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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE QUESTION AND ANSWER RELATIONSHIP (QAR) STRATEGY IN ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION AMONG ESL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyse whether the Question and Answer Relationship (QAR) strategy is effective in enhancing the reading comprehension performance of upper secondary, English as a Second Language (ESL) students of low English proficiency (LEP). A quasi-experimental pre-test post-test non-equivalent control group research design was employed in this quantitative study. Two intact Form Four classes in a rural secondary school were used as the experimental (35 students) and control groups (32 students). Explicit strategy instruction of QAR was conducted over six weeks for the experimental group while the control group was taught using the traditional method. Results of the pre and post-tests were statistically analysed using One-way ANOVA, Repeated measures ANOVA and 95% confidence intervals. Significant improvements in marks were found in the experimental group for three variables namely, the subjective reading comprehension questions and summary as a whole, 'In my Head' questions and the summary question. For the subjective reading comprehension questions, the result was inconclusive while for 'In the Book' questions, there was no significant improvement in both the experimental and control groups. Based on the results, it was concluded that explicit cognitive strategy instruction was effective in enhancing reading comprehension performance to a large extent. However, limited vocabulary seems to have hindered LEP students from locating the appropriate answers in the text for 'In the Book' questions. Therefore, this study found that in order to be fully effective, the QAR strategy should ideally be taught together with strategies that increase the vocabulary of LEP students.

KEBERKESANAN STRATEGI 'QUESTION AND ANSWER RELATIONSHIP' (QAR) DALAM MENINGKATKAN PEMAHAMAN PEMBACAAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menganalisis keberkesanan strategi QAR bagi meningkatkan prestasi pelajar peringkat menengah atas yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua (ESL) serta lemah dalam Bahasa Inggeris (LEP). Kaedah quasi-eksperimental kumpulan kawalan yang tidak sama dengan ujian pra dan pos digunakan dalam kajian kuantitatif ini. Dua kelas Tingkatan Empat di sebuah sekolah menengah luar bandar digunakan sebagai kumpulan eksperimental (35 orang pelajar) dan kawalan (32 orang pelajar). QAR diajar dengan kaedah pengajaran strategi yang eksplisit selama enam minggu bagi kumpulan eksperimental sementara kumpulan kawalan diajar dengan kaedah tradisional. Markah ujian pra dan pos dianalisa dengan menggunakan statistik ANOVA sehala, ujian ANOVA sehala untuk pengukuran berulangan dan 95% selang keyakinan. Penambahbaikan yang signifikan didapati dalam kumpulan eksperimental untuk tiga pemboleh ubah, iaitu kedua-dua soalan pemahaman subjektif dan rumusan, soalan pemahaman subjektif 'In my Head' dan soalan rumusan. Bagi soalan pemahaman subjektif, keputusannya tidak dapat ditentukan sementara bagi soalan 'In the Book' tiada penambahbaikan yang signifikan dalam kumpulan eksperimental dan kawalan. Berdasarkan keputusan ini, boleh disimpulkan bahawa pengajaran strategi kognitif secara langsung adalah agak berkesan. Walau bagaimanapun, perbendaharaan kata yang terhad nampaknya menghalang pelajar LEP daripada mencari jawapan yang tepat untuk soalan

‘In the Book’. Oleh itu, untuk meningkatkan keberkesanan QAR, strategi ini sewajarnya digabung jalin dengan strategi yang dapat meningkatkan perbendaharaan kata pelajar LEP.

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DECLARATION

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own work, except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

Signature: Date: 27th May 2008

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Reading comprehension is an important component in the Malaysian English Language Syllabus. It involves understanding a text or the process of constructing meaning from the text in order to answer questions based on it. Reading comprehension skills include locating specific details, identifying main ideas, guessing meanings from contexts, making inferences and drawing conclusions. These skills are tested at the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels of assessment in Malaysia.

At the primary level assessment known as *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR), reading comprehension requires students to read and answer five questions each on a linear and non-linear text (*Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2005*). The linear text comprises a passage of about 120-150 words while the non-linear text is in the form of an advertisement, notice, chart, table or graph.

The lower secondary assessment or *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) also has a linear and non-linear text with six questions on the former and four questions on the latter totalling to ten questions (*Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2005*). The linear text is about 300 – 350 words long and the non-linear text, just

as in UPSR, is in the form of an advertisement, notice, chart, table or graph. Questions for both levels are of the multiple-choice type.

When students take the English Language paper at the upper secondary level, they find that the Malaysian Certificate of Education or *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) format is much more difficult than the Lower Secondary Assessment or PMR format. This is especially true for the reading comprehension component which comprises one linear narrative or expository text with a length of 500 – 600 words, five subjective type questions, some of which are broken up into sub-questions and a summary question (*Lembaga Peperiksaan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2004*). There is no non-linear text at this level.

Reading comprehension is assessed in Paper Two of the SPM English 1119 paper. This paper has four sections namely, Section A (Understanding Short Texts and Graphics), Section B (Structured Responses), Section C (Reading Comprehension) and Section D (Literature Component) (*Lembaga Peperiksaan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2004*). After answering Section A which comprises 15 multiple-choice questions and Section B which requires short answers, students at the SPM level find Section C to be a challenging section to handle. This is because they have been used to answering multiple-choice questions based on a much shorter linear text and a non-linear text for reading comprehension at the lower secondary level. While high or average proficiency English as a Second Language (ESL) students are able to cope with this section after proper coaching and instruction, low proficiency learners are intimidated by the length of the text or passage and the need to look for the answers and write them down in complete sentences. As a result, some of them do not attempt this section or give irrelevant answers to even simple questions. This is a pity because in reality the reading comprehension section which carries a total of 25 marks (10 marks for the subjective questions and 15 marks for the

summary section) is an easy section to score in, if they know the proper strategies of finding the answers to the questions.

Reading can be seen as an interactive process between a reader and a text. Interactive models of reading (Rumelhart, 1977 & Stanovich, 1980) suggest that successful readers are both skilful 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processors of texts. As 'bottom-up' processors they are competently able to decode a series of written symbols into their aural equivalents in the quest for making sense of the text (Nunan, 1991). They are skilful 'top-down' processors because they can relate the new information in the text to their own background knowledge in order to construct a plausible meaning for the text. In contrast, low English proficiency students face reading difficulties because they are slow at decoding the text and activating their prior knowledge. Thus, they are reluctant to process the text in order to answer comprehension questions. In his study on the reading problems of Chinese students in Hong Kong, Lau (2006) found that poor readers lacked intrinsic motivation and gave up easily when they encountered reading difficulties. A similar observation prevails among low English proficiency ESL learners in this study.

Another finding in Lau's (2006) study was that poor readers were not able to use cognitive strategies to facilitate their reading comprehension. A strategy is a plan selected deliberately by the reader to accomplish a particular goal or to complete a given task (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). Cognitive strategies are guiding mental procedures that can help students complete reading comprehension tasks. Strategic approaches to tasks differentiate poor and effective readers. Research indicates that effective or expert readers are strategic (Baker & Brown, 1984). Poor learners on the other hand may not develop strategies or may use ineffective or inappropriate strategies. Studies have also shown that

while good readers can gradually develop their own strategies through reading experiences, students with reading difficulties need explicit instruction to learn reading strategies (Alfassi, 1998; Duffy et al., 1987; Schumaker & Deshler, 1992). Explicit cognitive strategy instruction involves teaching students about strategies; what to do, why you do it, how to do it and when to do it.

It is not a normal practice in Malaysian classrooms to teach reading strategies to learners (Abdul Rashid, Chew & Muhammad Kamarul, 2006). Classroom practice does not always prepare learners to utilise skills and strategies to predict, infer, analyse, agree, criticise, and evaluate by interacting with the reading comprehension passage given (Norizul & Abdul Rashid, 2001). In relation to this, Durkin (1979) in a classic observational study of reading comprehension instruction noted that of the 4,469 minutes she observed in reading instruction in grade four, only 20 minutes were spent in comprehension instruction by the teacher. Durkin noted that teachers spent almost all of the instructional time asking students questions, but they spent little time teaching students comprehension strategies they could use to answer the questions. Cheng (2005) noted a similar lack of strategy instruction in Taiwanese ESL classrooms:

> From my observations, the main problem is that there is something wrong with the English reading instruction in Taiwan, most of the time teachers just taught the meaning of vocabulary and phrases, explained the complicated sentence structures by analysing grammatical patterns, or simply discussed the general contents of the given text. I felt that the English reading class was only directed at translation activities. In these classes teachers only translated English into Chinese and they did not mention or teach reading skills or strategies (Cheng, 2005, p.5)

Presently, upper secondary ESL learners in the school being researched are taught reading comprehension using the traditional method of firstly asking sign-post questions for the

pre-reading stage. This is followed by the while-reading stage where students underline difficult words, try to guess their meanings and look for answers to true-false statements based on the text. The post-reading stage comprises answering comprehension questions. In order to find answers to questions, students are taught 'Wh' question forms such as 'What?', 'When?', 'Who?', 'Why?' and 'How?'. These are called 'Direct questions' because the answers can be found in the text. Questions that begin with 'In your opinion …' or 'Why do you think …' are indirect questions as students must infer or give their own answers. In other words, students are told what to do but not how and when to do it. Test scores of upper secondary students of low English proficiency in the First Term, Mid-Year and Final Year examinations in the school being researched, have shown that they are unable to get good marks for reading comprehension. Out of ten marks most of them get five or less marks. A lack of understanding of how to go about answering questions also has led to them not being able to pick the relevant points to do the summary question.

Yuill and Joscelyne (1988) focused their research on less skilled students' and found that those who were less-skilled in reading comprehension benefited from instruction, while those who were more skilled in reading comprehension did not benefit significantly. They concluded that training less-skilled readers to use comprehension strategies brought them closer in ability to those students who were more skilled in reading comprehension. In line with this finding and other research that has shown that students who use metacognitive strategies while they read become better readers and more clearly comprehend what they read (Cross and Paris, 1988; Dewitz and Dewitz, 2003; Paris and Oka, 1986), this study will use a cognitive reading strategy called the Question and

Answer Relationship (QAR) strategy, to enhance the reading comprehension performance of upper secondary ESL students, with low English proficiency (LEP).

The LEP students in the school being researched have not had explicit strategy instruction as teachers have been focusing on assigning tasks and providing corrective feedback in response to pupil errors when teaching reading comprehension. It is clear from research that all students need instruction in reading comprehension especially the kind that focuses on the strategies required to answer and generate challenging questions (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson & Rodriguez, 2003). According to Raphael & Au (2005), QAR provides a framework that offers teachers a straightforward approach for reading comprehension instruction with the potential of eventually closing the literacy achievement gap. This study has researched how effective the QAR strategy is in enhancing the reading comprehension test scores of LEP upper secondary ESL students so that this strategy can be used widely to close the performance gap that exists between these students and their peers who are of a higher proficiency.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Upper secondary ESL students of low English proficiency are unable to answer subjective reading comprehension questions based on a long linear text and a summary question based on the same text. This is found in Section C of Paper Two of the SPM English Paper. By not being able to answer this section effectively, students stand to lose as much as 25 marks (10 marks for subjective questions and 15 marks for summary). In actual fact, these questions are not that difficult to answer if students have the appropriate tools or strategies. The traditional method of teaching reading comprehension has not

produced favourable results. Students either hand-up empty answer sheets or just write irrelevant answers. Analysis reveals that sometimes answers to very straightforward questions are wrong.

This is mainly because the LEP students in the school being researched are generally poor readers with limited language literacy. They may be adept at phonic analysis but they do not know the meaning of many words. Their 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processing skills are not utilised at the optimum level. In other words, they are slow at decoding the text and using their prior knowledge in order to make meaning of the passage. These students view reading as looking at words and turning pages. When it comes to answering reading comprehension questions, it is just a task assigned to them and most of the time they do not know how to go about this task. One of the reasons for this is that these LEP students have not been taught cognitive strategies to tackle comprehension questions.

A cognitive strategy is a heuristic or guide that serves to support or facilitate the learner as he or she develops internal procedures that enable him or her to perform the higher level operations (Rosenshine, 1996). Results of several studies have shown the contribution of students' strategic awareness to learning and the importance of explicitly teaching students comprehension strategies (Paris, Byrnes, & Paris, 2001; Pressley, 2000). However, despite the sizable group of research documenting the effectiveness of strategy instruction, little attention is given to the explicit teaching of strategies that foster reflective reading. According to Fauziah, H. (2003), ESL instruction in Malaysia should seek to provide strategy training lessons in reading because metacognitive awareness of reading strategies significantly contributes to ESL reading ability. Nik Suriana (2001) emphasises

the need for teachers to know what metacognitive strategies are and be able to explain and model these strategies before students can learn how to use them effectively. A common misconception in dealing with LEP learners is that they are incapable of understanding cognitive strategy instruction. As a result, teachers just teach them lower level skills like matching words from the question to find the answer or that answers are in sequence. Some teachers have even gone to the extent of not bothering to teach students how to answer higher order questions that require them to give their own opinions.

Cognitive strategy training involves equipping students with declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge. Declarative knowledge means knowing what the strategy is and what it is meant to do. Procedural knowledge means knowing how the strategy works; the steps, the process and the procedures while conditional knowledge involves knowing when to apply the strategy.

In order to solve the problem of students not answering the reading comprehension section effectively due to limited language literacy and the lack of explicit strategy instruction, the researcher intends to experiment using direct instruction of a metacognitive reading strategy called the Question and Answer Relationship (QAR) strategy. This involves explicitly explaining what the strategy is, why the strategy is being used, how to go about using it and when to use it. The QAR strategy has been chosen as studies have proved it to be a successful strategy. It is also comparatively an easy and simple reading comprehension strategy for LEP students to grasp and apply.

1.3 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of carrying out this study is to provide the students with a useful strategy in handling subjective reading comprehension questions and a summary question based on a long linear narrative text. By using the QAR strategy, students will become familiar with the various functional relationships that exist between questions and their responses (Gavelek & Raphael, 1982). They will realise that there is a relationship between questions and answers and if they understand this relationship, it can help them find the appropriate answers to the questions. Through QAR, students will know that not all answers are found in the text. Some questions need them to infer from what is given in the text and some answers are not to be found in the text at all. Therefore, students will not waste their time looking for answers in the text but try to use their own ideas to answer questions.

Upper secondary ESL learners of LEP would be aware of the different sources of information for answering reading comprehension questions which may be in the text or the learners' own background knowledge. Armed with this knowledge, their mental processes will be stimulated and they would be more confident of tackling reading comprehension questions. It is hoped that by mastering the QAR strategy, learners can improve on their test scores in the reading comprehension section of the SPM English paper and consequently get a better grade for their English 1119 subject. On the macro level, it is hoped that the QAR strategy will aid any reading comprehension task that they may attempt be it in their leisure reading or in other subjects.

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to determine whether the QAR strategy is effective in improving LEP ESL students' question answering techniques and subsequently test scores in:

a) Both subjective reading comprehension questions and a summary question based on a linear narrative text of about 600 words.

b) Subjective reading comprehension questions.

c) 'In the Book' or text-based subjective reading comprehension questions.

d) 'In my Head' or background knowledge-based subjective reading comprehension questions.

e) A summary question

An additional objective of this study is to determine to what extent explicit cognitive strategy training is effective in improving reading comprehension performance.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

a) Is there a significant difference between the pre and post-test scores of students in the experimental and control groups for both the subjective reading comprehension questions and the summary question based on a narrative text?

b) Is there a significant difference between the pre and post-test scores of students in the experimental and control groups for subjective reading comprehension questions based on the same narrative text?