CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In this modern, sophisticated world and with the advance of high technology, we are overloaded with reading materials that come not only in the form of books, magazines or newspapers but e-mails, faxes and even SMS (short message service). Our everyday life revolves around reading, be it reading the daily newspapers, television sub titles, menus, directories, food labels and the list is endless. A person would be considered handicapped if he is without the ability to read as reading is ‘a life-support system’ in everyday life. With regard to this, Smith (1994:2) states that:

“Reading and learning to read are essentially meaningful activities; that they are not passives and mechanical but purposeful and rational, dependent on the prior knowledge and expectations of the reader (or learner)”

This chapter will look at the importance of reading in the language development of non-native learners of English particularly at the tertiary level and present a case for verbal reports as a possible method of assessing reading and Strategy Training in developing awareness of reading comprehension strategies. The significance and limitations of this study are also included.

1.2 The Role of Reading in Language Development

Reading is not only essential in our daily activities but it is also a powerful tool especially in the area of language development. If we consider the study of English as a
Foreign Language around the world – reading is the main reason why students learn the language (Carell, 1989).

Reading development has evolved from over time; from a ‘passive’ to ‘active’ process and then to an ‘interactive’ process. Recent reading research with ESL and natives students has demonstrated that reading is more than ‘active’; it is ‘interactive’ (Carell, 1990; Eskey & Grabe, 1988; Swaffar, 1988).

Reading used to centre on the ‘reading text’ and not the ‘reader’. Now however, the ‘interaction’ between the text and the readers is present. Researchers believe that as the readers interact with the text, they are able to relate their experiences and background to the text that they are reading. It is viewed as such because the reading process involves the interaction between the readers and the text and an efficient reader is one that can relate to the text that he is reading. Cohen (1990:75) is of the opinion that:

‘Reading is a dynamic interaction between the writer and the reader in which the reader creates meaning from the text by retaining newly acquired knowledge, accessing recorded and stored knowledge, and attending to the writer’s clues as the meaning intended for the text’

Though current research in L2 reading highlights reading as an interactive process, the situation is vice versa in Malaysia as schools or tertiary institutions still give emphasis to the importance of product over process in the teaching and learning of reading. Reading comprehension is seen as a product measured by questions seeking the ‘right’ answers rather than examining the thought process involved in arriving at those answers (Osman, 1986; Jaganathan 1992). This perception however needs to be changed as the aim should be why some students succeed while others fail to comprehend texts. On
this basis, the overall approach to reading comprehension instruction should be based on the principle of helping learners make the transition from reader-dependence to reader-independence. The teacher’s job on the other hand, should be to evaluate and monitor the thinking process of learners in response to what they have read.

More recently, some emphases have been put on the reader and reader’s background, especially culture-specific knowledge and experiences, as these are relevant to successful reading and reading comprehension. Goodman as cited by Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984:50), noted that ‘the proficient reader must draw on his or her experiential conceptual background in order to supply a semantic component to the message’, and he concluded that ‘learning to read is easier when the cultural background is familiar and students can draw on cultural information in the decoding process.’ In addition, Alderson and Urquhart’s (1984) study has found that topic familiarity is most often a greater predictor of comprehension ability than are text-based linguistic factors (Bernhardt, 1991:34). With this in mind, the researcher has chosen reading passages that are of recognizable context for the Dayak learners in this study to investigate whether the students are able to comprehend the text better when given passages of topic familiarity.
1.3 The Importance of Reading in English as a Second Language (ESL)

Context

The ability to read is acknowledged to be the most stable and durable of the Second Language modalities (Rivers, 1981) as cited in Bernhard (1991:1). This is because reading is considered as the most cost-effective of the second language skills that are taught throughout the world. Grabe (1991:375-376) asserts that, 'of all the four English language skills; reading is probably used most by ESL students in the academic context.'

Reading in the second language (L2) is different from reading in the first language because even though second language learners may already have basic literacy in their native language, they still need a certain level of proficiency in the target language to avoid comprehension 'break down' (Osman, 1986). Furthermore, the extent of prior knowledge exploited also determines the level of L2 comprehension of the text (Johnson, 1982). Reading researchers view that L2 readers have to concentrate more to bottom-up process than the L1 readers since their restricted linguistic ability will make it more difficult for them to use contextual clues that L1 readers use (Eskey, 1988).

It is without doubt that students in secondary schools and higher learning institutions in Malaysia may have problems in comprehending what they read. Although they have basic knowledge of the English language, their understanding may be hampered because of poor comprehension. In view of this, there is a need for more research into 'how second language learners comprehend text', for example, an investigation into the process engaged in reading and the strategies employed by the readers as they attempt to extend meaning from text written in second language (Osman, 1986).
In consideration of the fact that understanding the learners' reading process and strategies is fundamental in ESL context, the Malaysian English Teachers Association (MELTA) has organized a national conference on reading from May 24th to 25th 2002. This conference, discussed among others, matters pertinent to reading strategies and extensive reading.

1.4 **The Importance of ESL Reading among Students at Tertiary Level**

Reading is renowned as a key to success in higher education. Likewise, it is an undeniable fact that undergraduates at tertiary level spend most of their study time on reading. Students at this level deal with massive amounts of academic reading materials in English. In other words, students have to deal with complex vocabularies and structures presented in English language reference books or articles throughout their course. Students begin to have problems when they are required to cope with texts generally prepared for advanced native speakers of English. One of the problems the students have is they are shocked by the sudden requirement to take on a reading burden that they have not been adequately prepared for, that is, the transition from ordinary classroom English language materials to academic English (EAP).

Prior to that, there is a need to develop the students' ability to read and comprehend in English, particularly at tertiary level, as the reference books and journals that they have to read are written in English. Furthermore, university students need to have efficient reading skills to comprehend a large amount of materials both in studies at university and at home (Dubin & Eskey, 1986).
This study attempts to investigate students' perception of learning strategies, especially reading strategies, their awareness as well as use of reading strategies and how students process and monitor their comprehension of reading texts. It also makes a comparison of strategies employed by high and low achievers in processing texts. In addition, it introduces Strategy Training as a platform to equip learners to become strategic readers. The students involved in this study are Dayak students who are in their first year Diploma studies in Uitm Samarahan Campus in Sarawak. It is hoped that this study will shed some light on Dayak students' reading strategies.

1.5 Rationale of the Study

The need to be able to read in English is especially felt at the tertiary level as students are confronted with extensive amount of academic texts in English. L2 students need to acquire effective reading strategies to get access to information and simultaneously to gain better comprehension.

There are a growing number of studies done in Malaysia in the area of Reading Strategies. The prominent area of reading research is comprehension strategy training. This encourages the researcher to explore more into this interesting yet challenging area.

The focus of the study is on Dayak learners' reading comprehension strategies which reflect how Dayak learners process and comprehend reading texts in English. The motivation for this study came from the current emphasis on reading strategy awareness and strategy training. I have chosen the area of reading comprehension as the reading
component takes about 50% of the overall marks for testing requirement in the Uitm BEL100 English Proficiency Test.

Dayak learners are especially selected for this study due to three major factors. Firstly, there is no study done on Dayak learners specifically in the area of reading strategies at present and secondly, as the researcher belongs to the Dayak community, she would be capable of understanding the subjects as an insider. Lastly, Dayak learners have a poor command of English language and it is hoped that the findings of this research would enlighten us on the specific area of this study.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The aims of this descriptive study are as follows:

i. to show that research in reading strategy use is important because it creates awareness about the way learners manage their learning. This knowledge is important in helping students become better readers.

ii. to identify various reading strategies employed by Dayak students.

iii. to compare reading strategies employed by the high achieving Dayak students and the low achieving Dayak students.

iv. to expose effective reading strategies employed by the high achieving Dayak students compared to the low achieving Dayak students.
v. to train the low achieving Dayak students in selected reading strategies that would aid them upon completing their reading tasks.

1.7 Research Questions

This study will try to answer following questions:

i. What are the effective reading strategies for developing students' reading comprehension among Dayak students?

ii. What are the differences between learning strategies employed by the high achieving Dayak students and the low achieving Dayak students?

iii. To what extent does strategy training help students improve their comprehension as they use the strategies in their reading tasks?

1.8 Definition of Terms

i. Dayak Students

The term 'Dayak' refers to the native people in Sarawak. They are divided into two sub-groups known as the Sea Dayak or also known as the Ibans, and the Land Dayak or Bidayuhs. The Dayak students involved in this study come mostly from the rural areas of Sarawak such as Sri Aman, Kapit, Bintulu and Serian. The majority of the students come from the middle or low-income group. Their parents are mostly farmers or labourers and a small
number work as police or army personnel. The English language is regarded as a foreign language for these Dayak students, after their mother tongue and Bahasa Malaysia.

ii. **BEL100**

The BEL100 is the standardized Preparatory English Proficiency course particularly designed for all the courses in the first semester Diploma students in Uitm. The students are given six contact hours of English lessons per week. BEL100 covers the major aspects of Grammar, Reading, Writing and Speaking and prepares the students for the Mainstream English courses in Universiti Teknologi MARA. (Uitm). The main objectives of the course are to identify and rectify the common errors made by students in grammar, reading, writing and speaking.

The BEL100 Reading component aims to develop and improve students’ fundamental reading skills through using a dictionary, skimming and scanning, using reference words and contextual clues to aid comprehension and responding to WH-questions using complete sentences.

iii. **Mara University of Technology (Uitm)**

Uitm is one of the public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. There are a few Uitm Campuses scattered across Malaysia. The Dayak students in this research come from Uitm Samarahan Campus in Sarawak. This campus is rather unique as almost half of the student population pursuing their Diploma in Uitm, are the Dayaks.
iv. Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension or Comprehension is not a function of understanding every word but rather of developing strategies for selecting and identifying multiple verbal and non-verbal cues, strategies essential in both oral and written communication (Swaffar, 1988).

Reading Comprehension is the process of relating new or incoming information to information already stored in memory. It is an active process of matching or associating; it is not one of breaking complexes of language into simpler ones but is rather one of taking multiple units and building them into conceptual representations.

v. Metacognition

According to David Cooper (1986), metacognition refers to the knowledge and control that students have over their own thinking and learning activities. It appears to involve two basic components:

a. awareness of the process and skills needed to complete a task successfully,

b. the ability to tell whether one is performing a task correctly and to make corrections during the task if needed; this process is termed cognitive monitoring.
vi. Schema Theory

Schema is defined as 'the readers' previously acquired knowledge or background knowledge and previously acquired background knowledge structures are called schemata' (Carrell, 1984). Schemata serve several functions (McNeil, 1984: 8-9):

a. they are the slots for assimilating additional information
b. they help the readers see what is important
c. they permit inferential elaboration
d. they aid in summarizing by helping the reader separate important from less important ideas
e. they aid in memory

vii. Good Readers

Good readers or also identified as 'proficient readers', employ better reading strategies compared to less proficient readers. They use strategies interactively in reading (Carell, 1983b; Zamel, 1983). They are also flexible; they use and reuse different strategies as the moment calls them. Grabe (Grabe, 1986) gave a comprehensive definition of good readers:

‘they skim some texts or sections of text, they scan, they read in chunks rather than word for word, they note cohesion markers, they guess vocabulary meaning from content, they read fast.’
viii. Poor Readers

Less proficient readers or poor readers read too locally (Cohen, et al., 1979). These less skilled readers fail to link incoming text to previous text and they are unskilled in rapid text processing in L2. Due to this, they depend a lot on bottom-up strategies to decode or extract the message assumed to exist in the text (Carrell, 1988b; Hosenfeld, 1984; McLaughlin 1987).

ix. Reading Skills

Reading involves various different skills. According to Mary Spratt (1985), the following are some of the main reading skills required by the general EFL or ESL students:

- understanding the meaning of punctuation
- understanding the meaning of vocabulary items
- understanding the grammar of a sentence
- recognising the organization of a text
- making inferences
- reading for detail
- skimming for gist
- scanning for specific information
x. **Reading Strategies**

The term 'reading strategy' refers to the numerous problem-solving behaviours readers employ in order to understand texts: e.g., skimming, thinking about title, rereading, and guessing word meanings from context. Studies done on reading strategies in the 1980s emerged as researchers found that learners lack reading strategies that could help them cope with the target language (English) texts, books and articles.

x. **Learning Strategy Training**

Strategy Training or Learner Training explicitly teaches students how to apply language learning and language use strategies, can enhance students' efforts to reach language program goals because it encourages students to find their own pathways to success, and thus it promotes learner autonomy and self-direction (Cohen, 1998).

Strategy Training comes into the picture as researchers see the need to train students in effective learning strategies that could help them in their learning process. It is also proven that Strategy Training produces 'strategic learners' or 'strategic readers'. Strategy Training also can help weak learners overcome many difficulties that they face in language learning. Research has shown that training of learning strategies can help learners improve their language study (Danny & Murphy, 1986).
1.9 Limitations of the Study

i. The sample size was small, consisting of initially 58 first semester Diploma Dayak students for the background survey and pre-test. The number was later reduced to 24 students as these are the low achievers Dayak students identified through the pre-test results, to undergo the strategy training sessions. The Questionnaires on Reading Strategies, SILL and Think Aloud Protocol only focus on 8 students, not representing the whole Dayak students.

ii. The sample came from Uitm Samarahan Campus. The sample is not representative of Dayak students studying in Higher Learning Institution (IPTA) across Malaysia generally. Furthermore the sample came from Dayak students in particular courses - Diploma in Accountancy, Diploma in Business Studies, Diploma in Banking and Diploma in Public Administration.

iii. The study was conducted within a given time period, that is in January and February 2002, at the beginning of the semester. There were also semester break and Chinese New Year holidays in these months. Given more time, the students would have had time to be more familiar with the use of reading strategies and think aloud protocol.

iv. Students failed to give their commitment during the training due to constraints such as clashes in the timetable with extra curricular activities,
quizzes and other personal matters. In addition, students who attended the training mostly felt drained by the time the class was operated so they could not give their full attention during the Strategy Training class.

v. The study involves self-report data, the interpretations of which may or may not reflect the total reality. The limitation of self-report data is discussed in Chapter Three.

vi. The strategy training class could only be conducted three times, one session per day; two hours per session, within the period of one month and a half.
The time allotted for the Strategy Training class was at night, 8-10 p.m. as the students are having classes from 8 am to 6 p.m. every day, from Monday to Friday.

1.10 Significance of the Study

This study will offer insights into many issues in the research of reading strategies of Dayak students. Firstly, it looks into the Dayak students' reading process and awareness of the different reading comprehension strategies that they employed. This awareness will help the Dayak students to understand their learning or reading process better.

It will also try to observe how good and poor Dayak students differ in their use of strategies to monitor and control their comprehension and whether the poor readers would benefit from the good readers by revealing the reading strategies employed by good readers; the secret of their fellow course mates' success.
Furthermore, it attempts to demonstrate that teachers' understanding of the comprehension strategies that the poor learners employed would assist them in training the poor learners in the reading strategies that could help them. It also helps teachers to be sensitive to the variability of reading comprehension strategies that the students generally use so that they can tailor their lesson plan or reading tasks according to students' employed strategies.

Finally, it will focus on Language Learning Strategy Training to provide Dayak students with the training of reading strategies that will aid them in reading and at the same time expose the students to the available strategy options open for them to improve their reading in the target language. It will also explore how Strategy Training class affects the students reading comprehension performances positively based on the results of the pre test and post test.

In short, the study aims to increase the awareness of both the teachers and students on the nature of the reading process as well as in monitoring this complex process. With increased awareness comes the shift in the role of teachers as facilitators and students as independent learners.