Using Cooperative Reading Strategies for Learning and Comprehending Literature among Chinese Primary School Students

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Abstract
English, in Chinese primary schools, is learnt as the third language after Chinese and Bahasa Melayu. This makes English difficult to master since Malaysian Chinese school learners have limited time to practise the language. Incorporating Malaysian literature in English has been a part of our curriculum for a long period of time as it offers a more familiar, relatable setting and cultural elements while also promoting English proficiency to the students. Comprehension of English literature by Chinese primary school students requires great effort and practice by the children as it is not their native language. Therefore, language teachers are advised to introduce different types of reading strategies that are suitable to the students' needs. Cooperative reading requires socialisation and communication which can push the students towards conversing with each other in English language which in the end improves their comprehension too. In case of short stories, students are able to read the material again and again and this helps in expanding their vocabulary, when an individual has a broad vocabulary, it becomes easier for them to explain and understand concepts better as there are more words available in their mind for description. Researching and exploring the use of reading cooperative strategies for learning and comprehending literature is important to teachers in order to improve students' learning and understanding of literature.
Keywords: English Literature, English Proficiency, Reading Cooperative Strategies, Chinese Primary School Students

Introduction
In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language in specific language classrooms but not generally used on a daily basis. This makes English difficult to master since Malaysian learners have limited time to practise the language, especially in the Malaysian Chinese school setting. English, in Chinese primary schools, is learnt as the third language after Chinese and Bahasa Melayu. In addition, pupils only have about 6-7 periods during English lessons in a week which is only about three hours in a week. The best way would be reading as reading is an inseparable part of acquiring a language. It has been a long and twisting route for the teaching and study of English-language literature in Malaysia, from the centre of attention to the edge of extinction and back again. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025

emphasises the nation's dedication to integrating English-language literature into the curriculum. The use of literature in Malaysian schools has aided pupils' "personal growth and character development and broadened their vision of the world via reading about various cultures and perspectives" as well as their English skills (Ganakumaran, 2003, p.39).

The modern children's literature initiative, which aims to promote English language instruction by introducing children's literature, was implemented in Malaysian primary schools in 2003. As a result of reading literary works in English, Mustakim (2014) hopes that students' language competence will improve and their imaginations will be encouraged. The English language Curriculum Specifications (Ministry of Education, 2013) stated that the aim of literature is not only meant to address the interpersonal, informational aesthetic value of learning but also the overall learning of the English language (Singh et al., 2020, p.212). Two of the six aims of studying literary components are language acquisition, children's understanding of how language functions in communication, and exposure to narrative structure. It is also an effort to address the recent trend of declining English proficiency in elementary school classes (Basree, 2009). As stated in the Youngsters' Contemporary Literature report (Ministry of Education, 2013), the goals and objectives include instilling a love of reading in children and enhancing their vocabulary and critical thinking abilities via literature. Educational curriculum has become more refined to prepare the young minds for the challenges the world has to offer them. When talking about the English subject, it was made compulsory in 1951 in Chinese primary schools and it is being taken quite seriously nowadays especially. Talking about literature and comprehension in the educational reforms created by Malaysian Ministry of Education in the 1960s and 1970s, students in year 4 to year 6 were expected to be able to read short stories which included pictures and understand the context as well (Sivapalan & Subramaniam, 2008). The visuals in the short stories help the students attach meaning to the text with ease. Despite an increase in research on the challenges faced by ESL and EFL students, reading remains challenging for many. This may be attributable in part to the manner in which these pupils are taught to read, particularly in terms of reading skills instruction. According to some ideas, even if a youngster possesses fundamental reading abilities, he or she may still require further practice to perfect them (Nasab & Ghafournia, 2016; Wai et al., 2014).

It can be time-consuming and challenging at times to provide kids with differentiated reading instruction and practise. Students who struggle to comprehend a piece of writing because they are employing the incorrect technique are advised to utilise a number of reading strategies that may be adapted to their English skill level and the type of text they are reading. Before establishing such a framework, Nasab and Ghafournia (2016) advise that "we should assess the significance and success of these projects." As a teacher, you may test each technique to determine how students respond and how it improves class performance. (p. 39). One of the purposes of teaching literature is to help students develop their analytical and critical thinking abilities. The major objective of presenting literature to elementary school kids was to enable them to draw conclusions about the text's meaning based on prior knowledge. The capacity of a learner to connect what they already know to what they read contributes to the development of critical thinking abilities. According to Abdul Aziz (2017), for pupils to be able to read at a higher level, they must be able to link new knowledge to what they currently know in order to solve cognitive issues. According to Sarceni (2003), the fact that a literary work may be understood in so many different ways shows that it can be used to develop critical thinking.

Although numerous research has been conducted on improving reading, very few studies have been conducted on cooperative reading strategies for learning and comprehending literature in ESL classrooms. This study answers these research questions:

(a) How do cooperative reading strategies improve learning and comprehending literature among Chinese primary school students?

(b) What causes the lack of literature comprehension among Chinese primary school students?

Literature review

(a)   The Teaching and Learning of Literature in Malaysia

English literature is a part of the Malaysian Education Blueprint and plays a major role in promoting English proficiency. English literature has also been an integral part of the primary and secondary school curriculum. Malaysian literature in English has been a part of our curriculum for a long time since it gives students with a more recognisable and relatable location and cultural characteristics. It may be easier for children to enjoy literary works if they can relate to the local characters and issues (Vethamani, 2004). The relatability between students and text is a crucial element that needs to be addressed in selection of a suitable text to be used in the classroom. Blocksidge (2000) believes that merely naming books that "always do well" in the classroom is insufficient; these texts must also transmit the underlying assumptions in terms of intellectual, cultural, and emotional content. It is essential that books have a wide topic that students can relate to and that can help them develop moral, social, and emotional intelligence (Haddon 2000).

Literary appreciation is the most significant factor when it comes to reading and enjoying a piece of literature (Gwin, 1990). This level of literary appreciation can only be achieved by reading works that have a significant impact on the reader (Keshta, 2000; Ballentine & Hill, 2000). To achieve literary appreciation among the students, considerations must be given to select suitable text for use as it plays the key to success in proper understanding of the literature. Che Ton Mahmud conducted research on rural secondary school pupils (2005), which found out that in order for the English language curriculum's literary component to be effective, the books chosen must be carefully studied. Teachers and students in rural Malaysian classrooms should be able to engage with each other and the text by picking texts that stimulate students' existing knowledge. Localised literature should be supported, but specialised, interconnected topics should take precedence over generic ones. Mohaideen et al (2020) echo the sentiment of the research that recommends using texts that are relevant to students' lives, engage their existing knowledge, and convey a message. Students should be able to reply and contribute spontaneously to the selected titles, which should grab their interest and maintain their engagement. Cole (2003) emphasises the need of providing students with a rich literary environment in the classroom.

(b)   Literature Comprehension in Chinese Primary School Students

Chinese languages, Mandarin and Cantonese, are different from the English language in a multitude of ways. The phonetics, syntax, dialect, alphabets and even the rules of grammar are different. Comprehension of English literature by Chinese primary school students requires great effort and practice by the children as it is not their native language. With several other languages, there are usually some similarities with English for example in

the German language the alphabets, certain words and the sentence structure are similar to a great extent; if a German primary school Student studies English it will be easier for him to comprehend literature as compared to a Chinese speaking student. All of these differences contribute to the problems Chinese primary school students face when it comes to comprehension of English literature. English became a compulsory subject to be taught in Chinese schools in 1951, a major part of the Chinese population does not speak English and the ones who do are usually not that fluent (Wei & Su, 2012).

Majority of Chinese adults are not fluent in the English language, which also makes it difficult for their children to learn English since they cannot converse with their parents in that language (Wei & Su, 2012). If an individual is not speaking a certain language, it will most definitely have an effect on their comprehension levels (Clark, 2018). Language acquisition and comprehension depends a lot on the pride associated with the native language (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017). The Chinese have a collectivistic culture and native language is what makes the community stick together which is another factor why it is rather difficult for Chinese primary school students to have good comprehension of English literature.

(c)   Cooperative Reading Strategies and its Types

Cooperative reading is based on the concept that individuals sit together and read a passage for better understanding. Cooperative reading is a process which encourages reading, by making interesting and engaging activities, especially among children. The process maintains everyone's involvement (Slavin, 2015) where it combines students from different reading levels to sit together and analyse a piece of text or literary text, thus making reading interactive and gives students the chance to improve their comprehension of literature as well (Slavin, 2015). Cooperative reading focuses on the main theme of the literature provided to the students, annotation, comprehension, the textual purpose and the conclusion from the discussions based on the text. This is a long and interesting process. When it comes to primary school students, reading literature usually consists of simple passages of text or short stories for analysis (Pangesty et al., 2021). When students from different reading and comprehension levels sit together, they can help expedite each other's process towards improvement. This is also based on the concept of social learning proposed by Bandura (2000), where students who are not on higher levels of reading and comprehension, learn from others who perform better in reading and scrutinising text, get to observe the latter's behaviour during such process (Casey & Goodyear, 2015). This creates a healthy learning environment where the students are usually put into groups for such an activity.

Cooperative learning came into being around the early 1900s by the American educational psychologist and reformer John Dewey (Anderson, 2019). People have this misconception that if students are sitting in a group and working then it should be labelled as cooperative learning but in reality, cooperative learning is a systemized process with certain outlines and rules (Baloche & Brody, 2017). It consists of certain elements like; learning in a face-to-face environment, group effort which means that students will not be marked individually. The success of the group depends on all of the members. Furthermore, other factors such, the students are given the chance to actually analyse their own work and decide how much they have learned. Students get to build on social and interpersonal skills by communicating in a civilised classroom environment (Erbil & Kocabas, 2018).

There are several cooperative reading strategies. Yet, this paper will only review two types of its reading strategies – (1) reciprocal reading and Jigsaw learning. Cooperative

learning involves the concepts of scaffolding, accommodation and adaptation. First, reciprocal reading asks for students to be divided into groups each consisting of either 3 or 4 members. The teacher or the 1st member of the group reads a piece of text and asks a question related to the text and the 2nd member is expected to paraphrase the text while answering the question. The 3rd member predicts what the next paragraph or sentence of the passage will be about depending on the information, this way the student gets to comprehend and understand the literature in a way where he can actually make assumptions about what the passage might be possibly leading towards. The 4th member gets to summarise the process. The group members keep on passing around the cards until they have completed the entire passage or the time of the class is over.

Meanwhile in the jigsaw method every student is given a certain role and when the tasks assigned to every member of the group are fulfilled, the group is rewarded with success. When it comes to reading and comprehension, each member is given a certain task. One person gets to analyse the text, another person has to mark the important points of the text, one person has to focus on finding the meaning of the text and the last member has to summarise everything. This makes learning interesting and the students stay occupied. Another way of utilizing the jigsaw method is to give certain parts of a passage to every member in the group and then they are all responsible for explaining their parts to the entire group. At the end the group has a complete summary and analysis of the passage.

(d)   Cooperative Reading Strategies and Comprehension

Cooperative reading strategies force children to communicate with each other which gives them the chance to work on their comprehension, as comprehension is all about communicating the meaning attached to words (Jacobs, 2014). Students sit together and explain what they can apprehend from the text to other members in the group and if one of them knows more they can explain it to their group members. Cooperative reading includes and gathers ideas and concepts from each member of the group which can contribute to the process of comprehension (Lenkauskaite et al., 2020). This technique is highly beneficial for children as they have a vivid imagination and just with their imagination alone, they can come to such illustrative conclusions which can aid in comprehension of the text. In some cooperative reading activities children have to write the summaries or their part of the analysis on a piece of paper which helps them get better at the second language, English, the writing part helps them improve their comprehension too (Emak & Ismail, 2021). If there is a certain role given to the child, he feels responsible and the sense of autonomy can push him towards doing better in the activity. Reading cannot be a mundane task and based on just memorising what sounds are created if certain words are put together. It is an essential activity required for learning which is not that useful without comprehension of what is being read. Teaching students reading strategies cannot improve their comprehension but involving them in activities like cooperative reading where it does not seem like that, we are teaching them a strategy which they can use in their self-reading time, and can in fact improve their comprehension (Raqqad et al., 2019).

Cooperative learning techniques, also known as reciprocal learning, are beneficial for most of the subjects as the students and even teachers both get to engage in a dialogue to better understand the study material. The teacher only guides the students as much as they need based on the concept of a zone of proximal development. The child is then able to reach the goal with a slight push from the teacher and his group members (Smagonrinsky, 2018).

Children who are not proficient readers can benefit from cooperative reading in a way that the teacher only gives them this required jump start and the students in their group can contribute to the development of his reading skills (Rashid et al., 2010). The reading tasks or passages should be of a variety which has both hard and easy to read passages as it is important to keep in mind that we need to improve the reading and comprehension of students. Providing students with the same level of difficulty passages will not improve their skills as discussed in research which focused on Bloom's taxonomy and compared it to levels of high and low skill required reading (Al Raqad & Ismail, 2018).

(e) Short Stories

Short stories are a useful tool for practice of comprehension for primary school students. Short stories do not have extra details or lengthy passages which can make a child lose interest, this is why students stay attentive when a short story is being read to them. Moreover, primary school students are at a reading level where they can read the stories on their own and even understand what they are reading. Understanding the text is a major part of comprehension. In a classroom, the teachers can have a question answer session with the students once the teacher has read them the story, this will give the students the opportunity to communicate and discuss what they have understood and gathered from the story.

Students can even be divided in groups and asked to explain to the entire class what they have learned, presentation of literature can help with comprehension as well. Children tend to understand much better and in more detail through short and simple passages of literature (Handayani, 2013). When it comes to short stories, even if they are in English, students respond better to them if they are local ones based on their culture and topics or figures significant to them (Mohaideen et al., 2020). Storytelling has always been popular among children and when a teacher is reading a story out loud to the students, they can ask them questions related to what is being read to them. Even in the English curriculum in Chinese schools, students in 3rd to 4th are supposed to be able to read and understand short stories with pictures. Short stories with pictures are good for self-study periods too as the child can take help from the picture to figure out what is happening even if they are unable to understand the sentences. This practice helps them in their language comprehension as over time they become confident in attaching meaning to sentences based on what they had seen in the pictures in the short story books. This process involves accommodation and adaptation of information and language.

(f) Cooperative Reading, Short Stories and Comprehension of Literature

Coming towards comprehension of literature by Chinese primary school students, short stories and cooperative reading can both aid in the process. The short stories will develop students' interest in reading and learning. Cooperative reading involves bottom up and top-down methods of processing which aids in development of schemas which can further help in comprehension of literature. The children learn how to comprehend literature and anticipate what is going to happen next in the passage too as they learn how to use top-down and bottom-up processing methods (without it being taught to them directly).

Social cognitive theory comes into play when we are talking about cooperative reading, the students have to engage in conversations which gives them the ground to talk to each other in the English language and explain their ideas to one another (Johnson & Johnson, 2015). The more they converse in a certain language the better their comprehension gets.

The conversations add to their vocabulary as well which ultimately helps in language proficiency of the second language (Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021). Another study talked about Schmitt's VLS model to explain how important enhancing the vocabulary of children is for acquisition of a second language (Chiew & Ismail, 2021). The positive reinforcement in the form of "enjoyment" of the group work and "praise" received at the end of the task by the teacher can give students the motivation to do better in the activities too.

Methodology
(a)   Research design
    The most critical criterion for academic growth and success in school is the ability to read and comprehend what is read. According to American research, if you can read well, you are more likely to succeed in your personal and professional life (Block & Israel, 2005). Consequently, qualitative methodologies were selected. As a humanistic or idealistic approach, qualitative research investigates a research issue (Pathak, Jena & Kalra, 2013). Using the qualitative technique, people's thoughts, emotions, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions are investigated (Pathak, Jena & Kalra, 2013). Utilisation of qualitative research methods in intervention studies is gaining favour among academics of all disciplines (Pathak, Jena & Kalra, 2013).

(b)   Samples and Population
        The participants of the study were 20 students, aged 10 years old from Year 4 studying at SJK(C) Perak in Ipoh, a small Chinese school consisting of 128 students. The participants consist of 8 boys and 12 girls. The students were all of intermediate level without any over-achievers, under-achievers or students with special needs. The sample selected was small since the school is a SKM (Sekolah Kurang Murid) school. Most of the students come from a middle-class household and have parents who are very encouraging of their children to study well. This sample is purposive since I have teaching experience with the same class and it would be less challenging to implement my research. This study was conducted over a period of four weeks, including 1-hour a week dedicated to applying cooperative reading strategies in a week.

(c)   Research Instruments
    To collect data, students and instructors were requested to complete an observation checklist and an interview, respectively. The observation checklist was formed based on the research question *(i) How do cooperative reading strategies improve learning and comprehending literature among Chinese primary school students?*, while the interview protocol was based on the research question to be addressed which is *(ii) What causes the lack of literature comprehension among Chinese primary school students?*
        The observation checklist has 9 items adapted from the questionnaire developed by McLeish (2009) to investigate students' attitude toward Cooperative Learning. The items were then used as an observation checklist to check if students have improvement in their understanding and comprehension literature after applying cooperative reading strategies. The observation checklist is attached in the appendix.
        The interview protocol is divided into 5 questions adapted from a "71 item questionnaire" developed by Subarna and Ganakumaran (2007) and the Teachers as Readers questionnaire by the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA). The interview questions

focused on the reasons behind the lack of understanding and comprehension of literature to collect data from the teachers involved.

(d)   Data Analysis

This study employs a thematic analysis of the data to analyse and interpret it. Thematic analysis is used to discover and analyse patterns in qualitative data. Six stages took place in doing a theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first step to the analysis involves **familiarisation with the data**. As with any qualitative analysis, researchers must immerse themselves in their data and become thoroughly acquainted with it; reading and rereading the data and documenting any early analytic ideas are vital. In this research, after collecting the data, I re-read the interview responses multiple times in order to grasp the implicit and explicit meaning while jotting down phrases and recurring words. As for **coding**, the production of succinct labels for key data features pertinent to the research question guiding the inquiry is a frequent component of many qualitative analysis approaches. Coding is not only a tool of data reduction; it is also an analytic process. Therefore, codes record both a semantic and conceptual interpretation of the data. The data I collected were condensed to derive themes. The codes derived were generalised from the collected data. For example, when the teachers shared their ideas of their students' behaviours of them being lazy and are too lazy to read, the code of "students' behaviour" could be derived. Since the data collected had recurring answers for the interview questions, it was quite difficult to code them. When **searching for themes** in which a theme is a recurring trend in the data that is related to the topic of the investigation. Similar to coding is the technique of identifying similarities in data. Finding themes in the data cannot be accomplished passively; the researcher must actively seek them out. This stage involves the collection of coded data relevant to each subject. I simplified the codes which were then arranged to find themes. The process of **reviewing themes** to ensure that they are relevant to both the coded extracts and the complete dataset. The researcher should consider if the themes provide a clear and interesting story about the data, and then define the nature of each particular theme and their connection. In some instances, two or more themes may need to be combined or divided into many themes, or the theme creation process may need to be resumed from the beginning. Once the themes were found from the data I collected, it was combined necessarily in-line with the 2 research questions in order to make sure the themes did not deviate from the research. In **defining and naming themes**, researchers must conduct and publish a comprehensive investigation of each subject, identifying its "essence" and labelling it in a manner that is brief, catchy, and instructive. The themes derived from the data were made sure to be simple and carried the essence of the research. **Writing up** is an integral part of the analytical procedure for thematic analysis. The combination of data extraction and analytic storytelling creates a captivating narrative about the results and contextualises them within the literature.

Table 2
Themes derived from the interview

Theme	Simplified codes
Literature inclusion	- Literature is not a part of the syllabus (do not emphasise on it and it is not considered important) - Occasionally
Teachers' perception of students' attitude	- Find reading difficult - Feel English is a difficult subject - Too lazy to read - Not interested in literature

(e)   Research Implementation

This research was implemented in the span of 4 weeks, with the Year 4 students of SJK (C) Perak. The short story, King of Kites was used in this research. The cooperative reading strategy was implemented in all 4 weeks during the reading activity of the short stories. Reciprocal reading was carried out on the second and fourth week, while jigsaw learning was carried out on the first and third week. The observation and interview were conducted on the final week of the research.

Findings and Discussion

(a)   Research Question 1: *How do cooperative reading strategies improve learning and comprehending literature among Chinese primary school students?*

This research question was answered using the research instrument of observation checklist. Students were able to achieve the items listed in the observation checklist and showed visible improvement in their understanding and comprehension of literature after the implementation of cooperative reading strategies.

Overall achievement post implementation of cooperative reading strategies

All 20 students in the Year 4 class were observed over the span of 4 weeks during the literature lesson where the cooperative reading strategies were implemented. Their achievement is summarised in the table below.

Table 1

Overall Achievement Post Implementation of Cooperative Reading Strategies

Bil	Items	Students are able to achieve	Students are not able to achieve	Percentage of achievers (%)
1.	When working together, more is achieved than working alone.	16 / 20	4 / 20	80
2.	Participate in group tasks with vigour.	18 / 20	2 / 20	90
3.	Through cooperative learning, positive attitudes toward work can be cultivated.	18 / 20	2 / 20	90
4.	Cooperative learning allows students to become better acquainted with one another.	18/20	2 / 20	90
5.	When students work together in a group context, their interpersonal skills develop.	20 / 20	0 / 20	100
6.	Students' participation in class increases when they work together.	20 / 20	0 / 20	100
7.	It is simpler to encourage creativity in a group setting.	18 / 20	2 / 20	90
8.	When shared with others, knowledge is more enjoyable.	18 / 20	2 / 20	90
9.	Cooperative learning helps to answer questions on the literature studied better.	19 / 20	1 / 20	95

It can be seen that an average of 90% of the participants were able to show positive growth in understanding literature after incorporating cooperative reading strategies. A complete 100% was not able to be achieved for each item as 2 students were extremely passive and were selectively participative despite being continuously encouraged by the researcher and their friends. To address the research question *(i) How do cooperative reading strategies improve learning and comprehending literature among Chinese primary school students?,* majority of the students have shown a more positive growth towards understanding of literature and a more active participation in the classroom. Students get to understand better, improve socialisation skills, enhance class participation and make learning easier. They also build a better bond among themselves as each and every one takes the initiative to ensure that the literature is fully comprehended before completing other activities. When the reading strategies are carried out, especially jigsaw learning, their

inhibitions on questioning and clearing their doubts almost melts away due to the comfort they have with their classmates.

(b)   Research Question 2
What causes the lack of literature comprehension among Chinese primary school students?
This research question was addressed using this research instrument of an interview. Teachers shared their opinions on the reasons behind the lack of literature comprehension among Chinese primary school students.

Theme 1: Literature Inclusion
The interview demonstrated that the teachers do not emphasise on teaching literature in the classroom as literature is no longer a part of the Chinese school syllabus. As English is only taught for 6 periods in a week, the teachers are in a rush to complete the syllabus. Since CEFR has also been a part of the English teaching and learning, more content has to be squeezed into the weekly 3 hours of lessons. Therefore, literature is only occasionally included in the lessons.

Theme 2: Teachers' Perception of Students' Attitude
In this study, teachers had a preconceived notion that the students' attitude is the one of the biggest contributing factors to the lack of understanding and comprehending literature. Since English is the third language in Chinese schools, students struggle to learn English. They find it too difficult and this somehow leads them to lose interest in English. Although some of them find reading difficult, some students are lazy to read any materials given to them. When they read less, their vocabulary list does not grow. Therefore, understanding and comprehending literature becomes a chore.

Conclusion
A positive growth in understanding literature after incorporating cooperative reading strategies can clearly be seen. Students get to understand better, improve socialisation skills, build a better bond among themselves as each and their inhibitions on questioning and clearing their doubts almost melts away. Learning highly depends on the environment and cooperative reading and learning creates a positive environment which aids in motivating the students to learn and understand what is being taught to them.

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