

READING INTEREST AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH READING PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN MALAYSIA

Siti Normala Muhamad¹, Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi^{2*}, Isyaku Hassan³

¹PhD Candidate, Faculty of Social Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia, ²Doctor of Philosophy, Associate Professor, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia, ³Doctor of Philosophy, Post-Doctoral Researcher, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin Malaysia.

Email: ¹noornadzrie@gmail.com, ^{2*}mohdnazri@unisza.edu.my, ³isyakuhassan@unisza.edu.my

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: This study aims to specifically examine reading interest among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and determine its relationship with their performance in ESL classrooms.

Methodology: This study is based on cross-sectional survey design, comprising a randomly selected sample of 351 ESL learners from the state of Terengganu. The questionnaire was used as a data-gathering instrument, consisting of pre-test and post-test items using Know Want Learn (KWL) reading method.

Main Findings: The findings revealed that most of the ESL learners read English materials for academic purposes rather than news and entertainment. Also, there is a significant relationship between ESL learners' reading interests and their performance in ESL classrooms.

Applications: This study consists of empirical evidence regarding students' reading interests and their correlation with their performance in the ESL classroom. This could help ESL teachers to rectify the students' problems in reading English materials.

Novelty/Originality: This study provides valuable information on the importance of reading interests in determining students' performance, particularly in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Reading performance, English material, ESL learners, Malaysia, Reading Interest, Cross-sectional Survey.

INTRODUCTION

The English language is important to ESL learners in education, primarily because English is used as a medium in a great deal of professional, scientific and technical literature. Today, it is almost trite to say that through reading English materials, college students are able to exploit in depth any topic of interest. Students depend largely on informational and reference materials to perform specific academic tasks, such as on-going term assignments, research papers, and project reports. To produce a generation of book lovers, there is no factor as powerful as interest (Hidi, 2001; Unsworth & McMillan, 2013). This is because people generally do not read unless they have a reason for reading.

Reading is the process of extracting meaning from written or printed language. Specifically, reading can be defined as the ability to make sense of written or printed symbols. Readers use to guide the recovery of information from their memory and use this information to construct a plausible interpretation of the writer's message. Many children nowadays find it difficult to cultivate a love for reading. They consider it a bore and irrelevant to their needs. Research shows that 16.0% of students feel bored when asked to read (Muhamad, 2007). In most cases, this becomes an obvious obstacle to forming reading interests. If their reading activities are made more congruent, their reading interests would flourish naturally.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on students' reading interests in the ESL classroom. The study aims to specifically determine the extent of reading interests among ESL learners and ascertain its relationship with their performance in the ESL classrooms. The significance of this study lies in its collection of empirical evidence regarding students' reading interests and their correlation with their performance in the ESL classroom. Determining the students' reading interests will also guide ESL teachers in rectifying the students' problems in reading English materials.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Empirical Evidence

Reading experts believe that reading interests play a very important role in students' performance. One of the central components of learning motivation is interest, which forms a part of subjective task-value (Kikas, Silinskas, & Soodla, 2015). The enjoyment gained from doing certain tasks is called interest value, which is seen as a pivotal factor directly influencing students' choice of tasks and their performance on those tasks (Metsäpelto, Silinskas, Kiuru, Poikkeus, Pakarinen, Vasalampi, 2017). Students with higher interest make more reading progress (Ecalte, Magnan, & Gibert,

2006). [Haggard \(1986\)](#) indicates the importance of reading interest. In fact, interest plays a role in the decision to read and in the level of engagement with the text during reading ([Fox & Alexander, 2004](#)).

It is established that high reading interest results in high achievement. [Oakhill and Petrides \(2007\)](#) reported that schoolboy performed significantly better on texts for which they had reported high interest. [Al Murshidi \(2014\)](#) found that students' interests encourage them to continue working on reading the articles even though they face some challenges. According to [Fox, Dinsmore, and Alexander \(2010\)](#), interest is thereby associated with the articulation of learning goals. This is because competent readers should be able to read relatively difficult texts with understanding and interest. In addition, [Whitten, Labby, and Sullivan \(2016\)](#) investigated the impact of pressure reading on academic success. The authors concluded that students who read for pleasure averaged higher scores than their non-reading counterparts in the subject areas measured. The authors further concluded that educators were aware of the link between pleasure reading and academic success but felt limited by state curriculums and mandated tests.

[Fox et al. \(2010\)](#) investigated the reading competence, interest, and reading goals of three gifted young adolescent readers. The findings indicated that the participants have varying degrees of interest related to the domain of reading. [Muhamad \(2007\)](#) studied the reading habits and interests among Secondary School Students. The study found that more than one-third of the respondents read regularly outside school hours mainly for acquiring knowledge or for studying purposes. [Oakhill and Petrides \(2007\)](#) focused on sex differences in the effects of interest on boys' and girls' reading comprehension. According to the study, boys showed significantly better comprehension for a text which they themselves expressed a greater interest in reading. The effect of interest is also stronger for poorer comprehenders. [Renninger and Hidi \(2002\)](#) examined students' interest and achievement. According to the findings, well-developed interest plays a vital role in students' achievement but the interest needs to be supported.

Researchers have primarily focused on two forms of interest: individual interest and situational interest ([Fox & Alexander, 2004](#)). The separate categories of individual and situational interest reflect not only how interest has been viewed and researched, but also the two different ways in which the psychological state of interest can occur in people ([Hidi, 2001](#)). In this light, situational interest is defined as a temporary state that is produced by environmental conditions, rather than by well-developed internal needs while Individual interest develops slowly, tends to be long-lasting, and is associated with increased knowledge and value ([Renninger & Hidi, 2002](#)). [Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, and Perencevich \(2005\)](#) focused on situational reading interest and its relationship with long-term reading motivation. The findings showed that children's changes in situated motivation predicted their changes in general reading motivation. When students are captivated by a particular text, in a specific situation, with a host of environmental supports, they are enjoying a moment of situational interest. Continued situational and individual interests among students help in the processes of making connections to reading material ([Renninger & Hidi \(2002\)](#)).

Because teachers have recognized the importance of reading interests as a motivating factor in the reading process, more studies were concerned with reading interests and preferences of children ([Gengatharan, 2004](#); [Guthrie et al., 2005](#)) and adults ([Fox & Alexander, 2004](#); [Al-Nafisah, 2011](#); [Al Murshidi, 2014](#)) than any other reading issues. The previous studies on reading interest focused on areas such as reading interest and comprehension ([Fox & Alexander, 2004](#)), factors affecting the reading habits and interests ([Gengatharan, 2004](#)), situational reading interest and motivation ([Guthrie et al., 2005](#)), student interest and vocabulary development ([Haggard, 1986](#)), and students' interests and its impact on reading and writing performance ([Al Murshidi, 2014](#)). Very few studies focused on the relationship between reading interest and reading performance ([Al Murshidi, 2014](#); [Whitten et al., 2016](#)). None of the previous students specifically investigated reading interest and its relationship with reading performance in the ESL classroom, particularly in the Malaysian context.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

This study is guided by Information Transfer theories that focus on reading as a process of information transfer. If applied properly, this concept can help teachers to improve their reading instruction, thereby improving the students' ability to transfer information from texts to their minds. Therefore, this theory is the best way to measure students' understanding of texts based on how much information is transferred. Information Transfer theories are a group of reading models. These theories are strongly influenced by cognitive psychology and are largely responsible for the widely held view that reading is a process of information transfer ([Gough, 1972](#)). Theorists who support this view maintain that reading is a letter-by-letter and word-by-word process. Hence, readers extract meaning from written materials by processing the text in a linear way, allowing them to transfer meaning from the written materials to their minds. For the transfer to take place, the readers require specific skills. The theoretical framework of this study is represented in the following figure.

Education in Malaysia

Education in Malaysia is a complex phenomenon because of the different languages spoken, read and understood by the various communities. The educational system enhances this diverse language literacy among the Malaysian population by providing six years of primary education in the language of parent's choice: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil or English. In all non-Malay medium schools, Bahasa Malaysia is the compulsory second language. At the secondary level, education is provided in Bahasa Malaysia, while languages such as Mandarin and Tamil are taught as optional subjects. However, English is a compulsory subject in all secondary schools ([McBurnie & Ziguas, 2001](#)).

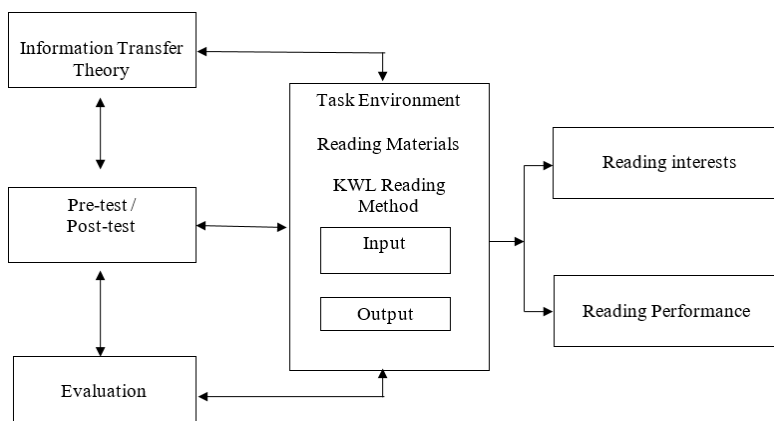


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

On completion of five years of secondary education, students are selected on the basis of the Malaysia Certificate of Education (SPM) for a two-year pre-university course known as the sixth-form course. Subsequently, the students are required to sit for STPM (Malaysian Higher School Certificate of Education). Students who have reached this level of education are considered to have attained a high level of literacy in at least two languages: English and Bahasa Malaysia.

Studies revealed that many school-going children do not read for pleasure as there is not enough free time after doing school homework (Norazit & Fatimah, 1992; Pandian, 1997). The country's shift of focus from basic education to quality education has led to a change in the government's goal of merely creating a literate society to developing a literate and intellectual society. One effective strategy that can be employed to achieve this goal is to promote reading interest. It is unfortunate that much still remains unknown about the reading interests of students in Malaysia. However, educators generally agree that students are not taught to fully realize the importance of reading. They do not seem to be aware that reading is the foundation of knowledge.

The personal background of the individual such as age, sex, needs, reading ability, intelligence, attitude towards reading, and target language are all individual factors that are likely to influence reading interests (Stoodt, Amspaugh, & Hunt, 1996). A major problem for many language teachers is the low level of motivation in their students when it comes to reading in the second language. This is especially so if their students have preconceived notions that they do not really need to read in English except for academic purposes. This is certainly the case in Malaysia, where even though students are surrounded by ample reading materials, the majority of them have little motivation toward reading English materials (Pandian, 1997).

While previous studies focused on factors affecting reading interest among students, it is interesting to explore how the lack of a reading interest affects the students' performance in classrooms. This area still lacks intensive and extensive research in the Malaysian ESL context. This indicates the need to explore students' reading interest and its relationship with their reading performance. The question here is to what extent does students' reading interest affects their reading performance.

Good readers are considered to be efficient at transferring information. The measure of success of such an approach to reading is based on how much information is transferred. Accordingly, reading instruction is based on teaching reading skills in particular. Often, a short passage is given to students, and they are required to answer a number of questions based on the passage. Based on the previous literature and the adopted theoretical approach, the following hypothesis was formulated.

H₀: There is no significant relationship between the ESL learners' reading interests and their performance in ESL classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a cross-sectional survey design to explore reading interest and its relationship with reading performance. According to Creswell (2012), a cross-sectional survey design is one of the most popular forms of survey. In the cross-sectional survey design, the researcher collects data at one point in time. This design has the advantage of measuring current attitudes, opinions, behaviors, characteristics, or practices of a large group of people. It also provides information in a short amount of time, such as the time required for administering the survey and collecting the information (Konting, 2000; Neuman, 2000; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Noraini, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Yusri, 2012). In addition, the cross-sectional survey method allows researchers to collect data directly from the subjects of the study and make a generalization for a larger population (Neuman, 2000; Creswell, 2008).

The questionnaire was used as a data-gathering instrument using a five-point Likert scale. Selected secondary school students from the state of Terengganu were asked to complete a questionnaire related to their reading interests. The questionnaire consists of 56 questions across reading time, duration, place, interest, and type of reading materials. The

questionnaire was developed based on the questionnaires in two previous studies ([Long et al., 1984](#); [Clark & Foster, 2005](#)). These two questionnaires, especially Long's questionnaire, were chosen because of their relevance to reading interests in the Malaysian setting. It took about 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, which included time for instructions about the survey. The concept of reading interests in the context of the study was also made clear to the respondents.

In addition, the respondents took a pre-test before receiving a form of treatment – the KWL reading method. On completion, they sat for a post-test to measure not only their reading interests but also the relationship of the tests to the students' reading performance in the ESL classroom. The tests taken by the respondents in this study are based on the principles of Information Transfer theories. The respondents' reading performance was evaluated based on the degree of improvement attained as derived through the pre-test and post-test. The assessment is based on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Reading Assessment criteria. Reading skills are part of the MUET, which is compulsory for pre-university students. The test is designed to develop students' reading fluency and introduce them to the necessary reading skills. The process of reading activities in this study focuses on five stages which include recognition-initiation, prediction, confirmation, correction, and termination. These stages allow interaction with each other to accomplish their reading tasks by asking questions ([Noraïen, 2008](#)).

The population of this study comprises 3,735 final year students selected randomly from both Arts and Science classes in selected secondary schools in Terengganu. According to [Konting \(2000\)](#), a size of 10-20 percent of the population is sufficient. Therefore, out of 3,735 final year students, a sample of 351 were randomly selected from both Arts and Sciences classes based on the sampling technique suggested by [Krejcie and Morgan \(1970\)](#). This group of students has had 12 years of schooling and they were due to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Thus, they are assumed to be matured enough to comment directly on their reading interests. The test was based on the 2009 exams paper set by 'Jabatan Pelajaran Negeri Terengganu' (JPNT) modelled on the Reading Comprehension format of the MUET paper. It was a speed reading test consisting of 45 questions to be answered within the duration of 90 minutes. The duration from the pre-test and post-test was three hours.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Regression, and Pearson Correlation ([Hoon & Fah, 2009](#); [Pallant, 2001](#); [Yusri, 2010](#)). Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 20) was used to calculate the results. Descriptive statistics were used to measure the sample while inferential statistics were used to measure the parameters of estimate or to make generalizations about the population of the study ([Konting, 2000](#)). Since the number of respondents is high, simple Linear Regression Analysis was used to determine the ESL learners' performance ([Bujang, Sa'at, & Bakar, 2017](#)). Pearson Correlation analysis was used to ascertain the relationship between students' reading interests and their performance in the ESL classroom.

To enable parametric analysis such as hypothesis testing, the data must be in a normal distribution ([Abu Bakar, 2007](#), [Park, 2008](#)). In this study, the researchers used the Normal PP plot to determine whether or not the data were normally distributed, based on regression standardized residual versus regression standardized predicted value. Data are considered to be in normal distribution when the dots lie in a straight line ([Abu Bakar, 2007](#); [Gravetter & Wallnau, 2000](#); [Park, 2008](#)). In this study, the data showed that there is no pattern, and therefore can be considered as having constant variance. Consequently, homoscedasticity and linearity were assumed. Since the dots lie in a straight line, the data have a relatively normal distribution.

FINDINGS

Out of 351 questionnaires administered to the respondents, a high response rate was achieved. All the questionnaires were returned and found valid for analysis. The students' reading interest is measured using the following variables: time, duration, motivation, place, reading materials, and reading activities. The following table presents the descriptive statistics on the types of English reading materials among the respondents.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Reading Materials

Reading Interest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Newspapers	351	3.768	0.347
Magazines	351	3.624	0.424
Books	351	3.789	0.416
On-line Reading Materials	351	3.594	0.400

The respondents were asked to indicate the type of English material they read. As shown in Table 1, the most preferred (Mean=3.789) type of English material among the respondents is a book. This indicates that the majority of the participants read English books. The second most read material is a newspaper (Mean=3.768), followed by the magazine and online reading materials with the mean value of 3.624.06 and 3.594 respectively. Since the majority of the respondents read books, it can be stated that most of the ESL learners read English materials for academic purposes rather

than news and entertainment. The following figure presents the students' reading interests in relation to time, duration, place, interest, and reading materials.

Table 2: ESL learners' Reading Interests

Level	Reading Interests	
	Frequency	Percent
Disagree	97	27.6
Not sure	37	10.5
Agree	217	61.8
Total	351	100.0

The participants were asked to express their views on their reading interests considering the aforementioned variables. Table 2 shows that 61.8% of respondents agreed with the perceived high level of their reading interests, in relation to English reading materials such as newspapers, magazines, books, and on-line reading materials. A few respondents (10.5%) were not sure about their level of reading interests. Furthermore, about a quarter of the respondents (27.6%) disagreed with their level of reading interests. This shows that the participants have different reading interests across the reading materials. The first objective of this study was to determine the extent of reading interests amongst ESL learners. The following table shows the Coefficient of Regression performed on ESL learners' reading interests.

Table 3: The Coefficient of Regression

Variable	β	Std. Error	t	P-value
Constant	27.198	8.534	3.187	.003
Reading Interests	10.465	3.614	2.896	.006

Table 3 shows that the p-value for the respondents' reading interests is 0.006 which is less than 0.05. This indicates that the coefficient for reading interests is significant. Regarding the pre-test and post-test measurement using Pearson correlation, a positive correlation was found with the value of $r = 0.639$ and a significant value of $p < 0.05$ (0.000). In addition, the students performed better in the post-test (Mean=6.82) than in the pre-test (Mean=4.15). The pre-test and post-test scores indicate the students' increased knowledge after answering the pre-test questions. This shows that taking the pre-test resulted in desired learning among the students. The second objective of this study was to determine the relationship between ESL learners' reading interests and their performance in the ESL classroom. The Pearson Correlation on the relationship between the respondents' reading interests and their performance is presented in the following table.

Table 4: Students' reading interests and their performance

Factor	Pearson Correlation	P-value
Reading interests	0.315	0.026

$P < 0.05 = 0.026$

Table 4 shows that there is a significant relationship ($p = 0.026$) between the ESL learners' reading interests and their performance in the ESL classroom. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis which assumes that there is no significant relationship between the ESL learners' reading interests and their performance in ESL classrooms. Considering the Coefficient of Regression, the best fit model is Students' Performance = $27.198 + 10.465$ Reading Interest. This signifies that the EFL learners' reading interests contribute to their performance. In ESL classrooms, students are exposed to basic linguistic elements such as vocabulary, grammar, literature and so forth. These initial experiences are likely to influence the student's early reading interest. This kind of exposure may contribute to the formulation of reading interest and simultaneously make a positive contribution to their performance in the ESL classroom.

DISCUSSION

This study found a significant relationship between ESL learners' reading interests and their performance in ESL classrooms. Thus, students' performance is correlated with their reading interests. This is an important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration in improving the quality of ESL teachers. This is because, from this study, it is clear that reading interests have a positive influence on students' performance in the classroom. By improving the students' reading interests, ESL teachers will be able to gauge students' capabilities in reading accurately. Hence, students will fully enjoy reading in the classroom. This study also found that most of the ESL learners read English materials for academic

purposes rather than news and entertainment. This is consistent with the findings of some studies on reading interests in Malaysia (Pandian, 1997; Noraziti & Fatimah, 1992).

Many children nowadays find it difficult to cultivate a love for reading. They consider it boring and irrelevant to their needs. Research shows that 16.0% of students feel bored when asked to read (Muhamad, 2007). In most cases, this becomes an obvious obstacle to forming reading habits. If their reading activities were made more congruent, reading interests would flourish naturally. However, the National Library of Malaysia prepared a second report in 2006 on Children's reading habits and interests. The survey shows that 63% of children prefer to play and watch television or video compared to reading. Obviously, reading is not a preferred activity for the children.

One revealing conclusion of the 2006 survey was that reading interest among Malaysians decreased as they grew older. Nevertheless, the trend is believed to be slowly changing as the level of literacy improves year by year. Geographically, a lot of urban area dwellers like to read newspapers and magazines compared to that of rural area dwellers. Similar to the findings of this study, Muhamad (2006) found that students reading were likely to be restricted mainly to textbooks while recreational reading is mostly restricted to newspapers. Al-Nafisah (2011) found that newspapers and magazines are widely read among ESL learners because they are inexpensive and readily available. It was reported that more rural area dwellers love to read comics. While this study found a significant relationship between ESL learners' reading interests and their performance in the classroom, some studies revealed that reading interests among secondary school students in Terengganu are poor, although students' performance is improving (Hamiruddin, 2002; AbdRasid, 2004; Azmi, 2010).

Reading is a process in which information is dealt with and meaning constructed continuously (Goodman, 1998). The brain is the organ of information processing. Based on the findings of this study, reading interest is correlated with performance. This research provides evidence that the act of reading itself improves students' performance. Hence, it is important that ESL teachers develop in their students a reading habit that will endure and produce sustained independent readers. Obviously, the teachers believe that providing reading materials in class like daily newspapers, monthly magazines and storybooks play a crucial role in improving students' reading interest. This suggestion is in line with other research conducted locally. Many studies (such as Hamiruddin, 2002; AbdRasid, 2004; Mohamad, 2007) found that the availability of reading materials in terms of variety and quantity is highly important in developing the students' reading interest.

In addition, a home environment wealthy with books as well as the active involvement of parents in reading activities acts as a powerful catalyst in fostering reading habits among youngsters. Gengatharan (2004) found that among the best ways to improve the reading habits among rural school students is by encouraging them to read extensively and by exposing them to a lot of reading materials during early schooling. Pandian (2007) emphasized that interactive activities have shifted the paradigm in education. In language classrooms, integrative skills exercises include activities such as students reacting to texts by producing summaries, new endings, or pastiches; re-enacting text; dramatizing interviews based on the text; carefully listening for keywords or phrases in authentic video or audiotapes, and creating role-play situations. He urged that educators be updated with the latest interactive approaches in language teaching and learning so that education will become more relevant and meaningful to the learners.

Parents and teachers play an active role in encouraging good reading habits. These two groups are the closest and most effective parties to influence and help learners to read. However, she also stressed that choosing appropriate reading materials (from easy to difficult) should be given priority as well (AbdRasid, 2004; Mohamad, 2007). They should provide a good example by reading themselves and by reading to their children. They should make reading an enjoyable family activity. A reading environment should be developed at home by having reading facilities and reading materials readily available. In brief, these findings are parallel to the finding of the present study, that is, teachers and parents should motivate the students to love reading so that it becomes a habit.

There is also a realization that reading in English is tough for students who come to school with greater strength in their first language. The natural tendency would be to reject English reading activities if teachers do not play their role well. As explained earlier, this study was based on Gough's Reading Model (Gough, 1972) which suggests that reading is a process of information transfer. In the transfer process, reading interest plays a significant role. Thus, readers extract meaning from the reading material by processing the text in a linear way, allowing them to transfer meaning from the texts to their minds. Furthermore, there is evidence that teachers have attempted to improve the ability of readers to transfer information from texts by applying this concept in their reading instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study is an important contribution to the field of reading in Malaysia. It offers a number of insightful findings. It is concluded that there is a significant relationship between students' reading interests and their performance in ESL classrooms. The findings provided valuable information on the importance of reading interests in determining students' performance. However, there is a need for improvement of reading interests among the students by focusing on the suitability and quality of reading materials. Teachers, parents, and governments should play a more proactive role in developing good reading interests and encourage the students to read especially by providing a wider variety of good reading materials. This study might be replicated to incorporate a computer-based learning environment which is crucial and prevalent in this age of information and communication technology.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study is limited to reading interest among ESL learners and their relationship with their performance in ESL classrooms, particularly in the Malaysian context particularly Terengganu, with a limited sample of 351 ESL learners. Thus, the outcome of the study is not applicable to other states in Malaysia. Further research might incorporate a computer-based learning environment especially in this age of advancement in information technology.

APPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The current study provides additional useful information on reading interest among ESL learners by examining the link between their interest and performance. This interest, which was found to be significant, lays the basis for academic achievement and engaged learning. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be useful to the teachers in assisting their students to develop reading interests. It is also hoped that the findings help the students in choosing appropriate reading materials. This will further help them to foster reading interests amongst themselves. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will encourage further studies on reading interests.

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