

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Research findings from numerous studies have indicated that cognitive strategy instruction can enhance learners' reading comprehension ability. However, despite these findings, many teachers still spurn strategy instruction in their reading or other content classrooms (Harris & Pressley, 1990). Additional evidence to support this view comes from Durkin's (1978, 1979) classroom observations which revealed that teachers spend more teaching time asking questions to check comprehension rather than engaging in direct comprehension instruction. It must be emphasized that this situation persists despite the knowledge that students do not, normally, automatically acquire the important cognitive and metacognitive skills necessary for successful comprehension (Irvin, 1990).

It is also stressed in the literature that inferential comprehension is much more difficult than literal comprehension, especially for young learners (Hansen, 1981; Hansen & Pearson, 1983; and Wilson, 1979). This difficulty is attributed to the fact that inferential comprehension requires the reader to fill in missing information by connecting implied propositions in the text (Holmes, 1987) while literal comprehension, on the other hand, merely involves the comprehension of explicitly stated information.

There is, however, ample evidence in the literature which suggests that children can be trained through a direct instruction paradigm to increase their inferential comprehension and that they can apply this ability across the curriculum (Carr, Dewitz, & Patberg, 1983; Dewitz, Carr, Patberg, 1987; Hansen, 1981; Hansen & Pearson, 1983).

Research in reading instruction is useful because it can help to identify effective reading strategies that can be adopted by classroom practitioners to enhance the reading comprehension capability of their students. It is important that a set of effective strategies whose capacity for improving comprehension be identified through research in light of the active role that is ascribed to readers. Readers, especially young and poor readers, need to acquire these strategies so that they can actively interface with the text.

1.2 Rationale

The importance of inferencing in the reading process is well documented in the literature. For instance, Davey & Macready (1985) are of the view that it plays a 'central role' while Winne, Graham, & Prock (1993) assert that it is the 'cornerstone' of effective reading. There are scholars who go to the extreme of asserting that even the simplest type of literal comprehension requires the reader to draw inferences (Samuels & Kamil in Winne, Graham, & Prock, 1993). Others such as Irwin & Baker (1989) assert that the ability of a reader to draw inferences is crucial to making sense of the text because written texts are never completely explicit. They suggest, therefore, that it is the inferencing ability of the reader which enables him to fill in the missing information in order to make the text more coherent and meaningful.

Carrell, Pharis and Liberto (1989) assert that though much research on strategy training has been conducted in first language reading, relatively little of such research has been done in a second language context, particularly, in second language reading.

Additionally, there is a dearth of information in the current literature on the effectiveness of a direct instruction paradigm for the teaching of inferencing in ESL reading classrooms. In order to bridge this gap, the present study will focus on the teaching of inferencing to adolescent Malaysian ESL learners through a direct instruction paradigm.

Since the inferencing skill is widely acknowledged as being crucial to the reading process, it is only sensible, therefore, to heed the call by researchers that it be taught. Furthermore, there are studies that demonstrate that inferencing taught through a direct instruction paradigm help improve the inferential comprehension of young as well as poor readers (Carr, Dewitz, Patberg, 1983; Dewitz, Carr, & Patberg, 1987; Hansen, 1981; Hansen & Pearson, 1983; and Poindexter & Prescott, 1986). Little evidence, however, is available of its efficacy in ESL contexts.

The findings of these studies serve as an impetus for the present study. The present study will provide insights to teachers of English in the lower forms (Forms 1 - 3) as to whether instruction in inference making, based on a direct instruction paradigm, is a useful tool for improving the reading comprehension of their charges.

1.3 Purpose and Significance

This study will employ a quasi-experimental design. The aim will be to determine whether provision of instruction in inference making, based on a direct instruction paradigm, can improve the inferencing ability of adolescent ESL learners.

The collection of data will be guided by the following research questions.

1. Does direct instruction result in improved performance in inference making in the Treatment group as a whole?
2. Do high and low proficiency subjects in the Treatment group benefit equally from direct instruction in inference making?
3. Are High Proficiency and Low Proficiency subjects equally successful in mastering the four categories of inferences?

This study is significant in that it offers insights into (1) the effectiveness of instruction in inference making, based on a direct instruction paradigm, for teaching inferencing to good and poor adolescent readers in an ESL context; and, (2) the types of inferences which good and poor readers can successfully master.