

## **CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background Of The Study**

Research findings from numerous studies have indicated that reading is a strategic meaning acquisition process which necessitates awareness and control of very involved reasoning processes (Myer, 1991). It is also stressed in the literature that the problem-solving activity of reading is more than the recognition of a string of isolated words; it is the ability to compute the semantic and syntactic relationship among words, phrases and sentences which construct a coherent and meaningful representation of the text (Daneman, 1987, p.57)

Teachers and researchers have all observed that some students approach the language learning task in more successful ways than others. This is echoed in general in ESL reading which assumes that some of this success can be attributed to particular sets of cognitive and metacognitive behaviours, that learners engage in.

Research and theory in second language learning strongly suggest that expert readers are seen to possess a set of flexible, adaptable strategies which they deploy in order to make sense of text and to monitor their ongoing comprehension (Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pearson, 1991). By implication, less competent learners should be able to improve their skills in a second language through training on strategies evidenced among more successful language learners (O'Malley et. al., 1990). However, it is only in the last decade that there is a noticeably growing interest in the problem of learning to read in a second or non-native language. This limited number of previous attempts to describe L2 reading is unfortunate considering that most non-native speakers of English have more difficulty with reading than with any other skill (Mackay, Barkman & Jordon, 1979; Cziko 1978; Eskey, 1979).

Besides, early researchers such as Ervin-Tripp (1970) and Rubin (1975) have indicated that there has been too much attention on the input to the learner and too little

on what is going on within the learner. They suggest that the focus on opportunity alone without considering the use that the learner is making of such an opportunity will not allow for any adequate model of language learning.

"Any learning model which predicts language learning on the basis of input without regard to the selective processing by the learner will not work, except for trivial problems" (Ervin-Tripp, 1970, p.9)

Alderson and Urquhart (1984), basing their study on reading comprehension suggest that knowledge about the process that goes on within the reader as he/she interacts with a text is essential in the teaching of reading. They stress that it is the process, which is the basis for the product. O'Malley et al., (1990), Rubin (1975) Naiman et al. (1975) and Stern (1975) introduced the notion that the 'successful language learner' might be doing something special or different that everyone can learn from.

In line with this there has been interest by language researchers in examining language-learning strategies that may be consciously employed by any language learner to facilitate second language acquisition. However, most quantitative studies comparing strategy use by different groups of students have tended to pay more attention to overall strategy use or to the use of broad categories of strategies than to differences in the use of individual strategies. In addition, variation by proficiency level has sometimes been emphasized to the neglect of other variables such as gender and learner characteristics. Thus it is argued research into comprehension reading strategy use is important because of what it reveals about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension. Knowledge of these strategies and their management is important in helping readers to interface with texts meaningfully and to help develop them into strategic readers. This knowledge can also help to identify effective reading strategies of high and low proficiency ESL students. It is also important that a set of effective reading strategies be identified through research in

light of the active role that is ascribed to readers, Besides, all readers need to acquire effective reading strategies so that they can interface with texts meaningfully.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

A common problem secondary school ESL students face is comprehending texts. The reading skills needed for success at these levels are substantially different from those taught in the primary school. No longer an end in itself, the purpose of reading is often to learn specific information in order to perform some criterion task (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984).

This type of reading, involves a number of complex activities, one of which is using appropriate study strategies for remembering that information, monitoring comprehension and learning, and taking corrective action when necessary. These activities all involve metacognition – the ability to think about and control one's own learning (Baker & Brown, 1984; Brown, 1980).

It has also been acknowledged in the literature that language processing strategies exist and influence second language (McLaughlin, Kinbourne, Cole & MacWhinney, Wode, Winitz in Winitz (ed) 1981). The operation of these strategies, it is maintained, should be considered as one cause of learner errors and the changing nature of the learner's interlanguage system (cf Taylor, 1975; Richards, 1975). However, language processing strategies focus on the cognitive processes involved in second language acquisition. They do not examine the learners' perception of what they do to learn or manage their learning. They do not seek to present the process of L2 learning from the learners' viewpoint. Nor have they looked at the conscious strategies learners utilize as they attempt to complete a learning or communication task. It is this therefore, unexamined learner characteristic that the learner strategy research presented in this study will bring to light. In view of this discussion this study will compare the reading

comprehension strategies by high and low proficiency ESL reading comprehension students to determine the following:

1. How do the high and low proficiency ESL reading comprehension students differ in their awareness of reading comprehension strategies?
2. How do the high and low comprehension ESL students differ in their use of reading comprehension strategies when completing the same task?
3. How do the use of reading strategies relate to the student variables of gender, language proficiency and language background?

### **1.3 Aims of the Study**

Several researchers have bemoaned the dearth of studies investigating reading strategy use, (e.g. Pressley and Harris, 1990), 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.

Casanave (1988) goes to the extreme of suggesting that 'no research yet exists that has definitively identified what reading strategies are and how they might be taught, a fact that points out the need for many more descriptive and instructional studies in both L1 and L2 reading research' (p.285)

Research into reading strategy use is important because it creates an awareness about the way readers manage their interaction with written texts. Knowledge of these strategies and their management is important in helping students to become better readers. Research in reading is also 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 in light of the active role that is ascribed to readers.

One other factor that has motivated research into comprehension strategies is the desire to provide learners with reading instruction that might enhance their reading comprehension. The basis of such instruction must be a set of strategies that is efficacious in enhancing comprehension. An effective way of identifying these strategies is by comparing the use of reading comprehension strategies by good and poor comprehenders (Paris, Cross and Lipson, 1984)

While the motivation for investigating metacognitive comprehension strategy use is to provide learners with a set of strategies that might enhance their reading comprehension there are additional reasons for investigating reading metacognitive comprehension strategy use by high and low proficiency ESL students.

First, Cohen (1990,) affirms that average learners who are also average readers are likely to select strategies that promote comprehension some of the time and inhibit comprehension at others. He argues that there is a growing consensus that if these learners have greater conscious awareness of the strategies that they select, this awareness can lead them to genuine gains in reading comprehension (p.74). Since it appears that awareness of metacognitive comprehension strategies is a necessary precondition for providing effective instruction in these strategies, it is important that we know whether L2 readers possess this awareness of their own metacognitive comprehension strategies. Thus this study will attempt to establish the awareness of metacognitive reading comprehension strategy use by comparing high and low proficiency comprehenders. Secondly researchers have indicated that good readers possess a set of flexible, adaptable strategies which they deploy in order to make sense of text and to monitor their ongoing comprehension (Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pearson,1991) Thus this study will also aim to investigate how high and low proficiency students differ in their use of reading comprehension strategies when completing the same reading task.

Thirdly, while the use and awareness of strategies by high and low proficiency ESL comprehenders could provide some valuable insights into strategy instruction and our understanding of how different students learn, this study will also aim to establish how the use of these strategies is related to the variables of gender, language proficiency and language background.

## **1.4 Definition of Terms**

In this section, the conceptual background of the research will be made explicit. What is intended by certain terms in this research will be explained.

### **1.4.1 Language Proficiency**

The English language proficiency of students is usually the composite measure of ability in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In this study, the proficiency level of the subjects will be gauged based on percentile scores obtained in the end of the year examination and monthly tests.

### **1.4.2 A Proficient Reader**

Existing research literature characterizes a proficient reader as one who has control over his/her cognitive processes. A proficient reader engages in 'self-monitoring' and 'comprehension-monitoring'. In addition, it is also widely acknowledged by researchers that proficient readers are strategic. They are aware that different strategies need to be deployed for different reading goals and for different text types. (De Britto, Oka & Paris 1983).

### **1.4.3 A Low Proficiency Reader**

A low proficiency reader is characterized as a reader who usually has little knowledge about reading strategies and text variables. In instances of comprehension failure, such readers fail to respond in a flexible way and generate alternative plans, hypotheses, and strategies. Using context, looking back in the text, rereading, and asking for help, are among some of the "fix-up" strategies that low proficiency readers need to acquire in order to be able to comprehend reading texts.

### **1.4.3 Urban Location**

An urban school is a school, which is situated in a town area with a population of more than 10,000. Students in urban schools, receive more exposure to English through means of contact with family and friends and mass media (Chandrasegaran, 1992)

### **1.4.4 Language Learning Strategies**

Language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that students use, often intentionally, to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. Strategies encompass a wide range of behaviors that can help the development of language competence in many ways (Oxford, 1990; Rigney, 1978). Strategies are plans that readers use flexibly and adaptively depending on the situation. A strategy has a purpose and it consists of a sequence of actions. It is often adaptable and flexible to suit the context of a text (Nisbet & Shucksmith, 1986). According to Kirby (1988), a strategy is a method for approaching a task or achieving a goal. Each strategy requires a variety of processes during its use. They involve conscious decisions of selecting particular skills from a wide array and implementing them in a way that enhances learning.

Language learning strategies, have also been defined as specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students employ often consciously to improve their

own progress in internalizing, storing, retrieving and using the L2 (Rigney, 1978). Oxford (1990) describes learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed and more transferable to new situations. Wenden, (1987) defines learning strategies as language behaviour learners engage in to learn and regulate their learning of ESL. In essence, language learning strategies involve actions taken by learners to enhance their own learning.

For the purpose of this study the term "strategies" will be used to focus on the actions that readers actively select and control to achieve desired goals or objectives. Reading strategies will include any of a wide array of tactics that readers use to engage and comprehend texts.

#### **1.4.6 Metacognition**

The term 'metacognition' refers to knowledge and control which individuals have over their own thinking and learning activities (Flavell, 1978). Metacognition can be characterized as the knowledge which guides' effective selection and implementation of task relevant skills and strategies. Metacognitive knowledge therefore serves an executive function of coordinating and directing the learner's thinking and behavior (Myers and Paris, 1978)

Metacognition has also been defined as "having knowledge (cognition) and having understanding, control over, and appropriate use of that knowledge (Tie & Stewart, 1985 pp.46-55). Thus, it involves both the conscious awareness and the conscious control of one's learning.

Such conceptions of "metacognition" imply that if individuals are aware of their cognitive processes, monitoring of these processes should make these processes work more effectively.



## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in that it will offer insights into, firstly, the differential awareness that students of different abilities have of reading comprehension strategies. Secondly, how good and poor ESL students differ in their use of these strategies to monitor and regulate their comprehension and thirdly, how the variables of gender, language proficiency and language background affect the choice of reading comprehension strategies. This study will also help to indicate to teachers the types and the extent of reading comprehension strategies which ESL students of differing abilities use so that they can effectively fulfill their roles as practitioners of reading comprehension strategy instruction.

Investigations which compare the metacognitive strategy use of high and low proficiency ESL students can provide valuable information and insights which can help practitioners to consider some basic aspects of reading comprehension processes from the vantage point of the learner before considering effective reading strategy instruction.

Similarly students awareness of reading strategies will help make available the full array of strategy options open to them for improving their reading in a target language.

Such investigations will also provide valuable insights to teachers of the type as well as the extent of metacognitive comprehension instruction they need to provide ESL students so that they become effective and strategic readers.

While the use and awareness of strategies by high and low proficiency ESL comprehenders could provide valuable insights into strategy instruction and our understanding of how different students learn, variation in strategy use according to gender, language proficiency and language background might show us some consistent differences in the way different groups learn a language.