

## READING TRENDS AND IMPROVING READING SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading skills are important throughout our lifespan, particularly as we respond to new demands and changes in jobs and reading for pleasure or recreational has been found to improve reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, and grammatical development. Lack of literacy skills including reading causes problems for living, working and survival in general. Malaysian National Literacy Survey reported that Malaysians still read an average of two books a year which is very alarming. Through reading, we acquire new ideas and knowledge, obtain needed information, relax the minds, and improve our command of language and vocabulary. The general trend of reading is for examinations rather than for information or pleasure. Research has proven that Malaysian do not read enough and the mainstream of readers are students reading books for examinations rather than knowledge and pleasure. This paper will attempt to show the readings trends and relate the importance of reading and conditioning this behavior towards a habitual way of life amongst Malaysian students. Certain past and current research will be used as a platform to provide solutions to improve and increase the intensity of reading amongst Malaysians. The paper concludes that some of the methods of improving reading among students participation in classes, homework to improve reading comprehension developing the survey, question, read, recite and review (SQ3R) method and peer teaching. The holy grail of reading begins at home as parents promote the reading skill and later into a habit for their children.*

**Keywords:** Reading, reading skills, reading attitude, peer teaching, information reading

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on reading instruction in higher education. In an effort to improve the quality of instruction, much research has been conducted to break down and understand the complex process of reading [1]. Learning to read and then improve and sustain reading skills involves a variety of interconnected elements [2]. These include students' attitudes to reading and motivation to read for enjoyment [3]. Based on the aspirations to become an industrialized nation, Malaysia has made many conscious efforts to improve and develop literacy so that it will achieve a literacy rate of 100% by the year 2020. The country still has a long way to go but there are positive indications that the literacy rate is increasing. The World Education Report (1993) states that Malaysia then had one of the lowest literacy rates (78.4%) compared to her other Southeast Asian neighbors,

like Singapore (100%), Indonesia (81.6%), Thailand (93%), and the Philippines (89.7%), respectively. Today, the country's population is close to 20 million, the Malaysian literacy is 85% [4]. All these will be quite impossible if our people, especially the young, do not cultivate good reading habits. We have been told about critical thinking skills, managerial skills, public speaking skills, but hardly do we consider reading skills. Reading is an aspect associated with literacy. However, the reading process is not simple in its nature. It does not merely involve recognizing a single character and pronouncing it correctly or to recognize and pronounce a few characters that are arranged in a particular manner, but more importantly it is the ability to understand the meaning of these arrangements.

The literacy rate in Malaysia was about 52 per cent in 1957, when we achieved independence from the British, and it was recorded as 80 per cent in 1994 [5]. While this progress may paint a rosy

picture, it cannot be assumed that this rate would continue to stabilize or increase in the coming years. Public attention has been drawn to the growing problem of non-reading among Malaysians, specifically among the students. Reading is regarded as a process, a mode of thinking, a kind of real experience and involves many complex skills: the ability to perceive printed words, to skim for information and then perhaps read intensively. With almost everyone in Malaysia owning a data based computer or phone, digital reading is much easier to access rather than the “hard copy” books which is costlier and occupy space. But why is that Malaysians are not reading enough and how do we inculcate the reading habits amongst them especially conditioning the younger generation to have a passion for reading. Research has proven that Malaysians are poor readers especially adults whilst children prefer to read in preparing for their examinations rather than read for entertainment and acquiring knowledge.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF READING

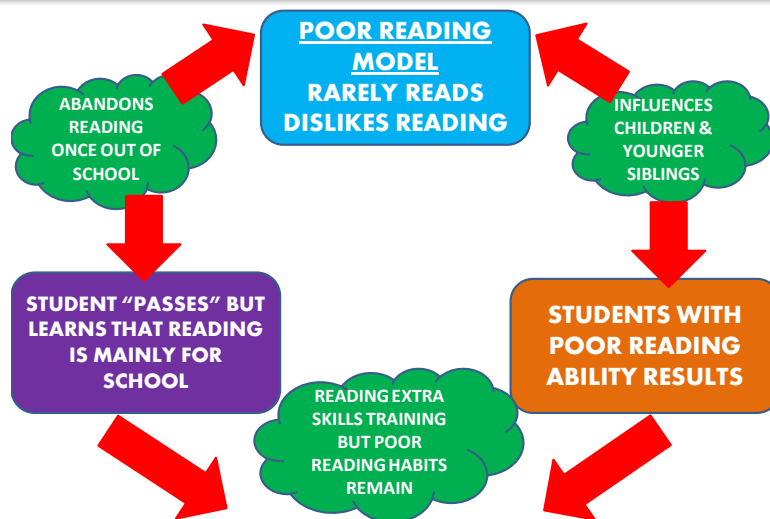
Reading is not a natural act, or as Maryanne Wolf [6] explained it, there are no reading genes. Rather, reading is a cultural activity that has undergone profound changes since its inception. In the standard history of reading entitled *Orality and literacy* [7] pointed out that the earliest basic script dates from only about 6,000 years ago. Furthermore, the first full alphabet did not have its beginning until the Greeks developed their alphabet about 750 B.C. Putting this time frame into an individual perspective, Wolf poetically wrote that “despite the fact that it took our ancestors about 2,000 years to develop an alphabetic code, children are regularly expected to crack this code in about 2,000 days” [8]. Providing insight into the cultural history of reading, Robert Darnton pointed out that up until the third or fourth century A.D., Europeans “had to unroll a book to read it” [9]. Scrolls would eventually evolve into folded pages, which in turn eventually became gathered pages or the codex in which the book as it is recognized today. The popular writer Alberto Manguel has written that early Christians adopted the codex because they found it a convenient format for keeping their spiritual texts hidden from Roman authorities [10]. These early Christians were the forefathers of the men who later read and transcribed

their religious texts in monasteries. Interestingly, these early scribes first did their work by reading out loud to themselves. Not until the ninth century did monastic regulations begin requiring silent reading [11]. By the thirteenth century the practice of men reading silently and alone became commonplace. This shift to silent reading was a profound change, one that Darnton suggested “involved a greater mental adjustment than the shift to printed text” [12].

### IMPORTANCE OF READING

Reading is a cornerstone for success not just in schools but throughout life. Through reading, we acquire new ideas and knowledge, obtain needed information, relax the minds, and improve our command of language and vocabulary. It also serves as a good companion and provides pleasure, expand our horizons and enrich our lives. We are fortunate as we can easily find libraries and bookshops throughout the country and we should know how to make good use of them. But sadly, this is not the case as many of our young people only visit the libraries and bookstores during examinations or in times of need. Reading has come to hold the most significant place in education as a means of communication in a highly literate society. The book is still very much part of people's lives in our modern society and in spite of the invention of the latest audio-visual materials, the book in its ordinary conventional form is still the most important means of communication ever invented. Reading is important for acquiring knowledge and information. The enrichment in knowledge would, in turn, enable one to present oneself more confidently. From the very young to the old and the sick, there are books to suit every taste.

In their research with adult readers [13], found that reading contributes significantly to job success, career development, and ability to respond to change. The importance of reading has resulted in much research work conducted to understand the nature of the reading habits of individuals. With the growing amount of digital information available and the increasing amount of time that people spend reading electronic media, the digital environment has begun to affect people's reading behavior.



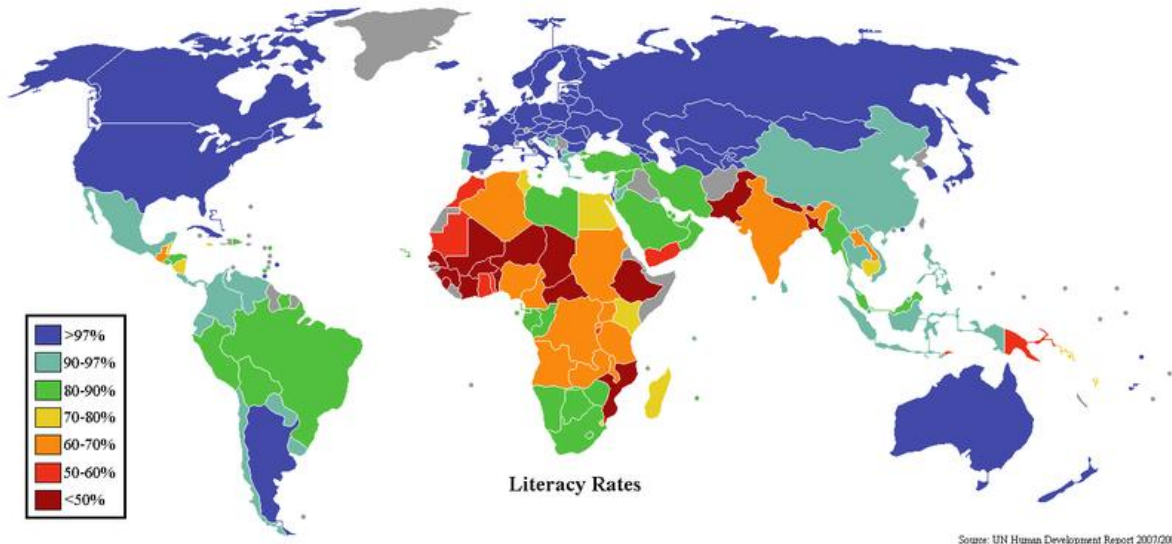
**Figure 1: Reading Modeling Effects  
(Source : Smith and Mikulecky 1978:78)**

influence as models in their respective homes, workplaces and schools if they are educators, will contribute to the amelioration of the problem of widespread reading reluctance in the nation.

In learning English as a second or foreign language [15], asserts that reading is the most important skill to master. In Malaysia, where English is taught as a second language, reading in English would undoubtedly help a learner to be proficient in the language as language can be learned through reading [16]. Nevertheless, a few surveys on reading habits in Malaysia showcased that tertiary level students spent less time reading than they used to before joining the university [17]. A similar result was found in a reading habit survey [18]. The survey indicated that even though most subjects had high level of motivation and attitude, only about two third of the subjects did spend time on reading English materials outside class hours. Two third who spent time on reading, almost half of them spent only less than one hour a week on English reading.

Studies have shown that ignoring reluctance is identical to sustaining the conditions for another generation of reading problems in the schools as the sons and daughters of non-reading parents complete the vicious cycle as shown in **Figure 1** known as Reading Modeling Effects [14]. This reading model presented alerts the importance of modeling effects. This study has found that unless people who read, do continue to read willingly for information and pleasure, we won't have models who can contribute effectively towards promoting positive reading behavior. The lack of positive reading behavior is one that breeds at both secondary school as was university levels. If university students who read will continue to read after graduation, their

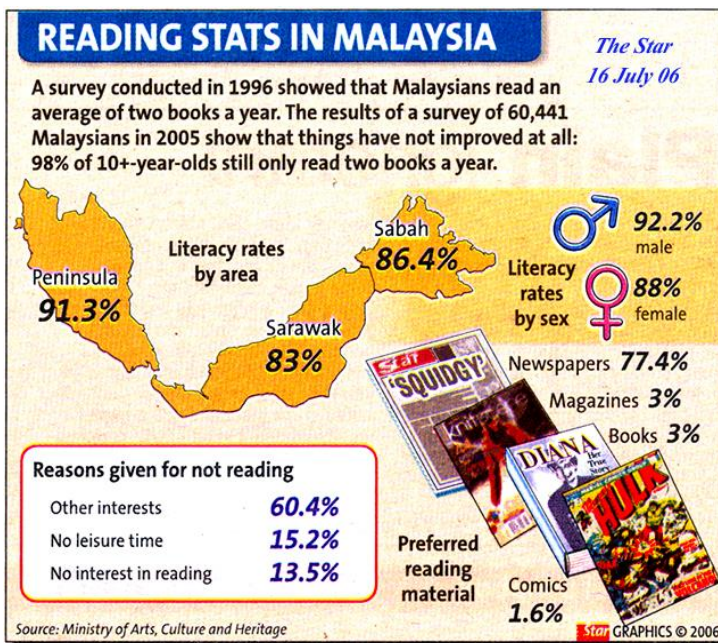
**READING TRENDS IN MALAYSIA**



**Figure 1: World Map Indicating Literacy By Country 2007/2008**  
(Source: UNESCO Institute For Statistics 2007).

Data on adult literacy rates from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS) April 2007, that combines direct national estimates with recent estimates based on its Global age-specific literacy projections model developed in 2007. The national estimates, made available through targeted

effort by UIS to collect recent literacy data from countries, are obtained from national censuses or surveys between 1995 and 2005. From 178 countries around the world, Malaysia was placed at 88<sup>th</sup> with a recorded a literacy rate of 91.9 % at shown in **Figure 1** [19].



**Figure 2 : Reading Statistics in Malaysia**  
(Source: STAR ,2006)

In 1982, the National Literacy Survey carried out by the National Library reported that Malaysians only read an average of one to two pages a year. Fortunately, the reading habit among Malaysians improved to two books per year when the National Literacy Survey was repeated in 1996. Nonetheless, the last National Literacy Survey carried out in 2005 reported that Malaysians still read an average of two books a year. In short, there had been no improvement. In a recent survey by the Malaysian National Library (2006) with sample 60,441 respondents, it was found that the literacy rate has slightly decreased to 92 percent from 93 percent in 1996 [20].

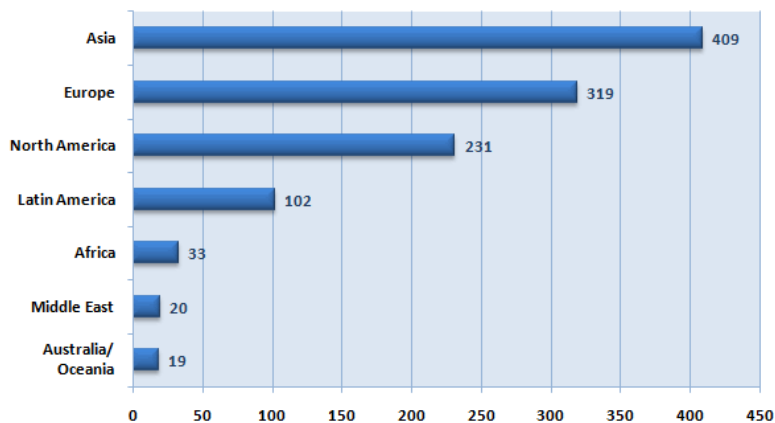
In this research the main findings is that more than half of the 60,441 odd Malaysians surveyed read less than seven pages a day [21]. This includes about two books a year for ages above ten years old excluding text books for students and books that are work related for working adults. Also shocking is that most of those who read books and magazines, read less

than three hours a week. The older we get, the less we read was the consensus on this research. Not surprisingly reading is not even the favourite pastime of Malaysians as most prefer to watch television and video. The is frightening as the reading habit looks to be a thing of the past as the survey also unearthed the trend among the young who read only to acquire knowledge and for academic reasons rather than knowledge based.

But according to book chains stores from MPH and Borders seen in **Figure 2** [22], they report increasing sales and the book business locally is apparently worth two billion ringgit a year. This only means Malaysian probably buy books for studies or they buy books but never read them. It can be deduced that rural Malaysians read even fewer books than this. For children to pick up reading skills easily, one of the core pre-requisites is that they understand the pleasure of reading through having books read to them and seeing adults around them derive pleasure and meaning from print. In rural Malaysia, most children come to school without having had this experience.

There are two major concerns involving Malaysian readers. One is that only 20 percent of Malaysian read regularly [23]. The rest of the population are called “reluctant readers”. Another concern involves students who read only to pass exams. Studies have shown that students were reluctant to read for information or pleasure. According to Pandian, “if this phenomenon is left unattended, the future of Malaysia will eventually be directed by reluctant readers, that is, by people who are ‘retarded’ in terms of knowledge, intelligence and maturity.” More rigorous studies need to be conducted in order to learn more about Malaysian readers. Among other findings, reported that, about 80 percent of Malaysian university students are reluctant readers of both English and Malay materials. Ethnicity, home environment, reading models, gender and school environment are important indicators of reading. Students from the urban areas are found to be reading more than the rural counterpart ,[24].

**Internet Usage by World Region**



**Table 1: World Internet Usage by World Region)**  
(Source: International Design and Children IDC (2007).

According to International Design and Children IDC (2004) there are total of 1.1 billion internet users in the world as of June 2007, according to data published by Internet World Stats. 409 million of internet users are coming from Asia as of June 2007, according to data published by Internet World Stats. \$1.6 trillion was made via e-commerce in 2003 and \$7.1 trillion is expected in 2007 as shown in **Table 1** [25]. Reading from the internet provide

The coming of the digital media may explain the differences in reading behavior among Malaysians. More and more people are using the web and wireless solutions to satisfy their information needs. As a result, their reading habits and attitudes towards the printed text materials may be decreasing significantly. On the other hand, the implication on the patterns of reading is such that reading time is made shorter by just skimming and browsing the hypertexts that are less structured and non-linear. Computers should be provided to enable the students to utilize the internet for research and also to locate online reading materials.

impetus for readers to virtually quest their thirst of knowledge and increase their intellectual capital globally. In Malaysia being part of the majority Asian internet usage will be part of the back wagon in increasing the number of readers virtually. As a result, their reading habits and attitudes towards the printed text materials may be decreasing significantly. On the other hand, the implication on the patterns of reading is such that reading time is

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A growing amount of reading time are spent more on skimming and browsing for information on the internet. On the other hand, the nature and purpose of reading seems to deviate as w from the traditional reading methods, which are brief, linear and less structured. Some researchers argued that the growth of electronic media may give negative implication to the fact that people are less engaged in extensive reading and lack the ability to read deeply and to sustain a prolonged engagement in reading [26]. Liu also provides the evidence that the age factor contributes to reading behavior on the internet. In addition, younger people can tolerate more time reading the screen-based materials. These resources are gaining importance particularly among younger people in Malaysia. This phenomenon may change the way people perceive about reading and how printed materials are being utilized to facilitate reading.

#### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING READING SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS**

Reading skills are important throughout our lifespan, particularly as we respond to new demands and changes in jobs and reading for pleasure or recreational has been found to improve reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, and grammatical development. The importance on teaching students to read and ultimately reducing illiteracy has been a major agenda in Malaysia [27]. When adults in today's age who can read, choose not to read, they are likely to create a generation of non-readers as perpetuate the problem of reading reluctance. The term reluctant readers to people who can read but do not read and the term reluctance to describe the phenomenon of people who can read but choose not to read. The focus on reading is crucial given the development of communications technology and the changed reality we confront in contemporary societies. For reading to be meaningful, it is essential that young people learn not only to read but they cultivate reading behavior for lifelong learning. While new forms of reading texts (mass and multimedia) have emerged, it is still not certain if communications technology will be used to maintain their reading for pleasure and lifelong learning.

Reading attitude is an integral part of the development and use of lifelong reading skills [28]. Having positive attitudes toward learning is one of the most important psychological concepts in education. A positive attitude determines the success of any instruction [29], so it is crucial for instructors to engage, maintain, and rekindle students' positive attitude. Positive reading attitudes affect the students' ultimate academic success by increasing the amount of time that is spent on reading [30]. Whether students read or not is largely determined by their attitudes toward reading [31]. If students do not like to read or think reading is boring, negative attitudes are likely to hold back their reading improvement. Poor readers generally have more negative attitudes than good readers [32].

Although Malaysia has a fairly high literacy rate and a good educational system, the reading habit has not developed as it should. Relatively recently, reading research has broadened in scope to consider the way in which social contexts influence reading ability. The development of reading skills is now accepted to occur not only in the classroom, but also within social settings, at home and in the wider community, including the public library. International research provides powerful demonstrations of the impact of the actions of young people and family members as they combine languages, illiteracies and cultural practices from a variety of contexts [33]. In many studies grounded in "real world settings", in other words, beyond the school gates, children's learning is supported and in turn supports the learning of others, in ways that are not necessarily recognized or understood within the school. It is much better to begin with to take books to the people than to expect people to come to libraries to look for books. There are two reasons for this. The first reason is that people do not go to libraries because it is not a culturally familiar thing to do. The second reason is that if people do pluck up courage and venture through library doors they often find that it is such an alien place that they leave as soon as possible and do not come back [34]. Almost all our valuable life-enriching habits are given to us by our parents, our peers or our teachers.

If students want to participate actively in the class, they are likely to perform extra work on their own in order to improve their reading skills [35]. When students are intrinsically motivated, they are undertaking an activity for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, or the feeling of accomplishment it evokes [36]. Intrinsic motivation

has more potential benefits than extrinsic motivation [37]. Students with intrinsic motivation use more logical information gathering and decision-making strategies than students with extrinsic motivation [38]. When intrinsically motivated, students tend to employ strategies that demand more time and effort, and that enable them to process information more deeply [39]. Students with an intrinsic orientation also tend to prefer academic tasks that are moderately challenging, whereas extrinsically orientated students gravitate toward tasks that are low in degree of difficulty [40]. Extrinsically oriented students are inclined to put forth the minimal amount of time, energy, and effort necessary in order to receive the maximum reward [41].

Students should be provided with sufficient homework and class work in order to help improve reading comprehension in their courses. Critical reading and thinking skills require active reading (White, 2004). Being active readers mean students have to engage with the text, both mentally and physically. Students should do the following: skim ahead, jump back, and highlight the text when they are studying [42]. They should make specific observations about the text [43]. Students should skim and scan homework and class work assignments to get the general idea of its contents [44]. Instructors should provide class-related topics that are exciting and interesting. The best instructors tell stories related to topic; when students are taking a quiz or exam, they will remember the story associated with the lecture to recall the information. Practice exercises are also essential to improve reading comprehension in college courses. Practice exercises in class and homework help students to remember the information for quizzes and final exams. New words appearing in the scripted materials are printed on a flipchart. In this way, students could see and take careful notice during the discussion of each new word as it is used in a textbook illustration, and is identified and printed on a chalkboard. These new words are referred to in the reading activity [45].

When you are reading, make it pleasurable and find a quiet place. Make your reading time your favourite time of day like have some good tea or coffee. Find a quiet place that you are comfortable and be easy to understand what you read. A quiet place will make you peace. If you find yourself stressful while reading the book, don't continue reading under pressure like that. Reading is for pleasure, so don't push yourself too hard that you can quit reading forever, or even if you can read, the

outcome won't be so good either. After approximately 11 years in formal education, majority of Malaysian students are able to read efficiently after finishing their secondary education. However, even equipped with literacy skills particularly reading skills, the reading habits of students are still at an unsatisfactory level [46]. Society at large, especially parents, need to change this mindset and be more proactive in guiding and cultivating reading habits among children from a young age. The people that are culturally closest to us and who are therefore most influential are our parents and our peers. Reading begins at home and parents are the key indicators on whether their child is acquiring the habit of learning. Children at a tender age are like sponge feeding into their minds knowledge and information from their parents which act as their role model. Conditioning the child with positive reading habits must be inculcated at this young age to provide a strong pillar and platform for them to create a passion in reading. Teachers in schools are busy with their daily stressful job of educating children and this require the parents to push the extra mile in spending time reading and this will improve the social bondage between them. If our youth spend their free time in reading and cultivate critical thinking, we will have less social problems such as illegal racing, wild sex, baby-dumping, drug-taking and so on. Another aspect of reading skill is the learning of speed reading which enables one to read and understand much faster and more knowledge in a shortest time. Speed reading is a collection of reading methods which attempt to increase rates of reading without greatly reducing comprehension or retention. The ability to read fast in a comprehensive manner is like any ability, something people can develop over time.

### STRATEGIES FOR MOTIVATING READING SKILLS

Reading motivation refers to a person's personal goals, values and beliefs on reading topics, processes and outcomes [47]. Motivation can be in the form of intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) factors. When the desire to read is controlled externally, for example, to meet teachers' or parents' expectations, readers are only extrinsically motivated because they may not be interested to read but they want to achieve certain outcomes like rewards or good grades [48]. In the mid-1940's, Francis Robinson developed the SQ3R method of self-regulated reading [49]. College students and professionals need a method to help them become proficient in reading in order to help them learn more

effectively. Proficient reading skills give students the potential to be better self-directed learners, and therefore acquire more expertise within their professional fields [50]. There are four items that proficient readers partake of. First, students have a reason for why they are reading and how they will read. Second, students know their skill process when they read. Third, students keep track of their reading comprehension. Finally, students use a large assortment of reading methods for different reading passages [51]). The SQ3R method includes survey, question, read, recite and review [52]. To survey the reading material, students need to quickly overview the text and understand the main points and how this information is structured. Using the survey part of this reading method, students will skim the textbook chapter to see the overall structure, decide which reading method will be best based upon the headings and view the larger image of the chapter to understand the reading. By knowing what the textbook chapters are about, students can provide questions to promote critical thinking skills.

Using peer teaching, a small group of college students take turn being the teacher. Peer teaching has also been called cooperative learning [53]. First, the group reads a portion of textbook chapter silently, and then the peer teacher asks a question that may be asked by the actual teacher about what they just read [54]. The group discusses the reading and assists each other with any questions or clarification if needed [55]. The peer teacher makes a guess about what could be happening next in the text. This process can help students to gain better understanding of their reading [56]. The actual teacher of the class starts off the group discussion and offers much help. Through time, the teacher reduces the assistance that is given to the group until the group is guiding the entire discussion on their own. Another approach is peer-assisted instruction. This procedure involves two students taking part in reading and understanding together, bringing about more opportunities for each student to ask questions they have and to answer questions the other student has [57]. They are able to learn together for understanding the reading assignment. Students were paired with another student based upon level of achievement [58]. Higher or average performing students are paired with a student who achieves lower results based upon a pretest performance. This approach allows students to ask questions about the assigned reading together in a group [59].

Reading habit should start from young itself. There for parents should play a main role in convincing and ting their children on how important it is for a person to read no matter what type of reading material it is but it must be beneficial. Nowadays it is understood that parents are busy with their work, but they must make sure their children reads daily. Other than that, parents should bring their kids to the national library at least once a week and they have to read together with their kids, so that the kids will be encouraged to read [60]. Parents also can set up a mini library at home with the materials available and suitable for reading. Parents also should advise their adult children to read newspaper on a daily basis and not only reading story book or novels. This is to make sure that they are aware about the current issues. For adults, it will takes time to change their habit when they realize reading is very important. Government also must carry out campaign regarding reading habits.

Children should be exposed to reading from the womb; however reading must be more to children than a time of fun and enjoyment. When asked why reading is important they should have the understanding that reading is the key to unlocking their future success. It is observed that children and teenagers who love reading have comparatively higher IQs. They are more creative and do better in school and college. It is recommended that parents to inculcate the importance of reading to their children in the early years. Reading is said to significantly help in developing vocabulary, and reading aloud helps to build a strong emotional bond between parents and children. The children who start reading from an early age are observed to have good language skills, and they grasp the variances in phonics much better. One of the best ways for children to understand why reading is important, is for them to see those around them reading [61]. Many adults have plenty of opportunities to ensure that children have a respect for the written word. Every time an adult picks up a newspaper, magazine, or reads a book in front of a child they are showing children that reading is important. In addition, it is also important that children understand that reading comprehension, vocabulary and the ability to discern critically the information being read are important elements for successful reading. Adults should never hesitate to explain to children the importance of reading, building vocabulary skills, and increasing reading comprehension.



As Malaysia move towards Vision 2020, which incorporates nine strategic objectives and the sixth is the challenge to establish a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future. And being poor readers, it is not going to be easy for us to attain this goal. In this context, perhaps Malaysians can learn a thing or two from our Japanese friends. Japan is one of the most developed nations in the world and most Japanese are good readers. The introduction of the digital age in terms of electronic learning better known as E Learning is another reason why reading must be emphasized as anyone can learn from anywhere as long as they have a computer and internet access [62].

## CONCLUSION

A reading habit is an essential life skill. Reading not only increases our knowledge, but it also builds maturity and character, sharpens our thinking, and widens our awareness in social, economic, political, and environmental issues. Reading helps in mental development and is known to stimulate the muscles of the eyes. Reading is an activity that involves greater levels of concentration and adds to the conversational skills of the reader. It is an indulgence that enhances the knowledge acquired, consistently. The habit of reading also helps readers to decipher new words and phrases that they come across in everyday conversations. The habit can become a healthy addiction and adds to the information available on various topics. The emergence of digital reading has create a much simpler paperless user friendly method of fun reading.

Other than parents, the school which is the primary educational institution of the society also has a crucial role to play in improving students' reading habits. The school library is one of the usual facilities found in a public school. Students in Malaysia however, for the most of the time have often associated reading with academic tasks and not for knowledge or pleasure. This does not enable the students who have the ability to read to use this activity in a significant way for self or social development. The holy grail of reading begins at home as parents educate the reading skill and later into a habit for their children. Reading must be fun and creative to ensure children are motivated and be conditioned to enjoy reading as a passion in the

future. The Malaysian government has provided infra structures , campaign and other related events schools, universities and the corporate world to encourage reading for children and adults. Organization must start at grass roots to ensure reading becomes a lifestyle in the Malaysian people and sustain a lifelong reading habit with imaginative ways to improve reading. The way forward for all Malaysian is to increase the literacy rate and compound a vigorous learning attitude by reading consistently. The paper concludes that some of the methods of improving reading among students participation in classes, homework to improve reading comprehension developing the survey, question, read, recite and review (SQ3R) method and peer t teaching. The holy grail of reading begins at home as parents promote the reading skill and later into a habit for their children.

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