

**THE ROLE OF SCHEMA ACTIVATION IN THE PRE-READING STAGE OF
READING COMPREHENSION IN THE ESL CLASSROOM**

By

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Abstract

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This study is intended to find out whether teachers carry out pre-reading activities in the pre-reading stage. It is also aimed to find out the most common types of pre-reading activities that teachers employ and the rationale for carrying out the activities. Three instruments were used in this study. The questionnaires were administered to 43 ESL teachers chosen for the samples of this study. Observation and interview were carried out to 10 out of 43 ESL teachers. The results of the findings showed that teachers do carry out pre-reading activities and employed different types of pre-reading activities such as brainstorming, discussion and word association, mind mapping, previewing and use of pictures. The results also revealed that teachers carry out the activities to prepare the students for the lessons and also to find out students background knowledge of a topic.

Abstrak

Peranan Skema di Peringkat Pra bacaan Untuk Pemahaman Di Dalam Kelas Bahasa Inggris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua.

Noraini binti Bujang

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui samada guru ada menjalankan aktiviti-aktiviti pra- bacaan. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengetahui aktiviti-aktiviti pra-bacaan yang kerap kali digunakan oleh guru dan rasional terhadap penggunaan aktiviti-aktiviti tersebut. Tiga instrumen telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Soal selidik telah diedarkan kepada 43 orang guru yang telah dipilih sebagai sampel kajian ini. Temubual dan pemerhatian telah dijalankan kepada 10 daripada 43 orang guru yang dipilih sebagai sampel kajian ini. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa guru ada menjalankan aktiviti-aktiviti pra-bacaan dalam peringkat pra-bacaan dan menggunakan pelbagai aktiviti-aktiviti pra-bacaan seperti sumbangsaran, perbincangan, peta minda, perkaitan antara perkataan dan penggunaan gambar. Hasil kajian ini juga menunjukkan guru menjalankan aktiviti-aktiviti untuk menyediakan mruid-murid terhadap pembelajaran dan juga untuk mengetahui pengetahuan sedia ada murid tentang suatu topik.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

ESL = English as a Second Language

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.0 Background of the study

Reading is a very important skill for communication besides listening, speaking and writing skills. According to Anderson (1999:1) “reading is an essential skill for English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) students”. However, reading is the most complex of the foreign language skills and it is challenging for the ESL teachers to teach reading (Abraham, 1991). It is a “complex mental activity” and hence learning to read takes time, effort and a lot of practice (Compendium, 1989:38). Due to these factors, many ESL students would find reading a difficult and slow process.

We often hear of teachers complaining that their students do not understand the texts they read. The students may find the texts difficult to understand because they are unfamiliar with the text. ESL teachers can guide students through the difficult reading process. Activities carried out can help to activate students’ schemata to enable them to relate what they know with the texts to make meanings. As stated by Smith (1978:88) “children know how to comprehend, provided they are in a situation that has the possibility of making sense to them”.

ESL teachers should give more emphasis to prepare students for meeting new texts and allow them to connect information in the text with their background knowledge to

make meanings. According to schema theory in Carrell and Eisterhold (1987) cited in Long and Richard (1987:220) “a text only provides direction for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own, previously acquired knowledge”. Appropriate activities carried out in the pre-reading stage can provide a reader with necessary background to organize activity and to comprehend the material (Ringler and Weber,1984) cited in Parviz Ajideh (2003:6). As further elaborated by Koh Moy Yin (1985:375) “students are encouraged to relate what they read in the text to what they already know. This encouragement often takes the form of a warm-up session...”. Students should be given a good exposure to any related reading text before they are actually going to read.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The purpose of conducting this study is to look at the importance of schema activation in the pre-reading stage. The activities that are carried out at this stage may enable students to comprehend the texts given to them. Chastain (1988) as cited in Parviz Ajideh (2003:6) points out that “the purpose of pre-reading activities is to motivate the students who want to read the assignment and to prepare them to be able to read it”. In relation to this, the pre-reading activities also serve to set purposes for reading, arouse students’ curiosity and motivate them to read. At the pre-reading stage ESL teachers can provide a discussion to elicit from students their feelings and reactions to ideas and issues contained in a reading selection before confronting those issues in the text (Yopp and Yopp, 1992:16). Students may not spontaneously integrate what they read with what

they know, so special attention should be paid to preparation for reading. ESL teachers can carry out pre-reading activities that could help to prepare students before they read the text given. The activities carry out could assist to activate students' schemata. Students would be able to understand the text better when they have the background knowledge of the text. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to find out:

- i) whether ESL teachers carry out pre-reading activities to activate students' schemata or not.
- ii) the reasons why they do and why they do not carry out these activities and therefore to find out how many teachers have some awareness of theoretical knowledge and have theoretical rationales for carrying out the activities.
- iii) the most common types of pre-reading activities that teachers carry out to activate schemata.

1.2 Statements of problem

Reading is widely a highly effective means of extending our command of a language and so it has an important place in classrooms where language learning is the central purpose. In order for the ESL teachers to guide students through the difficult reading processes, activities that are carried out should be of familiarity to the students. According to Anderson (1999:1) "reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning". The students will interact with the text and then try to make meanings of what the text is about.

ESL teachers sometimes give students texts to read and expect the students to understand the texts. According to Parviz Ajideh (2003:6) that “the major emphasis in the past has been on the product rather than the process, the teacher is assuming that meaning resides in the reading itself”. The teachers scold students when they are unable to answer the questions asked. Smith (1978:99) states that “children exhibit the same symptoms of boredom not because they know something already, but because they cannot make sense of what they are expected to learn”. The students are unable to make sense of the text because they have no prior knowledge to the topic (Kalpana and Bernadette, 1992:28).

Whether it is realized or not, teachers do sometimes expect far too much from the students in terms of their comprehending the text. Some teachers do give out text to students without first taking account to students’ background knowledge about the text given. As stated by Koh Moy Yin (1985:375) that “prior knowledge is often forgotten or ignored in discussion of reading texts”. Students should somehow be given a good exposure to any related topic to a related reading text before they are actually going to read. In some cases, students are asked to read a text without getting themselves familiar or even ready to read such a given text. As explained by Harris and Sipay (1990:558) that “reading comprehension may be hampered because readers lack sufficient topical knowledge or fail to activate the relevant knowledge they possess”. Teachers can carry out pre-reading activities that could activate their students’ schemata about a topic. The activation of students’ schema would enable the students to comprehend the texts better. Therefore, teachers should emphasize on students’ background of a topic that could be

activated by using pre-reading activities that could help students to comprehend the text better.

1.3 Research questions

In order to meet the objectives of the study the following questions have been formulated:

- i) Do ESL teachers carry out pre-reading activities to activate students' schemata?
If they do, why? and if not, why?
- iii) Do teachers have the rationales for carrying out the activities to activate schemata based on theoretical knowledge?
- ii) What are the most common types of activities that teachers employ to activate students' schemata?

1.4 Definition of Terms

The following terms are important to understand and they are defined in the context of the study conducted.

1.4.1 Schemata

Anderson (1999:11) refers schema as background knowledge which includes all experience that a reader brings to a life: life experiences, educational experiences, knowledge of how texts can be organized rhetorically, knowledge of how one's first language works,".

In the aspect of reading, Davies (1995:173) refers to schemata as "the background knowledge that includes knowledge about content, culture, text structure, rhetorical patterns and also information about how the knowledge is to be used". According to both the writers, Anderson and Davies, readers background knowledge is important in order for the readers to relate the new information to the known information to make meanings. For the purpose of this study the students background knowledge will consist of that mentioned by both writers.

1.4.2 Schema Activation

Schema activation is the mechanism in which people access what they know and match it to the information in a text (Vacca and Vacca, 2002:20). We store all sorts of schemata in our mind. To read with comprehension, the reader must consciously recall the schema structures that are relevant to the reading selection, so that the reader can

actively form connections between their background knowledge and the new information from the text. As pointed out by Cook (1989:69) cited in Wallace (1992:33) “the mind stimulated by key words or phrases in the text or by the context activates a knowledge schema”.

1.4.3 Pre-reading activities

Ringler and Weber (1984) cited in Parviz Ajideh (2003:6) call pre-reading activities as enabling activities because they provide a reader with necessary background to organize activity and to comprehend the material. According to the writers these activities can elicit prior knowledge, build background and also get learners’ attention. As stated by Vacca and Vacca (2002:12) “ pre-reading activities get students ready to read”. Pre-reading activities are any types of activities that students engage in as preparation for a reading task. For the purpose of this study some of the pre-reading activities will be explained in chapter 2.

1.5 Significance of the study

It is hoped that this study will give an insight on the importance of schema activation in the pre-reading stage that may help to assist teachers in helping their students to better comprehend texts read. For students to comprehend the texts read, they should have the background knowledge of the texts in order to understand the texts better. The activation of students’ schemata by using pre-reading activities could ensure the teachers that students have the background knowledge about the texts they are going to read. Pre-

reading activities carried out in the pre-reading stage to activate students' schemata are important in order for the while reading and post reading to be more meaningful.

The next chapter will review on the related literature reviews pertaining to this study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the various literature pertaining to this study. It will touch on the theories of reading, teaching of reading in ESL classroom, pre-reading activities, schema, schema activation, and schema activation in pre-reading stage in reading comprehension.

2.1 Reading

Devine (1986:8) defines reading as the “decoding of words for its meaning; understanding the message of the writer, and the ability to understand learning through the whole text. In order for the students to understand a text, they should be able to decode prints and symbols and constructing meaning from it. The readers interact with the text by using the information in the text and match it with their background knowledge to make meaning of the text. The text itself does not carry any meaning without the readers’ interaction with the text because meaning is created through an interaction between the text and the reader and not the text alone (Cooter and Flynt, 1996:27).

2.2 Theories of reading

The cognitive processes involved in reading are quite complex and for the most part are performed subconsciously. Reading is an unobservable act. According to Manzo et al, (2001:27) “we can see what goes in, and test what comes out, but what goes in between can still be known only in the form of theory”. We could try to understand how reading takes place based on three models of reading process that are categorized primarily as ‘bottom-up’, ‘top-down’ and ‘interactive’.

2.2.1 Bottom-up Models

Bottom-up processing is evoked by the incoming data. It depends primarily on the information that are presented in the text (Anderson, 1999:2). According to the writer the information is processed from letter features to letters to words to meaning. However, constructing of item by item does not make meanings in the text. The message or the text only provides only one of the critical sources of information and rest of the information comes from the reader’s prior knowledge, which is kept in permanent memory (Sloan and Whitehead, 1986:15). Reading is not merely placing letters into words and words into sentences. Letters are easily recognized when they are in words and words in sentences because letters and word identification are facilitated by meaning. As pointed out by Eskey (1986:11) cited in Anderson (1999:38-39)

“a reader proceeds by moving his eyes from left to right across the page, first taking in letters, combining these to form words, then combining the words to form the phrases, clauses, and sentences of the text”.

2.2.2. Top-down models

In the top-down models, reading is described as a meaning-driven process.

According to Sloan and Whitehead (1986:15-16) the top-down theories emphasize that

“reading begins in the head of the reader because the reader’s background knowledge is the starting point for recognizing a text and without prior knowledge, meaning cannot be made from print”.

Students will draw upon their intelligence and experience in order to understand the text.

Readers make prediction about the text based on their background knowledge to get the

meaning intended by the writer. As further elaborated by Stanovich (1980:34) cited in

Anderson (1999:3) top-down models “all have in common a viewing of the fluent reader

as being actively engaged in hypothesis testing as he proceeds through text”. Readers

construct meaning by selectively using the least and most productive indication or items

of information from the text. The interaction between the print and the prior knowledge

of the readers has lead to the construction of meaning. (Sloan and Whitehead, 1986:16).

2.2.3 Interactive Models

An interactive model suggests that readers can be taught to adjust their reading

strategies flexibly, selecting the best strategy to meet their purpose for reading and the

demands of the text (Sloan and Whitehead, 1986:17). Grabe (1991) cited in Anderson

(1999:8) emphasizes two conceptions of interactive approaches, which are the interaction

between the reader and the text and the interaction between bottom-up and top-down

processes.

The interaction between the readers and the text has made the construction of meanings possible. Readers interact with the text by using their own background knowledge to make sense of the text since meaning does not just reside in the text itself (Anderson, 1999:3). For fluent reading, it involves decoding which is the bottom-up process and the interpretation skills, the top-down process. As elaborated by Nuttall (1986:17) “in practice a reader continually shifts from one focus to another, now adopting a top-down approach to predict the probable meaning, then moving to the bottom-up approach to check whether that is really what the writer says”. The writer further explains that through conscious choice the two approaches can be mobilized because both are important strategies for readers. According to Khemlani and Lynne (2000) cited in Parviz Ajideh (2003:4)

“since the late 1969s, a number of theories (Goodman, 1970; Smith, 1978) have great importance on the role of the reader and the knowledge he or she brings to bear on the text in the reading process. These interactive theories, which now dominate reading research and strongly influence teaching practice, draw heavily on schema theory”

According to schema theory, comprehension depends on a person’s schemata and textual information and how the individual relates the information from these two sources (Harris and Sipay, 1990:559). When readers read they would search for the textual information that would match their schemata. The information is gathered and processed where the readers would construct hypotheses about the interaction between their schema and the textual information. According to Harris and Sipay (1990:560) “these hypotheses are progressively modified, refined, or discarded (J. Mason at el, 1984) until a plausible coherent interpretation is achieved (Rumelhart, 1984)”. The readers would determine and select which schemata are needed because no one schema is likely to contain all the

information that would be useful in constructing meaning. As pointed out by Samuels and Eisenberg (1981) cited in Harris and Sipay(1990:560) that “more than one schema can be evoked concurrently or in some sequence”. Thus schema is important because it can influence comprehending and learning (Vacca and Vacca, 2002:21).

2.3 Pre-reading stage

The pre-reading stage is a lesson that occurs before the learners are confronted with a reading text. Students are prepared mentally before reading the text as “effective comprehension depends largely on the readers’ ‘readiness’: entering the page with an appropriate mental set, orientation” (Manzo et al., 2001). At the pre-reading stage teachers could prepare the students for the tasks and to familiarise them with the given topic. The teachers can carry out pre-reading activities that could assist the students in preparing them to read the texts. As stated by Rosenshine (1984) cited in Manzo et al. (2001:72) “successful reading begins with genuine attention to the task: the reader must be actively ‘engaged’ in the process”. Teachers can also arouse students’ interest, which may lead students to have some expectations before they are given texts to read. As stated by Vacca and Vacca (2002:127) “a key factor related to motivation is activating students interest in the text reading”.

Apart from that, the pre-reading stage is also important because it provides necessary language preparation for the text. When students read the text they would be able to tackle the text without being stuck by language difficulties. The pre-reading stage serves

as a way to introduce new vocabulary that is connected to the topic. As pointed out by Nessamalar et al. (1995:128) pre-reading stage is also used “to introduce language or concepts which occur in the text but which learners may not know”. Students who are poor in proficiency would find it difficult to make sense of the text they read. They cannot make up the words from the texts that they can relate the words to their background knowledge to make meaning. This would prevent the students from making any use of their background knowledge in interpretation of the text. Teachers can help their students by carrying out activities that could help build students background as building and activating prior knowledge for a lesson and presenting key vocabulary and concepts are also essential to pre-reading preparation (Vacca and Vacca, 2002:127). When students interact with texts, they would relate the information to their background knowledge and would try to understand what the texts are about. Examples of pre-reading activities that teachers could use to help to activate their students’ schemata are pre-reading discussion, brainstorming, concept mapping, previewing and vocabulary exercises, word association which will be further explained in 2.4.

2.4 Pre-reading activities

Pre-reading activities carried out can activate the students’ schemata or background knowledge of the subject apart from providing the students with any language preparation (Dubin and Byina, 1991:202). Reading comprehension is most likely to occur when students have reasons for reading and the goals they want to achieve in their reading. In the pre-reading stage various types of activities can be carried out to help students to

tackle the texts so they could comprehend the texts better. Below are some of pre-reading activities that can be carried out to activate students' schemata in pre-reading stage.

2.4.1 Pre-reading Discussion

During this activity, the teacher asks the students what they know about the topic. This also gives opportunity for other students what they may know about the topic to share with the others. Dubin and Bycina (1991) as cited in Anderson (1999:14) recommended the use of 'anticipated guide' which according to them contain a series of statement, often provocative in nature, which are intended to challenge students' knowledge and beliefs about the content of the passage. Students may not realize that they have prior knowledge on a particular topic but as they listen to their friends sharing the information, they come to realize that they indeed know something about the topic.

2.4.2 Brainstorming

Hood and Soloman (1985:49) describe brainstorming as "the stage when the teacher provides a cue, associated with a text, and elicits from students any words or phrases that come to mind". The clues may be in different forms such as words or phrases, general ideas, or other contextual clues. This activity can encourage the students to build up association of words and ideas where they have to think about the context of the text. Hood and Solomon (1985:50) further explain "brainstorming activities aimed to make use of students' own experience and knowledge and also a way to introduce some of the vocabulary items from the text in a meaningful way". When teacher use brainstorming,

he or she can engage students to bring in their own knowledge and opinion in relation to the topic discussed.

2.4.3 Concept mapping

According to Wilson (1991), concept mapping is a way to graphically organize and represent the links or relationships between concepts. This activity can be used to build or establish background knowledge. They give students anchor points to which new concepts they will encounter can be attached.

Wilson (1991) points out that concept mapping can help to increase learners' ability to "organize and represent their thoughts". Students will be able to link ideas and concepts they already know to the new concepts that will be learned. Furthermore, according to the writer it is seen as useful for activating and retrieving prior knowledge related to the topic being read.

2.4.4 Previewing

According to Quinn and Irving (1997:26) "before one actually reads something, he or she previews it to find out what it might include, why it was written, and how it is presented". This activity can help the students to prepare themselves before they read the text given. It allows the students to formulate hypotheses about the text by using the contextual clues such as titles, headings and pictures. They will ask themselves few questions such as what is the text about, what are the things we already knew about the text. Asking those few questions are important because it can help students to decide