



My Bella TV interview: Encouraging children to read, the importance of reading, and what to do with the reluctant reader

I was very fortunate to be invited to appear on [Bella, a TV programme by ntv7](#), on my opinions about ways to encourage a reading habit in children, the importance of reading, and about reluctant book readers.

So, on Oct 13, 2013, 2:30 pm, my family and I made our way to the ntv7 studio in Glenmarie, Shah Alam. There we met the Bella TV crew and the lovely host, [Daphne Iking](#).

Prior to the show, I was given a set of questions that *could* be asked by Daphne during the interview. The following are questions that were more-or-less asked during the pre-recorded show.

In your opinion, do magazine and comics book count as reading?

Yes, they do. If our children are reluctant readers, then it is better that they read comic books than nothing. But bear in mind that there are many types of reading materials. Comic books are only one such type. Each reading type has its own function and effectiveness in building what I call our “mental muscles”.



I was asked about ways to encourage reading in children, the importance of reading, what I thought about public libraries, and my experience as an educator at my university.

Some people join a gym or fitness club - or buy an exercise bike or treadmill - to build up their physical fitness level. They want to be healthier, to lose or even gain weight, or to build up their muscles. Likewise, reading is an exercise for our minds, to build up our mental muscles; that is, our mental facilities for better thinking skills.



Zachary and I are waiting in the visitors' lounge while the Bella TV crew prepare for the show. Zachary was amazingly calm!

Yes, reading gains us knowledge and builds up our language skills, but perhaps most people are unaware that reading also gains us comprehension, awareness, understanding, appreciation, and empathy over a wide range of issues, be they issues on social, economics, politics, environment, and science.

Reading makes us more open-minded, not so open-minded that our brains fall out, but open enough to understand that other perspectives to an issue exists, that world issues are seldom black-or-white as some people tend to see.

So, different reading materials have different effectiveness to train our mental muscles. Comic books are useful and fun, but, as parents, we need to encourage our children to also read more advanced texts, those with more complex ideas that will cause our children reflect more deeply on ideas.

We can introduce to our children more advanced reading materials that have the similar genre or theme as the comics our children love to read.

A good example is a news article I read some time ago. There was an award-winning book author who has an interesting past. As a child, he hated reading and would never read the books his mother bought for him. However, he loved playing football, so his mother, on a whim, bought him a book about football. That book triggered his reading passion. Suddenly, here was a book that he enjoyed reading because it was about football, in which he was passionate. He enjoyed reading so much that he started to write, and who would have guessed that many years later, he would go on to win a book award for young adult fiction.



Daphne Iking, the host of

Bella TV programme by
ntv7.



Daphne is asking the kids questions about their favourite reading books and why reading is important to them. Each child is from a different parent. Zachary is seated farthest away from Daphne, at the far right.

As an educator, how do you see your students? Do they read books that are other than those required (textbook)?

Unfortunately, students seldom read beyond than the provided lecture notes. Moreover, lecturers, such as myself, would be evaluated by the students on whether the provided lecture notes are suitably comprehensive. So, lecturers cannot just come to class and teach without lecture notes, as done by some lecturers in the past. This “no notes provided” lectures certainly cannot happen today.

Yes, I could force the students to read books by saying materials from one or more books would be tested in their exams. However, this coercion would work only until the exams. Once over, the students would stop reading books. In fact, such coercion would probably enforce the idea in students that reading books is only for exams - a detriment to lifelong learning skills which we wish to inculcate in students.

From your observation, do students who read have better command in English?

Well, reading books is not about English but about command of a language. Reading would certainly improve our language command in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and expression of ideas and thoughts. So, a person who reads a lot would certainly speak and write better.



I hope I got all my points across. It is not easy to highlight all the important points during my interview as time was rather limited.

But what drives English proficiency in students is typically the students' background. Local studies have shown that students living in urban areas and whose parents have higher socio-economic status would not only use English more but read more English-language books.

Some people use reading as a way to improve their English. When they tried to improve their English, there are some cases where people start to make fun of them (for showing off). What is your comment on that?

This is very unfortunate because it is true. According to a 2001 survey, less than 2% Malaysians (less than 400,000 people) use English as their first language. English is seen by many as a language used only by elite minorities or for

professional, official, or international purpose.

The Chinese see speaking English as abnormal, and someone who speaks English is said to be a “banana”: yellow on the outside but white inside.

I once had a Malay student who decided to speak English to her Malay friends. For her effort, she was seen as a pariah. Her friends felt uncomfortable to speak English among one another. The same goes for the Chinese.

I think this is the largest hindrance to increasing English proficiency among Malaysians. It isn't about lack of English teachers or lack of schools hours on learning English. Although Malaysians understand the importance of English, they are not willing to master the language due to social - and political - barriers.

Unfortunately, what we see in Malaysia is not unique to just this country. Philippines and Hong Kong also see declining competency in English despite their government efforts to encourage English usage and even making English a compulsory language course in schools.



In the last segment, all parents were brought in together for our final remarks. These parents are also bloggers about parenting and child care issues.

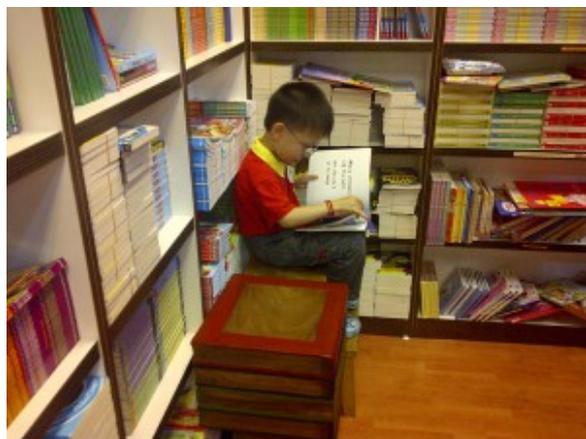
Do you see any significance difference between

students who like to read and those who don't?

Definitely. You can tell the difference between a person who reads and one who does not. And this difference is not subtle. A person who reads a lot will talk, speak, think, and behave differently than one who does not read.

One essential skill reading imparts is the ability to self-learn. As a lecturer, I am sometimes frustrated that I cannot count on books to help my students when they come to me with their problems. I cannot, for example, tell my students to read this or that chapter in a particular book. Students who do not have a strong reading habit suffer from some kind of mental block when they read text containing complex ideas. They may understand the individual words that make up the text but yet fail to understand what the whole text is trying to tell them.

In other words, a strong reading skill enables students to understand complex ideas. Research have shown that children who read a lot understand more complex ideas than children who do not read even if these children are computer or IT savvy.



The satisfying result of inculcating a reading habit in children is when they pick out their selected books from the shelves and start to read on their own — without coercion.

A fictional storybook can cost more than RM 30.

Do you think the price of books is a contributing factor of poor reading habit among children?

This is a common excuse people use for not reading. High price of books is only a small contributor to lack of reading among Malaysians. People are willing to spend so much money on buying the latest IT gadgets such as smartphones and tablets, but yet are unwilling to spend money on books.

Moreover, with their latest IT gadgets, they can buy eBooks which are much cheaper than print books, but do they buy these eBooks? Unlikely.

Public libraries are also available, and book sales are becoming increasingly common. So, the excuse that books are expensive does not hold water.

The real reason why Malaysians seldom read is reading is slow. Reading takes effort especially when reading text with complex ideas that forces us to reflect on its message. Reading is difficult because it is like exercising but for our minds. As some people do not like to physically exercise, some people will not like to read.

It is interesting to note that a baby can learn to speak without being taught. The baby can hear and learn to talk even without us teaching the baby. But reading must be taught. A baby cannot just learn reading on his or her own. Reading takes effort and it is hard work - but the returns are priceless and lasts a lifetime.



My books are this wide and this tall
... Zachary's amazing collection of
books! We started to read to him
since he was only a month old.

When it comes to reading, would you advise parents to encourage their kids to read light materials (Enid Blyton, Sweet Valley, and Harry Potter) or go for heavier and more informative materials (Shakespeare / biography), and why?

It is important that we do not force our children to read books that they do not enjoy reading. Reading should be a pleasurable activity and that our children do not associate reading books to only school work or exams.

But at the same time, we must ensure our children read a wide range of interests or issues. This will expand their outlook on life. We should try to encourage our children to read books on science, geography, and history.

There are so many good books out there that “teach” various important topics without making it too academic.

What is your opinion about the facility of public libraries in Malaysia? What are the things that need to be improved?

School and universities would be all right because these are places of learning. They would continue to see users who patronize these libraries for school or university work. However, public libraries would become obsolete if they continue as they are. Increasingly more books are in the digital format.

Even today, we see bookshops closing down or downsizing. So, in the future, I see a change in our libraries from those that carry printed books to those that carry books in digital format instead. No doubt we will witness an interesting future, to see how libraries evolve or adapt to changes.



Mom reading to Zachary in a bookshop. Ensure your child can see the pictures and words while you read to your child. As you read, point to the words you are currently reading so your child can track your reading.

This interview would be aired on Oct 29, 2013 (Tuesday) at 11:00 am on ntv7. You can also watch it for free on tonton.com.my.