



L2 willingness to read English story books amongst young EFL learners: social economic background, linguistic competence and gender as predictors

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Abstract. Even though previous research have shown that reading improves one's language proficiency and a lot of research have been done to examine how young learners learn a second or foreign language, our knowledge on their willingness to read second (L2) or English as a foreign language (EFL) materials remain inadequate and limited. The current study aims to explore young EFL learners' willingness to read English materials and if it can be predicted based on their social-economic background, English language proficiency and gender. Ninety-five young EFL learners from two elementary schools in a monolingual community participated in a reading program called *Ace Your English: Read for Life*. All participants completed a survey questionnaire on their willingness to read English materials/books before the start of the reading program. The study revealed that young EFL learners' willingness to read English books/materials is not necessarily influenced by their Social Economic Status (SES). However, linguistic competence and gender are strong predictors of their willingness to read. Based on the findings of this study, almost all young EFL learners are willing to read English books either voluntarily or through persuasion from the teachers or parents.

Keywords: Willingness to read, L2 proficiency, young EFL learners, socio-economic background, reading program

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INTRODUCTION

English language is best learnt in an environment where the learners are surrounded by people who actively use the language. Yet, this situation is almost impossible in many households not only in the east coast states of Malaysia where English is a foreign language to many but also in Mexico (Sayer & Ban, 2014), Jordan (Al-Damiree & Batanieh, 2016) and most Asian countries like Korea and Taiwan (Liu & Chen, 2014; Su, 2014) as most families are monolingual and the mother tongue is the only language spoken at home and in the community (Butler & Le, 2018). Hence, the second best option for young EFL learners to learn English as a foreign language is in state funded schools or at private institutions (Butler & Le, 2018; Liu & Chen, 2014; Su, 2014) and the third option is through reading extensively (Birketveit, Rimmereide, Bader & Fisher, 2018; Kartal, Ozkilic & Ozteke, 2012). While English lessons learnt in schools and private institutions come to an end once the English session is over, reading English books could continue throughout the day and well into the night for those who are willing to read.

Reading is a fundamental skill of literacy (Al-Damiree & Batanieh, 2016) which is not just for the purpose of learning but for life (Deutsch, 2005). The ability to figure out the print symbols and attach meanings to them is no mean feat for young learners, but children as young as three years old have started reading in their mother tongue, a language they hear every day and later on read the symbols with a lot of success. For young nonnative English learners (young EFL learners, hereafter), they are once again expected to read the symbols of yet another

language but one that is very foreign to their ears when they begin elementary school. While miraculously many young EFL learners have managed to read English fluently, there are so many who are struggling to read (Fan, Antle, Hoskyn & Neustaedter, 2018; Nation, 2005) which leads to loss of interest and consequently unwillingness to read in English which ultimately contributes to their low proficiency in the English language. Although willingness to read (WTR, hereafter) has been researched amongst EFL adults (Khajavy & Ghonsooly, 2017), research on WTR in a foreign language amongst young EFL learners is lacking. Hence, a closer look at the WTR amongst young EFL learners can assist teachers and researchers in planning the next step to inculcate second or foreign language reading interest and promote extensive reading to schools of similar circumstances.

Many researchers concur that a foreign language as a second or third language is best learnt at a young age (Krashen, et al., 1982; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Wang & Chang, 2011) where acquisition is certain before the age of six and still highly possible before the end of elementary school (Pinker, 1994). An early and sustained exposure to a second or third language has been found to lead to conversational proficiency (McGroarty, 1997 & Brown, 2007) which is valuable to the young EFL learners' future academic and career endeavors. Hence, early childhood language program is necessary to prepare young EFL learners with the basic English language abilities (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008) that will contribute to their future educational achievements.

Besides language programs conducted in schools, parents contribute substantial influence on their children's successful linguistic development (Young, 1994). In first language development, Hartas (2011) found that middle to top income families seem to help their young children to read and recognize alphabets more compared those in the bottom income group. Children with mothers educated at a degree level tended to get the most help at reading and homework. On the other hand, children in the bottom income group, especially those with mothers without any educational qualifications received the least help with their academic needs at home.

Similar results were found with regards to learning English as a second or foreign language. Parental education background and income levels are among the influential factors that predict their children's English language development (Butler & Le, 2018; Oncu & Unluer, 2010). Parents from high income group read more frequently (De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000) and pose as role models to their children and they tend to accommodate their children's English language needs by providing better opportunities (Barone, 2006) to develop their English language competency (Butler, 2014) while those in middle and low income groups often failed to provide the necessary supports needed by their children to excel in the language. In sum, research findings indicate that children from high and middle income groups performed significantly better than those from the lower income group (Fernández-Sanjurjo, Blanco & Fernández-Costales, 2018).

Reading in a foreign language is difficult for young EFL learners (Liu & Brantmeire, 2019). Liu & Brantmeire (2019), Mac Kay (2006) and Shin & Crandall (2014) define young learners as learners in the age range of five to twelve years old. They are children who are expected by society to learn the fundamentals in knowledge acquisition which include learning to read at home and also in school. As defined by Grabe (2014) and Koda (2007), reading is a complex yet efficient process of decoding symbols and recognizing words, extracting and interpreting meanings, comparing meanings to prior knowledge to build comprehension and all the while strategizing the cognitive processes to meet the goal and purpose of reading.

As difficult as it is, extended exposure to FL reading will gradually automate the complex reading process and reading becomes less laborious. In addition, research in EFL reading indicates that there is a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading ability of EFL learners (Qian, 2002) which suggests that L2 reading ability contributes to L2 proficiency. In sum, the virtuous L2 reading cycle will be formed as young EFL learners read consistently, their L2 reading proficiency develops, their WTR increases (Grabe, 2014), and their L2 proficiency improves.

Willingness to read (WTR) is defined as the readiness for a person to initiate the act of reading a text given the opportunity and time (Khajavy & Ghonsooly, 2017). Khajavy and Ghonsooly have initiated a study on WTR by modelling on the correlates of willingness to communicate as proposed by MacIntyre (1998). This study was the first study to look into WTR in a second or foreign language (L2 WTR, hereafter). Even though the participants of the study by Khajavy & Ghonsooly were first year undergraduate EFL students and not young EFL learners like the current study, it is the most relevant study to refer to so far on L2 WTR.

Khajavy & Ghonsooly proceeded to establish the underlying factors of L2 WTR and reported that language learning experience which refers to the teachers, classmates, tasks and other L2 classroom context emerged as the strongest influence. In this regards, teachers play an important role in EFL learners by selecting interesting topics and books and planning stimulating activities prior, during and after reading activities. The next predictor was the ideal L2 self. Khajavy and Ghonsooly found that this variable correlates positively to L2 WTR which means if the EFL learners feel they are competent in reading and can understand the text, they are willing to read more. The next predictor from the study on L2 WTR by Khajavy & Ghonsooly was communicative confidence where if the EFL learners are not anxious but confident to read, they are willing to read more L2 materials.

Even though the study on L2 WTR was on EFL adults, the underlying correlates of L2 WTR can be extended to L2 WTR of young EFL learners with some modifications. Since the linguistic and educational development of young EFL learners are most influenced by family background and supports (Butler & Le, 2018; Oncu & Unluer, 2010), it is reasonable to include family SES into the L2 WTR equation for young EFL learners.

Gender differences in willingness to read in English as a second/foreign language is another under-explored area of study. In terms of reading literacy in L1, a report by Norwegian Educational board in 2013 revealed that there was no difference in reading performance between girls and boys of years 5 and 8 (UDIR, 2013, cited in Birketveit et al, 2018). Yet, a number of studies (Kolic-Vehovec & Bajanski, 2006; Below et. al., 2010; Rosen, 2001) including a recent one by Gabrielsen (2017; cited in Birketveit et al, 2018) have found that girls are better readers than boys and often times because girls spend more time reading literary texts in their spare time.

Does girls' better performance at L1 reading transfer to their L2 reading ability? An interesting point to note is that more boys now love computer games which come with English subtitles. Hence, boys may be good readers of English texts as they spend a lot of time playing computer games with English subtitles. However, these studies were on reading interests and ability of different gender amongst EFL learners. A study is yet to be conducted on the willingness to read in L2 among young EFL learners. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of family's social-economic background, linguistic competence and gender on young EFL learners' willingness to read English story books.

METHODS

The study took place in the outskirts of Kuala Terengganu, an east coast state of Peninsula Malaysia, in two elementary schools which housed young EFL learners from mixed socio-educational background, with about 72% of both parents having no university degree. There were 49 participants from Elementary School A and 55 from Elementary School B aged 11 years old and all were in Grade 5. The administrators of both schools chose students from the two best classes of Grade 5 to participate in the English Reading Program. These young Grade 5 participants were purposely chosen as they would be sitting for the Primary School Achievement Test, a public examination for Grade 6 pupils in the following year, in 2019. This public examination measures the proficiency and competency of the children in their Reading, Writing and Arithmetic at the end of their elementary education. All 104 participants were from single ethnic group, which was Malay. There was almost equal number of male and female participants.

It is important to note that to enter any public schools in Malaysia for the purpose of conducting research or carrying out knowledge transfer programs, a researcher must abide by a strict procedure stipulated by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia as the legal representative of the students during school hours. Before a written permission was granted, the researcher had to submit a complete proposal of the intended program to the State Education Department. Permission to conduct the program and later administer a few questionnaires was granted for this English Reading Program approximately two weeks after the researcher's formal application.

Instruments

The first instrument was a demographic questionnaire. It requires information such as the participants' age, race, gender, English and Malay languages marks and grades in the most recent school based examination, and occupations of both parents.

The second instrument was L2 WTR for young EFL learners. Some items in the instrument were adapted from various studies (Kartal, Ozkilic & Ozteke, 2012; Khajavy & Ghonsooly, 2017; Noortyani, 2018) while the rest were developed by the researchers of this study. There were 25 items in this instrument with 11 items on willingness to read English materials such as books/texts (L2 WTR), 11 items on motivation to read English materials such as books/texts and 3 items on willingness to read in general. Each item is accompanied by five likert scale options for the young participants to choose from. The options vary according to the statement given. Among the items of L2 WTR section are as follows:

(1) How willing are you to read books in English?

The five likert scale options were *Very willing without being asked to, Willing without being asked to, Willing if someone asked me to, Unwilling, Strongly unwilling.*

(2) Would you be excited when asked to read English books at school or at home?

The five likert scale options were *Very excited, excited, excited, less excited, not excited, totally not excited.*

(3) Which one would you choose to do, to read English books or to do other activities such as watching TV or playing with friends?

The five likert scale options were *Would choose other activities, Would choose other activities first before choosing reading activity, Would choose both activities (reading & playing/watching TV), Would choose reading activity first before the others, Would choose reading activity only.*

(5) How often do you find time to read English books at home or at school?

The five likert scale options were *Very often, often, sometimes, rarely, not at all*

(7) How do you feel if you were given the opportunity to sit at the school library for one hour to read English books?

The five likert scale options were *Very happy, rather happy somewhat happy, not happy, very unhappy.*

The reliability index for L2 WTR was at Cronbach's Alpha .814 and the reliability index for all 25 items of this instrument was at Cronbach's Alpha .896.

Procedure

This instrument was prepared in the participants' first language, which was in Malay language and had been piloted on 100 primary school students prior to administering it to the current participants. Since the participants were young learners, the researcher read aloud each item and the accompanying options to the participants. They were given time to think which option to choose and were reminded that it was perfectly alright to give an answer which was different from those of their friends' since the survey was about each individual person. Hence, choices made by other friends have no relevance to his/her own response. The participants answered the questionnaire in about 30 minutes at the beginning of an English Reading Program entitled *Ace Your English: Read for Life*, which was a University Social Responsibility program conducted in two neighboring elementary schools for one year, from July 2018- August 2019.

RESULTS

Preliminary Findings

Of the 104 participants of the reading program, only 95 completed the survey questionnaire on demographic background which is as shown below.

Table 1. Participants' descriptive statistics

| | Variable | f | % |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|----|------|
| Age | 11 years old | 95 | 100 |
| Race | Malay | 94 | 98.9 |
| | Chinese | 1 | 1.1 |
| Gender | Male | 47 | 49.5 |
| | Female | 48 | 50.5 |
| School | Elementary School A | 35 | 36.8 |
| | Elementary School B | 60 | 63.2 |
| Socio-Economic Background | B40 | 68 | 71.6 |
| | M40 | 21 | 22.1 |
| | T20 | 5 | 5.3 |
| | Unknown | 1 | 1.1 |

Participants of the reading program, *Ace Your English: Read for Life*, were 11 year-old pupils in two elementary schools with 99% from the Malay ethnic group and were about equal in number of male and female pupils.

Three different household income groups in Malaysia are known as T20, M40 and B40 which refer to the high, middle and low income categories (Mahdzan, Zainudin, Sukor, Zainir & Wan Ahmad, 2019). The majority of the participants (71.6%) came from the low income group or the bottom 40% (B40) with fathers working as manual labours, construction workers, factory workers, mechanics, fishermen, lorry drivers, farm hands, janitors, gardeners, and government or military retirees. Twenty one percent of the participants were in the middle income group or middle 40% (M40) and had one or both parents working as teachers in elementary and secondary schools in the neighbourhood, lecturers at the two nearby universities, IT officers, or small business owners. While only 5% of the participants came from the top 20% (T20) high income group with one of the parents being a professor at a university and others are working as contractors, engineers at a prominent oil and gas company, doctors and a director of a big government agency.

Table 2. Participants' English reading comprehension scores in school-based examination

| Proficiency level | Marks/Grades | % |
|------------------------|---------------------------|------|
| HP High Proficiency | 70-100 marks/grades A & B | 25.6 |
| AP Average Proficiency | 40- 65 marks/grades C & D | 38.5 |
| LP Low Proficiency | 1-39 marks/grade E | 35.9 |

Table 2 shows the English language proficiency of the participants. With 71% of the participants coming from families of low socio-economic and educational background, it is interesting to note that only 35.9 % of the participants were in the low English proficiency group for reading comprehension who scored between 1 to 39 marks in the school-based examination. Even more impressive is that with only 5% of the participants coming from the top income families, 25.6% of the total participants are high proficiency young EFL learners. A close inspection of the data revealed that more than half of the high proficiency young learners in reading comprehension were from the B40 income group.

To answer the question on their willingness to read English books, the data on the first part of the L2 WTR instrument was analysed. Even though each item on the instrument was accompanied by 5 options on the Likert scale, for the purpose of making sense of the responses and understanding the data, the five options were collapsed into only three choices, as follows:

Table 3. Raw data and reported data

| Item | Options on instrument/ Raw data | Cross tabulation with income group | | | Reported Data |
|--|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----|-----|---------------------------|
| | | T20 | M40 | B40 | |
| How willing are you to read books in English? | Very unwilling to read | 0 | 0 | 0 | Unwilling to read |
| | Unwilling to read | 0 | 1 | 1 | |
| | Willing if being asked to | 3 | 6 | 32 | Willing if being asked to |
| | Willing to read | 1 | 9 | 29 | |
| | Very willing to read | 1 | 3 | 5 | Willing to read |

Table 3 shows the raw data from SPSS output where there are data for five options for each item in the survey questionnaire. However, to ease comprehension of the data, only three responses are reported, which are the negative, positive and neutral options. In the example above, the first two options are collapsed into one negative response, the third option is maintained to indicate a neutral stance, and the fourth and fifth options are collapsed into one positive response. In addition, the number of responses is converted into percentages to standardize all data in the report to facilitate comparison, if the need arises.

L2 Willingness to read, SES and English Language Proficiency

Eleven items were used to assess the young EFL learners' willingness to read English books. However, only 8 items were analyzed while three items were omitted from the analysis as they contain double barrel items.

The first two items (1 & 2) in Table 4 assess the young EFL learners' willingness to read and their feeling about reading English books while items 3, 8 and 9 assess the young learners' preference to choose between two options. Looking at the results of the first two items on the L2 WTR, it is a relief to discover that a big percentage of young EFL learners from all income groups are willing and somewhat excited to read English books, whether voluntarily or when they are asked to read with a combined percentage of 5.5% for T20, 19.8% for M40 and 72.6% for B40 on willingness to read English books. The figure is also encouraging for item 2 on excitement to read English books where 5.5%, 16.6% and 67.1% for T2, M40 and B40 indicated that they would be excited to read English books.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics on items 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9

| Item | Options | T20 % | M40 % | B40 % | HP % | AP % | LP % |
|---|--|----------|----------|----------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. How willing are you to read books in English? | Unwilling to read | 0 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 0 | 0 | 2.6 |
| | Willing if being asked to | 3.3 | 6.6 | 35.2 | 5.1 | 20.5 | 20.5 |
| | Willing to read | 2.2 | 13.2 | 37.4 | 20.5 | 17.9 | 12.8 |
| 2. Would you be excited when asked to read English books at school or at home? | Not excited | 0 | 3.3 | 6.6 | 0 | 0 | 5.1 |
| | Less excited | 3.3 | 6.6 | 29.7 | 7.7 | 12.8 | 10.3 |
| | Excited | 2.2 | 11.0 | 37.4 | 17.9 | 25.6 | 20.5 |
| 3. Which one would you choose to do, to read English books or to do other activities such as watching TV or playing with friends? | Would choose other activities (Watching TV/ Playing games) | 1.1 | 6.6 | 20.9 | 7.7 | 10.3 | 5.1 |
| | Would choose both activities (reading English books & playing games/watching TV) | 3.3 | 12.1 | 36.3 | 7.7 | 15.4 | 28.2 |
| | Would choose reading English books | 1.1 | 6.6 | 20.9 | 10.3 | 12.8 | 2.6 |
| 4. If you were given the choice to choose a birthday present, would English story book be your first choice? | No | 2.2 | 8.8 | 24.2 | 5.1 | 7.7 | 2.6 |
| | Perhaps | 3.3 | 8.8 | 29.7 | 10.3 | 23.1 | 20.5 |
| | Yes | 0 | 3.3 | 19.8 | 20.5 | 7.7 | 12.8 |
| 5. If there were an English story book on a table, would you be willing to see the content of the book? | Unwilling | 0 | 2.2 | 6.6 | 0 | 5.1 | 5.1 |
| | Not very willing | 4.4 | 9.9 | 22.0 | 7.7 | 10.3 | 7.7 |
| | Willing | 1.1 | 8.8 | 45.1 | 17.9 | 23.1 | 23.1 |

When the responses to the items were cross tabulated with young EFL learners in the three English proficiency levels, it reveals that HP young learners (20.5%) are more willing to read compared to AP (17.9%) and LP young learners (12.8%). Yet, there is still hope since a big percentage of AP (20.5%) and LP (20.55) young EFL learners are willing to read if they are asked to read by their teachers and parents.

It is also interesting to note that all HP, AP and LP young EFL learners would be excited if they were asked to read English books at school or at home. This is certainly a good news to all teachers of EFL/ESL young learners. This gives teachers hope that there are a lot of things that can be done to encourage young EFL learners to read English books since they do not seem to totally reject the idea of reading English books and hence can be cajoled to do so.

An online survey conducted after the English Reading program on the teachers and parents of the young EFL learners revealed that the practice of reading English books has increased from 53.8% before the program to 90.4% after the program. And interestingly, 82% of the reading practice was self-initiated and only 18% was done due to instruction by the teachers and parents.

Items 3, 8 and 9 assess the young learners' preference when put in a situation to choose between things to do with reading English books and other options.

For these items, young EFL learners' preference to choose reading, getting and looking at English books over other options cannot be predicted by their family socio-educational background. This is because, for all three items, it seems that young EFL learners from all income groups tend to be divided in their choices. In all SES groups, the option to choose both reading and playing is the highest among the three options available. This may be because they are children of 11 years old and playing is more attractive regardless of family socio-educational background and reading or getting English books is not considered fun or play.

For the three items above, when given two alternatives between reading English books and other choices, a big percentage of HP young learners chose reading (10.3%), getting (20.5%) or looking (17.9%) at English books compared to the other option. Their high proficiency level may perhaps be the reason for their willingness to read English books since they may not be struggling to understand the words. This could also suggest that their high proficiency level may be the result of their willingness to read English books.

In comparison, AP and LP young learners are somewhat indecisive since other options such as watching TV and playing games are equally enticing. With only 2.5% of the LP young learners chose reading activity only for item 3 is a clear indication that without the willingness to read, EFL/ESL young learners will remain weak in the language. The result of item 9 suggests that AP and LP young learners are willing to look at an English book even though there isn't any distraction with 23.1% for both groups choosing willingness to look at the content of an English book on a table.

Items 5 and 10 in Table 5 assess the amount of time devoted to reading English books by the young EFL learners while item 7 assesses the young learners' response on the opportunity to sit and read English books for one hour which in fact tries to complement the response for item 10.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics on items 5, 10 and 7

| Item | Options | T20 % | M40 % | B40 % | HP % | AP % | LP % |
|--|--------------------|----------|----------|----------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. How many days do you read English books in a week? | 1 day or less | 1.1 | 2.2 | 18.7 | 0 | 7.7 | 17.9 |
| | 2-3 days | 1.1 | 5.5 | 22.0 | 0 | 7.7 | 12.8 |
| | 4-7 days | 3.3 | 13.2 | 39.6 | 25.6 | 23.1 | 7.7 |
| 2. How long could you read English books at one time? | 8 minutes and less | 1.1 | 6.6 | 31.9 | 5.1 | 17.9 | 23.1 |
| | 10 - 15 minutes | 3.3 | 1.1 | 18.9 | 2.6 | 12.8 | 5.1 |
| | 20 minutes or more | 1.1 | 13.2 | 23.1 | 17.9 | 7.7 | 7.7 |
| 3. How do you feel if you were given the opportunity to sit in the school library an hour a day to read English story books? | Unhappy | 0 | 1.1 | 7.7 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 5.1 |
| | Not so happy | 1.1 | 5.5 | 25.3 | 5.1 | 17.9 | 17.9 |
| | Happy | 4.4 | 14.3 | 40.7 | 17.9 | 17.9 | 12.8 |

Family socio-economic background again can't predict the amount of time spent on reading English books by young EFL learners. Yet, it is a relief to find out that a substantial percentage of children from the B40 group reads English books between 4-7 days a week (39.6%) and spends 20 minutes or more in a single sitting (23.1%). The result from the two survey items also reveals that HP and AP learners are consistent readers of English books, with 25.6% (HP) and 23.1% (AP) responded that they spend 4-7 days a week to read English books. The data shows that 17.9% of the HP young readers spend 20 minutes or more to read at a single sitting while only 7.7% for both AP and LP young learners spent the same amount of time to read English books in a single sitting. This again suggests that consistency in reading English books may be the answer to achieving good grades in the English examination.

Based on the response on item 7, the result reveals that a big percentage of young learners from all income groups are happy to be sitting at the library for one hour to read English books. And it is also worth noting that 40.7% of the B40 children responded that they would be happy even though only half of them (23.1%) could read more than 30 minutes in one sitting as indicated in item 10.

The result for HP young learners on reading at the library for one hour a day seems to be consistent to the result from this group in item 10. This means, they are happy to get one hour of reading since they could read more than 30 minutes in one sitting. The results for AP and LP young learners for item 7 and item 10 are not compatible. If the response in item 10 reveals that only 7.7% of AP and LP young learners could read for more than 30 minutes, a high percentage of the response 'happy' to sit and read in the library may raise other questions.

L2. Willingness to read and Gender

Table 6 displays the results of items 1 and 2 on the willingness and excitement to read based on gender while items 3, 8 and 9 were on hypothetical choices made by girls and boys on either reading or doing something else.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics on items 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8

| Item | Options | Boys (%) | Girls (%) |
|--|--|----------|-----------|
| 1. How willing are you to read books in English? | Unwilling to read | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| | Willing if being asked to | 28.3 | 16.3 |
| | Willing to read | 19.6 | 33.6 |
| 2. Would you be excited when asked to read English books at school or at home? | Not excited | 7.6 | 2.2 |
| | Less excited | 22.8 | 16.3 |
| | Excited | 18.5 | 32.7 |
| 3. Which one would you choose to do, to read English books or to do other activities such as watching TV or playing with friends? | Would choose other activities (Watching TV/ Playing games) | 18.5 | 9.7 |
| | Would choose both activities (reading English books & playing games/watching TV) | 29.3 | 22.8 |
| | Would choose reading English books | 1.1 | 18.5 |
| 4. If you were given the choice to choose a birthday present, would English story book be your first choice? | No | 21.7 | 13.1 |
| | Perhaps | 22.8 | 18.5 |
| | Yes | 4.3 | 19.6 |
| 5. If there were an English story book on a table, would you be willing to see the content of the book? | Unwilling | 5.5 | 3.3 |
| | Not very willing | 22.8 | 13 |
| | Willing | 20.6 | 34.8 |

The analyses reveal that girls are more willing to read English books (33.6%) and more excited when asked to read (32.7%) compared to boys, a result which is consistent to the findings by Birketveit et al, (2018) and Gabrielsen (2017). What is interesting to note is that the percentage of unwillingness to read among these young EFL learners is very small; which is only 1.1% in both boys and girls.

Items 3, 8, and 9 were on hypothetical choices made by girls and boys on either reading or doing something else. Both boys and girls at a young age of 11 years old tend to go for fun activities instead of reading English books which is considered as a school chore. For both items that assess preference in the choice of activities and birthday presents, more girls choose

reading (18.5%) and getting English books as birthday presents (19.6%) compared to boys who are more reluctant to choose reading English books (1.1%) or choose English books as a birthday present (4.3%). However, when there is no other distractions or other choices to distract them, more boys are willing to browse through an English book to see the content (20.6%) while the percentage of girls' willingness to look through the content of an English book remains consistent at 34.8%.

Table 7 displays the statistics on Items 5 and 10 assess the young EFL learners' willingness to spend their time on reading English books and item 7 assesses their response on the opportunity to sit and read English books for one hour which in fact gives further insights on the response for item 10.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics on items 5, 10 and 7

| Item | Options | Boys (%) | Girls (%) |
|---|--------------------|----------|-----------|
| 5. How many days do you read English books in a week? | 1 day or less | 12.0 | 9.8 |
| | 2-3 days | 14.1 | 7.6 |
| | 4-7 days | 22.8 | 33.7 |
| 10. How long could you read English books at one time? | 8 minutes and less | 21.7 | 17.4 |
| | 10 – 15 minutes | 8.7 | 14.1 |
| | 20 minutes or more | 18.4 | 19.5 |
| 7. How do you feel if you were given the opportunity to sit in the school library an hour a day to read English story books? | Unhappy | 6.5 | 2.2 |
| | Not so happy | 20.7 | 10.9 |
| | Happy | 21.8 | 38.0 |

The results indicate that a high percentage of girls spend more time at reading English books compared to boys and more boys spend the least amount of time on reading English books compared to girls.

Item 7 which assesses the young EFL learners' response on the opportunity to sit and read English books for one hour reveals that young EFL learners are consistently happy to be given time alone to read English books at the library, yet perhaps one hour of reading English books is too long for pupils with attention span for reading English book is about 15 – 20 minutes. Hence, shorter reading period is best to ensure more young EFL learners devote their attention to reading English books happily.

The responses of boys and girls on their willingness to spend their time reading English books led the researchers to investigate the impact on their English language performance in the school based examination.

Table 8. English Proficiency in school-based examination

| Proficiency Level | Boys (%) | Girls (%) |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|
| LP | 23.1 | 12.8 |
| AP | 17.9 | 20.5 |
| HP | 10.3 | 15.4 |

The analysis in Table 8 above indicates that there are 35.9% of high and average English language proficiency learners among the girls compared to only 28.2% among boys. In addition, the number of low English proficient young EFL learners doubles in boys compared to girls. Hence, if willingness to read can be assumed to improve one's language proficiency, be it L1 or L2, the finding of this study has managed to provide a strong evidence for it. The result reveals that for this group of young EFL learners, willingness to read English books and the more time spent on it tend to contribute to one's English performance in the school-based examination.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

Willingness to read English books among young EFL learners has so far received little attention since the focus is more on L2 reading competence and reading motivation of this target group. However, it is argued that reading competence will be achieved when young EFL learners are willing to read and spend more time reading in the L2. Evidently, the argument that willingness to read L2 materials will emerge once EFL learners have reached reading competence level is also valid since reading competency is part of learners' motivation and willingness to read.

The result obtained showed that regardless of family SES, young EFL learners are willing to read English books voluntarily or when asked to read by teachers or parents. In addition, low and average proficiency young EFL learners require more push by teachers and parents to read English books. Since a lot of research findings have shown that the more one reads the better his or her L2 proficiency is (Alshawaikh, 2004; Mangubhai, 2001; Rodrigo, Krashen & Gibbons, 2004), the current data suggest that at least 41% of the low and average proficiency young EFL learners in this study may have not been given enough encouragement and support by the elders to read English materials since both AP and LP learners answered they were willing to read if asked to do so. The fact that they are still at average and low proficiency levels implies that they may not have been asked to read more English books which could have made a difference in their English language competency. A study which could give some insights to the reading habit and attitude of people from similar SES background as the current study is by Samsuddin, Mohamad Shaffril, Bolong & Mohamed (2019). The study found that more than 50% of the adult respondents read less than one hour a day in their first language (L1). In addition, the study further reported that there was a significant difference in the reading attitude based on household incomes and educational levels. The findings suggest that reading in L1 is not a priority in the household of the low SES group, what more reading in L2 or English as a foreign language like the young EFL learners in the current study.

An interesting finding emerges from the data which required young EFL learners to choose between two options, either reading English books or doing other activities such as watching TV or playing games; getting English books as birthday present or getting other types of present; and choosing to look through the content of an English story books or doing nothing.

As children of 11 years old, regardless of family SES and English competency, they are divided between option playing games and watching TV and option reading English books. Similarly, the option getting English books as birthday present was not as appealing as what the researchers had initially assumed of children from high and middle income groups. HP young EFL learners may have indicated some fondness of getting English books as birthday present compared to the AP and LP groups, which again indicates the contribution of reading to language proficiency.

When the young EFL learners were asked to choose between looking at the content of an English book to doing nothing, more than half of the B40 children were willing to do it compared to the children in M40 and T20 children. More than half of the children from all income groups read English books between 4-7 days with an attention span of reading at around 15-20 minutes. While the data shows that HP and AP young EFL learners spend 4-7 days on reading English books, LP spent less than 3 days a week with less than 10 minutes per reading session.

The data on willingness to read English books and gender reveal that girls are more willing and more excited to read compared to boys. Surprisingly, only one percent from each of the groups of 95 participants stated unwillingness to read. Hence, it can be safely assumed that willingness to read is higher amongst girls but if teachers and parents take greater initiative to encourage the young EFL learners to read, almost 98% of them would be willing to sit down and read. It is also interesting to note that only 1% of the boys compared to 18% of girls chose reading English books to playing games or watching TV. This data is consistent to current reports on girls as better readers than boys since girls naturally go for quiet and feminine

activities (Aditomo & Hasugian, 2018) compared to boys who require more stimulating activities such as playing games and watching TV.

Interestingly, even though it could have been anticipated, boys are not interested in English books as birthday present yet half of them are willing to scan through an English book if they find one lying around. While more girls like the idea of English books as birthday present and more than half will look at the content of an English book when they see one.

In general, girls spend more time reading English books compared to boys and have higher reading attention span of about 15 – 20 minutes. More than half of the boys have reading attention span of 15 minutes or less. The willingness to read English books which is higher in girls compared to boys is consistent to the findings by previous research that indicate girls as better readers in L1 and L2. Better readers in L2 contribute to better L2 proficiency as shown in this study where more than half of the girls are HP and AP learners while more than half of boys are AP and LP learners.

All young EFL learners for both gender are willing to read English story books, either voluntarily or encouraged by their teachers and parents. With this finding, schools should organise English reading program which requires young EFL learners to read more than 4 days a week and at least 15 minutes per reading session. Since many studies found that parental involvement has a big influence on students' English language achievement (Buchmann, Condron & Roscigno, 2010; Hosseinpour, Sherkatolabasi & Yarahmadi, 2015), parents of these young EFL learners should play their role in ensuring their children to continue to read at home, especially on weekends. If this can be consistently carried out by schools and supported by parents at home, it is very possible to see more young EFL learners attain high English proficiency level before the end of their elementary education (Pinker, 2004).

Based on the findings on the willingness to read amongst boys and girls, a reading program to be designed by the school should include fun and stimulating activities for most boys and quiet and feminine activities for most girls. A carefully crafted yet fun English reading program held consistently throughout elementary school may be one of many initiatives to be taken by all elementary schools to improve young EFL learners' English proficiency.

For future research, willingness to read in English among young EFL learners should include a variety of other materials such as English comics in printed and online versions, English instructions on computer games (Toomey, 2017) and English sub titles (Yildiz, 2017) for children's favourite TV shows, movies, cartoons and dramas. All these materials should be able to stimulate not only young male EFL learners' willingness and interest to read but also the willingness to read amongst young female EFL learners. In addition, animated movies such as *Frozen*, *Finding Nemo* and *Toy Story* with not only English sub titles but also English narrations will definitely enchant the young girls not only to read but also to listen with maximum comprehension. These suggestions and prediction of their increased willingness to read are made based on the findings that more than half of the young EFL learners in this study would choose both reading English books and other activities such as playing games and watching TV if given both options. Hence, educators and parents ought to make full use of the readily available resources and the current digital technology to support and encourage the reading interest of their young EFL learners.

In conclusion, this study has managed to obtain a glimpse of young EFL learners' willingness to read English materials which shows that they are willing to read either voluntarily or through persuasion.

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