Enhancing Reading Comprehension through Metacognitive Reading Strategies and Peer Tutoring among Year 7 Students at a Home School Centre

Nadiah Halim1*, Marina Mohd Arif2, Kaarthiyainy Supramaniam3

1Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
2Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
3Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Email addresses:
Nadiah_huda@hotmail.com (Nadiah Halim) *Corresponding Author
Marina363@uitm.edu.my (Marina Mohd Arif)
kaarthiyainy@salam.uitm.edu.my (Kaarthiyainy Supramaniam)
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ABSTRACT

Many students in Malaysia lack proficiency in the English language, from difficulty understanding the meaning of the text to inferring the text. The use of explicit instruction to introduce reading comprehension skills are also rarely employed in the classroom. This study investigated how metacognitive reading strategies and peer tutoring improved Year 7 students' reading comprehension at a home-school centre. A total of 20 Year 7 students took part in this research, whereby 10 students were placed in the controlled group and 10 students in the experimental group. Students in the experimental group were exposed to 12 weeks of training on metacognitive reading strategies and peer tutoring session. In addition, IGCSE reading comprehension, learning journals and a semi-structured interview were employed to collect data from the experimental group. A paired sample t-test was conducted to analyse the quantitative data of this study whereas document analysis and thematic analysis were used to analyse the qualitative data. The results obtained from this study indicated that metacognitive reading strategies have assisted students to use suitable techniques to comprehend the reading text and answer the reading comprehension questions. In addition, peer tutoring aids student by having their peers translate meaning of the texts in their native language, explain how to properly use the metacognitive reading skills as well as provide guidance and support in the classroom. Therefore, the findings of this study are significant as it suggests the difficulty of students to adapt to new strategies in a short time; hence, they should be exposed at primary level.

*Keywords***:** Metacognitive reading strategies, peer tutoring, reading comprehension, home- school centres.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, home-schooling is an increasing trend in education and is depicted as a 'vibrant explosion' (Home School Legal Defence Association (HSLDA) (2013). The increase in trend is due to the fact that parents consider home-school centres or private schools as a better choice as compared to public schools, which over the years has lost its appeal (HSLDA, 2013).

Similar to many international schools in Malaysia, home-school centres also uses an international syllabus from United Kingdom (UK). It is known as Cambridge curriculum and the subjects are taught in English. The curriculum employs UK qualifications known as GCSE, IGCSE as well as GCE O, which are equivalent to Malaysia's SPM qualifications (Honsbridge, 2008).

Therefore, since English is used as a medium of instruction in these international schools and home-school centres, it is vital that the students have good knowledge of the language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Reading skill, for instance is considered as a crucial skill for second language learners, yet teaching of reading comprehension strategy is still disregarded in the field of English language teaching (Azmuddin & Ruslim, 2014).

Major problem occurs when learners are not able to explain what that they have read due to their lack of understanding of the text. This then leads to other problems such as learners being unable to answer reading comprehension questions, thus providing irrelevant answers. Maasum and Maarof (2012) mentioned that students need to be able to comprehend implicit meaning of a text as well as be able to infer it, yet in order for students to excel they must be able to understand the accurate meaning of the text. Fitrisia, Tan and Yusof (2015) supported this by indicating that students lack the ability to interpret information gained from the text, critical thinking and employing contextual clues to obtain meaning from the text.

Moreover, studies have indicated that metacognitive reading strategies (MRS) is an ideal strategy to improve reading comprehension as it has provided many positive results in regards of students improvement (Tavakol, 2014). Additionally, peer tutoring (PT) is another efficient strategy that can assist student's learning by engaging students not only with the texts but with their peers (Blanch et al.,2012).

In addition, researchers have investigated different aspects of linking MRS and PT with reading comprehension, especially in areas of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Drayton, 2016; Ismail & Tawalbeh, 2014). MRS and PT have always been applied separately even though researchers have proved that both strategies are effective when it comes to improving students' reading comprehension performance. Yet, it is unclear to how these strategies assist students in their learning. Furthermore, there is also a lack of study involving home-school setting; therefore, this research was intended to look at the application of MRS and PT at a selected home-school centre.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are as follows:
1)   To determine how metacognitive reading strategies enhance Year 7 students' reading comprehension at home-school centres.
2)   To examine how peer tutoring enhance Year 7 students' reading comprehension at home-school centres.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Comprehension

Knowing how and when to implement MRS is crucial for second language learners when attempting to develop their ability in reading comprehension (Habibian, 2015). Furthermore, when enrolled in home-school centres, the Cambridge curriculum requires learners to possess strong comprehension skills and an in-depth understanding of the text. This is because students are expected to analyse and evaluate why authors use certain sentences and phrases. It was pointed out by Eskey (2005) that if compared to first language learners, second language learners are weaker in terms of linguistic competence. This is because they tend to have problems in area of distinguishing key points, cue words as well as making predictions. This indicates that second language learners are having difficulty in keeping up with the complexity of reading comprehension.

Metacognitive Reading Strategies (MRS)

The metacognitive reading strategies employed in reading are used to enhance learners' awareness and control, improve reading comprehension and distinguish if their effort has been reached (Zhang & Seepho, 2013). There are three sub-categories of MRS, which include Global Reading Strategy (GLOB), Support Reading Strategies (SUP) and Problem-Solving Reading Strategy (PROB). GLOB is intended to prepare readers before they start reading the written text, SUP are the resources used to aid readers in their reading and PROB are methods used by readers to overcome problems encountered in their reading (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002).

The Cambridge curriculum requires students to be able to evaluate not only ideas, but also facts as well as opinions based on the reading text. A thorough knowledge in this area is compulsory in order for students to pass their IGCSE examinations. In order to achieve this, students are in need of appropriate and effective strategies to acquire the ability to evaluate reading texts. Therefore, it is essential that Year 7 students are exposed to MRS in order to aid them in their learning.

Several studies have been conducted on MRS and PT in relation to reading comprehension. Zare and Othman (2013) investigated the correlation between reading comprehension and the use of reading strategies. Reading strategy inventory and reading comprehension test was implemented with 95 Malaysian ESL (English second language) learners and it was reported that a strong relationship existed between the strategies and achievement in the reading comprehension.

In addition, Ismail and Tawalbeh (2014) explored on the effectiveness of applying explicit instruction on MRS on EFL learners at TAIF University. The findings revealed that the group exposed to the explicit instruction had shown improvement in terms of their reading comprehension performance.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring, or also known as peer assisted learning (PAL) is described as acquiring knowledge actively with the assistance of a friend (Topping, 2005). This approach requires students to work together in pairs, whereby one student will act as a tutor and the other a tutee (Rahmasari, 2011). By taking on these roles, students will assist each other and improve their learning (Rahmasari, 2011).

Additionally, PT is a part of cooperative learning since it also promotes socialisation, team work and group processing (Blanch et al. 2012). However, teachers still remain dominant in the classroom and teacher-centred class is still being emphasised (Rahmasari, 2011). Cazden (1986) feels that this approach is insufficient for students to obtain deeper meaning of a text. This suggests that students rely too much on information provided by the teachers that they do not make the extra effort of obtaining deeper meaning of the text themselves. Thus, based on the literature, PT would be a suitable method to be executed at a home-school centre because students will be able to interact with each other and not relying on the teacher and at the same time develop social skills.

Blanch et al. (2012) researched on the effects of educational program involving PT and family tutoring on reading comprehension achievement. The findings presented in this study indicated an improvement on the reading comprehension skills and family tutoring aided in developing the academic skills of the child.

In addition, Rahmasari (2011) conducted a study to look at the effect of PT on first grade students' reading comprehension. The results of this study demonstrated similar data with Blanch et al. (2012) whereby PT was effective and helped enhance students' reading comprehension achievement.

Types of Home-schooling

Home-schooling in Malaysia has started 20 years ago and its popularity is increasing due to parents opinion that the national education system is disappointing (Loh, 2010). At present, there are many different types of home-schooling and the most well-known type is when learners learn at their own house where they are taught either by their own parents or tutors who come to the house to teach (HSLDA, 2013). The second type of home-schooling is similar to the first; however, instead of relying on parents and teachers, other family members are also welcomed to teach (HSLDA, 2013). For these two concepts, the syllabus, subjects and timetable are planned according to the parents interests (HSLDA, 2013). Besides that, learning centers also act as home-school centres specifically design for parents who want their children to be home-schooled yet do not have the time to teach the children themselves (HSLDA, 2013).

The difference between home-school centers and a school is that home-school centers do not provide the complete school facilities; nevertheless, students will still learn inside a classroom and follow the timetable organised by the principal. In Malaysia, there are a variety of home-school centers; yet the syllabus may differ. The syllabus may range from UK to American curriculum; hence, parents are able to choose a center according to their preferred syllabus (James, 2012).

Hence, for the purpose of this study home-schooling will refer to students that are learning at a home-school centre.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed explanatory sequential design as it collects both qualitative and quantitative data in two phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This design was employed because the qualitative data helped explain the quantitative results of this findings. Three instruments were utilised in this study: reading comprehension test, semi-structured interview and learning journals. The reading comprehension test is a standardised test adapted from Cambridge IGCSE and was used as a pre and post-test for this study. The test was identical for pre and post-test and only questions related to reading comprehension were used. In addition, the use of semi structured interview and learning journals were to gain information on how the strategies aided in improving students reading comprehension.

A total of 20 students took part in this study whereby 10 students were placed in the experimental group (Group A) whereas the other 10 students were placed in the controlled group (Group B). For the purpose of this study, purposeful sampling was used as the students were selected specifically to elicit information in learning at a home-school centre. All 20 students were Year 7 student attending a home –school centre in Selangor. Year 7 is equivalent to Form 1 in Malaysia's public schools. In addition, Year 7 students were chosen as the participants for this study due to the fact that they had just completed primary school and were not exposed to the use of MRS or PT. The students came from different primary schools, such as Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan, Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan, international school, home-school centre, and the traditional home-schooled setting. Students in the controlled group received lessons without any emphasis or direct exposure to MRS and PT whereas the experimental group received 12 weeks of explicit training on MRS and PT.

Both controlled and experimental group took the reading comprehension test as a pre-test at the beginning of the experiment. After the pre-test was completed, the twelve weeks of explicit MRS instruction and PT were executed using the process of metacognitive strategies: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. After each session, students wrote in their learning journals their thoughts and opinions on the lesson. At the end of the experiment, both groups took the reading comprehension post-test and those who had shown improvement in the pre and post-test were interviewed. This is because only the improved students can determine how MRS and PT has assisted to improve reading comprehension performance. Students who did not show any improvements were also interviewed in order to gain understanding to why MRS and PT did provide any impact on their learning.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of MRS and PT on Year 7 students reading comprehension performance. This section presents the data obtained from the pre and post-test, interview, and learning journals.

Quantitative Findings: Paired T-Test for Reading Comprehension

Table 1:
Group A Paired Samples Statistic

	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pair 1	PreRC	13.80	6.070
	PostRC	14.70	3.945

Table 1 indicates the mean score of reading comprehension obtained for pre-test (M = 13.80, SD = 6.070) and post-test (M = 14.70, SD = 3.945) of Group A. These results illustrate that the mean score for post-test is higher than the pre-test. It suggest that there was an improvement in the mean score for reading comprehension from M = 13.80 to M = 14.70 in the post-test.

Table 2
Group A Paired Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PreRC-PostRC	-.900	5.990	-.475	9	.646

Table 2 determines whether the mean score are significant and the data indicated that there is no significant difference between these two tests as (t = -0.475, df = 9, p = 0.646; p > 0.05). It suggests that there is no significant difference in the reading comprehension achievement after employing metacognitive reading strategies and peer tutoring.

Table 3
Group B Paired Samples Statistic

	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pair 1	PreRC	14.90	6.871
	PostRC	14.10	7.340

Table 3 presents the mean score of reading comprehension obtained for pre-test (M = 14.90, SD = 6.871) and post-test (M = 14.10, SD = 7.340) of Group B. These results indicate that the mean score for pre-test is higher than the post-test. It suggests that there was a decrease in the mean score for reading comprehension from M = 14.90 to M = 14.10 in the post-test.

Table 4
Group B Paired Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PreRC-PostRC	-.800	5.990	-.952	9	.366

Table 4 reveals whether the mean score are significant and the data showed that there is no significant difference between these two tests (t = 0.952, df = 9, p = 0.366; p > 0.05). It suggests that there is no significant difference in the reading comprehension achievement when metacognitive reading strategies and peer tutoring are not employed.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Findings from the post-test of the reading comprehension test revealed that only two out of the ten students in the experimental group had gained more marks than their pre-test. Therefore, Student A and Student B were called for the semi-structured interview to gauge information on their experience throughout the fourteen weeks of explicit MRS instruction and PT sessions.

Analysis of Learning Journals and Semi-structured Interview in both Metacognitive Reading Strategies (MRS) Instruction and Peer Tutoring (PT) for Student A and Student B

Data from the interview and learning journals indicated that MRS has assisted Student A and B by making it easier for them to understand the text and answer the questions. In addition, PT has assisted them because their friends were able to translate difficult words and explain the text again using their native language.

Both students informed that the MRS used in the classroom and the PT session had aided them in developing their understanding of the text as well as showing them how to analyse the text. Based on the information gathered in the learning journal, in week 12, Student A mentioned that being exposed to MRS only made the student aware of the skills and it was during PT session that the student was able to understand how to use the skills correctly when it was explained by the peer. However, Student B revealed that MRS has helped to understand and rephrase the text correctly as the explicit instruction

helped to guide the student to use the skill step by step. Student B also added that the PT session made him realise the importance of using MRS in reading comprehension.

These data were also consistent with the findings collected during the semi-structured interview.

Excerpt 1: Response towards Metacognitive Reading Strategies

Researcher   :   **Do you think the skills help you improve your reading comprehension?**

Answers   I think the skills summarise and rephrase help me improve my reading
Student A   :   comprehension because the skills can help me understand the texts easier.

In Excerpt 1, Student A mentioned specifically the skills that have helped in improving reading comprehension performance. The skills, *summarise* and *rephrase,* as stated by Student A have aided him in making the text more comprehensible.

Furthermore, the data from the semi-structured interview and learning journals indicated that the peer tutoring session had aided when friends helped to translate unknown words and explain the text using their native language.

Example of comments found during the interview and learning journals on how peer tutoring helped the students:

"…friend help me to analyze the text by teaching me step by step how to do. They also help to explain in Chinese." – Student A (interview).
"…friend help me to understand the question by explaining the question want what in chinese." – Student B (learning journal).

Analysis of Semi-structured Interview for Students that did not indicate Improvements in the Post-Test.

A semi-structured interview was conducted on the students that did not show any improvement in the post-test, this was to obtain information on why the treatment did not have any impact on their learning.

Based on the interviews, the most common reason given by the student was that they were not able to understand the question and was unsure of what the question had expected of them. When asked for reasons to why they could not improve considering that the test were identical to the test they had answered previously, two common answers were found. Students had mentioned that the reading text was too long, the words were too difficult and they just gave up trying. The second reason was that they wanted to finish the test quickly so they simply answered the question without giving the answers any thought.

Students were also asked if they had implemented MRS when answering the post test and unanimously the students answered 'no' as it was too 'troublesome'. Students main focus was not to improve but to finish the test quickly, thus extra effort in answering the question was not employed.

DISCUSSION

The first research question of this study was to identify how MRS assists to improve Year 7 students' reading comprehension performance. The findings of the study indicated that not many students were able to implement MRS when answering the test; nevertheless, there were students that had shown improvement. These students were able to employ the MRS when answering the test to aid in their understanding of the text. They were able to summarise and rephrase based on their own understanding.

However, considering that only two students have shown an improvement does raise a question on the effectiveness of MRS. Molla (2015) stated high usage of strategies does not indicate that the learning will be successful and Alsamadani (2009) mentioned that low strategy use is not always a sign of ineffective learning. In addition, Molla (2015) added that learners may work hard and try to employ different strategies in their reading comprehension, yet they were unable to employ these strategies effectively. Therefore, this indicates that students' thorough understanding of how to use the strategies play a vital role.

The second research question of this study was to investigate how PT helps Year 7 students' with their reading comprehension performance. The results of this study suggested that students understanding improved when they asked their peers for help. Translation to Chinese was the most effective outcome of PT. Students would quickly understand the idea of the text when their peers explained using Chinese. This is supported by Rahmasari (2011) who indicated that students would be able to comprehend the text better when learning from each other. In addition, Rahmasari (2011) also mentioned that PT can improve students' motivation and self-confidence. This suggests that students were not afraid to ask many questions to their peers and the more questions they ask the more motivated they are in doing their work.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the findings of this study revealed that employing MRS and PT as a treatment to improve students' reading comprehension were not effective. However, it can be concluded that MRS and PT do influence students' performance in reading comprehension, but based on the findings it can be said that MRS and PT does not effectively contribute to their performance. This indicates that there may be other factors influencing students learning; for instance, the students' behaviour and attitude towards learning and their emotional state when taking the test. Thus, it is recommended that future research should be made on identifying factors that may influence students' learning in the classroom during a treatment.

Despite the findings of this study, the teaching of reading comprehension strategies and encouraging tutoring in the classroom should not be neglected by teachers as students need to be exposed to reading comprehension strategies as well as develop social skills in the classroom. Students should be provided with many opportunities for strategy training especially when learning a second language.

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