

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE COMPREHENSION PROCESS
OF ESL LEARNERS

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Classroom observations show that ESL learners face problems in comprehending texts in English. This hinders academic pursuit especially at tertiary level because most reference books are in English. In order for teachers to be effective in helping ESL learners, there is a need to understand the comprehending process of ESL learners.

This paper addresses the following questions: (1) How do ESL learners go about comprehending a text?; (2) Do proficient and less proficient ESL learners differ in their comprehension process?; and (3) What are the main causes of comprehension failures?

The study was carried out on 20 ESL learners in the Universiti Pertanian Malaysia matriculation programme. The subjects were asked to think aloud as they read a text in English. The think-aloud protocols were taped and analysed.

The findings of the study reveal that most of the ESL learners were bottom-up text processors who relied on mental translation. The proficient ESL learners, however, differ in their usage of top-down strategies. Qualitative analysis of the data indicates that comprehension failure was usually due to inadequate mastery of specific vocabulary and grammar elements of the English Language. The final section of the paper deals with pedagogical implications of the findings.

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