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ENHANCING LITERACY ENGAGEMENT WITH CULTURALLY RELEVANT READING MATERIALS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

**Auni Batrisyia Suharto^{1*}, Puteri Rohani Megat Abdul Rahim²,
Nuramira Anuar³ & Nor Najihah Norafand⁴**

*1,2,3&4 Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)
Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, MALAYSIA*

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Corresponding Author:
2022214962@student.uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This concept paper delves into the critical realm of literacy engagement among foreign language English learners and its transformative potential when coupled with culturally relevant reading materials. As the global landscape continues to diversify, educational systems are witnessing an increasing presence of linguistically and culturally diverse student populations. Addressing the unique needs of these learners is paramount, particularly in the realm of literacy development. This paper proposes an innovative approach to enhancing literacy engagement by leveraging culturally relevant reading materials that resonate with the lived experiences and backgrounds of second language English learners. Drawing on a multidisciplinary foundation that integrates theories of language acquisition, cultural psychology, and educational pedagogy, this concept paper seeks to underscore the intrinsic connection between cultural identity and literacy engagement. By intertwining culturally resonant narratives, themes, and characters within reading materials, educators can bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, cultivating an enriched learning environment that empowers learners to engage more deeply with the English Language and its literary expressions. Additionally, the concept paper addresses practical considerations for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It delves into the process of selecting and

integrating culturally relevant reading materials, suggesting strategies to ensure authenticity, sensitivity, and alignment with educational objectives. Through an exploration of existing research, this paper highlights the positive impact of culturally relevant reading materials on third language learners' motivation, comprehension, and overall language proficiency. It also delves into the socioemotional dimensions of such engagement, elucidating how culturally imbued content can provide a sense of belonging, thereby fostering a positive attitude towards language learning.

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1. Introduction

Having excellent proficiency in multiple literacy skills is an asset and a necessity, especially with today's globally interconnectedness. The development of literacy skills specifically for foreign individuals may encounter complex linguistic nuances, cognitive challenges, as well as different cultural semantics. To be able to create effective English language acquisition for foreigners, there is a need to integrate relevant reading materials based on the local culture (Ferdiansyah et al., 2023), as it emerges as a powerful pedagogical tool to ignite and enhance literacy engagement for foreign language learners. Providing learners with meaningful contexts and authentic materials that are relevant to their culture, creates a window of opportunity for them into the socio-cultural scene of the target language (Sabilaha et al., 2018).

The relevance of integrating cultural reading materials to literacy enhancement refers to the alignment of cultural background, interest of the learners, as well as their experiences. This is to show that language is intricately woven into the tapestry of culture and resonates with their identities, rather than being an isolated entity. Allowing the learners to make connections between their existing knowledge and the foreign language learnt, creates a motivating and engaging environment (Haerazi et al., 2018) for the enhancement of literacy skills to take place. Incorporating local based materials is an act of mirroring the learners to see themselves being reflected in the learning content.

Acquiring a new language, especially the English language, is not purely memorising the vocabularies or understanding the grammar rules. They are about being able to steer through the structures and semantic meanings, as well as the sounds and symbols of the language. By embedding a familiar context to language learning, learners will be better equipped to decode and analyse the nuances of the target language (Seyyedrezaie & Barani, 2013). Using and applying cultural values into language learning will broaden the learners' linguistic proficiency holistically. This simultaneously enhances the literacy acquisition amongst the learners by enveloping, not limited to reading, writing, listening, speaking, and cultural comprehension (Yuan, 2017).

Furthermore, relevant reading materials to the language learners foster critical thinking and awareness of the intercultural values. Being able to develop a deeper understanding of the

complexities of the English language heightens the skill of cultural sensitivity in today's multicultural and interconnected world. In the following sections, there will be in depth details on strategies in implementing cultural materials to enhance literacy acquisition among foreign language learners.

2. What is Literacy

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023), defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy is an elemental skill that enables the learners to participate actively within the society and to successfully communicate in any situation. Literacy also embraces the skill to be able to critically engage, interpret texts, and apply the context in a meaningful and productive manner as it is a crucial skill for learners to navigate through professional and social situations today that is information-driven.

3. Ecological Systems Theory

The Ecological Systems Theory was proposed by Bronfenbrenner, a psychologist in 1977. The theory consists of five layers, and they are interconnected to each other. In layman's words, this says that a person's growth is influenced by their close family and neighbourhood, which are influenced by wider elements like the community and culture they are a part of. Layers of influence shape a person's development.

Using this theory, it is preferred for educators to be fully aware that surroundings play a vital role in the growth of language learning. Hence, the integration of the foreign learners' cultural values into the reading materials, to create a satisfactory engagement of English literacy.

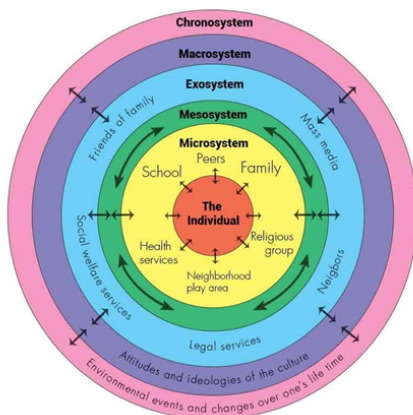


Figure 1. Ecological Systems Theory

4. Selecting and Integrating Culturally Relevant Reading Materials

To be able to enhance literacy engagement with materials that are culturally relevant entails a thoughtful and informed process in selecting them. It is also paired with strategic assimilation into the curriculum. To effectively engage and ensure the foreign language learners can connect with the content, it is compulsory to choose reading materials that reflect the

authenticity of their cultural backgrounds and experiences. This will also facilitate the learners to a deeper understanding of the language and its nuances (Nambiar & Anawar, 2017). The selection of reading materials includes authentic representation (Blasina Cantizano, 2020), relevance to learners' lives (Ebe, 2012), diversity of perspectives (Heineke, 2014), and alignment with educational objectives (Yuan, 2017).

5. Reading Materials for Literacy Learning Engagement

The use of English as a second language is being recognised as an important tool for better employability and improving social mobility in today's society. However, the lack of appropriate learning materials is seen as a major drawback for the ESL learners from achieving proper English language comprehension and literacy skills. In this section, there will be discussion on different reading materials that have been proposed to promote the engagement of English literacy learning among the foreign learners.

Letchamanan et al., (2021) pointed out that language learning should be situated within their own environment, which relates to the fact that it is important to incorporate the learners' cultural elements into the learning materials. This would help to increase the engagement between the learners and teachers, as well as among themselves (Englund et al., 2022). This in a way, would promote a sense of pride towards their culture and their identity. The study also mentions the appropriate materials would be those that incorporate stories, traditions, and cultural practices. Promoting bilingualism or trilingualism is important when facing the need to improve the ESL learners' English literacy level. With this, the process of meaning-making can be achieved by them.

a) Cultural Folklores and Short Stories

One approach that can be used to facilitate literacy engagement is using materials of local folklores or short stories. Folklores are stories that have been done for centuries to pass down information and knowledge to younger generations and stand as a foundation for pedagogical tools (Barton and Barton, 2017). By incorporating the learners' culture into story reading, it can bridge the gap between their native language and English. The stories are inclusive of representation of personal experience, traditions, and literature (Isbell et al., 2004). For instance, Satriani (2021) conducted a qualitative study towards six eighth grader students in an Indonesian school using storytelling. Satriani (2021) tested the participants in three different activities; before, during, and after storytelling, and approved of the outcome that incorporating storytelling with native culture can support better English literacy acquisitions.

b) Poetries

Poetry encourages learners to analyse and interpret meaning. Allowing learners to be exposed to a variety of poetry styles, promotes appreciation to linguistic values that are important components for language proficiency (Kramsch, 2014). Using poetry with contexts of local cultures will engage a deep understanding between the learners and English as their target language. According to Creely (2018), poetry instruction is critical for deep personal engagement and the development of varied literacy competencies. Thompson (2013) discovered that incorporating poetry into the classroom on a regular basis can boost student confidence, reading fluency, word recognition, engagement, connection, and understanding. Educators should assimilate poetries into one of the language learning strategies to heighten the level of literacy engagement of the learners.

c) **Graphic Novels and Comics**

Learning a second language is undoubtedly challenging for foreign learners. In this case, the learners would need motivation to allow the urge of learning a new language to consistently flow through their mindset. According to Lane and Coyne (2017), graphic novels can help struggling and hesitant readers by encouraging engagement and motivation. This type of reading material, combined with local context and cultural values, is targeted specifically for foreign learners who have a hard time acquiring and engaging with English literacy. Salehi (2019) highlights the pedagogical potential of adopting graphic novels in the English classroom to increase multimodal literacy engagement. This would create a supportive environment for the learners to be familiar with their background cultures. Derbel (2019) investigates the use of comics in the classroom and demonstrates how graphic novels can increase student involvement in the learning process by creating a motivating learning environment.

6. Enhancing Literacy Engagement: Concept Map

A framework is designed to promote engagement in literacy, targeting the foreign learners. Integrated with culturally relevant content, this framework is aimed to create a meaningful engagement using culturally relevant materials based on the diversity of the learners' backgrounds. The said materials include folklores/short stories, poetries, and graphic novels/comics, and they serve as conduits for cultural relevance (Peck, 2020), allowing the learners to connect with the learning content on a personal level.

The language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking must be evaluated by the educators to recognise the language acquisition level of the foreign learners. The evaluation is done with relations to the diversity of the learners' population which requires the educators to identify the learners' cultural background, language proficiency level, and the learners' learning style. With the collected information, a thorough and proper research on suitable reading materials that are related to their cultures used to enhance literacy engagement with the learners. To ease the educators, it is suggested for them to find context based on their learners' cultural folklores, poetries, and their graphic novels. This will create a sense of connection and a sense of familiarity (Titone et al., 2012) between the learners and the educators. Assessments and feedback must be conducted by the educators to ensure the enhancement of literacy acquisition, and identifying teaching gaps, misconceptions, and confusions to be covered afterwards (Piper, 2016).

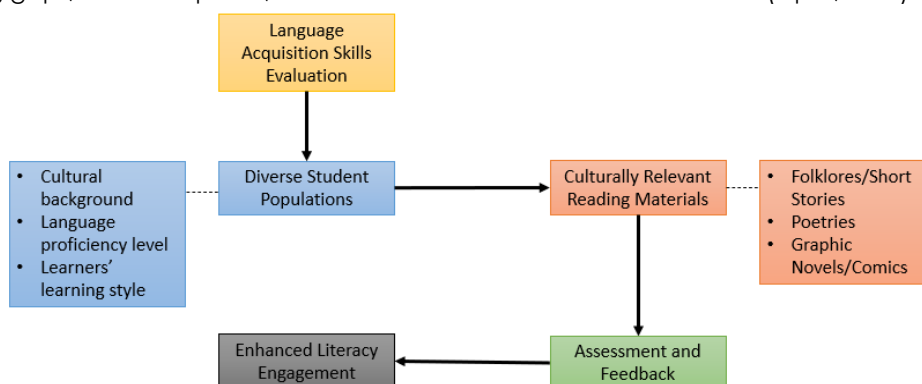


Figure 2. Concept Map on Enhancing Literacy Engagement

7. Conclusion

Culturally appropriate reading materials such as folklores, short stories, poetries, and graphic novels with local contexts of the learners are potential approaches that can be used to promote engagement on English literacy learning among the ESL learners. It is important for educators to consider the needs of foreign learners as well as their perspectives towards the learning experience. The materials used must fit the criteria to ensure the learning experience will be functional and effective. Cultural relevance materials can assist students improve their English language skills and encourage language transfer from their first language. Students can improve their language comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and communication skills by recognising and leveraging the similarities and differences between their local context and English.

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Conflict of Interest

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