

STUDENTS' READING HABITS, LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, AND LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES IN RELATION TO LITERARY COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to examine students' reading habits, language proficiency, and perception of learning preferences in relation to literary competence. A sample size of 181 respondents was derived from 236 Form Four students in an urban secondary school in Sabah. A self-administered questionnaire was selected as a mode of data collection. All instruments used in the hypotheses testing were adaptations of previously developed instruments. Descriptive, Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient and Multiple Regression statistics were used to analyse the data with the aid of SPSS. Additional research instruments used were interviews conducted with teachers and students. The findings showed that there was a positive significant relationship between students' reading habits, language proficiency, learning style preferences, and literary competence. However, language proficiency was found to be the salient predictor for literary competence. Additional findings also indicated that there was a mismatch of teaching style and learning style. This study concludes that students' language proficiency contributed significantly to the attainment of literary competence and therefore it should be given more emphasis in the teaching and learning of the literature component texts.

Introduction

In the study of literature, many studies have dealt with the approaches, methods, various teaching activities, and text/material selections that can be used or carried out in the teaching of literature. These studies (Collie and Long 1987; Carter 1986; Edwin 1993; Lazar 1993; McRae 1991) seem to lean on the notion that the teaching of literature, whether with a big "L" or a

small "1," can be taught to everyone and it depended very much on the teachers themselves to experiment, create, and improvised strategies used to make the reading and lessons meaningful. It is therefore hoped that this research will bring about some awareness that there are other factors such as students' reading habits, language proficiency, and learning style preferences that are equally important and should be taken into consideration in the teaching of literature.

The Ministry of Education has always emphasized on the importance of reading, and they have initiated many reading programmes such as The New Zealand Readers Programme (1970s), The World Bank Reading Project (1980s), The *NILAM* (*Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca*) Programme (1988), The English Language Reading Programme (1983) and The Class Reader Programme (1990s). It would be reasonable to conclude that the Ministry of Education recognizes the importance of reading and the habit of reading among students which it hopes promote life-long readers who not only reads efferently, but more importantly, aesthetically, so that they continue to find reading a joyful, purposeful, and meaningful activity.

The Integrated Primary/Secondary School Curriculum (*KBSR* and *KBSM*) was introduced in 1983 and 1988 respectively to enable students to develop their intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical potentials in a holistic and integrated manner. The new curriculum aimed to be student-centred. Since students are the focus, teachers will have to take account of learner's needs such as age, level of proficiency, aptitude, personality, cognitive style, first language, socioeconomic status, motivation, learning styles, etc. In the light of this, students' level of proficiency and learning style preferences have often been sidelined because of the large number of students per class the teacher has to teach, and also the assumptions that since students are of the same age at entry level of formal schooling, they should possess the same skills and abilities. With reference to the present time, it is generally acknowledged that students learn in different ways and the level of proficiency acquired would therefore be different for each individual even though they might be of the same age or in the same class/form.

The teaching and learning of literature in English in the Malaysian English Second Language (ESL) context is here to stay. The propagation of the study of literature both by policy makers as well as academics have indicated that they recognize the value of studying literature. Some of these values are fostering good reading habits, providing rich and diverse exposure to language, improving vocabulary, syntax and structures and leading to

language acquisition. It would not be wrong to say that literature can help students improve their linguistic performance and this, in turn, will help them improve their proficiency of the language. Consequently, it is crucial that consideration be given not only in the teaching and learning approaches, but also in the reading habits, language proficiency, and learning style preferences to help students acquire literary competence. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

1. What are students' reading habits?
2. What is the level of English language proficiency among students?
3. What are students' learning style preferences?
4. What is the level of literary competence among students?
5. Is there a relationship between students' reading habits and literary competence?
6. Is there a relationship between students' language proficiency and literary competence?
7. Is there a relationship between students' learning style preferences and literary competence?
8. Which is the best predictor—students reading habits, language proficiency, or learning style preferences—that contributes significantly towards literary competence?

Review of Literature

Reading habits of students

Living in the third millennium and with most of our students belonging to the PS (PlayStation) generation, the declining interest in books and reading among the young is inevitable. Most students today are more visually inclined and dislike reading, and for those who are still reading and writing, they are doing it on the Internet. Moreover, there is a general consensus among ESL teachers that the overall decline of English is due to the fact that students do not "read enough" and looked upon "reading" as something that they have to do in order to pass their examination, and not for the love of it. It is undeniable that students tend to equate "reading" with "to study". Hence the equation "To read=to study" and vice versa is quite true for a great many students (McRae 1991, 16). A study conducted by Ogunrombi and Adio (1995) echoed the

same sentiment in stating that the main motivation for reading in Nigeria is "to pass an examination and possess a certificate" with the hope to get a good job. They go on to say that most Nigerians "see books and reading as a means to an end." The assumptions to be made from these statements would be that the reading habits of students are only confined to their school textbooks because the need to pass and do well in public examination has left them little time to read anything else for pleasure.

Language proficiency and literacy

There are many aspects towards the study of a language and these would include phonology, grammar, lexicology, and discourse, and from formal, semantic, or sociolinguist perspectives (Stern 1996, 27). In studying a second language, or any other foreign languages, one of the main objectives of the learner would be to achieve proficiency in the language. Proficiency in a language is frequently conducted through formal assessment of their writing and/or written work. A few good examples are TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), IELTS (International English Language Testing System), or MUET (Malaysian University English Test), which tests the four skills—speaking, listening comprehension, reading, and writing—by using a band scale descriptor which describes the different levels of proficiency achieved. In all three language proficiency tests mentioned above, reading and writing skills are given a higher weightage as compared to speaking and listening skills. Therefore, it would not be too presumptuous of the authors to conclude that reading and writing skills are considered important in achieving literacy. Though it may be a narrow conception to think literacy in this way, but historically, the origin and development of the whole language movement was linked to this notion of literacy (Read and MacKay 1984).

Culture and learning styles

Teachers are too often seeking the one perfect method which they can use to teach every student in the classroom. Though it is a common fallacy to think that all students are the same, but in retrospect, they are different as "day and night." In the Malaysian context, this will be further compounded by the

different cultural background of each student. The diversity of culture to be found in Malaysia is indeed unique in the sense that the population of Malaysia comprises of three main ethnic groups: the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, whereas the Ibans and Kadazan-Dusuns form the main ethnic groups in East Malaysia. There are also other minority groups like the Straits-Born Chinese (Peranakans), Sikhs, Eurasians, where each ethnic group has their own mother tongue and dialects within those mother tongues. Malaysian classrooms are indeed a "cultural melting pot" where teachers are already having a difficult time teaching 45–50 students per class without taking into account of the learners' needs such as age, level of proficiency, aptitude, personality, cognitive style, first language, socioeconomic status, motivation, and others.

Some might like to think that the Malaysian classroom can be considered a homogeneous class because all students share a common native language—Bahasa Malaysia—and most of them are of the same age level as they enter formal schooling. But the underlying truth is that the "homogeneous class" is in fact made of different individuals whose culture influences their point of view, self-identity, and system of thinking, acting, feeling and communicating (Brown 1994). Moreover, how they perceive and process a learning task would also be totally different between a Chinese student and a Malay student. In *Iron and Silk*, Salzman (1986), as cited by Nelson (1995), who tells of his experiences in China while teaching English at the Hunan Medical College in Changsha, it describes how Chinese students learnt by "modeling." The "modeling" method involves watching someone models what is to be learnt. In the same way, many Chinese students learn to compose by applying this method. To improve their writing, students would memorize written texts, often several pages long, that are considered exemplars of a type of discourse (Carson 1992). In this way, the students learn, through memorization, the framework for writing and can then modify it as needed and desired (Unger 1977) as cited in Reid (1995). It is not uncommon to find that Malaysian students studying in Chinese vernacular schools are practising the same method. Rote learning and memorization are highly-prized because during examination, students regurgitate what has been taught to show the examiner/teacher that they have learnt the course content/subject. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Reid (1987) on "The Learning Style Preference of ESL Students," showed that Malay students prefer to study in groups rather than individually. The results also revealed that Malay students enjoyed working with their hands and focused well during "hands on" projects and activities.

The meaning of literary competence

Brumfit (1985, 108) implied that the "fundamental ability of a good reader of literature is the ability to generalize from the given text to other aspects of the literary tradition or personal or social significance outside literature." The term "Literary Competence" has never been clearly defined (Rosli Talif 1995) nor has the precise nature of this competence been fully interpreted. Carter and Long (1991, 6) in *Teaching Literature* did not give a precise definition of literary competence but presupposed it to as having "the ability to infer a message." The well-known linguist, Noam Chomsky, proposed the idea that all speakers of any language possess an internalized grammar which allows them to produce and understand utterances which they may not have heard before, provided that these utterances conform to the grammatical rules of the language they are speaking (Steinberg 1993). In the same way, some theorists, in particular Culler (1975), have argued that effective readers of a literary text possess "literary competence," in that they have an implicit understanding of, and familiarity with, certain conventions which allows them to take the words on the page of a play or other literary work and convert them into literary meanings.

What the researchers have gathered from their readings is that in developing literary competence among students, they would first have to be taught literary skills which would enable them to increase their knowledge, understanding, comprehension, and appreciation of literature. After being "fully equipped," these students would then be able to express their personal response to the text with supporting details and also being acquainted with literary laments, forms, and devices.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the suggested conceptual framework for this study. It consists of three independent variables and a dependent variable. The independent variables included in the study were: (a) students' reading habits; (b) students' language proficiency; and (c) students' learning style preferences, while the dependent variable was literary competence. It was hypothesized that students' reading habits, language proficiency, and learning style

preferences have no significant impact on literary competence. Therefore, the hypotheses posited for this study are as follows:

- H_{01} : There is no relationship between students' reading habits and literary competence.
- H_{02} : There is no relationship between students' language proficiency and literary competence.
- H_{03} : There is no relationship between students' learning style preferences and literary competence.
- H_{04} : The regression slopes for students' reading habits, language proficiency, and perception of learning preferences are equal to zero when regressed to literary competence.

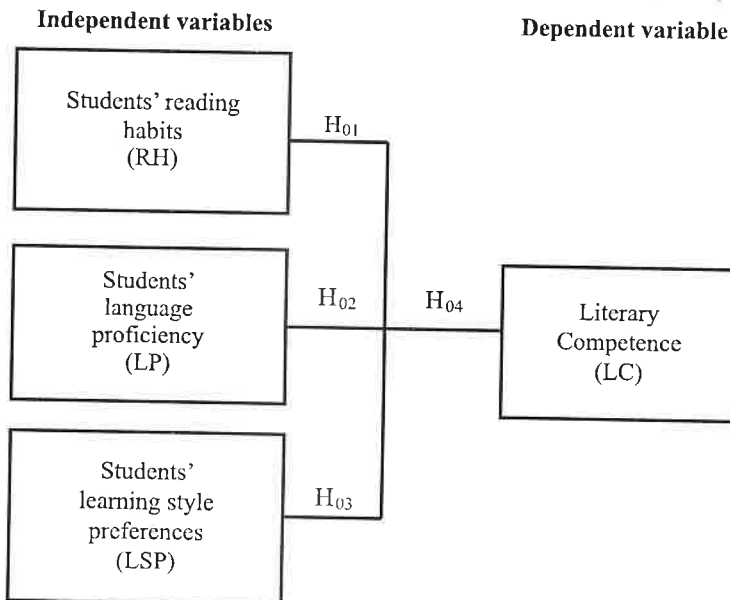


FIGURE 1: A conceptual framework of correlations between variables

Methodology

Research design

The survey technique using structured questionnaire was selected as the mode of data collection.

Population and sampling

The population selected for this study was the Form Four students between the ages of 15 and 16 years from *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Z*. The accessible population was 236 students where 148 were randomly chosen as the target population as recommended with reference to the sample size table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Reading habits

The independent variable *reading habits* was measured based on the adaptation of the Reading Habits Inventory (Mikulecky and Jeffries 2004). Originally, it had twelve items based on the simplest type of categorical scale: Yes/No. Hence, the researchers believed that the dichotomous variable is rather subjective and therefore increases the chances of guessing. As such and for the sake of validity, the Likert Scale method was used.

The adapted instrument consisted of a combination of "positive/efficient" and "negative/faulty" items so as to prevent the effect of respondent set. It has 14 statements with responses indicated by a three-point Likert-type format consisting of "rarely," "sometimes," and "usually." The instrument required that respondents indicate the frequency to which they usually or seldom practice with what is stated by each items. The items were mainly related to the individual's reading habits, specifically when reading materials written in English. Essentially, the items measured the regularities of an individual's reading behaviour.

Language proficiency

Students' language proficiency was evaluated through the achievement test which was acquired from the respective students' school-based final term results. This achievement test is a combination of English language Paper I and Paper II. The grade obtained will be further divided into category A, B, C, D, E, and F, with Grade "A" depicting the highest proficiency level of the students followed by B, C, D, E, and F. The range of marks for the six categories are as follows; A: 80%–100%, B: 70%–79%, C: 60%–69%, D: 55%–59%, E: 50%–54%, and F: 0–49%. Grading, or marking criteria, are based on the Band Descriptors provided by the Ministry of Education (MoE).

Learning style preference

Learning style preferences is measured by 24 items based on an adapted version of Kinsella's (1995) Perceptual Learning Preference Survey instrument. Originally, it had 32 items based on the Likert scale. However, the researchers believed that the statements presented in the survey were not suitable as they were intended for college or university students. For example, one of the items, "I am skilled with my hands and can easily repair things or put things together" was found to be not reader-friendly and was replaced by "I like to do things with my hands (like crafts or pottery)." For simplicity, the questionnaire was reduced to 15 items whose statements were simplified to cater to students' proficiency level. Furthermore, to facilitate understanding, every statement had an equivalent Bahasa Malaysia translation. The translation version was done and edited by teachers who were qualified in the Bahasa Malaysia subject.

The adapted instrument measured four different types of perceptual learning channels identified as visual learning, auditory learning, tactile learning and kinesthetic learning. In this study, tactile and kinesthetic learning have been combined even though there is a slight difference in meaning between these two styles. Nevertheless, the researcher had decided to use them interchangeably because the underlying meaning of both of these words conveys a similar reference to "working with hands" and learning best by doing, moving, or hands-on experiences.

Literary competence

The literary competence marks were acquired by subtracting the accumulated marks from the literature component section [SECTION D] of the English language Paper II. This section is made up of questions No. 32, No. 33 and No. 34 for which the accumulative mark is 25. Question No. 32 and Question No. 33 usually consist of four questions based on one pre-selected poem and short story. The poem and short story given are mostly excerpts taken from the literature component textbook titled *Selected Poems and Short Stories*. Questions are sequenced accordingly and based on literal and level of inferential skill. However, Question No. 34 is based only on the five short stories where one short story is selected by the examiner for testing. The marking scheme for Question No. 32 and Question 33 is straightforward, whereas Question No. 34 is based on the Band Descriptors provided by the Ministry of Education. In addition, a personal interview was conducted between the researchers and eight students. The purpose of the interviews was to provide an overview of the learning of the literature component in schools. The interviews conducted with students allowed the researchers to understand better the type of learning activities they like and dislike. Subsequently, the researchers would have an accurate understanding of the type of learning style preferences preferred by students and their reasons for selecting in a non-measurable way. The personal interview was selected because it allowed the respondents a greater freedom to express themselves and provided an opportunity for the researchers to observe the subjects' reactions and responses in total situations (Ary *et al.* 1996,432). The eight students comprised of four females and four males who were randomly selected from different classes based on the class teacher's recommendation. The personal interview consisted of five open-ended questions which allowed some flexibility on the researchers' part to repeat, rephrase, or explain their meanings when students did not understand what was being asked.

Data collection procedures

The research was carried out in January 2008 where two sets of revised questionnaires—Reading Habits and Learning Style Preferences—were distributed to all 236 students with the help of school administrators and class teachers. The students were given twenty minutes to answer the Reading Habits Questionnaire and another ten minutes for the Learning Style Preferences Questionnaire.

Next, students' language proficiency was evaluated through the achievement test which was acquired from the respective students' school-based final term results for the year 2007. Their grades were obtained from the schools' internal examination secretary. Following this, students' literary component section marks were acquired manually by checking through the "Section D" of the English Paper II for all classes involved.

Finally, a personal interview with five teachers and eight students was conducted face-to-face by the researchers. During the interviews, the researcher's observation, both oral and written accounts provided by the research participants, were noted. The interviews with students were conducted in the field or in the students' natural surroundings which happened to be in school. Meanwhile, the interviews with teachers were conducted in the respective English language teachers' homes to establish a close and personal rapport with the belief that research participants would be more spontaneous and unreserved in sharing their experiences in teaching literature.

Additional data collection

First, the data was coded before being transferred to the computer for data analysis. The system used for data analysis was the statistical program SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 11.5 for Windows. Frequency distribution and measures of central tendency were adopted in presenting and summarizing the data. In addition, the descriptive statistics were utilized to describe the profile of the respondents.

Next, the Pearson product moment correlation was utilized to determine the strength and direction of the association between the independent variables and the dependent variable—literary competence.

Then, in order to ascertain whether the independent variables were potential predictors of literary competence, the multiple regression analysis was utilized. In various kinds of research, the multiple regressions are not restricted to prediction purposes only. It may also be used to identify the variables that account for the variance in dependent variables which indirectly help researchers to understand complex phenomena (Ary *et al.* 1996,410). In addition, the researchers will use the results obtained from this study to determine the order of importance of each independent variable in contributing towards the dependent variable (Hair *et al.* 1995). The present study adopted the .05 level of significance in testing all hypotheses.

Finally, the answers given by both teachers and students were noted. The interview notes gathered were colour-coded to identify the similarities and differences shared by both students and teachers when the same open-ended questions were asked. In addition, ideas and emerging themes were categorized and organized into various "labels" so that the researchers could make a personal assessment or interpretation of the themes that capture the major categories of information.

Findings and Discussions

The outcome of the study revealed the answers to the research questions:

Research Question 1: What are students reading habits?

Results from the findings showed that 74.6 percent of the students have indicated that they practiced efficient reading habits while 18.8 percent indicated that they practiced faulty reading habits and another 6.6 percent indicated that they practiced both efficient and faulty reading habits (table 1).

While it is encouraging to note that majority of the students do perform effective reading habits, results from the frequency tables indicate that only 46.1 percent (table 2) of the respondents "sometimes" practiced effective reading habits, and 48.6 percent (table 3) "sometimes" practiced faulty reading habits. This high weightage seems to give a truer picture of the respondents' behaviour when reading. It may be justifiable to conclude that students' reading habits, both effective and faulty, are based on the inconsistency of the students' reading behaviour where other influencing factors may influence them to "sometimes" practice effective or faulty reading habits.

TABLE 1: Efficient and faulty reading habits

<i>Reading habits</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid percent</i>	Cumulative percent
Efficient Reading habits	135	74.6	74.6	74.6
Faulty Reading habits	34	18.8	18.8	93.4
Both Efficient & Faulty Reading habits	12	6.6	6.6	100.0
Total	181	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 2: Positive/Efficient reading habits (N=181)

<i>Positive Statements</i>	<i>3</i> <i>(Usually)</i>	<i>2</i> <i>(Sometimes)</i>	<i>1</i> <i>(Rarely)</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard</i> <i>Deviation</i>
1. Skimming	39.8	50.3	9.9	100.0	2.30	0.64
2. Read and underline words	42.5	40.3	17.1	100.0	2.25	0.73
6. Like going to the library	42.5	40.9	16.6	100.0	2.26	0.73
8. Like to read to acquire knowledge	35.4	47.5	17.1	100.0	2.18	0.70
9. Enjoys reading	41.4	48.1	10.5	100.0	2.31	0.65
10. Use the dictionary	37.0	47.0	16.0	100.0	2.21	0.70
11. Guess meaning of words	39.2	49.7	11.0	100.0	2.28	0.65
13. Guess the plot	37.6	45.3	17.1	100.0	2.20	0.71
Total	39.4	46.1	14.4	100.0		

TABLE 3: Negative/Faulty reading habits (N=181)

<i>Negative Statements</i>	<i>3</i> <i>(Usually)</i>	<i>2</i> <i>(Sometimes)</i>	<i>1</i> <i>(Rarely)</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard</i> <i>Deviation</i>
3. Reading aloud	14.4	50.8	34.8	100.0	2.20	0.67
4. Can't find books that are interesting	14.4	49.7	35.9	100.0	2.22	0.68
5. Can understand better when reading slowly	15.5	49.7	34.8	100.0	2.19	0.68
7. Pointing to words while reading	23.2	43.1	33.7	100.0	2.10	0.75
12. Need to know every word when reading	13.8	49.2	37.0	100.0	2.23	0.68
14. Can't understand paragraph if it has several new words	14.4	49.2	36.5	100.0	2.22	0.68
Total	15.9	48.6	35.5	100.0		

Research Question 2: What is the level of English language proficiency among students?

By referring to table 4, the results indicate that a large percentage of students (45.3%) failed in their language test, and a mere 2.8 percent managed to get an "A" grade. Another 28.8 percent were divided evenly between "B" and "C" grades while the rest were allocated to "D" and "E" grades at 10.5 percent and 12.7 percent respectively. Even though there were more passes than failures, it can be concluded that the students' level of English proficiency has not reached its mark of acceptance especially when the students are from an urban school.

TABLE 4: Frequency table showing the percentage of Grade A, B, C, D, E, and F acquired by students in their language proficiency test (N=181)

<i>Grade/Marks</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid percent</i>	Cumulative percent
A (80–100 marks)	5	2.8	2.8	2.8
B (70–79 marks)	26	14.4	14.4	17.1
C (60–69 marks)	26	14.4	14.4	31.5
D (55–59 marks)	19	10.5	10.5	42.0
E (50–54 marks)	23	12.7	12.7	54.7
F (0–49 marks)	82	45.3	45.3	100.0
Total	181	100.0	100.0	

Research Question 3: What is the students' learning style preferences?

Information from questionnaire indicated the following breakdown according to preferred learning style: Visual accounted for 61.3 percent of respondents, Auditory represented 5.5 percent, Kinesthetic/Tactile represented 12.7 percent, Visual and Auditory represented 12.2 percent, Visual and Kinesthetic/Tactile represented 1.1 percent, Auditory and Kinesthetic/Tactile represented 4.4 percent and finally, students who possess all three learning styles represented 2.8 percent. Table 5 provides the respondent breakdown according to preferred learning style.

TABLE 5: Means and Standard Errors of students' learning style preferences (N=181)

<i>Sub-variables of Learning Styles</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	Cumulative Percent
Visual	111	61.3	61.3	61.3
Auditory	10	5.5	5.5	66.8
Kinesthetic/Tactile	23	12.7	12.7	79.5
Visual & Auditory	22	12.2	12.2	91.7
Auditory & Kinesthetic/tactile	8	4.4	4.4	96.1
Visual & Kinesthetic/Tactile	2	1.1	1.1	97.2
Visual, Auditory & Kinesthetic/tactile	5	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	181	100.0	100.0	

Research Question 4: What is the level of literary competence among students?

By examining the results as shown in table 6, statistics indicate 2.2 percent managed to acquire a Grade "A" while 3.3 percent, a Grade "B". Students with a Grade "C" represented 8.3 percent, and students with a Grade "D" accounted for 2.8 percent. Students with a Grade "E" represented 11.0 percent and notably, 72.4 percent failed in their literature component test. It can be assumed that the low percentage of passes and the high percentage of failures in the literature component test present a bleak view of students acquiring literary competence.

TABLE 6: Frequency table showing the percentage of grade A, B, C, D, E, and F acquired by students in their literature component test

<i>Variables (Items)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid percent</i>	Cumulative percent
A (80–100 marks)	4	2.2	2.2	2.2
B (70–79 marks)	6	3.3	3.3	5.5
C (60–69 marks)	15	8.3	8.3	13.8
D (55–59 marks)	5	2.8	2.8	16.6
E (50–54 marks)	20	11.0	11.0	27.6
F (0–49 marks)	131	72.4	72.4	100.0
Total	181	100.0	100.0	

Subsequently, this is further compounded by the fact that majority of the students (43.1%) failed in both their language proficiency and literature component test while only 26.0 percent passed both papers. Ironically, the literature component was first introduced with the intention of improving students' language proficiency but results indicate otherwise as shown in table 7.

TABLE 7: Frequency table showing the percentage of passes and failures for both language proficiency and literature component tests

	Frequency	Percent
Pass LP & LC	47	26.0
Failed LP & LC	78	43.1
Pass LP	53	29.3
Pass LC	3	1.7
Total	181	100.0

LP—Language proficiency

LC—Literary competence

Research Question 5: Is there a relationship between students' reading habits and literary competence?

Hypothesis H_{01} : There is no relationship between students' learning style preferences and literary competence.

Though there is a positive relationship ($r = .303$) between students' reading habits and literary competence, it is observed that the relationship is weak. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

TABLE 8: Correlation Analysis: relationship between students' reading habits and literary competence

		Literary Competence
Literary Competence	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-
	N	181
REHABIT	Pearson Correlation	.303(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	181

Research Question 6: Is there a relationship between students' language proficiency and literary competence?

Hypothesis H_{02} : There is no relationship between students' language proficiency and literary competence.

As shown in table 9, there is a high positive correlation ($r = .765$) between the variables ($p < .05$). As a result, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

TABLE 9: Correlation Analysis of the relationship between students' language proficiency and literary competence

		Literary Competence
Literary Competence	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-
	N	181
Language Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	.765(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	181

Research Question 7: Is there a relationship between students' learning styles preferences and literary competence?

Hypothesis H_{03} : There is no relationship between students' learning style preferences and literary competence.

When students' learning style preferences were analysed as one entity, a positive correlation was found between them and literary competence (table 10). This result may indicate that in the learning of literature, students' learning style preferences are important for the teachers to take into consideration when teaching literature component.

TABLE 10: Correlation Analysis of the relationship between students' learning style preferences and literary competence

		Literary Competence
Literary Competence	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-
	N	181
Learning style	Pearson Correlation	.173(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.020
	N	181

Research Question 8: Which is the best predictor—students' reading habits, language proficiency or learning style preferences—that contributes significantly towards literary competence?

Hypothesis H_{04} : The regression slopes for students' reading habits, language proficiency and perception of learning preferences are equal to zero when regressed to literary competence.

To address question 8, a multiple regression analysis, as shown in table 11, was performed to analyse factors, which may influence students' literary competence in the learning of literature component in the classroom. The purpose of multiple regressions is to provide a thorough understanding of the relationship between numerous predictor variables (independent X variables) and a dependent (Y) variable. Variable information is used in multiple regression analysis to establish a multiple regression equation, which helps researchers decide best predictors of a specific event. Therefore, in this study, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the relationship between the independent variables (students' reading habits, language proficiency and learning style preferences) and the dependent variable, literary competence.

As the relationship for two variables—language proficiency and learning style preferences—were found to be positive, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed to identify which variables would be the best predictor for literary competence.

The multiple R as illustrated in table 12 shows a positive correlation between language proficiency at $R = .765$, learning style preference at $R = .775$ and literary competence (dependent variable). The R-square values

TABLE 11: Regression analysis of reading habits, language proficiency and learning style preferences [Coefficients (a)]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-25.993	8.469		-3.069	.002
	REHABIT	3.257	2.446	.068	1.331	.185
	Language Proficiency	.776	.054	.733	14.442	.000
	VAK	8.850	3.118	.136	2.838	.005

Dependent variable: literary competence

indicate that about 58.5 percent of the variance in literary competence is explained by the predictor variables, language proficiency and 60.1 percent of the variance in literary competence is explained by both variables—language proficiency and learning style preference.

Results from the analyses (table 13) demonstrated that the best predictor for literary competence was the language proficiency variable ($F = 252.084$, $p < .05$), followed by learning style preferences ($F = 133.789$, $p < .05$). Language proficiency explained 58.5 percent ($R\text{-square} = .585$) of the variance in literary competence, and learning style preferences explained 1.6 percent of the variance ($R\text{-square} = .601$). It was concluded that students' language proficiency was the best predictor for literary competence compared to students' learning style preferences. In the final analysis, it can be concluded that the best predictor would be students' language proficiency and therefore the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

TABLE 12: Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis of Language proficiency and learning style preferences in relation to literary competence

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F	Sig
1	.765(a)	.585	.582	252.084	.000(a)
2	.775(b)	.601	.596	133.789	.000(b)

a. Predictors: (Constant), Language Proficiency

b. Predictors: (Constant), Language Proficiency, VAK

Dependent variable: Literary Competence

TABLE 13: Stepwise multiple regression analysis of language proficiency and learning style preferences in relation to literary competence

<i>Variable</i>	<i>F - Value</i>	<i>Sig. F</i>	<i>R-square</i>	R-square Change
Language proficiency	252.084	.000**	0.585	0.585
Learning style preferences	133.789	.000**	0.601	0.016

**p < .05

Recommendations

Students' reading habits and literary competence

The variable, students' reading habits, was found not to be significant and the reason could be due to the fact that a high percentage of respondents claimed that they "sometimes" performed efficient and faulty reading habits (tables 2 and 3) which indirectly indicates that their readings can be considered arbitrary with no set patterns or behaviouristic tendencies. This seems to imply that their reading habits are erratic.

These erratic reading habits may be due to students' current exposure to English—through the television set and the internet. It is generally acknowledged that good reading habits are not formed by sitting in front of the television set. A reader's eyes are not following a text but rather following visuals being displayed on a screen at a high density impact. No doubt, there are some movies and documentaries with subtitles, but rarely is the case where one becomes an efficient reader because of watching television. Similarly, using the internet, whether it is for chatting on-line, e-mailing, searching for specific information or surfing the websites, can never be considered as "reading" in its truest sense of form.

It is true that any piece of texts, be it newspaper reports, songs or advertisements bill, can be considered as a piece of literature, but the literature component texts belong to a canonical body of text known as the classics. Furthermore, findings from the interview indicated the students' inability to respond to culturally charged texts with special reference to *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant, one of the five short stories found in the *Selected Poems and Short Stories* (1999) produced by the Ministry of Education,

Malaysia. Though the literature component texts used in the Form Four classroom are a mixture of both contemporary and the classics, it is still a different kind of reading which students have to do when he/she is reading a literary text as compared to reading a narrative essay. To quote Balakian (1994, 264), "What makes literature distinct from other reading materials is its ability to convey the uniqueness of a personal experience and at the same time transcribe it in an idiom that universalizes that experience through a dimension called aesthetics."

Students' language proficiency and literary competence

Students' language proficiency was considered the best predictor to literary competence and these findings seem justifiable since the *R*-square values indicate that about 58.5 percent variance in literary competence is explained by the predictor variable—language proficiency (table 13). This would mean that an increment in the *R*-square values would also lead to an increment in the students' literature component marks. Moreover, the beta value at $\beta = 0.733$ (table 11) indicates that a high percentage of influence on the dependent variable—literary competence—is caused by language proficiency.

However, these findings seem to contradict the aspirations of policy makers who have advocated the study of the literature component in view of improving students' proficiency of the language. In the final analysis, the findings reveal that the learning of the literature component text will not improve students' language proficiency but rather, literary competency is dependent on students' first acquiring language proficiency.

Students' learning style preferences and literary competence

The values obtained from the findings (table 10 and table 11) for students' learning style preferences were not as statistically significant as compared to the independent variable—language proficiency. Nevertheless, these findings provide a valuable insight for teachers to take into account of students' learning style preferences as a stepping stone in helping students to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in approaching the literature component texts.

Conclusion

Initial results from the Product-Moment correlation coefficient analysis indicated a positive relationship for all three independent variables; reading habits, language proficiency and learning style preferences with literary competence. However, stepwise multiple regression analysis has demonstrated that language proficiency variable was the best predictor for literary competence. Though many scholars and experts in the field of literature would differ and even admonish these final findings, the aims of this study is to bring about an awareness that although the literature component text was first introduced as a way to inculcate reading habits among students and enhance students' English language proficiency, it will definitely take a period of time to see the effects. In the meantime, teachers cannot just stand by and wait for the miraculous change to happen in their students. For the present moment, teachers need to address the immediate problem of students not doing well in the literature component. As the findings in this study suggest, they should pay close attention to students' language proficiency and not blame students for their lack of ability to answer adequately the literature component text questions.

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