

## **Why don't they read the way they should?**

*By Radha Nambiar- Gopal,Phd*

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics*

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities*

*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

*43600 Bangi Selangor*

*MALAYSIA*

[rads@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my](mailto:rads@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my)

Reading in the Malaysian primary and secondary school system is largely a matter of skill mastery and school textbooks, workbooks and even examinations are a testament to this approach. The teacher of reading is often forced to make the choice of training her learners to read and answer comprehension questions for examination purposes. Reading in the university, in contrast is much more cognitively demanding, especially for content study. The university student has to read actively and engage with the text, glean important information critically and synthesize information from a variety of related texts for academic writing assignments and discussions. There appears to be a mismatch between what the learners can do as a result of limited training in school and what they are expected to do for academic reading in the university. This study sets out to investigate how the learners read and what learning strategies they were using to complete a summary task. Think alouds were employed to gain insights into the learners' processing of the text and this was done individually with each learner. Interviews were then conducted with each learner and each learner's oral summary was also examined to help understand strategy use. The findings of the study revealed certain patterns in the learners' processing of a text and these are discussed as the four syndromes. As educators there is an urgent need for us to reconsider the way reading is taught and an understanding of what learners do to help them make sense of a text is a good place to begin.

### **Importance of reading**

Reading is an essential skill for students, more so for students wanting to attend university (Anderson 94,Carrel 91). The ability to read effectively and to source information from print is important in the process of learning. Reading can help empower the learner and make him a confident motivated learner because with the increasing awareness of one's abilities and thought processes one can help one take control of one's learning.

The key role of reading in academic learning necessitates that a learner be a successful reader (Shih 92). When a learner can read and learn from academic texts he can better understand his content area subjects. Furthermore when a learner can comprehend his content area texts he can participate in group discussions which are an integral part of university life.

Bernhardt (2000: 701) reminds us “the single purpose frequently cited for learning a second language is for reading it.” Reading is an important gateway to gaining new knowledge and learning more knowledge. The learner will find it easier to access alternative explanations to help enhance his understanding of new information with the help of reading. The ability to read, synthesize and critically evaluate a text is the foundation of all good reading.

### **The teaching of reading in school.**

The Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools (ICPS) and the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (ICSS) determine the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian schools. The syllabus adopts a skill-based approach to the teaching and learning of reading and teachers very often adhere closely to it. Koo (2001) asserts, “... reading is taught and learnt as a mechanistic, discrete and hierarchically ordered process involving the mastery of singular skills. Ponniah (1993) concurs that the teaching of reading in schools focuses on literal comprehension skills such as word or sentence recognition. This implied that learners are taught to answer comprehension questions not by having a holistic understanding of the text but by using the questions to look through a text to seek answers.

Teachers instruct learners on the skills to answer comprehension questions and basically prepare them for examinations, which are naturally comprehension based. Reading lessons are often conducted in a mechanistic manner with learners having to read a text first, underline difficult words and then use a dictionary to source the meaning of the each word. Then the comprehension questions are used to identify the important ideas in the text. A very popular method employed in school is to get learners to identify main ideas

in each paragraph and more often than not these main ideas are usually in the first few lines of each paragraph. This is basically how reading is taught in school.

The group of learners who participated in this study was asked how reading was taught in school and their responses (see below) mirror the approach described above.

- We are not taught to read. Just follow the textbook, so boring.
- Read, underline and then teacher gives the answer. Don't have to think very hard.
- Teacher asked us to read then she goes through. It was so boring.
- We were taught to read the questions then read the text and look back at the questions
- Basically comprehension questions. Taught us to skim, scan and how to get main ideas. Basically read and answer questions.

The products of this exam-centric system are students who are examination savvy in that they can pick out the required answers. Vasani (1983) points out that 70% of the comprehension questions for reading are of the direct reference type and this supports the approach taken in schools where the teaching of reading is concerned. The school system has left a vast majority of students without the basic skills and strategies that are required to read effectively. It is a fallacy to assume that because students can pick out main ideas from the text they can also present their understanding of the entire text. Shih (1992) cautions that students are often taught to break a text into little bits of easy to understand information but seldom are they taught how to put together the bits to make a complete whole.

In school the learner only has to read in the English language for English classes and the national language Bahasa Malaysia is the language of instruction for all subjects until recently. English lessons are usually taught for around 40 minutes 4 or 5 times a week and this is not enough to help raise the low level of proficiency amongst many learners. Recognizing this has led to the government introducing the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English in stages and it is hoped this will bring about an increase in

proficiency in English. This is the scenario where the teaching of English in schools is concerned.

### **The teaching of reading in university**

It is when the learner come to university he faces real problems because of the new demands placed on him. It is no longer sufficient for him to read and answer comprehension questions from doctored texts. He has to contend with new and lengthy articles and chapters from his content area books. He has to comprehend these new texts and present his understanding in the oral or written form. Interesting enough he is often left on his own to do all this and this is where the ability to think critically is important.

The sequence of instruction in reading is to get learners to read the text outside of class and use class time to talk about the text. Usually class time is spent going through unfamiliar words and phrases and having a general discussion about the text. Then the learner is asked to either write a summary or essay about the text or prepare for an oral presentation. Sengupta (2002) concurs with the notion that reading is a “linear additive process of reading the words, then the sentences, and so on from beginning to end by all the participants”(4). This traditional linear relationship of reading - talking - writing (Kern 2000) leaves the learner to carry out the most difficult tasks of reading and writing on his own without guidance from the instructor. This is odd because learners are faced with the task of reading many academic texts for their courses and need help with long texts and also the synthesizing of information from multiple sources (Sengupta 2002).

Academic reading is much more than identifying main points and understanding unfamiliar words. The learner finds himself having to associate his readings with his own schema or background knowledge and arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the text. Most of the time the learners have great difficulty in relating what they read to their background knowledge. This is not surprising because they never had to do anything like this formerly. These learners find they do not know how to read academic texts and learn from them. This is where the problem lies.

### **The mismatch**

The skill based approach to the teaching of English in schools has left many learners at the periphery of literacy in that they may be good readers but cannot interpret what they are reading. There is a tendency on the part of these learners to focus on micro-level issues rather than macro level ones so they view texts as bits of information to be understood and often neglect the bigger picture (Ramaiah & Nambiar 1993). In addition learners tend to have a superficial understanding of the text as they have been trained to use the comprehension questions to identify what is important in the text.

The teaching of reading in school has not helped foster the ability to interpret and critically evaluate texts and has burdened the undergraduate who comes in to the university with an insufficient inheritance from the school system. These learners have minimal reading skills and strategies and are ill equipped to handle demands of academic reading. Many learners do not know how to read academic texts efficiently let alone learn from them and they find it impossible to construct or negotiate meaning using information from texts.

There is obviously a need to reexamine the way reading is taught in school to encourage critical thinking and learners who are capable of higher order thinking. Learners need to be brought to the level that they would need to have to function in the university: to be independent thinking readers who are critically aware of the need to reconstruct knowledge in texts and to be less dependent on the teacher to steer the course of their learning.

### **The study**

A total of 10 students from the language department in a public university participated in the study. These learners who had all registered for an academic reading course in English were find it increasingly difficult to cope with the new demands on them where reading in English was concerned. All the learners had 12 years of English learning instruction. They were divided into a proficient group and a less proficient group using the English grade they had obtained for the Malaysian Education Certificate (Sijil

Pelajaran Malaysia) – a national examination held at the end of 5 years of secondary schooling. A learner with an A1 or A2 was considered as a proficient learner while a grade C5 or C6 was considered as a less proficient learner. In addition the learner had to be able and willing to talk about his thought processes because the think aloud protocol was used to obtain data.

The reading texts were representative of the expository type of academic texts learners had to read for their reading course. These texts were sourced from various ESL texts and covered very general topics on English as a Second Language. Care was taken to ensure they were of the same level of difficulty by getting independent raters to rank the texts according to order of difficulty.

The objective of the study was to identify how the learners read and what learning strategies they were using to help them pick out important details to complete the task of summarizing the text orally. This was done by getting them to think aloud and tell how they were processing the text they were given to read. Each learner worked with the researcher individually and using the think aloud protocol told how he or she made sense of the text. The entire procedure was tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Then using Oxford's (1990) taxonomy, learning strategy use was identified. Each learner was then interviewed to clarify and verify strategy use and any uncertainties arising from the think alouds.

An examination of the learners' transcripts revealed that the learners were not so different in their processing regardless of their proficiency i.e. they used more or less the same strategies. The learners were heavily dependent on the strategies they had learnt in school to read comprehension texts as these were the only ones they had at their disposal. Much of what they did to help them understand the expository text reflected how they read and understood the comprehension texts they were given in school.

## **Findings**

The findings of the study revealed definite patterns in the way the learners processed the reading text and these are discussed below as 4 syndromes – the surgeon syndrome, comfort zone syndrome, vocabulary syndrome and tunnel vision syndrome.

1. **Surgeon Syndrome** – The learners did not take time to read and interact with the text and instead read very hastily and were more intent on locating what they considered main points in the text. This ‘surgeon syndrome’ was quite apparent in that learners were intent on dividing the text into little paragraphs with each paragraph having its own main point. Their main focus was on finding the main point for each paragraph because of the training they had had in school. This sort of understanding where the text is dissected into paragraphs is dangerous because there is no attempt to link the information in one paragraph with that of the following paragraph. This leads to a lack of cohesion in the reading and therefore in the understanding of the text. The method of looking at the questions and then each paragraph for one answer may be useful when dealing with reading texts of the doctored type because the text would be structured in that way. However, when confronted with academic texts, which are largely expository in nature this kind of reading is meaningless and futile, to say the least.
2. **Comfort Zone Syndrome** – The length of the texts was a problem for the learners who were used to simple short passages. They repeatedly stated they found the texts too long and “boring” and they claimed they didn’t like such texts. One learner remarked boldly, “By the time I get to the third page I actually forgot what the text was supposed to be about.” Considering these were ESL texts and they were English Language studies learners this is a shocking revelation. Learners have become comfortable with reading only to answer comprehension questions and are reluctant to have to think critically about what they read or maybe they don’t know how to. They don’t understand the need to link what they are reading with the title and look for a central idea or theme that runs through the text.

3. Vocabulary Syndrome - There is this desire among less proficient readers to understand all the unfamiliar words they encounter in their reading and when they don't understand the word they find it difficult to proceed in the reading. In school, they were reminded to use the dictionary to source the meanings of the difficult words and they continued this practice. They are aware of how to guess the meaning from context and how to use a dictionary but the actual skill of doing these things are not developed. For instance, one learner focused on the sample sentence and said this was the meaning of the word he was sourcing from the dictionary. Thankfully when he realized his mistake he managed to locate the right meaning. In some cases the good old paperback dictionary has been replaced with a 4 by 3 metal contraption called a mechanical dictionary, which provides meanings in more than one language at times.
  
4. Tunnel Vision Syndrome – This was a major hindrance with almost all the learners and prevented them from completing the task successfully. The learners' preoccupation with vocabulary meant they didn't consider the text beyond the sentence level. They did not see beyond the sentence to understand the paragraph in its entirety and more importantly in relation to the main theme of the text. When they were asked to tell what they understood from the text they usually picked on the title. For instance, if the title was "Communicative Language Teaching" they would say the text was about communicative language teaching or the more creative ones would say it is about teaching language communicatively.

### **Implications**

Where do we go from here? We should teach our learners to read a text holistically and this can be done by encouraging them to view a text as a complete picture rather than a series of main ideas. Learners need to be shown how to pick out the main theme that runs through a text and relate the important ideas in the text to this main theme. Only in this way can we foster thinking in our learners and encourage them to see a text as a whole. We need to encourage our learners how to make short notes that they can use to enhance their understanding of the text.



It is when learners can see a text as a complete whole will they make cohesive links between the paragraphs in that text. Instead of using only one type of text to teach reading a selection of expository, narrative, descriptive and argumentative texts should be used in the classroom to expose learners to more than one type of writing. This is especially important for the tertiary learner who will find the skill of sourcing information from a multitude of texts invaluable for assignments and group discussions.

Learners need to feel confident enough to read a text without having to look up the meanings of all the unfamiliar words. Vocabulary should not be a hindering block to reading and using the context of the text to understand difficult words should be employed by all learners. We need to encourage our learners to read a text without stopping at every unfamiliar word to use the dictionary. They should instead understand that it is possible to read and make sense of a text without necessarily knowing all the words in it.

In conclusion, there is clearly a need to rethink the way reading is taught in school and encourage learners to think critically and be more aware of what they are reading. Learners should be encouraged to read not just for examination purposes but simply to appreciate different kinds of writing. Discussions on selected readings should be an integral part of school to help foster thinking among learners and encourage the expressing of viewpoints and opinions. Learners need to be reminded that they are capable of understanding texts without depending on the dictionary or the teacher to decipher the text for them.

We need to reexamine the teaching of the reading component in schools to include the element of critical thinking because only then can we have tertiary learners who can interact with a text actively and critically and synthesize information from texts for academic writing assignments and discussions.

## References

- Anderson, N.J. 1994 Developing active readers: A pedagogical framework for the second language reading class. *System* **22**(2):177-194.
- Bernhardt, E.B. 2000 If reading is reader-based, can there be a computer-adaptive test of reading? In M.Chalhoub-Deville (ed.). *Issues in computer-adaptive tests of reading*, pp. 154-178. Cambridge:CUP.
- Carrel, P.L. 1991. Second language reading: Reading ability or language proficiency. *Applied Linguistics* **12**:159-179.
- Kern, R. 2000. *Literacy and language teaching*. Oxford:OUP.
- Koo, Yew Lie. 2001. Exploring the view of reading as social practice. In Marlyna Maros and Quah Chiew Kin (eds.). *Writings in applied linguistics in the Malaysian Context*, pp. 53-64. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia: Bangi.
- LeVasan, M. 1983. A critique on the current English reading programme of undergraduates of UKM. MA Thesis. University of Malaya: Kuala Lumpur.
- Oxford, R. L. 1990. *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House Harper Collins.
- Ponniah, K.S. 1993. *Improving academic reading ability of EFL students at tertiary level*. PhD Thesis. University of Malaya: Kuala Lumpur.
- Ramaiah, M. & Nambiar, M.K. 1993. Do undergraduates understand what they read: An investigation into the comprehension monitoring of ESL students through the use of textual anomalies. *Journal of Educational Research* **15**: 95-106.

Sengupta, S. 2002. Developing academic reading at tertiary level: A longitudinal study tracing conceptual change. *The Reading Matrix* Vol 2(1) <http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/sengupta/index.html>. April 2002.

Shih, M. 1992. Beyond comprehension exercises in the ESL academic reading class. *TESOL Quarterly* **26** (2):289-317.