

Malaysian Journal Of ELT Research

ISSN: 1511-8002

Vol. 4, 2008

Learner Background and their Attitudes towards Studying Literature

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Abstract

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between students' background and their attitudes towards language learning. However, very few research studies focus on learner background and how it affects their attitudes towards studying literature, especially in the Malaysian context. This study aims to gather information on students' background, such as gender, socio-economic status, the location of schools, and find out which variables influence students' attitudes towards the Literature in English Component of the English Language Syllabus. Participants were students in arts and science classes from two schools, one located in a rural area and the other in a town. The instruments used were student questionnaires, interviews and their previous examination results. Data analysed suggest that students' attitudes correlate with their proficiency level (indicated by previous examination results), which is also linked to the location of their school and their classes.

Introduction

Attitude has cognitive, affective and conative components; it involves beliefs, emotional reactions and behavioural tendencies related to the object of the attitudes (McGroarty, 1996). It has an evaluative aspect, a disposition and tendency to react positively or negatively to something. It is, in short, the way someone thinks or behaves. However, attitudes are not static and can be changed by identifying the sources of negative attitudes and correcting them.

Students' attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context may all play some part in explaining their success in learning a language (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). Numerous research studies have been conducted on the role of attitude in second language acquisition, probably spurred by the knowledge that negative attitudes can change. Factors like better teaching strategies, classroom and social environment can drastically reduce negative attitudes (Choy, 2002). Individual differences also play a significant role in learning a language. In second language learning contexts, factors like age, gender, language background, type of school attended, and peer influences are some of the variables that influence language acquisition and attitudes (Merisou-Strom, 2007).

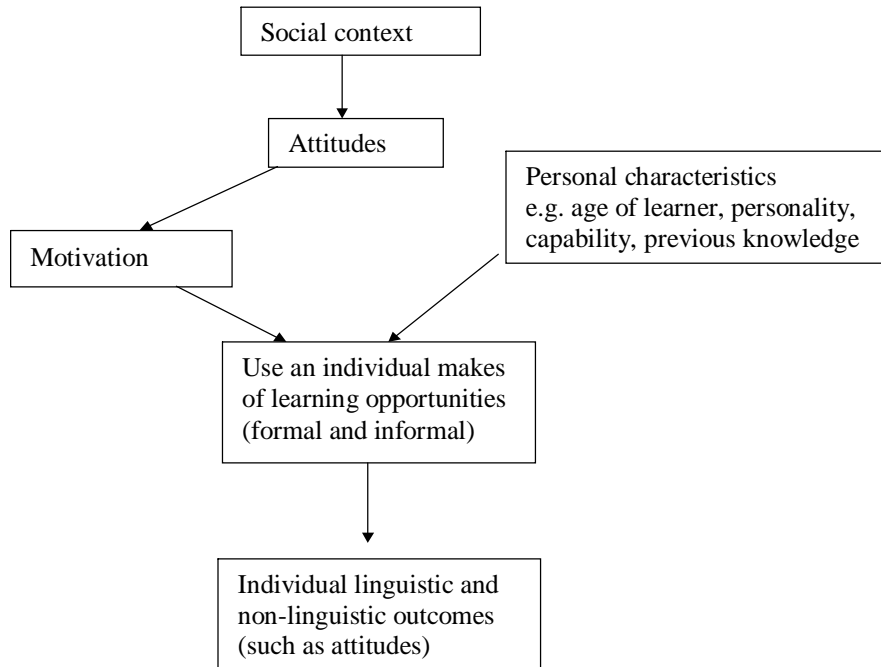
As there is limited research on students' background and their attitudes towards studying literature, this study uses students' attitudes towards second and foreign language learning as its conceptual framework. Attitudes related to the motives of studying a language can be divided into two main categories; integrative and instrumental motives. Gardner (as cited in Baker, 1993) suggests that integrative motives refer to situations where a person learns a second language in order to participate in the target language group's cultural activities. Instrumental motives refer to practical purposes of learning a language such as in order to get a better job or to pass examinations.

Attitudes are often shaped by the social context, "develop early in childhood and are the result of parents and peers' attitudes" (Brown, 2000 p.180) as well as contact with others from different cultures. Attitudes towards a language, such as whether a language is considered worth learning, often begin at home. Social context also determines provision and practice for second language learning at home. Families that have positive attitudes towards English for example, might provide reading materials and practice in an informal learning context.

Students with positive attitudes will spend more effort to learn the language by using strategies such as asking questions, volunteering information and answering questions (Baker, 1993). Attitudes therefore affect the rate of development and the final proficiency achieved in the target language. Fortunately, attitudes do not remain static; they can be changed through the learning process such as by using appropriate materials and teaching techniques. Attitudes also improve as a result of language learning as learners who learn well will acquire positive attitudes.

Students' attitudes towards second language learning can be explained by Spolsky's framework (Brown, 2000) shown in Figure1.

Figure1 Spolsky's model

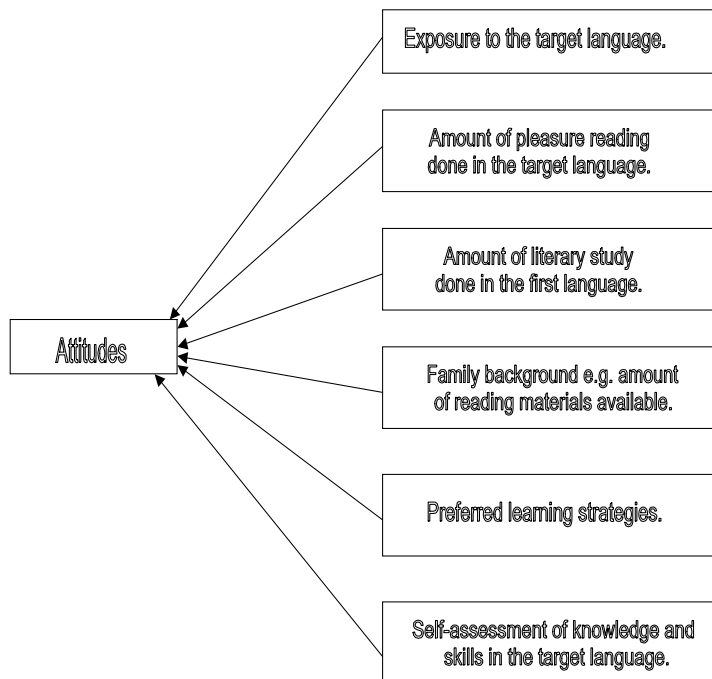


According to this framework, attitudes are shaped and influenced by the social context such as an individual's home and community. Attitudes in turn, determine the type and amount of learner motivation. Both motivation and personal characteristics influence how an individual makes use of the learning opportunities in formal and informal contexts. The final outcomes are the linguistic proficiency of a learner and also non-linguistic outcomes such as attitudes which might change after the learning process.

Attitudes and learner background

Davis et al (1992) conducted a survey of undergraduates' attitudes towards the study of foreign literature. The survey used Likert-scaled questionnaires which were distributed to 175 undergraduates studying French and Spanish in three colleges in the United States. The survey aimed to identify the potential impact of seven variables on students' attitudes towards literature as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Davis's model of research



Their study found that the amount of pleasure reading done in the target language showed a significant relationship with students' attitudes towards literature in a foreign language. Students who spent more time reading in the target language expressed better attitudes towards literature. Family background also contributed to students' attitudes concerning literary study. Results suggested students whose parents read more, who spent more time being read to and who had more variety of books available at home had better attitudes towards literary study. Inexplicably, students who thought they had more knowledge of the target culture showed more negative attitudes compared to those who rated their cultural knowledge lower. The other variables, exposure to the target language, exposure to literary study in the students' first language and teaching methods, did not show significant correlations to students' attitudes towards foreign literature study.

A survey conducted by Sarjit Kaur and Rosy Thiyagarajah (1999) suggested that even first year university students majoring in English language and literature found reading literary texts a major problem. A total of 48.6% of the participants agreed that they are not efficient and confident enough to read literary texts. Mohd. Shukor (2001) however, found that although secondary students thought their low proficiency level was a constraint, it did not negatively influence their attitudes towards the Literature Component in English.

In Malaysia, students with better attitudes towards reading are those who have a wider variety of reading materials at home. They also have positive influences such as parents and siblings who read, as well as a bigger reading area at home (Ambigapathy Pandian, 2000). However, the above variables also significantly correlate with socio-economic status. Students who come from a higher socio-economic background generally have more reading materials at home compared to students who are from lower income families. From this, perhaps we can hypothesize that learners of a higher socio-economic status will also have positive attitudes towards studying literature compared to other students.

The location of schools might also have an impact on students' attitudes towards literature. Students in urban areas tend to have a higher proficiency level of English compared to students studying in rural areas. For example, looking at PMR results, the majority of students in urban areas obtained distinctions while the majority in rural schools obtained credits and pass grades due to insufficient exposure to the language and the lack of practice (Rosli Talif & Jayakaran Mukundan, 1994; Jamali Ismail & Hasliza Aris, 2002). Lower proficiency levels, in turn, lead to frustration and lack of motivation among students, especially those from remote rural areas who cannot see the relevance of English in their daily lives.

Other personal variables that may affect students' attitudes are gender, ethnicity and class specializations such as science, arts or commerce. Ellis (1994) finds that female students have better attitudes towards second language acquisition compared to male students. Female students are found to allocate more time and money in purchasing and getting access to reading materials in English and they will probably have better attitudes towards studying literature compared to male students. Non-Malays tend to "have better positive attitudes towards reading in English and the subject" (Ambigapathy Pandian, 2000 p.12) compared to Malay secondary students. Again, this might translate into better attitudes towards literature as well although there is no empirical evidence to support it so far. Science stream students, both at undergraduate and secondary levels have better attitudes towards reading in English and they also read a wider variety of reading materials compared to students from the Arts and Commerce streams.

The Literature in English Component

The Literature in English Component was introduced in March 2000 at Form One and Four levels in every secondary school in Malaysia. Developed in line with the Malaysian Philosophy of Education to produce holistic individuals, it is hoped that through this component, students "would find the base for an appreciation of literature in English with its concerns with humanity, values, beliefs and customs as well as its great tradition and heights of imagination and creativity" (Ministry of Education, 2003 p. 5).

The programme aims to:

- i) enhance students' acquisition of English by providing examples of language in contexts which are authentic and interesting
- ii) help students understand others and themselves better and contribute positively as Malaysian citizens, in accordance with the National Philosophy of Education
- iii) appreciate the aesthetic values of literature
- iv) learn and understand the culture of others and universal and human values.

In addition, the new programme also hopes to empower students to:

- i) respond and react personally to texts
- ii) be more aware of how language forms and structures can be used to communicate more effectively
- iii) infer valuable moral values from the issues addressed in the literary texts and relate them to their own life
- iv) increase their cross-cultural knowledge and understanding.

(Ganakumaran Subramaniam, 2002).

The programme was implemented in stages with the Form One and Four levels in March 2000, followed by Form Two and Five in 2001 and Form Three in 2002.

Research objectives

This study has three main objectives:

1. To find out students' attitudes towards studying literature
2. To examine the relationship between students' background variables and their attitudes towards studying literature
3. To provide a profile of learners who have positive and negative attitudes towards studying literature.

Research questions

Based on the objectives, the research questions are:

- 1.a) What are students' general attitudes towards English and the Literature in English Component?
 - b) What are students' attitudes towards the text selection?
 - c) What are students' attitudes towards the teaching methods used in literature class?
2. Which of these learner background variables correlate with students' attitudes towards literature:
 - i) Gender.
 - ii) Ethnicity.
 - iii) Location of school.
 - iv) Proficiency in English as indicated by previous examination results.

- v) Socio-economic status or total household income.
- vi) First language.
- vii) Other languages spoken at home.
- viii) Parents or siblings who speak English.
- ix) Time spent reading English materials.
- x) Current exposure to English.

3. Who are the students with positive and negative attitudes towards studying literature?

Methodology

Subjects

The sample population consisted of 110 Form Five students from two different co-educational national schools in Kemaman district. The first school is located in Kemaman town while the second school is located in Kemasik, a rural area. Form Five students were chosen as they had read all the genres as well as texts from different authors and backgrounds. All students from the area were streamed according to their ability and also their academic options such as science, accountancy and arts. In each school, the questionnaires were distributed to students in the science and arts streams.

Table 1. Number of respondents according to school

School and class	No. of participants (questionnaire)	No. of participants (interview)
1. Town school (science class)	33	8
2. Town school (arts class)	19	8
3. Rural school (science class)	22	8
4. Rural school (arts class)	36	8

Instruments

The study combines the use of students' questionnaires, interviews and examination results.

1. The questionnaire.

The questionnaire is divided into two parts (refer to Appendix A). The first part aims to gather information concerning students' background such as gender, ethnicity, household income and the amount of materials available at home. It also requires them to state their name in order to enable the researcher to match their questionnaires with their marks for profiling purpose later. The second part addresses students' attitudes towards the

Literature in English Component. It consists of thirty-four statements using a Likert-scale where students indicate their general attitudes towards English and literature, text selection and teaching methods.

An analysis of item reliability was determined through the reliability coefficient, Cronbach alpha using SPSS. The result showed that the questionnaire demonstrated an acceptable alpha value of 0.79.

2. The interview.

The interview is meant to confirm and complement information gathered from the questionnaire. A total of thirty-two students, eight from each class participated in the interview which utilized open-ended questions. The interviewees were given the choice of using English or Malay. However, only students from the science class chose to use English while the others opted for Malay.

3. Students' examination results.

Students' English PMR (a standardized, national examination in Form Three) results and their final Form Four examination English language results were examined to determine if their language proficiency correlates with their attitudes towards literature.

Data analysis

The questionnaires were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive analysis of mean, frequency and percentage was conducted for all the items in the questionnaire. ANOVA, t-test and correlation analysis were used in order to find out which background variables correlate with attitudes. After finding out the students' attitudes and the correlation with their Form Four examination results based on their marks and names, the questionnaires belonging to the high (85-100) and low scorers (0-15) were isolated and analyzed for frequency in order to produce profiles of students with positive and negative attitudes towards literature. Data from the interview was transcribed and analyzed for frequency.

Results

Students' general attitudes towards literature

It seems that the majority of the students, a total of 90.9%, strongly feel that learning literature is enjoyable. Their attitudes towards literature are more favourable than their attitudes towards English where 86.3% of the respondents strongly agree and agree that they like learning English. A total of 71.9% of the students feel that the texts are relevant and useful for them. This is similar to the number of students who acknowledge that literature can help them improve their proficiency in English, learn more about others' "philosophy of life" and their culture and beliefs. Students are also aware that literature contributes towards producing balanced individuals, so that those who are involved in science and technology "will keep in touch with humanity".

Students' attitudes towards text selection

Short stories are the most popular genre in the Literature in English Component. A total of 80% participants express positive attitudes towards reading short stories. They find short stories easiest to read as they are not lengthy and are less time consuming which enables them to do their homework and participate in co-curricular activities. Based on the interviews, students agree that the language is manageable while the plots are interesting and fast-paced, "like watching a movie". Too (2006) also found that students were critical of slow-paced and boring texts and instead preferred texts with familiar settings and language that they could relate to.

Students express negative attitudes towards reading poems and novels. Almost 70% of the students find poems demanding, followed by novels, with a total of 62%. Poems are considered challenging as "every word has its underlying meaning", the language is deemed difficult, especially in archaic poems like Sonnet 18. The themes for both genres are seen as "dull", while the novels are described as lengthy with confusing plots and characters. Sidhu (2003) also found that students were dissatisfied with the texts due to the mismatch in language levels and interests. 84.6% of the respondents feel that they could not understand the texts due to their lack of proficiency in English. 70.9% students strongly agree and agree that although they can understand the literal meaning of a text, they do not seem to have the critical thinking skills to analyze and interpret the texts or identify their messages and themes.

The number of students who favour texts written by Malaysian and foreign authors is equal. Students who prefer non-Malaysian texts say their plots are better, more interesting, less predictable and refreshingly "weird" while Malaysian texts are also attractive as they are easier to comprehend, more familiar and help students to learn more about their own culture and "roots".

Data from the interviews suggests that regardless of gender, students' favourite text types are mysteries (27%) as they are full of suspense, followed by adventure stories (16.3%), love stories, science fiction, comedy and horror. However, only female students suggest the theme 'love' as they think it suits their age and can prevent them from "getting involved in the negative aspects of love".

Students' attitudes towards teaching methods

The preferred teaching strategies among students are providing background information (96.2%), using a variety of activities (95.4%) and working in groups (91.8%). Unexpectedly, students show a preference towards voicing their opinions and personal reactions during literature class with a total of 90.9% respondents agreeing to this idea. Teacher's explanation is ranked as the fifth most important teaching strategy. A total of 85.5% respondents would like to have audio-visual support in learning literature. Interestingly, quite a large number of students (70%) think it is acceptable for the teacher to use Malay while teaching literature.

On the other hand, half of the students express negative attitudes towards current teaching practices employed by their teachers which are described as dull and considered inadequate in preparing them for their examination. Based on the interviews, the classes seem to have a similar sequence of activities. For weaker classes, the teacher will read aloud and sometimes ask students to take turns to read, followed by teacher explanation and note taking. This could be due to teachers' lack of training on how to teach literature. A study conducted by Ganakumaran Subramaniam et al (2003) found that 48% of teachers surveyed agreed that they require more knowledge about literature teaching methodology.

Interestingly, the interviews reveal that students from the rural school have better attitudes towards teaching strategies utilized by their teachers compared to their urban counterparts. Their teachers exploit various techniques ranging from using the overhead projector, showing diagrams and charts about plot and characters to working in groups. They also write dialogues and perform them in front of the class, which helps them understand and remember the texts better. These students also admit that their notes are mostly in visual forms, probably due to their lower level of proficiency. In the town school, teacher explanation and doing exercises seem to be the norm while for lower proficiency students the teacher sometimes would translate the poems word-by-word. Students suggest using drama, watching videos, providing detailed explanations, using computers and the Internet to make lessons more interesting.

Learner background

These are some of the relevant results from the analysis of the questionnaires concerning learners' background.

Table 2. Number of respondents according to gender

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	45	40.9
Female	65	59.1
Total	110	100

Female students made up 59.1% of the students who participated in this study. In the urban school, the number of both male and female students in the two classes was equal. However, in the rural school, there were only three male students in the science class compared to twenty seven females, while in the arts class Professor Ronald Carter,

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there were twenty five boys to thirteen girls. In this school, boys are mainly found in the arts classes due to their poor performance in the PMR examination.

The data revealed that most of the respondents have very limited exposure and even less opportunities to practise English outside their classrooms. Only 14.5% students English at home as shown below:

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Table 3. Other languages spoken at home

Language	Number	Percentage
1. None	85	77.3
2. English	16	14.5
3. Mandarin	4	3.6
4. Hokkien	2	1.8
5. Teochew	2	1.8
6. Cantonese	1	0.9
Total	110	100

Most students only spend five hours or less a week reading English materials. Only nine students, most of whom are female, from higher income families and obtained an A in their previous examination, read more than ten hours a week.

Table 4. Time spent reading in English

	Number	Percentage
0 – 5 hours per week	70	63.6
6 – 10 hours per week	31	28.2
11 – 15 hours per week	8	7.3
16 – 20 hours per week	1	0.9
Total	110	100

Half of the students read mainly English newspapers, probably because they are widely available and are relatively cheap. 32.7% of the students read magazines, mostly on entertainment, followed by comics.

Table 5. Type of materials read

Materials	Number	Percentage
1. Newspapers	57	51.8
2. Magazines	36	32.7
3. Comics	9	8.2

4. Novels	6	5.5
5. Others	2	1.8
Total	110	100

About half of the students come from lower income families and most of them are from the rural school. Only a few students, most of whom are in the science class in the town school, are from higher income families. The location of the school is linked to the total household income and students' performance in examinations.

Table 6. Total household income

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	Number	Percentage
Less than 500	49	44.5
501 – 1500	32	29.1
1501 – 3000	17	15.5
3001 – 5000	6	5.5
More than 5000	6	5.5
Total	110	100

Correlation

Out of the ten variables examined, only one variable, students' final Form Four examination results, has a significant relationship to attitudes.

Table 7. Students' English PMR examination result

Grade	Number	Percentage
A	31	28.2
B	15	13.6
C	19	17.4
D	25	22.7
E	20	18.2
Total	110	100

There seems to be no correlation between students' PMR result and their attitudes towards literature.

Table 8. Students' Form Four examination result.

Grade	Number	Percentage
A	28	25.5
B	7	6.4
C	11	10.0
D	9	8.2
E	50	45.5
Absent	5	4.5

Total	110	100
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Although the number of students who scored A for their final Form Four examination is similar to the number who got A's for their PMR, the number of students who failed English in Form Four increased drastically. Almost half of the students or 45.5% failed English in Form Four. All the A students are from the science class in the town school. Science students from the rural school obtained credits while all the students from the arts class in the rural school failed their Form Four final examination.

Table 9. Correlations between students' result and their attitudes

		Mark	Attitudes
Pearson Correlation	Mark	1.000	.235*
	Attitudes	.235*	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	Mark	.	.013
	Attitudes	.013	.
Number	Mark	110	110
	Attitudes	110	110

*correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

For the analysis, the significant value was set at 0.05. Only students' final Form Four English examination results were found to correlate with their attitudes. This suggests that students' attitudes towards literature improve parallel to their proficiency in English. Similar results were also found by Akyel and Yalcin (1990) and Clark and Graves (2008) whose study showed that students who were better in English were more willing and interested in learning literature.

Discussion

Students' examination results are closely related to the location of school and their class. As mentioned before all the students who scored A are from the science class in an urban area. The students' marks makes it possible to group students according to their marks, identify their questionnaires and create profiles for both groups of students with positive and negative attitudes towards literature. The majority of the high scorers (85-100 marks) are Chinese students with a few Malays and one Indian student. Two profiles are provided below as there is a difference between Chinese high scorers and Malay and Indian high scorers.

Profile of a Chinese student with positive attitudes towards literature:

1. Total household income RM1500 or above.
2. Scored A for English PMR examination.
3. Spends less than five hours reading English materials.
4. Current exposure to English is through reading and the Internet.
5. Good results for final English Form Four examination.

6. Comes from a science class in an urban school.

Profile of a Malay and Indian student with positive attitudes towards literature:

1. Total household income of RM3000 and more.
2. Scored A for English PMR examination.
3. Reads a lot of English materials
4. Current exposure to English is through a variety of channels.
5. Speaks English at home.
6. Has siblings or parents who speak English.
7. Good results for final English Form Four examination.
8. Comes from a science class in an urban school.

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It seems that for Malay and Indian students, getting good marks in examination is related to higher income and high exposure to the target language such as getting a lot of practice in the language by speaking English at home and having parents or siblings who speak English as well as being exposed to English through various channels.

However, for Chinese students practice and exposure need not necessarily be present for them to get good results. We can perhaps suggest that highly proficient Malay and Indian students learn English through acquisition from their environment while Chinese students who are proficient learn English from formal lessons.

A profile of a student with negative attitudes towards literature (0-15 marks):

1. Malay.
2. Male.
3. Does not speak another language at home.
4. Does not have siblings or parents who speak English.
5. Comes from a lower income family of less than 500.
6. Low marks for final English Form Four examination.
7. Comes from an arts class in a rural school.

Although gender is not linked to students' proficiency as far as good and average students are concerned, all the ones with low proficiency in English are male students. These students are from an arts class in a rural school, all of whom are Malays. Negative attitudes also seem to be associated with very little exposure to English such as not having siblings or parents who speak English.

Conclusion

Admittedly, not much can be done to change students' background such as their families' socio-economic status or the languages spoken at home. However, certain measures can be taken to complement students' background and improve their attitudes towards English and literature.

A way to motivate students to read literature is through better text selection. The most important criterion in text selection is probably students' interest. This does not mean that the texts have to be about teenagers' issues only. Students' response suggests that they would like to read about adventure, mysteries and life experience. As the students come from different background, interest and abilities, the best option is to choose texts which vary in terms of genres, topics and language level. Matching readers and text and g
students choice and access to interesting texts are crucial in improving students' atti ¹⁵
towards literature (Clark & Graves, 2008).

Using a variety of attractive teaching strategies is another method to improve students' attitudes. For students with a higher proficiency level, teachers can use activities where students get to practise their creative and critical thinking skills such as writing their own scripts, staging a drama or even creative writing. Teachers can encourage students to be more autonomous by using computers as well as the Internet and guiding them in activities like researching information on the author's background or the historical elements of the texts. Baltrain (2007) suggests using multitasking tasks in groups for large classes where students rotate tasks so that they can try a variety of activities and work at their own pace.

Students with negative attitudes share similarities especially concerning their limited exposure to English. Most of these students do not have parents or siblings who speak English and are exposed to English mainly through television and academic reading. For them, school is probably the only place they get to practice using English. Therefore, teachers might want to avoid using too much translation and instead use short, simple sentences or visuals such as charts and diagrams to assist students' comprehension of texts.

As most of these students are boys, teachers can spend less time on reading comprehension exercises and conduct task-based or out-door activities as suggested by a few of the students. Teachers can ask students to do group work, drama, participate in debates, draw posters, mime or even use songs as part of their literature lessons.

Malaysian students, especially those in remote or rural areas do not see the need to use English in their life, hence their lack of motivation and proficiency in the language (Jamali Ismail & Hasliza Arif, 2002). As negative attitudes correlate with students' low proficiency in English, teachers and school administrators need to address this issue and find ways to make students aware that English is beneficial to them. Schools can employ various approaches to increase students' proficiency such as through extra classes/tuition, organizing motivational talks by speakers from similar backgrounds and getting support from the corporate sector. They can also boost students' exposure to English by using the Internet and stocking their libraries with attractive reading materials to inculcate the reading habit among students.

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