

Reading for Pleasure and Academic Success: A Preliminary Note

Khemendra K. Kumar

Abstract

English language literacy is considered very important in Fiji for many reasons. English is lingua-franca in Fiji. It is also the language of administration. It is the official language as well as a language of power. English in schools is the dominant subject. A fail in English means a fail in the whole examination no matter how high one scores in other subjects. Fail in English leads to academic failure. Although much attention is given to English, indications such as external examination results, and concerns by parents, teachers and employers show that there is a decline in English proficiency in the country. This is a concern. Can we rescue the declining standards? One remedy could be reading for pleasure. Reading for pleasure improves language proficiency. This research examines the link between reading for pleasure and scoring high marks in English tests which eventually leads to academic success.

Introduction

Success in English is vital to a student's progress at school in Fiji. The general assumption is that a student's competence in English language usage leads to academic success. This is due to a fact that all subjects, except the vernacular languages, are delivered using the English medium. Although English is a second or third language for the majority of the students in Fiji, it is the language of instruction, meta-language, and a key subject in the school curriculum. This means proficiency (or the lack thereof) in English language has an overbearing effect in general academic success. Being literate in a language means that a person is able to listen, speak, read, write, view and shape meaningfully. He/she is able

to break the codes of the language, decipher meaning, use language in a variety of contexts and most importantly analyze oral and written text to form their point of view.

One way to become literate in any language is to read storybooks written in the respective language. Reading is core to literacy. Literacy leads to reading and vice versa. Stephen Krashen (2000), a prominent linguist and theorist, claims that we learn to read by reading, and other aspects of literacy competence are the result of meaningful reading. Storybooks lead to reading, reading leads to literacy. This leads to a successful reading cycle.

It is widely accepted that free voluntary reading (also called pleasure reading, or reading for leisure) has significant benefits for young as well as adult readers. Reiter (2003) defines free voluntary reading as reading for pleasure. It is reading whatever one cares to read, from newspapers to comics to novels, without accountability to a teacher or other authority figure. Reading for pleasure is not limited to printed books; it extends to e-reading on devices such as Kindle. In this study, the researcher looked at the general notion of reading for pleasure.

Given the abundance of research showing pleasure reading's effect on native speakers, schools have adopted various programs in which students are given the opportunity to read for pleasure during school time. These programs are known by a number of different acronyms such as SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), and SQRT (Sustained Quiet Reading Time). The main goal for all these programs is to provide students with uninterrupted time to read materials of their choice, with little or no accountability.

Studies of the effects of second language pleasure reading on second language acquisition began with the 'Book Flood' study done by Elley and Mangubhai (1981) in Fiji. Other studies confirm that pleasure reading leads to language acquisition, significant improvements in reading comprehension and English syntax, and growth in reading (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981, 1982; De'Ath, 1980; Ricketts, 1981, 1982; and Moore & Ricketts, 1981).

Researchers and teachers accept that reading from a wide selection of well-chosen storybooks helps children learn to love literature (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Adams (1990) identified reading as an important means of preparing children for entrance into the world of literacy. Mariah Evans (2006) asserts that storybooks at home have strong effect on children's educational attainment. Nespor (1987) states that reading interest is closely related to one's concepts, views, and attitudes towards learning. Reading interest motivates one to learn and improve his/her knowledge

according to one's requirements and needs. Drejer and Printz (2006) claim that reading interest influences lifelong learning and continuing education. A number of studies have found that pleasure reading leads to educational gains (Greaney, 1980; Searls, 1985; Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988; Morrow, 1991; Krashen, 1993; Manzo and Manzo, 1995; and Short, 1995). According to Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) students who read storybooks in school are more likely to read outside of school too.

The notion that students who do a substantial amount of free voluntary reading demonstrate a positive attitude toward reading is upheld in both qualitative and quantitative research (Long & Henderson, 1973; Greaney, 1980; Hepler & Hickman, 1982; Greaney & Hegarty, 1987; Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1991; Shapiro & White, 1991; Mathewson, 1994; Barbieri 1995; Short 1995). Students' reading achievement has been shown to correlate with success in school and the amount of independent reading they do (Greaney 1980; Anderson, Fielding & Wilson 1988). This affirms the predictability of a success cycle: we become more proficient at what we practice (Cullinan 1992).

The amount of pleasure reading done outside of school has consistently been found to relate to growth in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general information (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding 1988; Greaney 1980; Guthrie & Greaney 1991; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama 1990). Students who read independently become better readers, score higher on achievement tests in all subject areas, and have greater content knowledge than those who do not (Krashen 1993; Cunningham & Stanovich 1991; Stanovich & Cunningham 1993).

Researchers such as (Ogbodo, 2002, Bhan & Gupta, 2010; Singh, 2011; Issa et al, 2012; Bashir & Mattoo, 2012; Palani, 2012) assert that good reading habit is interrelated to academic success. Owasu-Acheaw & Larson (2014), who studied reading in the eastern region of Ghana confirmed that reading habit has influence on academic performance and that there is a relationship between reading and academic performance.

Methodology

This study was conducted to determine the link between pleasure reading of storybooks and academic success in Fiji's primary schools. The following questions guided the research:

1. Do you read storybooks for pleasure in your leisure time?
2. How often do you read storybooks for pleasure in your leisure time?

3. Is there a correlation between pleasure reading of storybooks and academic success?

Participants

The participant pool for this research was relatively small. Year 8 students of one class were chosen. Nineteen students were present on the day the questionnaire was administered. The school is classified as peri-urban. The participants are of various socio-economic background. Three participants were Fijians of Indian origin and sixteen were *I'Taukei* Fijians. Ten were females and nine were males. All were thirteen years old.

Research Design

A descriptive research design was chosen. Descriptive research includes surveys and fact-finding inquiries. The main idea was to describe the state of affairs as it exists at present. Furthermore, Case Study method was employed because it is a useful tool for investigating trends and specific situations in many disciplines.

Measures

The research instruments used to collect data were questionnaires (primary data), and documents (secondary data). Primary data was collected using a 'Group Administrated Questionnaire'. The types of questions were Dichotomous, Likert scale, Cumulative/Guttman scale type, and Filter and Contingency.

The secondary data was retrieved from the school Head teacher. The questionnaire was administered in one day in a classroom. Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the responses. The result was compared with the secondary data that included internal (Term 1 and Term 2 examination results) and external examination results (LANA Literacy and Numeracy Achievement).

Results

All the participants responded that they read for pleasure. 84 per cent read storybooks while 16 per cent indicated that they read magazines, newspapers, online articles, and religious texts in their leisure time. 84 per cent chose 5/5 (highest level of liking) of reading storybooks whereas 16 per cent chose 4/5 rating.

Titles such as *Beast Quest*, *Teacher's pet*, *Rain of the moon*, *Goosebumps*, *Harry Potter*, *Strongman*, *Cinderella*, *My Book of Bible stories*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Dork Diaries*, *Lily alone*, *Treasure Island*, and *Malory Towers* were their favourite storybooks. *Harry Potter* was the

most popular amongst the list. The most popular authors were Adam Blade, Chris Demarest, Tom McCaughren, R.L. Stine, Jules Verne, Stephanie Greene, Walt Disney, Johann Wyss, Rachael Renee Russel, J.K. Rowlings, Jacqueline Wilson, Johanna Spiri, Briana, and Enid Blyton. Rowlings was the most popular author amongst the list. The most popular sub-genre was adventure followed by horror, comedy, romance, and suspense.

During January 2016 to August 2016, eleven out of the 19 participants read more than eight storybooks; two read 13-15 storybooks; two read 16-18 storybooks, and three read more than 21 storybooks. The rest of the participants read less than 8 books. One participant read only two storybooks. Figure 1 shows the number of books each individual student read.

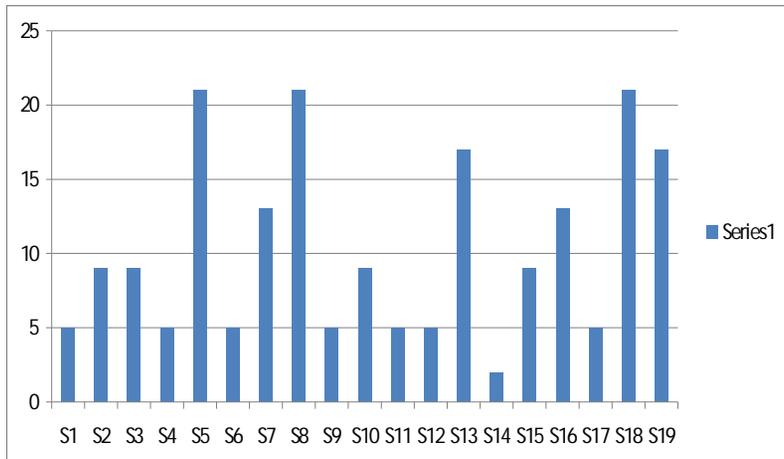
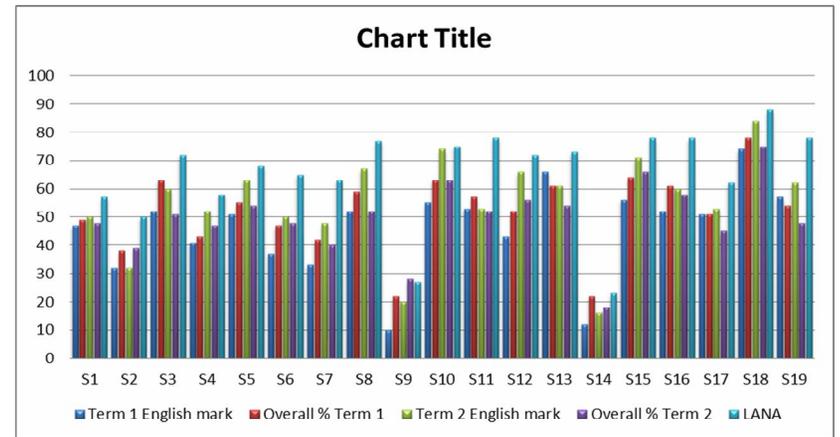


Figure 1.2 shows the growth in terms of scores in their Term 1 English Mark, Overall Term 1 Mark, Term 2 English Mark, Overall Term 2 Mark, and the LANA results.

The comparison shows a gradual increase in the marks from Term 1 to Term 2 and then to LANA mark for each participant. Not a single participant scored less in LANA than his/her Term 1 English Mark, Term 1 Overall Mark and Term 2 English Mark. Only one student (S9) had less in LANA compared to the overall Term 2 mark. Apart from this singular case, the other results indicate a successive progress in English achievement.

Figure 1.2: Internal and External Examination Results



The critical issues for our purpose would be:

- did voluntary reading help improve English marks of these students in internal assessments?
- did voluntary reading help improve overall marks of these students?
- did voluntary reading help improve LANA outcomes for these students?

To answer these questions detailed statistical and qualitative assessments need to be undertaken. Give the data set, and the lack of any control group for the present paper, these questions can not be answered. A later more comprehensive study would need to be done to answer these questions.

However, some data obtained from the survey are interesting enough to be mentioned here. Figures 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 show these results.

First, all four students who had read more than 20 books had scored over 65% in their LANA scores.

However, it is noteworthy that of all the 11 students scoring over 65% in LANA, six had read less than 20 books (specifically, students 3, 6, 10, 11, and 12 who had read less than 10 books, and student 13 who read 13 books). Another student (S7) had read 11 books, but scored just over 60%.

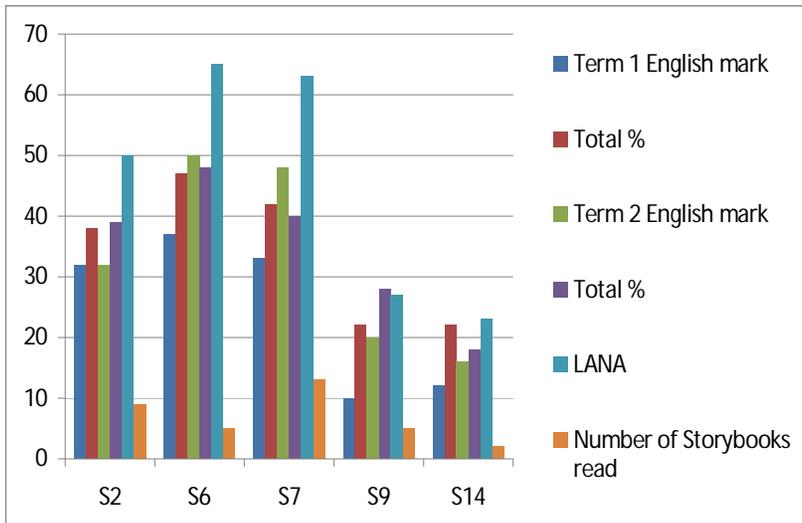


Figure 1.3 Comparative analyses of storybook reading and examination achievements of 5 students in the upper quartile

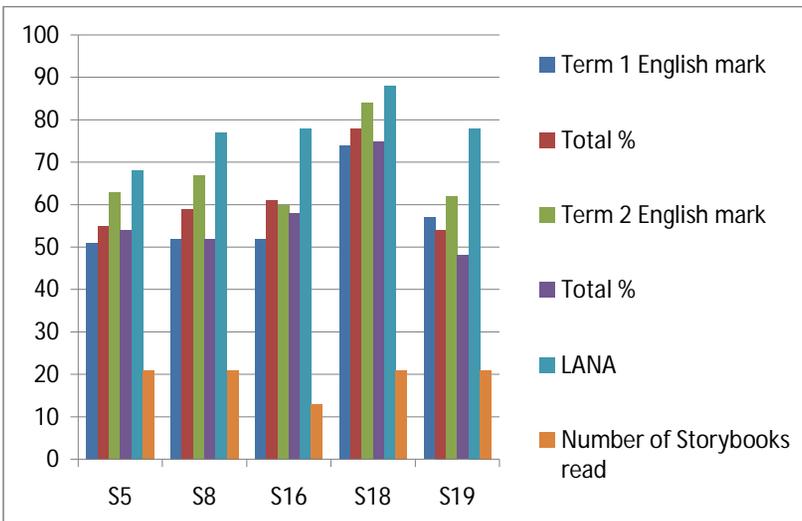
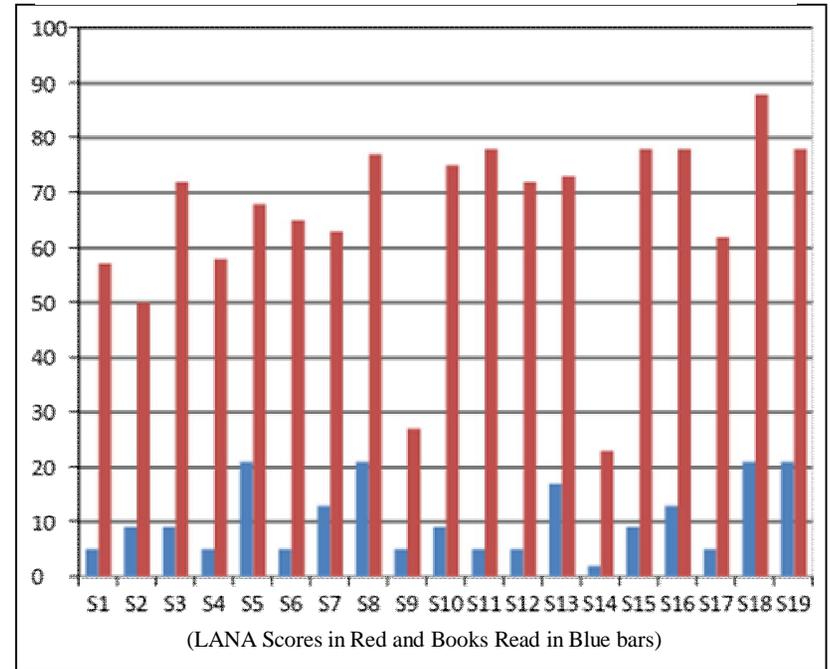


Figure 1.4 Comparative analyses of storybook reading and examination achievements of 5 students in the lower quartile

Figure 1.5: Comparative Results: LANA Scores and Books Read



Discussion and Conclusion

The study showed some relationships between reading storybooks for pleasure and academic success in Fijian primary schools. The students in primary schools like reading storybooks. This contradicts some views held in the country that students do not like reading storybooks. Not only students read storybooks, they also read newspapers, magazines, online books and materials, and religious texts. Adventurous storybooks are favoured over other sub-genre such as suspense, romance, horror, and comedy.

This study also shows that while some students are voracious readers, equal number of students read sparingly and selectively. On average, a primary school student reads storybooks twice a week. The main factor that acts as deterrents of reading storybooks is examination preparation.

Reading storybooks is seen as a leisure activity by parents and teachers, thus discouraged during examination preparation.

Reading storybooks for pleasure can affect academic success in primary schools. Students who read many storybooks for pleasure had generally scored high marks in English tests. This boosted their overall high academic scores. This holds true for internal and external examinations. Since examination is the most significant yardstick for academic success in the country, on the basis of this limited study, one can provide a preliminary conclusion that reading storybooks for pleasure contributes to academic success. For a definitive conclusion on this, however, a comprehensive research with a larger data set and detailed quantitative and qualitative assessments on reading for pleasure and academic success would be needed.

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Author

Khemendra K. Kumar is Lecturer in the Department of Language and Literature, Fiji National University, Lautoka Campus, Fiji.
E-mail: Khemendra.kumar@fnu.ac.fj.