Selected Malaysian adult learners' academic reading strategies: A case study

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Introduction

This study is designed to investigate the use of English academic reading strategies amongst in-service TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) students. It seeks to identify the possible differences and similarities between those who are proficient and non-proficient ESL readers. The findings should add to the existing body of knowledge as well as assisting ESL adult learners to maximize their potential as effective academic readers.

Research objectives and research questions

This study investigates Malaysian in-service TESL students and their academic reading strategies. It was conducted primarily to assist in any way possible those addressed. Therefore, its purposes are to:

1. examine the Academic Reading Strategies (ARS) of the in-service TESL students who are proficient and non-proficient readers in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) context
2. highlight the potential similarities and differences of the ARS of in-service TESL students who are proficient and non-proficient readers
3. determine the variety, quantity and level of the ARS of the in-service TESL students who are proficient and non-proficient readers.

Indirectly, the study is hoped to:

1. help TESL trainers to understand better about their students' reading problems and strategies in an EAP context
2. help in-service TESL students to be aware of their academic reading potential by identifying their strengths and weaknesses in the academic reading process
3. come up with suggestions that could be used in the design and assessment of instructional materials for academic reading skills classes
4. add to what is already known about reading and in particular the academic reading strategies of ESL adult learners in an EAP context

This study is guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the strategies involved when proficient and non-proficient readers read academic reading materials in English?
2. Why do they use the strategies?
3. To what extent do the academic reading strategies of the proficient and non-proficient readers differ in terms of variety, quantity and level?
4. Why do these differences exist?

Limitations of the study

In conducting this study, there were several limitations. While some are due to the design of the study itself, others are beyond the control of the researcher. The following are the limitations:

1. The study only attempts to explain the reading strategies of ESL readers in an EAP context, so only academic reading materials are used. Other genres and materials had to be ignored.

2. The study only focuses on the examination of the Academic Reading Strategies (ARS) of proficient and non-proficient readers who are **in-service** TESL students. It does not attempt to examine the ARS of **pre-service** TESL students.
3. Only four research participants were involved in this study. Although initially the researcher wanted to have six participants, the enrolment of adult learners in the class was too low.
4. Constraints from outside the classroom may also have influenced learners' Academic Reading Strategies. However, these influences are only a secondary focus of the study, although some of them may be identified as a by-product of the interview and student questionnaire process.

Review of literature

The research started with an understanding of theories concerning the reading process and adult learners' characteristics. These served as a foundation for identifying the research questions and deciding the research methodology.

To begin, 'reading' in this study is seen as an 'interactive process' (Rumelhart, 1977). In this approach, the reader plays an active role in trying to make meanings from the printed material. Various sources such as feature extraction, orthographic knowledge, lexical knowledge, syntactic knowledge and semantic knowledge are referred to when the reader tries to interpret the printed material. In his or her attempt to interpret the reading material, various sources of knowledge interact with each other. Reading also entails the reader's ability to 'compensate his deficiencies' (Stanovich, 1980). Simply, this enables the reader to "at any level compensate for his deficiencies at any other level' (Samuels and Kamil, 1988: 32). This reading model enables researchers to theorize how good and poor readers read.

It is equally important to know what reading strategies consist of. Several lists of reading strategies have been identified from previous research. Briefly, this study has adopted the list of strategies which was agreed upon by Weinstein and Meyer (1987). This list was also adopted by Caverly and Orlando (1991), who identify three groups of strategies involved: namely, cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are described as the "mental steps or operations that are used to process linguistic and sociolinguistic contents" (Wenden, 1991: 19). Metacognitive strategies on the other hand, involve the things that a reader does to regulate their use of the strategies and to evaluate their reading (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1985). Finally, affective strategies are the procedures that a reader uses to make his reading environment conducive (Teoh, 1996).

As mentioned earlier, this study is also influenced by theories on adult learners. Knowles (1990:236) suggests that the characteristics of adult learners can be understood by considering three domains; their self-concept, experience and time perspective. Briefly, self-concept is the image people have of themselves. Knowles adds, "as people grow, their self- concept moves from being a dependent personality to a self-directing one." This in turn makes them become "autonomous". However, Hanson (1996) argues that this claim ignores differences between adults and their contexts, and further suggests that some adults "who re-enter education after some time away from school may want to be treated as children." In addition, it is quite interesting to notice that autonomy "is limited by what the social culture permits" (Rogers, 2002: 71).

Second, Knowles (1990: 237) comments that adults' experience makes them a "rich resource in the classroom". However, one drawback is also inevitable due to the influence of the adult learners' experience. With their experience, adult learners can form habits that may not be suitable or helpful in their learning process (Knowles, 1990: 237). For example, the fact that they are used to teacher-centred classes, they may have difficulties coping in an 'adult class' which as said, is 'learner-centred.' Other possible negative habits are "presuppositions that close one's mind to new, fresh ideas" (Knowles, 1990:59).

Finally, the characteristics of adult learners are also associated with "time perspective." Mocker (1980: 35) mentions that "…adults enter (an educational activity) with more specific and immediate plans for applying newly acquired knowledge." Knowles further clarifies this idea by stating that due to the fact that adult learners need to be "equipped to overcome their current problems, they want to put to immediate use what they learn."

At this point of the discussions, it is worth noting that these merely serve as assumptions and the characteristics listed are said to be what are **commonly expected** of an adult. Hence, there should be flexibility in understanding why some adults may not be described as so. The reasons for the differences may be found by looking at the individual's demographic profile.

In conclusion, the conceptual framework for this study is based on the three commonly expected characteristics of the adult learners and their potential influence on the academic reading strategy use of the learners. These in turn are categorized into three; cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and affective strategies. The reading strategy use in turn may help to explain the reading proficiency of the adult learners.

Research methodology

Since this study is process-oriented, a qualitative research design was adopted. In order to ensure maximum understanding of the ARS of the selected research participants, the study was treated as a case study in that the number of participants was kept small and multiple research instruments were used. Three main research instruments - namely participant observations, student diaries and informal interviews - were employed.

In order to ensure reliability and validity of the data, several measures were taken. To begin, several instruments were used to collect the relevant data. This enabled triangulation (Glessne and Peshkin, 1992) Next, Cohen Kappa's test of agreement was conducted in the middle of the data collection. Two inter-raters assisted in ensuring the consistencies between the episodes extracted and given themes. For every inconsistency, a discussion was held to reach a consensus on a suitable theme. In addition, member-checks were conducted with the research participants to confirm the interpretations made by the researcher on the responses given during the interviews. (Yin, 1988) Finally, student diaries and observation field notes were collected. Besides allowing easy access, this practice allowed the 'building of an audit trail'. (Maykut and Morehouse, 2000: 146)

The study was conducted in the TESL department, Faculty of Education, MARA University of Technology, Malaysia. Four semester three in-service TESL students took part. The participants were selected on several criteria; 1) willingness to participate and keep in contact, 2) at least one year of experience as a tertiary student, and 3) ability to communicate effectively with the researcher. All were Malay females aged between 27 and 33 years old. They obtained their teaching certificates from local teacher training colleges and had between 5 and 10 years of teaching experience. All were primary school teachers from different schools in suburban areas. Their proficiency was determined by looking at their results in previous semesters as well as recommendations from their lecturers. The research participants are addressed as P1 and P2 (the proficient readers) and NP1 and NP2 (the non-proficient readers).

Each participant kept a student diary in which they reflected on their take-home reading assignments and reported on their use of strategies while reading the assigned reading material. In addition, each participant was observed on three separate occasions. All reading materials used were taken from the course syllabus.

Two things were kept in mind while analysing the data. First it was analysed inductively, to build an understanding of the phenomenon studied. Second, the early analysis of the data

gathered helped the researcher to think about the existing data and generate other strategies for collecting new or better data. (Miles and Huberman, 1994) In analysing the data, the researcher used the provisional start list of the ARS categories which she generated from the literature review and pilot study.

Excerpts in the form of short phrases or sentences were selected and studied carefully to determine themes and codes. In the middle of the data analysis, Cohen Kappa's test of agreement was conducted to ensure consistencies. Following this, the codes were transferred to a tree diagram to allow clearer picture of the connections between the themes and sub-themes. Similarly, the transcripts from the interviews were also studied and allocated to themes and codes. Member checks with the participants were done to confirm the researcher's interpretations, then studied and given themes and codes. Finally, the tree diagram was completed by the data from all the three instruments. It is from this tree diagram that the answers to the research questions could be found.

Findings
Basically, the this study confirms the main findings from previous research (Hosenfeld, 1976; Olshavsky, 1976-7; Block, 1986 and Sarig, 1987). First, the proficient readers used more strategies than the non-proficient readers. The proficient readers reported using 29 cognitive strategies, 12 metacognitive strategies and 5 affective strategies. Non-proficient readers on the other hand, reported using 24 cognitive strategies, 7 metacognitive strategies and 4 affective strategies. This finding confirms that proficient readers are better able to regulate and evaluate their own reading, through their use of more metacognitive strategies.

Next, though both groups reported using similar strategies, they differ in terms of their level of processing. This is most evident in their note taking, underlining and highlighting strategies. In their note taking, proficient readers prefer to use their own words more than non-proficient readers, and were better able to select relevant details from the passage. While proficient readers were able to make better selection of 'important details' and 'keywords' to be underlined or highlighted, non-proficient readers tend to underline or highlight longer phrases and complete sentences. The proficient readers were also able to create their own symbols and diagrams in their note taking. The non-proficient readers were not able to see themselves as being 'autonomous'.

Following that is the frequency of the re-reading strategy. Both groups applied this strategy, which falls under the cognitive strategies. Proficient readers reported and were observed doing less re-reading (9 times), and non-proficient readers were found to be doing more re-reading (17 times). This could also be associated with time spent on reading. Proficient readers were found to spend time reading less often (3 times) than non-proficient readers (8 times). One possible explanation is the need of time for re-reading amongst non-proficient readers. Interestingly, non-proficient readers were more vocabulary conscious. While they reported and were observed 7 times being vocabulary conscious, proficient readers only reported and were observed twice. This explains why some non-proficient readers claim to stop reading when confronted with difficulties even at word level. Besides re-reading the respective sentence per paragraph, they also claim to refer to the dictionary to retrieve the meaning of the difficult vocabulary. Clearly, this consumed more time.

Another interesting finding is the ability to relate the content of the reading passage to experience. Adult learners can draw on experience when learning or in this case reading, and indeed the participants in this study reported relating the content to their experience. However, unlike the proficient readers who were able to relate the content to their previous learning **and** teaching experience, the non-proficient readers were only able to relate the content to their previous learning experience. Non-proficient readers did not manage to decontextualize the content so as to make the content more meaningful outside their learning boundary. Further, they portrayed themselves as the 'learners' and not as adults with relevant

experience that could provide meaningful and extra information besides the content of the passage.

Next, it was found that the proficient readers were able to apply intertext and intratext information when attempting to understand the passage being read. While none of the non-proficient readers reported or were observed to apply this strategy, the proficient readers reported 3 times applying this strategy. In line with this finding, the proficient readers were found to apply the strategy of backtracking 16 times, while the non-proficient readers were only found to apply it 9 times. Clearly, proficient readers did more regulation and evaluation of their reading.

Proficient readers were also found to be able to make better use of the visual and technical aids in the passage. The non-proficient readers on the other hand, tended to skip or abandon the visual aids and were not aware of the importance of such technical aids in the passage as different print forms (italics, bold, etc.).

The proficient readers were more able to acknowledge the importance of the reading materials. As well as enabling them to gain more knowledge, the materials also promoted personal growth and transfer of skills. The non-proficient readers could only recognize the relevance of the materials to their additional knowledge. Again this suggests that they depicted themselves as 'learners' and not 'adults' who have much to bring to and benefit from the classroom. In addition, this also suggests that non-proficient readers were not influenced by the 'time-perspective' in their academic reading. Instead of seeing the academic reading task as something that could benefit them outside the classroom, they considered the reading tasks as another compulsory element in their learning.

Finally, it is clear from the study that both groups of readers were reading responsively and reflectively. Besides interacting with the author and the passage that is by asking questions to the author or the content while reading, they also reported being 'emotionally influenced by the content'. This is also evident when they were able to comment or give their opinions based on their teaching experience, learning experience and world knowledge. We conclude that they were able to do this since they are adult learners.

In summary, our data on reading strategies appear to answer the research questions number 1 and 3. Answers for the research questions 2 and 4 could be gained by understanding the influence of participants' characteristics on the use of the reading strategies. It is often said that no single reading strategy is better than the other, and it is obvious from the study that effective reading depends in turn on the effective use of the strategies. Based on the evidence of the adult learners in this study, it is safe to conclude that their characteristics - namely their experience, self-concept and time-perspectiveness - do play an important role in ensuring 'effective strategy use'. Proficient readers had clearly demonstrated that they were able to turn their characteristics into their advantage while non-proficient readers were not able to make full use of them.

Pedagogical implications and conclusion
In conclusion, it appears that most of the findings from this study confirm earlier findings. Yet since this study investigates the use of the academic reading strategies by considering the potential influence of adult learners' characteristics, it has added to what is already known. Basically, their characteristics - experience, self-concept, and time-perspective - influence their use of the strategies. This could either aid or hinder their better understanding of the reading text. For example, with the appropriate selection and use of experience as their frame of reference, adult learners could make the reading text easier to understand. Likewise, with a positive self-concept, a reader would be able to boost their confidence and ability to read more effectively. Finally, with an awareness of time-perspectives, readers could make their

reading more meaningful since they can relate the new information to their working situations and other future purposes.

In a nutshell, the research has led the following guidelines which are intended to assist the adult learners in maximizing their potential as effective readers and for the adult trainers to consider in their teaching of reading:

P- Promote positive self-concept

E- Use experience and decontextualize the information gained outside the learning
    boundary

R- Respond to the reading text

R- Read reflectively

I- Acknowledge the importance and relevance of reading materials to self

S- Share ideas by listening to others and be heard.

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