chow & Chou, 2000; Ermitage & Sluys, 2007) and fluency (Nichols, 2009), improves reading comprehension and reading skills (Hopkins, 1997; Chow & Chou, 2000; Douglas, 2009), improves grammar and writing (Nichols, 2009), and builds motivation to read (Nagy, Campenni & Shaw, 2000; Douglas, 2009).

SSR has been adapted into many reading programmes throughout the world. Although different names have been used to label these programmes, the primary objective remains similar which is "to encourage students to read self-selected materials silently without interruption for an extended period of time" (Ermitage & Sluys, 2007, p. 11). SSR is known by other names like SQUIRT (Silent, Quiet, Uninterrupted Individualized Reading Time), Self-Selected Reading, Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) (Ermitage & Sluys, 2007), High Intensity Practice (HIP) (Pilgreen, 2000 as cited in Ermitage & Sluys, 2007), USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading), and DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) (Nagy, Campenni, & Shaw, 2000) just to name a few.

"Drop Everything And Read" (DEAR) has become common in schools in order to help students to read a lot (Hasbrouck, 2006). Some schools even encouraged teachers to spend a significant amount of the classroom time to read silently up to 30 minutes a day (Sierra-Perry, 1996). Lindsay (2009) claimed that several schools responded positively towards the DEAR Programme. In Selangor, Malaysia, three schools began to launch the DEAR campaign in 2004 to encourage reading habit among schoolchildren (News Straits Times, 2004).

A review of the literature has revealed very little in terms of research studies done on the DEAR programme. However, non-research reports on the application of the DEAR programmes in classrooms were found in various journal entries such as Bryan (1999), Hopkins (1997), Manzo et al. (1998), Allen (2002) and Cumming (1997) who reported similar benefits as reported for SSR. This study therefore aimed to explore

students' and teachers' perceptions about the DEAR Programme in a school in the northern region of Malaysia, which, at the time that the study was carried out, was going into its second year of implementation.

The DEAR Programme in *Sri Bunga Raya Secondary School* (pseudonym) took up similar features as the original DEAR Programme. Only a few objectives were added to suit the school's aims for implementing the programme: To enable 80 percent of the students to read more than one type of texts other than the textbooks and reference books, to ensure that all students are involved in quality reading, to expose all teachers and staff members to various genres for their individual and professional development, and to allow them to share the texts with one another.

Objectives of the Study

Using qualitative research approach, this study explored teachers' and students' perspectives on the DEAR Programme. We examined what they thought about the programme and the extent that it was able to cultivate active reading habits among students in this school.

Methodology

Participants

Using maximum variation purposive sampling method (Patton, 1990), ten teachers (teaching different subjects) and twenty-two students (of mixed abilities and levels) were selected to participate in this study. The number of participants was not determined prior to data collection. Instead, it depended on the resources and time available (Delamont, 2002) and when the interview data had reached their saturation point (Robson, 2002). The students in this study are labeled with the initial letter *S* as in *SGI-3*, while the teachers are labeled with the initial letter *T* as in *TM-2*.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on an interview protocol (Robson, 2002). Through an iterative process, the interview questions were reviewed to ensure that the participants understood them and were able to respond. Following each round of interview, data were then analysed for recurrent themes based on a priori categories and emergent categories to reflect the participants' perceptions of the DEAR Programme (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The audio-taped interviews were transcribed and translated into English for the purpose of attracting a wider audience to this study (Xian, 2008).

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis of the students' and teachers' perception of the DEAR Programme revealed the following themes: reading related concerns (i.e. freedom to choose what to read, reading environment, reading time), and also teachers' role.

Freedom to choose reading materials

Most students and teachers agreed that the freedom given to choose their own

reading materials had benefited the students greatly in the sense that it had sparked interest to read as there was no restriction.

Not bored to read the books because I'm interested with the books chosen. (Interview, SG1-1)

I don't feel restricted to choose the books... I am interested to read. (Interview, SG2-18)

This finding supports a few previous research findings. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that students are motivated to read when they have the choice in selecting the reading materials. Similarly, Mohd Asraf and Sheikh Ahmad (2003), Yoon (2002) and Sanacore (2000) reported that students develop positive attitude towards reading when they can choose the reading materials that they prefer and this is a way to foster and maintain positive reading habit among students.

Some students in this study, however, were not in favour of the total freedom given to choose their own reading materials, saying that such freedom could be “taken for granted” by some students (Interview, SB2-20). They preferred to have some control or “guided freedom” over their selections in order to prevent students from reading “not useful materials like comics”, the reading of which was deemed to be a “waste of time” (Interview, SG2-19). At the same time though, there were students who felt that they were not given enough freedom as they were not encouraged to read textbooks (i.e. Interview, SG4-7).

When students expressed their dissatisfactions with the term “freedom” and felt that they were not free to read textbooks, they might have associated the idea of reading with academic task. Pandian and Ibrahim claimed that in Malaysia, students usually associate reading with academic tasks and not for knowledge gain or for pleasure (Sunday Star, May 26, 1991 as cited in Pandian & Ibrahim, 1997). Similar finding was also reported in Shaik-Abdullah (2005) who found students who defined reading as consisting of reading textbooks and revision books. Hence, freedom to choose was perceived as dangerous since in their view some students might choose “forbidden” texts, such as comic books.

The DEAR Programme as carried out in *Sri Bunga Raya* Secondary School, aimed to enable students to read more than one type of text genres which were other than textbooks and reference books. However, perhaps because of the education system in the country which places a great emphasis on examination, these students tended to become exam-oriented themselves and perceived everything in schooling as pertaining to exam. Although reading textbooks for the purpose of preparing for their examinations shows that students were aware of the importance of knowledge, this phenomenon could lead to a narrow perspective of what reading is. Hence, not surprisingly, some students held the view that reading non-academic materials, such as comic books, was a waste of time.

Reading environment

Some participants claimed that the quiet environment where no one could

disturb them had helped them to read. This refers to the influencing environment created during the DEAR activity.

The element that I find the most helpful for me is we can read in a quiet place where no one can disturb us. If at home, it's difficult to read because my younger siblings will disturb (Interview, SG1-2).

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) claimed that one of the factors which help to motivate students to read is the environment they are in. Quiet environment without any disturbance or distraction as claimed by the above student matches the characteristic of SSR. According to Nichols (2009) the atmosphere of SSR should be conducive, quiet, and uninterrupted. For some students, especially those from low socio-economic background, they may not have the space to study, let alone to read for pleasure at home. This increases the likelihood that they will not read at home. Thus, the quiet environment during the DEAR activity could be a motivating factor for them to read (Ermitage & Sluys, 2007).

Another claim concerning the environment is the influencing surrounding when the students see their friends reading, they will hopefully read as well. Both students and teachers spoke about this, for instance:

Students who never read will at least read when their friends read (Interview, TF-6)

According to Lundberg (2003) peer relationships play a strong role in students' learning of all ages especially when the relationships have educational focus. Peer influence through modelling as observed by Kiesner, Cadinu, Poulin, and Bucci (2002) has been the result of the process known as imitation (Bandura & Walters, 1963 as cited in Kiesner, Cadinu, Poulin, and Bucci, 2002). They claimed that individuals are more likely to imitate the behaviour of other individuals whom they strongly identified with, in this case, their peers.

Naturally, teenagers tend to imitate their peers' behaviours and the habit of reading is not excluded. Therefore, having and mixing with peers who enjoy reading might affect students' reading habits due to the peer relationships that they share. The DEAR Programme can indirectly create a ground where students are influenced in the following ways: 1) they can enjoy the quiet and uninterrupted atmosphere, and 2) they are exposed to peer models who are reading which may lead them to adopting favourable reading habit.

Reading time

Time is another element which the participants spoke about as they reflected on the DEAR Programme. This element is related to the allocation of time block for the DEAR activity and the duration of each session. Most students claimed that the allocated time block was beneficial to them as they often did not have time to read; some teachers also agreed to this.

[IT]... gives students some time to read. Because I don't have much time to read at home. (Interview, SG4-10)

The time, 40 minutes. Very suitable. Not too long and not too short. (Interview, SG1-5)

A number of participants claimed that the length of each period of the DEAR activity was suitable. A few participants commented that it was good that the period was carried out early in the morning since their mind was still fresh. These responses show that the allocation of the time block for the DEAR activity and its duration were important in helping the students to read. Yoon (2002) found that students gained positive reading attitude from a fixed period of time provided for them. Time set aside for reading was able to promote reading habit among students (Sanacore, 2000), led students to continue reading even after the period ended (Manzo, Kennedy, Zehr, & Ann, 1998), and showed the value of reading (Allen, 2002). At the same time Bryan (1999, p. 538-9) who spent five to twenty minutes daily with his students for DEAR activity found that the session encouraged them to enjoy reading.

On the other hand, some students in the present study thought that the 40-minute period was too long and they felt bored. Some claimed that the time block was only a waste of time because they did not read as expected. Instead the time was spent on some other activities like finishing their incomplete homework, chatting, or playing. A few teachers confirmed this.

If the teacher does not come in, we don't do anything, we just chat. (Interview, SG4-14)

We just play when the teacher is not in. (Interview, SB4-13)

Sometimes they don't read. They do their homework. (Interview, TF-6)

Obviously, for these students, the time block did not benefit them and was deemed as “a waste of time” (Interview, SB4-13). They claimed that there was no change in their reading habits because they did not read during the time block. As can be seen in the next section, this was especially so when the teacher was not there to monitor.

Teachers' role

The teachers' role during the DEAR activity included monitoring the students' activities during the reading session and modelling the act of reading in the classrooms. The participants of this study had mixed feelings about this matter. Many students claimed that teachers do not enter the classes during the programme. A few teachers also raised a similar concern.

Teachers seldom come in. If the teacher comes in, teacher asks us to do our own work, then teacher does his/her own work, we do our own work. Some teachers read. Some teachers do not read. This year, the teacher rarely enters

the class during the DEAR Programme. We just play when the teacher is not in (Interview, SB4-13).

In terms of modelling, a big number of students responded that many teachers read along with them during the DEAR activity. Only a few teachers did their own work, other than reading, during the activity and this was confirmed by both the students and the teachers themselves.

In discussing the aspect of monitoring and modelling by teachers during reading programmes, Sanacore (2000) claimed that observing successful readers, such as teachers, was an effective way in promoting reading habit among students. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) also found that one important factor that motivated students to read was the teacher.

Based on the above findings, teacher presence was clearly important, not just to be there, but to monitor the students so as they would feel compelled to read, and at the same time, to behave as a model for the students to follow. Modelling the act of reading is important to get the students to read because as teachers who are involved in the programme, they should portray themselves as avid readers too. On the other hand, when the teacher models to the students that it is acceptable to do other work during the DEAR time, then students will, in turn, perceive it to be acceptable to complete their homework or do other stuff like “chatting” during the reading hour, thus defeating the purpose of the programme which was to encourage reading.

However, of course, teachers do have their own constraints which may have an impact on their involvement in initiatives such as the DEAR Programme, as pointed out by the following teacher.

At the same time, we have something else to do other than just sit and read. Either our incomplete work or to prepare for the next lesson. We don't feel like reading at that time. (Interview, TF-4)

As Fullan (2001) asserts, any kind of implementation in schools should be done with special care given to the readiness of the people involved (in this case, the teachers) to accept the new idea and to be familiar with it. Otherwise, the new programme may just end up as another add-on to their already very long to-do list.

Changes in the students' reading habits

Most of the students claimed that before they participated in the programme, they did not like to read. However, they began to like reading after participating in it and in fact, had made attempts to increase the number of books they read. They had started to visit the library to borrow books. They were more prepared to read, they found reading enjoyable, and they felt comfortable reading. Teachers too found that students were reading more than before whenever there was free time.

Before this I was lazy, I read only one book per week, now increase one. (Interview, SG2-18)

When you walk around the school during free period or relief period, recess, you'll find them in groups, reading. (Interview, TM-9)

As found in the literature, students tend to find reading enjoyable and read more when programmes such as this is implemented (Gardiner, 2007; Nagy, CAmpenni & Shaw, 2000; Yoon, 2002). However, some students felt that the programme did not have an impact on their reading habits and continued to dislike reading. As, shown in the earlier section, students did not utilize the reading time to read, and instead chose to do other things.

None. I don't like reading. Even at home I don't read. I never read. There's no change. Just the same. There's no effect at all. (Interview, SG4-12).

When DEAR ends, they put reading aside. (Interview, TM-7)

Conclusion

Most students in this study perceived the DEAR Programme as a good programme because it encouraged them to read. The voluntary nature of the programme enabled them to self-select the kinds of texts they wanted to read. The time made available to them was appreciated by some who found it too difficult to set a time of their own to read. Further, the quiet and disturbance-free environment in the classrooms during the DEAR moment was conducive for reading - as for some students, this environment did not exist elsewhere, not even at home. However, there were students who did not feel that they benefited from the programme as they did not use the time to read as intended. These students' apparent lack of interest to participate might be due to various reasons which may need further investigation. However, the findings suggest that their indifference could be due to their perception of how teachers were handling the session. Teachers who modeled using the time to do tasks other than reading might suggest to the students that they themselves did not value the programme and did not take it seriously.

This study merely explored students' and teachers' perception of the DEAR Programme, and did not seek to assess the success of the programme. Nonetheless, the findings in this study have raised some issues which may require further reflections and investigations. First, for students who dislike reading, getting them to sit for a period of time and read may not always work. Reading should not be treated in isolation, but should be linked to skills such as creative writing and other forms of aesthetic expressions, in which students are allowed to construct their own interpretations of what has been read (Shaik-Abdullah, 2005). In addition, weak students may find reading alone in silence very difficult as they have to deal with challenging words and sentence structures and may therefore feel discouraged (Mohd Asraf & Sheikh Ismail, 2003). Thus, reading programmes should include ways to facilitate their reading, such as by reading together with peers, i.e. Reciprocal Teaching. At the same time, now that students are becoming more computer literate than ever before, reading should be extended beyond the traditional way, to include multimodal representations and digital media. Finally, the implementation of

initiatives in schools should make attempts to facilitate teachers' understanding and readiness to accept the new idea so that they can model the desired attitude and habits for students to follow.

Biodata

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