THE READING STRATEGIES OF
ESL LEARNERS AT A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

For many students of English as a second language, the acquisition of effective reading strategies is of primary importance. The need to be able to read in English is especially felt at the tertiary level where the bulk of academic texts is in English. Consequently, English has become the library or 'link' language and a relatively good command of reading skills in ESL is essential for students as the means of access to information.

Although much literature has been devoted to reading and the teaching of reading, there. is still little known about the reading processes of ESL learners. As Ellen Block (1986) states, "Knowledge about the process, not just the product of reading, is needed if we are to move from head-scratching to designing programs which truly meet the needs of our students". There is a growing awareness of the need for process-oriented research today. Much work has been done in this area in the field of writing,and research conducted by Zamel,1 982,1983, and Raimes,1 985, has helped provide valuable information into the writing processes of ESL students. However, considering the fact that reading is regarded as one of the most important skills for ESL students, to date there have been few descriptions of the reading processes employed by ESL readers.

The Reading Process

In Goodman's Model on reading (1970), he states that reading is an active and selective process and calls reading a 'psycholinguistic guessing game'. Goodman believes that when a person reads, he selects appropriate and necessary language cues to make predictions about what he is reading. These predictions are verified by a cyclical process of confirming, rejecting or refining. According to Goodman (1970), reading involves

> ... an interaction between thought and language. Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time.

Goodman believes that a reader uses a 3-cue system. They are:

i. *the grapho-phonic cue system*. Information is obtained from the graphics and the phonological system of the oral mode.
ii. *the syntactic cue system*. Information implicit in the grammatical structures of the language is utilized.
iii. *the semantic cue system*. The reader recalls his own experiences and utilizes his own conceptual background in order to bring meaning to his reading task. If the reader does not have sufficient relevant knowledge he will be unable to comprehend what he is reading. Reading is thus the result of graphic, syntactic and semantic components all working together.

The ESL learner

Because the ESL learner has not developed full linguistic competence in the second language, he may find it difficult to participate in the 'psycholinguistic guessing game'. Sampling the graphic, syntactic and semantic cues in the written text may prove quite a problem for the ESL student. The student may understand all the lexical items in the passage and yet may not understand the passage, because the syntactic rules of his native language differ from those of the second language and he therefore does not have adequate grammatical control of the language.

The ESL reader's literacy in his own language may help to a certain extent as he is able to transfer the more mechanical aspects of reading automatically to reading in a new language. However, his unfamiliarity with the grammatical rules of the target language and words which he may never have encountered before will severely hinder him from developing appropriate sampling strategies. He is therefore forced to rely heavily on the graphic display in the text in order to achieve meaning.

Yorio (1971) believes that a degree of proficiency in the target language is required for the ESL student to read fluently. Interference from the native language may also hinder the student's progress. Yorio (1971) points out one problem of the ESL learner:

> The prediction of future cues is restricted by his imperfect knowledge of the language; moreover, because he has to recall unfamiliar cues, his memory span is very short; he therefore easily forgets the cues that he has already stored. These two factors make associations insecure, slow and difficult.

Conceptual abilities and background knowledge are important in reading acquisition for an ESL learner. A student who is not able to draw on his conceptual experience may not be able to comprehend what he is reading. For example, a history student may be at a loss when he reads a highly scientific passage on the electron microscope. Coady (1979) believes that background knowledge is an important variable. He states that students with a Western background of some kind seem to learn English faster on the average than those without such a background.

Procedures

A study was undertaken at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to investigate the reading strategies of second language learners. The main aim of this study was to test the premise that learners of English as a second language tend to depend more on the graphic information than on the contextual information when they read in English. The underlying assumption is that as ESL learners, they do not have an adequate command of the grammar system and vocabulary of the English language.

The sample comprised two groups of ESL learners:a group of twenty more able readers (MAR) and a group of twenty less able readers (LAR). The subject were all Malays, from Malay-medium schools and were in their second year at the university.

Specifically, the study attempted to investigate:

a. Which one of the cue systems as defined by Goodman (1970) is employed predominantly by the two groups of ESL learners when they engage in selected tasks administered under experimental conditions?
b. Do the oral reading strategies of the better group of readers (the MAR) differ from the group of poorer readers (the LAR)?
c. If they do differ, can an explanation be found in Goodman's model of reading (1970)?

A reading passage which the students had never encountered before was used. This passage was similar in terms of level of difficulty to the passages used in the Reading Comprehension Course. (MF 1043).

Two semantic conditions were required of the passage. They were:

    a. the passage should contain normal semantic content (NS)
    b. the passage should contain low semantic content (LS).

The passage in its normal semantic condition was kept in its original format. As for the LS passage, some of the words (mainly nouns) were interchanged, making the passage appear rather meaningless and nonsensical, though syntactically still acceptable.

The following is an example of how the words in a sentence from the NS passage were interchanged to form a sentence in the LS passage.

    a. *Sentence with normal semantic content*
       When they were first discovered in 1971, the Tasaday caused a sensation: a tiny band of Stone Age people had been living in the jungle with no contact whatever with life outside the forest for perhaps a thousand years.
    b. *Sentence with low semantic content*
       When they were first discovered in 1971, the years caused a forest: a tiny band of Stone Age jungle had been living in the people with no contact whatever with life outside the sensation for perhaps a thousand *Tasaday*.

Apart from the two different semantic conditions, each passage was also subjected to two different graphic conditions. They were:

    a. normal graphic condition (NG)
    b. mixed graphic condition (MG)

The passage in a normal graphic condition was the original passage, without any changes made. In the mixed graphic condition however, every third letter was capitalized while all the other letters remained in normal print. An example is:

    'whEn tHey WerE fiRst DisCovEreD in 1971 The TasAdaY caUseD a sEnsAtion

Because of the two graphic conditions (NG, MG) and the two semantic conditions NS, LS) the passage resulted in four forms, which I termed, treatment conditions. They are:

    a. Treatment Condition I - Normal Semantic/Normal Graphics
    b. Treatment Condition II - Normal Semantics/Mixed Graphics
    c. Treatment Condition Ill - Low Semantics/Normal Graphics
    d. Treatment Condition IV - Low Semantics/Mixed Graphics

Each subject was required to read aloud the four Treatment Conditions. The reading tasks were administered in a language laboratory. All recordings were recorded on cassette tapes.

Analysis of Results

The miscues (errors) made by the students during the reading tasks were utilized as the measure of performance. A miscue occurs when a reader produces a response which is different from the expected response. Miscues help to provide insights in understanding the reading process.

The miscues were categorized into 5 types*:

    i. substitutions
    ii. insertions
    iii. omissions

    iv. reversals
    v. mispronunciations

*The system used in analysing miscues was based on the scheme outlined n Yetta Goodman and Carolyn L.Burke, Reading Miscue Inventory Manual: Procedure for Diagnosis and Evaluation (New York: Richard C.Owen Publishers lnc: 1972). As ESL learners were used ri my study some minor modifications were made.

The Types of Miscues

(1) Substitutions

When a reader replaces a word with another word, it is considered a word substitution, Word substitutions can be further sub-categorized into acceptable word substitutions and unacceptable word substitutions. An acceptable word substitution is a substitution that is grammatically, syntactically and semantically correct.

Example 1

    clothes

Dafel brought them cloth and for a year, they wore loin cloth and skirts.

In Example 1, the word substitution 'clothes' for 'cloth' is considered an acceptable word substitution.

Word substitutions are considered unacceptable if they do not fit into the sentence either grammatically, syntactically or semantically.

Example 2

    outer

Five years later, it is time to ask whether the Tasaday have changes twenty changed under the glare of twentieth-century curiosity.

In Example 2, 'outer' and 'twenty' are considered unacceptable as they are syntactically incorrect. 'Changes' instead of 'changed' is also unacceptable as it is grammatically incorrect.

1.1 Non-word Substitutions

When a reader produces a substitution that is unrecognizable as a known word in English, the miscue is called a non-word substitution. When recording this type of miscues on the worksheets, the original spelling pattern of the non-word substitution was retained as closely as possible and a dollar sign (preceding the miscue) was used.

Example 3

    $ poliness $ tass

Out of politeness, the Tasaday have tasted rice and putted at cigarette.

(2) Insertions
Insertions occur when the student adds in a word or words which do not occur in the passage.

(3) Omissions
Omissions occur when the student omits reading a particular word(s)

(4) Reversals
Reversals take place when the student reads the words in the wrong order, for example 'They now know' instead of 'They know now...'

(5) Mispronunciations
As the sample comprised ESL learners, mispronunciations occurred very frequently due to the influence of the readers' native tongue. Readers tended to pronounce certain words in a different sound variation from the word in the text due to native language interference.

A dialectical mispronunciation miscue was identified on the worksheet by preceding it with a circled 'd' and spelling it as closely as possible to the sound variation produced.

Example 4

(d) teeny

a tiny band of Stone Age people had been living in the jungle with no contact whatever with life outside the forest

(d) perharp

for perhaps a thousand years.

Miscues in which the letter 's' at the end of the words were not pronounced were also regarded as dialectical mispronunciations. The occurrence of this type of miscues was quite frequent because of native language interference. In the Malay language, the plural form does not have the letter 's' at the end of the word.

This type of miscue was identified by circling the letter 's' whenever the 's' was omitted.

Example 5

The Tasaday do not seem to want material possession(s).

One problem faced when determining the types of miscues was in differentiating between non-word substitutions and dialectical mispronunciations. Occasionally, a reader may produce a miscue that could be passed off as either. For example, it was difficult to determine into which category the miscue 'koorios' (instead of 'curious') should be placed in. It could have occurred because of native language interference or it could have been a non-word substitution. As there has been no system devised yet for the categorization of this type of errors, the researcher had to make her own subjective interpretation.

Results

Table 1 shows that if dialectical mispronunciations are not considered, the largest category of miscues made by both the MAR and the LAR is in the unacceptable word substitutions category of miscues (29.5%). This is followed by non-word substitutions miscues which comprise 20.19% of the total number of miscues. Word substitutions that are considered acceptable form only 10% of the total number of miscues. The proportion of insertions and omissions is relatively small (2.48% and 3.16% respectively). The smallest number of miscues is the number of reversal miscues, which comprises 1 .0% of the total number of miscues. Quite a large number of

dialectical mispronunciation miscues were made by the MAR and the LAR. This category of miscues comprises 33.27% of the total number of miscues.

Table 1

The Number of Oral Reading Miscues of the MAR and the LAR for the Four Treatment Conditions

Types of Miscues	I		II		III		IV		Grand Total of Miscues Made(By Type)	Grand Total of Miscues Made(By Type) %
	MAR	LAR	MAR	LAR	MAR	LAR	MAR	LAR		
Word Substitutions										
(1) Acceptable Word Substitutions	37	45	31	48	54	69	65	67	416	10.00%
(2) Unacceptable Word Substitutions	82	204	112	221	67	240	77	222	1225	29.45%
Non-Word Substitutions	23	159	81	200	25	148	39	165	840	20.19%
Insertions	9	7	15	10	17	6	24	15	103	2.48%
Omissions	18	19	41	7	16	12	22	15	150	3.61%
Reversals	6	9	1	5	2	9	4	6	42	1.01%
Dialectical Mispronunciations										
(1) Sound Variations	94	201	75	169	66	155	55	158	973	23.30%
(2) Omission of 'a'	29	49	37	68	35	66	39	88	411	9.88%
Total No. of Miscues	298	693	393	728	282	705	325	736	4160	100.00%
Total No. of Miscues Without Mispronunciation Miscues	175	443	281	491	181	484	231	490	2776	66.73%

Table 2 shows the percentages of oral reading miscues, according to type, made by the MAR and the LAR for the four Treatment Conditions.

Table 2

The Percentage of Oral Reading Miscues, by Type, made by the MAR and the LAR for the Four Treatment Conditions

Types of Miscues	I		II		III		IV	
	MAR	LAR	MAR	LAR	MAR	LAR	MAR	LAR
Word Substitutions	39.94	35.90	36.39	36.95	42.91	43.83	43.69	39.26
(1) Acceptable Word Substitutions	(12.42)	(6.49)	(7.89)	(6.59)	(19.15)	(9.79)	(20.00)	(9.10)
(2) Unacceptable Word Substitutions	(27.52)	(29.44)	(28.50)	(30.36)	(23.76)	(34.04)	(23.69)	(30.16)
Non-Word Substitutions	7.72	22.94	20.61	27.47	8.87	21.00	12.00	22.42
Insertions	3.02	1.01	3.82	1.37	6.03	0.85	7.38	2.04
Omissions	6.04	2.74	10.43	0.96	5.67	1.70	6.77	2.04
Reversals	2.01	1.30	0.25	0.69	0.71	1.28	1.23	0.82
Dialectical Mispronunciations	41.27	36.07	28.49	32.55	35.81	31.59	28.92	33.43
(1) Sound Variations	(31.54)	(29.00)	(19.08)	(23.21)	(23.40)	(21.99)	(16.92)	(21.47)
(2) Omission of 's'	(9.73)	(7.07)	(9.41)	(9.34)	(12.41)	(9.36)	(12.00)	(11.96)
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

1. Word Substitutions

Table 2 indicates that a large proportion of the miscues made by both the MAR and the LAR during the reading tasks of Treatment Conditions I to IV are word substitution miscues. The MAR were able to make more acceptable word substitutions than the LAR. This is especially evident in Treatment Conditions Ill in which 19.15% of the total number of miscues of the MAR are acceptable word substitution miscues, whereas the LAR achieved only .79%. This is also the case in Treatment Condition IV where the proportion of acceptable word substitution miscues made by the MAR (20%) is. greater than that of the LAR (9.10%). An explanation for this could be that in the absence of meaning in Treatment Condition Ill (LS/ NG) and Treatment Condition IV (LS/MG), the MAR were affected to a certain extent, and made word substitution miscues in an attempt to bring some meaning to the passage.

The following is an example taken from the worksheets of MAR students when reading Treatment Condition Ill.

Example 1

  often they

In fact, open / are frightened and uneasy when they are in the they.

The example shows that the student has substituted 'open' with 'often', as well as made an insertion miscue 'they'. The student, befuddled by the nonsensical sentences might have unconsciously made some miscues in an attempt to understand the sentence.

2. Non-Word Substitutions

The number of this type of miscues made by the MAR is significantly greater in Treatment Condition II (20.6%) and Treatment Condition IV (12%). This could have been brought about by the mixed graphic condition. The MAR may been affected by the varied graphic display resulting in the production of this type of miscues. 88 89

Table 2 shows that the LAR consistently substituted words in the text with 'nonsense words' (non-word substitutions) in all four Treatment Conditions. Unlike the MAR, the LAR did not seem to be very affected by the mixed graphics in Treatment Conditions II and IV. Some examples of nonword substitutions produced by the MAR and LAR are:

Word in the test	Miscue
sensation	sentions, sation
uneasy	u-easy
copied	coupile, compied, kopeyed
forest	foss
voyages	yogers, voyess
discontent	dischoturn
politeness	politeens
frightened	fraitinert
are	aree
perhaps	perfek
adventurous	adwangers
twenty	twenteen
puffed	puffal, poof
glare	graey, glaret
bare	bra-re
world	wert

3. Insertions

The number of insertions made by the MAR exceeded that of the LAR in each Treatment Condition. This could indicate that the MAR, being more proficient readers than the LAR, were more capable of producing insertions, whereas the LAR tended to read the words in the text very closely, and produced very few insertions in their readings. It is interesting to note that in the semantically meaningless passages (Treatment Condition III and Treatment Condition IV), there is an increase in the number of insertions by the MAR compared to that in the semantically normal passages (Treatment Condition I and Treatment Condition II). When the semantic contextual constraints are low, the MAR tended to make more insertions.

Most of the insertions made by the MAR and the LAR consist of the articles, 'the' and 'a'. The article 'the' is the most common insertion made. Other insertions made are the verbs 'are', 'is' and 'were'; the connectors 'and' and 'but'; and the preposition 'of'.

4. Omissions

Of the two groups, the MAR made a greater number of omissions than the LAR. The number of omissions made by the LAR is very small for all four Treatment Conditions. This could indicate their greater dependence on the words in the text.

5. Reversals

Reversals form the smallest proportion of the total number of miscues made by both the MAR and the LAR. No definable pattern could be discerned from Table 1.

6. Dialectical Mispronunciations

Both the MAR and the LAR produced mispronunciation miscues due to interference of their native tongue. The proportion of dialectical mispronunciations to the total number of miscues made was quite high for both the MAR and the LAR.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that the more able readers relied on the graphic information in the text. When the graphic display was manipulated, the MAR were affected and made more miscues. The MAR did not seem to rely too much on the semantic cue system. This is indicated in their performance in Treatment Condition Ill (LS/NG). The semantically meaningless passage did not affect them into making a significantly greater number of miscues. Although the MAR did make a number of miscues, mainly word substitutions, in an attempt to bring some meaning into the reading task of Treatment Condition Ill, the number of miscues was not significantly larger than that of Treatment Condition I.

A proficient reader in English would not be affected by the graphic condition of a reading text because he does not need to rely so much on the graphic information as he would on the contextual information. His good command of the English language enables him to sample cues from the text, and make accurate predictions in order to achieve comprehension of the text he is reading. The MAR group, however, although representing the more proficient readers of this group of ESL learners, revealed that their control of the grammar system and vocabulary of the English language, was not adequate enough for them to approach a reading task without having to resort to the graphic information.

The second finding revealed that the LAR did not seem to be affected by the mixed graphic condition in Treatment Conditions II and IV. Nor did they seem to be affected by the low semantic condition of Treatment Condition Ill. The results show that they made a great number of miscues in all four Treatment Conditions regardless of how the graphic or semantic conditions were presented. Most of the miscues made by the LAR were either word substitutions that were unacceptable in the context of the passage, or non-word substitutions. They did not seem to have acquired any oral reading strategies, or even if they had, the strategies were at best, rather haphazard in nature. This study was not able to determine the kind of cue system used by the LAR.

The findings indicate that the LAR made significantly more miscues than the MAR in all four Treatment Conditions. This as well as the first two findings mentioned earlier, indicate that the oral reading strategies of the MAR differ from those of the LAR. Based on Goodman's model of reading (1970), the findings indicate that the MAR did not possess a totally adequate control of the grammar system and vocabulary of the English language and as a result, tended to rely on the graphic information in the text. The LAR, who possessed an even poorer command of the language than the MAR seem not to have acquired any oral reading strategies at all. They read in a haphazard manner, making a great number of miscues, and did not seem to be making use of the graphic nor the contextual information available.

In conclusion, the results indicated that the ESL learners possessed varying degrees of utilization of the cue systems in coping with the reading task. Both the less and the more able readers did not exploit the semantic cue system fully. The better readers still tended to rely on the graphic cues.

The pedagogical implications are obvious. ESL readers at tertiary level need to acquire effective reading skills in order to cope with the demanding task of mastering their academic texts and reference books. They need to be taught to exploit to a greater advantage the contextual cues in the passage in order to derive meaning. They should also learn how to identify main points and supporting points and to develop an awareness of the sentence structures and sentence relationships used in the English language. Only by ensuring greater use of the semantic and syntactic cue systems and placing less emphasis on the graphic cue system can ESL students become more effective readers.

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