

A STUDY OF THE READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES IN THINK-
ALOUD PROTOCOLS BY LOWER SIX STUDENTS OF
SMK RAJA CHULAN, IPOH.

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DECLARATION

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

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FOR ALL MY TEACHERS

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Abstrak Kajian

Perkara yang utama yang sering diketengahkan berkaitan aktiviti membaca ialah aspek kefahaman terhadap bahan bacaan tersebut (Block, Gambrell & Pressley, 2003). Belajar membaca dengan tahap pemahaman yang tinggi memerlukan satu tugas dan tanggungjawab yang mesti dilakukan secara kompleks. Pemahaman terhadap sesuatu bahan bacaan merupakan sesuatu yang rumit dan ia memerlukan strategi yang berkesan untuk membina sesuatu makna secara efektif. Oleh itu, kajian ini dilakukan untuk mengenal pasti beberapa strategi yang telah digunakan oleh para pelajar untuk membina, mengawasi dan menilai hasil bacaan mereka. Dalam kajian ini, pengkaji menggunakan kaedah "Think-Aloud" yang dipelopari oleh Cote dan Goldman (2004). Menurut mereka, kaedah ini menggunakan lima strategi membaca iaitu, penerangan sendiri, ramalan para frasa, kebolehan menghubungkan kait dan pengawalan bacaan. Hasil kajian, pengkaji mendapati bahawa pelajar yang baik menggunakan pelbagai strategi untuk membentuk makna (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005). Penumpuan terhadap bahan bacaan merupakan suatu skil yang penting untuk mendapat kefahaman yang baik. Manakala, bagi pelajar yang lemah pula, telah dikenalpasti masalah yang dihadapi tetapi tidak menunjukkan kesungguhan untuk menyelesaikan masalah mereka.

ABSTRACT

The most important thing about reading is comprehension. Reading comprehension is the heart and soul of reading (Block, Gambrell & Pressley, 2003). Learning to read with good comprehension is a complex task. Comprehension is complicated and it requires strategies to construct meaning effectively. Because of its significance, this study is to investigate the strategies used by students to construct, to monitor and to evaluate what they are reading. Think-aloud protocol analysis is the method used in this study. The think-aloud protocols are coded according to the procedure developed by Cote & Goldman (2004) which involved five concrete reading strategies: self-explanation, paraphrase, prediction, association and monitoring. The results indicate that better students used a wide range of strategies to construct meaning. Monitoring, a skill which is often cited as important to comprehension (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005) is evident in all the think-aloud protocols. The weaker students identified the problems but made no attempts to resolve them. These findings suggest that students will benefit from explicit reading comprehension instruction.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.0 Introduction

Reading is so much of our daily life that most of the time we hardly consider the purposes and processes involved. We take the activity for granted much like with listening and speaking. For some people, comprehending seems to develop automatically. Certainly there are non-readers in our communities who need basic help. But poor readers need help to develop reading comprehension.

One of the difficulties which students may have is not knowing that an ability to read also involves an understanding of what is read. Learning how to comprehend involves negotiating so many cognitive, metacognitive and affective processes that these poor readers simply avoid complicated texts and context.

Hall (2002) argues that in the real world, effective reading means a flexible and appropriate response to the material and this is always guided by the reader's purpose; and this means that the reader is aware of options, including the option to give up when the reading material gets difficult. Writers assert that readers do not understand due to ineffective prior instruction, as well as readers' limited background knowledge, weak decoding skills and negative concepts (Grimbell, Block & Pressley, 2002).

In order to assist the weaker students who have problems in reading comprehension, teachers first need to find out what are their reading comprehension problems by investigating the reading strategies of the students concerned. In this chapter, I will discuss the statement of the problem, the purpose, the rationale and the research questions of the study.

1.1 Statement of the problem

In this researcher's Lower Six class in *SMK Raja Chulan*, there are Chinese, Indians and Malays. Chinese students speak a Chinese dialect at home, attended a Chinese primary school where the medium of instruction was in Mandarin, and Bahasa Melayu which they learned after six months in Standard One and only started to learn English in Standard Three. Indian students speak Tamil at home, attended Tamil school, learned Bahasa Melayu after six months in Standard One and English in Standard Three. Malay students speak Malay at home, attend a Malay-medium school throughout their school lives and studied English after six months in Standard One. These students continued to use

Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in secondary school and English is relegated to second or foreign language status. However, students read in English for content especially in Science and Mathematics from form one to form five. They need to be proficient in English for these subjects. They need to comprehend reading texts in English for their examinations in form five and form six. In addition to that students in form six are required to take the MUET which requires students to comprehend English language texts. A problem arises when students do not comprehend reading passages in English.

1.2 Rationale of the study

As stated earlier, reading comprehension is an important component of The Malaysian University English Test (MUET). This proficiency test in the English language is compulsory for all pre-university students intending to further their studies at local and private universities. MUET comprises of four components testing the language skills of listening, speaking, reading comprehension and writing. Students need to sit for a total of four-and-a-half hour test. Based on their score in the test, they will be classified into six broad bands, from band six for a very good user of the language to band one for an extremely limited user (see Appendix 1). The reading comprehension paper carries a weightage of 45%. Therefore, in order to excel in MUET, students must do reasonably well in reading comprehension. As all students in Form Six aspire to enter tertiary education or the job market, one can only imagine the problems they would encounter if they had trouble comprehending what they read.

Academic reading is not easy. Successful students learn how to read effectively and remember what they read. Students need to learn ways to read, keep going, finish up, summarize, and connect the new information to other knowledge they have acquired (Freeman & Long, 1991).

From the result of this investigation this researcher hopes to gain insight to the appropriate reading instruction for the less proficient readers based on the reading behaviour of the more proficient readers.

1.3 Research Questions

This researcher intends to investigate the reading strategies employed by students when they read based on students' think-aloud protocols. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the reading strategies used by students while reading?
2. How do students monitor their comprehension during reading?

1.4 Purpose of the study

Reading is private and no one knows what goes on in the readers' mind. Reading in lower forms often focus on the concrete aspects of the texts such as identifying the main and

supporting ideas which are easily visible on the page. However reading in form six requires meta-cognition, the ability to make meaning. Students need to think about how their own learning styles interact with the text they are reading, and perhaps change their reading strategies to meet the challenges of the text. Cote & Goldman (2005) posit that think-aloud is a popular research instrument among both L1 and L2 reading researchers in general and especially those who are interested in the area of reading strategies and comprehension monitoring. In this study, this researcher will attempt to observe the reading behaviour of the participants using think-aloud protocols

The aim of this study is to identify the strategies in reading comprehension among form six students. It also attempts to find evidence of comprehension monitoring in the participants' think-alouds

1.5 Definition of keywords

The following are the definitions of several key terms and phrases applicable to this project.

- reading comprehension - “a process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with the written language” (Sweet & Snow, 2002, p 23)

- strategy - a physical or mental action used consciously or unconsciously with the intention of facilitating text comprehension and or learning (Davies, 1995,p37).
- think-aloud protocol - a verbal report that an individual produces in an effort to explain his/her behaviour while in the process of reading (Kucan & Beck, 1997,p217).
- comprehension monitoring - a general “control” to keep track of one’s understanding of the reading text and to take remedial action if comprehension fails (Pressley, 2002, p291).

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, on the background of the study, I discussed the statement of the problem as well as the rationale and the purpose of the study. I have also defined terms or concepts used in the study. In the next chapter, I will review the related literature.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction

Comprehension is a very complicated task and to comprehend effectively, students need to enforce an equally complicated set of strategies (Reutzel & Cooter, 2005; Cote & Goldman, 2004). In this chapter, I will investigate the reading behaviour of students with different levels of proficiency using the think-aloud protocols. I will discuss the psycholinguistic model of the reading process. I will also discuss what is reading comprehension, reading strategies, the use of think-aloud protocols as a research instrument, the benefits of think-aloud and its limitations.

2.1 A psycholinguistic model of reading

During the past decade, EFL/ESL reading theory has come under the influence of psycholinguistics. Hall (2002) suggests that the linguist Noam Chomsky revolutionised the study of language when he demonstrated that comprehending language was not a matter of linking up the various meanings of words. Hall (2002) further claims that reading is a constructive and a problem-solving activity.

Wong (2005, p 3) cites Goodman (1985) who described reading as a “psycholinguistic guessing game” in which the “reader reconstructs, as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display” Goodman & Goodman (2004, p638) further elaborate this act of constructing of meaning as being an “ongoing, cyclical process of sampling from the input text, predicting, testing and confirming or revising those predictions, and sampling further”. In this model, the reader need not use all the information available to him.

Similiarly, Smith (1971) argued that reading was not something that you are taught, but rather something you learned to do as a consequence of belonging to a literate society. In line with Goodman (1985)’s notion of reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game, Smith (1971) suggested that reading was a matter of making informed predictions about a text based on what the reader already knew about how language works and what they knew about the world.

In the same context, Rumelhart (1994) proposed an alternative model of reading by incorporating the possibility of parallel processing, that is the simultaneous processing of information from more than one source. The model as suggested by Rumelhart (2002) demonstrates the interaction between different sources of information. It includes examples of the identification of a letter being determined by the word in which it appears, of the identification of a word being dependent upon the semantic and syntactic context in which it appears, and the interpretation of a text being dependent upon the schematic framework within which it is represented.

In addition, an individual's schemata may change over time and with experience. From this it should be clear that schemata should not be thought of as "fixed and stable but rather as constantly changing and subject to modification" (Rumelhart, 2002, p864). Reutzel & Cooter (2005, p 98) clarify that schema is "a package of knowledge containing related concepts, events, emotions and roles experienced by the reader". In the comprehension process, learners draw upon their schemata and then check their schematic predictions as they progress through the text. Rumelhart (2002) calls these predictions hypotheses and these hypotheses will be subsequently confirmed or rejected as the learners read on. Therefore the aim of this study is to identify the reading strategies employed by the participants and to further investigate whether the participants exhibit reading behaviour as suggested by Rumelhart (2002).

2.2 Reading comprehension

Traditionally in the study of second language comprehension, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on the language to be comprehended and not on the listener or reader (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Grambell, Block & Pressley (2002) define reading comprehension as acquiring meaning from text. In this meaning-making process, the reader interacts with the print and is involved in making sense of the message. Readers comprehend text by acquiring meaning, confirming meaning and creating meaning. In other words, reading comprehension is the process of meaning making.

Reading comprehension traditionally refers to a readers' complete understanding or full grasp of meanings in a text. However, this broad definition results in some confusion when different levels of comprehension cannot be appropriately identified and explained. Yang (2004) suggested that comprehension involves an "active, dynamic and growing process of searching for interrelationships in a text". Generally, comprehension is the readers' understanding of the meaning in a text.

Harvey and Goudvis (2000) suggested that constructing meaning is the goal of comprehension. True comprehension goes beyond literal understanding and involves the readers' interaction with the text (NAP,2000). Pressley (2002) and Snow & Sweet (2000) suggest that good comprehenders are capable and active readers. Good comprehenders depend on fluent reading because nonfluent reading demands valuable mental capacity that is required for comprehension to occur. Good comprehension also