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PRIOR KNOWLEDGE IN READING AND COMPREHENSION



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MARIA SHU HONG BEE BT ABDULLAH

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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**PRIOR KNOWLEDGE IN READING
AND COMPREHENSION**

MARIA SHU HONG BEE BT ABDULLAH



**A PROJECT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER IN EDUCATION**

**FACULTY OF LANGUAGES
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS**

2006





DECLARATION

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

07.04.2006

MARIA SHU HONG BEE BT ABDULLAH
M20041000148





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Lastly, I must ever be thankful to my husband for his support and motivation and my children, Ly and Qim who are responsible for shaping my understanding in their learning. To my mum, this literary labour of love is for you. I thank each and everyone who challenged everything and contributed so much.



ABSTRACT

Prior Knowledge in Reading and Comprehension

This research investigates a group of primary five students utilizing their prior knowledge as they construct meaning while reading the expository texts in the English as the Second Language (ESL) classroom. In this case, the students are viewed as bringing personal meaning actively to the reading process. The reading comprehension lessons were carried out with a group of elementary students' reading behaviours being observed and audio-recorded and the data were collected and analyzed qualitatively. The KWLS grid was used to assist students to activate their prior knowledge by generating questions and discussion to construct meaning while reading.

Activating and developing prior knowledge presents background material supporting the importance of schemata and prior knowledge for literacy development. In short, the outcome of this research showed that comprehension can and should be taught. At this time, the challenge for the field is to mesh research with reality. Students of all ages need to get the message that reading is about constructing meaning. The findings of this research were echoed in the main complaint for teachers who proclaimed that their students have no trouble with decoding but they do not understand what they read.

As teachers, we must strive to move forward with the challenge and yet rewarding task of teaching students to comprehend – to activate prior knowledge and to evaluate arguments with a critical eye.



ABSTRAK

Pengetahuan Sedia Ada Dalam Bacaan dan Pemahaman

Kajian ini menyelidik sekumpulan pelajar Tahun Lima di sekolah rendah yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua (ESL) yang menjana pengetahuan sedia ada sewaktu membaca teks berbentuk fakta untuk membina pengertian. Dalam kes begini, para pelajar dilihat seperti membawa makna tersendiri secara aktif dalam proses membaca teks. Proses membaca dan memahami teks oleh sekumpulan pelajar ini dikendalikan di kelas Bahasa Inggeris sewaktu sesi bacaan telah memperlihatkan tingkahlaku bacaan mereka. Data yang dikumpul melalui temubual, pemerhatian dan rakaman audio yang dijalankan sewaktu sesi bacaan dianalisa secara kualitatif.

Menjana dan memperkembangkan pengetahuan sedia ada di kalangan pelajar memperlihatkan kajian asal yang menyokong kepentingan skemata dan pengetahuan sedia ada demi untuk merealisasikan pembangunan literasi. Sebagai rumusan, hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa pemahaman boleh dan patut diajar kepada pelajar. Pada masa kini, cabaran kajian lapangan ini perlu direalisasikan. Pelajar dalam pelbagai lingkungan umur perlu mengetahui bahawa proses membaca adalah untuk membina pengertian. Hasil kajian ini memberi arah tuju kepada para guru yang menghadapi situasi pelajar yang tiada bermasalah dalam mendekod teks yang dibaca tetapi bermasalah dalam memahami teks tersebut.



Sebagai guru, kita perlu bertungkus-lumus bergerak maju ke hadapan menempuh cabaran dalam mengajar para pelajar di sekolah untuk memahami teks dengan menjana pengetahuan sedia ada. Dengan amalan ini, para pelajar dapat membaca teks dengan penilaian yang lebih kritikal.





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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This study investigates a group of primary students on how they utilize prior knowledge to construct meaning while reading in a Malaysian primary school. Specifically, it aims to find out whether students can activate their prior knowledge while reading. This chapter will look into the background of the study, the theoretical framework of the study, the purpose and the significance of the study in which relating to the statements of the problems. The definition of terms will provide some understanding of the investigation of this study.

This study explores on issues of construction of meaning in reading by a group of primary five students who learn English as a second language in an elementary school. It investigates on how students' prior knowledge or schemata influence their construction of meaning as they read. Specifically, this study aims to probe into the act of learning another person's thoughts while reading. We create mental representations based on the





detailed and analytical interaction with text (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). Both the text itself and our prior knowledge influence the reading and constructing meaning (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). The purpose should be to understand and to actively create this representation and put it to use (Pressley & Harris, 2000).

Precisely, this study is a call to view reading comprehension as a strategic process. Here, participants play active role in developing and implementing specific strategies of self-generating questions and discussion to help them to maximize their understanding of text. Further, this study examines participants' abilities to discern their own progress in reading a text and to choose and implement strategies to activate and develop their schemata for a purpose of constructing meaning. The teacher's role is to guide participants toward achieving that level of reading independence. Therefore, this research probes into participants' reading behaviours and interactions during the reading session in a naturalistic social context in an ESL elementary classroom.

1.1 Background of the study

Success in literacy learning for all students continues to be the national goal and priority in the Malaysian educational system. Learning is very much associated with literacy. In our effort to investigate how the participants read and construct meaning is to understand literacy in which will provide background on the views of reading, language acquisition and prior knowledge. Thousands of students and teachers in the past years have provided many ideas and reactions on the understanding of reading and its process of constructing meaning in a Second Language setting. Since many years ago, educators and





psychologists have tried to understand what really happens when an individual learns to read (Smith, 1973).

As teachers place greater emphasis on decoding, they find that many students still do not understand what they read and comprehension does not take place automatically (Smith, 1973). But today's technological world has brought an escalating need for literate, critical thinkers who can fully participate in society. Current thinking supports teachers using questions as prompts to focus students' attention on the important aspects of a text (Shake & Allington, 1985). Numerous researches have dealt with issues of reading process. Reading is a transaction between the reader and the text and established the beliefs that readers have the right to establish or construct their own meanings (Rosenblatt, 1978).



In the last quarter of a century, especially in an educational context, much of the discussion, of students' language development were in view. This is the view that was embodied into the 'creativity' and 'personal growth'. The challenge then, is to explain what participants do when they read and comprehend text. The major emphasis of this discussion is to provide explanation of how the reading process occurs in the classroom context involving reader, text and teacher. From the socio cognitive interactive model, reading is conceptualized as a meaning construction process in the instructional context of the classroom.

As noted, the prior knowledge construction and its potent influence on students' text-based learning were enduring legacies of this era (Alexander & Knight, 1993). Specifically, the readers' knowledge base was shown to be powerful, pervasive, individualistic, and modifiable. Prior knowledge was linked to individuals' perspectives





on what they read or heard, their allocation of attention (Anderson, Pichert, & Shirey, 1983), and their interpretations and recall of written text (Bransford & Franks, 1972; Lipson, 1983). In addition, significant associations were established between readers' existing knowledge and their subsequent reading performance (Stanovich, 1986), comprehension (Alvermann, Smith, & Readence, 1985) and strategic processing (Alexander & Judy, 1988; Garner, 1987).

Because of the primacy of reading-specific studies during this period, there arose an extensive literature on text-based factors, particularly in relation to comprehension. Further, in parallel with the focuses within the broader cognitive field, reading theories and researchers investigated the organization of knowledge in the mind (Anderson, 1996; Rumelhart, 1980) and how that organization distinguished novice readers from more expert readers (Allington, 1980; August, Flavell, & Clift, 1984).

The information-processing research of this period resulted in a multitude of cognition-related constructs. Of the many constructs articulated in this decade, schema theory remains one of the most potent legacies of the time. In fact, Baldwin et al. (1992) described schema theory as "one of the hottest topics in the history of NRC" (National Reading conference, p.507). The theoretical construct of schemata as what (Rumelhart, 1980) called the building blocks of cognition drew explicitly from the philosophy of Kant (Anderson et al., 1977) and embodied the power, pervasiveness, individuality, and modifiability of knowledge previously mentioned. Even those forwarding alternative explanations for the structure of human knowledge and the processing of information have had to counter the tenets of schema theory and the body of supporting evidence (Sadoski, Paivio, & Goetz, 1991).





Many researchers in the 1990s investigate on the way learners and learning perceived within the literacy community. This forces lead to changing perceptions of text, readers and the reading process. Texts are generally defined as printed materials such as books or magazines and to read in linear fashion (Wade & Moje, 2000). In addition, some recent researches suggest that the readers targeted in the research are most often young children acquiring the ability to decode and comprehend written language or older students struggling with the demands of traditional text-based learning (Hiebert & Taylor, 2000). Engagement also pertains directly to students' meaningful and goal-directed participation in text-based learning. While the philosophical writings of Skinner, Chomsky, Kant, and Vygotsky were central to prior eras of reading research, the writings of John Dewey, 1913 with his notions of experiential learning and interest are evident in the conceptions of engagement frame within the burgeoning motivation research and have resulted in a unification of once oppositional stances. Still, the literature on reading indicates that the perception differs from the Kantian distinction between the sensible and the intelligible world inherent in information processing theory and the efferent distinction underlying the psycholinguistic perspective of reading (Goodman & Goodman, 1991).

The study proves and establishes that learners are more than passive receptacles of information (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and they are active and willful participants in the construction of knowledge. In particular, while the learner still resides and operates within a socio cultural context, attention again is turned to the individual working to create a personally meaningful and socially valuable body of knowledge. Thus, the portrait of the engaged readers frame by the research is a group of readers actively





engaged in the process of learning rekindling the interest in strategic processing. The body of literature on learning strategies, particularly reading comprehension has grown in recent years in response to this new view of readers (Pressley, 2002).

The primary focus of recent comprehension research is on what the reader brings to the text (Weiner, 1979). The research demonstrates that schema or organized prior knowledge plays a vital role in comprehension. Comprehension is an active process. It depends on a dynamic interactive memory structure or set of structures that are schemata used to organize and interpret what is heard or read. What we remember, and consequently infer from a passage, seems to be affected not only by linguistic cues and semantic content, but also by the knowledge that we bring to a passage. Schema theory is a theory about the way knowledge is structured and stored in memory (Rumelhart 1980;



05-Pearson and Stephens 1994; Pressley 2002).



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A central tenet of schema theory is that much of what we know is stored in complex relational structures known as schemata that is the plural of schema. Schemata are like containers into which we store particular experiences we have. The schema for chair is stored in our chair schema. The schema for a wedding ceremony is stored in our wedding ceremony schema. Schema theory explains not only how and when we store information in memory but also how we establish relations between one and another, and this enables us to understand events easily. Events may be similarly encoded in the minds; therefore when the readers read they may be constantly referring to prototypic experiences that allow them to make sense of the text.

Schematic processing is top-down, in that the higher order process is triggered first and this triggers attention to the details. Schematic processing influences





comprehension of events around us from early in life and it is this knowledge that allows readers to draw inferences from text that includes information related to their schematic knowledge. Thus the richer a child's world experiences whether he accounts from real or vicarious or reading and television, the stronger the schematic knowledge base (Pressley, 2000). Clearly, another term for schematic knowledge is prior knowledge that the psycholinguists greatly stressed. Schema theory fits well with the constructivist notion of learning, that all learners build their own meanings. In terms of comprehending written language, this means that the prior knowledge the reader brings to the text is crucially important.

Some theorists and researchers attempt to identify types of schemata. House and Acker (1979) categorized schemata into two categories that is content schema and relational schema. Content schema is receiver stored knowledge about objects and events and they are not specifically related to other people but to knowledge of historical events and mathematical theorems. Relational schema is the expectations for the different ways people relate to one. It is suggested that a reader can acquire schemata through experience and or training.

Along with prior knowledge, making inferences is a critical component of reading comprehension. Carr (1987) points that information that can be logically assumed maybe omitted by authors. The reader uses information from the explicit text, plus knowledge of the world to infer the missing information. Inferences are generated by matching up internal representatives encoded in the memory with the reader's existing prior knowledge or schemata. When a match occurs and an inference is generated, comprehension results. In this way, readers draw on a broad range of world knowledge,





spontaneously, integrating the information, making inferences, assumptions, and best guesses.

Existing schemata provide the basis for the identification and organization of the critical semantic elements of a message. The readers are merely using their prior knowledge to make sense of the text. When comprehension fails on the part of the reader, it may be due to a schemata deficiency where in the reader has no experience at all with the subject or it may be that through inattentive reading, the appropriate schemata, although existing in the reader's mind, is not summoned up to make sense of the text.

Comprehension strategies are not skills that can simply be taught by drill methods rather they are plans for constructing meaning (Duffy et al, 1987). Being strategic is not simply about knowing the strategies like self-questioning, predicting based on prior knowledge but about knowing how and when to apply them. With a little guidance, young readers are able to question themselves as they read. The purpose of helping students to generate questions as they read is to enable them to construct better memory representations of the text contents thus promoting reading comprehension.

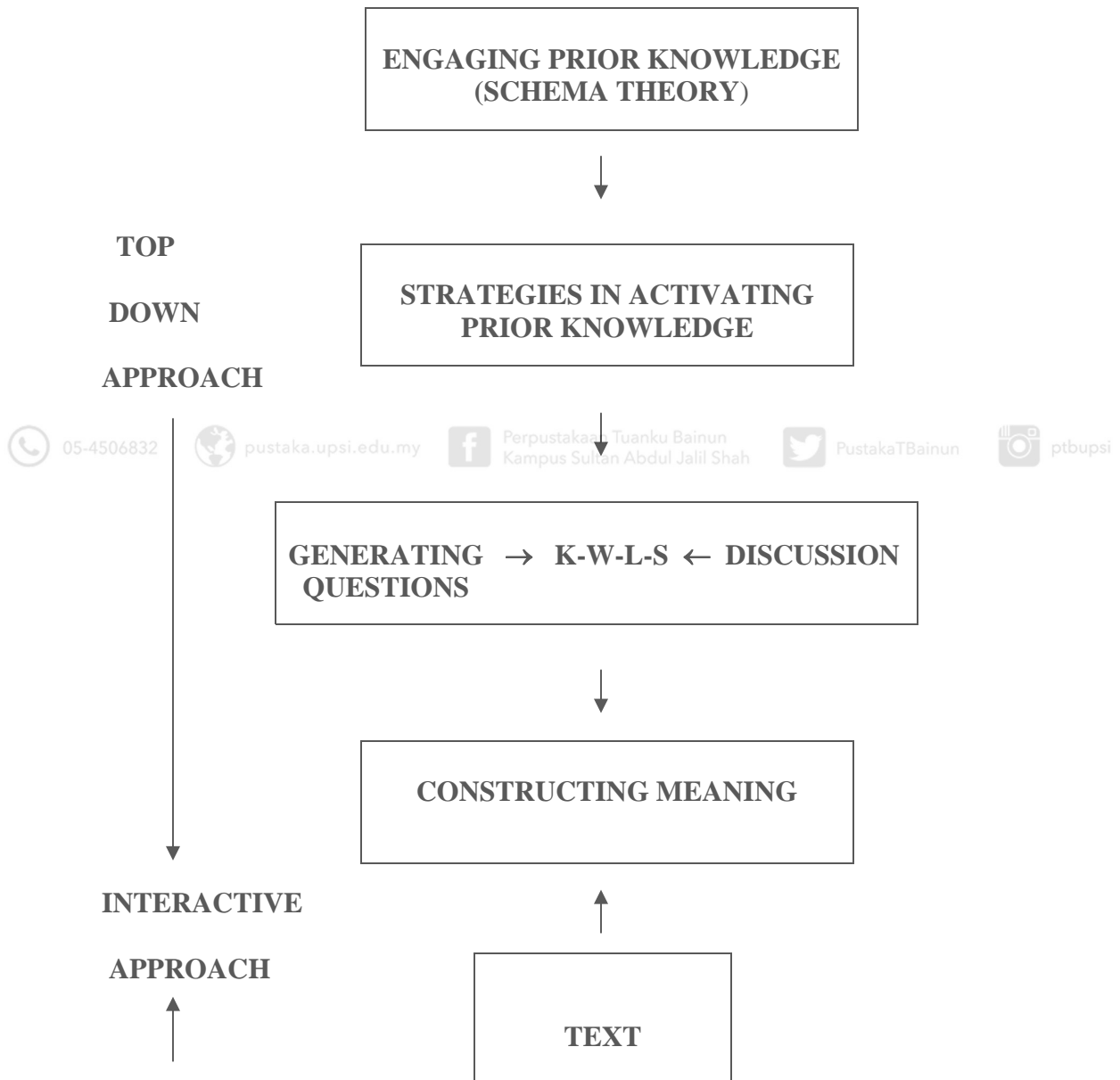
1.2 Theoretical framework of the study

The theoretical framework provides the concepts and assumptions that directs the researcher to the research questions and suggest ways for the researcher to make sense of data. Furthermore, theoretical framework increases the researcher's awareness of the interconnection of the broader significance of data by refining their concepts and



assumptions of the models. For this study, the theoretical framework develops as the researcher gathers and analyzes the data.

Figure 1.2 Theoretical Framework of the study





The theoretical framework of this study draws on top down approach. The top-down approaches generally place their emphasis on the active role of the reader in comprehending a text. The top-down approach, or whole to part model, is a more holistic approach to reading. In this case, the participants are of primary importance, bringing personal meaning to the reading process from her background of experiences. In this way, the participants are the catalyst to comprehension, breathing life into seemingly inert words upon the page.

Therefore, this reading process is said to begin with the highest level of unit that is meaning in the mind of the reader and deals with lower level units like words. This processing operates in a single direction and in a top-down perspective which emphasis on that the view is from the reader to the text (Graves et al., 2001,p.14). With the top down approach, learning to read is much like learning to speak. Speaking is such a natural process as children gather oral language, immersed in the verbal world around them. To get the meaning of a story, then the participants draw on their personal background knowledge collected from the world around them, on their innate ability to use language, and on their expectations of what will happen in the story. In short, the top-down approach for reading is meaning-driven process rather than print-driven (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). With this approach, the tale would be to read the passage aloud several times and they can savor it in its entirety. Essentially, this top-down approach reading is seen as an active process.

The interactive approach in reading reflects the view that the reading process is actually an interactive process between the reader and the text and that the reader actively interacts with the text using top down and bottom up approaches. When examining the





reading process in this study, through the lens of the interactive model, be noted that both the reader and the text play critical roles in the reading process. Rumelhart (1980) and his colleagues expostulated that the processing of the information is not expressly in one direction or the other. Instead, they believed that a reader grasps the meaning of the text by simultaneously synthesizing information from a number of sources in order to accurately interpret what the reader is reading or comprehending. The role of the background or prior knowledge in reading comprehension is widely known as schema theory. This theory gives direction to readers to construct their own meanings from their own previously acquired knowledge or schema. Hence, comprehending a text as this study takes the focus is an interactive process between the text and the reader and the reader's schema.



Rumelhart has devised a theory of reading comprehension that utilizes the principle of interactive stages. There are no fixed steps through which a reader must progress to arrive at comprehension. It is both a top-down and bottom-up process. While Rumelhart's theory is predicated on the belief that a reader will begin with graphemic input and advance through the other stages to comprehension, it does allow the reader to begin at any point and work in any direction. Although in schema theory which takes the interactive nature of the reading process, the emphasis in the theory is on the top-down processing in reading. This study is aimed to look at the models of approaches and theories that underline the reading process and its construction of meaning in an ESL reading classroom. It will look into documenting the readers' behaviours and processes as they activate their prior knowledge and their generations of questions to infer meaning and confirming their inferences through discussion to construct meaning interactively.



Thinking of helping students to construct meaning is more important than simply being recipients of policy change. As teachers, we can take actions to initiate for shaping literacy policies to improve reading and literacy development.

1.3 Rationale of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how participants read and how they construct meaning by using or activating their prior knowledge in reading. Literacy learning is an interactive, constructive process. In essence, children develop literacy in writing, reading, speaking, listening, viewing and thinking by having real literacy experiences. Implicit and modeling like reading aloud or shared reading among learners involves the processes or ideas being modeled. Explicit modeling involves directly sharing and talking with students about what is being modeled. Roenler and Duffy (1984) have identified two types of explicit modeling, talk aloud and think aloud. In a talk-aloud, the teachers present learners with a series of steps for completing a task or a process and then ask questions to guide them through the process.

In a balanced literacy classroom, “Kid watching” (Goodman, 1986) as it is frequently described, is the process of observing learners as they perform authentic literacy tasks or looking at the results of these tasks. Observation is a powerful and reliable part of assessing and evaluating this process. With this interest, I choose to develop the habit of always looking, thinking and asking, “What does this process mean?” The work of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978) provides a basis for the concept that children learn by being supported by adults and peers. At the same time,



researches establish the idea that children learn language holistically rather than in bits and pieces (Halliday, 1975). This study explores participants' reading behaviours in a language classroom with the hope to see that a combination of direct instruction and authentic reading experiences to teach students to be literate, in short, to have learned and to be able to construct meanings.

It is important to note that every individual student has a unique set of experiences relating to language and this is an important basis for the student in figuring out how constructing meaning from reading occurs. Every student brings a unique composite of personality characteristics to the task. Students differ in how ready they are to take risks and in how much they choose to learn and to acquire comprehension in reading. The intention hereby is to observe and document language and reading behaviours of these participants performing their acts and roles as they are taking risks in learning to read in the English Language Classroom, for the observations will lead into behaviours that will portray how they construct meanings.

There must be discussion because new questions and wonderings often arise in interactions and discussion to clarify their thoughts. It is of utmost importance to learn how the use of language in communication contributes to comprehending and learning due to the fact that students in the school years discover new selves and new voices to express themselves. Learning from these participants will lead us to a journey of discovery on how they read and how their prior knowledge can aid them in their reading and constructing meaning. Readers construct meaning as they read and they use their prior learning and experiences to make sense of the text. Readers predict, select, confirm and self correct as they seek to make sense of print. Effective reading makes sense.





Comprehension of meaning is always the goal of readers and expression of meaning is always the goal for writers compose and readers comprehend.

The importance of teaching students to read and ultimately reducing illiteracy has been a major agenda in the Malaysian education system. In schools and classrooms across the country, educators are working to improve the achievement of all students to ever-higher comprehension levels. Research on comprehension, schema, metacognition and cognition is of utmost importance as the process of reading is being emphasized. Educators and policy makers must recognize that besides phonemic awareness in reading program, reading comprehension strategies must be incorporated in the program too.

Reading however is more complex because sometimes students can be reading accurately but they do not understand what they read because they do not get a significant amount of the text's meaning. Therefore understanding how to improve reading comprehension for all elementary students who are facing increasingly academic challenges should be the primary motivating factors in future literacy research. Building understanding is currently viewed as what a reader needs to do to read successfully. It is important to consider that building understanding is not extracting information from the page in which how reading was once characterized. Rather, building understanding involves determining what information means. Reading is constructing meaning.

1.4 Statement of Problem

Millions of children cannot understand or correctly interpret written materials at an elementary level and may be classified as functionally illiterate. The way reading is





taught in school has something to do with the students' beliefs about reading. The traditional method of "read a chapter and answer the questions" encourages students to memorize facts, quashes any creative thinking they might be doing and fails to cultivate a love of reading. This instructional approach affects mostly upper-elementary and secondary students, of course but some researchers believe the problems begin even earlier, in the primary grades.

Wollman-Nonilla and Werchadlo (1995) argue that primary reading instruction focuses exclusively on teaching students how to read at the expense of teaching them to respond to reading. Thus, from their earliest experiences in school, children learn that reading is a process to be mastered, a mystery to be decoded, rather than an opportunity to interact with and construct meaning from the ideas of others. This resulting situation will shed some light upon us. "When you first ask students what they think, they don't know. They don't seem to have been asked that question very frequently" (Fuhler, 2000).

Traditional approaches to enhancing the writing, reading, and thinking skills of adolescent reluctant readers have been drawn from research with young children. It is noted that the deleterious presence of Mathew Effects in adolescents (Stanovich, 2000). It is an effect of reading that good students are getting better but the struggling student is inhibited to read. In many ways, reading is an intellectual multiplier. The more students read, the larger their vocabularies become, and the more proficient they become as readers. Unfortunately, this scenario is not true with our students in the Malaysian school context. Students in primary and secondary schools rarely read and this is why their skills deteriorate especially as the level of difficulty with texts escalates as they matriculate through secondary school. So, an ineffective reader in second grade may likely become a





non-reader by tenth grade. By the time students reach secondary school, they are expected to have the comprehension skills necessary to read in the content areas. Reading in the content area poses new challenges to the secondary students where as elementary reading instruction focuses primarily on learning to read, secondary reading instruction focuses on reading to learn. That is, reading becomes a tool for gathering information about a subject area.

In addition, the reading material required of secondary school becomes more difficult. Gone are the short stories filled with vivid characters and familiar topics that were the basis of the elementary reading program. At the secondary level, textbooks predominate materials that often are compactly written and contain specified vocabulary. So students must read expository texts packed with facts and visuals representations compared to the simplicity of narrative texts in primary school. Because of these demands on reading skills, secondary students with poor literacy skills are at risk in many of their subject-area courses. If this problem is not being tackled well by teachers in elementary school, there will be a large group of struggling readers who when they reached secondary school will be able to read a passage in a textbook but cannot relate about what they have just read. They may literally not be able to read the words on the page or they spend time sounding out and deciphering unfamiliar words that meaning is lost and comprehension suffers.

Students also face problems in not having strategies that would help them to preview text, make use of prior knowledge and generate questions and thinking as to be able to actively engage in reading. Evidence has proven that every upper primary and secondary teacher has students who are the struggling readers in his or her classroom. To





add to the problem is that there are teachers who question why they should teach reading when their main responsibility is their specific content area. This has not been a central concern for many teachers. Even the upper primary school teachers usually moan that when they received the initial class of students in primary four which is considered as the Level Two students in Malaysian primary school, they are faced with a group of students who will be able to sound out words without being able to make any meanings of text they read. Therefore, in these circumstances, students were not guided to generate questions or engage actively in reading. This research is hoped to help teachers to understand the importance of attending to students' readings and to relate to needs that is key to successfully addressing the problems faced by our struggling readers.



05-parrot read beautifully but have difficulties comprehending what is read. From the analysis of test papers and yearly assessment, it raises great concern from our school community when our test scores are low in the area of reading comprehension. School English Panel Department conducted error analysis and find out that students are confused on ways to make meaning from text to arrest reading comprehension. Unfortunately, generally, students do not have the skills to help them with creating meaning of text. Students have no trouble with decoding but face problems constructing meaning. The students need to be aware that the purpose of reading is to construct meaning.

Anderson (1984) conducted an interesting study in this regard. The research findings prove that students could decode every word in the text as required by the researcher but they found that comprehension did not follow naturally as a consequence





of students being able to decode every word. Researchers, policy makers and principals in school must play the key role in providing opportunities that will help teachers learn how to teach reading and higher order thinking skills by using methods that require higher level intellectual performances of secondary students.

Students need to be engaged in their reading by incorporating strategies to help them to construct meaning in text, especially expository text, which is more content based. They will be able to use the effective skills embedded in reading that their energies can be devoted to focus on the meaning instead of decoding text word by word. They can be guided to construct meaning through interacting with the text using reading strategies. Practices will make them perfect that so automatically they will not realize performing the strategies. Reading comprehension is a constructive process in which individuals construct meaning by interacting with the text (Pearson, 1990). This constructive interaction involves the individual's prior knowledge, the text and the reading situation or concept (Lipson & Wixson, 1986).

For the past decade, much emphasis has been placed on reading in schools, for example the "NILAM Program". This novel program has been successfully implemented in schools, yet a great number of students fail to realize the deep influence of reading. They are just merely reading without interacting with text. Why do students fail to read and make meaning? As teachers, what is the biggest problem we faced when teaching reading? Teacher's understanding of students should form the basis of all instructions. To understand students, one must understand the way students learn.

Some researchers (Babbitt & Bryne 2000, Crowley 1995, and McBride 1999) suggest that problems of self-esteem and self-efficacy apart from reading comprehension





are the contribution to reading performance as more intellectual causes. Teachers, especially concerned teachers will advocate to discover students' strengths and interests and use them as springboards to spur interest and achievement in reading. With this, we will be more aware of student' interests in topics for reading before we encourage reading and constructing meaning.

In order to arrest the problem faced by students in this research on reading, this study examines the condition on how the students construct meaning and the extent of generating their self-questioning skills in order to activate their prior knowledge in reading.



This case study is designed to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How do elementary students construct meaning while reading?
 - a) Do students utilize their prior knowledge when constructing meaning while reading?
- (2) How do students activate their prior knowledge to construct meaning while reading?
 - a) Do students generate questions when constructing meaning?
 - b) Do students discuss with their peers when constructing meaning?





1.6 Definition of terms

The definitions below are to clarify the important terms of being used in this study.

1.6.1 Reading

Reading is the process of constructing meaning from the text by relying on prior experience to parallel, contrast, or affirm what the author suggests. By utilizing prior knowledge as a channel, readers learn new information, main ideas and arguments (Carter, 1997).



1.6.2 Comprehension

Comprehension is a strategic process by which readers construct or assign meaning to a text and their own prior knowledge (Cooper, 2000).

1.6.3 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension involves the ability to construct meaning from and to respond to text, using background knowledge as well as printed information.





1.6.4 Prior knowledge

Prior knowledge or background knowledge is a sum of person's previous learning and experience about a topic or about the kind of text.

1.6.5 Schema theory

Schema (plural schemata) is a theory that assumes individuals as develop by cognitive structure of knowledge in their minds (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980). As individuals experience the world, they add new information to their schemata, which are divided into various interrelated categories. One way to picture this concept more concretely is to think of the mind as a large system of file folders. As one gains new knowledge and information, the mind creates a new file folder, or adds the information to an existing schema (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980). Then as individuals develop and expand their schemata, they construct meaning by drawing from various schemata and building connections among them; that is, they make inferences (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). This process goes on continuously while a person engages in literacy tasks.

1.6.6 Expository text

These are texts that present information organized around main ideas. These are the types of materials commonly found in informational books, textbooks, the World Wide Web, newspapers and magazines (Meyer, 1975).





1.6.7 Strategy/Strategies

A strategy is a plan selected deliberately to accomplish a particular goal (Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1983). Strategies are in the head operations that we cannot see, but we know they are there because students give us evidence through their behaviours while reading and after they have read (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

1.6.8 Make connections

Good readers make connections between prior knowledge and the text. Most readers naturally bring their prior knowledge and experience to reading but proficient readers make connections between the text, their lives and the world. This is why they comprehend better. Before, during, and after a student process a text, they make connections to what they already know (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

1.6.9 Drawing Inferences

When readers are making inferences, they are forming conclusions, making predictions, or creating new ideas (Brown & Day, 1983). Inferencing is the process of judging, concluding and reasoning from some given information (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).





1.6.10 Generating and Answering Questions

Thinking of questions while reading that require integration of new information and then reading to answer those questions.

1.6.11 Preview and Predict

A strategy used for accessing reader's prior knowledge by previewing the text to be read and making predictions about it.

1.6.12 Prediction



05 In reading, telling what one thinks will happen in a story or what information will be presented before actually reading the text.

1.6.13 Discussion

A small group of persons talking with each other (usually face to face) in order to achieve interdependent goal, such as increased understanding, coordination of activity, or a solution to a shared problem.





1.6.14 Interaction

It is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other (Brown, 2001).

1.6.15 Reading Comprehension as a Strategic Process

Comprehension means that readers need to think about what they are learning while reading and make links using strategies to construct meaning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

1.6.16 Reading Comprehension as Constructing Meaning



Constructing meaning is a reading comprehension process that the interactions that the reader makes with the text and the reader's schemata will shape the understanding and perception of the text (Cooper, 2000).

1.7 Significance of the Study

The outcome of the study will look at the role of teachers in facing the challenge of educating students who struggle with reading for meaning. This will make teachers more aware of using instruction in comprehension of texts, recognizing the good and struggling readers and help students to construct meaning in reading by having more peer discussion and comprehension strategies to improve students' reading ability. The effect of students' schemata in reading will be a springboard for teachers to work on with a class of





diverse learners. These various windows into reading help us see that while there are multiple goals in reading (Stahl, 2001), comprehension or construction of meaning is the central aim (Kuhn & Stahl, 2002).

This study explores the facts that participants self-generated questions to activate their prior knowledge will be an effective strategy to try on struggling readers and this strategy will enhance comprehension. Expository texts used in this study will give light to teachers and curriculum designers to use the information obtained from the reading process in selecting materials for reading and incorporating the reading text in teaching and learning context.

This study will look into a naturalistic setting on what and how participants construct meaning by activation of their prior knowledge and experiences. By giving a picture of the social interaction that occurs in the reading class is hoped that teachers can recognize their stipulated strategies in conducting reading comprehension. Addressing the needs of all students in a classroom is an ongoing challenge, but it is the teachers' responsibility to recognize and value all of their students' rich and varied potentials and experiences they bring with them for learning and to provide appropriated educational opportunities to nurture them.

Researchers, policy makers, curriculum designers of teacher education programs are hoped to play their roles by providing the opportunities to help teachers and students and the environment rightfully to teach reading. In addition, this research will advance our understanding of how students become skill readers as well as the factors that make it difficult for some students to learn to read. The findings from this research in reading and constructing meaning may give meanings to teachers of elementary school to look at the





importance in building future reading skills, the process of reading for constructing meaning should get center-stage focus in primary classrooms.

The exploding world of technology is an excellent resource to provide backgrounds on nonfiction topics and to provide opportunities for students to read and write about intriguing topics from the realm of the real world. With these opportunities not only will reading be made an active process but a constructive process and building a nation of good readers and good thinkers will lead to independence and autonomous learning situations.

1.8 Limitations of the study



The study was limited to a classroom based observation of a group of second language primary five students in a national elementary school conducting reading lessons by working on their prior knowledge in helping to shape their understanding of the expository texts. Only five participants and one English teacher were involved in the study. Judging from this fact, it is not appropriate to apply the results and findings to other classroom based reading lesson. The findings and results are only applicable to the participants of this research under observation.

Besides, the participants for this study were a mixture of two good readers, two less proficient readers and one struggling reader. They were also a blend of mixed culture and mixed ethnicity students comprised of four Malay participants and one Indian participant. For that matter, the findings of this study may not be stereotyped of similar levels of proficiency and of any one ethnic group.





On the other hand, the participants for this study were Malay and Indian students, whose proficiency level of second language is lower than their proficiency in their first language that is the national language, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil Language. Not only that we encountered reading problems but also language problems due to the findings that proved that they use their first language in their thinking and reading skills to find meanings in comprehending the second language reading texts. Although in some situations the use of their first language help in their comprehension but this will not account in concluding that their first language will not impede their reading comprehension in the second language. The study dealt with the second language and may not be applied to situations or context of other types of learners.



This study will make contribution towards an understanding of participants' utilization of prior knowledge to construct meaning while reading in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. However, there are inherent limitations in this study as often found in other investigation as well. It is important to mention the major limitation of this investigation so that the findings of this investigation will be interpreted and used in the most appropriate ways.

Despite the above mentioned limitations, the researcher believes that certain findings through observations and suggestions pertaining to the study on how the students construct meaning will bring forth some understanding and sensitivity to the teaching and learning context which will be beneficial to teachers and their clients: "students".

