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Creating Better Stories for Malaysian Schoolchildren to Read

Abstract:

Learning to read can be tough for kids, and of course reading in a second language even harder. Children learn to read because they want to read. Some children apply themselves simply because they are eager to be rewarded with approval from the teacher. However, an engaging tale that creates a burning desire to know what happens next stirs their natural curiosity and builds up intrinsic motivation.

This workshop builds on preliminary research undertaken among primary school children at the IPGKDRI ‘Teaching School’ (in Kuala Terengganu). Children answered a questionnaire (in Bahasa Malaysia) about their interests, and follow-up interviews were conducted with selected students.

Based on these results, stories in English were created around the children’s ideas, developing adventures for believable characters that they can readily relate to. The stories were then presented for the children to read.

In this workshop we will present the questionnaire, results, and stories, as well as practical ideas for various methods of creating and publishing stories. It is hoped that at least some of the workshop participants will become involved in continuation of this research and production of materials.

Introduction

Everybody loves a good story. Traditional stories and classical tales have lasted down through the years because they are good stories. However nothing beats a story with a character that the reader can personally relate to, and enjoy vicarious adventures.

Malaysian children are told stories of mythical heroes, and they hear good moral stories to teach them how to behave (and the consequences of misbehaviour). But the Malaysian equivalents of the 'Famous Five' and 'Secret Seven' stories which British kids grew up with are noticeably absent. Curiosity about what happened next, and an enthusiasm to adventure vicariously with their book characters can quickly develop a strong love of reading.

Of course they could read Enid Blyton's books (and I'm sure some do), but there is so much cultural mismatch with the "lashings of ginger beer" and other expressions so popular in the well-loved stories that it must be difficult for young Malaysian readers to really get into the story.

It is the intention of the instigators of this project to create, and assist others in creating, culturally relevant stories to excite Malaysian children into reading in English with enjoyment. The stories are fictional adventures based on real Malaysian school children as characters. Children can stories about themselves, their friends, other children from their school or district, and fellow Malaysians. Some school teachers already create some of their own materials, and this project will give an opportunity to network and share materials.

Some stories are written simply for the younger, less able readers, leading up to the longer "chapter books" for the more capable readers. Stories are written to be read to children – maybe even as a serial story for them to look forward to each day – and simpler stories are written for children to read to themselves.

The workshop will introduce the process of producing books for Malaysian Kids, and provide an opportunity to begin creating stories.

The Process

For the purposes of this workshop, four issues are covered.

- Getting Story Writing ideas – finding and/or creating characters and plots
- Basic Story Writing techniques
- Illustrating a story
- Producing the Stories to read.

1. Getting Story Writing Ideas

Writers need to know their characters, and our characters are based on real Malaysian school children. Teachers know the children in his/her class, but maybe not well enough for this project.

Not having a class to work with, we created a questionnaire to find out about the children at the IPG Teaching School. As we wanted their ideas and information, the questions were translated into BM. The classroom teachers were asked to let the children write whatever they wanted without scolding. The questionnaires are the appendix below.

The children were asked about their home, likes and dislikes, hopes and wishes, and happy / sad / embarrassing events in the past. Some of the children were interviewed, photographed, and asked to draw pictures. Appendix 3 shows the questions.

Malaysian classroom teachers may need to find out more about their students, and they can do so without holding an interrogation. Children can be asked to create pictures depicting their desired super power, longed-for three wishes, or an incident in the past, and the pictures can be incorporated into the story / book. Drama and oral story-telling reveal themes that the children will relate to.

Teachers could think about each student's hopes and fears, special talents, friendships, and special physical characteristics that are obvious but not embarrassing. Even a small incident they mention can be elaborated into a story for children.

2. Basic Story Writing Techniques

Long or short, the story has essential elements.

- Character(s)
- Plot
- Setting

Characters

When writing these stories, if possible we want to include more than one of our students, so it's good to know who their friends are.

For longer stories for older children writers could consider having an antagonist or villain as part of your story – just don't set up a fight between two of the children in the class! The villain could be imaginary, and should not be seriously bad.

Plot

The main character faces some kind of problem / difficulty / challenge. By the end of the story there must be a solution. For younger children particularly this does not need to be something big and/or frightening.

Setting

We want the setting to be somewhere familiar to Malaysian kids – school, home, shops, beach – but it's more than just a "place". We can employ all five senses in setting the scene. It should be familiar, but at the same time possibly a little surprising in some way.

3. Illustrating a Story

Truthfully, for a lot of children (even the better readers), the most important part of a story is the pictures. If they like the pictures then they will want to read the words. So it *is* important to have pictures, and for the pictures to be appealing to the readers, at least the younger ones.

So - where do you get the pictures from?

- If we are printing one or two stories / booklets for just your class to use, then there is really no harm in searching Google Images and clipart and using whatever we like.
- If we are self-publishing a story / booklet that *may* be made generally available in print and/or on the Internet, then we need to be **careful about copyright**. We must not steal pictures or ideas from someone else.

If we are being careful about copyright, hoping to share our stories with a wider audience, where can we find some pictures? Some possibilities are:

1. Photos we have taken.
2. Drawings and pictures the children have created.
3. Pictures we have drawn / created.

Creating Our Own Pictures

Most adults say they can't draw. And yet kids rarely say that. If you ask a kid to draw something, they just give it a go. So let's think like a kid, or just ask a kid to draw our pictures.

Kids don't really mind what the pictures are like, they will be fascinated regardless. Here are some ideas:

- **Use the tools** that kids like to use - get some crayons / pencils / paints. Draw the pictures and then scan them and insert them into the story.
- **Keep it simple** – Don't draw the whole panorama. There are many ways to draw a picture without drawing faces - if that is the difficult part. Just draw the important part.
- **Use lots of colour**. Kids love colour. Or draw in black and white and let the children colour it in. (Of course, black and white is better for print / photocopy.)
- **Adapt a photo or picture**. Use photos or pictures to help with the parts that are difficult to draw, such as perspective or the proportions of people and animals.
- **Use an App**. This is *my* favourite. Rather than drawing and then scanning pictures, I like to draw / create pictures using Apps on my iPad. Maybe you have access to something similar.

Here is an example of one way of making an illustration

1. Enter a search word into Google Images search - in this case I wanted a picture of someone "window shopping".



1.

2.



Trace the picture, and adapt it to suit the story. (I used the app "Tracing Paper" on my iPad.)

I changed it into a picture of two women in headscarves window shopping.

3. Colour the picture. I use that old program that comes on most computers - "Paint". It is on every computer, and it is fun to use. It can be used for drawing as well.



Why not just use the original picture? Because it's not mine, the copyright belongs to someone. But this is MY picture, my drawing and my colouring.

4. Creating a Story Book

Having written a delightful story for our children to read, we need to produce it in a form that they can access. There are several possibilities:

4.1 Soft Copy or e-Book

The story can be produced as an e-Book to be stored and read on the computer or to be read online. In this case a PDF version of the story can be created and children need to know how to scroll through the pages. Stories that are made into paper books can of course also be easily shared as eBooks.

4.2 Little Books

For a very quick, easy, cheap solution you can create a short story in a "little book" which is made from a single folded sheet of paper.

Here are instructions for folding a little book.



The little book has a front and a back cover, and six tiny inside pages.

The little book is written on only one side of the paper, so it can easily be opened flat and copies made so that each student can have their own copy.

The story can also be written into the little book on the computer, and then printed out as multiple copies to be folded and used by the children.

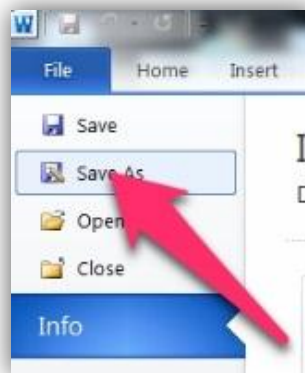
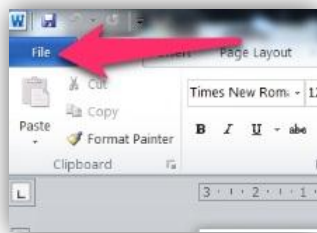
4.3 PDF Booklets

Type the story in 'Word'. Here are some layout pointers:

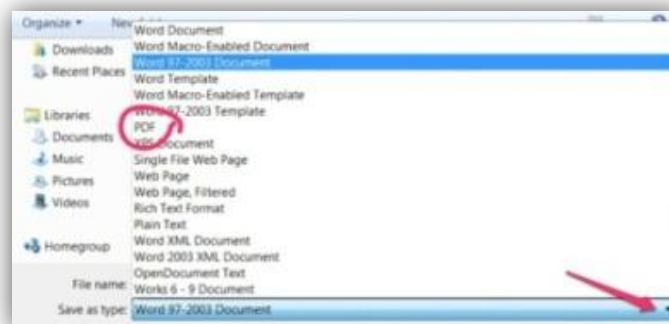
- It's a good idea to insert page numbers as you go, just to make sure you eventually staple it together properly.
- When you print your booklet, it will be A5 size. That is half of the normal A4 size. so you will need to use quite a large font size.
- Type your story in "portrait" layout - in the booklet the paper will be "landscape" with two pages next to each other.
- Leave reasonable margins - the default margins setting is fine, do NOT change to 'narrow'.
- You can insert a header and/or footer with the title of your story and/or your name as author, or any other useful information.
- You can insert a 'cover page' from the selection offered in 'Word', and then change the picture for one of your own. (Right mouse on the picture, click 'change picture').
- Add photos / pictures / illustrations.

When you are ready to print your story:

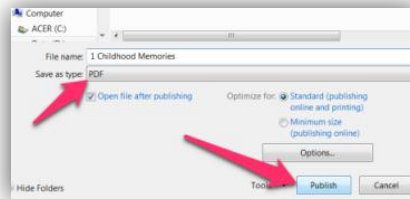
Save your document as a PDF. Click on 'file' (top left) and select 'Save As'.



When you see the dialogue box asking for the name of your new file, click the arrow underneath this space where it says 'save as type:' and select your file type as 'pdf'.



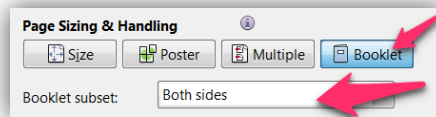
Now you just need to click the 'publish' button. Your document will appear in PDF format.



Print your document as a booklet. Click on the 'print' icon.

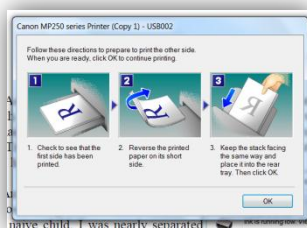


In the 'print' dialogue box look for the 'booklet' option. It will be in the middle under 'page size and handling'.



Also make sure you have selected the 'both sides' printing option. And then click 'Print'.

After printing one side of the pages, your printer will send instructions about turning over your pages and re-inserting them into your printer. How this works will depend on your particular printer.



If you have a big enough stapler, you can now put a staple or two right into the middle fold of your booklet. If you only have a small stapler, then you will need to fold the booklet and put a couple of staples along the back edge.

4.4 Self-Publishing

If you have a really good story with great pictures, it might be worth self-publishing so that you have a nice professional book to share around and use again and again.

There are several possible websites / programs that make this process easy and reasonably-priced. The best ones are:

Lulu.com is a site where you can upload your story and pictures, and they will publish and print it for you. A softcover book can be produced for about \$8 (US).

Blurb.com can be slightly cheaper. Some books can be created online, or you can download the program (BookSmart), work on it on your computer, and then upload it for them to print. The cheapest book – a 20 page “Pocket Book” – is less than \$6 (AUD).

4.5 Get Published

We are hoping that eventually we can find a publisher who will think our project for Malaysian kids is worthwhile. This could take a while. So, in the meantime, our intention is to produce some good quality stories, and test them on the kids to see what they like.

Workshop Activity

Participants will be invited to:

1. Create a story plan – choose / create character(s)
 - select setting
 - create a plot
2. Create a Little Book story complete with illustrations, and share ideas with the group.
3. Design / write a longer story along the same lines.

If participants have a computer with them, they could start creating a story in Word. Otherwise participants can work singly or in pairs/groups with a plan for writing a story by hand.

Examples of stories already created will be available.

It is hoped that participants will continue to network after the conference, sharing stories and ideas and making them available on the Stories for Malaysian Kids website.

Appendix 1: Questionnaire for School Children (English)

Questions for School Children

This is NOT a test! Please answer as much as you can.

My name is I am years old.

I am a boy girl

I like school because I DON'T like school because

I live with my

mother

father

brother(s) (how many?

sister(s) (how many?

grandfather

grandmother

Others. Who?.....

We live in a

What is fun?What do you hate doing?

Who is your best friend?..... Why?

What Super Power would you like to have?

If you had 3 wishes, what would they be?

What do you have bad dreams about when you sleep?

Which country would you like to live in?

What kind of house would you like to live in?

Who is your hero / heroine?

What is something funny that happened to you?.....

What is something frightening that happened to you?.....

What is something sad that happened to you?.....

What is something embarrassing that happened to you?.....

What are you really good at?.....

What is something naughty that you have done?.....

Would you like to read a book with exciting stories about you?.....

Appendix 2: Children's questionnaire in Bahasa Malaysia

Ini **bukanlah** satu ujian. Sila jawab di ruang yang disediakan.

Sila tandakan dalam kotak yang berkenaan.

Nama saya ialah Saya berumur tahun.

Saya ialah seorang lelaki perempuan

Saya **suka** ke sekolah kerana

Saya **tidak** suka ke sekolah kerana

Saya tinggal dengan

ibu

ayah

saudara lelaki : ____ orang

saudara perempuan: ____ orang

datuk

nenek

lain-lain : Siapa? Saya tinggal di

Apakah yang membuatkan anda rasa seronok

Apakah yang anda paling tidak suka buat?

Siapakah kawan baik anda?

Kenapa anda suka berkawan dengannya?

Apakah kuasa luar biasa yang anda inginkan?.....

Jika anda berpeluang membuat 3 permintaan, apakah permintaan itu? _____
 Apakah mimpi buruk yang pernah anda alami? _____
 Di negara manakah yang anda ingin tinggal? _____
 Bagaimanakah rupa rumah idaman anda? _____
 Siapa 'hero' (adiwira) atau 'heroin' anda? _____
 Apakah perkara yang paling melucukan pernah berlaku pada anda? _____
 Apakah perkara yang paling menakutkan pernah berlaku pada anda? _____
 Apakah perkara yang paling menyedihkan pernah berlaku pada anda? _____
 Apakah perkara yang paling memalukan pernah berlaku pada anda? _____
 Apakah perkara yang paling baik dapat anda lakukan? _____
 Apakah perkara nakal yang telah anda lakukan? _____
 Adakah anda ingin embaca buku yang menceritakan tentang anda? _____
 Terima kasih di atas ker jasa yang diberikan.

Appendix 3: Guidelines for IPG students Meeting with Children

- A lot of the children gave similar answers in the questionnaires. We would like to find out a little more about individual children.
- Write some physical characteristics – tall / short / cute / round-faced / curly-haired / big brown eyes - which they are ok with!
- Find out what they *think* they are good at.
- Ask the children about any small story about an event. Examples would be if something surprising / funny / sad / scary happened. How did it make them feel?
- Encourage each child to draw pictures of any or all of: their family, house, pets and/or livestock (cows, chickens, goats etc.), playing with their friends, something that has happened – sad / happy / funny / scary. Write the child's name and a caption.
- Take photos of the children.
- Write an interview sheet (below) for each child.

Notes about a student from Teaching School

Child's Name Boy Girl Age.....

1. Physical characteristics

2. What are they good at? Not good at?

3. Which of the children here their friends?

4. Ask for stories about something that happened.

5. What did they draw a picture(s) of?

6. Did we take a photo(s) of them? with friend(s)

Name of IPG Helper

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Ruth Wickham (MEd TESOL) is an English Language Training Fellow, stationed at IPGKDRI. She has 20 years' experience in the classroom in Australian primary schools, 12 years as a field linguist in the Torres Strait, and 6 years teaching and managing ESL courses in China, Turkey, UK, Saudi Arabia and Australia.

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