CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This action research study had been driven by three key questions as stated in Chapter One. In presenting the findings to this study I will first discuss the perceptions and attitudes of my sixth form students towards English language with particular reference to reading comprehension. Next, I will discuss the problems faced by students in reading comprehension and highlight the role of vocabulary in impeding reading comprehension. In the next section of the findings the teaching-learning strategies used in reading comprehension lessons will be discussed focusing on the use of semantic mapping.

4.1 Students’ Background and Perceptions towards English

The four students who participated in this study had different English proficiency levels. This difference stemmed from the fact that they came from different backgrounds. Their exposure to the English language and experiences with regards to the use of the English language further contributed to their differences in the proficiency level and the command of the language.

4.1.1 Students’ Experiences with English

My experiences as an English language teacher indicated that students’ proficiency levels were often shaped by both their early formal and informal experiences with the language.

4.1.1.1 Early Formal English Language Learning Experiences

From the interviews I found that three of my four key informants had learnt English formally in pre-school. The fourth student, S3, was from a Chinese school and he only learnt
to speak and use English beginning in Standard 3. From classroom observations during lessons, I noticed that S1, S2 and S4 used the English language more confidently during discussions but S3 spoke very little although he did try to take part in the discussions. During my interview with S3 he said,

My parents do not speak English at all. My brothers, sister and I went to a Chinese primary school, so we only use a few words sometimes. I started learning English in standard three. I didn’t know much English before going to school. I speak Cantonese and Mandarin at home. With my friends I usually speak in Mandarin and English. With the teachers I use Bahasa and English. I use English mostly during the English class.

He also mentioned that he was “shy and scared to speak because there are so many words [that he] don’t know”. His exposure to the language was limited to the school environment. S1 who was of Chinese-Malay parentage spoke English in the home. He was more exposed to the language as he spoke the language more often and he had more access to reading materials in English at home. However, both students felt that English was very important and were interested in improving their proficiency in the language. S2’s background also helped to shape her proficiency in English, as she mentioned, “although my parents and my grandparents spoke Tamil all the time, my brothers and sisters spoke in English. I am the youngest in my family. . . I learnt English formally in kindergarten and school. I have been reading English books and speaking English since young”. S4, who was the most proficient in the group and learnt English when very young, said, “I learnt the language formally from my mum who is a kindergarten teacher. She used to teach me using flash-cards”.

Therefore, because of the early exposure to the language S1, S2 and S4 spoke fairly well in English and did not feel intimidated when asked to speak in the language. In contrast, S3 was not very confident to speak English and he felt very conscious of his inadequacy in the language. As I jotted the number of times these four students spoke within a span of ten
minutes and did a tally, I found that, S1 spoke English 10 times S2, seven times, S3 three times and S4 spoke in English 12 times. S3 was a little cautious about speaking in English although he tried.

4.1.1.2 Informal English Language Learning Experiences

Another factor that contributed to the differences in the proficiency level among my four informants was the fact that S1, S2, and S4 had been exposed to English very early in their lives in their own homes.

4.1.1.2.1 Language Use at Home

S1 and S4 came from homes in which English could be said to be the mother tongue since this was the only language they spoke. As S4 said, “actually I only speak English. I know very little about the Chinese dialects”. S2 had experience with both Tamil and English before attending school. S3, however, was the eldest child and he had very little experience with the English language in the home. S4 was advantaged in English Language because she came from an English speaking background and had a lot of exposure to English. As she remarked, “I was exposed to various materials in English, be it storybooks, songs, movies or encyclopaedias. When I started school, I can safely say that I was far ahead of my peers”.

4.1.1.2.2 Other English Language Experiences

From my interview with S4, I found that she did not have any problems comprehending the text on ‘The Chinese Girl In Singapore, 1913’ which was the reading text used in class, because she was quite an avid reader. She had read novels about the life of Chinese women in the olden days. She mentioned that she had read Amy Tan’s Joy Luck Club and Wild Swans by Jung Chang. Both these novels portrayed the lives and tribulations of Chinese women especially in China in the early years of their lives. Her experiences gave
As they completed the mapping after reading all the paragraphs they could "see" the concepts featured in the text as they had managed to organize the ideas, connect the ideas and they could also see what the main ideas were and which were the support 'strands' in the text. The students felt a sense of achievement, as they could also now comprehend the content of the text better.

From my interviews with the students S1 said that he found semantic mapping useful because according to him "... use the mind maps... to get ideas put in a diagram so that I can see the connections". S2 felt that "for reading comprehension I find the mapping method very helpful because I can see the connections when there are arrows connecting the ideas". S3 found that "the drawing in the maps really helped [him] to see the whole picture". S4 was of the opinion that mapping helped her with writing the summary. She said,

I personally like the mapping that can link the ideas. When we map out the whole passage by making short notes we can actually understand it better. Also this helps in the writing of the summary.

Hence, each of the students was able to see the connections of ideas in the text although they saw the use of the mapping strategy helping them in different ways. The whole map was then put together after the whole text was read. Each group came up with their own version of the semantic map.

As a conclusion to my intervention I showed the students the semantic map that I had prepared on the transparency (Appendix I). The colourful map with the pictorial visuals excited them and they were very impressed. Different colours were used to distinguish the different ideas. As I pointed out the ideas and the links they were able to comprehend the ideas better because now they could "see" the ideas. They then answered the same
the role of English among the four students was that they all felt that the language was very important.

From the data collected I can conclude that the students in this study are very positive towards learning English. They unanimously answered in the affirmative when asked if the language was important during the interviews. S1 felt that English is an important language. It is the international language and most educational materials are in English. Nearly everyone speaks the language around the world. For me English is like a window that opens [to] the whole world.

Similarly, S2 was of the opinion that “English is widely used all over the world. Being an international language, I know that I will be understood in any part of the world. It is the language of information and technology”. When S3 was asked about its role, he answered that English was very important “for getting knowledge”. Finally S4 reiterated the supremacy of English as an international language in her remark that “English is the gateway to knowledge. We can gain a lot of information in English. It the global language that unites the world”.

On the question of how they could improve their English, they were all positive that reading a lot and practising could help them become more proficient. S4 said that reading novels had helped her improve and gain a lot of knowledge. For S4 English lessons were “a breather from the daily struggle of learning numerous facts”. I believed her because she was always much livelier during English lessons. She enjoyed doing crosswords, answering vocabulary quizzes, and correcting misprints and other language games. She had the linguistic ability and learning English was enjoyable for her. Generally, all the key informants were highly motivated and very keen to learn the language and improve themselves. I have mentioned in my journal that “my students were very motivated and very serious about improving themselves”.

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4.2 Students’ Perceptions of Reading Comprehension Lessons

All four of my key informants were very motivated and interested in learning and improving their proficiency in English. This section discusses students’ perceptions towards teaching and learning of English, their response to group-work, and the techniques they used in answering reading comprehension questions.

4.2.1 Group-work as a Teaching Strategy

As teacher-researcher, I was interested to see how students worked together in a group as they discussed reading comprehension in order to make interpretation of the text overt for observation. Furthermore, in a group that consisted of a mixture of good and average, students could learn from their peers. They also enjoyed group discussions and enjoyed my lessons because it helped them gain a lot of knowledge that they could actually use for their ‘Pengajian Am’ (General Paper). They were therefore, positive and were happy working in their group and they did not feel that there was a problem to work with group members who were of a different proficiency level. They said they could learn more if the other person was better in English.

4.2.2 Students’ Perception of Teaching Style

In analyzing their views during the interview I realized that I spoke a little too fast and that I should give them more time to think before they gave their answers. I found this to be a very fair request and now I realize that I did not allow enough ‘wait time’ for students to think about their answers. They enjoyed studying English but they also felt that sometimes I expected too much. When asked to elaborate S1, answered “sometimes you expect us to know a lot of things and this makes us feel very inadequate.” Another problem they had was that I used very ‘bombastic’ words, which they could not understand. When I ask them why they
did not stop me they felt that it would reveal their inadequacy. But they all reiterated that they enjoyed my enthusiasm, my jovial nature and teaching methods. One of the best compliments I had ever received was when S3 said, “I wish my earlier English teachers were as interesting as you, my English would have been better”. That gave me a warm feeling.

4.2.3 Students’ Perceptions of Reading Comprehension

The students in this study took the English 914 paper as an elective and as such they had to take four papers namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. When they were asked about their preferences with regards to these language skills in the questionnaire the responses revealed that 12 out of 15 students liked reading comprehension the most. Three of them indicated listening comprehension as their first choice. None of them liked the speaking or writing components. This showed that students preferred the receptive to the productive skills. These students’ responses indicated that they did not have negative perceptions towards reading comprehension. In response to the questionnaire item on how they rated their reading comprehension ability, 10 of them rated their reading comprehension as good and five felt that they were of average ability. With reference to text types, most of them preferred narratives (10 out of 15), two of them who were both literature students liked literary extracts the most and three others liked descriptive texts. None of them had a first preference for expository texts. This could probably be due to the fact that they did not have much experience with such types of texts. Expository texts are mostly very factual and contain a lot of information, which may be unfamiliar to them.
4.2.4 Techniques Used by Students in Reading Comprehension

As to their techniques or the steps taken in answering reading comprehension it was noted that eight of the respondents skimmed through the text first before answering the questions, while four of them said they read the text very carefully first. One student said she read the questions first, and two of them actually read the text several times before attempting to do anything else. When answering reading comprehension, it was noted that 13 of them answered the direct questions first and then worked on the vocabulary section. Two of them would look for similar words in the question and text to locate the answer. Most of them, (12) did underline key words to locate answers. They all generally reread the questions several times to understand them.

4.3 Identifying Problems Faced in Reading Comprehension

Action research begins with the teacher’s diagnosis of the problem faced by students. As such my first research question read, ‘does a lack of understanding of specific vocabulary items in the text impede the ability to comprehend text?’ To answer this question I adopted the three-pronged approach of observing my students in class as I administered a diagnostic procedure and further obtaining information through questionnaires and interviews. As I observed my students and probed what they thought through the questionnaire and interviews I found that many of them were very slow readers. For example, my teacher journal entry early in the study read, “some of my students had a real problem with vocabulary and I have to do something about this”. Furthermore, as they read I also “noticed that some of them read very fast while my target subject, S3 was struggling, reading back and forth, using a ruler and a pencil to underline numerous words”. He “looked up the dictionary for many words, wrote down
something...". This gave me an indication that some students were not reading to get the meaning of the text but rather meanings of individual words. S3's reading and comprehension of the text was therefore, impeded by a lack of vocabulary skills.

From observations and the interviews I realized that my students faced a range of problems. For example S1 had a problem with spelling. As he mentioned,

My biggest problem is my spelling. I don't know how to spell sometimes even simple words like 'their'. I don't know how to improve. I didn't realize it until you started giving us spelling test. That is my biggest problem. Like I know the meanings of the words but sometimes I can't spell them such as the word 'phlegm' or osteoporosis.

S2 felt that her major problem was

... using my own words to answer comprehension questions and the summary [paraphrasing]. I tend to use word for word from the passage. I also have difficulty giving the exact meaning of words for vocabulary exercises. I know the meaning but I cannot give the definition.

Similarly S3 had a problem with pronunciation and S4 was not confident about writing summaries. This indicated that these students had a range of problems with reading comprehension. This range of problems was also ascertained from the responses in the questionnaire.

4.3.1 Problems Pertaining to Teaching-Learning Aspects

According to Crawley and Mountain (1988) reading is a complex thinking process and students are often unable to cope with this complexity of the reading process. When students were asked about the problems they faced in reading comprehension, they responded by indicating several comprehension problems. These problems can be categorized as problems pertaining to the teaching-learning aspects of reading comprehension lessons and problems related to texts used in reading comprehension.
lessons which, will be discussed in the following section. Table 1 below indicates the problems related to teaching-learning aspect of reading comprehension.

**Table 1: Problems Related to Teaching-Learning Aspect of Reading Comprehension**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited vocabulary</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of practice with open-ended questions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to infer</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor grammatical skill</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding of questions asked</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited time</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many questions</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No proper teaching method</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= 15

Table 1 revealed that all my 15 students had a problem with limited vocabulary. Therefore, the problem in reading comprehension was mostly attributed to limited vocabulary. This answered my research question as to whether a lack of vocabulary skills impeded their ability to comprehend text. This was further confirmed by the interviews as indicated by S3’s account, “...there are so many words I don’t know and I get like ....[stuck]”.

**4.3.2 Problems Related to Texts**

Students can have several problems that are related to text such as passages that contain too many unfamiliar words and those that have too many figurative expressions. Another problem could be texts that have unfamiliar content. The table in the following page summarizes the problems that are related to texts in reading comprehension. Student responses verified the problem students had with vocabulary skills as difficult words impeded their understanding of the text. Again all 15 students found difficult words a major problem in
reading comprehension. This further verified that students had a problem with vocabulary, especially in expository texts. Most of the texts used in reading comprehension lessons were expository ones, which had a number of unfamiliar and difficult words.

Table 2: Problems Related to Texts Used in Reading Comprehension Lessons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficult words</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long sentences</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figurative language</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar content</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long passages</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= 15

As to the response of what they usually did when they came across a difficult word, nine out of 15 confirmed that they looked up the dictionary as the first alternative. Consulting the friend was second and guessing the meaning was next. What was surprising was that they would rather ignore the word than ask the teacher. Given the fact that there was a rapport between the teacher and the students and the fact that they were more mature students, this could indicate that they were quite independent learners who could work on their own. Seven out of 15 said that a difficult word did impede their understanding of the text. As to whether the dictionary helped, 14 of them answered sometimes and one said seldom.

4.4 Problems Related to Vocabulary

Although the students faced a variety of problems in reading comprehension, classroom observations and the questionnaire highlighted one common problem that all my students had and that was a problem with vocabulary. According to Nelson-Herber (1986), students' vocabulary has a strong relationship to their reading comprehension and using the
students' background knowledge is more effective than using definitions. Since this study was
driven by specific questions pertaining to reading comprehension namely vocabulary and
prior knowledge, this discussion will focus on these areas.

Despite the problems with vocabulary, how did students cope with reading
comprehension tasks? This was my new concern as a teacher. Reading comprehension
involves meaning making and the goal of reading instruction is to produce readers who
understand what they read. Unfortunately, here some of the students were answering
comprehension questions mechanically without real comprehension so students did not make
meaning with the texts because they were looking for word forms in the text that were
identical to the words used in the question to answer reading comprehension exercises.

I had to probe into this problem and make students realize that for real comprehension
they had to engage with the text and it did not matter if they did not understand individual
words. I had to see how students responded to words that were not contextualized as
compared to those that were found in context. I had to show them that they could use the
context to get at meaning making. This is when I devised the tasks on vocabulary
(Appendices C and D ). I was still at the diagnostic stage and wanted to observe to see what
students did to get meaning of vocabulary items. I also had to wean them off the dictionary
because as Brozo and Simpson (1995) posit, "dictionaries are not a panacea for learning the
meanings of unknown words" (p.167). Nelson-Herber (1986) is of the opinion that learning
vocabulary through context may be more effective than using definitions. I had to show my
students that the context of the word can help them make meaning by involving them in the
learning process.
4.3.3 Students' Strategies Used in Vocabulary Tasks

I had to know what exactly students did for vocabulary tasks and wanted to point out to the students that it was not necessary to know every word in a text for meaning making. The procedure has been discussed in the methodology section in Chapter Three.

I gave them the vocabulary task sheet and I instructed them that they could not use the dictionary. My observation during the lesson, revealed that S3 “seemed to be very disturbed and I could see that he was ‘itching’ to pick up his prized possession and look the words up. He was really struggling and looked very miserable”. Most of the students seemed agitated including my ‘star’ students who asked, “what if there are more than one meaning to the word?” Later, as I gave them the list in context, the students gave a sigh of relief and this probably meant that they were more comfortable with words in context. This seemed true for all the students. As I did a tally I found that all the students did better in this task (Task II).

4.3.4 Results of Vocabulary Task

The results showed a marked difference in the number of correct responses. S1 guessed 28 of the 34 words correctly from the list of decontextualized words. He also managed to detect all the nonsense words. S1 was one of those students who enjoyed guessing the meaning and he was not too concerned about using the dictionary. This is revealed from what he said about the technique he used when he came across a difficult word,

I usually guess the meaning and I actually enjoy this. I like to guess and when my guess is about 90% right I feel good. It’s like taking a chance and winning. I must do this more often especially when reading.

S1 was able to define 30 of the 34 words in context. S2 managed to define five more words correctly in context in the second task. S3 showed a marked difference in the
number of words that he guessed correctly in context as compared to the initial task with the decontextualized words. Initially he failed to guess the meanings of 32 words including all the eight nonsense words. Yet when the words were contextualized he could define seven new words. This showed that when students use the context the meanings are easier to find. The table below summarizes the findings on the vocabulary task students were given.

**Table 3: Results of the Vocabulary Tasks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Decontextualized wordlist</th>
<th>Contextualized words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Known word</td>
<td>Partially known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S2) 1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S1) 5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S3) 10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S4) 13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another factor contributing to their problem in reading comprehension was the lack of background knowledge about the topic of the text as indicated by the number of students (14 out of 15) who could not answer reading comprehension due to lack of prior knowledge.

### 4.3.5 Inadequate Background Knowledge.

According to one of the fundamental tenets of schema theory, meaning is not inherent in the text. Comprehension can only occur if students are able to anchor new information and ideas with some prior knowledge in order to understand new information. This pertained to
my second research question whether activation of prior knowledge helped in the comprehension of a text. In order to activate students’ prior knowledge I decided to provide a set of leading questions.

When I first gave the passage two weeks after the vocabulary exercise I noticed that the students “seem to vaguely remember the words”. After the third word from the list, S1 was already able to activate her prior knowledge as she reminded the group members of the sentence they had read earlier. This either meant she had a good memory or she had activated her prior knowledge. I had to find out. Students seemed to have fewer problems with the vocabulary. They discussed the words when answering question 7 first. They were probably more confident with this question. They finally asked me “didn’t we do an exercise on these words?” Once again I suspected they had a good memory. They discussed the contents of the text and as I observed them I noticed that S1 and S3 dominated most of the discussion. They read the text and after reading the leading questions they discussed in detail some of the leading questions. For example they were not sure which states made up the Straits Settlements but S1 was quick to note that since Singapore was mentioned in the title it must be one. After some deliberation they realized that it was “negeri-negeri Selat”. They also discussed the comprehension questions and wrote out the answer. They could not answer questions 5 and 7, which were inferential questions that involved application.

All the students agreed that leading questions did help them to understand the passage better because they activate students’ memory and make text more familiar, especially when students’ prior knowledge is related to the new information. This answered my second research question that is, whether students’ prior knowledge can be activated to make learning more meaningful and the text more familiar. As S2 commented on the effectiveness of
activation of prior knowledge, "... [if] we have heard or read about a certain topic we can remember certain things and these connections make us know more about the topic, it is easier to discuss if we find some information before coming to class". Similarly, S4 agreed that leading questions helped in comprehension because

it can help students to understand the main idea or what you call ... [theme]. Yes, theme. For example when we were doing the passage on the Chinese girl I could understand the facts better because I had read stories about life of Chinese girls in the past in Joy Luck Club and The Wild Swans.

She further elaborated when asked if leading questions were effective,

Yes, they are effective. I like the activity where you provide us with the extra questions ... [leading questions] to discuss the ideas in the passage. This helps because we can think in depth and bring in ideas that we know that are connected to the ideas in the passage. It is a good feeling when we can speak on something we are familiar with.

However, the problem I found in activation with leading questions in a group was that students tend to digress from the main aim of the task because a lot of ideas were being generated and they lost track of what they were supposed to do. Now I had to bring them to focus on the text they were reading. I had to intervene. This was where I started with the semantic mapping technique to help enhance comprehension by giving students an overview of the text and shape their creative thinking.

4.4 Teaching Semantic Mapping

Semantic mapping is a technique that activates and builds on students' prior knowledge. This activation is crucial for reading comprehension. As such, the leading questions helped to trigger their memory to retrieve what they already knew about the topic. When their prior knowledge was activated the topic became familiar and they were able to discuss it in detail. However, the problem was that they were unable to focus their discussion.
After the vocabulary exercise was done the passage on "The Chinese Girl in Singapore, 1913" was given to the students after a lapse of two weeks. As they read and answered the leading questions I observed that although they could answer some of the leading questions they still could not link the ideas in the passage or answer questions that required them to infer or evaluate. Although they discussed the leading questions and their prior knowledge was activated they would digress from the focus of the text. As I had observed and written in my teacher journal,

I had tried to activate their prior knowledge with the leading questions and although they discussed them there was a lot of straying away from the topic. They sometimes got carried away and digressed from the topic. They needed to focus their discussion.

Hanf (1971) describes mapping as a verbal picture of ideas which, are organized and symbolized by the reader. As a shaping activity semantic mapping helps students keep reading focused since they are guided by the diagram and their priority is to complete it with the relevant ideas and important details. Semantic mapping helps them to focus their discussion because they can map out their ideas to relate and link the ideas in a map or a diagram. The mapping procedure assists students to organize information in graphic form. It is an effective way to illustrate the relationship between content area and all other content-related information. This relationship or connection is crucial in comprehension.

4.4.1 Procedure in Semantic Mapping

According to Brozo and Simpson (1995), the common features of semantic mapping include firstly, the core theme, which is placed in the centre of the whole map. The supporting ideas and details are set off in boxes or circles around this central theme. Lines and arrows are drawn to connect them to each other and the main theme. In Freebody’s and
Reynolds' (1980) words there is a core theme, web strands and strand ties that complete a semantic map.

I gave students instructions on how to map the content ideas in a semantic map. The text was read aloud by the teacher. Short leading questions were asked again and some of the students volunteered answers, which were recorded on plain paper using coloured markers. A semantic map was drawn for each of the paragraphs (see Figure 2 in page 63). They were asked to think about the Straits Settlements as centres of trade in 1913. They had to activate their prior knowledge to find out what states made up the Strait Settlements. Most of them knew this. They wrote these down in their notes. As I asked them what they knew about some of the common features of the Chinese in these states, S4 spoke about the ‘Niffanyas and the Babas’ and the assimilation of Malay culture especially in the dressing. This was relevant to the description of the young lady’s dressing described later. They also knew about the history of the Chinese settling down in these three states. They were asked to focus their discussion on the life of the Chinese girl from childhood to puberty to marriage. I also demonstrated how they could connect the ideas in the text as well as bridge their prior knowledge with the new information in the text with the semantic map.

I demonstrated how this was done. Students were given blank papers so that they could draw out and fill in the details in their groups. I also showed them how to link the main ideas and the supporting details using arrows and lines. They then drew the arrows that connect the stages in the life of the Chinese girl as shown in Figure 2 (p. 63)

As they filled in the details I walked around and helped them. More ideas arose from the discussion that was more focussed. They could compare and contrast life as a child and after puberty. They filled in all the details under the different headings. They were very
responsive and enthusiastic about filling in the details. As I went around helping them to construct the maps some of the students had chunks of notes copied out, for example the notes on dressing. I reminded them to put in only the important points and to leave unnecessary details. I also told them that they could draw pictures from the descriptions. S2 who was good at drawing managed to draw the costume to depict how ladylike the ‘Chinese girl’ looked. S2 commented in her interview;

I also like the mapping idea. I can draw and I haven’t drawn for a long time, but now to map out ideas I can actually draw some of them. I have never done this before. Now I’m able to picture it [visualize] better.

The students could compare the dressing with what girls wore these days. The target group of key informants managed to write out and link the ideas in their semantic map in Figure 2(p.63). I also asked them to draw the dress based on the descriptions to enable them to have a more concrete idea of how this looked like. When I told them to draw the conveyance or mode of transport, most of them had no idea how it looked like. I then drew a picture of a conveyance. Students could now visualize the need for of a conveyance and a chaperone to protect the young lady from public gaze and also why she was not educated or allowed to have a career those days.

Next, they noted down reasons why life of the girl was dull and uninteresting. These included facts from the text that needed students to infer as well as from their prior knowledge. They were of the opinion that the life was dull as a result of no education hence, the arrow showed the connection. Boredom was due to lack of education because they felt with education, her life would have been more meaningful. They also understood why the Chinese girl was not educated.
Figure 2: Semantic Map of 'The Chinese Girl in Singapore, 1913' by Key Informants.

Para I
- Straits Settlements
- Singapore
- Malacca
- Penang
- Chinese Girl → monotonous life but contented.

Para II
- Childhood
- Happiest Time
- No restraints
- Romp around with boys
- Unkempt appearance
- Daughters → never sold into slavery some given for adoption.
- Trained in cooking sewing 
- future - good match
- Little education

Para III
- 13 - 14 yrs. (Puberty)
- Seclusion
- DRESSING
- Long dress + sarong + jacket
- Slippers
- "Kongsangs" + hairpins.

Para IV
- LIFE
- Lonely
- Occasional outings in conveyances + chaperone (female relative)
- No Men (seclusion)
- Education denied (very little)
- regarded as waste of $ 
- No career
- Disgraceful
- Indecent exposure

Para V
- 15 - 19 yrs.
- Marriage
- Match made total stranger wishes not consulted
- Typical Chinese + Jewellery great deal heavy
- Obeisance ← fainting spells
- Life
- Tyrannical mother-in-law
- Household drudge
- Wretched life
As they completed the mapping after reading all the paragraphs they could “see” the concepts featured in the text as they had managed to organize the ideas, connect the ideas and they could also see what the main ideas were and which were the support ‘strands’ in the text. The students felt a sense of achievement, as they could also now comprehend the content of the text better.

From my interviews with the students S1 said that he found semantic mapping useful because according to him “… use the mind maps … to get ideas put in a diagram so that I can see the connections”. S2 felt that “for reading comprehension I find the mapping method very helpful because I can see the connections when there are arrows connecting the ideas”. S3 found that “the drawing in the maps really helped [him] to see the whole picture”. S4 was of the opinion that mapping helped her with writing the summary. She said,

I personally like the mapping that can link the ideas. When we map out the whole passage by making short notes we can actually understand it better. Also this helps in the writing of the summary.

Hence, each of the students was able to see the connections of ideas in the text although they saw the use of the mapping strategy helping them in different ways. The whole map was then put together after the whole text was read. Each group came up with their own version of the semantic map.

As a conclusion to my intervention I showed the students the semantic map that I had prepared on the transparency (Appendix I). The colourful map with the pictorial visuals excited them and they were very impressed. Different colours were used to distinguish the different ideas. As I pointed out the ideas and the links they were able to comprehend the ideas better because now they could “see” the ideas. They then answered the same
comprehension questions. When the two sets of responses were compared the answers this time, were longer and more elaborated.

4.5 Results of Reading Comprehension Tasks

The results of the two attempts showed that with the help of only activation of prior knowledge for vocabulary, students were able to answer questions on the vocabulary (question 7) and the two direct questions (questions 1 and 3). They answered questions 2 and 5 but the answers were short and not accurate. Questions 4, 6 and 8 (summary) were left out. After the discussion and mapping out of the main points in the second attempt, the group performed better. The subsequent answers showed more understanding of the text. This was depicted by the answers that were more elaborate and with details from their own prior knowledge. The second attempt was also complete. Even the summary writing was well written indicating that they had a good understanding of the passage (Appendix H).

Semantic mapping can help students to understand reading texts as they help to connect ideas in the passage. Students can categorize and see relationships among the ideas presented in a text and it is an excellent way for students to reorganize information they have already read. Students could see the link in the ideas in the paragraphs as well answer the summary question by looking at the information in the map of the text.

Conclusion

An overt approach to developing and implementing a reading comprehension strategy was taken since my intentions for the research in class was to improve both teaching and learning. I had built a rapport with the students, which helped me to gain their confidence and this also enabled me to get more honest responses, as they were not self-conscious about my presence or note-taking activities.
In this section I had set out to identify the problems that impeded comprehension and I found that the students had a range of problems with reading comprehension but most of my students had a problem with vocabulary and inadequate prior knowledge. To overcome these two problems I devised a vocabulary task to help students to guess meanings of unfamiliar words by using contextual clues. They were able to meanings of more words through contextual clues. Then, I devised the leading questions that generated students' ideas by activating their background knowledge. According to Ausubel (1968) meaning depends upon the learners’ background and experiences. If the text can be related to their experience or background then it can become meaningful. The students discussed in detail the text with the leading questions. However, due to too much digression they could not focus their discussion. To enable them to focus their discussion semantic mapping was used. Semantic mapping helped students to connect the ideas and see relationships among the ideas in the text.

As a result of intervention, the students learnt how to map out and connect the main points and supporting details in the reading text in a diagrammatic and pictorial form of a semantic map. A comparison of student responses in reading comprehension tasks before and after this intervention procedure revealed that the use of semantic mapping helped students perform better in reading comprehension.