Malaysia’s reading habit

Update (30 Oct. 2013). Added two photos, updated some information, and slightly reformatted the article.

It is well known, even among Malaysians, that Malaysians hardly ever read. So, imagine my surprise when the Information, Communication and Culture Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Rais Yatim, recently said that “Reading has become an enveloping habit for Malaysians with most reading an average of eight to twelve books per year.”

In 1982, the National Literacy Survey carried out by the National Library reported that Malaysians only read an average of one to two pages a year. Fortunately, the reading habit among Malaysians improved to two books per year when the National Literacy Survey was repeated in 1996. Nonetheless, the last National Literacy Survey carried out in 2005 reported that Malaysians still read an average of two books a year. In short, there had been no improvement.

The last survey also reported that Malaysians read increasingly less as they grew
older. By the age of 50, for example, only 20% of Malaysians would still continue to read books, a drop from 40% (a figure which is already pathetic) from those in the mid-twenties to thirties age group.

Reading rates in 2005 among Malaysians have not improved since 1996 (photo from thestar.com.my)

What about the reading rates from other countries? Surprisingly, finding that kind of information from the Internet makes quite a hard work. What I managed to procure was the following:

- Mexico: 0.5 books per year
- Chile: 1 book per year
- Thailand: 2 books per year
- Philippines: 3 books per year (interestingly, the Bible accounted two-thirds of the type of materials read)
- USA: 5 books per year (1 in 4 Americans never read a book, but for those who do read, the average number of books they read per year is 7, an average of 5 for males and 9 for females)
- Japan: 10 books per year
- France: 10 books per year
- Canada: 17 books per year

The worst record I got was that in the U.A.E. countries, where their citizens only spent an average of six minutes a year on reading books! The normal reading rate is 200 to 250 words per minute, and let’s further take the average number of
words in a book as 100,000, with 250 words per page. This would make an average U.A.E. person covering only 1500 words (about six pages) per year or nearly 0.02 books a year!

Now, if Datuk Seri Rais Yatim is correct that we, Malaysians, read an average of eight to twelve books a year, this would make us one of the most well read people in the world! Could this wonderful news be true?

As they say: *if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.*

So how did our Minister of Information, Communication and Culture get that figure of eight to twelve books per year? Was there a recent (but done in secret) National Literacy Survey carried out? Unfortunately, our minister did not quote the reference or explained how that figure was derived.

Anyway, it doesn’t matter. This “latest” figure of eight to twelve books per year clearly contradicts what we know of ourselves and those we know. Ask ourselves, ask our colleagues, ask our friends. Do we like to read?

Evidence of Australians’ reading habit. Compare theirs with ours below (photo from cimeecomel.blogspot.com)
Why read when you can, err, stare into space? Typical non-reading scene in a Malaysian commuter train (photo from cimeecomel.blogspot.com)

Perhaps we could believe in a marginal improvement in the reading rate among Malaysians, but an improvement by as much as four to six times? If this improvement is true, it would be blindingly evident around us. You would see people reading on your left, right, and centre. Look around you... see any Malaysians reading? Perhaps reading while they wait for the bus, plane, or train? If you find one, he or she probably has an exam coming up. As a university lecturer, I can confidently tell you that there is hardly a university student whom I have met who willingly reads books (in any language).

Prof. Ambigapathy Pandian from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has perhaps studied the most on the reading habits of Malaysians. In an interesting paper by him in 2000, he surveyed that 80.1% of university students are “reluctant” readers in English-language materials. In other words, 80.1% university students read because they have to. Interestingly, Malay and Indian students have a higher tendency to seek English-language reading materials than the Chinese.

Based on his survey, Prof. Pandian also outlined a profile of a habitual reader in English. People who read often in English are likely to:

- live in an urban than in a rural area
- belong to a family with a high socio-economic standing
- come from a home where there is a greater variety and amount of
materials in English, with more influence and reading models at home
- attend a school with a greater variety and amount of materials in English, with more teachers who encourage students to read and more friends who read English.
- be exposed more to English
- have a more positive attitude towards reading in English.

The Malaysian education system is in dire straits. With the education system reverting back to Malay language as the medium of instruction in schools and the government desperately plugging all holes in a sinking boat, I strongly believe the key to improving our education is the inculcation of a strong reading habit among all Malaysians. Although the government has launched several reading campaigns (the recent one is the Mari Membaca 1Malaysia, launched in March 2010) to increase the reading habit among Malaysians throughout the years, obviously these campaigns aren’t quite working as desired.

A reading habit is an essential life skill. Reading not only increases our knowledge, but it also builds maturity and character, sharpens our thinking, and widens our awareness in social, economic, political, and environmental issues. What most of us don’t know that, unlike speech, reading is a learned skill; our brains aren’t hard-wired to read. Although a baby can pick up speech from listening to others talking, reading requires learning. In other words, reading takes effort. It is hard work. But it builds our brain muscles. The effort to inculcate a reading habit pays off handsomely, either directly or indirectly, in our lives.

I like to end this topic by quoting from Proust and the Squid by Maryanne Wolf, a book given to me by my wife, Jennifer, on my birthday:

*Reading is one of the single most remarkable inventions in history; the ability to record history is one of its consequences. Our ancestors’ invention could come about only because of the human brain’s extraordinary ability to make new connections among its existing structures, a process made possible by the brain’s ability to be shaped by experience. This plasticity at the heart of the brain’s design forms the basis for much of who we are and who we might become.*

*Reading can be learned only because of the brain’s plastic design, and when reading takes place, that individual brain is forever changed, both physiologically*
and intellectually.

Proust and the Squid

Maryanne Wolf

Sources


Web sources

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