

A Study on Students' Activity Preferences and their Implications for Extensive Reading Programmes in Rural Sarawak

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Abstract

Understanding students' preferences for daily activities plays a crucial role in designing effective educational interventions. This study explores the favorite activities of students in rural Sarawak and examines how these preferences relate to reading habits and the implementation of an Extensive Reading Programme. Using quantitative survey data, the study identifies trends in leisure and academic choices among students. The findings reveal that while entertainment-based activities such as watching television and listening to music dominate a notable proportion of students show interest in reading English storybooks. The study highlights the importance of aligning educational strategies with students' interests to improve engagement and learning outcomes.

Keywords: Student Preferences, Extensive Reading Programme, Leisure Activities, Reading Habits, Rural Education, Sarawak

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on promoting reading habits among students, particularly in rural educational contexts where access to learning resources may be limited. Reading is widely recognized as a fundamental skill that not only enhances language proficiency but also contributes significantly to cognitive development, critical thinking, and overall academic achievement (Krashen, 2004; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Through regular reading, students are exposed to new vocabulary, ideas, and perspectives, which play a crucial role in shaping their intellectual growth and communicative competence. Despite its importance, fostering a sustained interest in reading among students remains a challenge, especially when competing with various forms of leisure and entertainment activities.

One of the key factors influencing students' reading habits is their personal interests and daily activity preferences. In the contemporary context, students are increasingly engaged in activities such as watching television, listening to music, and participating in recreational or extracurricular pursuits. These activities, while beneficial for relaxation and creativity, often reduce the time and motivation available for academic tasks, including reading (Rideout, 2015). As a result, understanding how students allocate their time and what they enjoy doing in their free time becomes essential for educators and policymakers aiming to promote reading culture effectively.

In rural areas such as Sarawak, the situation becomes even more complex due to socio-economic and environmental factors. Students in these regions may have limited exposure to English language materials and fewer opportunities to engage in structured reading activities compared to their urban counterparts. At the same time, they are exposed to a range of alternative leisure activities that may compete with academic engagement. Research has shown that students' reading behaviour is closely linked to their environment, availability of resources, and personal motivation (Pandian, 2000). Therefore, gaining insights into students' preferences is crucial for designing instructional strategies that are both relevant and engaging.

The Extensive Reading Programme has emerged as an effective approach to addressing these challenges. Unlike traditional reading instruction, which often emphasizes intensive study and assessment, extensive reading encourages students to read large amounts of material that are interesting and appropriate to their proficiency level. The primary goal is to develop a positive attitude toward reading by making it an enjoyable and self-directed activity (Day & Bamford, 1998). When students are allowed to choose reading materials based on their interests, they are more likely to engage consistently and develop long-term reading habits.

The success of such programmes largely depends on how well they align with students' existing preferences and lifestyles. If reading is perceived as an extension of academic work rather than a pleasurable activity, students may be less inclined to participate actively. Therefore, it is important to examine students' favorite activities and identify ways to integrate reading into their daily routines in a meaningful manner. For instance, incorporating themes related to students' hobbies or using multimedia resources alongside reading materials may enhance their interest and participation.

In this context, the present study seeks to analyze students' favorite activities and examine their implications for the success of the Extensive Reading Programme in rural Sarawak. By identifying patterns in students' preferences, the study aims to provide valuable insights for educators to design more effective, student-centered reading interventions. Ultimately, fostering a strong reading culture requires not only access to resources but also a deep understanding of students' interests and motivations, which this study attempts to explore.

Review of Literature

Previous studies have consistently highlighted the relationship between students' leisure activities and their level of academic engagement, particularly in the context of reading habits. Leisure preferences play a significant role in shaping how students allocate their time, which in turn influences their exposure to reading and learning opportunities. In this regard,

extensive reading has been widely recognized as an effective approach to improving language acquisition and fostering a positive attitude toward reading. According to Krashen (2004), extensive reading significantly enhances vocabulary development, reading fluency, and overall language competence, especially when learners are intrinsically motivated and engaged with materials that match their interests and proficiency levels. His Input Hypothesis further emphasizes that meaningful and enjoyable reading experiences contribute to natural language acquisition.

Similarly, Day and Bamford (1998) argue that successful reading programmes should be student-centered and designed to promote enjoyment rather than obligation. They propose key principles of extensive reading, including providing easy and interesting materials, allowing learners to choose what they read, and encouraging reading for pleasure. Such approaches help in building intrinsic motivation, which is essential for sustaining long-term reading habits. When students perceive reading as a pleasurable activity rather than an academic requirement, they are more likely to engage in it voluntarily and consistently.

Motivation has been identified as a crucial factor influencing reading behavior. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) highlight that student who develops positive attitudes toward reading tend to read more frequently and with greater engagement. Their research on reading motivation demonstrates that intrinsic factors such as curiosity, involvement, and personal interest significantly impact students' reading practices. Conversely, a lack of motivation often leads to reduced reading frequency and lower academic performance. This indicates that fostering a positive reading environment is essential for encouraging students to develop strong reading habits.

In the modern context, students are increasingly exposed to various forms of entertainment and digital media, which often compete with reading for their attention. Activities such as watching television, listening to music, and using digital devices have become dominant aspects of students' daily lives. Rideout (2015) notes that the increasing consumption of media among children and adolescents has significantly reduced the time allocated to reading activities. While these forms of media can offer educational value, excessive engagement may limit opportunities for sustained reading, thereby affecting literacy development.

The influence of socio-cultural and environmental factors is particularly evident in rural educational settings. In regions such as rural Sarawak, students may face challenges such as limited access to reading materials, inadequate library facilities, and reduced exposure to English language resources. Pandian (2000) observes that students' reading habits are strongly influenced by the availability of materials and the support provided by their learning environment. In such contexts, students are more likely to engage in alternative activities that are readily accessible and enjoyable. This highlights the importance of creating supportive reading environments that provide both access and motivation.

Recent studies have emphasized the need to integrate students' interests into educational practices to enhance learning outcomes. By aligning reading materials with students' hobbies and preferences, educators can create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience. For example, incorporating themes related to music, storytelling, or visual media into reading programmes can help bridge the gap between leisure activities and academic tasks. This

approach not only increases students' interest in reading but also supports the development of critical literacy skills.

In light of these findings, it becomes evident that understanding students' activity preferences is crucial for the successful implementation of reading programmes. The interplay between motivation, accessibility, and competing leisure activities must be carefully considered when designing interventions aimed at promoting reading habits. Therefore, this study builds on existing literature by examining students' favorite activities and exploring how these preferences can inform the development of more effective and engaging Extensive Reading Programmes in rural contexts.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design using a survey method to collect data from students in rural Sarawak. The quantitative approach was chosen as it allows for systematic collection and analysis of numerical data, enabling the identification of patterns and trends in students' activity preferences. A structured questionnaire was designed and administered to gather information on students' favorite activities, ensuring clarity, simplicity, and relevance to the objectives of the study.

The sample for this study consisted of 260 students drawn from selected rural schools in Sarawak. The sample size was considered appropriate to ensure representativeness and reliability of the findings, as it captures a diverse range of student backgrounds, interests, and experiences. The selection of participants was carried out using a stratified sampling approach to include students from different age groups, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the results within the rural context.

The questionnaire included multiple-choice items that required students to indicate their most preferred activity from a given list, including watching television, listening to songs, doing homework, engaging in hobbies or extracurricular activities, doing housework, and reading English storybooks, along with an option for other activities. This structure enabled the collection of quantifiable data that could be easily categorized and analyzed.

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, particularly frequency distribution and percentage analysis. The use of percentages allowed for a clear and concise interpretation of students' preferences, as reflected in the analysis where proportions such as 25%, 21.9%, and 28.1% highlight the relative popularity of different activities. The relatively precise percentage values indicate that the sample size was sufficiently large to capture nuanced variations in responses, thereby increasing the reliability of the findings.

The analysis was interpreted in relation to the objectives of the Extensive Reading Programme. By examining the distribution of students' preferences, the study seeks to understand how leisure activities influence reading behavior and to identify opportunities for integrating reading into students' daily routines. The methodological approach thus provides a strong empirical basis for drawing meaningful conclusions and recommendations for enhancing reading engagement among students in rural Sarawak.

Analysis

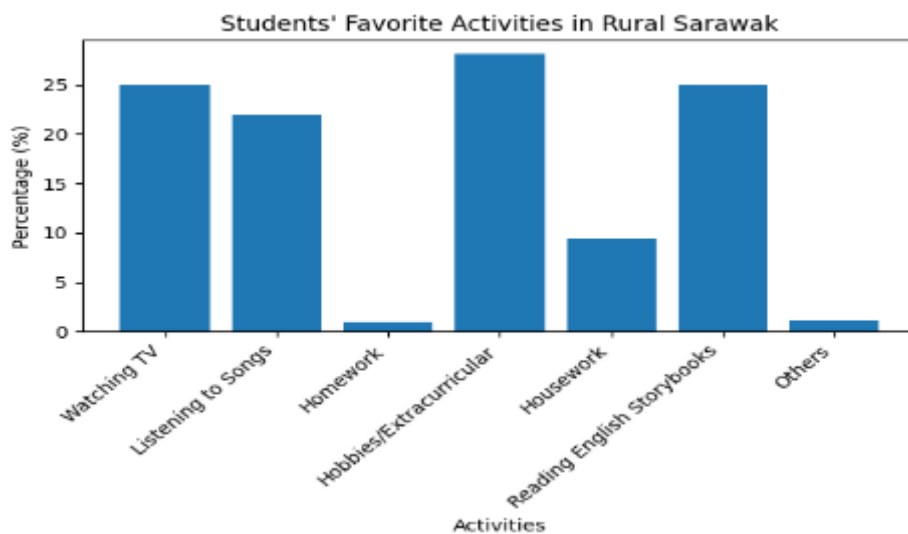


Figure 1: Students' Favorite Activities in Rural Sarawak

A quarter of the students (25%) indicated that they like watching television the most. This finding suggests that television is a popular leisure activity and holds a significant appeal for a substantial portion of the students. Nearly a quarter of the students (21.9%) expressed a preference for listening to songs. Music appears to be another favored pastime, although slightly less popular than television. Only a very small percentage (1.0%) of students mentioned that they like doing school homework the most. This indicates that, as a preferred activity, academic work is not highly favored among the surveyed students. More than a quarter of the students (28.1%) reported that engaging in their hobbies or extracurricular activities is their favorite activity. This finding suggests that students have diverse interests and value personal hobbies and interests. A noticeable but still relatively small percentage (9.4%) of students mentioned that they like doing housework the most. This could indicate a sense of responsibility or participation in household chores among some students. An equal percentage (25%) of students stated that they like reading storybooks in English the most. This is a positive finding, indicating that a significant portion of students has a genuine liking for reading, which aligns with the objectives of the Extensive Reading Programme. A small percentage (1.1%) mentioned activities not listed in the survey as their favorite. This underscores the diversity of interests among students. The statistical interpretation shows that students in rural Sarawak have a range of preferences when it comes to their favorite activities. While watching television, listening to songs, and engaging in hobbies are popular choices, reading storybooks in English also holds a significant appeal. The relatively low preference for school homework suggests that academic tasks might not be as enjoyable to students as leisure and personal activities. These findings are essential for understanding students' preferences, which can be used to tailor and enhance the effectiveness of the Extensive Reading Programme in promoting reading comprehension among these students.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the present study provide valuable insights into the activity preferences of students in rural Sarawak and their implications for reading engagement, particularly within the framework of the Extensive Reading Programme. The data clearly indicate that students' preferences are largely oriented toward leisure and entertainment-based activities, with

hobbies or extracurricular activities (28.1%) emerging as the most favored choice. This suggests that students place a high value on personal interests, creativity, and self-directed engagement. Such a preference highlights the importance of autonomy in students' daily lives, which is a key factor in fostering intrinsic motivation.

Watching television (25%) and reading English storybooks (25%) share equal preference among students, which is a particularly significant finding. While television represents a passive form of entertainment, reading storybooks reflects an active cognitive engagement. The equal distribution suggests that reading, when presented in an enjoyable and accessible manner, can compete effectively with popular leisure activities. This aligns with the principles of extensive reading proposed by Day and Bamford (1998), which emphasize reading for pleasure rather than obligation. It also supports Krashen's (2004) view that voluntary reading plays a crucial role in language acquisition.

Listening to songs (21.9%) is another highly preferred activity, indicating students' strong inclination toward auditory and entertainment-based experiences. This finding opens up possibilities for integrating music and audio-based resources into reading programmes. For instance, combining storytelling with audio elements or incorporating song-based reading materials could enhance students' engagement and make reading more appealing. Such integration may help bridge the gap between students' leisure interests and academic objectives.

The relatively low preference for activities such as housework (9.4%) and especially school homework (1.0%) provides important insights into students' attitudes toward responsibility and academic tasks. While a small proportion of students demonstrate engagement in household responsibilities, the minimal interest in homework suggests that traditional academic practices may not be sufficiently motivating. This supports the argument made by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) that students' motivation plays a crucial role in their academic engagement. When learning activities are perceived as compulsory or monotonous, students are less likely to develop a positive attitude toward them.

Another noteworthy finding is the presence of a small percentage (1.1%) of students who preferred activities not listed in the survey. Although minimal, this highlights the diversity of students' interests and suggests that standardized categories may not fully capture the range of their preferences. This further reinforces the need for flexible and inclusive educational approaches that accommodate varied student interests.

From a broader perspective, the findings demonstrate that students in rural Sarawak maintain a balance between entertainment, personal interests, and, to a lesser extent, academic-related activities. The relatively strong preference for reading English storybooks is particularly encouraging, as it indicates an existing foundation upon which reading programmes can build. This is especially important in rural contexts, where exposure to English language materials may be limited (Pandian, 2000). The presence of a genuine interest in reading suggests that with appropriate support and resources, students' reading habits can be significantly enhanced.

The discussion of these findings underscores the importance of aligning educational strategies with students' preferences. The dominance of leisure activities such as television and music suggests that reading programmes must compete with highly engaging alternatives. Therefore, it is essential to design reading interventions that are equally engaging, interactive, and enjoyable. Incorporating elements of storytelling, visual media, and student choice can transform reading into a more appealing activity.

The findings highlight the need for a shift from traditional, teacher-centered approaches to more student-centered learning models. The Extensive Reading Programme, with its emphasis on choice, enjoyment, and self-paced learning, is well-suited to address this need. By allowing students to select reading materials that align with their interests, educators can foster a sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation toward reading.

In addition, the results suggest that reading should not be positioned as a purely academic task but rather as a meaningful and enjoyable part of students' daily lives. Integrating reading with students' preferred activities such as reading stories related to their hobbies or incorporating multimedia elements can significantly enhance engagement. This approach not only improves reading comprehension but also contributes to the development of lifelong learning habits.

The findings of this study reinforce the idea that students' preferences play a critical role in shaping their learning behaviors. By understanding and leveraging these preferences, educators can design more effective and contextually relevant reading programmes. The study thus provides important implications for policy and practice, particularly in rural educational settings, where innovative and student-centered approaches are essential for promoting literacy and academic success.

Conclusion

The present study provides a comprehensive understanding of students' activity preferences in rural Sarawak and their implications for the implementation of the Extensive Reading Programme. The findings clearly demonstrate that students' choices are predominantly influenced by leisure-oriented activities such as hobbies, watching television, and listening to music. These preferences reflect the importance of enjoyment, relaxation, and personal interest in students' daily lives. At the same time, the study reveals a noteworthy and encouraging trend: an equal proportion of students expressing a preference for reading English storybooks, indicating that reading already holds a meaningful place among their favored activities.

This balance between entertainment and reading presents a valuable opportunity for educators and policymakers. Rather than viewing leisure activities as obstacles to academic engagement, they can be leveraged as entry points for promoting reading habits. The study highlights that when reading is aligned with students' interests and presented as an enjoyable and self-directed activity, it has the potential to compete effectively with other popular forms of entertainment. This finding strongly supports the principles of the Extensive Reading Programme, which emphasize reading for pleasure, learner autonomy, and sustained engagement.

The relatively low preference for academic tasks such as homework underscores a critical challenge within the current educational framework. It suggests that traditional instructional approaches may not sufficiently motivate students or connect with their interests. This calls for a shift toward more innovative, student-centered pedagogies that integrate elements of enjoyment, creativity, and relevance. By transforming reading from a compulsory academic activity into a pleasurable and meaningful experience, educators can foster intrinsic motivation and long-term reading habits among students.

The study highlights the significance of contextual factors in shaping students' preferences, particularly in rural settings where access to resources may be limited. The findings suggest that providing accessible, engaging, and culturally relevant reading materials is essential for enhancing students' reading engagement. Schools and educators must therefore play an active role in creating supportive reading environments that encourage exploration, curiosity, and independent learning.

The implications of this study extend beyond the immediate context, offering valuable insights for the design and implementation of reading programmes in similar educational settings. By understanding students' preferences and incorporating them into instructional strategies, educators can develop more effective interventions that not only improve reading comprehension but also promote a positive attitude toward learning. Additionally, integrating multimedia elements, storytelling techniques, and interest-based materials can further enhance the appeal of reading and bridge the gap between leisure and academic activities. This study underscores the critical role of student preferences in shaping educational outcomes. The success of the Extensive Reading Programme, particularly in rural contexts, depends largely on its ability to resonate with students' interests and lifestyles. By adopting flexible, engaging, and learner-centered approaches, educators can cultivate a strong reading culture that supports both academic achievement and personal development. Future research may explore the integration of digital technologies, longitudinal impacts of reading programmes, and comparative analyses between rural and urban contexts to further strengthen the field of reading education.

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