The characteristics of struggling university readers and instructional approaches of academic reading in Malaysia

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Abstract

Many university students are struggling readers when they have to read academic texts. Thus these students are not able to comprehend academic texts which hinder their success academically. These students are forced to sit for Reading for Academic Purposes in order to improve their academic reading skills. This paper is a reflection of the authors' experiences teaching reading for academic purposes at a local higher learning institution in Malaysia. In order to improve struggling readers' reading abilities, the authors examine the ways struggling readers transacted with their academic reading demands. This paper examines reading strategies and characteristics of struggling readers. It also suggests a reading instructional approach for struggling readers and their instructors.

Keywords: reading skills; academic reading; university students; struggling readers;

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Introduction

It is expected that university students after 11 years of studying English are able to utilize dictionary properly and have adequate vocabulary to comprehend academic texts. However some university students are struggling readers who struggle to comprehend advanced level reading texts in English. Due to the lack of reading skills, they have become surface readers, not critical readers. It is important to note that these university students were taught reading skills and strategies in their language classes in the first few semesters during their diploma courses. They were given ample practice with authentic texts, so they would be able to cope with the readings of their content-areas subjects. They have problems with vocabulary and at the same time they refuse to bring their dictionary to class which directly affects their performance. As a result of their own attitudes, majority of them pass the course with minimum passing marks since they have difficulties in comprehending the texts and lack of critical thinking skills.

In order to improve the academic reading skills of college-level learners, university students are also taught critical literacy. Critical literacy includes the ability to clarify purpose, make use of background knowledge, focus on major content, critically evaluate content, draw and test inference and monitor comprehension (Palincsar & David, 1991), reflective thinking and meta cognition (Calfee and Nelson 1991). Nevertheless, some students face difficulties comprehending academic texts. The paper reflects our experiences teaching Reading for Academic Purposes to struggling readers in order to investigate the causes that hinder university students from comprehending reading texts successfully.

analyze, synthesize and evaluate two passages on contemporary controversial issues. Propositional features for those assessments are argumentative type.

The majority of students who enroll in this course can be categorized under the category of struggling readers as majority of them are surface readers. Surface readers depend on memorizing and rote learning, failing to distinguish major from supporting details or new information from old (Abraham & Vann, 1987). The educational system in Malaysia stresses more on the results achieved which encourages copying and memorizing culture cause students to face greater challenges with vocabulary. The results achieved by the students every semester prove this scenario and these students can be categorized as struggling readers. Struggling readers are known as poor readers (Zabrucky & Ratner, 1992) or disabled readers (Ford & Ohlhausen, 1988). Struggling readers have common characteristics such as having difficulty decoding texts (Swanson, 1986), having poor metacognitive skills (Paris & Oka, 1989), not comprehending what they read (Worthy & Invernizzi, 1955) and struggling to apply

comprehension strategies appropriately (Bakken, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). In this context, struggling readers refer to students who fail to get B grade (65%-69%) and above in their Reading for Academic Purposes.

Literature Review

Reading Strategies and Successful Reading

Reading strategies reveal the ways readers comprehend written texts. Oxford and Crookall (1989) define strategies as learning techniques, behaviors, problem-solving or study skills which make learning more effective and efficient. Rigney (1978) suggests that learners use a variety of strategies to assist them with the acquisition, storage and retrieval of information in second language reading. These reading strategies indicate how readers conceive of a task, how they comprehend their reading and what they do when they don't understand. In short, strategies are processes used by the learner to enhance reading comprehension and overcome comprehension failures.

Since the early seventies, a lot of emphasis is given on teaching second language students to use various reading strategies in order to read better. These strategies consist of skimming and scanning, contextual guessing, reading for meaning, utilizing background knowledge, recognizing text structure and so forth. Some research are devoted on reading strategies used by successful and unsuccessful learners while other studies examine readers' metacognitive awareness of reading strategies, strategy used and reading proficiency.

Oxford (1990) states 6 categories of various strategies used by learners: cognitive, memory, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social. Clearly, the differences between successful and less successful readers are in terms of strategy use. According to Singhal (2001), task requirements help determine strategy choice. It is important to readers to identify the strategies that can be used to facilitate comprehension with the task requirements. For example, a learner can employ the memory strategy of grouping to understand the meaning of vocabulary more efficiently and more effectively. This is supported by Anderson's (1991) study which indicates the successful reading depends on not only knowing which strategies to use, but also knowing how to apply strategies successfully. In short, successful readers appear to use more strategies than less successful readers and also appear to use them more frequently.

In a second-language study, Hosenfeld (1977) uses a think-loud procedure to identify reading strategies employed by successful and unsuccessful second language readers. The successful reader kept the meaning of the passage in mind while reading, read in broad phrases, skipped less important words and

had a positive self-concept as a reader. The unsuccessful reader on the other hand, lost the meaning when decoded, read in short phrases, seldom skipped words as unimportant and had a negative self-concept.

There appears to be a strong relationship between reading strategies used by readers, metacognitive awareness and reading proficiency. Metacognitive knowledge or awareness is knowledge about ourselves, the tasks we face and the strategy we employ (Baker & Brown, 1984). Knowledge about ourselves may include knowledge about how well we perform on certain types of tasks or our proficiency levels. Knowledge about tasks may include knowledge about task difficulty level. Better readers also have an enhanced metacognitive awareness of their own use of strategies and what they know, which leads to greater reading ability and proficiency (Baker & Brown, 1984; Garner, 1987; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition; that is to co-ordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning and evaluating. Affective strategies help to regulate emotions, motivations and attitudes. Metacognitive means beyond, aside or with cognitive (Oxford, 1990).Brantmeier (2004) in his study on L2 strategy investigations with participants beyond elementary school grade levels, finds that the common thread between top-down strategies and bottom-up strategies is the most successful readers are ones who use top-down strategies rather than bottom-up.

Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002) investigate students' reading capacity and strategy use. The results suggest that good readers use wider range of strategies. The more reading strategies readers employ, the better their comprehension of the texts. In order to be critical readers, students need to engage themselves in reading beyond the application of skills and processing text and that students not only need to decode the text, but also to think through it by experiencing, anticipating, questioning, appreciating, puzzling over, confirming, being curious about and imagining it (Cabral,2002).

Comprehension Process of Struggling Readers

In this paper, reading is treated as an interactive process as it requires readers to comprehend the author's intended meaning by using their background knowledge, purpose of reading and the context itself. Reading is also treated as a problem-solving process and reading strategies are treated as problem solving tools. There are four aspects of interactive reading aspects and the parallel compensatory behaviors of struggling readers.

Effective readers extensively coordinate sources of information from the text prior knowledge, elaborate meaning and strategies, monitor their understanding and revising when necessary and use context to focus on their reading (Walker, 1990). On the other hand, the struggling readers of Reading

for Academic Purposes extensively utilize compensatory strategies which caused reading failure (Stanovich, 1986).

Struggling readers struggle to comprehend the texts in the first aspect of interactive reading process as they had limited prior knowledge of English texts. They fail to integrate sources to make their reading meaningful. They do not have problems when they are required to answer simple questions by referring directly to the text. As they face more difficult texts, their over-reliance on text-based inferencing causes them reading failure.

During the second phase of interactive reading process, struggling readers face reading difficulties when they fail to elaborate content and strategies when they read difficult texts. They rely on words in the texts not on elaboration of meanings. The gap between what they knew and the reading texts was widen till they forgot how and what they read. They tried to memorize a lot of unfamiliar information in search of comprehension.

The struggling readers fail to monitor meaning which caused passive reading. This happens when they rely too much on the text and ceased to elaborate meaning. Bristow (1985) as cited by in Walker (1990) explains that the infrequent usage of strategic reading caused a set of disorganized strategies and failure to check reading understanding. They know that they fail to comprehend the texts they are reading, but they are helpless to remedy the situation. They often rely on their initial prediction and do not change the initial prediction (Maria & MacGinitie, 1982).

The struggling readers define context of reading as a failure situation in which they were helpless to do anything. The struggling readers fail to use the situational context to focus their purposes and frame their attitude toward the literacy event. They fail to understand that different situations affect how information sources are combined, what is elaborated and how the text is monitored.

Methodology

The students who enroll in Reading for Academic Purposes are expected to comprehend academic texts and apply critical skills in reading. The course contents include identifying theses and implied main ideas in texts, identifying purpose and tone, distinguishing between fact and opinion, identifying logical reasoning: deductive and inductive reasoning, evaluating inferences/implications, recognizing and evaluating arguments, detecting bias and asking questions which analyze, hypothesize and evaluate the materials read. Texts on contemporary controversial issues of 500-600 words of formal and advanced language level are prescribed. There are two types of assessments; on-going assessments and final examination. For the on-going assessments, students are required to produce out with a folder of

articles on two controversial issues, one written article review and an oral presentation of a controversial issue. As for the final examination, students are required to

analyze, synthesize and evaluate two passages on contemporary controversial issues. Propositional features for those assessments are argumentative type.

The majority of students who enroll in this course can be categorized under the category of struggling readers as majority of them are surface readers. Surface readers depend on memorizing and rote learning, failing to distinguish major from supporting details or new information from old (Abraham & Vann, 1987). The educational system in Malaysia stresses more on the results achieved which encourages copying and memorizing culture cause students to face greater challenges with vocabulary. The results achieved by the students every semester prove this scenario and these students can be categorized as struggling readers. Struggling readers are known as poor readers (Zabrucky & Ratner, 1992) or disabled readers (Ford & Ohlhausen, 1988). Struggling readers have common characteristics such as having difficulty decoding texts (Swanson, 1986), having poor metacognitive skills (Paris & Oka, 1989), not comprehending what they read (Worthy & Invernizzi, 1955) and struggling to apply comprehension strategies appropriately (Bakken, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). In this context, struggling readers refer to students who fail to get B grade (65%-69%) and above for English. 30 students who were identified as struggling readers in Reading for Academic Purposes were observed by their class lecturer for one semester and were interviewed at the end of the course in order to determine the characteristics of struggling readers and to propose

Findings

Characteristics of the Struggling Readers

Struggling readers have low proficiency. They have limited vocabulary, so they are unable to deal advanced level reading materials. They have problems reading texts with formal and advanced language level. Although during the examinations, they are allowed to bring their dictionary, they complain that they do not have enough time to use the dictionary as there are too many difficult words that they do not comprehend.

Struggling readers are inexperienced readers. They are not familiar with the structure of academic reading texts. Struggling readers find difficulties to analyze the texts such as seeing organization, recognizing hidden meanings and identifying of components of the texts. Furthermore, they have to deal with text passages with specialized vocabulary dealing with general issues. According to Aebersold & Field (1997), successful readers recognize text structure. Weinstein and Walberg (1993) analyze the 1986 NAEP results for fixed and alterable factors associated with reading performance find

that frequent and extensive engagement in literacy-promoting activities associated with higher scores in literacy outcomes.

Struggling readers display characteristics of surface approach when reading. They memorize than understand the content. They do not vigorously interact with content. They do not relate new ideas with previous knowledge. They do not relate concepts with everyday experience. They do not relate evidence to conclusions and they do not examine the logic or the argument. They also do not reflect about the purposes of reading and reading strategies. They lack of critical thinking skills as their intention is to complete task requirements. This type of thinking does not always come easy since readers need to consider the issue from various perspectives, to look at and challenge any possible assumptions that may underlie and to explore its possible alternatives. More specifically, when we think critically about a given topic, we are forced to consider our own relationship to it and how we personally fit into the context of the issue (Halvorsen, 2005).

Struggling readers do not know many reading strategies and they do not know how to use these strategies successfully. The students are taught reading strategies according to reading strategies suggested by Oxford (1990), yet there are only three popular strategies the struggling readers often use. The most popular strategies they implement are cognitive strategies when they read the questions and find the answers. When they do not understand, they would apply social strategies when they involve other people in the learning process by asking feedback or correction from their instructors or peers (Oxford, 1990). When faced with difficult words, they used compensation strategies such as inferencing. There is also a strong relationship between reading strategies used by readers and proficiency level. Overall, successful readers or high proficient readers appear to be using a wider range of strategies and more frequently than poor readers. The struggling readers do not have many reading strategies, so they just use the same few reading strategies all the time for all different tasks. They do not apply memory strategies in order to help them remember information.

Struggling readers lack of self-confidence. They perceive themselves as poor readers so they doubt their abilities to complete the given tasks. Hall (2005) found that the struggling readers' interactions with the texts are not based solely on the difficulty of the text and their cognitive abilities, but also how a student perceives him or herself as a reader. How he/she perceives him/herself as a reader depends on his/her experiences he/she has in class which can help to support his/her beliefs about him/herself as a reader and potentially create false impressions of how well he/she has comprehended text and learned content.

Struggling readers have problems answering higher order level of questions that require brain power and more extensive answers. The struggling readers face difficulties in questions which require their competence of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The struggling readers also find it hard to synthesis the texts by using old ideas to create new ones, generalizing from given facts, relating knowledge from several areas and predicting outcome. The struggling readers find it hard to comprehend the competence evaluation. They find it hard to compare and discriminate between ideas, assess value of theories, presentations, make choices based on reasoned argument, verify value of evidence and recognize subjectivity. The struggling readers have problems answering questions which require them to explain the writer's intended meaning, identify the writer's opinion and give evidence to support their answers. Ahmad and Asraf (2004) investigated underlying strategies used by second language learners in responding to English texts in testing the question types with the eight skills. The results of the study suggested the good readers consistently focused in comprehension answering strategies.

Struggling readers have poor dictionary skills. In most cases, they have sophisticated dictionaries, but they do not have sophisticated dictionary skills. Stanovich (1992) stated that the dictionary acts as a helpful resource to help sustain exposure to print and develop reading skills. While Beech (2004) in the study of 241 children found that poor readers are slower and less accurate in looking for words in dictionary than average readers. When investigating the influence of dictionary on children's reading, spelling and phonology among 39 poor readers from primary school, it was found that these poor readers are less efficient when assessing a dictionary.

Struggling readers are also lack of a consistent, well-organized, research-based reading program-one that provides for early intervention and individual help. More programs that require them to do beyond reading should be organized and with the help of good facilities, in this case the language lab that is well-equipped with internet connection should be added and improved. Thus, giving more experience for students to explore beyond the text book and helping them to explore more and be more critical. There are other areas that limit comprehension for struggling readers. These are lack of fluency, inability to transfer information to new settings, finding the main idea in a story and using context clues while reading.

Instructional Approaches

Singhal (2001) proposes that there should be effective strategy instructions in classroom. In order to teach students reading strategies, there is a need to train instructors on the most effective instructional means for teaching reading strategies. Singhal (2001) advocates that reading strategies must be taught
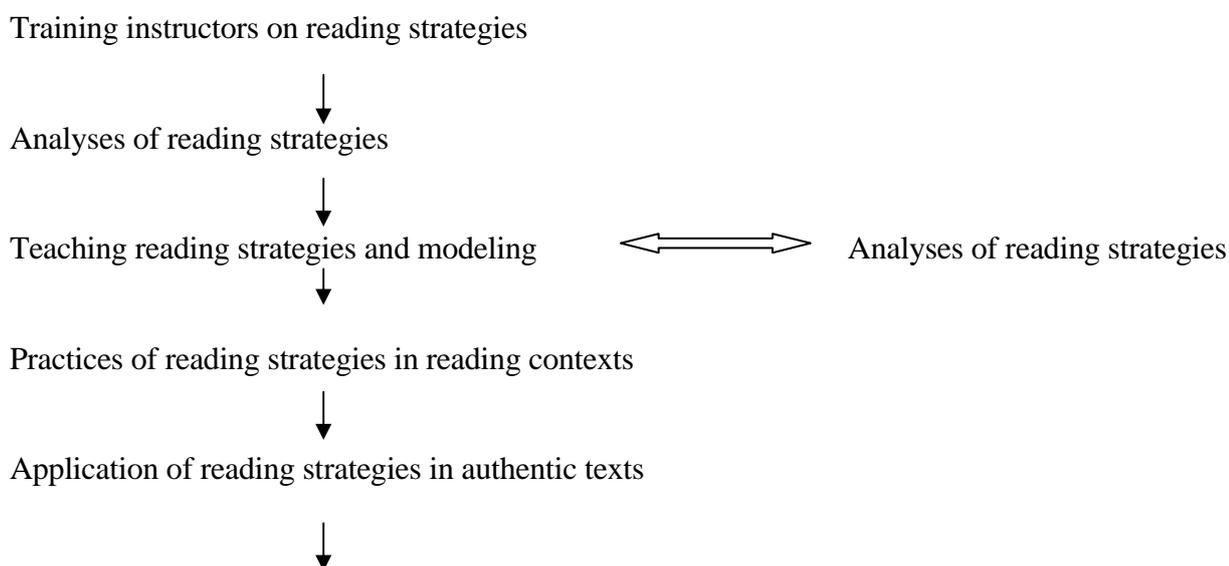
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as a part of the curriculum. In order for the classrooms to become arenas for extensive strategy instruction, content-areas subjects should be included.

Singhal (2001) proposes several phases for effective strategy instructions in classrooms. In this paper, another phase is added, and analyses of reading strategies which originally were on the second phase, would be conducted in the first phase and throughout all the phases. The first phase involves training instructors on reading strategies, so instructors know when and how to use reading strategies appropriately. The second phase is about the analyses of reading strategies to determine the appropriate reading strategies for the reading tasks. The on-going analyses of reading strategies are implemented by observing students; instructors will determine students' strengths and weaknesses in terms of strategy use, which later will help in providing effective and appropriate strategy instruction training. During the third phase, instructors teach reading strategies and modeling these reading strategies to the students. Aebersold & Fielding (1997); Garner (1987); Pressley & Afflerbach (1995) emphasize the importance of teaching students reading strategies which would facilitate successful reading. The fourth phase is instructors must present strategies as applicable to texts and tasks in a variety reading situations and contexts. The fifth phase is, instructors must provide students with opportunities to practice strategies they have been taught. The final phase is that instructors must provide opportunities for students to teach each other about reading and the studying process. The following figure (figure 1) depicts the whole phases involved.

Figure 1
 The phases of effective instructional strategy in class (adapted from Singhal 2001*)*

Training instructors on reading strategies

Analyses of reading strategies

Teaching reading strategies and modeling   ⇐⇒   Analyses of reading strategies

Practices of reading strategies in reading contexts

Application of reading strategies in authentic texts

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Peer teaching about reading and studying process

Instructional Approach for Struggling Readers

Block (1986) proposes that intense reading program must be designed to meet the needs of students. The reading programs act as a short-term intervention model of instruction of a 12-15 week and individualized series of lessons for struggling readers taught by specially trained teachers, as a supplement to classroom literacy instruction.

Based on a research done to immigrant students in the United States who have language proficiency problems in participating in mainstream English classes, teachers are suggested to use a variety of strategies to ensure that students are actively engaged in reading. They can explicitly teach what good readers do and give students opportunities to interact with both teacher-selected and self-selected texts. For example, in reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) teachers instruct students in four distinct reading strategies: questioning, predicting, clarifying and summarizing. A well-designed unit might include practice in all four reciprocal teaching strategies. For example, students might practice predicting by creating questions about a text based on reading the first paragraph. They can learn how to summarize by looking at a series of statements and deciding which are necessary for the summary and which can be omitted. The teacher can model how to create questions about what is happening in the text, how to hypothesize, what might happen next, how to ask for clarification and how to state the most important ideas in what has just been read. When students gain sufficient skill, they can work in groups on selected portions of text and take turns using these four strategies.

Hasselbring & Goin (2004) find that high-students faced difficulty in comprehending texts as they had to decode and comprehend expository texts without assistance. A literacy program must consider several factors such as meaningful, practical and motivating activities. The program must consider that these adolescent students are self-conscious, so learning must be built on their strengths as the students would feel in control over their learning. The literacy program should include notes, examples, ample practice to practice their reading strategies in small scale and larger and more authentic texts.

Another recommendation is the use of think-aloud strategies by using self-evaluation sheet and self-questioning strategy which use prediction process that promotes active thinking in which the struggling readers think aloud. By using think-aloud procedures, the students verbalize their reading processes. The struggling readers would be able to discuss their strategy use and evaluate of their prediction process. Walker (2003) argued that by using these think-aloud strategies; struggling readers become less passive readers, more aware of various reading strategies and more confident readers.

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Social and literacy events are critically important (Schifini,2005). Reading and writing workshops, literature discussion and participation in cooperative learning groups help to provide real reasons for students to communicate with others, share ideas and gain confidence with books and other print materials. By making these students familiar with these print materials; they will have the confidence to try to read and comprehend a more challenging reading text and at the same time will share their ideas in groups that further ill enhance learning.

As struggling readers become better readers, another checklist to evaluate and monitor the struggling readers' performance and behaviors is strongly recommended. By having this checklist for every reading task, struggling readers are able to know whether they use reading strategies successfully and appropriately. The following is the example of the checklist for successful reading behavior in Figure 2.

Figure 2
 Successful reading behaviors (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995)

1. Overview text before reading.   _____
2. Employ context clues while reading and pay more attention to it than other
  information.   _____

3. Attempt to relate important points in text to one another in order to
     understand the text as a whole.   _____

4.   Activate and use prior knowledge to interpret text.   _____

5.   Reconsider and revise hypotheses about the meaning of words not
      or recognized.   _____

6.   Attempt to infer information from the text.   _____

7.   Attempt to determine the meaning of words not understood or
      recognized.   _____

8. Monitor text comprehension.   _____

9. Identify or infer main ideas.   _____

10. Use strategies to remember text.   _____

11. Understand relationships between parts of text.   _____

12. Recognize text structure.   _____

13. Change reading strategies when comprehension is perceived not
    to be proceeding smoothly.   _____

15. Reflect on the process additionally after a part has been read.   _____

16. Anticipate or plan for the use of knowledge gained from the reading.   _____

The use of the internet as a supplementary self-access learning is also helpful for these struggling readers. Two-hour per week which is the duration of class for Reading for Academic Purposes is not enough to build strong reading skills, so struggling readers need to read extensively on their own. Levine, Ferenz & Reeves (2000) in their research investigating the development of EFL critical reading skills in a computer-networked environment found the advantages of computerized environment. The findings of the study suggest that the computerized environment encouraged students to be independent critical readers as they took initiative and assumed responsibility for their progress. The computerized learning environment also affected the development of critical reading skills and strategies as it provided authenticity in academic reading. In order to achieve success for self-reading, the instructors have to prepare the compilation of reading materials and reading tasks, so that the struggling readers can access and practice on their own.

Conclusion

Struggling readers need to be coached, assisted, trained and monitored through their learning in order to be able academic readers. Exposure to the different types of teaching methodology with the help from instructors definitely will further assist them to comprehend advanced texts. Students need to be coached individually and need to be exposed to different types of academic texts. Besides, the use of technology in the classroom specifically the internet indirectly will widen their knowledge since the information related to their reading can be found easily and fast. In conclusion, by doing what we can to help these struggling readers, hopefully they will become critical readers in the future.

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