

**FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHING OF READING
IN ESL CLASSROOMS**

by

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Abstract

Factors Affecting Teaching of Reading in ESL Classrooms

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Reading is an important receptive skill that is basic to the acquisition of any language. This project sought to shed some light on the beliefs of ESL teachers with regards to their understanding of the nature of the reading process, the practices they adopt in the teaching of reading and also their confidence in teaching reading. The study was conducted in 3 sub-urban schools in Kuching. 30 teachers were involved in this study. The method used for data collection was through interview with the respondents. The Data collected was analysed qualitatively. The findings revealed that teachers hold certain beliefs with regards to the nature of the reading process. 46.7% of the respondents were believers of Bottom-up Model of reading. 43.3% of them believe in the Interactive Model of reading whereas the remaining 10% believes in Top-down model. However, some of these beliefs were not put into practice. The findings also revealed that all the respondents agreed that they faced problems in teaching reading. They were also not fully confident with the teaching of reading.

Abstrak

Faktor-faktor mempengaruhi pengajaran pembacaan bagi kelas ESL

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Pembacaan merupakan salah satu kemahiran yang amat berfaedah dan asas kepada penguasaan sesuatu bahasa. Projek ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kepercayaan guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris terhadap asas proses pembacaan, cara mereka mengajar pembacaan dan samada guru-guru ini berkeyakinan dalam pengajaran pembacaan. Projek ini telah dikendalikan di tiga buah sekolah menengah laur Bandar di Kuching. Kaedah temuduga telah digunakan untuk tujuan mendapatkan data. 30 orang guru dari sekolah-sekolah yang berkenaan telah terlibat. Analysis data telah dibuat secara kualitatif. Hasil kajian ini telah menunjukkan bahawa para guru mempunyai kepercayaan masing-masing mengenai asas proses pembacaan. 46.7% daripada mereka percaya kepada Model "Bottom-up". 43.3% mempercayai Model "Interactive" sementara itu, 10% daripada mereka didapati percaya kepada Model "Top-down". Walau pun demikian, kepercayaan ini kebanyakannya tidak diaplikasikan dalam pengajaran mereka. Hasil kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa guru-guru menghadapi masalah dalam pengajaran pembacaan. Mereka juga tidak begitu yakin dalam pengajaran pembacaan.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the study

The role of English in the Malaysian school curriculum is taken as secondary importance. It is a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum, 2000). The Malaysian Ministry of Education has clearly spelt out the aims of teaching the English Language in the Curriculum Specification, that is, to increase the students' skills in using the Language so that they are more equipped to face the real life situation (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum, 2000). It is hoped that this will not only help the students in their social life but also in gaining more knowledge after they have completed the English Language Curriculum.

In order to achieve these aims, the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught in schools, so that Malaysian students who have undergone the national education system will acquire an overall proficiency in English Language. Reading in English is one of the skills taught and it is one the most useful language skill that learners need to master. Abraham (1983) stresses that an individual who wishes to become more educated needs to gain more knowledge through reading. This is especially true when one goes for higher studies, as most of the

information is obtained through reading. Therefore, it is imperative that reading skills are mastered since it is a vital skill that is very much needed in one's life.

Jefferson (cited in Ahuja & Ahuja, 1991) also claims that reading can help people to be well informed of many things. This implies that a person who has mastered the reading skills can then make sound judgments and precise decisions in life. Therefore, it is evidence that reading serves an important role in one's daily life.

Realizing the importance of reading skill, the Malaysian KBSM curriculum emphasizes the need to master the skill. Reading is a complicated language skill and one that is the most difficult for both teachers and learners (Abraham, 1983). Therefore, not only may many ESL learners find reading a difficult skill to master, some ESL teachers may even find the skill difficult to teach. Some of the teachers even confessed that they do not possess adequate knowledge to teach the skill well. This has greatly led to a lack of confidence among teachers. As a result, many students are found to have an unsatisfactory mastery of the reading skills on completing their secondary education.

An analysis by the Malaysian Examination Council on the December 2002 Malaysian University English Test (Khatija, 2003) has revealed that candidates did not perform satisfactorily in the Reading Component. More than 40 percent of the candidates were in Band 1 and 2. They are described as having a limited understanding of the language and have limited ability to function in the language. Only about 7 percent of the candidates managed to score Band 5 and 6. This is probably due to the reason that many students have not acquired the reading skill even after they

have undergone the English Language Curriculum. They may be able to recognize the words presented in a text but they might not be able to move beyond that level to read between the lines.

Based on some informal discussion with a few secondary ESL teachers, they agreed that reading is a much more challenging skill to teach than what most people think. Rivers (1981) points out that in many ESL classrooms, what the teachers normally do in the reading lessons is to give learners unfamiliar texts to be read aloud or silently. This would be followed by learners attempting comprehension questions. In this case, the emphasis of the lesson is on the learners' ability to answer the questions rather than their comprehension of texts. The lesson then is more like a test than a learning process.

Chan (2000) also stresses that in Malaysia, the teaching of reading is not emphasized and teachers always assume that learners know how to read when they enter secondary schools. This assumption may have arisen from the common belief that if learners were able to answer comprehension questions, then that would mean they know how to read. This ill-founded practice will only result in learner's inability to read effectively even if they have completed their years of secondary education.

Inadequacy in acquiring reading skills among individuals will make them unable to perform well in the society as has been expected of them. Apart from facing problems in the job situation, they may also face difficulties in comprehending academic literature and this will hinder their pursuit of higher education.

The main reason for this phenomenon is the reading process is so complicated that it cannot be broken down into a series of steps and brought into the classroom to be taught by the teachers (Dubin, Eskey & Grabe, 1986). Thus, the teaching of reading becomes much more challenging. Carrell, Devine & Eskey (1988) stress that the main concern of second language teachers should be focused on how to improve learners' reading skill. Since ESL learners need to be taught the skills of reading well, ESL teachers themselves must possess the skill and knowledge to teach reading effectively to ensure that learners master the skill.

1.1 Scope

This study is a case study involving 30 samples. The samples were randomly selected from among teachers of 3 suburban schools in Kuching.

1.2 Statement of problem

Reading is seen as the most important skill in a language class (Anderson, 1999). It is a skill through which knowledge is obtained. It is also a skill which enables individuals to function well in a society (Burns, Roe & Ross, 1992). In fact, many of our daily activities involve reading, such as reading road signs, labels, and menus. Therefore, reading skills is a need in one's everyday life. According to Rubin (1993), anyone who finds reading difficult is seriously handicapped. This implies that people who cannot read well are unable to function well in a society.

Reading is especially essential for students at the tertiary level because it will be the source of information. A lot of the information is obtained from the readings assigned to them (Rivers, 1981). When students have difficulties in understanding these reading materials or articles, they may face

problems proceeding with the course of study. Hence, it is important that teachers be aware of its importance and are ready to work towards helping learners to learn and master the skill.

Teachers' practices in teaching reading are very much influenced by what they believe to be the best in helping the learners to learn the skill. This belief is often influenced by their understanding and knowledge of the nature of the reading process. Harste (cited in Purcell-Gates, 1997) reveals that teacher's assumption of what reading is does matter. This is because this assumption will directly influence their daily instruction and practices of teaching reading in the classroom. Inappropriate reading instructions may result in students not receiving proper guidance on how to read.

According to Lyon (1998), several studies done have indicated that many teachers are under prepared to teach reading. This may be due to the reason that they are not very clear of what are the good practices of teaching reading. Teachers who are unsure of what is to be done to help students learn reading skills may be greatly compromised in the effectiveness of their lesson delivery.

Therefore, this study is carried out to identify the factors which may have affected the teaching of reading in the class. This includes an investigation of the background knowledge of teachers regarding the nature of the reading process. Apart from that, this study also attempts to investigate how teachers conduct their reading lesson and to ascertain the degree of confidence of teachers in teaching the reading skill.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The purpose of conducting this study is to identify factors which affect teaching of reading in ESL classroom. It also includes an investigation into the background knowledge ESL teachers have pertaining to the nature of the reading process. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to find out

- i. ESL teachers' knowledge of the reading process.
- ii. Practices of ESL teachers in teaching reading.
- iii. ESL teachers' confidence in teaching reading skill.

1.4 Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, the following questions have been formulated

- i. What are teachers' beliefs about the reading process?
- i. What are ESL teachers' practices for teaching reading?
- ii. How confident are ESL teachers in teaching reading?

1.5 Significance of the study

It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide appropriate insight to ESL teachers on the importance of the reading lesson. It is also hoped that the findings can contribute toward a better understanding of the factors that need to be considered in order to improve the teaching of reading. In addition, this study could also enlighten curriculum designers on the problems of the teaching of reading and recommend solutions where possible.

1.6 Definition of terms.

1.6.1 ESL

Long & Richards (1987) define ESL as a situation in which non-native speakers of English use English to communicate. It usually refers to using English as the Second Language. According to Richard et al. (1992:64) ESL is the role of English in countries where it is widely used within the country but is not the first language. With regards to this study, ESL is referred to as English as a Second Language. It is officially the Second Language in Malaysia and taught as a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools.

1.6.2 Reading

Wallace (1988) defines reading as the ability to interpret written texts as a piece of communication. This implies that in order to know the purpose of the text and react to it, the reader needs to get the meaning. The definition of reading in this study will be based on the definition proposed by Anderson (1999) that reading is actually a process of interaction between the reader and the reading text to result in meaning making. Therefore it involves both the recognition of printed symbols and association of meaning with these symbols. Similarly, Anderson et al. (cited in Burns, Roe & Ross, 1992) maintain that reading is a process in which information from the text interact with the reader's knowledge to produce meanings.

1.6.3 Schema (plural: schemata)

Schema refers to the prior knowledge that one has. Herber & Herber (1993) defines schemata as units in which background knowledge is stored and from which knowledge is taken out to be used. During the reading process, schemata are activated by the written symbols and thus help the reader to make sense of the text.

1.6.4 Model

According to Ahuja & Ahuja (1991), model refers to a systematic set of predictions about a process which are then subjected to be tested through experimental studies. For this study, model refers to the theory of what happens in the readers' mind while attempting to make meaning of what is being read.

Conclusion

This chapter is followed by Chapter Two which discusses the review of literature with regards to the field of this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1.0 Introduction

This study aims to identify factors affecting teaching of reading in Malaysian secondary schools. This chapter focuses on the definition of reading process, the different models of reading, sub skills in reading, the importance of reading and how these elements are crucial to the success of teaching reading.

2.1 Defining the Reading Process

According to Reed (cited in Ahuja & Ahuja, 1991) reading is the recognition of linguistics symbols from among a whole range of written symbols. This definition implies that for a reader to identify the written linguistics symbols, he is able to do it without even knowing the meaning of the symbols.

However, Goodman (1971) defines reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game in which the reader attempts to interpret the message hidden in the text. What the reader needs to do is to predict from the information given what the writer is trying to convey. This view is further supported by Smith's (cited in Bernhardt, 1991) definition of the reading process. According to him, reading is a

process of understanding what a text is about. In order to achieve this, the reader must first of all construct questions about the text. When the questions are answered, it also means that the text has been successfully understood.

Heilman (1990) views reading as meaning construction from written text in relation to learners' experience and prior knowledge. Therefore, when people read, in order to make sense of the text, they need to make use of their previous knowledge. The complexity of the reading process has resulted in different definitions of the process. This has further given rise to different models of reading.

2.2 Teachers' Beliefs and Assumptions

As teachers of reading, there is a need to know where one stand, what one's belief and assumption is with regards to the reading process. Klein, Peterson & Simington (1991) assert that all teachers of reading teach based on an underlying theory how children learn to read and how best to approach instruction in reading. Purcell-Gates (1997)) also stresses that a thorough understanding of the reading process is important if teachers are to guide and direct their students to the correct path of learning how to read. Teachers are then able to provide more proper guidance for the students.

2.3 Models of Reading

According to Sloan (1980), reading models are made up of sets of insights about reading. These models attempt to explain the processes and the factors involved in and related to reading. Eskey (1997) also maintains that models of reading are models of an ideal reader reading since they reveal

what such a reader does. This implies that a thorough understanding of models of reading may be helpful in deciding the appropriate teaching strategies and course materials. Some research studies suggest that teachers are influenced by the knowledge they have in the field.

According to Mitchell (cited in Lapp & Flood, 1992), if teachers of reading instruction is being influenced by what they know or what they believed in, then there is a need for them to find out what these influences are so that the teaching of reading will not be influenced negatively. There are three main models of reading.

2.3.1 Bottom-Up Model

Bottom-up of reading is also referred to as “data-driven” model. Sloan (1988) reveals that based on this model, reading begins with the smallest unit of word, which is then combined to become words. From words to become phrases and then sentences. This model is grouped under the Behaviourist Theory as there is a stimulus and a response involved (Sloan & Whitehead, 1986). In this case, the stimulus is the combination of letters to form words whereas the recognition of meaning would be the response. Therefore, believers of bottom up model of reading emphasize the teaching of reading in sequence, from the smallest units to single words and then recognition of whole sentence. Klein, Peterson & Simington (1991) reveal that in the Bottom-up Model of Reading, word recognition accuracy is important for comprehension. Hence, teachers who are believers of this model tend to focus on decoding words and word recognition during the reading lesson.

2.3.2 Top-Down Model

The top-down model of reading is also known as the “inside-out” reading model. Sloan & Whitehead (1986) point out that, based on this model, reading begins in the head of the reader and reader’s background knowledge is influential for recognizing a text successfully. The process begins with the reader making an interpretation of the text and this interpretation is further confirmed or rejected with the clues from the text (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). The emphasis of this model is on the reconstruction of meaning. The reader and the text are the main elements of the process. According to Klein, Peterson & Simington (1991), the reader imposes meaning onto the text instead of deriving it directly from the text they have read. This is only made possible if readers have the previous knowledge. Without prior knowledge, the process of meaning making will not be able to be accomplished.

2.3.3 Interactive Model

Interactive model of reading is a model which incorporates elements of both bottom up and top down. Its proponent, Rumelhart (1977) suggests that reading using the interactive model will involve both data-driven sensory information and non-sensory information. The reader therefore needs to select from a range of information to be used to interpret the text. Proponents of this model also argue that readers can be taught to adjust their reading strategies flexibly in order to accomplish the purpose of reading (Sloan & Whitehead). When the interactive model of reading is used, the reader makes use of knowledge from sources which include their prior knowledge, the information from the text and reader’s strategies to help in the reading. Under this model, the role of schema is also emphasized. It is believed that in reading, schema is used to help in predicting the meaning of the texts.

2.4 Genre-Based Approach to Teaching Reading

In using Genre-Based Approach to teach reading, the term genre refers to any classification of reading materials based on text type (Syrquinn, n.d.). Each genre will have its own generic structures, language features and purpose. Learners are taught to recognize the structures and the language features of the particular text.

A research was done by Hyon (cited in Johns, 2002) to examine the effects of teaching reading using Genre-Based approach with regards to students' genre knowledge and developing their second language reading abilities.

2.5 Stages in a Reading Lesson

Many teaching strategies towards reading in ESL classrooms have been developed. Devine (1986) states that effective strategies have been developed and this helps teachers to select suitable materials and make informed choices to teach reading. Some of the strategies are grouped under three conventional stages, pre-reading, while reading and post reading.

Devine (1986) asserts that the main aim of the pre-reading stage is to activate students' background knowledge and to build up their knowledge related to the topic. By doing so, students' attention is focused on the topic besides building up sufficient knowledge to make sense of the text.

Anderson (1999) further supports the benefits of activating students' background knowledge during pre-reading stage. According to him, activation of prior knowledge facilitates

comprehension. Therefore, when students relate their background knowledge to the text, they can understand the text better.

The while reading stage is the stage when students are actually reading the text. According Devine (1986), at this stage, learners are encouraged to be flexible, active and reflective. Therefore, teachers need to ensure that students are actively involved in meaningful reading activities which help them to make meaning from the text. Nesamalar, Saratha and Teh (1995) suggest that activities during this stage can be answering questions pertaining to the text, problem solving, drawing of concept maps and poster drawing.

According to Devine (1986), the post reading stage of a reading lesson is to consolidate and apply what has been learnt. This is the stage that would allow learners to go beyond what has been learnt at the while reading stage. Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh (1995) maintain that the function of post reading activities would be to look out of the text and relate it to the other activities. Some of the activities for post-reading stage are discussion, games and further reading.

2.6 Reading skills

Reading skills refer to the abilities which enable readers to interact with the message in written language to create new meanings.

2.6.1 Skimming and Scanning

Skimming is a technique employed when a reader aims to obtain an overall idea of a text. Scanning, on the other hand, is a skill which demands a quick answer to a specific question from a text or chapters without having to read the whole text or chapters (Davis, 1995).

2.6.2 Critical Reading

According to Long & Richards (1983) critical reading involves more than just understanding what is being read. In order to read critically, readers need to react to the information provided in the text and thus make a judgement on what has been read.

2.6.3 Creative Reading

Creative reading is the ability to read beyond the printed lines (Ahuja & Ahuja, 1991). To read creatively, readers not only need to comprehend the content of a written text, he/she is required to create new meanings from what is understood.

2.6.4 Word Attack Skill

This is a skill which help readers to figure out new lexical items. A primary attack skill is the ability to identify words that can be ignored (Nuttal, 1996). Readers need this skill so that words do not become the hindrance towards comprehension.

2.6.5 Comprehension Skills

Smith & Dechant (cited in Ahuja & Ahuja, 1991) suggest that comprehension skills are the ability to

- a. associate meanings with graphic symbols
- b. understand words in context and to select the meaning that fits the context
- c. read in thought units
- d. understand units of increasing size
- e. acquire word meaning
- f. select and understand main ideas
- g. follow directions
- h. draw inferences
- i. understand writer's organization
- j. recognize literary devices, mood and tone
- k. retain ideas
- l. apply ideas and integrate them with one's past experience

Lanier and Davis (cited in Dechant, 1982) categorize comprehension skills into 4 categories namely literal skills, interpretative skills, critical skills and creative skills. Therefore, it can be deduced that comprehension skills not only involve low-level thinking, they also include higher order thinking. The readers not only have to rely on their background knowledge, to comprehend a text, they also need to bring in their mental and intellectual skills.