

CHAPTER 5 : DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion of the Main Findings

The main findings of the study delineated in chapter 4 are discussed below. The implications of these findings for instruction are also considered, following which a number of suggestions for further research are proposed.

5.1.1 Subjects' Awareness of Reading Strategies

The present study found that the high proficiency and low proficiency respondents' awareness and knowledge of reading comprehension strategies as measured on the Index of Reading Awareness, was quite similar.

There is considerable evidence in the L₁ reading literature which indicates that "good readers are better at monitoring their comprehension than poor readers, that they are more aware of the strategies they use than are poor readers, (Garner, 1987; Pressley, 1990 & Brown, 1994) The findings from the present study were consistent with this conclusion. Though the reading comprehension strategy awareness of the high and low proficiency respondents of the study was almost similar, the high proficiency respondents awareness was greater. It was also evident from the study that the high proficiency respondents were better able to monitor their reading comprehension. The present findings also support research findings reported by Anderson 1991. "Rather than a single set of processing strategies that significantly contributed to successful reading comprehension, the same kinds of strategies were used by both high and low comprehending readers." Recent findings by Kern (1997) also support this view "that no strategy is inherently a 'good' or 'bad' strategy that so-called 'bad' strategies are used by 'good' readers and vice-versa."

Certain possibilities may account for the similarity in the high and low proficiency comprehenders awareness and knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies. First, the subjects of this study were mature bilinguals in contrast to Garner's subjects who

were monolinguals and they could have used their L₁ knowledge. There is evidence in the literature that strategies used in reading a target language may be similar to the ones used in a native language (Levine & Reves, 1985). Second, the subjects were matured Form Four students, who had been exposed to language learning for almost ten years. This exposure may have provided the subjects with a greater awareness of reading strategies. Thirdly, the evaluation system of the 'Sijil Pernilaian Rendah' which requires students to sit for an English comprehension and oral reading test might have contributed to this greater awareness and knowledge of strategies.

5.1.2 Subjects Frequency and Use of Strategy Types.

The analysis of the verbal report data showed that the high and low proficiency respondents used all the 15 different types of reading strategies. These findings indicate that the high and low proficiency respondents did not differ significantly in their use of the 15 types of strategies. These findings were similar to Kletzein (1991); and Kern (1997) findings which report both groups (poor and good) comprehenders to be dependent on the same strategies.

The findings indicate that the high and low proficiency respondents' awareness and knowledge of different types of strategies was quite similar, however, a difference in the frequency of use of these strategies was evident. The low proficiency respondents' instance of strategy use was higher (583) than the high proficiency respondents. These findings were inconsistent with the findings by Kletzien (1991); Hasbun (1988) and Chandrasegaran (1992) where high proficiency learners tended to use more strategies than poor learners.

The low proficiency respondents' higher frequency of strategy use in the present study could best be explained by the ranking of strategy use. The low proficiency respondents' highest ranked strategy is checking fit (89 instances; 15.2%) followed by

comments and questioning' maybe indicative that the low proficiency respondents encountered more difficulties in the reading tasks than the high proficiency respondents. Thus, the low proficiency respondents may have required more attempts to overcome these difficulties which consequently resulted in a larger number of strategies.

From the analysis of the verbal report data the high and low proficiency respondents of this study did not only differ in their frequency of strategy use they also differed in their frequency of use of the three different strategy categories.

5.1.3 Subjects' Use of Comprehension Enabling Strategies

This category of comprehension enabling strategies made up the largest portion of strategy use for both the high and low proficiency respondents. Total strategy use was 374 instances, that is 64.15% for the low proficiency respondents and 237 instances, that is, 51.3% for the high proficiency respondents. The low proficiency respondents' use of this strategy was 12.85% higher than the high proficiency respondents of this study.

The high instance of use of this category by both the groups may be due to the function of these strategies in comprehension. This set of strategies assists the reader in developing the literal meaning contained in the text. This involves accessing of meanings associated with the words comprising a text and the placing together of these word meanings into appropriate relationships to derive propositions (Gagne 1985). Thus it is not surprising that these strategies should account for the highest portion of total strategy use by both the groups.

Though both groups used this category of strategies frequently, the low proficiency respondents used it more frequently. These strategies are normally resorted to in instances of comprehension difficulty. This suggests that the low proficiency respondents probably encountered greater difficulties than the high proficiency

respondents even at the literal comprehension level. The manner in which the two groups deployed the use of these strategies may help advance this argument.

The high proficiency respondents in this study used the strategy of inferring words and referencing norms most frequently in this category. These strategies are more precise and effective in looking for specific clues and inferencing. On the contrary the low proficiency respondents used the less precise more generalized and perhaps less effective strategies of checking fit, formulating and eliminating and rereading more often. These strategies not only required the respondents to look for new specific clues but suggest that the respondents might have guessed some of the answers. The more frequent use of testing fit may be related to the more frequent use of the formulating and eliminating strategies. It is also possible that the testing fit strategy was used to decide whether to accept or reject alternatives. By rereading more often than the high proficiency respondents, the low proficiency respondents probably tried to overcome their comprehension difficulties.

Referencing norms, syntax and style provide some evidence of a link between language proficiency and the respondents reading ability. The low proficiency respondents, whose inter language system diverged more than that of a native speaker than did the high proficiency comprehenders (Selinker, 1974) probably made more untenable inferences while assessing information pertaining to norms, syntax, pronunciation and style.

5.1.4 Subjects' Use of Comprehension Extending Strategies

There were significant differences between the two groups of the study in their use of comprehension strategies. While this category of strategies made up 42.64% of the

high proficiency respondents' total strategy use they comprised only 7.71% of the low proficiency respondents' total strategy use.

Comprehension extending strategies help readers to move beyond the more literal comprehension of the text, to a broader and deeper understanding of text. The greater and more frequent use of these strategies by the high proficiency respondents suggest they probably were more successful in establishing relationships between text events and propositions. This helped them to gain a deeper and more extended understanding of text.

In contrast the low proficiency respondents' much lesser use of the comprehension extending strategies suggest that the low proficiency respondents' understanding of text is more likely limited only to the literal level.

The high proficiency respondents' higher frequency use of text interpretation and text integration may be related to their use of the strategy of prior knowledge. Text integration assists readers in establishing links between texts and events while text interpretation enables readers to make inferences and hypotheses. The importance of the readers' prior knowledge for inferential level processing of text is well documented in the literature. Wilkerson (1986) asserts that "all inferences involve the construction of relationships through the use of text-based information in conjunction with prior knowledge. Inferences in reading are thus the products of the interaction of information from the text and from the reader's prior knowledge in the construction of meaning" (p192).

The distinct differences in the use of the comprehension extending strategies by the two groups of respondents could be attributed to the difference in the reading abilities of the informants of this study.

5.1.5 Subjects' Use of Comprehension Monitoring Strategies

The comprehension monitoring strategies ensure that the reader is meeting his/her goals effectively and efficiently. It includes goal-setting, strategy selection goal checking and remediation. These strategies were used by the respondents of this study to monitor their comprehension and to ensure that they were meeting their goals effectively and efficiently.

A distinctive difference was noted in the high and low proficiency respondents' use of the comprehension monitoring strategies. This strategy made up 28.1% of total strategy use of the low proficiency respondents in contrast to 6.06% of total strategy use of the high proficiency respondents. These findings indicate that the low proficiency respondents were better able to monitor their comprehension and are contrary to earlier findings. Studies done by Garner (1980); Paris and Myers (1981) and by August, Flavell and Cliff (1984) indicate that good comprehenders are better able to monitor their comprehension than poor comprehenders. In these studies the comprehension problems were embedded in the texts. Though knowledge of text structures is critical for comprehension, the knowledge of the effect of text structures on learning is dependent on age and ability, Armbruster et al (1983). Thus, good comprehenders display a greater awareness of comprehension breakdowns and are better able to monitor these breakdowns than the poor comprehenders.

In the present study, the comprehension difficulties were posed by the blanks representing the missing words. The low proficiency respondents more frequent use of comprehension monitoring strategies was related to the difficulties they encountered in overcoming the comprehension difficulties built into the text. According to Armbruster, 1983

"a related conclusion about metacognitive development is that knowledge precedes control and that learners must first become aware of structures of text, as well as

knowledge of the task and their own characteristics as learners, before they can strategically control the learning process to optimize the influence of these factors".

(Collins, 1996; p. 2)

In this study the low proficiency respondents therefore often expressed their awareness of their comprehension difficulties and voiced their frustrations at their inability to complete the blanks.

The more frequent use of the monitoring strategies by the low proficiency students are indicative of the greater difficulties they encountered in completing the reading tasks. While they used comprehension monitoring strategies they were not able to use them effectively. These findings reflect what Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) , as cited in Carrell, say about reading strategies . . . "because strategies are controlled by readers, they are personal cognitive tools that can be used selectively and flexibly" (p.3). Similarly, Knight, Padron and Waxman, 1985; and Sarig, 1987, assert

"unfortunately, the relationship between strategies and comprehension are not simple and straight forward. Use of certain reading strategies does not always lead to successful comprehension, while failure to use these strategies or use other strategies does not always result in successful reading comprehension".

(Carrell, 1996; p.4)

5.1.6 Subjects Use of Strategies according to gender and language background

As anticipated the results of this study are consistent with the general tenor of previous strategy studies and provide new evidence for a substantial relationship between strategy use, language proficiency and background and gender. Like previous researchers, the present study found significantly greater overall use of language learning strategies among more successful learners, higher overall strategy use by

women than by men, and significant differences by proficiency levels and gender in respondents use of effective strategies.

In looking at patterns of variation in overall strategy use and in the use of strategy categories it was found that variation was most likely to be significant when the low proficiency respondents were compared with the high proficiency respondents. With overall strategy use however, differences in strategy use were not significant between gender groups, and language background but they were significant between the high proficiency and low proficiency respondents. This suggests that in research of this kind, the strength of the findings obtained can depend to a significant extent on the range of ability levels in the study.

At the individual item level, significant variation by proficiency level was usually positive (more frequent strategy use by more proficient respondents) but there were several interesting exceptions to this general trend. The only strategy showing negative variation (more use by less proficient respondents) was the comprehension monitoring category of strategies. A probable explanation for this variation is in the types of moves employed by the two groups of respondents. The low proficiency respondents used more moves and a larger variety of moves in overcoming the comprehension difficulties built into the text than the high proficiency respondents, but with less successful results.

This explanation appeared when analyzing the types of strategies employed. The low performer was involved mostly in clarification and simplification strategies, expressing awareness of comprehension failure and uncertainty and tentativeness in completing the reading tasks. Often frustrations at their inability to locate meaningful leads to overcome the comprehension difficulties were also expressed. The high proficiency students on the other hand focused more on comprehension monitoring strategies to monitor their comprehension (e.g., a critical analysis of meeting their goals, self-evaluation of reading success, awareness of lack of comprehension). Also most of

the low proficiency subjects' strategies had a deterring effect on comprehension whereas almost all of the high performers' strategies were comprehension promoting.

Strategies used across language backgrounds were similar to strategies used by high and low proficiency subjects. A probable explanation could be that students from a English speaking background were more exposed to language. There is a general consensus that students who are exposed to language have better language proficiency than students not exposed to language. It is further stated in the literature that increased exposure facilitates increased use of language learning strategies which in turn leads to improved competence in language learning (Chandrasegaran, 1992).

Though differences were noted in the frequency of strategy types by high and low proficiency respondents, in describing the strategy choices of successful learners we should look at the total range of strategies selected by these learners, rather than paying attention only to the strategies such learners use more frequently than their less successful peers. The high proficiency respondents in this study reported using a number of strategies more often than the low proficiency respondents and respondents from a non speaking English background. It was also reported that they used them in combination with other strategies used frequently or moderately so by students at all levels. The strategies used frequently or moderately frequently by successful and unsuccessful learners alike are not necessarily unproductive. A more likely interpretation, in my view, is that these are what we term as "bedrock strategies", which contribute significantly to the learning process of the more successful students, although not being in themselves sufficient to move the less successful students to higher proficiency levels. The concept of bedrock strategies could be important to a full understanding of language learning strategies.

Findings of significant relationships between gender and strategy use also serve as a useful reminder that strategy use is a complex phenomenon, related to a number of

variables including but not limited to L₂ proficiency. As with the proficiency finding it is at the individual strategy level that the gender differences observed became particularly interesting. The females' total range of strategy use outnumbered the male' respondents total range of strategy use. However, the only strategy where gender difference explanation was not readily apparent was checking fit often, although this might fit with women's documented desire to follow rules and be compliant (Bardwick, 1971; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) or their documented desire to manage their learning in a metacognitive sense (Zoubir-Shaw & Oxford, in press).

Many of the strategies used by the females more frequently are rather global strategies, and females are more often than males classified as global learners (Oxford, 1993a, 1993b.). Females also tend to pay greater attention to affective strategies (Oxford, 1993a, 1993b. The frequent use of the strategy of comments, questioning and personalizing reflect women's conversational behaviour that is typified – even in the native language – by rapport seeking, sociability, and elicitation of comment by the speaker (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1986, 1990). In this case, the affective strategies appear to be playing a powerful role in supporting social strategies that involve asking for help, especially in conversational situations.

Male-female differences in language learning strategies do not necessarily mean that respondents of one gender are more successful at reading comprehension than respondents of the other. In the current study, variation by gender and variation by proficiency appear to be working differently and is unrelated. There was no overlap between the strategies used more often by women and strategies used more often by the proficient respondents. It is clear however, different trends in strategy use are quite pronounced between the female and male respondents of this study. This means that male and female respondents are using different approaches to language learning. This could be related to underlying learning styles, motivation and styles.

5.1.7 Summary

Though the high proficiency and low proficiency respondents' knowledge and awareness of reading comprehension was almost similar differences were noted in their application and regulation of these comprehension strategies.

The low proficiency respondents experienced greater comprehension difficulties. This was reflected in their higher frequency of use of comprehension enabling and comprehension monitoring strategies. However, though the low proficiency respondents frequency of use of these strategies was higher than the high proficiency respondents there is evidence that they were not able to use these strategies effectively. On the contrary, for the high proficiency respondents, who experienced less difficulty in completing the reading tasks much of the lower-level processing of the text was atomized. As a result, they used more comprehension extending strategies which helped them to develop a broader and deeper comprehension of the text than comprehension enabling and extending strategies.

Variations in overall strategy and category use according to language proficiency, gender and language background were significant when the low and high proficiency respondents were compared. Similarly significant relationships between gender and strategy use indicate that strategy use is a complex phenomenon, related to a number of variables.

The findings from this study have several implications for reading comprehension strategy instruction. These are addressed in the next section.

5.2 Classroom Implications

The findings in this study suggest a number of implications and extensions for the classroom. A crucial role in reading comprehension appears to be played by

strategies involving active use of the target language. The aim of this study was to determine the awareness and the application of reading comprehension strategies by high and low proficiency subjects, and to investigate whether the variables of language proficiency, language background and gender affected the choice of these strategies. Sharing research results such as those in this study could be useful in offering insights into students' awareness and the application of these strategies to manage their interaction with written texts.

The fact that students identified as high proficiency language learners do use effective and conscious learning strategies is an indication to language practitioners that intervention by the teacher could help low proficiency students profit from the strategies used by more able students. Even the more able students could be provided with opportunities to refine and add to their learning strategies so that they become as efficient as possible.

As an initial step, teachers could attempt to discover what strategies their students are already using. Possible ways of achieving this are through students' learning experiences; through verbal reports and retrospective interviews.

Two benefits could be derived from such a teacher-generated activity: students would likely become more metalinguistically sophisticated as they practice retrospective analysis of themselves as language learners. Teachers would also become sensitized to the learner's perspective and to factors affecting their learning process. Hosenfeld (1979) in fact suggests that a teacher's first act should be to identify the student's learning strategies so that instruction can be adapted accordingly.

The second benefit suggested by Hosenfeld (1979) is that after having made a comparison of strategies used by the high proficiency and the low proficiency students performing the same task teachers could set up small groups in which an able student

'thinks aloud' during the task so that the less able students can expand their own learning strategy repertoires as they listen.

At the same time it is felt that students should be made aware of the broad range of strategy options available to them. Brown, Campione and Day (1981) assert that "self-awareness is a prerequisite for self-regulation, the ability to orchestrate, monitor and check ones cognitive activities". The subjects in this study did not differ in their awareness of meta-cognitive reading strategies. However, there was a significant difference in their ability to effectively apply and regulate the use of these strategies. It is possible that the inability to apply and regulate these strategies is a result of strategy instruction.

An often cited reason why strategy application has been unsuccessful is that it has not included meta-cognitive knowledge about the utility of the strategy as well as about when and where to use it (Pressley, Goodchild, Fleet, Zajchowski & Evans, 1989) as cited in Wade and Reynolds (1989). Rather than just making students aware of strategies by mentioning them teachers must explain the reasons why these strategies are useful and provide opportunities for their use. Mosenthal, Schwartz and Macissac (1992) assert that mentioning as opposed to teaching implies a superficial presentation without sufficient development or sustained involvement to have an impact on student performance" (p.198).

The fact that the bedrock strategies were used often by students at all proficiency levels does not mean teachers can assume that all students are equally aware of these strategies. It is suggested that teachers and students would do well to think of these actively used strategies as being like the keystone that holds together the pieces of an arch whose strength derives from all its pieces and the way they are combined.

The classification of strategies can help learners to see that there are different levels of strategies – from comprehension enabling to comprehension monitoring. On a

practical level, the average reader may simply need to learn a few of these strategies. This calls for a diagnosis of each reader's individual reading profile, which can then serve as a basis for deciding which strategies to teach or unteach.

It is also important for teachers to recognize that some strategies may be more suited to some learners than to others. Many factors exist to explain individual differences in strategy choices. Males and females (as groups), for instance, might have different preferences in terms of strategy use, although individuals would certainly differ from overall groups. Students at different levels of proficiency and from different language backgrounds are likely to use different kinds of strategies. Although not examined in the current study, students with different degrees and types of motivation tend to choose certain kinds of strategies. Students with different learning styles often choose strategies that reflect their style preferences. The more that teachers know about such factors, the more readily the teacher can come to grips with the nature of individual differences in the classroom. Such knowledge is power -- the power to plan lessons so that students with many different characteristics, including varied strategies, can receive what they need.

5.3 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations

Though the findings of the present study have various limitations it opens a number of avenues for further research.

The generalizability of the finding of this study may be limited to the following factors : 1) the types of texts used; 2) the task employed in the data collection; and 3) the size and type of sample

The texts that were used for instruction were narrative texts. As such, it is not possible to generalize the findings pertaining to reading strategy use to other text genre. Meintosh (1985), for instance, cautions that it cannot be assumed that because a

student reads well in narrative texts, she will read equally well in expository texts. It is therefore, suggested that future research investigating the effectiveness of strategy use make use of expository or descriptive texts to extend the findings of this study.

Additionally the task employed in the data collection may have effected the scores obtained. The use of the cloze task may have required the subjects to use a set of strategies that are peculiar to this type of task. Some evidence of this was found in the use of the strategy of formulating and eliminating alternatives.

More research is required to determine if task type significantly affects the performance of the subjects to access a different set of strategies.

Third, the sample of this study comprised of only four good and four poor comprehending respondents, which it can be argued is not representative of a population. Larger sample sizes will allow the use of parametric statistical procedures, which will be more conclusive in such a study.

Also worthy of further investigation is the relationship of gender and potentially gender-related factors such as learning styles, motivation and attitude to the choice of individual strategies and combinations of strategies.

Finally, it is stressed that because quantitative and qualitative methods each have their strengths and limitations, both kinds of research are necessary if we are to develop multifaceted insights that are at once broadly applicable and rich in observed detail. Both traditions can add immensely to our understanding of how students comprehend texts. Neither tradition will give the whole answer, but both together can provide a clearer picture of the processes of language teaching and learning.