

THE INTERACTIVE ROLES OF LEXICAL
KNOWLEDGE AND READING STRATEGIES ON
READING COMPREHENSION PERFORMANCE
AMONG EOP LEARNERS AT UITM TERENGGANU

BY

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Language
Studies

Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human
Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia

JANUARY 2020

ABSTRACT

The current study is an investigation into the interactive roles of lexical knowledge and reading strategies on reading comprehension performance of EOP learners at UiTM Terengganu. It determines whether the lexical knowledge or the reading strategies contribute to L2 reading comprehension. It examines whether there is a relationship among the three main variables. In order to accomplish this, the Survey of Reading Strategy (SORS) (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002), the Vocabulary Levels Test (Smith, 2000), a writing test and a reading comprehension test were administered to 70 fourth-semester students from the Public Administration course. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the respondents' performance on these three tests and their reported reading strategies used as well as to assess the relationship between the three main variables of this study. As a whole, the respondents reported using most of the reading strategies with high and moderate frequencies. They also reported that they frequently use the global strategies. Apart from that, it is found that, the word mastery level of the EOP students of UiTM Terengganu is only 2,000 word families, which is far below the minimum level required for the tertiary level of education. There is no correlation found between the reading strategies used and the reading comprehension achievement of the respondents. On the other hand, a statistically significant relationship ($r=.74$, $p<0.01$) was found between the participants' vocabulary size and reading comprehension performance. The study concludes with some theoretical and pedagogical implications as well as recommendations for further research.

ملخص البحث

يستقصي البحث الأدوار التفاعلية للمعرفة المعجمية (الكلمات) والإستراتيجيات فيما يتعلق بأداء القراءة بلغة أجنبية وفهمها واستيعابها لدى متعلمي "برنامج الفرص التعليمية" في جامعة UITM ترينجانو، وقد اعتمد البحث الاستقصائي لإستراتيجية القراءة SORS، واختبار مستويات المفردات، واختبار الكتابة، واختبار فهم القراءة واستيعابها لدى عينة من 70 طالباً في الفصل الدراسي الرابع من دورة الإدارة العامة، واستخدم الإحصاء الوصفي لبيان أداء المشاركين في الاختبارات الثلاثة وفق تقارير إستراتيجيات القراءة الخاصة بهم، ومن ثم؛ تقييم العلاقة بين المتغيرات الرئيسة الثلاثة للبحث، وقد ذُكر في التقارير أن المشاركين استخدموا معظم إستراتيجيات القراءة بتكرار ما بين كثير ومتوسط، ولا سيما الإستراتيجيات العالمية، ومن أهم النتائج أن متوسط عدد الكلمات التي أتقنها المشاركون بلغ 2000 كلمة متشابهة (من الجذر نفسه)، وهو أقل بكثير من الحد الأدنى المطلوب في مستوى التعليم العالي، وكذا لم يُتبيّن أي ارتباط بين الإستراتيجيات المستخدمة ومؤهلات المشاركين في فهم القراءة واستيعابها، في حين ظهرت علاقة ذات دلالة إحصائية ($r=0.74$ ، $p>0.01$) بين عدد الكلمات لدى المشاركين وأداء القراءة وفهمها واستيعابها؛ إضافة إلى بعض الآثار النظرية والتربوية والتوصيات لإجراء مزيد من البحوث في هذا المجال.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*This thesis is dedicated to my dearest mother, Hjh. D.Zakiah Hj. Ma'soom; my father,
Hj. Md. Yasin Mohd Yusof; my husband, Mohd Azri b. Rahim; my son, Muhammad
Rizq Qayyum and my little princess, Siti Sara Qhaleeda*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All glory to Allah, the Almighty, whose Grace and Mercies have been with me throughout my research. Despite many challenges, His Mercies and Blessings on me ease the herculean task of completing this thesis. I always have faith in Him that He will give me health and strength to complete my study. Alhamdulillah.

I am most indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie, for her invaluable guidance, courage and endless words of wisdom. Despite her commitments, she took time to listen and attend to me whenever possible. I am also grateful to my co-supervisor, Dr. Ainul Azmin Md. Zamin, whose support and cooperation contributed to the outcome of this work. I am deeply grateful to En. Jamri b. Awang Besar from the Faculty of Science and Mathematics, UiTM Terengganu, for sharing his expertise in statistical analysis.

My special thanks and appreciation go to my beloved husband who has never failed to give support and encouragement throughout this long journey. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to my dearest parents and siblings for being there every time I needed them the most. Without their *duas* and constant moral support, it would be impossible for me to be able to reach this stage.

I sincerely thank all my participants, colleagues and the institution for giving me great co-operation especially during the data collecting process. I also could not have made it this far without those who were indirectly involved.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EOP	English for Occupational Purposes
ESL	English as a Second Language
L2	Second language
SORS	Survey of Reading Strategies
VLT	Vocabulary Level Test
UiTM	Mara University of Technology

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Islam has placed great importance on the process of seeking knowledge. This is because Islam encourages humankind to seek knowledge in order to holistically cultivate and develop one's potentials including physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual and emotional. One of the activities which provides a great source of knowledge is reading.

Read! In the name of your Lord, who has created (all that exists), Has created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous, who has taught (the writing), by the pen (Al Alaq, p. 597).

As can be seen above, it is clear from the first few verses of Al-Quran, which were revealed to us through our Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon Him) that Islam strictly teaches its followers to read as a way to expand knowledge.

In the era of technology in which reading sources become ever-increasing and can take place anywhere, readers need to equip themselves with appropriate reading skills and strategies. This is crucial as most readers are continuously exposed to endless information everyday and thus, demands them to be more sensitive and critical during their reading processes. Going through a well-planned reading process allows these readers to independently comprehend a variety of texts. As a result, they will be able to maximize their reading performance.

In the academic field, reading is considered as a key source of comprehensible input and a skill that is most required to be mastered in language learning. It helps to familiarize L2 readers with the different forms of contexts, sentences, vocabularies,

and grammar. Nevertheless, many ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students who are at the tertiary level are unprepared for the reading demands placed upon them (Munsakorn, 2012). This is worrying because most of the time, these students need to read a large volume of academic materials in English. This involves a number of complex activities such as understanding and remembering ideas, identifying and selectively attending to important information, monitoring comprehension and learning, synthesizing information as well as critically evaluating a text in the academic context (Tengku & Nooreny, 2012).

Realizing the critical role of reading comprehension in language learning, reading researchers such as Rumelhart (1977), Goodman (1967) as well as Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson (1985) suggested many different definitions and descriptions of this process. Reading comprehension was viewed as a separate and static compilation of skills until the middle to late 1970s. Since then, there have been an increasing number of new frameworks being introduced to study and explain reading process. For example, Sweet and Snow (2003) propose that reading comprehension is a multidimensional process which involves the reader, the text and the activity during which the reader extracts information from the words and creates meaning at the same time.

In order to facilitate the reading comprehension process, some reading models were introduced and applied. Among the three prominent ones are the bottom-up (Gough, 1972), top-down (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1971) and interactive models (Rumelhart, 1977, 1980). According to Reutzel and Cooter (2013), the bottom-up model conceptualizes that learning to read progresses from learning the parts of language (letters), to understanding the whole text (meaning). A reader begins to

process a written text with phonological recognition of individual letters, followed by the recognition of the individual words and larger units (phrases, clauses and sentences). However, this reading model ignores other contributing factors towards effective reading process. These include the context and purposes of reading as well as readers' schemata. On the other hand, the top-down model begins when a reader associates knowledge, experiences and emotions to the text in order to obtain meaning (Farrell, 2012). Compared to the bottom-up model, the top-down model expects an active role from the reader. The third reading model, namely, the interactive model, is widely accepted and applied due to its effectiveness in helping both first language (L1) and second language (L2) readers to comprehend texts. This model was initially developed by David Rumelhart (1977) and Keith Stanovich (1980) which integrates both bottom-up and top-down reading processes. From the perspective of the interactive theory, comprehension involves the interaction between the reader and the characteristics of the text and the ability to combine various skills and components in the reading process (Wilson & Smetana, 2011). Specifically, this reading model takes into account language factors and reader variables, such as background knowledge and prediction, during the comprehension process. Hence, the interactive model is the most effective in both L1 and L2 reading contexts compared to the bottom-up and top-down reading models.

Based on the interactive view, this study simultaneously examines the relationship between language proficiency and reading problems in order to analyze whether they promote or impede L2 reading. In particular, it explores the tri-dimensional relationship between vocabulary size, reading strategies and reading comprehension of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) learners in Mara University of Technology (UiTM) Terengganu.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the most controversial issues that has been widely debated by reading researchers is whether poor second language reading performance is attributed to reading problems or language problems. According to Al-Nujaidi (2003), language problems are related to one's second language proficiency while reading problems are connected to one's first language reading ability and strategies.

Most researchers such as Robinson (2005), Read (2000), and Naggy and Scott (2000) agree that vocabulary knowledge is one of the main predictors of second language reading proficiency. This must not be taken lightly by both teachers and ESL learners as most studies conducted, particularly in Malaysia, show that ESL readers frequently reported that the lack of sufficient word understanding as one of the major barriers to comprehension (Debbita, 2016, Roselan & Shima, 2013). Similarly, a study done by Ahmad Azman, Rafizah, Mohamad Fadhili, Azaharee and Abdul Rashid (2009) involving Malaysian tertiary students enrolled in various academic programmes revealed that a majority of them performed poorly in the Passive Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 1990) as well as the Controlled Active Vocabulary Test (Laufer & Nation, 1995). Based on their findings, these researchers concluded that despite more than a decade of experiencing formal exposure to English language, Malaysian tertiary students still lack sufficient vocabulary knowledge and thus, experience difficulties in understanding English texts. Even worse, it may hinder learners from achieving mastery of the target language.

Besides vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies are also another essential element that must be put into consideration in comprehension processes. In their study, Noli, Sabariah, Sharifah and Roslan (2013) found that certain reading strategies need to be used to construct meaning effectively from any given written texts.

Some examples of the commonly used strategies are questioning, using mental imagery, summarizing and making inferences. Nonetheless, some students in Malaysia are unaware of or do not have any effective strategies to help them deal with L2 texts. This is because the teaching of English language in Malaysia tends to pay less or no attention to the use of effective reading strategies and focuses more on grammar learning (Sementin & Maniam, 2015). Hence, if the teachers do not teach reading strategies to their students, the degree of frequency of use is quite limited (Majidi, Shakirah, Krishnasamy & Issa, 2009). Due to this, reading in English becomes an unnecessary 'burden' done only to carry out the activities during the English lesson.

While there is a growing number of studies by researchers such as Amua-Sekyi, Nti and Atiah (2015) and Karakoç and Köse (2017) focusing separately on how either reading or language problem(s) may affect the ESL reading comprehension process, there is still very limited number of research conducted to examine how these factors actually interact. It is believed that if second language readers are exposed to the use of effective reading strategies, yet have poor lexical and background knowledge, a successful comprehension process may still be challenging (Jahankohan & Shahrokhi, 2014). Thus, second language readers must be able to simultaneously have adequate lexical knowledge and proper reading strategies to enable a productive reading process.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the relationships between the students' lexical knowledge and their reading strategies in their reading comprehension process. This study will also describe the students' perceived reading strategies and provide

estimation of their receptive vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the examination of lexical knowledge and reading strategies is important to this study in order to identify which variables contribute to the significant differences in reading comprehension.

Specifically, this study is designed to meet the following objectives:

1. To describe perceived reading strategies of Mara University of Technology (UiTM) Terengganu students in EOP classes when reading academic texts.
2. To provide estimation of second language(L2) learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge.
3. To assess the English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) students' reading performance.
4. To investigate the relationship among the three variables, namely, reading comprehension, reading strategies, and vocabulary size, in the ESL reading process.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived reading strategies employed by UiTM Terengganu students in EOP classes?
2. What is the vocabulary size of the ESL learners?
3. What is the reading comprehension performance of the UiTM Terengganu students in EOP classes?
4. Is there a relationship between the students' perceived reading strategies, vocabulary size and their reading comprehension performance?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the central objective of this research is to help L2 readers to assess, learn, and understand their reading ability. As this study provides estimation of students' vocabulary size and shows the preferences of their reading strategies, the L2 readers will have the opportunity to better understand their reading problems. As a result, it will be easier for them to find the best ways to improve their L2 reading abilities. Simultaneously, this will help increase learners' participation as well as responsibility for their learning processes. More importantly, it can help promote learner autonomy among Malaysian university students.

Secondly, based on pedagogical perspective, the findings of this study will be able to facilitate language teachers to better understand how lexical knowledge and reading strategies play prominent roles during L2 comprehension activities. It is imperative for all language teachers to be familiar with their students' vocabulary knowledge and reading strategies as these might enhance teaching techniques and improve language learning strategies. Furthermore, since this study provides estimation of the ESL learners' vocabulary size and reading abilities, the findings will enlighten language teachers on the reading and vocabulary needs of the ESL learners.

Besides, from the data gathered, the current study may also become a reference for programme or course developers, particularly in universities in Malaysia in designing appropriate reading courses that better suit the reading ability of the students. This is essential as the main objective of reading activities among ESL learners should always emphasise on developing their reading strategies.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study had several limitations which need to be addressed. First, this study investigated only 70 university students from UiTM Terengganu who are enrolled in the EOP course. These participants were selected by means of non-probability sampling. Babbie (2010) states that this type of sampling method prevents a broad and adequate generalisation over a population and thus, the findings of this study are not generalized.

Secondly, this study investigated the ESL students' vocabulary size and reading strategies in reading comprehension process. However, it should be noted that these are not the only reading variables which may affect their L2 reading comprehension process. Additionally, this study does not provide any specific details on vocabulary acquisition problems which these students may have experienced.

Finally, the current study employed quantitative methods while examining EFL learners' perceived use of reading strategies. Its findings are not based on any in-depth examination of reading strategies employed by the UiTM Terengganu students. Hence, it is hoped that this study may pave the way for future qualitative studies as they can help language teachers to better understand their students' reading problems and needs.

1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

This section presents the operational definition of the main terms used in this study including vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies and reading comprehension performance.

1.7.1 Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary knowledge refers to the readers' ability to use previously learned or understood word knowledge to facilitate acquisition of meaning from the printed materials read (Huang, 2006). In this study, the term "vocabulary knowledge" is used interchangeably with "lexical knowledge". The students' lexical knowledge was measured by using two sets of tests which are the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Schmitt, 2000) and a writing test. During the VLT, the participants' vocabulary knowledge were tested in three separate sections wherein each consists of three different word levels (2000, 3000 word levels and academic vocabulary). The students' vocabulary size was then determined based on their total scores in this test. The second test which was used to assess the students' vocabulary level was a MUET writing test. In this test, the students' lexical performance was measured based on the word choices and the use of vocabularies.

1.7.2 Reading Strategies

Reading strategies refer to any processes that readers are conscious of executing with the intention of constructing meaning from written texts (Noli et al., 2012). In this study, the term "reading strategies" is referred to as deliberate actions that readers actively employ while reading in order to monitor their own reading processes and to avoid comprehension failures, and hence, accomplish a reading task. In this study, the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) designed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) was used as an instrument to assess participants' type and frequency of reading strategy use. It consists of general inclination statements about three types of reading strategies: global, support and problem- solving strategies.

1.7.3 Reading Comprehension Performance

Reading comprehension performance is linked to a few processes such as understanding, gaining meaning and interpreting texts in which readers are able to develop while reading (Wooley, 2011). In this study, this term is associated with interactive process of deriving meanings from a text in which one's reading performance is influenced by a few reading variables such as lexical knowledge and reading strategies. In this study, the students' reading performance was measured by a score they obtained in a reading comprehension test which was taken from a MUET reading test.

1.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented and discussed the background of the study. It highlighted the importance of reading comprehension especially in the academic setting. It also introduced three prominent reading models which include the bottom-up, top down and interactive models. In addition, this chapter also provided its explanation on the definitions and concepts of the two reading variables involved in this study, namely lexical knowledge and reading strategies. Other than that, the statement of the problem was also discussed as this study set to determine the relationship between lexical knowledge, reading comprehension and reading performance. This was followed by the purpose, objectives and research questions. Next, the chapter also included the significance of the study which highlighted how this study may contribute to reading research and pedagogical fields in the future. Additionally, a few limitations of this study were also mentioned. Last but not least, the operational definitions of the three

main terms used in this study (vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies and reading comprehension performance) were also explained.