

## **Exploring struggling readers of English as a second language's experiences in the Malaysian primary classroom**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Children are stakeholders in education, yet the young students' voices pertinent to their learning experience with ESL reading, have been under-studied. Therefore this study aimed to explore the way struggling readers engaged with their English as a second language (henceforth ESL) reading. This study adopts a qualitative approach and data analysis was performed inductively involving co-construction of meaning between the participants' expressions and the researcher's own understanding. This paper discusses two themes discovered in the study which were "challenges" and "perceptions on classroom learning experiences". The study revealed that all students had difficulties in reading English and perceived themselves as non-readers as well as had particular preferences on teaching methods of the teacher. The findings suggest that the Ministry of Education needs to assist educators to deal with the particular needs of young students and set attainable goals for the students to achieve in their ESL reading to boost their self-confidence.

**Keywords:** English as a second language; struggling readers; students' perceptions; classroom participation; literacy

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Low literacy attainment among ESL primary school students, particularly in reading and writing, has long been a concern in Malaysia (Yunus & Chun, 2016). Therefore, there had also been an increased focus on identifying and intervening to support students who are struggling with the learning of English. This is manifested in the implementation of the literacy intervention programme called Literacy and Numeracy Screening (henceforth LINUS), and later LINUS 2.0, to facilitate improving students' reading and writing skills. This nationwide screening programme aimed to assess students' ability to master all twelve constructs in the screening test with this being judged to be sufficient for students to progress through mainstream learning. The MOE aims for all students, except for special needs students, to be able to achieve the aforementioned standards by the end of Year 3 (PADU, 2015; PEMANDU, 2014). According to the MOE, the high percentage of students with low literacy performance in LINUS 2.0 has remained unresolved since the implementation of the programme (Sani & Idris, 2013).

In 2019, the MOE stopped supporting the LINUS 2.0 module formally, as part of a shift towards a more autonomous approach at school level. Schools are now being encouraged to formulate their own approaches to identifying and helping struggling readers (Chan, 2018), the greater autonomy now allowed to schools actually increases the relevance and importance of the findings of this study in that schools are now able to take more account of child perceptions of the experiences of struggles with reading English.

Muñoz (2014) asserted that there has been little research looking at young students' perceptions of learning a foreign language, let alone students who are identified as low attainment students or struggling readers. Furthermore, Jin and Cortazzi (2019, p. 487) stated that "despite huge interest and the millions of learners involved at ever younger ages", researching young students in English language in East Asian "remains one of the least researched areas in ELT." In Malaysia specifically, research investigating Year 1 struggling readers (as in my study) is yet to be found. This is

probably because researchers may not be very confident with children's awareness of their own experiences and children's ability to clearly express their experiences, particularly those prior to or in primary school (Kissau, Adams & Algozzine, 2015; Iwaniec, 2014). Nonetheless, studies conducted outside Malaysia by Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry (2005), Hsieh (2011) and Ma (2011) have revealed that "children are knowledgeable about their learning environment" from a very young age and able to express their experiences (Hsieh, 2011, p. 256).

Based on this backdrop, the research question formulated for this study is: How do the students engage with their ESL reading?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section discusses work on accessing and interpreting related studies on the perceptions of students themselves about their learning experience in the ESL classroom as a way ultimately to gain access to an understanding of how individual students engage with their ESL learning.

### **2.1 Challenges facing the students**

Difficulties experienced and reported by students are also illustrated in a few studies. For instance, Ruzane (2013) reported that of the thirty participating students, seven said that learning English was enjoyable but difficult, five admitted that they did not enjoy learning English, and two mentioned that learning English was boring. All five children also admitted that they would find learning the language easier when they were older. One child also reported that she was uncertain to answer the questions posed by the teacher in the classroom as she might be ridiculed by her friends for providing wrong answers and that made her get embarrassed and angry at herself. Another child confided that she could not remember what she wanted to say because English words were still strange to her. She also worried that her teacher would consider her lazy and as not putting enough effort in class because she would take a long time to think before producing the answer. Problems related to self-confidence and concern over people's judgment were also reported in the study by Tepfenhart (2011), who discovered that students were reluctant to participate in classroom learning because they were afraid of making mistakes that would embarrass them in front of their friends. Students also did not feel that they were good enough, or had sufficient knowledge, regarding foreign language learning. Besides that, Mat and Yunus (2014) also revealed that in relation to the problems that ESL students faced in learning English, 73% of the participants reported that they felt nervous when speaking English in the classroom. This is because they did not understand the lesson, did not have sufficient vocabulary to answer the teacher's questions, had problems pronouncing words correctly in English, and were worried about being laughed at by other students. In addition, three participating students in the study by Hsieh (2011) mentioned that, although learning English was fun, they also felt that it was challenging. For instance, one student, named Bon, said that he could not understand English because he did not speak much of the language. Another student, Wen, stated that learning and speaking English was hard for him. Another student, Yi, also expressed a negative reaction towards learning the language as she said that she could not understand the language at all. Although the teacher taught her, she still felt that the language was difficult and she did not know how to learn the language.

Garrett (2012) also revealed that three of the four highest and middle performing students provided negative experiences associated with reading. For example, Jessica and Calvin stated they felt unhappy when they were unable to understand things they read in the classroom. Gavin, in contrast, seemed to feel successful in reading as he only gave a comical example of negative experience. All of the highest and middle performing four students showed that they were successful readers since they chose to do reading as their preferred activity when asked by the researcher. As for the two lowest performing students, although they enjoyed reading, sometimes they felt lazy and found it boring. Further, they could articulate the positive and negative experiences they faced when they read. This was probably because they did not read in extra time and had insufficient experience of the reading process. Both of them did however mention that their favourite books were 'Sport Illustrated' and 'Twilight'. From the study by Garrett (2012), students considered as struggling readers (Destiny, Mirinda and Calvin) regarded themselves as poor readers, having problems in reading and in understanding what they read. In contrast, non-struggling readers (Gavin, Kole and Jessica) acknowledged themselves as good readers and highlighted in detail elements of taking ownership of their own reading, such as rereading, asking questions to oneself, figuring out the meaning of words and focusing on comprehension as an important aspect that a good reader should possess.

### **2.2 Classroom learning experiences**

Preferred teaching methods were also discussed by students in previous research. For example, the students in the study by Araos (2015) felt that they enjoy doing activities which are challenging but motivating and fun. They are

inspired to become attentive and participative in the lesson when the teacher said something that they cannot really understand. The findings concur with Inostroza (2018) who found that the EFL students in his study liked the challenging activities, which made them engaged in the learning. Besides that, Ruzane (2013) also illustrated that EAL students in her study preferred to learn English in a range of different ways. These included through seeing, feeling and touching real things, having interactive learning using computers, learning by looking at examples shown by the teacher, doing diverse activities like drawing and painting, talking to others like friends, listening to stories, listening to and singing music, and acting out the stories. Another finding discovered in the study by Ruzane (2013) was that some of the students liked to learn through repetition because this activity helped them to memorise what they learned in the classroom. In contrast, EFL Chinese students in the study by Jin et al., (2016) stated that they disliked reciting and memorising English words. Besides that one child in Ruzane (2013)'s study also reported that he enjoyed the interesting lessons planned and executed by the teacher who also gave praise and rewards to the children with stickers, similar to the children in the study by Nikolov (1999).

In another study by Hsieh (2011), the findings revealed that children reported that activities that they found interesting were singing, dancing, and playing games. Similar findings were discovered in a study by Nikolov (1999), where children aged 6-8 years old cited playing games as the most enjoyable activity in the EFL classroom. In contrast to the studies by Hsieh (2011) and Nikolov (1999), which showed that students liked hands-on activities, participants in the study by Muñoz (2014) preferred traditional types of learning, where all students could see the board and hear the teacher's voice, over group work activities or play.

Studies have also revealed negative experiences of ESL students in English language classrooms. For instance, students had restricted opportunities to take part in the English lessons, including not being picked by their teacher although they were excited to answer the questions. This is similar to findings by Inostroza (2018), that students felt that they had limited opportunity for involvement in lessons, such as experiencing a narrow chance to answer the teacher's questions. Some participants felt that the teacher's use of English words that they did not understand made learning complicated and difficult (Araos, 2015). Additionally, some children in a study by Inostroza (2018) also mentioned they sometimes disliked the lesson as it involved difficult to understand words. Students in the study by Muñoz (2014) similarly revealed that students found spelling activities challenging. Mat and Yunus (2014) also explored negative experiences of ESL students, citing how a small number of intermediate and low-achieving students in their study admitted that they paid little attention in class for reasons such as being distracted by other students' noises and students' passing the classroom. Two participants said that they did not understand what was being taught by the teacher while another two students stated that the lessons were uninteresting and dull.

A few studies, such as those of Araos (2015) and Inostroza (2018) also discuss students' ideal ESL lessons. Students in the study by Araos (2015) felt that they preferred lessons that integrated acting, playing and handicrafts activities to make the learning more fun. Similar responses were garnered from EFL students in the study by Inostroza (2018) who mentioned that students preferred a classroom with hands-on activities, such as acting, games, handicrafts and oral activities.

### **2.3 Theoretical Framework**

Social constructivist theory by Vygotsky (1978) has been renowned in the study of sociocultural influence research related to reading (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000). Students' skills and abilities are not seen as "original and constitutive realities, but rather as effects that have become gradually constituted through exchanges taking place in a multi-leveled, inter-relational context" (de Castro, 2013, p. 101). Students' social environments therefore play a big role in generating knowledge, in that interactions among social group members facilitate knowledge construction (Alawiyah, 2014; Aminah & Asl, 2015; Schunk, 2012). This is because it is believed that "understanding, significance, and meaning are developed in coordination with other human beings" (Aminah and Asl, 2015, p. 13). The importance of social context has also been underscored to facilitate an explanation of students' successes and failures in their literacy education (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Gun & Wyatt-Smith, 2011). This context includes the functions of family members, friends and teachers in facilitating learning which affects children's achievements (Moll, 1990; Ebrahimi, 2015). It has been argued that studies which employ social constructivism as a framework seek to restructure the literacy learning experiences at school to facilitate students in attaining academic knowledge so that the academic

knowledge that children are expected to acquire is built up from everyday concepts or personal experiences (Au, 1998).

Besides that, although no strong indicators are understood with respect to motivation in social constructivist theory, the question of what motivates learning has been observed to be well-matched with the theory (Sivan, 1986; Au, 1998). One of the associations cited by Sivan (1986, p. 216) was a “discussion of context and cultural issues that influence motivation and how motivation is shown”. In so far as the social constructivist perspectives directs researchers to explore the ways in which culture influences individuals’ opinions, emotions and actions, motivation may also be perceived as a cultural construction (Sivan, 1986). From that basis, young students’ motivations are principally influenced by people concerned in or connected to their English learning, including parents, teachers and friends, and learning in the classroom setting, such as learning activities and teaching instructions or other related factors (Harmer, 2007; Li, Han & Gao, 2019).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research approach was utilised to undertake this study. Particularly, a case study approach was adopted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) which focused on an existing occurrence of a group of people (Gustafsson, 2017) and examined a specific situation about which little is known (Kumar, 2011).

#### **3.1 Participants**

Six struggling readers were recruited mainly by using purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012). These participants were intentionally chosen to meet the research objectives and research questions. The students were those who achieved non-mastery results in the reading screening and who studied in the low-attaining class. Based on the teacher’s report, the participants in this study also scored below the passing mark in the school English tests, signifying that they had difficulties with reading and had reading issues as reported by their teacher.

#### **3.2 Data collection method**

One of the methods utilised with the struggling readers was observation. Five reading lessons were observed in the ESL classroom which lasted between approximately thirty and sixty minutes. The specific focus of the observation was the students’ behaviours, participations and interactions in the classroom with the teacher and among their friends. Attention is also devoted to things that students mentioned in the reading conversation.

Apart from observation, focus group (Gibson, 2007) or a less formal term, reading conversation (Ferrara, 2005) was also employed in this study. Each conversation session lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. The conversations were held after each of the observed reading lessons in the ESL classroom in order to obtain insights into students’ perceptions of those lessons. Before the final conversation began, students were also invited to do a drawing activity in which they drew a picture about the ESL reading that they experienced at home or in the classroom.

#### **3.3 Data analysis**

According to McMillan & Schumacher (2006) qualitative data analysis principally involves an inductive approach, in which the data is sorted out into categories and patterns discovered among the categories. Furthermore, Data obtained in this study were analysed to find emergent themes, which are defined as the “broad units of information consisting of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). Themes are also defined by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003, p. 38) as “an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas.”

The process of analysing data in this study involved the following stages:

- 1) Transcribing interviews and observations, managing the field notes and documents.
- 2) Choosing and highlighting relevant data and identifying codes by jotting down words, phrases or sentences to them.
- 3) Thinking about the codes and situating the selected codes into categories. At this stage, I looked at the list of codes and identified those which emerged repeatedly in the data. These codes were not necessarily similar in words but conveyed similar concepts or ideas.
- 4) Looking for connection between categories and placing the categories into themes.
- 5) Rereading the themes, categories and modifying them by referring to the literature.
- 6) Finalising the themes and categories for findings presentation.

## Exploring struggling readers of English as a second language's experiences in the Malaysian primary classroom

Among the themes emerged in the study were “challenges” and “perceptions on classroom learning experiences”, which will be presented and discussed in the following sections.

Themes	Categories	Explanations	Mentioned by:
1)Challenges	•Support	•Lack of support from parents	C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6
	•Self-perceptions	•Cannot read in English	C1, C2, C4, C5, C6
		•Can only read little English	C3
		•Can only do counting and adding numbers in Malay	C1
•Self-perceptions	•Can only read in Malay	C2, C6	
	•Can only read English when he becomes a grown-up	C1	
	•Can read in English if clever/get a high mark in exams	C2, C3, C4, C5, C6	
•Self-perceptions	• Can read in English when she progresses to the next level or when she gets place in exams	C5	
	•Reading is difficult words	•Many difficult words to read and understand causing the disengagement/inability to read in the classroom	C1, C2,
		•Cannot read or understand many words	C3, C4, C5
• Cannot read, spell and understand many words		C6	
	•Home verses classroom experiences	• Read the Supermind book, one-to-one with mother and asks many questions	C3
		•Read through spelling at home	C6
2)Perceptions on classroom learning experiences	•Positive views	•Likes to do something such as writing activities	C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6
		•Likes rewards	C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6
		•Likes picture	C1, C3, C5, C6
•Likes big book		C2	
•Positive views	•Likes the use of Malay	C5	
	•Negative views	•Dislikes repeating the teacher	C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6
		•Dislikes HFW list activity	C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6
•Dislikes friends who made noises		C3, C4, C6	
•Dislikes reading aloud		C4	
•Ways of learning could be more fun	•Ways of learning could be more fun	•To include playing activities	C1
		• To include game and reading Supermind	C3
		•To include singing activity	C5
		•To include English cartoons	C6

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Challenges facing the students

One of the challenges that all of the participating students reported was that they did not have much ESL reading activities at home with their parents. For example, Child 1 said,

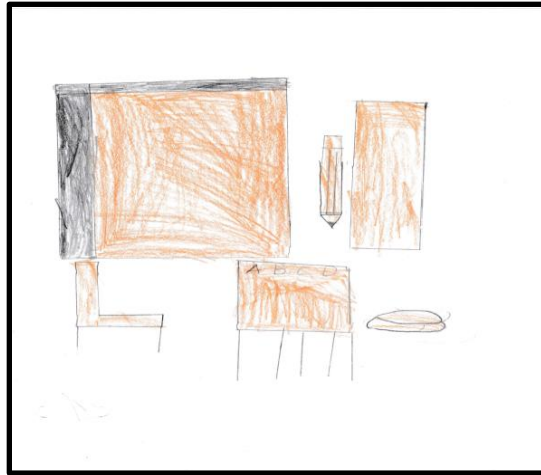
*“I don’t read English book at home”*. He also added, *“No one reads with me and dad only teaches me ABC and counting”*.

Another participant Child 2 said,

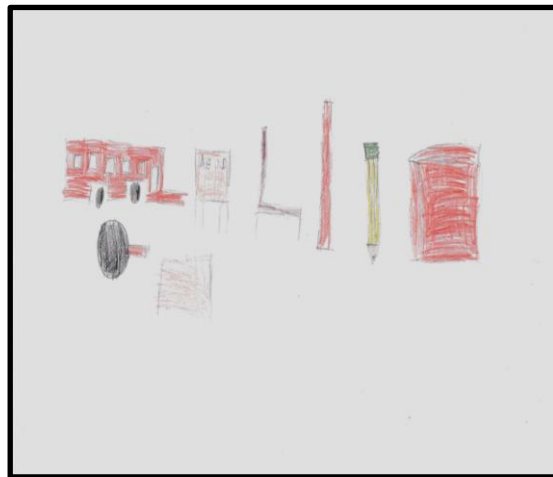
*“I don't read anything in English at home”*. He also mentioned, *“My parents don't teach English”*.

This is also evidenced by the fact that all of them drew the picture of them learning in the classroom instead at home.

For example, Child 4 decided to draw an image (Figure 1) about the reading that she did in the classroom. She told the researcher that she drew the picture because English reading was not done at home except for homework. She also said, *“My mum did not read with me, I learn only at school”*.



Another participant, Child 5 decided to draw her experience with reading in the classroom because she said that reading was rarely done at home (see Figure 2). She also said, *“My parents and my sisters are busy. They have work to do.”*



One child believed that support with his learning from other parties might help him develop his English reading ability. He said, *“If I go to the private tutoring, I will be able to read in English”*.

Besides that, all the participating students also believed that they could not read in English, except for a student who thought that he could read a little English.

For instance, Child 6 said, *“I can't read and spell many words”*. He also stated, *“I can't understand the words too”*.

Another example is from Child 1 as he said, *"Reading is difficult. It is hard to read and understand the words"*. Data collected from observation showing that the difficulties expressed by Child 1 emanated through his behaviour in the classroom. From the observation it was noticed that Child 1 had a tendency to not engage in the learning sessions and looked around in the classroom or looked blankly.

In addition, some students mentioned being clever as a criterion for them to be able to read in English which is measured by getting good marks or first place in the exam and when they progress to a higher level at school. For instance, Child 3 said, *"I need to get an A to be a good reader, now I only get a B mark"*.

Apart from that, there is also a student who stated that he would only be able to read English when he grew up. Another challenge that all the students had was that they believed that English was all about hard words which they cannot read and understand. Difficult words challenged the students, as evidenced in the reading lessons either due to disengagement, difficulty reading the English words aloud and incomplete or incorrect answers in writing tasks, as well as their inability to recall the lessons they learned in the classroom. For example, Child 6 said, *"I can't read and spell many words"*. He also stated, *"I can't understand the words too"*.

Another challenge was specifically mentioned by two students who shared the differences of experience they had at home and school. For instance, Child 3 mentioned, *"At home, a bit different compared to at school. I read Supermind book"* and *"my mum answers all my questions"*. He also mentioned, *"I learn reading alone with my mother's help."*

#### **4.2 Perceptions of the classroom learning experiences**

The students also talked about their perceptions of the classroom learning experiences. All the students stated that they liked activities that required them to do something such as writing. For example, Child 2 said, *"I like to do activity such as writing"*.

Further, they all mentioned rewards from the teacher as another positive thing they experienced in the reading lessons. For instance, Child 1 said, *"I feel happy today because I got something from Mrs. Leena"*.

Some students expressed liking the pictures that the teacher employed in the classroom. For example, from one of my observations I discovered that Child 5 talked about the pictures to his friend. He said, *"Teacher gives me a nice picture"*.

The big book used by the teacher was also liked by a student. Similarly, the use of Malay was also favoured by a student. On the other hand, all the students disliked the drilling activity where they had to repeat after the teacher and the HFW list activity. For example, Child 6 said, *"I don't really read because my mouth is tired. I like to do different things"*.

A few students also disliked their noisy friends, with one among these few disliking reading aloud. Additionally, students also talked about ways of learning could be more fun. For example, Child 6 stated, *"I would love to watch cartoons in the classroom"*. He added, *"Cartoons like Upin Ipin like my sister shows me, or any cartoons"*.

Another child also hoped that the teacher could integrate play activities in the classroom, and another student wished to have games and his favourite book included in the ESL reading lessons.

### **5. DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1 Challenges facing the students**

The students in this study talked about their challenges in relation to learning ESL. Firstly, all the students stated that they had infrequent ESL reading activities with their parents at home. A similar finding is also reported by Mat and Yunus (2014). The students in this study further stated that their encounters with English only normally occurred at school, as was also conveyed through their drawings. Similar findings were obtained from low-attaining students in the study by Cheng, Yunus & Mohamad (2016) and some students in the study by Ruzane (2013), who reported that they did not have a supportive ESL learning environment at home. One student also mentioned that additional support

from private tutoring might be helpful for his learning. This lack of activities at home may have a negative impact on children who need a supportive learning environment to thrive in their ESL learning.

Secondly, the students also perceived ESL as difficult, a similar finding to the low-attaining students in the study by Cheng, Yunus & Mohamad (2016) and participating students in the studies by Hsieh (2011), Ruzane (2013) and Tepfenhart (2011). They perceived themselves as unable to read in English, except for one student who said he could read a little English. A previous study by Garrett (2012) also evidenced that struggling readers perceived themselves as non-readers. The students in this study further mentioned that they thought they could only achieve the ability to read in English when they are clever, for example when they obtained good marks or gained first place in examinations. Additionally, they felt that they could read when they progressed to the next higher level at school. One student also stated that he would only be able to read English when he grew up, a similar point made by the students in a study by Ruzane (2013).

The explanation given by the students showed that they based their achievement and ability in ESL reading on what has been set by the school. Such an explanation also portrays that the students felt that ESL reading was not something attainable for them at the moment when they are in that particular class or year level. Additionally, the responses given by the students illustrated that they were aware of their position as struggling readers as set by the school, which could have an impact on their aspirations in learning English. This argument could also be strengthened by the fact that all the students were learning together in a low-attaining class.

The third challenge perceived by the students was they believed that English was associated with difficult words that they could not read and comprehend. Problems in understanding the English words or what is being read, were also reported by some students in previous studies (Garrett, 2012; Hsieh, 2001). Difficulty in spelling words was also stated by one participant in this study, similar to what was faced by some students in the studies by Li (2004). These difficulties were manifested during the lessons in the students' disconnection from the teaching and learning sessions, including playing alone or with their friends, disturbing friends, chattering and looking blankly as if they were day-dreaming. Conversely, the hard word challenge that the students reported was evident in their struggle during the reading aloud activity.

## **5.2 Perceptions Regarding the Classroom learning Experiences**

In terms of positive experiences, all the students admitted that they liked activities that involved them in doing something active such as writing. Findings from past studies by Ruzane (2013), Hsieh (2001) and Nikolov (1999) also revealed that the children preferred more active tasks. This included writing among other activities, as stated by the students in this study, but could also include other activities such as games and songs. In addition, all the students also liked receiving rewards from the teacher. Similar findings were found in previous studies by Nikolov (1999) and Ruzane (2013). Moreover, the use of materials by the teacher such as the big book and pictures was also liked by one and four students, respectively. These findings were similar to the studies by Hashim (2016) and Betty (2016), who discovered that the materials utilised by the teacher played an important role in attracting students' interest to learning English. Aspects of teaching method was also mentioned by a student, namely the use of the first language (Malay) through code-switching in the lessons, which they found helpful to make them understand the message that the teacher was trying to deliver (Ruzane, 2013).

In terms of negative experiences, all the students expressed their dislike of simply repeating the teacher. The findings echo the perceptions held by the students in the study by Jin et al. (2016), but contrasts with some of the students' perceptions in the study by Ruzane (2013). Reasons such as being tired, bored and wanting to do other activities were given by the students for not their dislike of doing the drilling activity repeatedly. The findings suggest that the students preferred activities that required them to participate in the learning activity, rather than just being passive receivers or listeners. These findings appear plausible as children have short attention spans (Harmer, 2012), therefore activities need to be varied to avoid non-participating behaviour (Ruzane, 2013). Children also talked about their dislike of using one particular material, the HFW list. They found it difficult and challenging, with too many words listed. Additionally, a few of the students mentioned the learning environment, namely noisy friends that had disturbed them. Similar findings were reported by the students in the study by Mat and Yunus (2014) who felt uncomfortable with noisy friends. The findings suggested that the students needed a more supportive environment to learn in the classroom. One student did not like the activity that required her to read aloud in the classroom as she felt shy making mistakes (Ruzane, 2013; Tepfenhart, 2011) and was worried that this would be noticed by her friends and lead to her being teased by them (Mat & Yunus, 2014; Ruzane, 2013).



Some students articulated the kind of lesson they wished they could have in the classroom. This included playing activities, and incorporating games and their favourite books, English cartoons and songs into the lessons. The findings concurred with the studies by Araos (2015) and Inostroza (2018), in which the participating students talked about their ideal classroom activities which included playing (Araos, 2015) and games (Inostroza, 2018).

### **5.3 Theoretical Discussion**

According to Vygotsky (1978) in his social constructivist theory, learning is a social process that accentuates the roles of other people such as teachers, family members and friends in mediating the learning process (Moll, 1990; Ebrahimi, 2015). The findings of this study suggest that the students have limited opportunities to learn as they are positioned in a low attaining class in which most of the students share similar issues in terms of reading attainment, motivation and behaviour. This means that the students might not be able to learn from one another, to communicate with each other and build up their knowledge. The students in the study had scarce opportunities for teacher-student or student-student interactions as much of the learning focus was on drilling or repetition activity.

Besides, Vygotsky (1978), in his social constructivist theory, has argued that scientific concepts need to be built based on everyday concepts. In other words, the academic knowledge that the children are expected to acquire at school needs to be built based on the students' personal experiences that they gained outside school such as watching cartoons and reading pizza box.

In addition to that, the students were not exposed to many learning opportunities at home. Apart from infrequent learning activities that transpired, and the limited capacity of English that the parents possessed, the students did not have extensive literacy resources to assist their learning process. In social constructivism, it is argued that knowledge construction happens between people and social environments (Vygotsky, 1978). That is to say, students' knowledge is reliant on communications or collaborations with other people and their environments prior to the internalisation process occurring (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Roth, 2000). Moreover, "the opportunities that learners have, impacts on how literacy is achieved" (Pillay, 2018, p.35). As a result, the students might not be able to develop their reading ability further because they had inadequate support from more knowledgeable people surrounding them, namely the teacher, parents and friends, as well as from other tools such as the learning resources available at home.

Furthermore, students in this study also recognised themselves as poor readers and thought that they could not possibly be able to read until they achieved a certain quality, attained a certain mark in exams or moved on to the next level in school. Such a negative connotation advocates that the reading experience is socially connected, shaped by the teacher's opinions or the school system, and that this affects the way they perceived themselves. This finding is also in accordance with social constructivist theory which highlights that motivations are influenced by what surrounds the students. In short, the findings of this study are aligned to social constructivist theory: the students' actions, perceptions and achievements are products of the social process that they experience (Pritchard & Woolard, 2010).

## **6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

To summarise, the students faced a few challenges in learning to read such as they had little support from their parents. The students also had negative self-perceptions and associated reading with difficult words. Besides that, the students read at home reading differently. All these challenges might have impeded students' development in ESL reading. In addition, the students had positive and negative perceptions on classroom learning experiences. They also expressed their views on how learning to read in the ESL classroom could be more fun.

The findings of this study suggest that it is essential for teachers of struggling readers to know the theories of language learning embedded in the teaching methodologies, alongside taking into consideration individual child differences, and employing suitable techniques that promote the reading development of those students (Kırkgöz, 2018). It is also paramount to understand the students' interests and recognising students' voices in the learning process. Additionally, the teacher can set attainable goals for the students to achieve in their ESL reading. This can help students to feel that they are successful and may acknowledge themselves as good readers.

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Exploring struggling readers of English as a second language's experiences in the Malaysian primary classroom

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