A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE UPON UNGKU OMAR POLYTECHNIC IPOH STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION

ZALILLAH BINTI HARON

PROJECT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF EDUCATION

LANGUAGE FACULTY
UNIVERSITY PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS
2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I thank Allah the Almighty, for making me what I am today and for gracing me the will to progress another step forward in my professional career. My gratitude to the Director of Ungku Omar Polytechnic and especially to Dr. Nor Azmi bin Mustapha for making this research paper possible and for giving me the opportunity to improve myself professionally and personally. Thank you for all your professional guidance, concern, support and encouragement.

My thanks is also extended to the staff of the library of University Pendidikan Sultan Idris, University Kebangsaan Malaysia and Maktab Perguruan Ipoh, my colleagues in the Language Unit, General Affairs Department, Ungku Omar Polytechnic, for their kind assistance in locating research materials and the chosen students from the Mechanical and Commerce department, who had cooperated fully in providing the invaluable data.

To all my colleagues and friends who had encouraged and supported me in one way or another during this trying time. I would like to thank you for your kind help.

Lastly, to members of my family especially to my husband and children for their help, encouragement, prayers and patience in completing this research, my everlasting love, gratefulness and thanks to you all. May Allah bless us all.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the writing in this project paper is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged .

Date: 4. Jun 2003

ZALILLAH BINTI HARON
2002 00448

ABSTRACT

Schema Theory describes the process by which readers combine their own background knowledge with new information from the text the readers are reading. Readers carry different schemata which are often content/culture specific. To enable readers to form connections between pre existing background knowledge and new knowledge from the text, pre reading tasks are often designed to build or activate the reader's schemata.

This research paper looked into the effects of background knowledge upon Ungku Omar Polytechnic (PUO) students reading comprehension, looking into the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students' achievement in reading familiar and unfamiliar text. In addition, this research paper looked at the influence of the training sessions to activate /induced background knowledge. Lastly this research paper looked at the role of vocabulary in enhancing PUO ESP students' reading comprehension.

This research adopted an experimental study of fifty eight elementary level students from the engineering and business field. The students involved were in their third semester. The instruments chosen were engineering and business text. A pre and post test was administered with training sessions in between. Brainstorming sessions, semantic mapping and discussions were conducted to build, stimulate or induced students background knowledge. The results obtained from the two test confirmed that there is positive significant difference in the PUO ESP students' reading comprehension before and after training.

ABSTRAK

Teori Skema menerangkan tentang proses bagaimana pembaca menggabungkan pengalaman lampau mereka dengan maklumat baru dari teks yang sedang mereka baca. Pembaca mempunyai pelbagai skemata yang selalunya berpusatkan kepada isi kandungan dan alam sekeliling yang dipengaruhi oleh budaya sesuatu tempat. Untuk membolehkan pembaca membuat pertalian antara pra wujud pengetahuan lampau dengan pengetahuan baru dari teks yang dibaca, tugasan pra bacaan selalunya direka untuk membina atau merangsang skemata pembaca.

Kertas penyelidikan ini mengkaji kesan pengetahuan lampau ke atas pelajar-pelajar Politeknik Ungku Omar(PUO) dalam bacaan pemahaman terutamanya merujuk kepada pencapaian pelajar-pelajar"English for Specific Purposes" (ESP) dalam membaca teks yang lazim dan tidak lazim. Tambahan daripada itu, kertas penyelidikan ini juga mengkaji keberkesanan sesi latihan yang telah dijalankan bagi meransang pengetahuan lampau pelajar-pelajar. Akhirnya, kertas kajian ini juga mengkaji peranan kosa kata dalam meningkatkan bacaan pemahaman pelajar-pelajar ESP PUO.

Seramai 58 pelajar semester 3 dari jurusan kejuruteraan dan perdagangan di pilih untuk kajian ini. Mereka mempunyai tahap pemahaman Bahasa Inggeris yang sederhana. Teks kejuruteraan dan perdagangan digunakan sebagai instrumen kajian. Ujian pra dan pos dikendalikan. Sesi latihan diberi diantara dua ujian di atas. Sesi latihan merangkumi aktiviti `brainstorming, peta semantic dan perbincangan bagi membina , merangsang pengetahuan lampau pelajar-pelaja tersebut. Keputusan dari dua ujian mengesahkan bahawa terdapat perbezaan signifikan yang positif di dalam bacaan pemahaman pelajar-pelajar ESP PUO sebelum dan selepas latihan.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background of the study

The   end   of World War Two brought about enormous expansion in
scientific, technical and economic activities on an international scale. The world
was united by two forces - technology and commerce - which in their rapid
progress generated a demand for an international language. For various reasons,
most notably the economic power of the United States, the role fell on the English
Language The need for learning a language, in this case English, became focused
and well-defined - to learn new technology and to do business. The oil crisis in the
70s accelerated the development. Cash-rich people from the Middle East needed to
handle the technology bought with their oil wealth - fast. There was then a market
for English language instructors who could help these people learn English to
handle specific tasks. For the first time the needs of learners became important, and
they dictated what they wanted to learn. For a time, English for Science and
Technology (EST) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) were almost

synonymous. Identifying the target situation of learners' needs and then carrying out a rigorous analysis of the linguistic features of that situation - conducting needs analysis. The identified features will form the syllabus of the ESP course.

The syllabus emphasises reading and listening strategies. The characteristic exercises get the learners to reflect on and analyze how meaning is produced in and retrieved from written and spoken discourse. As a reaction from cognitive learning theories, the learners are now looked upon as an individual who thinks, with a mental capacity to observe and imitate the target language. The need for English vary according to the fields of specialization of the learners and the nature of work that they would eventually be involved in. For example, an electrical engineering graduate who becomes a sales engineer may need more oral communication skills than one who works as a technician in a factory. This poses a problem in devising a programme flexible enough to fulfill the students' diversified needs.

In preparing the English language syllabuses, there was also the difficulty of striking a balance among the following categories of needs for learning English:

a)   the immediate academic need

b)   the post graduation needs - for performing tasks in the workplace, and

c)   the professional development needs - for career advancement

According to a needs analysis (Needs Analysis Report 1994 Bahagian Teknik dan Vokasional, Kementrian Pendidikan Malaysia). ESP students are generally aware of the importance of English, but it is still a low priority subject to them because the need for English is not pressing for academic purposes as well as for securing employment after graduation. This is because the medium of instruction is in the national language and these ESP students do not have to use English outside the classroom. In addition, most of the ESP students are employed even before they graduate. There is such an acute shortage of technical personnel that employers are prepared to overlook the English proficiency level and opt for the ESP students technical knowledge. On the other hand, the need for English becomes crucial when these ESP students are poised for career advancement or for professional development. This is especially true in multi-national companies where the language of work at the management and executive level is English and training programmes could be conducted overseas.

The existing 19 Polytechnics and more than 90 technical schools all over Malaysia provide the students with English language proficiency programs/courses

to enable them to function efficiently, effectively as well as confidently in their future work place and field of specialization. ESP is now one of the compulsory subjects in the curriculum for all courses taught in the polytechnics and technical schools. Although it is ESP in nature the general objectives of the syllabus is an equivalent to English for Second Language (ESL) which integrate the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The researcher will be referring to English at the polytechnics as ESP. Though the curriculum emphases the communicational approach to learning the language, the other skills are given equal importance. Top priority would be the skill of reading as students are required to do extensive reading to be able to extend their knowledge in their respective field and to complete assignments. Of equal importance is writing as students need to write reports and formal letters as well as curriculum vitae upon completion from the course. English instruction at the polytechnic level is usually the "intensive reading procedure" which implies close study of short passages, including syntactic, semantic and lexical analyses and translation into the first language to study meaning. Specifically, learners are taught reading skills/strategies for understanding such elements as content, textual features, rhetorical elements and cultural background. Furthermore to enhance comprehension activities such as recalling word meanings, inferring, drawing conclusions are practiced in the class room.

To enable the students to perform their task as stated above, one of the modules prepared by the Ministry of Education for all polytechnics is information gathering skills which would enable the students to work towards their self-development thus paving the way for lifelong education and reading comprehension. The former is formally taught in semester one but reading comprehension is taught integratedly throughout the semester. Enhancing the students reading comprehension is crucial due to the lack of resource books in Bahasa Melayu, especially in the technical field. However these students have limited time to devote to language learning and little interest in knowing English outside the work or study context. Nevertheless they are required to undergo a series of courses to qualify themselves for their respective area of specialization, in many instances these courses require them to read extensively in English.

This is especially true for students doing diploma and certificate courses in Ungku Omar Polytechnic. These courses cater for post secondary school students who have a minimum of a 'C' in either Mathematics or Science. The competition for admission into the polytechnics is very high hence the successful candidates usually have grades which are well above the minimum requirement but alas the fate of English is very much left neglected. English is not a requirement, students

can enter even if they had failed it at SPM. These students come from the normal secondary schools and from the technical schools and they enter the polytechnics with limited proficiency in the English language. The irony of the situation is that their source of reference is mostly from reading materials written in English. From a needs analysis (Needs Analysis Report 1994) conducted on the use of English at the work place, it was discovered that the workers are required to perform reading tasks such as reading manuals (operational, maintenance, trouble shooting), understanding instructions(procedural), and reading descriptions of objects. The polytechnics do teach these students these skills but in addition they have to do extensive reading for their content subjects. The unfortunate situation here is that some of these students fail to comprehend what they have read.

In an ESP course, language skills are taught in combination with content from specific disciplines. The language course is essentially concerned with the language typical of the limited kinds of texts students of, for example engineering and business are required to read. Their reading in the classroom will focus specifically on their specific field. In their engineering classes these students are exposed to text written in Bahasa Melayu and instructions are also in Bahasa Melayu. But their source of reference is mostly in English, even if they surf the

internet the language that confront them is not familiar. It's the same scenario for the commerce students.

1.2   Need for the study

The introduction of a new ESP syllabus for polytechnics and technical schools as well as increased efforts to meet the country's vision of becoming an advanced nation by the year 2020, puts ESP into a more challenging role The future work force needs to have the expertise and knowledge of an advanced nation and these can only be realised if the language facility is also at par with the present advanced nations of the world. Knowledge comes from experience and extensive reading while expertise comes from training. To be trained the future work force needs the information from all available source, from printed materials to media and electronic media. All these need good reading skills. The unfortunate things is that the present generation of students is not active readers nor motivated readers in ESP. They rely on the first language when acquiring information during training. With insufficient reading practice, strategies and doubled by low motivation, reading is now an acute problem which has given rise to this study. The researcher hopes to look into the effects of background knowledge on comprehension amongst technical and commerce students in Ungku Omar Polytechnic. Specifically, the

study will look into students achievement whilst reading familiar and unfamiliar text. Another area would be if background knowledge could be activated/ induced to help foster comprehension among the ESP students in PUO. Lastly, the study will look at the role of vocabulary in enhancing comprehension.

1.3   Statement of problem

Reading is one of the most important skill a student should master. With good reading skills a student would be able to access information from many sources. Achievement in reading ESP for polytechnics and technical schools is depreciating and if measures are not taken the situation will become worse. This study will not address reasons for the depreciation but it will look at one angle on how to improve reading, that is focusing on the students' background knowledge.

1.4   Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to look into the relationship between the PUO ESP students achievement in reading comprehension of familiar and unfamiliar

texts. In addition, the researcher looked at the influence of the training sessions that activated/induced background knowledge and finally the study looked at the role of vocabulary in enhancing PUO ESP students' reading comprehension.

1.5   Research questions

The research questions to be answered in this study are as follows: -

1.   Does background knowledge influence PUO ESP students in their achievement in reading comprehension when they read text which are familiar to them?

2.   Does background knowledge influence PUO ESP students in their achievement in reading comprehension when they read text which are unfamiliar to them?

3.   To what extend does induced/activated background knowledge influence PUO ESP students' reading comprehension?

4.   Does vocabulary influence the ESP students' achievement in reading comprehension?

1.6   Hypotheses

The hypothetical statements that the researcher wishes to look into are:

Null hypothesis (Ho)

1. There is no relationship between ESP (technical /commerce) students background knowledge and achievement in reading comprehension when they read a familiar text.

2. There is no relationship between ESP (technical /commerce) students background knowledge and achievement in reading comprehension when they read an unfamiliar text.

3. There is no relationship between induced/ activated background knowledge and ESP students' reading comprehension.

4. There is no correlation between ESP students' vocabulary and achievement in reading comprehension.

Alternative hypothesis (Ha)

1. There is a significant relationship between ESP (technical /commerce) students background knowledge and achievement in reading comprehension   when they read a familiar text.

2. There is a significant relationship between ESP (technical /commerce) students background knowledge and achievement in reading comprehension   when they read an unfamiliar text.

3 There is a relationship between induced/ activated background knowledge and ESP students' achievement in reading comprehension.

4 There is a correlation between ESP students' vocabulary and achievement in reading comprehension.