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Reading Strategies among ESL Malaysian Secondary School Students

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	This study aimed to investigate the types of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies employed by secondary school students in Malaysia to improve their comprehension. The study employed a mixed-method approach which involves the instruments of a questionnaire and an interview. This study was conducted at SMK Kapit, involving ninety Form 4 students. Based on the findings, the students had used various reading strategies. The use of particular reading strategies is implied as their autonomous learning efforts to become more proficient readers. However, according to the frequency scales of strategy used, the findings from the questionnaire indicate that most of the reported reading strategies have a mean between 2.5 and 3.49 as the students sometimes use these reading strategies. This revealed their lack of awareness of practising these reading strategies. Thus, teachers play a vital role in training students on the reading strategy use in order to enhance the effectiveness of their reading.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English is regarded as an international language used both globally and locally [1]. English, which functions as the second language in Malaysia, has been widely utilised as a means of interaction in various fields particularly in education [2]. The ability to read in English is deemed an important skill to be acquired for academic, business and other purposes. In Malaysia, English is a compulsary subject in Malaysian schools.

Reading strategies are part of language learning strategies. Reading strategies are "deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words and construct meanings of text" [3]. Although a few studies have been done within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, even less has been studied in a mixed English Language setting such as Malaysia [4]. Some students in Malaysian secondary schools especially those in suburban areas such as Kapit, Sarawak are unaware of or do not have effective strategies to comprehend English reading materials. This is because in Malaysia, the teaching of English language focuses more on grammar than other aspects such as reading, listening, writing and speaking [5]. The students need scaffolding and guidance from their teachers or friends to help them understand the reading materials. They seem to lack vocabulary, and this impedes their reading compehension.

Thus, this study is concerned with an investigation of the reading strategies employed by Form 4 secondary school students in a suburban area of Kapit, Sarawak in order to help teachers identify the students' preferences of particular reading strategies and exert more efforts to train students to utilise appropriate reading strategies. This study aims to investigate the types of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies used by the students.

In the second language learning context, reading strategies are important in assisting the learners' reading process and providing them with a clear sense of guidance in their interpretation of written text [6]. There is a gap in the literature, as some of the previous studies are situated within pre-university and university students (e.g. [7],[8]). Although there are previous studies concerning reading strategies among Malaysian secondary school students, the studies have different strategy classifications such as supervising strategies, support strategies and paraphrase strategies [9].
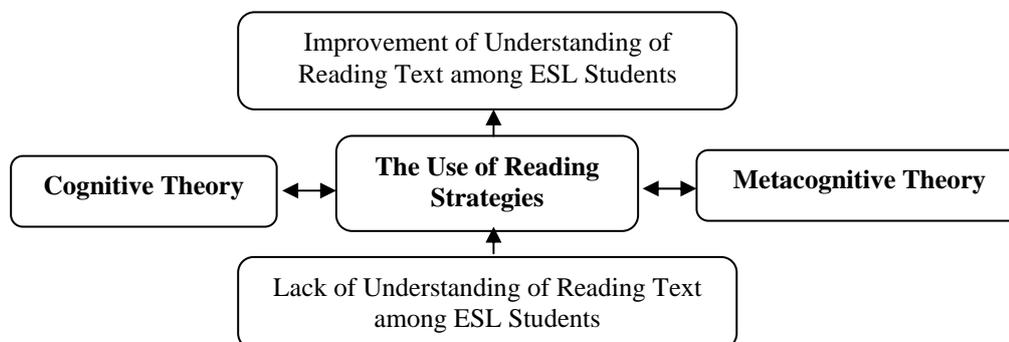

Figure 1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a simple theoretical and conceptual framework for this research. In the second language learning context, reading strategies are vital in assisting the learners' reading process and guiding them in their interpretation of written text [6]. In the framework, the use of reading strategies is closely related to two theories: cognition and metacognition. Regarding the cognitive theory of learning, reading is not just concerned with how readers carry out an assigned comprehension task, but also the cognitive processes involved [10]. It is indicated that "the cognitive psychologists investigated mental structures and processes to explain learning and change in behavior" [11]. Reading involves a complex cognitive activity that is important in developing literacy among students in order to function well in the modern era [12].

Pertaining to the metacognitive theory of learning, students can monitor comprehension through evaluation of their progress toward learning objectives, and they exert control of their learning process by deciding on effective strategies to enable them to carry out learning tasks [13]. Flavell (as cited in [14]), indicated that metacognition comprised both learning aspects such as monitoring and regulation, as these aspects reflect on the learner's ability to organise the input, storage, search, and retrieval of the contents of his own memory. He mentioned that metacognition comprises selecting, evaluating, revising or deleting cognitive tasks, goals, and strategies.

This present study is concerned with an investigation of the reading strategies based on the classification of learning strategies by O'Malley and Chamot (cited in [15]). They indicated that learning strategies are mental and socio-affective processes. The learning strategies are categorised into cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies. As this study is aimed to explore the reading strategies that are closely related to reading comprehension and used mainly by the ESL learners in doing reading tasks, it will consider the investigation of two reading strategies: cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. It is asserted that the cognitive strategies are closely associated with specific learning tasks and employed in the learning process such as relating the new words in mind and writing down the main idea, listing key points, or summarising the text in order to develop a clear understanding of the text. On the contrary, metacognitive strategies require planning for learning, thinking about the learning process that takes place, monitoring of one's comprehension, and evaluating learning after a completion of a task.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a mixed method design. The mixed method design is a research design that can be used to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data in order to get a holistic understanding of the research topic [16].

2.1. Sampling procedures

This study incorporates convenience sampling. It involves ninety Form 4 students from SMK Kapit, a secondary school which is located in a suburban area of Kapit, Sarawak. A sample population of eighty

students are the participants for the questionnaire. Another ten students are recruited in the semi-structured interviews.

2.2. Data collection instruments

The study uses the instruments of a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire on reading strategies in this study is adapted from the questionnaire on reading strategies [15]. It employs the 5-point Likert scale: (1) "I **never or almost never** do this.", (2) "I do this **only occasionally**.", (3) "I **sometimes** do this." (About **50%** of the time.), (4) "I **usually** do this.", and (5) "I **always or almost always** do this". Besides, a semi-structured interview protocol is designed based on the classification of language learning strategies by O'Malley and Chamot (cited in [15]).

2.3. Data analysis procedures

The analysis of collected data from the questionnaire encompasses the types and frequency of reading strategies employed by eighty Form 4 students. According to the frequency scales of strategy use [17], mean scores between 3.5 and 5.0 are regarded as high in frequency, and mean scores between 2.5 and 3.49 are viewed as medium. Mean scores between 1.0 and 2.49 are regarded as low. Apart from that, data from the interview transcripts is analysed qualitatively. The data is coded with the types of reading strategies reported by the participants in this study. Thematic analysis is done by formulating themes based on the types of reading strategies and the data is recorded on an analysis schedule.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Based on the findings from the questionnaires and interviews, the students have used various reading strategies. The use of particular reading strategies is implied as autonomous efforts to become more proficient readers.

3.1. Analysis of questionnaire
3.1.1. Cognitive strategies

In Table 1, items 1-10 represent the statements in the questionnaire related to cognitive strategies. According to the frequency scales of strategy use [17], the frequency scales of the strategies of translation, repetition and inferring are high with a mean above 3.5 and they are "usually used" by most participants. The results show that Item 5 (M=3.88, SD=1.107) is the most frequently used strategy of all the ten statements of cognitive strategies and its frequency scale is high, so it is "usually used" by the participants. The statement of Item 5 is "I translate what I have read into my first language" (Translation).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of cognitive strategies

Item	Statement (Strategy)	n	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1	I skim the text quickly to have a general understanding of the text. (Skimming)	80	2.75	.834
2	I predict the content of the upcoming passage or section while reading. (Prediction)	80	2.87	1.129
3	I analyse the relationships between the given reading text and reading tasks. (Analysing)	80	2.84	1.141
4	I attempt to understand the implicit meaning of the given text. (Inferring)	80	3.55	1.168
5	I translate what I have read into my first language. (Translation)	80	3.88	1.107
6	I summarise the important information and the main ideas of the text. (Summarising)	80	2.86	1.088
7	I relate my prior knowledge to new information so as to understand the given reading text. (Elaboration)	80	3.01	1.185
8	When the given text or questions became difficult to understand, I reread them to improve my understanding. (Repetition)	80	3.82	1.088
9	I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases according to the context of text clues. (Guessing)	80	3.26	1.199
10	I take notes when reading to help memorise useful information. (Note-taking)	80	2.96	1.335

It reflects that most of the participants usually translate what they have read in their first language in order to improve their understanding of the reading text. One possible explanation for this can be due to their limited exposure to English language and the sociocultural backgrounds of the students whose first language is

Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin or Bahasa Iban. The results show that Item 8 is the second highest strategy use with the mean of 3.82. The statement of Item 8 is "When the given text or questions became difficult to understand, I reread them to improve my understanding" (Repetition). Item 4 is also in high frequency with the mean of 3.55. The statement of Item 4 is "I attempt to understand the implicit meaning of the given text" (Inferring). Meanwhile, Item 1 (M=2.75), Item 2 (M=2.87), Item 3 (M=2.84), Item 6 (M=2.86), Item 7 (M=3.01), Item 9 (M=3.26) and Item 10 (2.96) belong to "sometimes used" and the frequency scale is medium. The respective strategies that are implied in these items are skimming, prediction, analysing, summarising, elaboration, guessing and note-taking. Item 1 is the slightly less frequently used strategy with the mean of 2.75. The standard deviation of .834 in Item 1 is the lowest one. It indicates that the degree scores in the 5-Likert scale chosen by the participants toward this statement are very close to the mean, and the use of this strategy does not vary greatly among the individuals. The statement of Item 1 is "I skim the text quickly to have a general understanding of the text".

3.1.2. Metacognitive strategies

In Table 2, items 11-20 represent the statements in the reading questionnaire related to metacognitive strategies. From the table, it can be seen that the frequency scales of most reading strategies are in medium use with a mean between 2.5 and 3.49, which are reflected in Item 12 (M=2.84), Item 13 (M=3.26), Item 14 (M=2.87), Item 15 (2.75), Item 16 (M=3.02), Item 17 (M=3.06), Item 18 (M=2.79), Item 19 (M=3.05), and Item 20 (M=2.56). The respective strategies that are implied in these items are advanced organisation, selective attention, self-management, directed attention, monitoring, and self-evaluation. Although these strategies are sometimes used by the participants, Item 13 shows the highest mean score, which is 3.26. The statement of Item 13 is "I pay attention to the questions and memorise them before reading the text" (Selective attention). It implies that some participants are aware of the importance of scrutinising the questions carefully as it may be helpful to them in performing the reading tasks. Besides, Item 12 has the mean of 2.84 and the lowest standard deviation of .961, as compared to Item 19 with the mean of 3.05 and the highest standard deviation of 1.321. It reveals that the degree scores in the 5-Likert scale chosen by the participants toward the statement of Item 12 are very close to the mean, and the use of this strategy does not vary greatly among the individuals. The statement of Item 12 is "I am aware of the objective of the reading tasks. (Advanced organisation)", and the statement of Item 19 is "I try to find out my weakness in the reading activity, and think how to improve my reading efficiency. (Self-evaluation)". On the contrary, Item 11 (M=2.36, SD=.997) is the least frequently used strategy. Its frequency scale is low. According to the frequency scales of strategy use [17], Item 11 belongs to "generally not used". The statement of Item 11 is "I set plans on how to complete the reading tasks". It indicates that the participants lack awareness of planning how they can perform their reading tasks efficaciously.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of metacognitive strategies

Item	Statement (Strategy)	n	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
11	I set plans on how to complete the reading tasks. (Advanced organisation)	80	2.36	.997
12	I am aware of the objective of the reading tasks. (Advanced organisation)	80	2.84	.961
13	I pay attention to the questions and memorise them before reading the text. (Selective attention)	80	3.26	1.028
14	I read the text quickly to find out the relevant information of the reading tasks. (Selective attention)	80	2.87	.973
15	I adjust reading speed on the basis of different reading purposes of the reading tasks. (Self-management)	80	2.75	1.258
16	I know what to read closely and what to ignore. (Directed attention)	80	3.02	1.102
17	I monitor the understanding of the reading materials and reading tasks. (Monitoring)	80	3.06	1.162
18	I am aware of my ongoing reading tasks. (Monitoring)	80	2.79	1.040
19	I try to find out my weakness in the reading activity, and think how to improve my reading efficiency. (Self-evaluation)	80	3.05	1.321
20	I evaluate the effectiveness of strategies I used while doing the reading tasks. (Self-evaluation)	80	2.56	1.123

3.2. Analysis of interview

Based on Table 3, analysis of the data gathered from the ten interviews elicits more unpredicted responses on students' perceptions on their use of reading strategies. Some strategies are similar to some of

those mentioned in the questionnaire. Those reading strategies from the interviews are analysed based on the classification of language learning strategies by O'Malley and Chamot (cited in [15]).

Table 3. Types of particular strategies reported by participants in the interviews

Category	Question	Types of Particular Strategies Reported	No. of Participants
Cognitive Strategies	i) What do you do when you encounter unfamiliar words or phrases that affect your reading comprehension?	• Resourcing	9
		• Repetition	3
		• Guessing	1
	ii) How do you use and organise important information in a reading text?	• Grouping	5
		• Note-taking	4
		• Summarising	2
		• Recombination	1
		• Elaboration	1
Metacognitive Strategies	i) How do you identify the specific details in a reading text?	• Selective attention	8
		• Monitoring	2
	ii) How do you identify the general ideas in a reading text?	• Directed attention	8
		• Self-evaluation	1
		• Monitoring	1

3.2.1. Cognitive strategies

Pertaining to the first interview question of 'What do you do when you encounter unfamiliar words or phrases that affect your reading comprehension?', the participants reported three types of cognitive strategies such as resourcing, repetition, and guessing. Nine participants indicated they use a dictionary or the Internet to understand unfamiliar words in the reading text. It is indicated that the use of printed resources such as dictionaries, word lists, grammar books, and phrase books is useful in understanding what is heard or read [17]. Three participants indicated that they use repetition to understand words, phrases or sentences in a reading text. The strategy of repeating involves reading a text more than once to understand it more completely [17]. One participant indicated the strategy of guessing the meanings of unfamiliar words or phrases according to the context of text clues.

For the second interview question of "How do you use and organise important information in a reading text?", the participants reported five types of cognitive strategies that involve grouping, note-taking, summarising, recombination and elaboration. Five participants indicated the strategy of grouping by organising information that they have read in the reading text in the form of mind maps or graphic organisers. Anderson (cited in [15]) stated that a map or sketch of linked ideas can be used to show the relationships between words and ideas in order to enhance reading comprehension. It is asserted that grouping involves classifying or reclassifying what is read into meaningful groups, thus reducing the number of irrelevant components [15]. Four participants gave fairly sufficient responses to imply that they highlight and write down key words or concepts that they have encountered in a reading text in order to improve their understanding of a reading text. Two participants indicated that they summarise some important details in the text in their own words to improve their reading comprehension. One participant reported the strategy of recombination which involves writing a meaningful sentence by combining known elements such as words and phrases. One participant reported the strategy of associating background knowledge with new concepts in order to understand a reading text.

3.2.2. Metacognitive strategies

Pertaining to the first interview question of 'How do you identify the specific details in a reading text?', the participants reported two types of metacognitive strategies such as selective attention and monitoring. Eight participants indicated that they give attention to specific details or questions, and read the text carefully to find out the relevant information of the reading tasks. Two participants implied that they monitor their understanding of a text and the reading task by rereading the text.

For the second interview question of "How do you identify the general ideas in a reading text?", the participants reported three types of metacognitive strategies such as directed attention, self-evaluation, and monitoring. Eight participants indicated that they give attention the main points, interesting topics, the titles or the headlines of a reading text in order to get the general ideas of the text. One participant implied that he assesses how well he has carried out the reading task by rereading the text and checking the answers. One

participant implied that he monitor his understanding of a reading text and the reading task by distinguishing different concepts in reading.

The findings reveal the autonomous learning efforts that are reflected in the reported reading strategies as some participants have done extensive reading that include academic materials, comics, magazines or newspapers with the use of particular reading strategies. Besides, the participants' learning efforts are also prevalent through the use of English media such as the Internet to look for meanings of unknown words or phrases in the reading texts. As reading strategies are one of the components in the research field of language learning strategies, these findings are supported by Mohamed Amin Embi's emphasis on autonomous language learning, extensive reading, and the utilisation of English media as part of language learning strategies [4]. Although the socio-affective strategies are not part of this study, some participants reported the adoption of the strategies such as discussion about their reading tasks with teachers, parents and friends to help them understand reading texts.

3.3. Summary

Based on the findings from the questionnaires and interviews, the students have used various reading strategies. The use of particular reading strategies is implied as autonomous efforts to become more proficient readers based on the reading purposes and task requirements. However, analysis of collected data from the questionnaire showed that the frequency of reported reading strategies is moderate. The results show that the frequency of using cognitive strategies used by the students is almost equal to the use of metacognitive strategies. The strategy of translation (M=3.88) is the most frequently used one in the cognitive strategy category, while the strategy of skimming with the lowest mean of 2.75 is sometimes used by the students in the cognitive strategy category. The sequences of 10 subcategories of cognitive strategies are translation, repetition, inferring, guessing, note-taking, prediction, summarising, analysing, and skimming. In the metacognitive category, the strategy of selective attention which involves paying attention to the questions and memorising them before reading the text has the highest mean of 3.26 and it is sometimes used by participants. The strategy of advanced organisation which involves planning on how to complete reading tasks has the lowest mean of 2.36 and it is generally not used by the students.

Analysis of the data gathered from the interviews elicits more unpredicted responses on students' perceptions on their use of reading strategies. Although a variety of strategies were implied in their responses, some strategies are similar to some of those mentioned in the questionnaire. The students indicated their use of cognitive strategies such as resourcing, repetition, guessing, grouping, note-taking, summarising, recombination and elaboration. They also implied in their responses that they use metacognitive strategies such as selective attention, directed attention, monitoring, and evaluation. Based on the findings, it is noteworthy that the use of particular reading strategies are associated with the students' learning efforts of becoming autonomous readers with the breadth of extensive reading, their reading purposes and task requirements.

4.   CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, there have been various reported reading strategies employed by the students in reading comprehension. It is important that language teachers should be made aware that reading strategies are important for students' language learning, and thus students should be exposed to various types of reading strategies that can be practically used in reading. This is also prevalent in the literature which asserted that it is more effective for students to reach their learning goals if they have a higher frequency of employing a variety of strategies in their reading process [18],[19].

In light of the present development and needs in education, one of the pedagogical implications that can be drawn from the findings of the present study is that language teachers play a vital role in exposing students to various reading strategies thereby allowing students to decide on strategies that are appropriately aligned with their reading purposes and task requirements. Instead of facilitating students' reading comprehension, the teachers can integrate the use of reading strategies in the materials and the classroom activities. They can train students to use appropriate reading strategies which will enable them to learn English language more efficiently. This corroborates Parilah M. Shah et al.'s assertion that educators play an important role in employing appropriate pedagogical techniques that can help learners enhance their second language reading proficiency [9].

As reading strategies are part of the research field of language learning strategies, the findings of the present study echoed Mohamed Amin Embi's emphasis on autonomous language learning, extensive reading, and the incorporation of English media in language learning [4]. It is important that teachers should be aware of the need to delegate more responsibility to the students in their reading strategy use and think of feasible ways to help students become autonomous learners. In the present study, most of the reported reading

strategies employed by the students are related to their autonomous learning efforts to improve their reading. If teachers can make students responsible for their own learning, then they can entrust the students with the responsibility of practising various reading strategies outside the classroom. The approaches to promoting autonomy may draw attention to the utilisation of technology or other resources, the learners themselves or decision-making in the learning context [20].

Besides, extensive reading plays an essential role in reading strategy use and the improvement of students' reading comprehension. The findings of the interviews imply students' initiatives to read English reading materials which are not solely for academic purposes but also reading for general knowledge. The students not only read academic materials but also magazines, comics and newspapers. Thus, language teachers can establish a class library programme by which students can easily gain access to a variety of interesting English reading materials [4].

Equally important, the role of English media such as the Internet need to be emphasised in English reading lessons as it is a useful source of input to the learning of English language. The present study reports the use of the Internet aids students' reading comprehension as they able to find unknown words and phrases easily. The findings of the interviews is strengthened by Mohamed Amin Embi's assertion that language teachers need to think of ways to utilise the English media in language learning [4]. One possible way is to establish a computer lab where Internet-based reading lessons can be conducted efficiently. Hsieh and Dwyer's study asserted that web-based or online learning environments can be established with the integration of reading strategy use to cater to students' distinct learning styles for processing information [21].

In this present study, it is worth noting that students with mixed abilities use different reading strategies to understand a reading text. The integration of reading strategy instruction in the language curriculum is important to promote reading proficiency among second language learners of differing abilities [9]. Thus, teachers need to be more flexible in their pedagogical selection and incorporate various reading strategies in the language classroom so that students will be able to identify and draw upon particular strategies relevant to their reading purposes and task requirements.

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