



READABILITY ANALYSIS OF MALAYSIAN SHORT STORIES IN ENGLISH (ANALISIS KEBOLEH BACAAN CERPEN MALAYSIA DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS)

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to examine the readability statistics of a corpus of Malaysian short stories in English with reference to a corpus of established canonical short stories written by native speakers. The short stories selected for analysis comprise twelve short stories published in the *New Straits Times*. The reference corpus consists of seven short stories that have been at some stage been recommended as texts for the English Literature syllabus in the Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) / Secondary Schools New Curriculum. Three readability statistics are generated (Flesch Reading ease, Flesch grade level and Gunning Fog index) for the stories. The readability scores of these stories are then compared to the readability of the recommended texts on similar themes in order to assess their suitability for Malaysian ESL adolescent readers. The analysis reveal that both the Malaysian corpus and the recommended text falls within the range of US grade 6.0 – 8.5 with the Malaysian corpus having the added advantage in terms of cultural and local references.

Keywords: readability index, Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, Gunning Fog index, Malaysian short stories in English.

ABSTRAK

Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk meneliti indeks kebolehbacaan satu korpus cerpen bahasa Inggeris karya penulis Malaysia dan membandingkannya dengan kepada satu korpus rujukan yang mengandungi cerpen tersohor yang ditulis penutur asli bahasa Inggeris yang lazim menjadi teks bacaan di sekolah. Sebanyak 12 cerpen bahasa Inggeris karya penulis Malaysia yang diterbitkan dalam akhbar *New Straits Times* dikumpulkan untuk kajian. Korpus rujukan mengandungi tujuh cerpen yang pernah diperakukan dan dicadangkan menjadi teks bacaan Sukatan Pelajaran Kesusasateraan dalam Bahasa Inggeris Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah (KBSM). Tiga jenis statistik kebolehbacaan (Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and Gunning Fog index) dijana untuk tujuan kajian. Seterusnya, indeks kebolehbacaan ini dibanding antara cerpen hasil karya penulis Malaysia dengan cerpen yang diperakukan dalam sukatan mata pelajaran untuk menilai kesesuaian untuk pembaca remaja Malaysia. Hasil analisis mendapati korpus cerpen Malaysia dan teks yang diperakukan berada dalam julat kebolehbacaan gred US 6.0 – 8.5 dengan korpus cerpen Malaysia mempunyai kelebihan dari segi rujukan kebudayaan dan tempatan yang lebih tinggi.

Kata Kunci: indeks kebolehbacaan, Kebolehbacaan Flesch , Tahap Gred Flesch-Kincaid , Indeks Gunning Fog, cerpen Malaysia dalam bahasa Inggeris.

INTRODUCTION

The matching of appropriate text difficulty level to the readers' reading ability is crucial to inculcate an interest in reading. Many of us must have at some stage or rather attempted to read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Derrida's *On Grammatology*, only to have to put the book down after the first page, the first paragraph or even the first sentence. We cannot read things that we are not 'ready for' regardless of whether the material has been 'prescribed' or that it is compulsory reading. With this dictum in mind, this article attempts to investigate the readability

of texts used in the Literature in English syllabus in Malaysia and a corpus of Malaysian short stories.

LITERATURE IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The use of literature for the teaching of English language has a long history. In the 1960s and 70s, schools were given a free hand in making their own selection of texts for classroom teaching (Ganakumaran Subramaniam 2003). Texts chosen were primarily English canonical literature which included *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations* and *Little Women*. These texts are long, difficult to read with multiple plots inbuilt within them. Privileging them over Malaysian Literature exhibits our preoccupation with English Literature as the best examples of literary works. In 1999, the Ministry of Education made a significant change to the syllabus by making it compulsory for students to study literature within the English Language subject. The teaching of literature makes up twenty percent of the syllabus content. Relatively simple texts of short stories and short novels were chosen for the Lower Secondary School Syllabus such as “The Pencil” (Ali Majod), “Life’s Brief Candle” (William Shakespeare) and *Phantom of the Opera* (Gaston Leroux). At the upper secondary level, more complex short stories and novels were chosen which included “The Lotus Eater” (Somerset Maugham), “The Necklace” (Guy de Maupassant) and *The Return* (KS Maniam). The blend of Malaysian texts as well as English works and those in translation provide a variety of issues and perspectives. By standardizing the texts used and making it compulsory for students to answer examination questions on the literature component, the syllabus is innovative in its approach to teaching English.

Incorporating literature as part of the English language subject has been a practice in many countries. Mario Saraceni (2003), in his article “Literature in the EFL Classroom: Roses or Thorns” elaborates on the advantages of using literature which includes linguistic benefits, awareness of language use and development of interpretative skills. As Bassnett & Grundy (1993: 7) argue, “anyone learning English (or any other language) moves into literature because literature is a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate.” The language of poetry, for example, is markedly different from everyday language, where the economy of words conveys richness of details and vibrancy of emotions. By acquainting oneself with this genre, one can appreciate the dexterity of using language in this way. Similarly, language use in different genres such as short stories, novels, ballads, sonnets requires the learner to develop sensitivity to diverse forms and structures. Finally, honing one’s interpretive skills can be executed through explorations of literary works because analysis of the mechanics of texts (setting, characterization, plot, point of view) require a critical and inquiring mind as well as fluency in language use.

The choice of what texts to include and what to exclude in a literature syllabus is not an easy one. Donnell & Welsh (1996) point out that in the case of teaching English literature in the Caribbean, the literary works selected as texts for study are most likely to serve the interests of colonial policy with certain ideological intention. Furthermore, because literary materials do not exist in a cultural vacuum, there are additional cultural challenges in such texts. Ideology, culture and politics aside, the choice of such texts, often written by native English speakers, presents certain linguistic challenges in terms of their readability to ESL readers. Hence it is important that teachers and curriculum developers are made aware of the readability of texts – whether a particular text chosen is at a suitable reading level for the intended target group.

Readability is a concept closely tied to literature. Different genres of literature appeal to different groups of readers. Short stories, for instance, have been a genre of literature that is

found in the literature curriculum in most schools. We commonly prescribe or recommend texts for adoption, sometimes for their literary value, the inherent didacticism or sometimes due to expediency such as the availability of the texts. As teachers and curriculum developers, we should also be concerned about the readability levels of the materials we choose for our students. Interesting and readable material would surely reinforce and foster our interest of literature and can also ensure that students actually do read the texts rather than rely on secondary material for their critical appreciation of the texts. In terms of the readability of texts, two factors should be considered. The first is the reader, and the second, the text. There must be a matching of readers to texts. This is, however, not an easy task in a literature programme because of various demands and constraints. On the literature reading readiness, this paper makes the assumption that the readers will come to a text with the possession of specific cognitive and motivational skills that are related to the cognitive requirements of reading a particular type of text. Often a literature programme is meant to build up such skills, and consequently, reading readiness and critical appreciation of texts develop as the readers get more acquainted with the text type. The second is the text. How readable is the text that one is faced with? The aspect of readability is the main concern of this paper.

READABILITY

When we use the word 'readability,' we are only making use of a psychological construct. There are a multitude of factors that contribute to the ways in which we perceive and define this construct. First, there are the psychological factors which fall within the domain of psychology. These factors include the reader's motivation and cognitive or neurological ability. Second, there is the external factor of the text as well as the act of reading such as legibility of the print, the size and type of character or fonts used, the paper quality and illustrations. Even the amount of lighting, our posture, ambience of the reading room or mood can influence our reading. And finally, there is the linguistic aspect to be considered. This includes the vocabulary, syntax, lexical difficulty, organisation and also text structures. Figure 1 illustrates some of the factors that influence 'readability'.

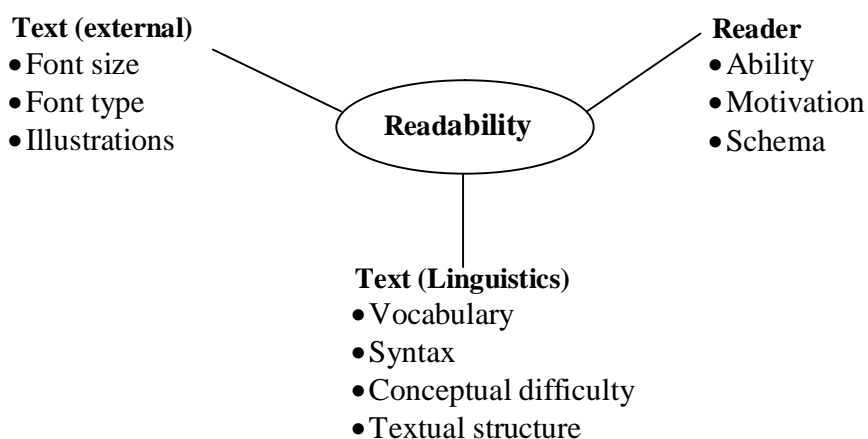


Figure 1: Some factors that influence readability.

To some, a text is readable if the reader has the essential skills to decode, recall and interpret the text. This is perhaps too subjective a measure for our purpose. Perhaps an

acceptable definition of this construct is the one by Harris (1980). Readability, according to him, is the way in which we measure the relative level of difficulty of the reading material. This concept is an objective one and is the one that we adopt in this study. Essentially, the difficulty level becomes the gauge of the texts' readability and various objective appraisals such as word frequency, word length, number of syllables, and some computation of sentence complexity, determined either by average sentence length becomes surrogate for readability measurement.

Researchers working with readability formula have long realised the limitations of the formula. Readability formulas measure only particular features of a piece of text, in particular the vocabulary and the sentence length. It has been acknowledged that these two factors are only reliable correlates with text difficulty and not the causes (Harrison, 1980:55). In the context of assessing literary texts, readability formula are not able to assess the literary value of a book. But this does not mean that they should not be used in evaluating literary materials objectively when selecting them for use by a particular group of readers. Another often mentioned limitation of readability formula is the fact that different formula yields different results. This objection is not invalid. However, if the same formulae is used to evaluate all the texts under study, then inconsistency in the judgment of the readability of the text could be determined and ranked. The ranking based on the readability scores are important especially in developing graded reading material. The readability scores and indices have been, in most cases, validated based on the reading abilities of American readers. In relation to this practice, there might be certain factors that need to be considered when converting the grades for use in the Malaysian ESL context. Individuals will have different schemas and prior knowledge which they will bring with them when reading a text. This is a factor that will not be considered here. The important thing is that we are not using the readability scores to deny access to materials they might want to read but only as a warning to the individual that the text might not be suitable. The approach to readability adopted in this study is still the most widely used for predicting comprehension difficulty of materials. The reason that this formula has worked so well, according to Kintsch & Miller (1981:222), is that 'the factors that make up these formulas are indeed correlated with the conceptual properties of texts: long sentences generally correspond to complex syntactic structures, infrequent words generally refer to complex concepts, and hard texts will generally lead to harder questions about their content'. In the same vein, Puurtinen (1998:524) in her investigation of the readability and ideology in children literature, sees readability as an aspect of comprehensibility that is determined by linguistic difficulty. She enlarges the concept to encompass speakability – 'the suitability of a text to be read aloud fluently, which is one of the most important qualities of children's books as children's books are read aloud not only by adults but also by children themselves'. More importantly, she concludes that readability may have consequences for the readers. Readers exposed to stories that are too difficult for them may discourage them from reading further and is 'likely to alienate them from reading and may thus even slow down the development of reading skills', whereas books which are at the correct measures of readability can be 'pleasant and interesting to read and hence encourage the reader to read more and may create a lifelong interest in literature'.

As early as 1965, Auckerman in his paper, 'Readability of Secondary School Literature Textbooks: A First Report,' began with the statement that 'At least 3,000,000 young people in Grades 7-12 in America today are being given American literature, English literature, and world literature textbooks that they cannot read' (1965:533). After discounting for the student - teacher factors, he concludes that the choice of texts has a large part to do with why students 'cannot read'. He therefore suggests two measures of complexity, namely mechanical complexity and verbal complexity. Mechanical complexity is based on (a) average sentence length; and (b) the degree of complexity of the sentences, measured in percentages. Verbal Complexity consists of a

count of the following five factors of readability:

- a) incidence of verbals, in which the number of verb forms used as nouns or adjectives, making up the category of infinitives, gerunds and participles, is found and converted into a percentage of the total five-hundred-word sample.
- b) incidence of word difficulty, in which the measure consists of three sub-factors:
 - (1) number of ancient, classical and mythical words and word references;
 - (2) number of colloquial, dialect and slang words and phrases; and
 - (3) number of words of three syllables or more not counted in (1) and (2) above. (The total of 1, 2 and 3, when divided by 500, gives the percentage of occurrence of difficult words in the sample.)
- c) incidence of abstraction, in which the measure depends somewhat on the investigator and his estimate of which nouns are abstract in the framework of a secondary school student's experience.

(Auckerman 1965:536-537)

While the reading measurements of Auckerman (1965) are specific to literary texts, his parameters are difficult to implement and cultural dependent. In some instance, such as the incidence of abstraction, these measurements rely on students' experience. However, fortunately in reading measurements, there are numerous formula available. Each of the formula has specific attributes and uses (e.g., for grammar school children only, for highly technical topics only and for textbooks only). When readability of literary materials is evaluated in literature, it is common for one formula to be chosen by the researchers concerned; occasionally a study reports readability based on more than one formula. Two of the commonly used readability formulas are the Flesch-Kincaid formula and the FOG. The Flesch-Kincaid grade level formula, developed in the 1940s, measures the average sentence length in words and the average word length in syllables. The Gunning-Fog Index, developed in the 1950s, estimates the number of years of formal education that a person requires in order to understand the text on a first reading.

Schulz (1981:44) has argued that careful selection of literary texts according to their linguistic difficulty can avoid 'frustrated' reading in a foreign language and increase the comprehension, appreciation and enjoyment of literature. Based on the English Language Syllabus in Malaysia, attempts have been made to incorporate both local and foreign texts, either written originally in English or translation of the works. As Malachi Edwin Vethamani (2003) opines, intelligibility is a valid concern in the choice of texts for the syllabus. However, we need to show the continuum of varieties of English. While we aspire to meet standard English, we must not forget that other lectal forms can contribute to the richness of language use, conveying identity and cultural specificities of the context and content. Vethamani (2003: 5) makes this pertinent point:

It is my view that as much as we want to teach our students to be able to communicate effectively in English, we need to pay attention to both the standard and non-standard forms of the variety of English in our local contexts. What needs to be emphasized is appropriacy of language of the lectal form that is used. ESL learners need to be made aware of both intelligibility and appropriacy of language used for communication.

To dismiss the local variety and products of literature as non-standard would be detrimental in nurturing the growth of our own literature and language maturity. For many learners whose command of English and proficiency in literary skills are elementary or average, local literature can be the way into forays for more complex works.

While readability is only one variable that should be considered for how suitable a particular text is for readers and inclusion in a syllabus, it is clearly one of the most important. Other essential aspects of selection of text include literary merit (a subjective notion), message, theme and cultural appropriateness. However, these other markers of literariness may have little impact if the words cannot be read and understood.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a descriptive study of the readability of the Malaysian short stories and the recommended short stories in the school syllabus. Twelve Malaysian short stories and seven recommended texts are collected and analysed. Each short story is typed into a text file in Microsoft Word and then analysed using the readability software packaged into the programme. The readability calculation provided reports for various readability formula. Since a different formula sometimes produces different interpretations, three formula will be used to analyse the readability of the texts - Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) score, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL) and Gunning Fog index (FOG). These formula are chosen for analysis in this study because they are the measurements most frequently used and the best known in readability analysis. The FRE readability statistics formula rates text on a 100-point scale (the higher the score, the easier the document is to read). The calculation of the scores is based on the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence. The readability formula for the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) score is: $FRE = 206.835 - (1.015 \times ASL) - (84.6 \times ASW)$ where: ASL is the average sentence length in words or average number of words in sentence (number of words divided by the number of sentences) and ASW is the average syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words). The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 'rates text on a U.S. grade-school level based on the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence, for example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader would understand the text'. The formula for the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL) score is: $FKGL = (0.39 \times ASL) + (11.8 \times ASW) - 15.59$ where: ASL is the average sentence length in words or average number of words in sentence (number of words divided by the number of sentences) and ASW is the average number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words). The formula for the Gunning Fog Index is $FOG = 0.4 (ASL + PHW)$ where, ASL is the average sentence length and PHW represents the percentage of hard words (multi-syllabic words). (<http://www.readabilityformulas.com/gunning-fog-readability-formula.php>)

The study examines only the readability of the texts. A caveat to such research on readability is that the readability scores and index do not assure comprehension of the texts and future studies should examine the comprehension of the various texts and employ more holistic reading assessment of both texts and targeted readers. It is also recognised that short stories are only one genre in the literature syllabus. Genre such as poetry might not be amenable to mathematical calculations of readability due to length and number of words in such texts. This study also does not examine other aspects of reading comprehension such as cultural competence, literary literacy and other literary dimensions such complexity of plot. These should be studied in the future.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the readability analysis are shown in Table 1. Based on the Flesch Grade level, the twelve Malaysian short stories fall within the range of US grade 6.0 – 8.5 (UK grade 11.0 – 13.5). This data together with the Flesch Reading Ease scores suggest that most of the stories are

suitable material for secondary school readers.

Table 1: The readability statistics of Malaysian short stories

Title	Flesch Reading Ease	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	Gunning Fog index
Winter' s son	90.2	6.0	5.2
The Old House	88.7	6.1	6.7
Winnie	88.2	6.2	5.0
Ice-cream	84.9	6.5	5.4
The Leather Bag	81.1	6.9	5.7
Gina's Dream	77.7	7.2	6.5
The Last Day of Innocence	76.6	7.3	9.0
Boon Wah's Bird Cage	71.8	7.8	11.0
The Cantonese Queen	69.1	8.1	8.9
When Seasons Sleep	65.5	8.4	10.2
Mr. Poh	64.9	8.5	11.7
A Matter of Principle	64.6	8.5	10.0

According to the FKGL formula, five (42%) of the short stories in the Malaysian short stories corpus are on the sixth grade level, and three (25%) are on the seventh grade level while the remaining four (33%) are on the eighth grade level. The FRE rating is similar in most respects to the FKGL rating with 42% of the short stories being fairly easy to read (FRE 80 – 100). It is worth noting that the FOG identifies some stories as being difficult texts (FOG 10 – 11). The stories include the short story 'Boon Wah's Bird Cage' which both FKGL and FRE rates at 71.8 and 7.8 respectively.

In the absence of research applying these scores to a Malaysian ESL context or to other non-native speaker contexts, it is difficult to reach any conclusion as to the corresponding Malaysian level. However, considering the fact that Malaysian students can matriculate without much difficulty in a UK A-levels programme after secondary education, the grade levels can be extrapolated to the Malaysian context and corresponds to the Malaysia's form four and five secondary grade levels. In terms of the Malaysian produced short stories, they reflect contemporary literature from Malaysian perspectives. However, this paper will not be discussing the literary worth of these stories. Having acquired the readability indices of the various stories, the next question is how suitable are they as reading materials/texts for the KBSM English literature elective subject. In order to do this, we must first scrutinise the KBSM syllabus specification in terms of the criteria for selection of texts. The basis for the selection of texts is a significant consideration in any literature programme. The choice of texts depend on a multitude of factors. This is the case in the KBSM English Literature syllabus where the 'texts to be selected should be accessible to a good percentage of the students in terms of language use, concepts and ideas and cultural references made, and also be in keeping with the values and aspirations of the culture and norms of Malaysian society'. (Sukatan Pelajaran Mata Pelajaran Elektif. Literature in English KBSM 1991. Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia). Another parameter in the selection of texts includes the thematic consideration where 'specific themes that cater to the interests and maturity level of students' are encouraged. Possible themes mentioned include human relationships, the process of growing up, issues of life, nature, patriotism, war, adventure and science fiction. In addition, the curriculum specifies that 'selected works should ideally be

drawn from the corpus of English, Malaysian and American literary works. However, selections from the Commonwealth and European corpuses may also be included. These selections should comprise a selection of classics, contemporary works and good translations. Texts selected must be original and unabridged works and also be of reasonable length'. (Sukatan Pelajaran Mata Pelajaran Elektif. Literature in English KBSM 1991. Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia).

It is interesting to note that the selection of texts for use in the KBSM does consider readability as a criteria namely that 'texts ... should be accessible to a good percentage of the students in terms of language use'. In terms of the cultural component, the curriculum does not exclude Malaysian short stories. In fact, such short stories have an advantage in that the concepts, ideas and cultural references made are norms of Malaysian society. The specificity of language use in a short story should be incomprehensible if one is not equipped with the cultural knowledge of the story. For example, in one of the recommended short stories, 'The Necklace' by Guy de Maupassant, the description of the dining scene with the 'Scotch broth' and the gleaming 'silver, tapestries peopling the wall with folk of a past age' in the dining room might be incomprehensible and alien to a young Malaysian unaccustomed to European customs. However, most Malaysians will be able to identify and recognise the familiarity of the kitchen where 'pungent mixture crackled and hissed inside the kuali releasing aromatic fumes that stung' in the Malaysian short story 'The Leather Bag'. This is not to say that Malaysian adolescent should not be exposed to the ways of other cultures, in fact, they should, but the use of more relevant and recognisable literature is surely a more appropriate first step towards English literature if we desire to inculcate a love for literature. As such, the Malaysian short stories are commendable in capturing such moments of local appreciation. The semantic and conceptual complexity / alienness in some of the recommended texts inherent in the writing of the story will only lead to incomprehension on the part of the adolescent Malaysian reader of English literature especially if there is no reliable guidance. Thus, the KBSM text selection criteria should place emphasis on this aspect when evaluating texts for the syllabus.

The readability statistics of some of the recommended texts for the KBSM English Literature course are shown in Table 2. The analysis reveals that the recommended texts fall within the range of US Grade 6.1 - 7.8 (UK grade 11.1 - 12 8) which are suitable for use in the British secondary schools. Using the Fog index, the stories fall within the range of 5.7 - 10.9. In terms of the Fog index, an index of between 7 or 8 is ideal. Several of the recommended texts might be too challenging for secondary 4 and 5 pupils to read.

Table 2: The readability statistics of recommended texts for the KBSM literature syllabus

Title	Flesch reading ease	Flesch-Grade level	Gunning Fog index
The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber	89.1	6.1	5.7
Tell-Tale Heart	85.0	6.5	7.1
The secret life of Walter Mitty	79.8	7.0	6.6
The Necklace	79.3	7.1	8.2
The Demon Lover	73.6	7.6	9.7
The Open Window	72.5	7.7	10.7
A Horse and Two Goats	72.0	7.8	10.9

CONCLUSION

Readability is a basic element for literature study, for if the students cannot read or are frustrated by the reading experience, they cannot appreciate the message and aesthetics of literature. Teachers and curriculum planners should take into account the issue of readability in the selection of texts and should know if the texts recommended are readable by the students. This is sometimes a challenge due to established notions of what constitute 'English Literature'. The study here has revealed that locally produced texts are equally readable as recommended texts and therefore should be given due consideration for inclusion into the curriculum. Based on the Flesch Grade level, the twelve Malaysian short stories fall within the range of US grade 6.0 - 8.5 (UK grade 11.0 - 13.5). The recommended texts analysed fall within the range of US grade 6.1 - 7.8 (UK grade 11.1 - 12.8). Thus, according to the Flesch Grade level, the Malaysian short stories are as easy (or as difficult) to read as the recommended texts. The materials would be suitable for the secondary school levels in the US and UK. The findings are the same if we appropriate the readability on the Gunning Fog index. The Malaysian short stories fall within the range of 5.0 - 11.7, and the recommended texts within the range of 5.7 - 10.9. The different formula rank the texts in almost the same order of difficulty. Thus, out of a random selection of Malaysian short-stories and recommended KBSM short-stories, the Malaysian short stories are as difficult as the recommended ones, and both corpora are suitable in terms of readability for the intended age group - secondary schools pupils - Malaysian adolescents. The Malaysian short stories have the added advantage in terms of cultural and local references. This study, however, is confined to readability analysis on the word and sentence level. Readability could be very well be conducted at a higher level of text or propositions. After all, the text structures of the established short stories follow conventions which one expects to find in a 'good' short story. However, the study has shown that the corpus of Malaysian short stories (written by Malaysian) are by measures of readability as complex and as rich as the recommended texts. The analysis reveals that almost all of the recommended texts and Malaysian short stories have adequate and comparable levels of readability as measured by the FRE and FKRL. However, this inquiry highlights that some texts are deemed too difficult for the adolescent readers by the FOG readability measure. Towards this end, readability measure must be taken into account in the selection of texts, bearing in mind, that what is regarded as 'Literature' is often an institutionalised and politicised decision.

The criteria of culture and norms of Malaysian society in the text selection, together with the fact that there is probably an enormous fissure (perhaps cultural chasm) between our students' tacit knowledge of social and literary conventions and those embodied in some of the selected texts, surely calls for grounds to look at our own backyard where texts which are more familiar and readable would encourage students to appreciate Literature. As Harris & Hodges (1995:203) rightly point out, "Text and reader variables interact in determining the readability of any piece of material for any individual reader." The cultural content must thus be an aspect to be factored in with the readability of a text. The selection of texts for a literature curriculum must be mapped to best match the readers with suitable texts, not only in terms of the measure of readability, but also the cultural content. The same text materials may be, by readability measure, very easy, yet the cultural content could be 'opaque' to the readers.

Another element which one has to bear in mind is that the goals of teaching literature are somewhat different from those of the other content areas. In content areas, reading provides a means to an end. In the Malaysian school context, all other academic subjects require the pupils to read in Malay. Only at the tertiary level, reference reading or academic reading in English is required. Undoubtedly, even in the subject areas, the readability of academic texts will differ and students (especially non-native speakers of English) should be exposed gradually to these texts

as well. Our quest for knowledge sometimes forces us to dive into the shallow end and the deep end at the same time. In the case of English literature in Malaysia, students are meant to enjoy literature. Thus, reading is not a means to an end. In other words, the selected works exemplify literature with the big 'L', although they are actually targeted for the small 'l,' as a pathway into elevating proficiency of second language learners.

As far as this paper is concerned, we hope we have demonstrated that the Malaysian produced short stories score the same in terms of readability measures as the recommended texts and should be given due consideration for inclusion based on their literary merits. If they are introduced as recommended texts in the syllabus, then we are one step closer towards nurturing and cherishing our own treasure trove of Malaysian literature in English.

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