

## ESL Students' Perspectives in Understanding English Reading Materials: The Insight From A Language Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading is an active language activity which comprises a variety of skills. The reading comprehension lessons are normally used by instructors to help students develop their reading skills. However, in most cases, it was found that reading comprehension lessons have been centered on passages or texts followed by a set of questions. These questions were usually designed to merely test the students' comprehension of the given text and not part of the teaching process. It has been seen and said that students merely scan for information in the text to answer these questions but were unable to relate to it. This could be due to cultural factors including the lack of reading habits among the students but most likely due to the manner reading has been taught. Thus, this study aims to investigate the teaching of English Reading materials and reading comprehension to a group of 15 students undergoing Diploma courses in UiTM Perlis. This is a qualitative study and the data are gathered through classroom observations, students' journals, instructor's diary and interview sessions with the students and instructor to get clearer picture on the problems they face when having to comprehend English materials. The insight generated by the description and analysis of the data collected for this study can be used for a variety of purposes, particularly; to better understand the problems faced by students when having to read in a second language, to help ESL curriculum and instructional practices, and to provide useful insights for educational language policy making.*

**Keywords:** *comprehend, perceptions, descriptive, insight*

### INTRODUCTION

The four language skills regarded as fundamental to acquire when learning the second language are reading, writing, listening and speaking. Among all, reading skill is the most important and necessary skill to acquire since it brings effects on the learner's vocabulary, spelling as well as writing abilities. Many people assume that reading is an easy process whereby learners read and find the answers to the comprehension questions given. But not many realize that reading needs understanding to decode the message of the writer. Thus, reading can be considered as an interactive process between the reader and the writer. Goodman (1973) states that the learner interacts with the message encoded by the writer. Dubin (1982) assumes that the task of reading is complex since this skill comprises psychological, physical and social elements. As such, reading is considered as the most difficult language skill which needs the interaction of multiple cognitive, meta cognitive, linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects.

Reading is not a passive task, but rather an active task. Reading requires both the learner's mental and experimental input of who is expected to comprehend the written message. In order to prove the importance of reading comprehension, Rivers (1981, p.147) stated, "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also as a mean of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language". That is why reading is composed of two parts; the written form, and the meaning of the conveyed message.

In Malaysia, English is taught as early as in primary schools. English is also taught at secondary and tertiary education. Its position is that of a second language. It is a mean of communication in certain everyday activities and specific job situations. Nevertheless, it is an important language to enable Malaysians to engage meaningfully in local and international trade and commerce. It also provides additional means to access academic, professional and recreational materials.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

From observation and experience, reading comprehension lessons are geared towards providing students with knowledge, skills and strategies for reading, and to prepare students to utilize the skills and strategies to predict, infer, analyze, agree, criticize and evaluate by interacting with the reading comprehension passages given. However, some students failed to understand the given texts because they lacked understanding especially on the vocabularies used.

Comprehension results from an interaction among the readers, the strategies the readers employ, the materials read and the context in which reading takes place. As a rule, we can say that students benefit by reading for general comprehension first, and looking for details later. If the first task they have to deal with is relatively simple, then their anxiety is decreased, and they can approach the more difficult tasks that follow with confidence. However, understanding the message of the text is not the only use for reading materials. We also want the students to see how the texts are constructed, what language is used to give examples or to generalize? What language devices do writers use to refer backward and forward? This is because when students understand paragraph and text construction, they have better chance of understanding text meaning.

Nevertheless, there might be several reasons why these students are unable to comprehend and participate well in reading comprehension lessons. The obvious fact that a comprehension text must be read at some stages of the lesson also leads one to raise several questions about classroom activities. For instance, how should the text be read? Silent reading? Or the instructor prepares the silent reading by explaining difficult words. Can students manage to understand all the reading instructions given by the instructor? If not, reading comprehension lesson will not be a successful one and this will lead to the problems of why some students are unable to comprehend well.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main aim of this study is to investigate the teaching and learning of reading materials in class and to determine the issues involved in the lesson. Apart from that, it also hopes to see how reading comprehension is conducted in class and the interaction between the students and instructor during the lesson. This involves understanding the

1. reading comprehension levels of the students
2. teaching approaches, methods and strategies used by the instructor
3. interactions between the (i) instructor and students and (ii) students and students

4. perceptions of instructor and students on the lesson carried out.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading involves skills that the students must learn for himself, and that the measure of the teacher's success is how far the student learns to do without the teacher's help. Nuttal (2000) mentions that some people would go as far as to say reading could not be taught, but only learnt. This does not, however, mean that there is nothing for the teacher to do. There is in fact, a great deal.

At advanced proficiency levels in a second language, the ability to read the written language at a reasonable rate and with good comprehension has long been recognized to be as important as oral skills, if not more important (Eskey, 1999). In second language teaching and learning situations for academic purposes, especially in higher education that makes extensive use of academic materials written in English, reading is paramount. Quite simply, without solid reading proficiency, second language readers cannot perform at levels they must in order to succeed.

Reading comprehension is known to be a complex intellectual process involving a number of abilities. The two major abilities involve word meanings and verbal reasoning. Without word meanings and verbal reasoning, there would be no reading comprehension. However, over the years, language teachers have adopted, adapted, invented and developed a bewildering variety of terms which describe the activities in which they engage and beliefs which they hold (Barret, 1999).

Edward Anthony, an American applied linguist, in 1963 proposed a scheme to clarify the difference. He identified three levels of conceptualization and organization that he termed as approach (a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching), method (an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language materials, no part of which contradicts and all of which is based on the selected approach) and technique (a technique is implementational; what takes place in the classroom). The use of the right approach, method and techniques are very important to arouse the students' interest in reading comprehension. Therefore, teachers and instructors should have a well-planned lesson in order to make reading comprehension a more enjoyable lesson for the students. An ideal starting point for motivating learners is to discover their wants, needs and interests, and then to select texts and device activities that are appropriate (Williams, 2002).

As an instructor, one should know that learning to comprehend involves a complex of skills. Various writers have attempted to categorize these into three or four levels. Lanier and Davis in Dechant (1982), in summarizing comprehension skills, categorize them as literal skills, interpretative skills, critical skills and creative skills. This is because comprehension involves thinking. As there are various levels in the hierarchy of thinking, there are various levels of comprehension. Higher levels of comprehension would obviously include higher levels of thinking. Thus, each category is cumulative in building on the others.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is basically a case study using qualitative approach. Sigmund Freud was an expert in the case study method in the field of psychiatry. This method involves organization of data for viewing social reality and entity being studied such as a person or a group of learners. It is the most preferred method of study as it can provide an extensive and in-depth analysis of the case, which is a single unit or a bounded system in its idiosyncratic complexity. Therefore, this study hopes to be able to delve into the minds of the students and instructor to provide the answer to the aim of this study. Since this is a qualitative study, the researchers' role were that of non-participant observer. A group of 15 undergraduates were involved in this study. Their

selection was based on the class they were in for reading lessons. The data collection tools used for this study are:

1. Observation (4 observations for 4 reading classes)
2. Interview session (for both instructor and students)
3. Journal writing
4. Think aloud protocol

A total of 4 observations were carried out and each observation lasted for forty minutes. The observations were carried out for 4 reading classes. The students for this study carried out the lessons as usual with the respective instructor. The reading materials, tasks activities and questions were decided by the instructor without any influence from the researchers. The instructor planned, gave instructions and evaluated the students herself. Students' perception and journals were part of the information gathered for this study.

The students were required to write in their journals and the instructor also was requested to write in her diary. They were given some guidelines on what to report on in their journals. The guidelines given were on the level of difficulties on the materials given to them, their thought on the materials, their understanding and their feelings on the questions which followed the given materials. Basically, the students were free to write their feelings about the lessons that had been carried out and the methods and strategies used by the instructor.

Besides that, 2 rounds of interviews were conducted with the students; before and after the lessons. Students were interviewed in groups of three. The instructor was also interviewed to get her feedback and response regarding the classes she carried out.

Think aloud protocol is another method used in collecting data for this research. For think aloud protocol, students were asked to reflect on the 4 reading lessons they were involved in. Think aloud protocol is a way to see how respondents verbalize their thoughts and opinion regarding their reading lessons.

## **DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

From the observations, interviews and analysis from the students' and instructor's journals, it was found out that the instructor had used most of the strategies intricate in the syllabus.

### **Observations**

Knowing the students' deficiencies in reading and in trying to overcome their own limited understanding, the instructor would at times ask the students to read silently before going through the text with them. The usage of dictionary is allowed in class as well as in tests as stated in the syllabus. However, some students especially the male students failed to bring dictionaries to class and this dampen the mood of the instructor.

In one of the observations, the researchers noticed that there were 3 female students who were actively participating in the classroom discussion. The assumption would be these students have good command and understanding of the given text. They were seen to raise their hands to answer the questions even when it comes to vocabulary questions. They did not even refer to the dictionary. The instructor also was seen to focus towards them if the questions asked were not answered by the others. This was proven true because when their journals were analyzed, their command in writing was good, the way they expressed themselves were convincing and their background also proved that their level of proficiency is very high. They like to read story books and communicate in second language at home.

### Interviews and Journal Writing- Instructor

When interviewed after the lesson, the instructor voiced out her frustration towards some students who were not serious in class and portrayed boring attitude while lesson is in progress. They also did not bring their dictionaries and tend to borrow from the other students. It was found out that 6 out of 15 students did not bring their dictionaries to class. They gave various reasons for not doing so. The instructor voiced her frustration over this by saying this in the interview:

*“They should bring their dictionary because they need to understand the meanings of words and enhance their vocabularies, but they did not”.*

In addition, she wrote the same thing in her journal:

*“Some students are good but their attitudes in reading comprehension class has demotivated my teaching”.*

However, the instructor also provided positive feedback to some students who attentively did all the exercises given. They were focused in class and listened to the instructor’s teaching. They managed to read and understand the given text. This was also proven when they were able to relate in class on their understanding of the text.

The instructor felt that she had used all the strategies and methods rendered in the syllabus for reading lessons. And the strategies, methods and approaches used also are tallied to the test the students need to sit for their on-going assessment. The instructor also feel that reading is the most difficult language skill to acquire compared to other skills in second language learning. She said in the interview:

*“...given a choice I would rather skip reading comprehension, but no matter how tired or bored I feel, reading comprehension has to be taught and I know I have to be patient”.*

And on another occasion added:

*“It is not an easy lesson because I am unsure of the approach to use”.*

### Interviews and Journal Writing- Students

If the instructor has reactions towards reading comprehension class, the students also have their own opinions towards the lessons they went through. They gave their views and perceptions during the interviews and in their journal. Since their identities were kept confidential from the instructor, the students felt safe and free to voice their perceptions. The students admitted that the instructor has followed the guidelines and abide to the syllabus well. The materials given to them were of the standard of tertiary education. They also admitted that if they were unable to understand and did not perform well in their test, the fault came from them. One of the interviews with the students found a few answers: (Students were allowed to provide feedback in Malay and later translated by the researcher).

*“I pity her since I think she is trying to help us in understanding, but we fail to comply to her needs”.*

*“...too lengthy passages and I have to spend a long time reading and understanding”.*

The students also admitted that at times they felt sleepy since they had to read long texts and refer to dictionaries most of time. However, they never blame the instructor for making them read the text since it is in accordance to the syllabus which has to be abided. The students also admitted that they lacked vocabulary because of their bad reading habit and reading ability. They admitted of not reading English materials and spend most of their time on the Internet. Nevertheless, they were happy because spending time on the Internet can more or less widen their knowledge on the vocabs they do not know.

*“The passage given was long and not interesting, so I was sleepy”.*

*“I feel bored when she asked us to read from story books, I cannot understand all, but sometimes I pretend to know and I copy answers from my friends”.*

*“I like to browse and google search, so at times I think can help my understanding in English”.*

### **Think-Aloud Protocol**

For this method, the students recorded their thoughts and emotions over the phone and later passed to the researchers. We listened to all the thoughts they voiced out. This was done when they were given time to answer comprehension questions after reading the comprehension texts. Think-aloud protocol was done only once throughout the research session. All 15 students were required to submit their recorded version.

Think-aloud protocol is rather an interesting piece of information that can be gathered in a research. The students gave full commitments in doing so. They felt happy to render their emotions and feelings for this purpose. Even though some of them offered the same comments made via the interview and journal writing, it is worth to have think-aloud protocol as we can also access the students' ability in speaking. Based on think-aloud protocol analysis, these findings were gotten from the students and transcribed as evidences:

*“I would be much happier if reading materials given are related to students, at least to their study field”.*

*“...even if we are given something, some articles related to our programme, but if we are not able to understand, it will still be the same”.*

*“...actually, the students, we ... should do something to overcome our inability to read and understand better. The lecturer guides us is enough. She has other work also”.*

*“not too much to worry... we try and we make mistakes, later she provides answer and we can still check right or wrong”.*

### **CONCLUSION**

Both the students and instructor have their own opinions and perceptions regarding the teaching and learning of reading comprehension which were taken from the journals and interviews and later triangulated from the researchers' observation. Both parties admitted that reading comprehension is very important.

Students believed that they need not only passed their test, but also to enhance their knowledge while reading. Nevertheless, some reading lessons were bogged down with so many problems.

Based on the findings of the study also, it is rather obvious that the literal reading comprehension of the students were rather minimal and different in individual. This is in lieu of the fact that students had not been exposed to and made aware of the various strategies that they can use. The use of suitable strategies will be able to help students acquire good and meaningful reading habits when they receive consistent practice in adopting reading strategies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations would be of help to the instructors.

1. Students need to be taught reading strategies which could help the students to answer questions with minimal help from the instructor.
2. Various reading activities will make the lesson more interesting and meaningful for the students.
3. Several signpost questions can help students to read and encourage them to ask questions pertaining to the given texts.
4. Think-aloud strategy is one of the approaches that instructors may use. Think-aloud strategy means the instructor verbalizes her thoughts to give students insight into the process. The instructor states out loud exactly the steps that she goes through to solve the problem or gain an understanding of a concept.
5. If reading comprehension lesson also means to enhance reading habit among students, then it could be suggested that reading texts given to them without questions. This can pose a psychological problem rather than students concentrating more on questions than understanding the given texts.

Consequently, from the above recommendations, there must be an awareness and acknowledgement that both product and process information are necessary for decision making. As such, the emphasis on reading comprehension lessons have to be on thought, not memory, on understanding, not mechanics, on applications, not practice, on conscious awareness, not rote response; and on reading in the real world, not for the purpose of passing examination.

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