Lower Secondary School Students' Attitude toward Reading in English

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ABSTRACT

Reading in English as a second language (ESL) is a vital skill that must be mastered by all adolescents. However, the reading process is neither easy nor straightforward in its nature. Despite the initiatives by the government and non-governmental agencies to inculcate reading habits, statistics has shown that students' interest in reading has not improved much. This is worrying as prosperous nation requires well-read and educated youths. Given the importance of developing a positive attitude among adolescents, the current study aims to investigate the attitude among lower secondary school students towards reading in English and explore whether the variable of gender would affect the reading attitude. A quantitative approach was used whereby data collected using an instrument, the Adult Survey of Reading Attitude' (ASRA). The questionnaires were administered to 300 lower secondary school students (Form1 & Form 2) at two different national schools in Puchong, Selangor. Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0. Descriptive analysis was carried out for RQ1 and Independent Sample T Test for RQ2. Findings of this study shows that despite an overall moderate attitude towards reading, these students lack in proper reading habit and practice both in and outside the classroom. In terms of gender difference, female students show significantly higher attitude compared to male students, while there were no significant differences among Form 1 and Form 2 students. The study provides several pedagogical implications for both ESL students and practitioners. Furthermore, to facilitate and further improve the EL reading skills among the students, an amalgamation of appropriate teaching approaches or methodologies can be adapted and practiced in the ESL reading classrooms creating a more conducive and stress-free environment to encourage students to build the reading attitude more confidently.

Keywords: Lower Secondary Students, Reading Attitude, English as Second Language (ESL)

INTRODUCTION

Reading in English as a second language continues to be an important part of literacy development, especially for teenagers growing up in multilingual surroundings where English serves as a primary academic and communicative tool. As earlier research already recognizes that access to reading materials plays a very significant role in language acquisition, it is considerably more difficult to develop a lifelong and authentic reading habit than to teach the mechanical skills needed for reading. Study revealed how books remain vital sources of knowledge despite advances in digital media [1]. Such perspectives on the broader significance of reading reveal simultaneously that there is a need to realize why some students, particularly those in the lower secondary levels of school, cannot develop positive attitudes toward reading in English.

Within the broader field of literacy studies, a considerable volume of earlier research evidence has reported reading attitudes, reading habits, and reading behaviours across various settings. Research carried out in the Asian context and Malaysia specifically by [2-5] gives valuable insights into how learners approach reading. However, most of these studies focus on university students or adult readers and thus do not contribute much to the understanding of adolescents in their early years of secondary education. These studies act as valuable comparators since they indicate a gap that seems to exist between the exposure to reading and the actual interest in reading among students. Again, reading attitudes have also been found to vary greatly among different age

groups, reading purposes, and other contextual factors. These aspects suggest that further research is required within the field, targeting more specialized segments, such as younger ESL learners.

International assessments continue to underscore the gravity of this situation. For instance, the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, has reported that some countries in the region, including Indonesia, continue to perform among the lowest in reading skills, with a score of 397 in 2015 and ranked 63 out of 72 participating nations. Such outcomes have deeper implications for reading engagement, particularly as adolescents increasingly rely on digital platforms as their key sources of information. Despite the many interventions put forward by the Malaysian government, such as the NILAM programme, to instill reading habits in people, the overall interest in reading does not appear to improve significantly. This is evidenced by the ranking of Malaysia in the bottom sixth out of 61 countries in terms of the World's Most Literate Nation by Central Connecticut State University, indicating that national policies may not be adequate to instill positive attitudes toward reading in young learners.

The call for specialized research is even more evident when considering the trends reported in [6] that discovered a significant decline in reading for pleasure among 13- and 17-year-olds in the United States. These findings, though restricted to L1 reading, have become pivotal points of reference because they indicate that adolescents in general are reading less, even in contexts where access to reading materials is plentiful. Since it is already established that L1 reading habits are declining worldwide, the situation may be even worse for L2 reading, especially for those students who have to deal with additional linguistic complexities. Good L2 reading supports memory development, critical thinking, and wider academic skills [7]; however, these benefits can only be achieved if learners hold a positive attitude towards reading. This asserts the significance of identifying how lower secondary students in Malaysia view English reading and whether their attitude is supportive of or detrimental to language development.

The inconsistent findings on gender differences in reading attitudes also motivate the present study. Study argued that girls usually exhibit stronger reading efficacy [8], while [9] discussed shifting reading motivations among boys, and [10] mentioned that deeply engaged text readers, of either gender, are more likely to become lifelong readers. These conflicting results imply that gender continues to be a relevant but unresolved variable in the understanding of reading attitude. Since there is only a limited number of gender-focused studies concerning Malaysian lower secondary students, the empirical evidence derived from this current research will contribute to judging whether global trends coincide with local patterns.

Apart from academics, the home environment plays an important role in reading habits. According to [11], family context, early reading exposure, and parental encouragement are the vital elements that help in building good reading behaviors. By the time students reach the lower secondary stage, their experiences with reading during the early years will determine whether they continue with or give up reading as an activity. It is, therefore, even more critical to understand how these factors influence students' attitudes toward reading in English in this rapidly changing digital world when smartphones, tablets, and other gadgets vie for the attention of students. Although digital tools make reading more accessible, even here, many students prefer online entertainment over reading, according to [5], and hence interest in reading is even more difficult to inculcate.

Against this backdrop, the current study contributes specialized knowledge through its investigation into the attitudes towards reading in English of lower secondary school students, a cohort whose reading habits are still in development and who represent the important juncture in the process of literacy formation. Contrasting general assessments of reading proficiency, this study explores the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dispositions toward reading in students; it further supplements national undertakings on literacy and complements existing literature with findings. The comparison of students' attitudes across gender in this study provides empirical data useful for judging how effective previous findings are in refining interventionist strategies. This is a gap in Malaysian literacy studies, considering early-stage secondary learners and providing data that may guide educators, policymakers, and school administrators in developing approaches to promote more meaningful reading engagement in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading in a second or foreign language has long been regarded as one of the cornerstones of literacy and academic success. While the ability to read in a second or foreign language can be acquired with little effort, habit formation in reading is infinitely more difficult to inculcate than the mechanics of reading itself. Books remain some of the most enduring vehicles of knowledge despite claims of the predominance of audio-visual and digital formats of information [1]. Cognitively, reading is viewed as an active process of meaning-making in which readers make use of prior knowledge and textual cues to construct meaning [12-13]. According to [14], rote learning needs to be differentiated from meaningful learning, and true learning takes place when new information is integrated into existing cognitive structures. In L2 reading, learners are dependent on their linguistic knowledge and background knowledge to arrive at an interpretation of texts, consistent with psycholinguistic guessing game stated by [15]. Other research into L2 reading points to its role in promoting memory, critical thinking, and study skills [7]. Further, both the reading processes of L1 and L2 have been found to play an essential role in comprehension [16]. Nevertheless, research on L2 reading still lags work on reading in L1, although EFL/ESL students are increasingly expected to engage in complex reading operations such as skimming, scanning, and reading for detail [17-18]. Other studies confirm the notion that awareness and actual use of reading strategies could enhance EFL students' reading skills and vocabulary growth [19], and reading practice is directly related to academic success [20].

The present study has its theoretical base in the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the cognitive view of reading. TPB, developed initially from the Theory of Reasoned Action [21-22] explains behaviour through the aspects of joint influence of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control with relevance on behavioural intention [23]. Attitude toward a behavior reflects an individual's overall evaluation of performing that behavior [24], while subjective norms reflect perceived social expectations and perceived behavioral control reflects perceived capability and constraints [23; 25]. Perceived behavioral control is conceptually related to Bandura's 1982 self-efficacy, emphasizing belief in performing the behavior under specific conditions. Within this frame, students who perceive that reading in English will be beneficial, feel that significant others believe that reading is worthwhile, and also feel capable of reading English texts are more likely to intend to read and to translate that intention into actual reading behavior. Combining this with the cognitive view, where reading comprehension and strategy use strongly form reading experiences [12; 13], TPB provides a useful lens to interpret lower secondary students' attitudes to reading in English.

Several initiatives and studies both in Malaysia and the wider Asian region cast light on the importance as well as the ongoing challenges of reading cultivation. At the national level, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has implemented programmes such as Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca (NILAM) to instill reading as a culture among school students [26]. Complementing these are initiatives at the NGO and school levels that include reading corners, book exchange programs, and large-scale book fairs. Regional studies have looked at attitudes and habits of reading across different populations: for example, Asian American adults [2], Malaysian tertiary students [3-4], and university undergraduates in other contexts [5]. These all point to one direction: attitude and habit toward reading is crucial to successful learning. Simultaneously, empirical evidence points to worrying patterns: Malaysian readers are reported to be more inclined toward reading newspapers and non-book materials compared to books; and young people increasingly prefer digital content that is non-academic in nature [5; 27]. It is stated in the literature that home environment serves as one of the most critical determinants of the reading habit; parental support and early exposure will shape the reading behavior of adolescents [11; 28].

Attitudes and habits towards reading are also shaped by personal and contextual factors. It was found that students who read aloud to others and who had more reading materials such as magazines had more positive attitudes about reading [29]. Another study identified that favourable reading attitudes are attributed to supportive home environments, which are characterized by parents providing books, making an appropriate atmosphere available, and encouraging use of the library [30]. In Malaysia, [31] showed that students' reading interest was related to academic achievement, socio-economic status, and participation in school programmes, with female students and those from higher income backgrounds spending more time reading. Reading habits have been conceptualised as regular patterns of reading frequency, material types, and preferences [32-33]. Factors such as gender, age, educational background, and academic performance influence these habits [34], and good reading habits are associated with healthy intellectual growth and academic success [35; 5]. Conversely,

poor reading habits have been linked to weaker comprehension and lower academic performance among secondary school students [36]. School is, therefore, a crucial location where such habits are set, although much of the regular classroom work involves reading exercises and comprehension tasks [37-38], yet external factors such as access to material and parental involvement remain highly influential in this matter [18].

A large number of studies found to have explored adolescents' attitudes towards reading, as well as both social influences and developmental trends have been emphasized and highlighted. Adolescents encounter a wide range of reading requirements, ranging from recreational reading to syllabus-based academic reading, and selections are often determined by peer groups and family networks. Research discovered that many students rely and listen more on friends than teachers in terms of book recommendations [39]. This highlights the role of peer networks. Parents and environmental factors shape attitudes, too, with [18] emphasizing the combined power of environmental, educational, and social conditions. Social dimensions of reading are revealed in studies showing that adolescents enjoy sharing reading experiences, making recommendations, and discussing texts with family, peers, and teachers [40-43], even though some students report feeling they have little opportunity to voice their own views in peer reading groups [44]. Large-scale surveys across the United States reported declining attitudes toward reading from primary into middle school, especially with respect to reading for academic purposes [45-48]. Another research reported that adolescents read increasingly for utilitarian purposes, rather than for personal development or enjoyment [49], and studies in Singapore and Europe also reported declines in reading enjoyment and leisure reading among high-achieving students aged roughly 10 to 14 [50-51]. Motivation is central to these patterns: intrinsically motivated adolescents are more likely to read in their free time and take pleasure in reading [52; 41; 53]; meanwhile, many devote their limited free time primarily to reading associated with exams [44; 40].

Gender often emerges as a significant factor in adolescent reading research. Many studies have found that girls are generally more open to reading activities, show more enjoyment of reading, and read at a greater frequency than boys [54; 40; 55; 56]. Research [57] posited that reading is at times perceived as more "feminine," with girls having an advantage when it comes to concentrating for reads. The more recent work also reveals that boys report lower motivation to read [58-60], even when they do read, which may involve social or group reading activities. Given these findings, it is reasonable to suggest that gender differences in reading attitudes and habits are both persistent and nuanced, influenced by cultural expectations, school practices, and the kinds of texts made available to students.

Finally, it points to significant changes in the type of materials adolescents read and how they conceptualize "reading." Adolescents read a range of materials: books and newspapers as well as digital texts, blogs, and social media content [59]. Most of them have greater preferences for magazines, newspapers, and online materials than for traditional printed books [61; 40; 62]. They report enjoying reading on digital platforms and valuing the interactivity and immediacy of online environments [63-64]. Yet, both adolescents and adults rarely or do not consider digital practices such as emailing, texting, browsing websites, or participating in online discussions as "real" reading [65; 66; 43]. Studies also show that there is a tendency to spend more time on non-academic digital content rather than spending that on books or academic reading [67; 5].

Taken together, the literature reviewed here reflects a convergence of cognitive, behavioural, and sociocultural influences that act on adolescents' reading attitudes in English. Cognitive models highlight how readers draw upon linguistic knowledge, strategy awareness, and background experience to make sense of texts [12–15], while the behavioural theories, such as TPB, identify beliefs, norms, and perceived control as key antecedents for reading intention and behaviour [21–25]. These strains of scholarship together suggest that reading in L2 is not just a technical ability but rather one influenced by their assessment of its utility, their self-efficacy in performing it, and how strongly they perceive teacher, peer, and family expectations. By the same token, however, the literature indicates that reading practice and attitude are unevenly developed, with convincing evidence documenting declining motivation and enjoyment as students go deeper into schooling [45–51], and that digital reading practices complicate the traditional understanding of literacy because adolescents increasingly expand what counts as reading [59; 63–66]. Notwithstanding a raft of initiatives toward promoting reading in Malaysia— be they NILAM efforts, school-based initiatives, or NGO-driven projects—the pattern of limited leisure reading and preference for non-academic digital content continues unbroken [5; 27; 67], which points to gaps between institutional aspirations and actual student reading engagement.

These insights point clearly to the need for research that examines reading attitudes at the lower secondary level, a period marked by shifting academic pressures, widening social influences, and intensifying exposure to digital media. While studies have explored university students [3–4], adults [2], and broad national trends [27; 5], far less is known about how early adolescents in Malaysia form their reading attitudes within the interplay of school culture, peer relationships, home environments, and gendered expectations. Furthermore, although gender differences in reading attitudes are consistently documented [40; 54–60], it remains unclear how these differences manifest within Malaysian lower secondary schools, where students are transitioning from structured primary reading routines to more autonomous academic demands. The present study therefore addresses an important empirical gap by focusing specifically on Form 1 and Form 2 students, examining how their attitudes toward reading in English are shaped and whether gender remains a significant differentiating factor. In so doing, this research integrates not just cognitive and behavioral frameworks but also provides context-specific evidence to inform school practices and national literacy initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a quantitative research design to investigate the attitude of lower secondary school students towards reading in English. Quantitative studies involve the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of numerical data to describe a phenomenon and to identify patterns or relationships among variables [68]. A descriptive, cross-sectional design was adopted because it facilitates the capturing of the attitudes of a defined population at a single point in time and allows for an efficient comparison of such variables as gender and reading attitudes [69]. In this context, the design was suitable for the profiling of students' attitudes and the identification of any significant differences that existed between groups without manipulating the environment in which the study was conducted.

The target population consisted of the lower secondary school students in Puchong district of Selangor; that is, Form 1 and Form 2 students. Two national secondary schools were therefore randomly chosen for the study to get a sample that was both manageable and sufficiently representative. Students within each selected school were thereafter selected through stratified random sampling. Strata were developed in this case based on the form level and gender. Stratified random sampling is a probability-based sampling technique that ensures representation in the sample of key subgroups in the population, thereby enhancing generalizability of the findings [70]. Respondents within each stratum were selected randomly in numbers that were proportional to the size of that subgroup in the school population, hence allowing meaningful comparison of attitudes by form level and gender.

Data were collected by a self-administered questionnaire survey, which is recognized as an efficient method to collect factual, behavioral, and attitudinal data from a relatively large sample within a limited time [71]. The instrument was adapted from the Adult Survey of Reading Attitude (ASRA) and modified to fit the context of younger lower secondary students [72]. In the adaptation process, items were revised linguistically and contextually to be age-appropriate, and those found to be redundant or overlapping were removed. Based on the input from content experts and feedback from a pilot study, the original 35 items were reduced to 28 items while retaining the core domains of interest.

The final questionnaire comprised two main parts. The first part solicited information on students' demographic data, namely form level and gender. The second part consisted of attitudinal items, which were grouped according to three key dimensions: reading activities, enjoyment during reading, and any difficulties or anxiety encountered while reading. Items reflected students' frequency of reading in English, their affective responses towards reading tasks, and their perceived challenges. The responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), which is a common and appropriate format for capturing attitude intensity in survey research [71]. To ensure that the items were comprehensible and inclusive of all respondents, the questionnaires were prepared in both the English and Malay languages, and the translation was checked by language experts to maintain semantic equivalence and clarity [72].

The data collection procedure was carried out during the regular school day in collaboration with school administrators and teachers. Before the data collection, formal approval to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethical committee of the researcher's university, as well as from the appropriate

educational authorities. Written permission was also obtained from the principals of participating schools. Since all respondents were minors, informed consent was obtained from their parents or guardians and assent was obtained from students themselves. Students were briefly informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary basis of participation, and their freedom to withdraw from participation without penalty at any point in time. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and that no personal identifiers would be reported. The questionnaires were completed in a classroom setting in the presence of the researcher and teacher, without any discussion among the students to minimize response bias.

All the completed questionnaires were coded and entered IBM SPSS version 21.0 for analysis [73]. Data cleaning was performed to check for missing values, out-of-range responses, and inconsistencies. The means and standard deviations were computed to address the first research objective, which seeks to examine the overall attitudes of lower secondary school students towards reading in English. These descriptive results provided an aggregate profile of students' reading activities, enjoyment, and perceived difficulties. In relation to the second objective, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether gender influences students' attitudes towards reading in English. This is an appropriate inferential test in comparing mean scores between two independent groups in determining whether observed differences are statistically significant [69], enabling this study to assess the extent to which variation in reading attitudes is associated with gender.

This methodology offers a structured way to generate valid and interpretable findings on LSS students' attitudes toward reading in English through the combination of a rigorous sampling approach, a validated and adapted instrument, ethically sound procedures, and appropriate statistical analyses.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In this research, 350 questionnaire sets were collected successfully, and 50 questionnaire sets were deleted for the study due to incomplete data. Only 300 sets of completed questionnaires were completed. Table 4.1 gives the demographics of the respondents, with most of them being female (52.3%) while the males were the remainder (47.7%). After all, the population of both schools was dominated by female students.

The Form 1 students constituted most respondents (56.7%), with Form 2 students at 43.4%. Referring to Table 4.1, it was clear that most of the respondents preferred reading in Malay (90.0%).

Table 4.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Information	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n=300)
Gender:		
Male	47.7	47.7
Female	52.3	157
Level of Education:		
Form 1	56.7	170
Form 2	43.3	130
Preferred language to read:		
Bahasa Malaysia	90.0	270
English	10.0	30

Both descriptive analysis and inferential analysis were considered to address the formulated research questions

in this study. Referring to the categories classified by [75] in Table 4.2, the attitudes of lower secondary school students towards reading and the relationships between variables were evaluated.

Table 4.2: Classification of Perception level by Oxford (1990)

Perception Level	Range of Mean Score
Negative	1 – 2.33
Moderate	2.34 – 3.67
Positive	3.69 - 5

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of lower secondary school students towards reading in English?

To answer the first RQ, descriptive analysis has been performed. Table 4.3 presents the results of the mean and standard deviation. All variables recorded a mean value of above 3. Enjoyment of reading recorded the highest mean value of 3.21 (SD = 0.28), which was then followed by reading activities with a mean value of 3.17 (SD = 0.33). Anxiety and difficulty in reading recorded the lowest mean value of 3.10 (SD = 0.35). In other words, all variables should be retained and taken into consideration. All variables recorded an SD of less than 1.0, suggesting the presence of acceptable variability in the data [76]. In other words, the respondents provided varying responses from one another.

Table 4.3: Results of descriptive analysis for attitudes towards reading by components

Component	No. of Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading activities	11	3.17	0.33
Enjoyment of reading	9	3.21	0.28
Anxiety and difficulty in reading	8	3.16	0.35
Total	28	3.16	0.36

The results are tabulated in Table 4.4. Overall, the mean values for this component ranged between 2.74 and 3.79. In particular, B8 which mainly focus on inserting chart and graphs for better understanding of the knowledge recorded the highest mean value of 3.79 (SD = 0.92). This was followed by B6 which represent the resistant nature of students towards learning English with a mean value of 3.49 (SD = 1.09).

Meanwhile, B10 which shows the similarity with other people in terms of poor reading capabilities recorded the lowest mean value of 2.74 (SD = 1.01). On the other hand, B11 recorded the second-lowest mean value of 2.76 (SD = 0.91). This signifies the willingness of students to spend their spare time on learning English.

Table 4.4: Results of descriptive analysis for reading activities by items

No	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
B1	I can read English but I don't understand what I've read.	3.15	1.03
B2	There are better ways to spend time rather than reading books	3.45	1.09
B3	I'm a good reader	3.41	0.91
B4	When I'm at home, I read a lot.	2.93	0.87

B5	I want to have more English books of my own.	3.08	0.95
B6	I try very hard, but I just can't read English well.	3.49	1.09
B7	My friends and I often discuss the English books we have read.	2.95	0.98
B8	It's easier for me to understand what I'm reading in English if pictures, charts, or diagrams are given.	3.79	0.92
B9	When I read English, I usually get tired and sleepy.	3.07	1.08
B10	I have a lot in common with people who are poor readers.	2.74	1.01
B11	I spend a lot of my spare time to read in English.	2.76	0.91

The second component of ASRA in this study referred to the enjoyment of reading, which consisted of nine items. This component measures the enjoyment of performing various reading activities. The results are tabulated in Table 4.5. Overall, the mean values for this component ranged from 2.70 to 3.69. B20 recorded the highest mean value of 3.69 (SD = 1.02), which was followed by B12 with the mean value of 3.45 (SD = 1.03). Meanwhile, B16 recorded the lowest mean value of 2.70 (SD = 0.87). B17 recorded the second lowest mean value of 3.01 (SD = 0.95). All items recorded a mean value of more than 3, except for B16. In other words, these students did not like to go to the library, which may be attributed to the environment that is too quiet for their liking or induces anxiety.

Table 4.5: Results of descriptive analysis for the enjoyment of reading by items

No	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
B12	Reading is easy for me compared to speaking and writing in English.	3.45	1.03
B13	Reading is one of my favourite activities.	3.19	1.08
B14	I read in English when I enjoy reading it.	3.32	0.94
B15	I get a lot of enjoyment while reading in English.	3.18	0.93
B16	I like to go to the library to read English books.	2.70	0.87
B17	Reading in English is one of the most interesting things I do.	3.01	0.95
B18	I'm the kind of person who enjoys reading a good English book.	3.32	0.98
B19	I like when I receive an English book as a gift.	3.08	1.00
B20	I need a lot of help to read in English.	3.69	1.02

The third component of ASRA in this study referred to anxiety and difficulty in reading, which consisted of eight items. This component measures the anxiety and difficulty in performing various reading activities [77]. The results are tabulated in Table 4.6. Overall, the mean values for this component ranged between 2.48 and 3.48. B24 recorded the highest mean value of 3.48 (SD = 0.98). This was then followed by B25 with a mean value of 3.47 (SD = 1.05). On the other hand, B22 recorded a mean value of 2.48 (SD = 0.97). Meanwhile, B23 recorded the second-lowest mean value of 2.76 (SD = 1.08).

Table 4.6: Results of descriptive analysis for anxiety and difficulty in reading by items

No	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
B21	I get upset when I think about having to read in English	3.02	1.05
B22	I think it's easier to read in English compared to Malay.	2.48	0.97
B23	My parents always force me to read English books.	2.76	1.08
B24	Encountering unfamiliar words is the hardest part of reading in English.	3.48	0.98
B25	I worry a lot about reading in English.	3.47	1.05
B26	I try to avoid reading in English because it makes me nervous.	3.31	1.08
B27	I have trouble understanding English when I read.	3.24	1.15
B28	I'm afraid to read in English that people may know that I'm a poor reader.	3.05	1.22

Research Question 2: Does gender influence the attitudes of lower secondary school students towards reading in English?

With respect to the second research question, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The obtained results in Table 4.7 revealed the influence of gender on attitudes towards reading in English. In particular, the difference in attitudes towards reading in English was significantly different between male and female students (t = -2.715, p = 0.007). Based on the recorded mean values, female students (M = 3.22, SD = 0.332) demonstrated more favourable attitudes towards reading in English than male students (M = 3.11, SD = 0.386).

Table 4.7: Results of an independent samples t-test on the relationship between gender and attitudes toward reading in English

No	N	Mean	SD	T-Value	Sig.
Male	143	3.11	0.386	- 2.715	0.007
Female	157	3.22	0.332		

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that students at lower secondary school level hold an overall moderate attitude towards reading in English, a finding which reflects both the complexity of L2 reading and the diverse influences shaping adolescents' literacy behaviours. While some participants declared interest in certain types of reading activities, their responses also reveal a lack of enjoyment, increased anxiety, and difficulty related to reading in English [78]. These factors together suggest that students' attitudes towards reading are influenced not only by skill-related difficulties but also by wider psychological and contextual influences. Such findings chime with research indicating that insufficient practice, a lack of meaningful exposure, and mismatches between text difficulty and learners' proficiency can hinder the emergence of positive reading dispositions, especially in L2 settings.

Interpreting these results through the Theory of Planned Behaviour provides further insight into the mechanisms underlying students' reading attitudes. According to TPB, behaviour is shaped by attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control [23; 25]. The moderate attitudes observed in this study likely reflect students' ambivalence about the value and enjoyment of reading in English-an attitudinal component shaped by both positive recognition of academic necessity and negative emotional experiences such

as anxiety or frustration. Students' reported difficulties with vocabulary, comprehension, and text complexity relate directly to perceived behavioral control, as lower confidence in their ability to read effectively diminishes their intention to engage in the behavior. Likewise, inconsistent motivation can be interpreted as a function of subjective norms: when peers, family members, or teachers do not actively reinforce reading as a valued practice, students may not internalize reading as a meaningful or socially endorsed behavior.

These findings also resonate closely with the broader literature on L2 reading attitudes. Researchers highlight that motivation—particularly intrinsic motivation—is one of the strongest predictors of long-term reading engagement [79], and the current study corroborates this relationship. Students who perceive reading as fun or useful are more likely to continue searching for opportunities to read, whereas students who experience anxiety or consider reading to be too challenging tend to avoid reading. This corroborates cognitive perspectives of reading that suggest comprehension relies fundamentally upon the interaction between linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, and strategy use [12–13]. When these latter components are underdeveloped, reading becomes a cognitively effortful activity, which diminishes perceived control and undermines behavioural intention.

Gender differences also emerged as a significant variable, with female students reporting more positive attitudes toward reading than male students, consistent with previous research [80]. From a TPB perspective, this may reflect differences in both subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. For instance, prior literature suggests that girls may receive stronger encouragement to engage in literacy activities, may perceive reading as more aligned with their interests, or may adopt learning strategies that better support comprehension and enjoyment. Boys, conversely, may experience social norms that position reading as a less desirable or less valued activity, or may gravitate toward non-reading-based activities that compete for their time. These differences underscore the importance of considering gender not simply as a demographic variable but as a component tied to broader social expectations and identity-related experiences. The findings of the study additionally confirm the wider regional and national trends described in the literature. Notwithstanding the existence of initiatives such as NILAM and other reading programs operated at school level, students show less interest in reading, much less for pleasure, as the years of schooling progress. This is in line with large-scale survey findings that report declining attitudes toward reading from primary to secondary levels, especially where reading is associated with academic obligation rather than personal enjoyment [45–48]. The growing exposure to non-academic digital media also pushes against the traditional formats of reading materials through the students' perception of the effortful nature of reading in English and its lower appeal compared to other activities—a well-documented pattern from Malaysian and international studies [27; 67].

The results collectively point to a set of interrelated factors: cognitive, emotional, motivational, and social, influencing adolescents' attitudes towards reading in English. The moderate attitudes observed are thus not a lack of interest but an indication of an underlying system where students' confidence, experiences, and social environments interact in either encouraging or constraining the reading behaviour. Situating these findings within TPB and established reading research, this study contributes a theoretically coherent explanation as to why lower secondary students may face difficulties in cultivating strong, positive reading attitudes and how targeted interventions need to address anxiety reduction, strengthening of reading confidence, the development of supportive social norms, and enhancement of engagement through relevant and level-appropriate materials.

Limitations

In interpreting the findings of this study, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, research was carried out in only two national schools within one district, Puchong, which limits generalisability to wider Malaysian contexts. School culture, teacher practices, and demographic makeup may vary significantly across regions, so attitudes toward reading in English observed here may not be representative of students attending rural schools, vernacular schools, or higher-performing urban schools. Second, the data were sourced through self-report questionnaires alone, whose response tendencies may be affected by issues of social desirability, limited self-awareness due to relatively younger age, or simple misunderstanding of questionnaire items despite translation checks. Hence, responses may not fully indicate students' actual reading behaviors or motivational levels.

A third limitation is that the study investigates only two variables, overall reading attitude and gender, without

consideration of other potentially important predictors, including socio-economic background, parental involvement, reading proficiency, or access to reading materials. These omitted variables may interact with attitudes in ways not captured by the present design. The use of a cross-sectional approach also limits the extent to which developmental changes in attitudes across the school years could be traced. Finally, while the Theory of Planned Behaviour informed conceptual framing, subjective norms or perceived behavioural control were not empirically measured in the study; this limits the depth of theory-data alignment, and leaves some TPB constructs inferred rather than directly tested.

Future Research

Future research should expand the geographical and institutional coverage to include more diverse ranges of schools from rural, suburban, and urban areas, as well as schools offering different mediums of instruction. Such expansion would allow comparisons across socio-cultural and linguistic contexts and would yield a more complete understanding of Malaysian adolescents' L2 reading attitudes. Future research would also be enhanced by incorporating mixed-methods designs through interviews, classroom observations, or reading diaries that can triangulate self-report data and capture nuances in students' reading motivations, challenges, and behavior patterns.

Furthermore, more theoretically robust research should be conducted to operationalize and test all components of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Future studies could more explicitly measure subjective norms (e.g., peer and parental expectations), perceived behavioural control (e.g., confidence or access to reading resources), and behavioural intentions, allowing a clearer assessment of how these constructs interact to determine actual reading behaviour. Researchers might also consider the role of digital reading habits, since adolescents now read a great deal online, on social media platforms, and in multimodal texts. Determining the ways in which digital literacy practices either compete with or complement traditional reading will be important for designing reading interventions.

Longitudinal studies would, finally, be very useful in tracking changes in reading attitudes from primary to upper secondary schooling. This would be helpful in understanding the critical transition points where the attitude starts to change, thus informing earlier and more focused support. Further investigation of gender-specific factors-for example, interest profiles or types of preferred reading material, or cultural expectations-may help educators design interventions that can better speak to boys' generally lower engagement with reading in English.

CONCLUSION

This study provided an in-depth look into the attitudes of lower secondary school students towards reading in English in two national schools in Puchong, demonstrating a general moderate yet irregular pattern of engagement. Students realized the importance of reading; however, this realization was not fully manifested in regular and consistent reading practices, specifically with regard to both extensive and intensive reading activities. The study also underlined gender-based differences, with the girls showing more positive attitudes towards reading than the boys, calling for a gender-sensitive intervention to help boys build up better confidence, interest, and perceived control over reading activities. This reinforces international literature suggesting that early adolescence remains a formative period during which reading identities and dispositions can be shaped with the right forms of encouragement and instructional support.

The important roles of the teachers, parents, and community also clearly emerged through this study. Yet it also demonstrates that even within a relatively small context, it is not productive to apply broad national generalisations, but that students' reading attitudes are shaped by the quality of their exposure, meaningfulness of reading activities, and social value placed upon reading. Structured support—such as dedicated leisure reading periods, book circles, classroom autonomy for text choice, and home–school collaboration—may therefore help cultivate more positive reading identities. These approaches align with broader educational aims of fostering lifelong learning, especially in a digital era where students' attention is increasingly diverted toward non-academic content.

Although this study is constrained to just two schools, it provides valuable insights that can inform national

literacy efforts, particularly in strengthening reading habits at an earlier age before negative or indifferent attitudes are entrenched. The study further builds a foundational platform for future research on identified gaps in reading motivation, perceived difficulty, and gendered engagement patterns. Ultimately, coordinated efforts in homes, schools, and communities are needed toward the goal of improving the attitude towards reading among adolescents. With adequate and targeted support, Malaysian students will be better equipped not only to navigate academic demands but also to navigate the complex multilingual literacy landscape that characterizes contemporary society.

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