



## **EFL READING INSTRUCTION: COMMUNICATIVE TASK-BASED APPROACH**

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The purpose of this study was to examine the overarching framework of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) reading instructional approach reflected in an EFL secondary school curriculum in Malaysia. Based on such analysis, a comparison was made if Communicative Task-Based Language is the overarching instructional approach for the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum. This study used document reviews as the primary data collection. The coding of data analysis was based on the modifications of the components of Richards and Rodgers's (2001) analysis of language teaching model. The curriculum was examined in terms of theories of SLA, theories of L2 reading as well as learner roles in relation to Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching (CTBLT) characteristics. The findings of the study suggest that the majority of reading tasks in the selected EFL secondary reading curriculum is highly lacking CTBLT characteristics. The results of the study were discussed in relation to the current Malaysian EFL secondary curriculum framework and their implications on the EFL reading at the tertiary level.

Key Words: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), EFL curriculum, reading comprehension, EFL reading, L2 reading, secondary education

### **INTRODUCTION**

Past studies have shown that English language proficiency may affect English as a foreign language (EFL) students' academic performance at the university level (e.g., Songy, 2007; Stoyhoff, 1997). Since reading is an important part of language proficiency that affects academic literacy and success within the tertiary academic context, "the ability to read academic texts is considered one of the most important skills that university students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign language (EFL) need to acquire" (Levine, Ferenz, & Revez, 2000, <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/past-issues/volume4/ej16/ej16a1/>). However, many EFL university students are not able to read and understand well materials in the English language (e.g., David

& Govindasamy, 2003; Otlowski, 2008; Vlack, 2009; Valencia & Buly, 2004), a situation of which may affect their academic performance. Considering the impact of English language reading on education attainment, the instructional approaches of EFL literacy in preparing students for academic success deserves further exploration.

### **COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT)**

The Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum has been identified as a communicative curriculum (MOE, 2003), “an organization of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) around a specification of communication tasks” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 164). Therefore, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and Task-Based Instruction (TBI) and related theories of second language acquisition (SLA), second language (L2) reading, and learner roles were reviewed.

In contrast to a direct approach or traditional approach, the communicative approach is considered an indirect approach to L2 instruction (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Terrell, 1997) and is also viewed as a learner-centered approach (Nunan, 1988). Communicative Language Teaching is in line with socio-cultural theory (SCT), which views language as a tool in a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978) and as a central tool for the development of thought processes or the crucial means of mediation for one’s cognition.

The features of Communicative Language Teaching can be found in a more specific communicative approach to L2 instruction such as Task-Based Instruction (TBI). Currently, there are two main second language acquisition (SLA) theoretical accounts for TBI; the psycholinguistic and the socio-cultural approaches (Ellis, 2003). The psycholinguistic approach to TBI is also known as the cognitive approach of language learning (Skehan, 1998). In general, Skehan’s (1998) cognitive approach to TBI for language learning concerns with psycholinguistic factors such as fluency, accuracy, and complexity of language production when students engage in meaning-making oriented tasks. However, such meaning-making oriented tasks within the cognitive approach of TBI is related to language learning processes that take place in the readers’ mind in line with the cognitive information processing of SLA. On the contrary, within the perspective of the sociocultural theory of SLA, tasks in Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching (CTBLT) constitute the co-construction of meaning (e.g., Donato, 2000) via students’ participation, self-regulation through private speech, mediation, imitation, internalization, and assisted interactions within a learner’s ZPD or zone of proximal development (e.g., Ellis, 2003). Since the present study examined the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum which is labelled as Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching, hence,

such form of Task-Based Instruction is grounded in the socio-cultural approach. However, since the present study only examined the constituents of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching reflected in curriculum documents, only aspects of tasks within the socio-cultural approach such as co-construction of meaning via students' participation or collaborative meaning-making tasks could be reviewed.

### **COMMUNICATIVE TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching (CTBLT) is a form of Communicative Language Teaching in which tasks or activities are viewed as central to meaningful language learning (Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998). The primary goal of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching is to prepare learners with language that matches their needs (Long & Crookes, 1993) and is suited to their context and familiarity (Ellis, 2003). Teaching and learning activities under Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching typically involve learners as problem solvers who have to fulfill a specified real world task in relation to the instructional objectives or learning outcomes such as making travel arrangements with a travel agent (Crookes, 1986; Prabhu, 1987).

In using Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching for the teaching of L2 reading, learners not only have to process and comprehend data in the reading text, which is part of cognitive information processing, but also to fulfill an assigned task based on text information, via meaningful interaction (Nunan, 2004). The cognitive information-processing theory of SLA within the context of L2 reading involves linguistic information processing, textual information processing, and the synthesis of text information and prior knowledge processing (Koda, 2005).

When the cognitive information processing of text is situated within task-based communicative activities as part of a problem solving process, readers collaborate to negotiate text meaning in order to build a mental representation of the text as intended by the author. In addition, learners are also simultaneously positioned as the monitors of their own learning by attending to the grammatical forms that are highlighted in the tasks and as risk-takers who have to attempt the target language by devising language innovation such as paraphrasing, restating, using paralinguistic signals and so forth due to their lack of control or knowledge of the L2 (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This feature of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching which integrates information processing and communicative task-based activities around a reading text in meaning making process contrasts Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching with traditional reading instructional approaches such as the Grammar Translation (GT) method. GT is developed based on the SLA

structuralism theory which concerns with individual form-focused tasks instead of collaborative meaning-focused tasks (e.g., Griffith & Parr, 2001). GT is also developed based on bottom-up L2 reading theories which regard the reading process as text-driven in nature with the emphasis on lower level text processing such as phonological processing, word recognition, and word identification (e.g., Nassaji, 2003). The approach used in GT commonly results in the design of learner role in the form of individual pattern of learner grouping which is in the contrary to the pair and group pattern of learner grouping promoted by the Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching.

Within the context of L2 reading, reading tasks that foster meaningful communication with the goal of fulfilling text-based tasks (e.g., Oxford, Lavine, & Crookall, 1989), is reflected in communicative task-based L2 reading approach such as Whole Language instructional approach which is grounded in the SLA theory of language as communication. Although the Whole Language instructional approach is traditionally developed based on top-down L2 reading theories which perceives reading as a process of constructing meaning from whole to part (e.g., Bergeron, 1990), the inclusion of the communicative aspects in the reading tasks results in the transformation from top-down L2 reading theories to the communicative-based interactive theory of L2 reading. The traditional view of interactive theory of L2 reading is a combination of reader-driven and text-driven processes which integrates both lower level and higher level processes (e.g., Bernhardt, 1991; Nassaji, 2002) and takes into account readers' background knowledge of content, text structure, and cultural factors (Roebuck, 1998). However, within the present decade, L2 reading researchers have begun to shift their focus towards the importance of having students to be actively engaged with the text by linking social context and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1987). Hence, in line with the sociocultural theory, the interactive theory of L2 reading has been expanded to include the interaction between the reader, the text, and the reading context. The interactional theory of L2 reading promotes discourse competence around text information using language as a tool in a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978) and also as a central tool for the development of thought processes which may assist in enhancing L2 reading processing.

In contrast to GT which focuses on forms, the communicative Whole Language approach to L2 reading instruction which is a recent approach to first language (L1) and L2 literacy education (e.g., Goodman, Smith, Meredith, & Goodman, 1987) focuses on meaning making using tasks as mediation. Nonetheless, the Whole Language instructional approach is considered as not reflective of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching if learner roles are designed in the form of individual tasks. For example, in a Whole Language reading

classroom, if students are asked to read a text and answer comprehension questions on their own, such reading activity although task-based, is not communicative in nature. Hence, in contrast to the CTBLT, such form of Whole Language instructional approach can be considered as a Cognitive Whole Language Task-Based Instruction.

Many L2 researchers have recommended Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching as a suitable and practical instructional approach for second and foreign language learning because it promotes real-time communication and learning is meaning-centered (e.g., Basturkmen, 2006; Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Newton, 1995; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Storch (1998) conducted a CTBLT study using text reconstruction as the communication task was carried out by among adult ESL learners. The results indicate that text reconstruction task or combining jumbled-up text ideas into a coherent text assists the ESL learners in analyzing text meaning beyond sentence level. However, some L2 researchers have argued that the focus on task may disadvantage learners in developing linguistic competence which they need as academic preparation (e.g., Widdowson, 2003) because the focus of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching is primarily on the fluency of communication flow and task completion rather than on language accuracy. On the contrary, Hatch (1992) found that communicative interaction with others via pair and group reading tasks not only assists in developing better understanding of text meaning, but also assists in the development of the linguistic aspects of the second language.

In line with the goals of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching, the general goal of the Malaysian EFL secondary curriculum developed in 1975 and 1981 (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) was to prepare upper secondary students “with the ability to communicate accurately and effectively in the most common English language activities they may be involved in” (p. 230). Richards & Rodgers’ (2001) assessment of the previous Malaysian EFL secondary curriculum in 1975 and 1981 concluded that Malaysian EFL secondary curriculum was a task-based communicative curriculum based on their examination of the general English use objectives for EFL oral communication as well as the introductory parts of the documents. However, Richards and Rodgers (2001) neither analyzed whether the reading tasks in the previous Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum were in line with Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching nor examined the most recent Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum introduced in 2003. The present study built on their scholarship by examining if Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching as part of Communicative Language Teaching instructional approaches is the overarching EFL reading instructional approach of the most recent Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Context**

The Malaysian EFL context was selected as the research context for this study because EFL instruction is highly valued in Malaysia and is a required subject beginning from pre-school to university level. Due to efforts to preserve the importance of the English language, Malaysia is becoming a more significant exporter of English language services to many Asian countries (Graddol, 1997). Therefore, on the international level, this study may serve as an impetus for larger and more comprehensive studies of a similar nature in the future across EFL contexts. Within the Malaysian context, the term *EFL Secondary Curriculum* refers to the Malaysian Form Five English Language Curriculum while the term *Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum* refers to statements in the Malaysian Form Five EFL Curriculum Specifications document and in the Form Five EFL textbook that are related to EFL reading skills.

### **Research Framework**

This study is explorative in nature (e.g., Gatbonton, 1999; Hedgcock, 2002). The purpose of this study was to explore whether Task-Based instructional approach serves as an overarching EFL reading instructional approach in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading as the curriculum claims itself to be. At the fundamental level, a curriculum should have a coherent instructional framework in line with the intention of the curriculum to ensure effective implementation. Without alignment as such, the expected instructional outcomes might not be materialized. Therefore, this study may provide insights to curriculum developers across EFL contexts into the importance of developing a coherent curriculum in terms of approach and design in relation to the selected instructional framework. Such alignment will enable appropriate materials development and classroom implementation with regards to the selected instructional method.

The method of analyzing the Task-Based Instruction approach reflected in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum in this study was substantially influenced by the language teaching model of Richards and Rodgers (2001), a revision of Anthony's (1963) model. This model presents a conceptual framework for language instruction proposing that at the fundamental level, language instruction can be analyzed in terms of *Approach* (foundational theory), *Design* (e.g., selected language skills, learning tasks), and *Procedure* (e.g., classroom techniques, classroom observation, teacher interviews). Nonetheless, the study did not use the entire original framework of these

researchers because some of the components in the framework are not relevant to the current study. For example, Richards and Rodgers's (2001) *Procedure* level was excluded because the study did not examine actual classroom teaching or interviews with teachers. Since the purpose of this study was to examine if the Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching to EFL reading instruction is the overarching instructional approach of the Malaysian EFL secondary curriculum, only elements at the *Approach* and *Design* level of Richards and Rodgers' (2001) language instruction conceptual frameworks are applicable to the study, although with modifications.

Since the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum as a whole is claimed to be primarily developed based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching in the form of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching, the EFL secondary reading curriculum which is a part of the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum was expected to primarily reflect a similar instructional approach. In order to find out if this is so, the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum was examined in terms of the underlying theories of second language acquisition (SLA) and L2 reading theories which undergird the development of the curriculum at the level of *Approach*. In addition to analyzing TBI characteristics at the level of *Approach*, it is important to also analyze the roles of learners at the *Design* level because the roles of learners will reflect whether the EFL reading tasks in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum are designed to be collaborative in nature in line with the features of task characteristics in TBI from the socio-cultural perspectives.

In order to find out if Task-Based Instruction is the EFL reading instructional method of the current Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum, the following research questions were answered:

- (1) Was the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum developed based on the socio-cultural theory of SLA?
- (2) Was the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum developed based on the communicative-based interactive theory of second language reading?
- (3) Are the EFL reading activities in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum designed as collaborative tasks?

### **Instruments**

Past studies that examined EFL curriculum often used key documents such as the EFL curriculum documents, EFL policy-related documents as well as EFL assessments to gather relevant data followed by document review (e.g., Alwan, 2006; Hung, 2006; Su, 2006). Therefore, following previous EFL curriculum

studies, EFL curriculum documents were also reviewed and analyzed in this study in order to obtain data related to the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum. In order to answer the research questions in this study, the Malaysian Form Five Curriculum Specifications document (Ministry of Education, 2003) and the Malaysian Integrated Curriculum English Form Five textbook were examined. Henceforth, the Malaysian EFL Curriculum Specifications document will be referred to as EFL Curriculum Specifications while the Form Five EFL textbook will be referred to as the EFL textbook.

### **Data Collection**

For this study, the statements in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and EFL textbook which were related to EFL reading skills were regarded as the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum and thus analyzed. The inter-rater reliability index of tasks inferred as reading tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and EFL textbook were 0.876 and 0.941 respectively.

### **Data Analysis**

Past studies examining L2 curriculum used content analysis (e.g., Bachman, Davidson, & Milanovic, 1996; Lee, 2009). According to Basturkmen (1999, p. 21), "Content analysis is widely used in historical and communication research. It involves the analysis of the content of communication (documents) as the basis for inference." Therefore, content analysis can be a useful tool for examining trends and patterns in documents (Stemler, 2001). Since the current study solely involves document analysis to make inferences, content analysis was used as the method of data analysis. The analysis for each research question will be explained individually.

*Research Question 1: Was the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum developed based on the socio-cultural theory of SLA?*

Based on the reviews of SLA theories used in Task-Based Instruction, Whole Language, and Grammar Translation Method, reading-related statements in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and in the EFL textbook were inferred as one of the three prominent SLA theories; structuralism, cognitive information processing, and socio-cultural.

The structuralism theory reflecting Grammar Translation Method was inferred in statements such as using the dictionary to find the meanings of words, read an excerpt and change all verbs into Simple Past Tense and read an excerpt and underline all verbs in Simple Present Tense. The cognitive information processing theory of SLA reflecting cognitive Task-Based instructional



approach was inferred in statements such as read a passage and find main ideas, process information by extracting main ideas and details in texts, process information and by skimming and scanning. The socio-cultural theory of SLA reflecting Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching was inferred in statements such as encourage students to give reason based on a text read, discuss values explored in the text, and compare and contrasts information in a text and decide on a choice via a discussion.

*Research Question 2: Was the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum developed based on the communicative-based interactive second language reading theory?*

Based on the reviews of second language reading theories used in Task-Based Reading Instruction, Whole Language Reading Instruction, and Grammar Translation Method, reading-related statements in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and in the EFL textbook were inferred as one of the three prominent L2 reading theories; bottom-up, top-down, and communicative-based interactive theories.

The bottom-up theory reflecting Grammar Translation Method was inferred in statements such as *highlighting keywords and phrases in texts, acquiring vocabulary in texts through word association, and using the dictionary to find the meaning of words*. The top-down theory reflecting cognitive Task-Based Whole Language reading instructional approach was inferred in statements such as *read a text and relate to personal experience, read silently a variety of materials, and predict outcomes in a text*. The communicative-based interactive theory reflecting Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching was inferred in statements such as *read topics of current interest and exchange ideas, identify and discuss point of view in a text, and give opinions on articles read*.

*Research Question 3: Are the EFL reading activities in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum designed as collaborative tasks?*

Since the Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching used to develop the Malaysian EFL reading curriculum is grounded in the socio-cultural theory, the nature of students' participation or interpersonal mediation (Thorn, 2004) defines learner roles in Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching. Using Richards and Rodgers's (2001) model, learner roles could be examined in terms of patterns of learner groupings. The current study did not examine learner roles in terms of self-regulation through private speech or independent learning, imitation, internalization, mediation, and assisted interactions because the data for these variables could only be gathered through classroom observation and thus were beyond the scope of this study.

Upon preliminary analysis of the selected documents, there appeared to be three types of learner groupings mentioned in the curricular materials: Individual, pair or group. Reading tasks that are designed to be carried out in pairs or groups reflect Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching because information processing of text occurs via meaningful collaborative effort to construct meaning. On the contrary, individual reading tasks reflect the Cognitive Task-Based Instructional Approach because such tasks are limited to information processing within individual learner's cognition without the inclusion of others in the reading context. Therefore, patterns of learner grouping in this study were analyzed by categorizing the reading tasks into these three categories. Since reading tasks involving pair or group work are both considered to be communicative in nature, these two categories were combined in the data analysis.

Examples of reading tasks categorized as individual grouping were such as read a passage and write a summary, read a text and summarize ideas in the text, read a passage and answer open-ended questions, and read a passage and answer multiple-choice questions on main ideas and details. Examples of reading tasks categorized as pair/group were such as read a passage and discuss point of view in the passage, read topics of current interest and exchange ideas, read a passage and discuss in a group a given statement related to the passage, and read a newsletter and discuss the comments in the letter.

## **FINDINGS**

In analyzing the data for each research question, the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and the EFL textbook were analyzed separately. This approach was utilized in order to see the extent to which the instructional approach in the EFL textbook and the EFL Curriculum Specifications document were in alignment in instructional direction. Then, the data from the two documents were combined in the form of an overall percentage in order to generalize the instructional approach to EFL reading in the EFL secondary reading curriculum as a whole.

### **Theories of Second language Acquisition (SLA)**

This section presents the findings of the first research question: Was the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum developed based on the socio-cultural theory of SLA?

Table 1: Analysis of second language acquisition theories and instructional approaches

<i>Documents / SLA Theories &amp; Related Instructional Approaches</i>	<i>Structuralism (%) (Grammar Translation Method)</i>	<i>Cognitive Information Processing Theory (%)</i>	<i>Socio-Cultural Theory (%) (CTBLT)</i>
Reading Tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications	4.7	64.7	30.6
Reading Tasks in the EFL Textbook	16.2	77.0	6.8
Overall Percentage	10.2	75.7	14.1

Key: % = Percentage of theories of SLA and corresponding instructional approaches

Table 1 shows that approximately 65% and 77% of the reading tasks proposed in the EFL Curriculum Specifications and in the EFL textbook respectively are highly influenced by cognitive information processing theory. In contrast, the findings for reading-related statements based on socio-cultural theory, the total percentage of reading-related statements reflecting this theory and CTBLT is about 31% for the EFL Curriculum Specifications and approximately 7% for the EFL textbook. The overall representation of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching in the EFL secondary reading curriculum was merely 14.1%. Although there is a trace of structuralism and Grammar Translation Method in the curriculum, as a whole, they only account for 10.2% of statements related to reading. Given that 75.7% of reading-related statements in the curriculum reflect a cognitive information processing theory of SLA, a model in which students are mainly asked to work individually and take on roles as information processors, it seems that the EFL secondary reading curriculum was primarily developed based on this theory instead of socio-cultural theory. Therefore, the claim that the EFL Secondary Curriculum is a Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching curriculum does not seem to be in tangent with the theory and instructional approach reflected in the statements about reading in the EFL Curriculum Specifications and the EFL textbook.

### Theories of Second Language Reading

This section presents the findings of the second research question: Was the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum developed based on the communicative-based interactive theory of second language reading?

Table 2: Analysis of second language reading theories and instructional approaches

<i>Documents / L2 Reading Theories and Related Instructional Approaches</i>	<i>Bottom-up (%) (Grammar Translation Method)</i>	<i>Top-down (%) (Cognitive Task-Based Whole Language Reading Instruction)</i>	<i>Interactive (%) (CTBLT)</i>
Reading Tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications	15.3	60.0	24.7
Reading Tasks in the EFL Textbook	25.1	65.4	9.4
Overall Percentage	22.1	63.8	14.1

Key: % = Percentage of L2 reading theories and related instructional approaches

Table 2 shows that the Top-Down theory to reading instruction is the most prominent L2 reading theory in both the EFL Curriculum Specifications document (60%) and the EFL textbook (65.4%). This L2 reading theory is in line with instructional approaches such as Whole Language instructional approaches (e.g., Goodman, Smith, Meredith, & Goodman, 1987). However, the use of Top-Down theories in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum primarily involved individual tasks such as students' reading texts and finding main ideas via the use of schemata, but without any interaction with others in the context. In order to make a distinction between reading instruction based in top-down theories of L2 reading and interactive theories of reading, reading instruction reflecting Top-Down theories was considered Non-Interactive Whole Language instruction.

In the EFL Curriculum Specifications, the Interactive theory of EFL reading instruction which reflects Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching is most frequently implied in reading-related statements (24.7%) after Top-Down theories. However, in the EFL textbook, the Interactive theory and Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching are least reflected (9.4%). This finding suggests misalignment between the prominent L2 reading theories in the EFL textbook and in the EFL Curriculum Specifications. As a whole, Table 2 exhibits that the Interactive theory and the Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching reading instruction are least reflected in the entire EFL secondary reading curriculum (14.1%). The infrequency of Interactive theories and

Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching and the prevalent reflection of Top-Down theories and Non-Interactive Whole Language instructional approaches in the EFL secondary reading curriculum suggests that the curriculum was not primarily developed based on the Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching grounding.

### The Roles of the Learner

This section presents the findings of the third research question: Are the EFL reading activities in the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum designed as collaborative tasks?

Table 3: The roles of the learner

<i>Documents / Types of Learner Grouping</i>	<i>Individual Tasks (%)</i>	<i>Pair/Group Tasks (%)</i>
Reading Tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications	82.4	17.6
Reading Tasks in the EFL Textbook	88.0	12.0
Overall Percentage	89.1	10.9

KEY: %= Percentage of individual and pair/group reading tasks

As indicated in Table 3, in terms of pattern of learner grouping, the reading activities in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document are 82% designed as individual tasks in nature, such as *read a text and systematically make tables to compare information in the text* and *read silently materials in print and from the internet*. The same pattern emerged from the EFL textbook in which 88% of the reading tasks are individual activities such as *read a newspaper extracts and do true or false exercise* and *read a passage and answer open-ended questions*. The overall findings indicate that in the EFL secondary reading curriculum, individual reading activities carry 89% of the total activities with the remaining 11% designed as pair/group activities.

These findings add evidence to the claim that within the EFL secondary reading curriculum, reading is perceived to primarily involve cognitive information processing; a perception which results in the design of cognitive task-based instructional approach on the presumption that reading revolves around the individual reader and the mind (e.g., Bernhardt, 1991; Grabe, 1991). In contrast to the Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching label of the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum, the importance of reading tasks which involve readers' interaction with peers and the teacher as part of the reading context in the process of meaning making seems to be significantly disregarded. Hence, the finding on the roles of the learner reflected in the EFL secondary reading

curriculum indicates incongruence between the EFL Secondary Curriculum instructional design and its current Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching label.

## **DISCUSSION**

The overall findings suggest that the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum does not conform to the features of a Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching curriculum. The findings on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories reading tasks in the EFL Curriculum Specifications document and the EFL textbook indicate that the EFL secondary reading curriculum is primarily developed based on cognitive information processing theories of SLA reflecting cognitive Task-Based Instruction. Minimal socio-cultural theories are reflected in the reading tasks; theories of SLA that are the principle grounding of communicative Task-Based instructional approach.

Analyzing the theories of L2 reading and their corresponding instructional approaches in the reading curriculum generated a 2:7:1 ratio for reading tasks reflecting Bottom-Up theories and Grammar Translation instructional approach as compared to task reflecting Interactive theories and Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching. The high percentage of Top-Down L2 reading theories and Cognitive Task-Based Whole Language Instructional approaches in the reading tasks indicate that L2 reading instructional framework in the EFL Secondary Curriculum was principally designed based on the cognitive information processing model. Within this model, the reading process is perceived to occur mainly in the readers' minds while readers acting as information processors completing individual reading tasks.

Without the inclusion of interaction with others in the reading context, the reading tasks in the curriculum lack communicative features. This claim is also supported by the findings on learner roles which show that 89% of reading tasks in the curriculum are individual tasks and only 11% of the tasks involve interaction with others in the learning context. The finding on the types of learner grouping corroborates with the findings of Nambiar (2005) and Ponniah (1993) regarding EFL reading instructional procedures within the Malaysian setting. Although communicative features such as collaborative learning in the form of pair and group work was evidenced, individual reading tasks outpaced the pair/group reading tasks with a ratio of 9 individual reading tasks to 1 pair/group reading tasks (9:1). Such a disparity in the ratio is further evidence of lack of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching features. Therefore, the findings on theories of SLA, L2 reading theories and their corresponding instructional approaches as well as the finding on learner roles stand in contrast

to the current Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching curriculum label of the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum as a whole. Hence, the findings also suggest that Richards and Rodgers' (2001) claim that the Malaysian EFL Secondary Curriculum is a Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching curriculum might hold true for other EFL skills but not for EFL reading.

Should the curriculum be designed based on the socio-cultural grounding, collaborative reading tasks in the form of pair and group work would be highly reflected in the reading tasks along with significant reflection of Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching. Hence, those who developed the EFL secondary reading curriculum based on the premise that the curriculum is intended to be a Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching curriculum should have the understanding of what constitutes the principles of communicative task-based language teaching in terms of its underlying SLA theories, L2 reading theories and the related communicative instructional approach. Misunderstanding of the conceptualization of a theory selected as the fundamental grounding of a curriculum may cause erroneous design of instructional approaches and implementation against what it is intended to be (e.g., Thompson, 1996). Having the appropriate understanding of learner roles within Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching would not translate into individual reading tasks even when taking the goal of EFL reading instruction as preparing students for the national EFL reading test. Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching may assist in preparing students for EFL reading tests because its principles revolve around socio-cultural theories which posit that cognitive development occurs surrounding meaningful interaction (e.g., Hymes, 1972; Paulston, 1974; Savignon, 1991). For example, in Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching for the teaching of L2 reading, learners not only have to process and comprehend data in the reading text, part of information processing that is cognitive in nature, but also to fulfill an assigned task based on text information, via meaningful interaction (Nunan, 1993; 2004).

Since the characteristics of the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum do not conform to the Communicative Task-Based Language Teaching principles, a revision of the EFL secondary reading curriculum is called for. Such revision is to ensure that the instructional approach and design for EFL reading presented in the curriculum are coherent and explicitly reflective of the intended communicative instructional approach. As such, the curriculum can be interpreted in unison by EFL textbook authors as well as by EFL teachers. Such revision may also enable the curriculum to serve as a clear guideline for EFL textbook development and classroom instruction. In addition, misalignment between the EFL Curriculum Specifications and EFL textbook can be

significantly minimized. When the EFL Secondary Curriculum is reflective of its intended communicative instructional approach and in alignment with the EFL textbook, instructional implementation will better reflect best practices.

In addition to issues of inconsistent theories of SLA and L2 reading, instructional approaches, and curriculum design in the EFL secondary reading curriculum, the instructional implications of the inconsistencies are also serious concerns because classroom instructional planning, design, and implementation are conceptualized based on the curriculum (e.g., O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995; Williams, 1983). Thus, what is prescribed in the curriculum is translated into classroom procedures which influence instructional outcomes. Incongruity issues within the curriculum at the approach and design levels could be one of the contributing factors to the persistent EFL reading issues at the secondary school level which might be transferred to the tertiary level within the Malaysian educational setting (e.g., David & Govindasamy, 2003; Kaur & Thiyagarajah, 1997; Nambiar, 2007; Rajaretnam & Nalliah, 1999). Hence, a revision is called for the Malaysian EFL secondary reading curriculum as a step to improve the effectiveness of secondary EFL reading comprehension instruction in order to prepare students for EFL content area reading comprehension skills at the university level.

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