ASSESSING READABILITY OF
A NATIONAL EXAM READING TEXTS
IN MALAYSIA

Nurul Farehah Mohamad Uri[1i],
Mohd Salehhuddin Abd Aziz[2]
[1]Universiti Kuala Lumpur,
British Malaysian Institute,
Malaysia
[2]Universiti Kebangsaan,
Malaysia

Abstract:

This paper intends to investigate the readability level of the passages in the English paper of a national examination in Malaysia. In specific, this study seeks to identify the level of readability for reading passages of SPM English papers using readability formulas and judgement of reading experts. The readability of the English papers was analyzed using three readability formulas: Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning Fog Index and Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index. Five reading experts were also invited to evaluate the difficulty level of the reading texts. The readability scores of these reading texts revealed that these texts were graded as "fairly easy" texts as they fell within the range of 66.7-80.6 for Flesch Reading Ease, 6.9-10.1 for Gunning Fog Index. Results of Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index also prove the readability level of the passages. Correspondingly, the content experts noted that the reading texts were interesting and generally easy to read texts. The analyses of the reading passages have shown that the texts chosen for the English papers were reasonably appropriate for the upper secondary school students.

Keywords: readability; reading texts; Flesch Reading Ease; Gunning Fog Index; Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index, high stake test

1. Introduction

1.1 Readability

Readability is the easiness of elements in a reading text which the readers could understand and find it interesting (Dale & Chall, 1949). Akbari, Atae and Marefat (1999)

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[1] Correspondence: email nfarehah@unikl.edu.my

defined readability formulas as mathematical equations used for the determination or the prediction of the level of reading competence necessary for the comprehension of a particular piece of writing. Since readability formula was first introduced, it is estimated that there are over 200 readability formulas that have been developed throughout the years (Hiebert, 2012). Readability formulas kept on developing and now it can be grouped into two: classic and modern readability formulas in which the criteria of determining text readability between these two are slightly different.

Those early readability formulas as proposed by Vogel and Washburne (1928); Gray and Leary (1935); Lorge (1944); Flesch (1949); Spache (1953); McLaughlin (1969); Elley (1969) were mainly focused on sentence length, number of sentences, number of prepositional phrases and pronouns used, number of easy and hard words found in a single text with the use of mathematical equation known as readability formulas. Other features of text which are measured to determine text difficulty are (a) the complexity of sentences and (b) the complexity of the vocabulary in the text. Also, classic readability formulas measure some other aspects such as word familiarity, word frequency, abstract versus concrete words or word length – number of letters, number of syllables or affixes. Not to forget, in terms of sentence complexity, it either measured average sentence length or complex versus simple sentences (Chall, 1996). Ojemann (1934) suggested different readability concepts than the common text difficulties and idea density saying that conceptual aspects of a text were more fundamental compared to word and sentence measures.

As a result, readability researchers have invented new easier formulas to replace the classic which includes the use of computer as a support tool. Among hundreds of readability formulas, Fry and SMOG are the most popular readability formulas used by teachers to evaluate middle school and junior/senior high school texts because the calculations are very easy (Ulusoy, 2006). As proposed by Fry (2002), selects three passages with 100 words each which include proper nouns, initialisation and numerals. Next, count the number of sentences and syllables, and convert to an average. Then, find the intersect point of these two lines on the graph and the graph gives an approximate grade level from 1 to 17+ grades. Among other popular and widely used readability formulas are Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch –Kincaid Grade Level, Gunning Fog Index and others.

Modern readability formulas still retain the original concept of classic readability as the core of readability formulas. However, it has diverted a little and adds on more relevant criteria in measuring text readability. In modern readability, word and sentence variables are no longer the only contributing factors in readability. Things which were obviously missing in classic readability is now counted, it includes organization, format and illustration - verbal and pictorial (Chall, 1996). Then, came along Kintsch and Vipond (1979), who suggested that readability should also consider interactive aspects of text difficulty and readers' characteristics. This is known as the new cognitive- structural readability. Kintsch and Vipond (1979) pointed have six predictor variables mainly density of propositions, the number of different arguments, coherent parts, inferences required to connect a text base, long term memory searches,

reinstatements of propositions into short term memory and reorganizations and required for the best organized text base.

In late 70s, another researcher had proposed one more criterion to look at when assessing text difficulty. This time Meyer (1985) sees that it is better and more effective to measure text according to topical plan instead of solely relying on words, sequence of sentences or paragraph. The following are the topical plans as suggested by Meyer: antecedent/consequent plan, comparison plan, description plan, response plan and time order plan. The most recent modern readability formula was created in 2008 by Crossley, Allen and McNamara from the University of Memphis (Crossley, Allen & McNamara, 2012). It is known as Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index. Coh-metrix is the latest and most comprehensive readability formula so far. This is because Coh-metrix is able to measure more than 60 characters in determining readability of a text.

1.2 Readability Studies in Malaysia

A readability study in Malaysia is still new based on the limited number of research completed. Some of the local research studies done on readability are by Abdul Kadir Mohd Nor (1997), Rosli Mohamad and Azhar Abdul Rahman (2006), Imran Ho Abdullah and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2007) and Dahlia Janan and Wray (2012). Readability formulas can be applied to almost any contextual materials as well as various fields such as education, business and industry, journalism and mass communication, legal and governmental writing and many more (Klare,1969). So far, readability in Malaysia only involves the fields of education and business and industry. Kadir Mohd Nor (1997) and Rosli Mohamad and Azhar Abdul Rahman (2006) have analysed the readability of corporate annual and also financial reports. One the other hand, Imran Ho Abdullah and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2007) have conducted readability analysis on several Malaysian English literature. Dahlia Janan and Wray (2012) has come up with a new model of readability which focuses more on readers' psycholinguistics domain and reading processes. As for this reason, it is crucial to measure the readability of SPM reading text since it has never been done before by any party. Moreover, the number of studies on text readability in Malaysia is very few and it reflects badly on Malaysian for the lack of knowledge and awareness on the important of text readability. A good teacher, educator and test developers will surely find the fit between readable text and readers' reading level.

This paper intends to investigate the readability level of the passages in the English paper of a national examination in Malaysia. Specifically, it intends to answer two of the following questions:

1) What is the readability level of the passages in the English language paper of Malaysia's national examination based on readability formulas?
2) What is the difficulty level of the texts based on the judgments of the reading experts?

2. Methodology

2.1 Selection of Samples
Seven reading texts in the Section C of English papers for Malaysia's national examination from the year 2009 till 2015 were selected as samples for the readability formulas. Apart from the formulas, five experienced teachers were also invited to take part in the study as content experts. All of them were female teachers and have been teaching English language subjects at their respective schools. In addition, all the content experts have more than fifteen years of experience as English teachers and they have also have been appointed as examiners for English language paper of the national examination.

2.2 Readability Formulas
The readability of these texts was calculated using three different readability formulas, namely Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning Fog Index and Coh-metrix L2 reading index. From hundreds of readability formulas available, Flesch Reading Ease and Gunning Fog Index were chosen because these formulas are the most frequently used readability formulas and the best known in readability analysis. Additionally, the Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index was also chosen because it is the latest and most comprehensive readability tool and more and more researchers are using Coh-metrix along with other classic readability formulas. As for Coh-Metrix, a total of 108 indices are classified into eleven categories, however, only six relevance categories were chosen. The categories are: descriptive, lexical diversity, connectives, syntactic complexity, syntactic pattern density and word information.

3. Results

3.1 Readability Formulas

Table 1: The readability level of passages according to Flesch Reading Ease Index

Year	Flesch Reading Ease Index	Level
2009	72	Fairly easy to read
2010	66.7	Standard
2011	73	Fairly easy to read
2012	80.6	Easy to read
2013	79.7	Easy to read
2014	72.4	Fairly easy to read
2015	74.6	Fairly easy to read

The results of the readability analysis are shown in Table 1. Based on the Flesch Reading Ease Index, all seven passages fall within the range of 60 -80. According to Flesch Reading Ease Index formula, one of the passages is at 80.6 and is categorized as an easy text. Five of the passages fall within the range of 72 -79.7 and so these five passages are considered as "fairly easy" to read texts. The remaining text is at 66.7 on the 100 scale and is classified as a 'standard' text. The results have shown that

throughout the seven years of national examinations, the passage for the year 2012 has the highest score of 80.6 and this indicates that it is the easiest to read, the passage with the second highest score of 79.7 is in the year of 2013 while the passage with the lowest score of 66.7 is in the year 2010. In general based on the Flesh Reading Ease Index, it can be concluded that the level of the passages from the year 2009 until 2015 is quite consistent and not too difficult to read especially for upper secondary school students.

Table 2: The readability level of the passages according to Gunning Fog Index

Year	Gunning Fog Index	Level
2009	8.8	Fairly easy to read
2010	10	Fairly easy to read
2011	10.1	Fairly easy to read
2012	6.9	Fairly easy to read
2013	8.5	Fairly easy to read
2014	10.1	Fairly easy to read
2015	8.7	Fairly easy to read

Based on the Gunning Fog Index in Table 2, these passages ranged between 6- 10.1. One passage ranged the lowest with 6.9 score, three passages for the year 2013, 2015 and 2009, ranged between 8.5, 8.7 and 8.8 based on the scale. The remaining three passages-year 2010, 2011 and 2014 ranged between 10 - 10.1. The passages with the highest score of 10.1 is in the year 2011 and 2014, the second highest is 10, the passage from the year 2010 and the lowest score 6.9 is for the year 2012. In general, all seven passages are graded as "fairly easy" to read texts according to the Gunning Fog Index scale. It can be concluded that the passages used for the national examinations from the year 2009-2015 are reasonably standardized and the difficulty level is very consistent- "fairly easy to read".

Table 3: Lexical diversity

Year	Type-token ratio
2009	0.526
2010	0.533
2011	0.444
2012	0.451
2013	0.438
2014	0.469
2015	0.442

Lexical diversity is one out of 200 indices in Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index which refers to the types of words which occur in relation to the number of words. The term is called type-token ratio. It works by dividing the number of unique words (called types) with the number of tokens of these words. Each unique word is equivalent to a word type and each example of a particular word is a token. So, when the type-token ratio approaches 1, it means that each word only occurs once in a text. As a result, comprehension should be reasonably demanding because many unique words need to be decoded and integrated with the discourse context. In contrast, as the type-token

ratio decreases, words are repeated many times in the text, which should increase the ease and speed of text processing.

Table 3 provides the type-token ratio for each passage. Interesting results obtained from this data is that the type-token ratio for all the passages is between 0.4 and 0.5 only and none of the passages approaches closely to 1. Both passages in 2009 and 2010 have similar type-token ratio of 0.5. However, type-token ratio of 0.533 puts passage 2010 as the passage with the highest number, next in line is passage 2009 with 0.526 type-token ratios and the smallest type-token ratio is 0.438 which goes to passage in 2013. The type-token ratios for the other four passages are between 0.442 and 0.469. It can be concluded from the results that words in all passages occur several times and this makes the passages easy to read. In conclusion, the results of type-token ratio prove that these English passages are "fairly easy" –to- read text because unique words are found to be repeated many times in these passages. Directly this makes comprehension less demanding for the students.

Table 4: Syntactic Complexity

Year	Words before main verb	Number of modifiers per noun phrase (NP)
2009	3.21	0.85
2010	4.13	1.03
2011	3.94	1.04
2012	3.36	0.65
2013	2.75	0.57
2014	3.74	0.73
2015	3.72	0.59

Syntactic complexity is measured by Coh- metrix index in several ways, namely: the number of words that appear before the main verb as well as the number of modifiers which comes before the main noun with the purpose of modifying it. Difficult sentences are said to be structurally dense, syntactically ambiguous and ungrammatical. Therefore, a noun phrase which is made of more than one modifier is more difficult to read compared to noun phrase with a single modifier and sentences that have many words before the main verb are taxing on working memory. As can be seen from table 4, it illustrates both the number of words before main verbs and modifiers per noun phrase (NP) for passages from 2009 till 2012.

First, the number of words before main verb indicates that the average number is between 2.75 to 4.13 words only. However, sentences with 2 and 4 words only appear once each throughout the seven years while the majority of sentences have 3 words before the main verb. Moreover, it is apparent that the 2010 passage has the highest number of words before main verb with a total of 4.13 words and the lowest number of words is 2.75 in 2013 passage. Passages chosen for 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2015 have equal number of words before the main verb with only 3 words each. Another significant result lies behind these number of words is sentence difficulty. Sentences in 2013 passage are the easiest because only 2 words come before the main verb whereas the passage in 2010 has more difficult sentences compared to the others. This is because it requires readers to put more effort to get their memory to work. The rest of the

passages have sentences of medium level, neither 'easy' nor 'difficult' with the presence of 3 words before the main verb.

Second, another index which helps to measure syntactic complexity of a text is the number of modifiers per noun phrase (NP). Shockingly, the passage chosen in 2010 appears again as one of the passages with the most number of modifiers per NP with a result of 1.03 and another passage with similar result is in 2011 with the score of 1.04, with just a slight difference of 0.01. The passage with the lowest number of modifiers per NP is passage 2013 with the total of 0.57. Since only two passages reached the score of more than 1.00, the total numbers of modifiers for the remaining five passages are in the range of 0.57 to 0.85 with 0.85 being the highest in its cluster. This marks that the number of modifiers per NP from 0.57 to 1.04 is too small and as a result, it does not negatively affect sentences or makes it difficult to read or comprehend. In brief, it indicates that these passages are fairly easy-to-read text because the syntactic complexity is appropriate with four being the maximum number found before main verbs and the number of modifiers per NP is not more than one.

Table 5: Total number of connectives in the passages

Year	All	Causal	Logical	Adversative & contrastive	Temporal	Additive
2009	89.82	19.96	25.94	9.98	13.97	55.88
2010	80.64	26.88	23.29	10.75	28.67	30.46
2011	88.23	26.47	33.82	8.82	30.88	39.70
2012	57.83	15.22	22.83	7.61	27.39	16.74
2013	102.01	33.04	43.10	18.67	35.92	40.23
2014	91.04	39.45	45.52	12.14	21.24	36.41
2015	118.85	28.68	56.01	15.02	40.98	50.54

Signalling devices are used to ensure the cohesion of a text and connectives are one of the signalling devices adapted by the Coh-metrix index in determining the coherence of a text. It is used to measure the occurrence of connectives of different types. There are five types of connectives namely: causal (because, so, consequently, although, nevertheless) adversative & contrastive (although, whereas), logical (and, or, actually, if), temporal (after, when, before, until, first) and additive (also, moreover, however, but). Coh-metrix calculates the overall as well as different types of connectives separately.

Table 5 presents the total connectives in the texts and the results for all connectives which are found in the passages show that the range starts from 57.83 to 118.85. It is revealed that there are only two passages with more than one hundred of the total number of all connectives, passages in 2013 and 2015. Indirectly, passage 2015 has the highest number of all connectives and the second highest number goes to passage in 2013 with the total of 102.01 connective. The passage with the least total number of connectives is in 2012 with only 57.83 connectives found with the difference of 60 connectives. Next is causal connective and the passage with the most number of causal connective found is 2014 passage with an average of 39. 45 connectives, the passage for the year 2013 is also within the range of 30 as the result is 33.04 which

makes it the second passage with the most number of causal connectives. The passage which has the lowest number is in 2012 with just 15.22 connectives.

Then, the passage which has the most number of logical connectives; *and, or, actually or if* in the passage used in 2015 with the total of 56.01, followed by the passage in 2014 with a slight difference of 10.49, leads the total of 45.52 connectives. The passage which rarely used logical connectives with the total number of 22.83 is in 2012. Moving on to the next types of connectives are the adversative & contrastive connectives. It is found that the totals of adversative and contrastive connectives for all the passages are not as many as the other connectives because the scale is between 7.61 and 18.67. This proves that the average connective is below 20. 18.67 is the highest total of adversative & contrastive connectives found in 2013 passage, the second highest result is 15.02 in 2015 and again the passage which appears to have the lowest number of adversative & contrastive connectives with only 7.61 connectives is passage used for 2012.

Temporal connectives are also important in text cohesion especially in indicating the sequence of events that happened. Generally, the total number of temporal connectives for all passages starts from as low as 13.97 to 40.98. So the range is between that numbers. It is obvious that 13.97 is the lowest number of temporal connectives and the text with minimum use of temporal connectives such as after, when, before, until, first is passage in 2009. On the contrary, the highest total number of temporal connectives is found in 2015 passage with the total of 40.98 and the passage that follows with the total of 35.92 is 2013 passage. The total of temporal connectives found in passages 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2014 are 28.67, 30.88, 27.39 and 21.24 respectively.

The last type of connective is additive. The 2009 passage is the oldest passage of all and surprisingly it turns out to be the passage with the most number of additive connectives with the average of 55.88, it is then followed by 2015 passage with the total of 50. 54 and the passage with the lowest number is in 2012 with just 16. 74 total of temporal connectives. The number of temporal connectives for all the passages falls in the range of 16.74 to 55.88 and the difference between the lowest and the highest passage with temporal connective is 39.14, merely half of it.

To summarise, the total of connectives differs each year from one type of connective to another and no static number of connectives is documented as it keeps on fluctuating. Another outstanding finding occurs after all six connectives are compared , the passage in 2015 turns out to be the one with the most number of connectives as it includes the combination of all types of connectives plus the logical and temporal connectives. The text with sufficient number and types of connectives are easy to read as it helps to make sure the text is coherent with smooth transition from one paragraph to another.

Table 6: Total number of parts of speech

Year	Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb	Pronoun
2009	29.41	153.69	79.84	35.92	53.89
2010	315.41	137.99	68.1	43.01	66.30
2011	251.47	148.53	82.35	60.29	38.23
2012	197.86	190.25	65.44	50.22	146.11

2013	178.16	170.97	56.03	84.77	145.11
2014	245.82	133.53	77.389	57.66	62.21
2015	192.62	181.69	62.84	72.04	150.27

It can be seen from Table 6 that only five out of eight types of parts of speech are significant to this study and those are: noun, verb, adjective, adverb and pronoun. Interestingly, the chosen passage for 2009 has 29.41 nouns whereas the other passages have more than 100 nouns, even up to 300 nouns. Therefore, it is obvious that the passage chosen for 2009 has the lowest quantity of nouns while the passage for the following year, 2010, is the passage with the highest number of nouns, 315.41. The variance is tremendous with the difference of 286 nouns. Another passage with the second highest total number of nouns is in 2011 with the total of 251.47 nouns. The total number of nouns in all passages from 2009 till 2015 can be classified into four different groups: 1) under 50, 2) under 200, 3) more than 200 and 4) more than 300 nouns per text. Unlike the nouns in the passages, the number of verbs in these passages is divided almost evenly since the total numbers of verbs are more than 100 but do not exceed 200 verbs. It ranges from 133.53 to 190.25 and the gap between each passage is also small. The passage selected for 2014 has the least number of verbs with only 133.53; another passage which is also around this range with a total of 137.99 is the year of 2010 and the passage with the most number of verbs in it is the passage used in 2012 with 190.25 verbs. The number of verbs for passages 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2011 are 153.69, 148.53, 170.97 and 181.69 respectively.

Next is the analysis of adjective found within the texts. As can be seen from Table 7, the numbers of adjectives for these passages are on average at 56.03 to 82.35. Automatically, the passage with the average of 56.03 is the passage with least adjective in it and 82.35 is the highest amount in the table. This indicates that 2011 passage has the most number of adjectives and this is followed by the passage for 2009 with a total of 79.84 verbs. It is the same for adverbs and it is mostly found in 2013 passage with the total number of 84.77; next in line is the passage used for 2015 with 72.04 adverbs altogether. On the other hand, adverbs are hardly found in 2009 passage since there are only 35.92, the smallest figure. Then, the quantity of pronouns used by the author is also calculated by Coh-metrix and it can be seen that the number of pronouns in the passages throughout the year is inconsistent. The passage chosen for 2015 has the maximum quantity of pronouns, 150.27 and with just a slight difference of 4.16 pronouns; passage in 2012 comes in second with a total of 146.11 pronouns. The passage with the least number of pronouns is in 2011 with only 38.23.

When the data is analysed by year and across all five categories of parts of speech, it reveals that the passage for 2009 has more verbs and less nouns. The passage in 2010 has more nouns and less adverbs, passage in 2011 has more nouns and less pronouns, passage in 2012 has more nouns and less adverbs, passage in 2013 has more nouns and less adjectives, passage in 2014 has more nouns and less adverbs, similar result with 2010 passage and lastly passage in 2015 has more nouns and less adjective. Majority of these passages have more nouns than other types of parts of speech except for 2009. In short, the parts of speech which are most frequently used by the author and

found in the passages are nouns, verbs and pronouns. This is one of the factors which make these passages 'fairly easy' to read because nouns, verbs and pronouns are parts of speech commonly used compared to the other categories of parts of speech.

3.2 Difficulty Level of the Passages Based on the Judgments of Reading Experts

Table 7: Year 2010 passage

Experts	Remarks
1	*a story* -easy to read-**easy to read**
2	*news from newspaper and very familiar to students* -**easy to read**
3	*an experience related to flood*-**easy to read**
4	*it explains the hardship of people who have experienced terrible flood*-**easy to read**
5	*a real disaster happening to other people on other parts of the world*- **easy to read**

In addition to the statistical formulas used to evaluate the English language texts, this investigation also engaged content experts to evaluate its difficulty level. The reading experts were given a rating scale to evaluate the difficulty of the passages. They were also asked to give some remarks about the passages used in the test. It was found that passages from the year 2009 until 2015 were interesting because of many reasons. The following were some of the responses by the content experts:

As illustrated in the table 7, one of the obvious reasons that make a text interesting and easy to read is one which is culturally related to the students. The passage chosen for the year 2010 discusses the issue of flood in a local setting. Students who have experienced flood themselves or at least heard about it in the news or from their friends should not have any problem comprehending the content. Also, a reading text which tells a story, for instance flood rather than facts would be more interesting to students according to content expert 1. Similar the same evaluation is made by content expert 2 who stated that "news *from newspaper and very familiar to students*" This is because a story is easier to read compared to factual type texts or science fiction. Moreover, the contents of factual text types or science fictions are usually more serious and loaded with information. Content expert 3 maintains that the passage *"explains the hardship of people who have experienced terrible flood* "Overall, the content experts believed that the text for the year is clearly easy to read, interesting and readable to the form 5 students.

Table 8: Year 2012 passage

Experts	Remarks
1	*it is about an unforgettable experience* –**easy to read**
2	*related to a topic in textbook*-**easy to read**
3	*a close encounter with death (in the form of leopard's attack)*-easy to read
4	*a story*-**easy to read**
5	*it shows students the power of nature and ways to overcome it*-**easy to read**

According to the content expert 2 remark in table 8, the 2012 text is also considered to be interesting because it is *"related to one of the topics in the textbook"*. Indirectly, students

have read and discussed this passage before with their teachers and classmates, and it should be familiar to them. The passage which is familiar to the students is easy to understand because of the schemata possessed by the students. One good example of schemata possessed by students as mentioned by content expert 1 was *"about an unforgettable experience".* It really makes sense in helping students to better comprehend a text. Again, in looking for readable texts which are interesting, teachers and test developers should consider one more criterion namely the students' schemata. This is because students' schemata help readers in the reading process especially in comprehending and grasping the ideas from the texts. Therefore, it is best if a text of a similar topic is used during class and examination. Based on the responses in table 8, the content experts have indicated that the text for the year 2012 was readable and easy to read the intended audience.

Table 9: Year 2014 passage

Experts	Remarks
1	*It's an inspiring story –***easy to read**
2	*Interesting story-***easy to read**
3	*Shows the capability of kindness-***easy to read**
4	*About act of kindness-***easy to read**
5	*Shows how kindness can have an effect on other people's life.-* **easy to read**

Apart from the content of the passage which is culturally related to the students, another reason that makes a passage interesting is the moral values injected by the author through the writing. Both content expert 1 and 2 agreed that 2014 passage is an inspiring as well as interesting story to be read. Furthermore, all the content experts agreed that this passage is interesting because it teaches students about kindness and promote students to show and do kind things to other people. All content experts 3, 4 & 5 mentioned the same thing about the moral values of being *"kind"* which is portrayed in this passage by the author. Meaningful purpose for reading text is also part of readers' interests because the quality of reading process and understanding of the content is very much dependent on the purpose of reading. Because of that, it is crucial to find out if there are any other meaningful purposes for reading this text other than for the sake of answering the questions. Most of the content experts believed that there were a few meaningful purposes for reading this.

A good and readable passage also takes into account readers' background knowledge. It is found out that majority of the experts agreed that students have appropriate background knowledge for understanding the content for almost all the passages. Readers' background knowledge also covers the questions related to the content of passage. This includes the appropriate questions asked with the type of text, level of difficulty and the needs of students. The overall response to this question was very positive. In conclusion, it is agreed by all the experts that some selected passages from 2009 until 2015 were easy to read and suitable for the students. Virtually all the content experts surveyed have indicated that the selected passages from the year 2009 until 2015 were easy to read and interesting. This is because readable texts would have

appropriate level of abstractness, avoids vague and ambiguous ideas, coherence, well-organized with clear sequence signals, availability of extra-textual support which helps readers to understand the texts, the use of simple sentence structure, the ranged of difficult vocabulary items which are within the students parameter and acceptable syntactic complexity as highlighted by the respondents.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In short, this study attempted to assess the readability of Malaysia's national examination English reading texts. The findings bring in lots of valuable information on the precise level of difficulty of the English passages. It also provides some key points which would help make a text readable. From the statistical formulas, it is found that the difficulty level of the passages from the year 2009 till 2015 is between "easy" and "fairly easy" to read. Based on the literature review, these results seemed to be partially in agreement to other studies conducted on Malaysian short stories in national exam English paper. Imran-Ho and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2007) in their study found that seven short stories recommended as texts for the English Literature Syllabus in the Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) are suitable reading materials for secondary school readers. They also found out that the locally produced texts were equally readable as recommended texts and this indicates that both types of short stories are readable texts. This implies that reading materials in English paper, be it the reading text in Section C or literature texts in Section D are both easy to read texts and also suitable for Malaysian students. The findings of the current study are also not inconsistent with those of Abdul Halim Ibrahim and Mariam Mohamed Nor (2011). In their investigation of knowledge of linguistics cues among Malay EFL students and teachers' practices in the teaching of reading skills, they found that majority of their participants were at the independent level which refers to the easiest scale of reading level when reading readable texts.

The findings also indicate that these passages are graded as "fairly easy to read texts" by all the content experts because it takes into account readers as the main factor in determining text readability. It seems that the Malaysia Examinations Syndicate should consider students' interest, previous knowledge and cultural background when selecting materials for national exam reading texts. The findings of the present study in similar vein support previous research by Lin and Min (2011) who also found that teachers in primary schools in Singapore contemplate students' culture and history in books selection. Again, this finding is in agreement with Imran-Ho and Ruzy Suliza Hashim's (2007) findings which showed that culture and norms of Malaysian society in the text selection is necessary as one of the criteria to be considered when selecting literary texts as it helps to instill interest in literature and as encouragement for students to appreciate literature.

Furthermore, this finding corroborates the ideas of Dole, Duffy and Pearson (1991), who suggested that readers use their existing knowledge, a range of cues from text, and the situational context in which the reading occurs to build or construct a

model of meaning from the text. This marks the importance of the amount of previous knowledge students' bring in during the reading process. This embraces the knowledge that the readers bring to the task and the strategies that they use to foster and maintain understanding according to Dahlia, Wray and Pope (2010). Also in Vietnam, Khang (2010) found out that readable text would enhance students' interest and motivation in a reading class. Again, reading lesson is no longer dry and boring because the text keeps the class interesting for the teachers and students.

In conclusion, this study has provided evidence with regard to the readability level of reading texts used in Section C of the English paper. This research has shown that all the reading texts in Section C of the English papers from the year 2009 till 20015 are "fairly easy" to read. Taken together, these results suggest that the responsible party, the Malaysia Examinations Syndicate need to choose reading texts which are in between 'fairly easy' to moderately difficult texts so that they cater to the needs of students from various levels of English language proficiency. By doing so, students with low or intermediate level of language proficiency are still able to do it and at the same time, the texts are not too easy and bore the advanced students either. This study has also highlighted the importance for teachers, educators and test developers to use readability formulas and make them a practice to always find the right "tunes" between students' reading level and readability of reading materials. It is hoped that this study would not just provide meaningful insights into the issues, but also help policy makers in terms of identifying the problem of other related issues.

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