

## Factors Affecting ESL Reading Comprehension of Malaysian Secondary School Students

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**Abstract:** The ultimate goal of teaching reading is to enable the readers to understand what they have read. It is often the case that good readers have good vocabularies. They are able to understand and use the words correctly. This research was motivated by concern over the factors that affect reading comprehension among Form Two students in SMK Green Road Kuching, Sarawak. It was aimed at analyzing factors such as lack of interest, motivation, previous knowledge and vocabulary knowledge which could affect student's reading comprehension when reading and comprehending the text. Data were collected through the use of questionnaires which involved 30 students who were randomly selected as sample for this study. Percentages and frequencies were used to analyze the data collected. The findings revealed that the factors studied affected student's reading comprehension. An implication of the study is that teachers need to identify reading strategies that could help improve ESL students' reading comprehension of texts read.

**Keywords:** Reading comprehension, motivation, interest, previous knowledge, vocabulary knowledge

Reading is a skill that every student needs to master in order to understand the text well. However, the interest and to be able to read correctly is not enough if the students have poor understanding of the text. According to Maasum & Maarof (2012), the process of reading is a doorway to gain and learn more knowledge as it is important skill for the learners. The reading process is really meaning driven. Phantharakphong & Pothitha (2014) stated that the process of reading and comprehending the text refers to the capability to identify the information in written form.

Language plays a vital role in reading. In order to read and understand the content of the book, the students have to understand the language. For instance, if the student's knowledge of English is poor, then his or her reading will also be poor. Therefore, the students will have problem as they cannot use the language to communicate or to convey their ideas. The learners have a hard time to understand the written text as they still have difficulties in their reading comprehension (Phantharakphong & Pothitha, 2014). The learners also face difficulty in which they cannot understand the text and cannot relate what they have read and identified the meaning of the text.

Besides that, in order to understand the text well, learners also need use their background knowledge. The students need to understand the meaning of the text and able to make conclusion by using their own words based on their reading (Maasum & Maarof, 2012). The students will be able to understand the text better if they can connect the text to their background knowledge. Therefore, it is important for the teachers to activate students' background knowledge during the lesson to help them to comprehend the text well.

Interest plays important role in reading. Without interest, it is impossible to encourage students to read and try to comprehend the meaning of the text. For that reason, teachers have

to figure out each one of their students' interest or preferences in reading in advance. This will help the teachers to engage the students well during the lesson as well as to boost their interest to read. Yunus and Abdullah (2011) claim that "It is important that motivation plays the role in language learning and students need to initiate the steps towards language learning". According to Pardo (2004), the students' motivation is important to encourage students to keep on reading. Teachers also play important roles to always encourage their students to read. Teachers can provide their students with interesting reading materials according to the students' reading ability (Grimes, 2004).

Language learning, in order to be expert in all skills, students must have well-built vocabulary knowledge. Razak and Yunus (2016) stated that "Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial step in acquiring a language". According to Richek (2005), the reading achievement is related to reader's vocabulary knowledge. In order to understand the text well, students need to master their vocabulary skill.

The researcher is an English teacher who is teaching English as a second language to her fourteen years old students. Through her observations during the English lessons; she found out that her students refuse to read during the reading time. In her school, students will be given one hour to read in the library under teacher's supervision. However, her students did not read attentively but wasting their time whispering or talking to their classmates. It is important that the students make use of their reading time wisely as reading can assist them in their language learning especially to understand and comprehend the reading texts.

Hence, this study aims to investigate some factors such as lack of interest, motivation, previous knowledge and vocabulary knowledge which affect student's reading comprehension when reading and comprehending English text.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilizes the quantitative approach to evaluate the factors that affect student's reading comprehension in reading English text. In addition, the use of descriptive method also applied to explain the collected data of this study. A total of 30 students of Form Two students were randomly selected as research sample who involved in this study. In order to collect the data, the questionnaire was designed, structured and validated by 2 experts consisted of sixteen questions which employed the 5-point Likert Scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The questionnaire was divided into two sections consisted of respondents' background information and the questions in three parts according to the objectives of this study.

The data collection was done by the researcher with the assistance of the school personnel. Out of 30 copies of the questionnaire distributed, all questionnaires were filled and returned. The data collected were arranged according to the objectives of the study during the analyzing process. The descriptive method such as frequency calculation and percentages were used to analyze the data collected.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the data collection, a total of 30 Form Two students were randomly selected as research sample in SMK Green Road. In this study, 14 male respondents (46.7 %) and 16 female respondents (53.3 %) were selected in this research. All of them comprised of 11 Malay respondents (36.7 %), 12 Chinese respondents (40 %), 6 Iban respondents (20%) and 1 Bidayuh respondent (3.3%).

### **Main Findings of the Study**

The main findings of the study are presented based upon the following factors:

**Table 1: Lack of interest and motivation affect student's reading comprehension**

| Statement/Frequency                   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Rarely/ Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|-------|----------------|
| 1. My hobby is reading.               | 0                 | 21       | 1               | 8     | 0              |
| 2. I read every day.                  | 6                 | 18       | 1               | 3     | 2              |
| 3. I interest in reading since young. | 16                | 1        | 8               | 1     | 4              |
| 4. My interest motivates me to read.  | 2                 | 15       | 3               | 4     | 6              |
| 5. I read two hours every day.        | 5                 | 15       | 0               | 4     | 6              |

Table 1 showed that lack of interest and motivation affect student's reading comprehension. The result of each item in the questionnaire showed that:

1. Respondents did not treat reading as their hobby. (21 respondents-Disagree)
2. The respondents did not read every day.( 18 respondents-Disagree, 6 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
3. Respondents did not instill their interest in reading since young. (1 respondents-Disagree, 16 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
4. The respondents are not motivated to read.(15 respondents-Disagree, 2 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
5. The respondents refuse to read even just for two hours.(15 respondents-Disagree, 5 respondents-Strongly Disagree)

From this finding, the researcher concludes that without interest and motivation, students will have difficulty to read and comprehend the text. According to McKenna et al. (1995) stated that not all secondary students fail to read but they just do not love to read. Therefore, this condition causes their motivation and interest in reading appears to decline in school every year. For many secondary students, reading is not a habit of their daily lives.

**Table 2: Lack of Previous Knowledge Affects Student's Reading Comprehension**

| Statement/Frequency  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Rarely/ Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-----------------|-------|----------------|
| 1. I can connect previous knowledge from different sources in the passage.                   | 6                 | 11       | 1               | 5     | 7              |
| 2. I relate new information to the background knowledge in my mind to understand the text.   | 4                 | 13       | 0               | 9     | 4              |
| 3. I can imagine some scene described in the passage to facilitate my reading comprehension. | 5                 | 15       | 0               | 5     | 5              |
| 4. I use my previous knowledge and common sense to predict the main ideas of the passage.    | 7                 | 15       | 0               | 7     | 1              |
| 5. I combine new information with what I have read in the passage to understand well.        | 5                 | 13       | 0               | 8     | 4              |

|  |   |    |   |   |   |
|--|---|----|---|---|---|
| 6. I apply what I have learnt and read to facilitate my reading comprehension. | 5 | 15 | 0 | 2 | 8 |
|--|---|----|---|---|---|

Table 2 portrays the result which showed that lack of previous knowledge affect student's reading comprehension. The result revealed that:

1. The respondents fail to connect their previous knowledge from different sources in the passage.( 11 respondents-Disagree, 6 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
2. They fail to relate new information to the background knowledge in their mind to understand the text.( 13 respondents-Disagree, 4 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
3. The respondents fail to imagine some scene described in the passage to facilitate their reading comprehension. ( 15 respondents-Disagree, 5 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
4. The respondents hardly predict the main ideas of the passage.( 15 respondents-Disagree, 7 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
5. The respondents fail to combine new information with what they have read in the passage to understand well. ( 13 respondents-Disagree, 5 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
6. The respondents fail to apply what they have learnt and read to facilitate their reading comprehension.( 15 respondents-Disagree, 5 respondents-Strongly Disagree)

The findings proved that lack of previous affect student's reading comprehension. Previous knowledge is important in reading skill as readers can illustrate and make connection with his or her reading. Johnson and Pearson (1982) acknowledged that lack of previous knowledge causes reading problems as they hardly make connection to the text they read.

**Table 3: Lack of Vocabulary Knowledge Affects Student's Reading Comprehension**

| Statement/Frequency   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Rarely/ Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|-----------------|-------|----------------|
| 1. I have a dictionary.   | 6                 | 13       | 1               | 3     | 7              |
| 2. I often use dictionary.  | 6                 | 13       | 2               | 1     | 8              |
| 3. I know how to use dictionary to search the meaning of the words.                                       | 4                 | 16       | 1               | 2     | 7              |
| 4. I think a dictionary helps me a lot as a source of reference to learn and understand unfamiliar words. | 8                 | 14       | 0               | 5     | 3              |
| 5. I think dictionary is a helpful tool in my learning process.   | 5                 | 16       | 2               | 1     | 6              |

There were five items in this part. The data in Table 3 showed that lack of vocabulary knowledge affect student's reading comprehension. The result claimed that:

1. Respondents did not have a dictionary and bring effect to them in which they lack of vocabulary knowledge which is important for them in understanding the meaning of the word and comprehending the text. (13 respondents-Disagree, 6 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
2. The respondents did not often use dictionary. For that reason, they face a problem which they lack of vocabulary knowledge which leads to reading comprehension problem.(13 respondents-Disagree, 6 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
3. Some of the respondents did not know how to use dictionary to search the meaning of the words. It happen when respondents felt that vocabulary knowledge and the use of

- dictionary did not important in their reading comprehension.(16 respondents-Disagree, 4 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
4. Half of the respondents lack of vocabulary knowledge and think that a dictionary did not help them a lot as a source of reference to learn and understand unfamiliar words in comprehending the text.(14 respondents-Disagree, 8 respondents-Strongly Disagree)
  5. They think that dictionary is not a helpful tool in their learning process. For that reason, they did not refer to dictionary when they did not understand the text and it became worst when they face difficulty in their reading comprehension.(16 respondents-Disagree, 5 respondents-Strongly Disagree)

Last but not least, the result also revealed that lack of vocabulary knowledge is one of factors affect student's reading comprehension. Chall & Jacobs (2003) claimed that the students will have difficulty to comprehend the text if they do not improve their vocabulary knowledge. The mastery of vocabulary is essential for the students to learn and communicate by using the previous knowledge they have in mind. Therefore, if their vocabulary knowledge is not strong, they will have problem to express their idea or to convey message.

According to the tables above, the data was strong to be evidence and illustrated that mostly respondents selected strongly disagree and disagree which proved that lack of interest and motivation, previous knowledge and vocabulary knowledge affected respondents' reading comprehension.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research made, it was important for the teacher to find best technique of teaching based on the students' ability, background and previous knowledge, interest, motivation and vocabulary knowledge to gain their understanding in reading comprehension aspect. These motivate them to read books, journals, or other printed text especially English language. Besides that, teacher must know that students need to be told the purpose of reading for their future use. This is because English Language is uses in worldwide which are vital for everyone. Interesting teaching and learning process can help students to build their interest in learning English especially in reading aspect. In the future it is recommended that reading strategies should be applied by the schools because it can help teachers and students to overcome problems in reading comprehension.

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