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**READING STRATEGIES OF AVERAGE
AND WEAK ESL READERS A CASE STUDY**

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READING STRATEGIES OF AVERAGE

AND WEAK ESL READERS : A CASE STUDY

by

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This study approaches reading from the psycholinguistic standpoint. Miscue analysis is used to investigate the reading strategies of a group of average and weak ESL readers from Sekolah Menengah Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur. The readers' miscues were analyzed in accordance with Yetta Goodman and Burke's Reading Miscue Inventory (1972). The research addresses itself to the question of how these readers utilized the language cues – graphophonic, syntactic and semantic – to help them make sense of the text.

The findings shows that both groups of readers depended extensively on graphophonic cues and were less efficient in using syntactic and semantic cues. Qualitative analysis of the

miscues show that when the readers did resort to the syntactic and semantic cues, the average readers produced better quality miscues.

The applicability of miscue analysis as a research tool is indicated in the suggestions for further research. The pedagogical implications of the findings underscore the practical use of miscue analysis in the classroom.

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Kajian ini mendekati pembacaan dari sudut psikolinguistik. Analisis "miscue" diguna untuk menyelidik strategi-strategi pembacaan sekumpulan pembaca Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua yang sederhana dan yang lemah dari Sekolah Menengah Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur. "Miscue" pembaca-pembaca ini dianalisis menurut 'Reading Miscue Inventory" (1972) oleh Yetta Goodman dan Burke. Penyelidikan ini mengarah kepada soalan mengenai bagaimana pembaca-pembaca ini menggunakan "cues" bahasa — grafofonik, sintaktik dan semantik — untuk membantu mereka memahami teks.

Dapatan-dapatan menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua kumpulan pembaca bergantung atas "cues" grafofonik secara meluas dan

kurang cekap dalam menggunakan "cues" sintaktik dan semantik. Analisis kualitatif tentang "miscues" itu menunjukkan bahawa apabila pembaca-pembaca menggunakan "cues" sintaktik dan semantik, pembaca-pembaca sederhana menghasilkan "miscues" yang lebih bermutu.

Keboleh-terapan analisis "miscues" sebagai alat penyelidikan dinyatakan dalam cadangan-cadangan bagi penyelidikan lanjutan. Implikasi-implikasi pedagogi mengenai dapatan-dapatan penyelidikan ini menegaskan faedah praktikal analisis "miscues" di dalam bilik darjah.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Reading is a very complex mental process. There have been many attempts at defining the reading process. Huey's attempt in 1908, resulted in his conclusion that it remains a mystery. That it remains as complex as ever, has to do with the fact that when one tries to analyse or define this process, one is probing the workings of the human mind. Huey was thus to conclude that if we can analyse what happens when we read, we could have succeeded in describing as well as revealing "the tangled story of the most remarkable specific performance that civilization has learnt in all its history" (Huey, 1908, cited in Lovett, 1981:1).

Southgate et al. (1981:27) echo this difficulty and emphasize that since most reading is done silently, the problem of investigating what happens when one reads, is enhanced.

Mackay (1979:viii) in Reading in a Second Language voices the same concern and extends the problem to the ESL (English as a Second Language) scene. Mackay observes that applied linguistics has attempted at coming to an understanding of the reading process through learning from the learners' errors in their oral reading and their written work.

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Goodman's work (1967, 1969, 1981) on miscues is yet another attempt at trying to make some sense of the "tangled story". Southgate et al. (1981:27) acknowledge Goodman's contribution to this area of research. The writers affirm that miscue analysis can help to explain the reading process.

Miscue analysis examines the errors made by readers in oral reading and attempts to explain what the readers do through these miscues. As such, the reading process that Chall (1977, cited in Southgate et al., 1981:24) labels as "a complex mental process" can then be explained. For this reason, Goodman (1974:3) sees it fit to refer to miscues as "windows on the reading process".

Research using miscue analysis requires one to subscribe to the psycholinguistic view of reading as propounded by Goodman (1967). Thus, the following factors should be borne in mind.

When the reader tries to grapple with a piece of text in order to get meaning from it, three language cues play a part in aiding him in his attempt. The three cues are the graphophonic cues, the semantic cues and the syntactic cues.

In addition, his reading is also influenced to some extent by his knowledge and experience of the world (Levin and Williams 1970; Goodman, 1969, 1981; Burke, 1981).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Malaysia, the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia and English is taught as a Second Language. One of the aims of the most recent syllabus for the English Language in the KBSM (Integrated Secondary School Syllabus), which will be implemented in schools in 1988, is to equip pupils with a language which will provide them access to information vital to their academic and professional studies. A survey of the major libraries in the country will reveal that the bulk of the references and academic texts are in English. Translated works can be obtained but they are not as abundantly and readily available as desired. The ability to read effectively and efficiently in English is thus an important skill as it is a means to getting information vital to one's education. Lee Su Kim (1983:2) emphasizes this point:

> In Malaysia, although the medium of instruction is in the Malay language, the majority of the academic texts and references are in English, of which only a few have been translated into Malay. Consequently, English has become the library or "link" language, and a relatively good command of reading skills in ESL is essential as the means of access to information without which professional studies might be greatly impaired.

The role of reading in the ESL curriculum is thus a significant one. Mackay et al. (1979:vi) see it as a "legitimate goal in the ESL curriculum". Lee Su Kim (1983:3) expresses the same sentiment. There is a need, therefore, to investigate the reading process so that a better and clearer

understanding of this process can be arrived at. Such gained insights can then pave the way to better teaching strategies.

How then can one "look into a reader's mind" and understand the way in which he reads? Reading comprehension scores which claim to reflect a reader's reading ability actually measure the product rather than the process by which the product has been arrived at. Such scores only give a picture of the end and not the means to the end. The mystery of the reading process still has to be unravelled. Eskey (1979:68) sums up the problem:

> The major problem here is that although we do know a great many interesting things about reading, no one knows exactly what reading is or how anybody learns to do it.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Generally, this study attempts to analyse the reading process of two groups of Second Language readers, that is the average and weak readers. Both groups are following the Second Language programme at the intermediate level. These readers have completed six years of primary education during which English was taught as a Second Language. They are now studying in Form One. These pupils will continue to be taught English as a Second Language in school. These pupils can thus be considered to be at the intermediate level of the English Language Programme. This study will examine how these two groups of readers process information from the text.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are the three cues (graphophonic, syntactic and semantic cues) used by these readers in the reading process?

2. What types of operations (substitution, omission, insertion and reversal) are these readers engaged in the process of reading?

3. Do the readers exhibit a concern for getting meaning from the text? If so, what strategies were used?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Reading is an important skill in the context of the teaching and learning of English as Second Language in Malaysia. Consequently it is important that research into the nature of the reading process be made so that one can obtain a clear picture of what an average learner, at the intermediate level of the language programme, does when he reads. (The category 'average' refers in this study to the reader who is not able to read independently. Such a reader is at the instructional level of the reading programme.) We need to have some concept as to the sort of strategies that the average reader uses, for detecting problems at this early stage of the intermediate programme will go a long way to improving the teaching of reading in Malaysian schools.

One also needs feedback on the way the weak reader reads. (A 'weak' reader is one who is also at the instructional level of the reading programme. Such a reader, however, reads with much difficulty.) Much has been written about the strategies used by the proficient reader. One needs to know what strategies the weak reader uses so that effective teaching strategies can be planned. This study will chart the profile of a small group of average and weak readers. Although the sample size (only eight readers were studied) is too small for any generalization to be made, it will be the start of some research that gives due attention to the weak readers.

Mackay et al. (1979:viii) make a call for more research to be done in the ESL scene. The writers take the stand that 'reading comprehension' should be defined in 'operational' terms. They assert that what is needed in ESL teaching and learning today is a "better and fuller understanding of what a second language reader does". This study aims to add then to the existing body of research on reading in ESL for the insights gained will enable one to teach reading in a Second Language more effectively.

Since hardly any research has been carried out on the reading process using miscue analysis in Malaysia, the findings of this study will contribute positively to this particular field especially in Malaysia.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations which stem from the use of miscue analysis:

1. Miscue analysis uses oral reading (observable behaviour) to infer the workings of the reader's mind. As such, it would be impossible for one to assert that the findings from such investigations can accurately describe what the reader does at all times when he reads. Nevertheless, as one might well agree, the only recourse open to the researcher who wants to study the 'mental process' of reading, is still the reader's overt behaviour. Whatever the limitations, only such research can offer more 'windows into the reading process'. It is hoped that with more research conducted in this area, more and more 'windows' will be opened so that one day the 'picture' of what goes on in the reading process will stand clearly before us.

2. One also notes concern about the inconsistencies which could arise through the observation process. Page (1974: 67-68) emphasizes that miscue analysis rests on the study of the discrepancy between the reader's observed behaviour and the expected behaviour (the print). When a reader interacts with the text and his observed behaviour does not match

the expected behaviour, a miscue has been generated. However, Page asserts that there are two additional interactions which one should be aware of:

i) the observer's own interaction with the text (which can produce miscues since miscues are considered regular occurrences of proficient readers),

ii) the observer's own interaction with the reader's spoken words, that is the reader's oral reading – again giving rise to the possibility of other miscues being generated.

Page (1974:69) thus draws attention to the need for devising research strategies that account for the inconsistencies known to be present in the observation process.

Page suggests that the language differences between the observer and the reader can contribute to the inconsistencies in the observation process. Thus for this research, it was with this limitation in mind that the type of language the observer would use and expect the reader to use was that of Standard English. The definition of this is in line with that given by Strevens (1982) in his article 'Varieties of English: A TEFL Approach'. In his article, Strevens

(1982:69) lists six important features of Standard English. Of these, this study notes the following:

i) it is used by educated people who make use of English all over the world, not solely in Britain.

iii) it may be spoken with an accent from any geographical locality, or with a non-regional accent;

iv) it has been universally accepted in the English-speaking world as the only approach model for educational use (and hence, for the 'educated' use) whether we are thinking in English as the mother tongue or as a foreign or second language.

v) it is the variety of English which has been the most comprehensively described and studied.

Thus differences in pronunciation and intonation (if it did not affect meaning) were discounted. Dialectical differences will not have any part to play at all and hence were not considered. However, interlanguage was a feature that had to be taken into account.

In order to have some consistency in the observation process, a second observer who has had experience in teaching English as a Second Language, will be asked to evaluate the oral reading which has been audio-taped. The taping of the oral responses will enable the researcher to ensure that "the limitations of the memory" (Page, 1974:69) does not

add to the inconsistency of the observation process. The making of the miscues, as the reader reads, will be double checked against the taped responses. Page (1974:69) notes that this technique is

> substantially better than current clinical practice – relying solely on the single marking of a typed script while listening to the initial reading only once, at the actual time of the performance.

3. The retelling session was the weakest part of the instrument. This was because the reader had to depend on some amount of recall in order to retell the study. Gershon (1985) also acknowledges this recall factor as a limitation in his study.

    To aid the readers in remembering the details of the story, the researcher is expected to ask probing questions. It was found that the readers' lack of mastery of the English Language contributed to their problem of retelling as they could not express themselves adequately. The researcher's probing questions did not aid memory nor help clarify poorly expressed ideas in cases when the readers' comprehension of the language was weak. To solve this problem the researcher resorted to the use of Bahasa Malaysia. The readers were given the option to retell the story in either English or Bahasa Malaysia. Probing questions were also asked in Bahasa Malaysia when the occasion warranted it.