



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES AND
COMPREHENSION LEVEL OF PROFICIENT AND LOW
PROFICIENT ESL READERS**

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READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES AND
COMPREHENSION LEVEL OF PROFICIENT AND LOW
PROFICIENT ESL READERS

By

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DEDICATION

To the memory of my father Abdullai Morjan Danga, to my mother Eseja Achen,
to my sisters and brothers, all for their love for me and their patience with me.



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I give my thanks to Jesus Christ my Lord, I praise him and I glorify his name for his guidance, protection and love throughout the duration of my study in Universiti Putra Malaysia.

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LISTS OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATION

- 1 EFL English as Foreign Language
- 2 ESL English as a Second Language
- 3 TESL Teaching of English as a Second Language
- 4 TOEFL Test of English as a Foreign Language
- 5 L1 First Language
- 6 L2 Second Language
- 7 UPM Universiti Putra Malaysia
- 8 MT Matriculation TESL



Abstrak Projek yang dikemukakan kepada Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan Universiti Putra Malaysia diserahkan sebagai memenuhi sebahagian bagi mendapatkan Ijazah Master Sains.

STRATEGI-STRATEGI PEMAHAMAN DAN TAHAP PEMAHAMAN
ANTARA PEMBACA ESL YANG CEKAP DAN PEMBACA ESL YANG
KURANG CEKAP

Oleh

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Februari 1999

Penyelia : Sabariah Mohd. Rashid.

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Kajian ini bersifat kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Kajian ini berfokus kepada strategi-strategi pemahaman dan tahap pemahaman antara pembaca ESL yang cekap dan pembaca ESL yang kurang cekap dalam Program Matrikulasi TESL di Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Teknik pemikiran secara lisan terluah (oral) digunakan untuk menyelidik penggunaan strategi pemahaman. Hasil pemahaman diketahui menerusi penceritaan semula.

Dapatan kajian menerangkan bahawa kedua kumpulan pembaca banyak bergantung kepada pemprosesan teks secara “bottom-up” khususnya di kalangan kumpulan pembaca ESL yang kurang cekap. Pembaca ESL yang cekap menggunakan strategi metakognitif dan “top-down” dengan lebih signifikan berbanding dengan pembaca ESL yang kurang cekap. Dapatan kajian yang menunjukkan bahawa kumpulan pembaca ESL juga menggunakan strategi “bottom-up” yang lebih kerap daripada pembaca ESL yang kurang cekap. Ini bercanggah dengan dapatan kajian-kajian lampau yang menyatakan bahawa kumpulan pembaca ESL yang kurang cekap menggunakan strategi “bottom-up” yang lebih kerap daripada pembaca ESL yang cekap. Perbezaan ini berpunca daripada tahap kecekapan L2 yang lebih rendah di kalangan pembaca ESL yang kurang cekap. Ini menyebabkan mereka tidak dapat melaporkan pemikiran mereka dengan kerap, lalu menyebabkan penggunaan strategi “bottom-up” yang lebih rendah. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa pembaca ESL yang cekap mempunyai tahap pemahaman yang lebih tinggi daripada kumpulan pembaca ESL yang kurang cekap.



Protokol-protokol analisis kualitatif juga mencadangkan bahawa masalah utama pembaca ESL ialah penguasaan tatabahasa dan perbendaharaan kata Bahasa Inggeris yang lemah. Ini turut menghindarkan tahap pemahaman pembaca ESL kurang cekap. Untuk memahami maksud teks bacaan, pembaca ESL bergantung kepada pemprosesan teks 'bawah ke atas'.

Dapatan kajian juga menyarankan keperluan untuk mengembangkan pengetahuan linguistik dalam perbendaharaan kata dan tatabahasa Bahasa Inggeris serta meningkatkan kecekapan penggunaan strategi pembacaan.

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READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES AND COMPREHENSION
LEVEL OF PROFICIENT AND LOW PROFICIENT ESL READERS

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This study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The study focuses on the use of reading comprehension strategies and comprehension level of proficient and low proficient ESL readers in the TESL Matriculation programme of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The think-aloud technique was used to investigate the use of reading comprehension strategies. The product of reading (comprehension level) was assessed by the means of oral retelling.

The findings illustrate that both groups of readers depended much on bottom-up text processing, especially the low proficient ESL readers. The proficient ESL readers however, used significantly more metacognitive and top-down strategies than the low proficient ESL readers. The findings of this study further indicate that the proficient ESL readers tended to use more bottom-up strategies than the low proficient ESL readers. This contradicts findings of previous studies which illustrated that the low proficient ESL readers used more bottom-up strategies than the proficient ESL readers. However, this difference is attributable to the lack of competence in L2 among the low proficient ESL readers. This made them unable to report their thoughts frequently hence perhaps producing bottom-up strategies less than the proficient ESL readers. The findings also illustrate that the proficient ESL readers had a significantly higher level of comprehension than the low proficient ESL readers.

The results of the qualitative analysis of think-aloud protocols suggest that the major problem faced by the ESL readers of this study seems to be their



inadequate control over grammar and vocabulary in English. This also hindered the subjects' comprehension of the text especially among the low proficient ESL readers. Thus in order to derive meaning from the text, the ESL readers relied on bottom-up strategies.

The results of the study also suggest that there is a need to enhance the students' linguistic knowledge in vocabulary and grammar of English as a second language to improve the students' efficient use of the reading strategies.



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Reading is one of the basic ways of acquiring information in our society and in academic settings in particular. The ability to read with understanding has become an essential skill in modern society. Individuals who cannot read well are at serious disadvantage with respect to educational and vocational opportunities. These individuals may not be able to read and understand any material both for obtaining information or for pleasure reading since they do not have good reading skills. Skilled reading depends on a multiplicity of perceptual, linguistic and cognitive processes and for many children, reading difficulties reflect the inadequate development of one or more of these processes.

The process of reading comprehension involves such things as abstracting the main ideas, understanding the sequence of events, recognizing the author's purpose, and drawing inferences. However, in language classrooms, reading comprehension questions usually focus on the identification of specific details in the text. The assumption underlying this practice is that students who are able to extract the required details from a text have understood the text well. In reading, it is not sufficient just to focus on comprehension (the product of reading done). The process of working through a reading task is often as important as producing correct responses to comprehension questions.

The product of reading has been the focus of a number of studies in ESL contexts. For example, in Malaysia, Chai (1990) studied the effect of pre-reading

instruction on comprehension of forty ESL students. The findings of the study indicate that the students involved in the study were capable of identifying clearly-stated information, but were not as capable at inferring from stated information in the text. Similarly, in a study by Jariah Mohd. Jan et al. (1993), the seventeen Form Four literature students were able to answer the literal level questions well but not the higher order inferential questions.

The findings of Chai (1990) and Jariah Jan Mohd. et al. (1993) indicate that second language readers can comprehend text literally but lack interpretative comprehension skills. Investigating the comprehension process of ESL readers would therefore, perhaps reveal why they are unable to build on literal comprehension and go beyond information which is explicitly stated in the text. The practical value of process-oriented reading research is in the identification of effective comprehension strategies that can be taught to poorer readers in the language learning classroom.

In Malaysia, a more in-depth study of the process and product of reading was carried out by Sali Zaliha Mustapha (1991) using think-aloud, retell and free-write protocols. The study focused on strategies of proficient ESL readers only. The findings suggested that proficient ESL readers used a variety of reading strategies to comprehend an expository text. In other ESL contexts studies of this kind have been carried out by researchers such as Rubin (1975), Hosenfeld (1979), Davis and Bistodeuu (1993). However, to date, in-depth studies of a similar nature on the reading process of low proficient ESL learners are still lacking. Since it is the low proficient ESL learners who face comprehension difficulties, it is important that

in-depth studies be conducted to find out how they read to get meaning from a text in English. In studies done in other ESL contexts, Abraham and Vann (1987), Vann and Abraham (1990) and Block (1986, 1992) found that low proficient ESL readers used certain reading strategies which are less efficient in facilitating comprehension as compared to their proficient counterparts. In view of these findings, it is also important perhaps to find out differences in the way reading comprehension strategies are used by proficient and low proficient ESL readers.

Statement of the Problem

In many parts of the world, English is taught and learnt as a second language. One of the aims of English language syllabus in basic or secondary education is to equip the pupils, students or simply learners with a language which will provide them access to information vital to their academic and professional studies. The ability to read effectively and efficiently in English is thus an important skill as it is a means of getting information vital to one's education.

The role of reading in the ESL (English as a Second Language) curriculum is thus a significant one. Mackay et al. (1979) sees it as a "Legitimate goal in the ESL curriculum". 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 way to better selection of reading materials and better teaching strategies.

How then can one “look into a reader’s mind” and understand the way in which he reads and reaches comprehension?. Reading comprehension scores as mentioned earlier only reflect a reader’s reading ability and only 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 needs to be unraveled. Eskey (1979:68) summed up the problem as:

“ 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”.

Thus, looking into the reading comprehension strategies of proficient and low proficient ESL readers by analyzing the verbal protocol of readers will perhaps provide some insight into the reading process and makes us understand what is meant by reading.

Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study attempts to examine the reading process and reading product of proficient and low proficient ESL readers. Specifically the study seeks to:

1. investigate the use of reading comprehension strategies by proficient and low proficient ESL readers.
2. examine the comprehension level of proficient and low proficient ESL readers.

Research Questions

Based on the objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do the proficient ESL readers use more metacognitive strategies than the low proficient ESL readers?
2. Do the proficient ESL readers use more top-down strategies than the low proficient ESL readers?.
3. Do the low proficient ESL readers use more bottom-up strategies than the proficient ESL readers?.
4. Do the proficient ESL readers recall more main ideas than the low proficient ESL readers?.

Significance of the Study

Reading is an important skill in the context of the teaching and learning of English as a second language. It is an important receptive skill in ESL context because the students need the skills in order to have access to information. In many ESL context, students may not have problems in reading text in their L1, but when confronted with the reading texts in L2, then comprehension difficulties occur. Classroom observations indicate that some ESL students are only able to comprehend isolated ideas in the text. Other ESL students are able to comprehend the text superficially, but are unable to make inferences based on it. In the light of this, it is important that a study be conducted to obtain a clearer picture of how proficient and low proficient ESL readers comprehend a text. With this knowledge, English teachers are in a better position to help ESL readers who need help in

overcoming their comprehension difficulties. The teachers may also improve on their teaching strategies and their materials.

Although many studies have been done in comparing the reading strategies of proficient and low proficient ESL readers for example, (Hosenfeld 1977, 1979, Cziko 1980 and Carrel 1989), the patterns of comprehension strategies of low proficient ESL readers have yet to be researched in depth. This study will, therefore, contribute to the existing body of research on reading comprehension strategies of ESL readers. Mackay et al. (1979) makes 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".

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations which stem from the use of verbal reports, and sample size. The limitations are as follows:

- 1- It may be difficult for individuals to report their thinking as they read. While for proficient ESL readers, reading has become so automatic that they may not be able to report their thinking, the low proficient ESL readers may have difficulties in verbalizing their thoughts, and as such they may refrain themselves from reporting their thoughts.

- 2- The process of interrupting informants to report on their thoughts may change the nature of the thinking and precipitate strategic processing which otherwise might not occur.
- 3- Since the sample size of the study is very small one has to be cautious in generalising its findings.
- 4- Restricting the participants to think-aloud as well as retelling in their L2 may affect their think-aloud and retelling protocols as the low proficient ESL readers may not be able to verbalise their thoughts due to poor L2 skills.

Operational Definitions

Proficiency

Proficiency is used in this study to refer to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak or understand language.

Low Proficient Readers

These are readers who are still unable to read independently. They are less familiar with the semantic and syntactic constraints of the second language. They do not have enough vocabulary of the target language. Grabe (1986) pointed out that lack of a large vocabulary that can be read rapidly, accurately and automatically accessed may be the greatest single impediment to fluent reading by low proficient readers.

Proficient Readers

These are readers who are able to read independently. The proficient readers or skilled readers as referred to by (Rumelhart, 1980) comprehend text by actively constructing meaning and integrating information from text with relevant information from their background knowledge.

Second Language (L2) Learning

This study follows the terminology used by Dulay et. al. (1982:10) who defines L2 as “the process of learning another language after the basics of the first have been acquired”. This definition includes the learning of a new language in a foreign language context.

Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension can be seen as the process of using one’s own prior experiences and writers cues to infer the author’s intended meaning. This process varies in ways designed to satisfy the requirements of the total situation in which it is taking place.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Reading Comprehension Strategies can be defined as those procedures employed by readers to aid them in understanding or constructing meaning from texts.