

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Race for Literacy: Alternative for LINUS2.0

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ABSTRACT – Teachers often struggle to deal with pupils who have minimum mastery levels towards learning. On the other hand, teachers need to provide all pupils with access to specific learning activities that work best for them. However, what works best for some pupils might not work for others and as a result, teachers need to think out of the box to improve the pupils' motivation. In dealing with mixed-ability pupils, differentiated instructions would make sense because it offers different paths to understanding the content, process, and products which will eventually affect the students' motivation to perform better. Hence, this study presents the findings gathered from a programme called Race for Literacy (RFL) which was intended for the struggling learners. The RFL programme comprises outside classroom activities to boost the struggling learners' four basic skills of English language. 200 Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) pupils from two districts in one of the states in Malaysia were involved in the programme and their performances were measured using LINUS screening instrument from the Ministry of Education. The spiral cycle of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) action research methodology was used to collect the data, and results from the screenings proved the positive impact of RFL activities on the pupils' performance. Apparently, learning out of the four walls of classroom, and providing equal opportunities to be involved are highly recommended to boost struggling pupils' motivation to improve their language proficiency levels.

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INTRODUCTION

Part of the success in educating and producing holistically developed students is “boosting all students’ proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia and English language” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. E-12), in which after three years of schooling, a child will achieve 100% basic literacy of these two languages. However, teachers’ commitment is challenged when they face issues in teaching students, particularly the illiterate ones (Ministry of Education, 2013). The Ministry of Education has channeled the focus on dealing with these illiterate students with a programme called LINUS. LINUS mainly stresses on the development of students who are struggling to catch up with the mainstream students. In 2008, Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) Report indicated that 54,000 (13%) of Year One pupils were identified as incompetent readers (Ministry of Education, 2010) due to the pupils’ background knowledge, as well as their limited knowledge of the language (Joseph, Thomas, Simonette, & Ramsook, 2013).

Additionally, Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) that stresses on the development of critical literacy was introduced in 2011. The focus is on learning standards and content standards. Learning standards mean setting the criteria for quality learning and as performance indicators to measure each content standard. Content standards refer to specific statements about what the students should know and can do in a period of schooling including their knowledge, skills and values. Engagement and experiences in English language learning are described in the curriculum based on the development of students’ ability to speak, listen, read, and write in English meaningfully, purposefully and with confidence (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2011, p. 20).

Nevertheless, the reality of classroom setting is that teachers are dealing with students who are culturally and cognitively diverse. It is important to realise that students cannot be equally fit into monolithic ways of teaching and learning. Students with minimum levels in particular, may require teachers to think out of the box. Teachers cannot simply rely on textbooks, and fully depend on in-class activities to boost the pupils’ motivation to improve. Based on the observations conducted in LINUS classrooms, the District Education Department came up with an alternative that consists of outside classroom activities. The alternative approach for LINUS programme was intended to kill two birds with one stone i.e. (i) to assist the pupils’ literacy in reading English language materials and, (ii) to nurture collaboration between teachers, pupils and the programme developer/designer. Two cycles of the programme, Race for Literacy 1 (RFL1) and Race for Literacy 2 (RFL2) were employed to identify the improvised actions to be taken. Therefore, this paper aims to present the impacts of RFL activities on the struggling pupils for the development of their English language literacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LINUS2.0 Programme

Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS2.0) for English Language programme is one of the initiatives by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 to increase the rate of English language literacy among Malaysian lower primary students. It was introduced in 2013 to help Year One pupils to master basic skills in the English language after three years of their primary education. In accordance to LINUS Manual Book, literacy for the English language is defined as the ability to master the basic skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and comprehending in English (Ministry of Education, 2015). For that, the pupils need to sit for screenings twice a year, in March and September. These two screenings are the standard procedures to measure the pupils' achievement of the standard language literacy after undergoing remedial sessions or the Literacy Intervention Programme (Ministry of Education, 2012).

There are two components that the pupils need to master namely the oral screening, and written screening. The screenings are based on outlined instruments to measure pupils' ability to master verbal and written skills. There are twelve constructs in both instruments that emphasise on phonics, phonemes blending, and segmenting components. The twelve constructs are aligned with the KSSR syllabus (Table 1).

Table 1. The Constructs in LINUS Screening Instruments (Ministry of Education, 2011; 2015).

Construct	Descriptions: Able to...
1	identify and distinguish the shapes of the letters of the alphabet
2	associate sounds with the letters of the alphabet
3	blend phonemes into recognisable words
4	segment words into phonemes
5	understand and use the language at a word level
6	participate in daily conversations using appropriate phrases
7	understand and use the language at phrase level in linear texts
8	understand and use the language at phrase level in non-linear texts
9	read and understand sentences with guidance
10	understand and use the language at sentence level in non-linear texts
11	understand and use the language at sentence level in linear texts
12	construct sentences with guidance

Developing Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness development is the utmost crucial skill that needs to be taught to young learners, although according to Gail (2018), it is difficult but has the strongest correlation of learning how to read. The purpose of exposing phonemic awareness is to give them the basic knowledge of the language so that they will be able to differentiate different letters by different sounds, while phonics in this study is to raise the accuracy of decoding and fluency in word recognition via the use of online materials.

This is correlated with the Bottom-up theory which perceives reading as “a process of decoding written symbols into their aural equivalents in a linear fashion” (Barachers, 1998, p. 14). The theory focuses on the principle that, when young learners understand the relationships between letters and sound, it will be easier for them to read any unfamiliar words. Automatic word recognition and rapid reading rate are the goals of the bottom-up approach. The bottom-up approach plays an important role in reading because this method is a suitable method to teach the beginning readers (Barachers, 1998). Based on this perspective, the implications for reading instructions are that children need to begin reading through three simple steps: by learning the letter names, associating the letter names with their sounds, and then be shown how to blend these sounds into words. To reach this aim, explicit instruction in phonics and spellings is crucial; children should not be “word bound” in bottom-up approach processing (Grabe, 1991; Pratt & William, 2016).

CORI Framework

The Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction Framework (CORI) coined by Guthrie, Meter, Hancock, Aloa, Anderson, & McCann (1998) points out how the basic idea of assisting students in reading through explicit instructions will have an impact on several aspects. Guthrie et al. (1998) assert that the explicit reading instructions will directly and indirectly influence the students' motivation to read, change the behavioral engagement in reading and reading achievement (Guthrie et al., 2014). Guthrie (2020) has even expanded CORI Framework in supporting those who are categorised as struggling readers when fluency development and cognitive strategy learning are merged together.

The framework aims to increase student engagement in reading, in which the activities can be conducted through five practices: (1) using content-area goals for a conceptual theme during reading instruction; (2) giving students choices and control over their reading topics; (3) providing hands-on activities; (4) using interesting texts for instruction; and (5) organising opportunities for students to collaborate and learn from the text. In short, the Concept-Oriented Reading

Instruction is based on the rationale that when readers are fully engaged in reading, they comprehend better, use reading strategies effectively, and are motivated to read.

Differentiated Instructions for Reading

Dealing with mixed-ability students requires teachers' capability to differentiate their instruction to cater to students' abilities. It is very important because different students have different needs and intelligence (Morgan, 2014). This is because students tend to lose focus if the teacher does not use instructional strategies that fit the diversity of students' learning styles. Unfortunately, the increasing diversity of children in the primary classroom and the large class size could not address the needs of some children. Hence, teachers are encouraged to employ systematic differentiated instructions as the fundamental for effective remedial teaching and learning in dealing with students' learning style diversity.

According to Tomlinson (2010), differentiated instruction is very impactful if teachers implement three strategies namely emphasising on students' interest, using the right starting point, and allowing students to work at their own pace. Differentiated instructions have been proven effective in teachers' lesson implementation through the provision of quality and equity education (Valiandes, 2015). To add, Joseph et al. (2013) highlight one of the key elements of differentiated instruction which is content differentiation. Teachers are required to modify or adapt the materials used in their lessons by giving students access to the materials. Teachers have the choice to differentiate the content by grouping the students in small groups and use the internet as the main source in developing the learners' understanding and knowledge of the topic (Valiandes, 2015).

Out-of-class Activities

The learning of the English language should not just depend solely in the four-wall classroom. Instead, English teachers should engage students in more fun-learning out-of-class activities. Out-of-class activities constitute an extensive context of language learning as it allows authentic language exposure and plays essential roles in sustaining pupils' motivation in learning (Richards, 2015). In providing a highly immersive language-rich environment in school, pupils are deliberately and recurrently exposed to the English language through a variety of activities of high-quality linguistic input both within and beyond the classroom (Jiew, 2017). Besides, Ansawi (2017) who conducted a research on 125 rural pupils in Tuaran found that the pupils became eager and motivated to learn and speak the language in an informal, out-of-the-classroom setting. Interestingly, Vongkrachang and Chinwonno (2015) found that the reading problems among the foreign or second language Thai students were caused by the approach, which is lacked of autonomy, not so engaging materials, and less conducive environment.

Furthermore, Rashidah and Yusnamariah (2019) shared a similar finding with the rural students in Kelantan. In the study, the number of participation among the students increased when they were given adequate opportunities to engage in the activities conducted. In this light, it can be said that out-of-class learning composed of diversified constituents that met the varied needs in language learning and complemented in-class learning by striking a balance between focus on meaning and focus on the form which were positively associated with good English grades, English language learning efficacy, and enjoyment (Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015). In other words, out of class activities could act as the medium or the subject to arouse students' interest to learn better.

In many cases, students are still bound under certain circumstances where they only have the option to study inside the class; the main learning environment which they are exposed to. Class learning is the avenue that not everyone agrees or believes that it can cater to every students' learning style. A study revealed that intelligence focuses on the capacities that are important for success in school. Problem-solving is recognised as a crucial component, but the ability to fashion a product to write a symphony, execute a painting, stage a play, build up and manage an organisation, carry out an experiment are not included, presumably because the aforementioned capacities cannot be probed adequately in short-answer tests (Gardner, 2011). As success is mainly based on exams per se, teachers and schools are not furthering the cause of huge possibility that perhaps, students with different learning styles cannot function well in a classroom-based environment.

For many years, the ministry is trying to find a better way to improve English language learning and teaching by implementing initiatives and programmes for both students and teachers. Failures in implementing effective English learning and teaching especially in rural areas has recurrences and teachers are seeking alternative initiatives especially using out-of-class activities. In fact, the literature in this area underscores how students' motivation and interest play important roles in delivering effective out of class activities. When learners are involved in self-directed, active, and purposeful language activities outside a formal learning context, it will eventually increase their participation and understanding towards the whole lesson (Hyland, 2004). Obviously, out of class provides an alternative to tackle the students in this matter, in which a different learning style, environment, and method are used to increase their motivation. Using English for social interaction in out-of-class situations gives ample opportunities for learners to sustain and develop their proficiency in English (Richard, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The spiral cycle of action research by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) was applied in this programme. The activity which was known as Race for Literacy was specially designed for out-of-class activities to be conducted to the rural primary school pupils in one of the states in Malaysia. It was carried out in two different cohorts with the collaborations between the English language teachers and District Education Department. The spiral cycle which was proposed by

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) is explained in detail under the subheading Race for Literacy as the differentiated approach. Figure 1 is the spiral cycle of action research which was adapted in this study.

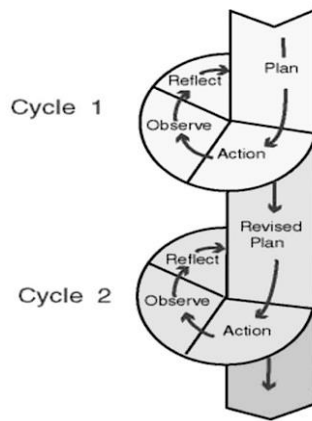


Figure 1. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) Action Research Cycle.

Participants

Selection of the participants was done purposively with the collaboration from the school teachers in each district with several basic criteria: participants were from national-type schools, the chosen pupils were those who not able to achieve Construct Three to Construct 12 in the first LINUS Screening conducted in March 2016, and the total number of participants from each cohort was 100 pupils respectively. Table 2 displays the schools involved in the study.

Table 2. The Cohorts of the Participants.

Cohort	No. of Schools	No. of Pupils
Race for Literacy 1	10	100
Race for Literacy 2	12	100

Race for Literacy (RFL) as the Differentiated Approach

The RFL was decided as an intervention for the struggling learners in two districts, District Y and Z. The activities planned would require the participants to work collaboratively in groups where each group consisted of ten group members. The main design of RFL is the station-based activities which are moderated by the teachers. Figure 2 displays 12 stations, leveled as according to LINUS descriptors and the objectives of each station.

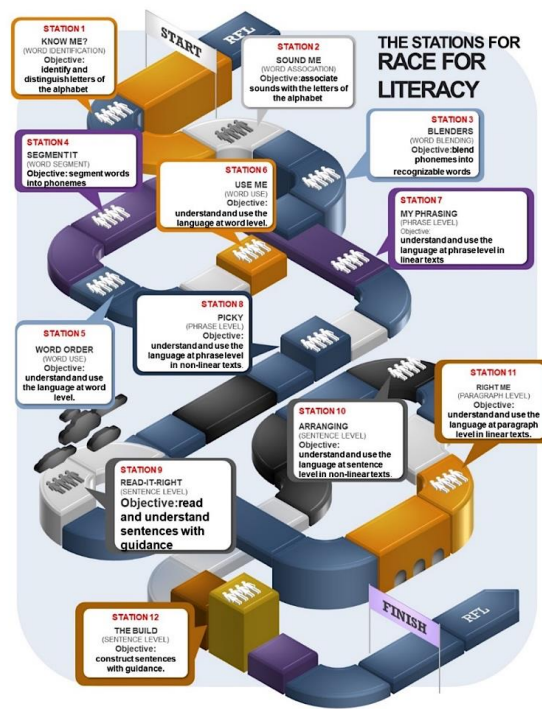


Figure 2. The Race for Literacy Stations.

Teachers were briefed on the tasks before the actual day of the event. The station-based activities required the pupils to complete 12 tasks at 12 stations which involved the integration of language skills and physical education activities. The pupils were required to complete the tasks within the stipulated time with discussions were allowed. Each task was designed to ensure the pupils would work in groups or pairs. All team members were given equal opportunities to practice the language. The list of tasks in each station reflects on the constructs listed in the LINUS descriptors (Table 1).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was gathered via pre and post-tests conducted with the pupils. The analysis was carried out descriptively before and after the activities using LINUS screening instruments. Table 3 summarises the data collection and analysis.

Table 3. The Summary of the Data Collection and Analysis.

Cohort	No. of Schools Involved	Timeline			Analysis
		Screening 1	Race for Literacy	Screening 2	
RFL 1	10	March 2016	April 2016	September 2016	Descriptive
RFL 2	12		May 2016		

FINDINGS

In this section, the results of the analysis of using the twelve constructs as specified for LINUS screening (Table 1) are presented in accordance to the two cycles, the Cycle 1 (Race for Literacy 1), and Cycle 2 (Race for Literacy 2).

Cycle 1: Race for Literacy 1

Based on the data gathered from Race for Literacy 1, the pupils showed significant changes in their scoring from the 1st Screening and 2nd Screening (Table 4). The data gathered from the 1st Screening showed that the majority of the pupils from the respective schools scored between 26.7% (lowest) to 93.9% (highest); however, after these pupils joined the Race for Literacy activity, their accumulated percentage boomed to 63.6% (lowest) to 100% (highest). Six out of 10 schools in District Y improved between 11% to 62% after the pupils joined the activities namely SK D (34%), SK E (23%), SK G (20%), SK H (62%), SK I (11%), and SK J (41%). Another three schools improved between the range of 0.8 to 9.8% which were SK A, SK C, and SK F. Only one school, SK B result was found to slightly drop from 93.9% to 91.9%. In short, most of the schools from District Y have shown remarkable changes in their literacy rate performance after the implementation of the activity.

Table 4. Literacy Rate Performance Schools in District Y.

No.	School	1 st Screening	2 nd Screening	% of improvement
1	SK A	81.8%	90.9%	9.1
2	SK B	93.9%	91.9%	-2
3	SK C	78.3%	88.1%	9.8
4	SK D	61.1%	95.2%	34.1
5	SK E	76.9%	100%	23.1
6	SK F	86.7%	87.5%	0.8
7	SK G	75%	95%	20
8	SK H	26.7%	88.5%	61.8
9	SK I	52.6%	63.6%	11
10	SK J	54.5%	95.5%	41

Cycle 2: Race for Literacy 2

Race for Literacy 2 was conducted with another 100 pupils from 12 schools in District Z. Similar activities were carried out and the teachers were also briefed before the programme. Results of the pre and post activities from the second cycle of the programme also showed profound changes in every school. Before the programme, the pupils' cumulative percentage was between 28.6% (lowest) to 92.9% (highest). The pupils' performance progressed between 0.4% to 35% improvement. Four of 10 schools from District Z showed 2-digits improvement (SK M, SK N, SK R, and SK U); whereas, another seven schools increased between 0.4% to 8.7% (SK P, SK O, SK T, SK V, SK Q, SK X, and SK S respectively). Like the first cohort of the programme, only one school (SK W) dropped from 91.7% to 88.6% (Table 5).

Table 5. Literacy Rate Performance for Schools in District Z.

No.	School	1 st Screening	2 nd Screening	% of improvement
1	SK M	59.1%	94.1%	35
2	SK N	71.4%	95.8%	24.4
3	SK O	89.7%	91.5%	1.8
4	SK P	92.9%	93.3%	0.4
5	SK Q	30%	36.4%	6.4
6	SK R	28.6%	47.8%	19.2
7	SK S	69.6%	78.3%	8.7
8	SK T	79.5%	83.7%	4.2
9	SK U	72.2%	93.8%	21.6
10	SK V	89.7%	95%	5.3
11	SK W	91.7%	88.6%	-3.1
12	SK X	83.3%	91.3%	8

Based on the data gathered, it shows that all 12 schools have shown tremendous improvements after participated in this activity. Overall, there was significant surge achieved for both districts, 17.9% for District Y, and 10.9% for District Z. Figure 3 illustrates the overall progress for each district.

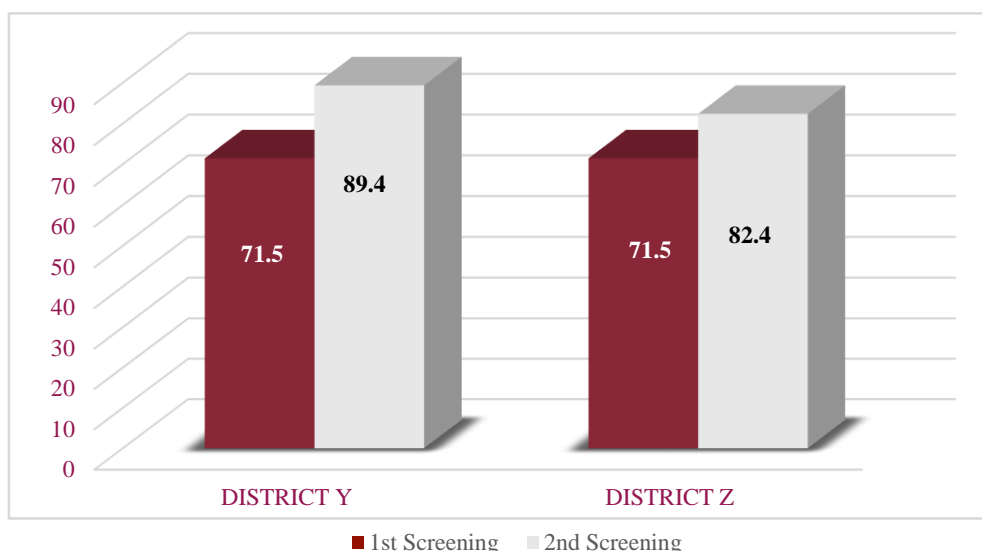


Figure 3. The Percentages of Overall Literacy Rate Performance of Schools in District Y and Z.

In short, the struggling pupils who participated in Race for Literacy activities have shown improvements based on the 12 constructs listed in the LINUS requirement. The Race for Literacy programme has succeeded in assisting the pupils to improve their verbal and written skills in accordance to the LINUS descriptions.

DISCUSSION

The findings have positive indications. The learning environment does play an important role in boosting the struggling readers' motivation towards reading. Race for Literacy was conducted out-of-class and it has proven that the out-of-class activities do have a significant impact on pupils' motivation to learn the language. Conducting lessons out of the four walls will create a different learning environment for learners. Furthermore, by incorporating the elements of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile, it will assist the struggling readers to acquire the skills and comprehend better in a less threatening environment. In this light, it shows that reading engagement via out of class activities help the pupils to improve their reading skills as it involved the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social engagement. This is in line with Guthrie et al. (2014) that social interaction in reading was one of the four defining characteristics of engaged readers, along with cognitive, behavioral, and emotional involvement in literacy. When readers are struggling to comprehend the reading texts, their conditions would turn out to uninterested and disconnected (Moje Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Vacca & Vacca, 1999). Therefore, the idea of integrating multisensory tasks or activities would be one of the alternatives which can be taken into consideration. The focus on mastering the academic requirement to master the required word levels would be enhanced should they be given a different setting.

Notably, the results showed that the pupils were giving signals to their teachers that they can perform better in the target language when they are not learning it individually, and in an informal context. Even though the overall 10.99% increment might be considered as minimal, there was still a change in the results. Another key point that many teachers might have overlooked at times is the ability to differentiate their instructions via games. The concept of arranging the 12 Stations was one of the examples of differentiation namely by content, process, and product. Chunks of the English language were differentiated throughout RFL programme but the same content was used for all the pupils. The content was only differentiated during delivery, from the simplest word level to the most challenging one, the sentence level either from reading texts, visuals, or audio. The differentiation by the process was spotted through the various activities which the pupils had to go through and complete. According to Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010; 2011), when learners are trying to figure out the given content, that is when differentiation by the process takes place. The process was evident during the RFL implementation of the two cohorts. The pupils were trying to make sense of what was given at each station, and they did it collaboratively and accordingly, at their own pace. Those who managed to configure out the tasks faster, they would complete earlier as compared to others.

The modifications of content and process of learning had an impact when the second screening was conducted for both districts. The completed worksheets or tasks provided by the pupils at each station or the results of the screening were the instances of when the differentiation element by-product were met. The results of the formative assessment (during the RFL) were triangulated with the results of the summative assessment (the second screening) to find out what the pupils have learned.

The impact of different learning settings was also witnessed from the RFL activities. The struggling pupils who were given the chance to move around from one station to another showed significant performance. They obtained better results in their second screenings, which were conducted months after the programme ended. The fun of running with other team members have even boosted their self-esteem and motivation. This shows learning has happened in a fun way. These

pupils were engaged with the reading activities more when they were working together with others. They were given choices and control over their reading topics either to complete the tasks individually, in pairs or groups. As proposed in CORI Framework (Guthrie et al., 2014), when the students are fully engaged in the reading activities, they comprehend better and are motivated to read. Rashidah and Yusnamariah (2019) made a similar revelation from their study on how “the injection of environment changes” (p. 11). The students from the rural districts showed a positive change in terms of confidence in using the language as compared to before the activity.

Moreover, language learning activities, when it is organised at a wall-less venue with the presence of unfamiliar people other than their English language teachers, can lead to a more meaningful changes in students’ understanding towards the target language. What is vital, as pointed out by Sharifah Nor, Rashidah, and Aidah (2010), language teachers need to select methods which can catch their learners’ attention, attract their interest to learn the target language, and help them see that learning a second language is fun. The students need to be aware that the mastery of the basic language skills should be a life-long process, and the knowledge of knowing other languages other than their mother tongue would be beneficial for real-world context. Therefore, the underlying goal for organising any language activity is to expose them to the knowledge that would be useful for their real-life in the future.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The importance of a conducive environment is one distinct feature that can be concluded from this study. When learning takes place in a less threatening atmosphere, the anxiety to use the target language is lessened. These struggling pupils did not seem to bother that they were being assessed as at that moment; most importantly they needed to compete and complete. There was no fear of making mistakes as there was no one who would be pointing at their mistakes. They understood that to reach to the last station, they could not take the risks to make more mistakes. Thus, their inner voice would make them be more alert on what to produce at each station; as for those among them who have a better cognitive ability, they would consciously know, they need to support their other peers. In short, everyone was given equal opportunity in completing the given tasks. The arrangement of the tasks in every station was done in line with the curriculum from the basic reading of the letter recognition and up to the sentence level; however, as they completed each task, they did not feel the pressure to do it like they were with the teachers in the classroom.

The study recommends RFL to be expanded not merely for struggling language learners. The idea of having station-based activities like RFL can also be designed for those who wants to upskill their abilities in the language. RFL is recommended to be used on advanced or adult learners but with more challenging yet, appropriate tasks. Test data might reveal achievement of learners’ cognitive aspect, however, the data from the affective attributes is highly sought to prove the robustness of RFL.

The highlight of working collaboratively with others is another noticeable contribution of RFL. The teachers involved were not given the burden to come out with the activities; instead, it was done with the others in the community from the District Education Department. No man can work in silos. The aim is to nurture collaboration between teachers, students and programme developer/designer, and this shall be the success criteria for all. Teachers need ideas from others and to understand the learners’ context, and the other party needs input from teachers. Continuous collaboration from all the stakeholders in the education is highly commended to realise all the aspirations set by the ministry.

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