

# **An Initial Study Of Reading Problems And Strategies: A Teacher's Perspective**

by

**Sharmini Ghanaguru, Ng Hee Liang, Ng Lee Kit**

Institut Perguruan Bahasa-Bahasa Antarabangsa  
58200 ,Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur

## **ABSTRACT**

*This study seeks to find out what one experienced teacher thinks are the main reading problems among her primary school pupils and how she helps them cope with their reading problems. It is an initial study to find out whether the in-service teacher is aware of the types of reading strategies she can use to resolve her pupils' reading problems and the reasons why she employs certain approaches and strategies to tackle the problems she has identified. There appears to be a link between one's background (both academic and social) and the strategies employed to teach and handle reading in the classroom. The conclusion is based on one case study and it is far-fetched to make any generalisations about reading problems and associated strategies for other teachers. Nevertheless the initial findings might still be useful for both teacher trainers and curriculum designers in order to maximise the potential of teacher training of ELT in teacher training institutions.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The work of the teacher is context specific and constantly revolving (Shulman 1992). Growing research on explaining teachers' subject matter, knowledge in teaching and beliefs about learning and pedagogy helps reflect the reality of teaching.

Several studies reveal that teachers' beliefs about control, management and motivation consistently relate important teacher behaviours such as lesson presentation and classroom management behaviours (Saklofske, Michayluk and Randhawa 1998). Teachers' belief systems are founded on the goals, values and beliefs they hold in relation to the content and process of teaching and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles in it (Richards 1998: 51). Their beliefs relate to the application of the four macro skills of language teaching: reading, writing, listening and speaking. How a teacher deals with the reading needs of her students is of particular interest in this study.

How a teacher identifies the reading problems of her students and the strategies used provide a clear understanding of what he/she needs to know about the reading process

and the teaching of reading skills if he/she is to cope with students' reading problems. How does the teacher cope with the reading class? Does his/her understanding and beliefs about the range of alternatives for teaching a particular skill to particular students influence his/her behaviours and decisions? The teacher plays an instrumental role in determining the teaching and learning outcomes. ESL teachers, in particular, should serve as effective language role models to their students. To ensure a successful reading class, the teacher must play an effective role and be able to identify and solve students' reading problems.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to explore a primary English language teacher's perspective of the reading problems faced by young ESL learners and the strategies she used to overcome these problems. What is the teacher's role in teaching reading and solving her students' problems? Is there a tendency to use certain strategies to solve the reading problems identified? The findings can help provide insights into the types of strategies the teacher used to solve what she perceives are her students' reading problems.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What reading problems does an in-service English language teacher perceive her students face in the classroom?
2. How does an in-service English Language teacher help her students cope with reading problems?

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Definition of Reading**

Reading cannot be regarded simply as a set of mechanical skills to be learned once and for all but rather as a complex process of making meaning from text for a variety of purposes and in a wider range of contexts.

What research tells us about the reading process is that sounding out words is necessary but not sufficient to the task. The reading process is really meaning driven. It is important to understand that unlocking the code and reading words is only a part of the complex process of reading (Adams 1990). In other words, there is a distinction between reading aloud and reading for meaning.

#### **Does learning to read mean learning to pronounce words?**

According to Weaver (1994), the first definition of reading is being able to pronounce the words. Phonemic awareness is the ability to segment, delete, and combine speech sounds into abstract units. While students will be able to hear phonemes, they may not be able to

conceptualize them as units. Phonemic awareness must be based upon a growing understanding of the alphabetic principle of English; there is sufficient evidence that many children basically understand this before they have mastered the set of letter to sound correspondences (Adams 1990). This definition supports the bottom-up theory of reading where the reader decodes the text by referring to the smallest unit (letters to words to phrases and to sentences).

Studies examining how children with training in phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge fare in comparison to children receiving "whole language" instruction have been conducted. Preliminary findings indicate a positive impact on decoding of training in phonemic awareness. However, children in "whole language" classrooms fare better on comprehension tests.

The importance of the early development of phonemic awareness is evident as a number of studies (Carnine and Grossen 1993; Juel 1991; Pearson 1993; Stanovich, 1986) point to phonemic awareness as a predictor of early reading success. However, it is but one factor important to the development of effective reading strategies.

Phonemic awareness promotes learning to read in the initial stages, but it cannot be used as a tool or device once the reader is able to read. In other words, a reading approach using the phonemic based awareness is suitable for beginner or elementary readers.

### **Does learning to read mean learning to identify words and get their meaning?**

The second definition on reading by Weaver (1994) pertains to the ability to identify words and extract meanings from words. Knowledge of phonics or basic letter-sound relationship is necessary but not sufficient when reading to extract meaning from a text. Fundamental questions remain about how much, how, when, and under what circumstances knowledge of phonics should be included in instruction. Just teaching the letter and the associated sound does not develop good readers. The teaching of phonics should be contextualized and the students' learning ability needs to be taken into consideration.

### **Does learning to read mean learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it?**

The third definition on reading as posited by Weaver (1994), supports the interactive model of reading. In the interactive reading model, the reader interacts with the text. The level of depth of text processing depends on the reader's background knowledge, language proficiency level, motivation, strategy used and culturally shaped beliefs about reading (Aebersold and Field 1997).

The ultimate goal for reading will be to enable the readers to understand what they have read. Good comprehenders have good vocabularies. They are able to understand and describe words. They use the word in the text to unravel its meaning. They ask questions,

predict and extract main ideas. They are also facile in employing sentence structures within the text to enhance their comprehension.

Therefore, one can conclude that the three definitions of reading by Weaver (1994) encompass three elements: the ability to recognize and pronounce words, the ability to extract meaning and interact with the text. The three definitions of reading by Weaver (1994) are illustrated in the following diagram:

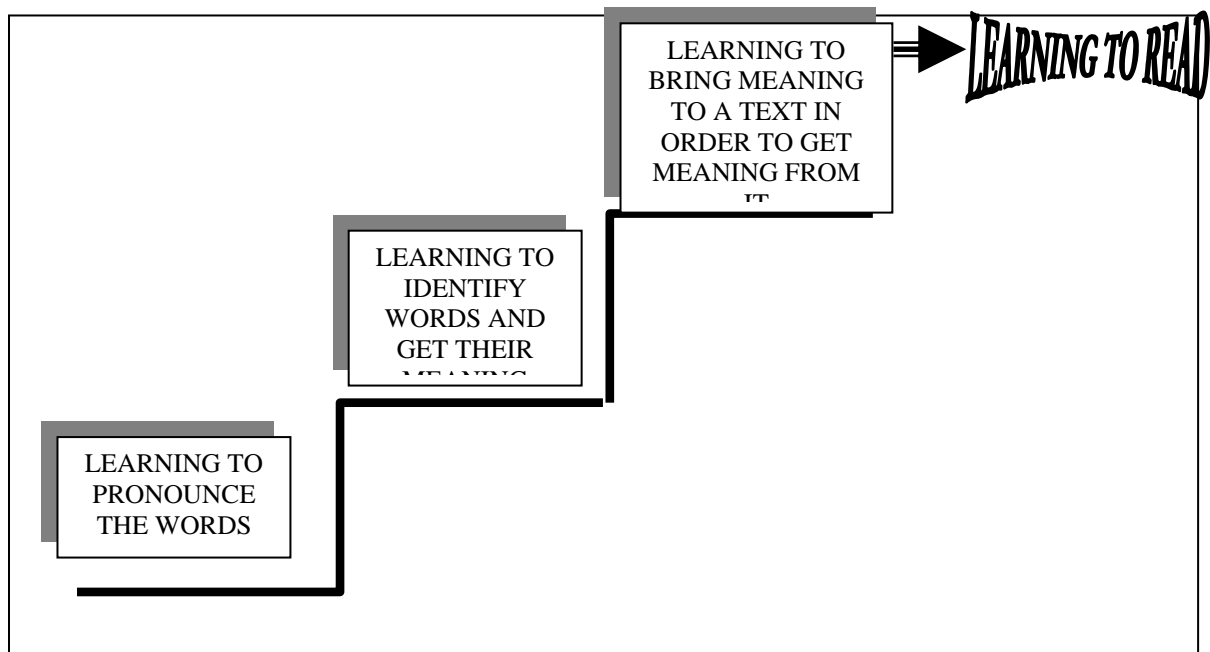


Figure 1: The Three Definitions of Reading by Weaver (1994)

### **Reading problems**

A review of literature on second language learning emphasizes motivation as an important affective variable. Collins (1996) identifies other causes for incomprehension besides poor motivation to a lack of experience or inadequate prior knowledge and a limited or subjective view of what is read. Students experience low motivation in reading when they are unable to use the language in meaningful situations. Only widespread involvement in language can solve the problem of poor motivation. Communicative based activities such as oral and recorded readings, asking questions, dictating stories and working in small groups will also facilitate learning as well as increase students'

motivation for reading (Carr 1995). Commitment to read and invest interest in reading is crucial in order for instruction in learning strategies to be effective.

Another reading problem is the lack of prior knowledge to help students make connections to text. As a result, under confident students revert to lower level reading processes such as word level literal comprehension. Support materials such as television and films can help enlarge experience and supply the necessary vocabulary to aid comprehension. Many struggling readers lack confidence in their own ability to learn unfamiliar words or phrases found in a text. This can sometimes impede the reading process when students assume that the text is far more difficult than it actually is. Moreover, if the reader chooses to disregard portions of a text deemed unimportant or make irrelevant associations, then the actual meaning of the text can be misconstrued. To eradicate this reading problem, the reader needs to be exposed to other viewpoints of the text. Reading and discussing about the text will help individual readers gain different perspectives on issues in the text. Hence, this will enable the reader to realize that his interpretation of the text is limited by his subjective view.

According to the University of Alabama, Centre for Teaching and Learning, bad reading habits come in the form of vocalizing, reading everything at the same speed, regression and reading one word at a time. Vocalizing impedes the reading process as it slows the reading rate. As a result, processing the information in a text will not be carried out efficiently. A good reader adjusts the reading speed according to the level of difficulty of the text. If the text is deemed difficult, the reading rate becomes slower. If one reads a text at the same speed, there is a tendency that pertinent information in the text will be ignored or unnecessary portions in the text be given more emphasis.

When words in a text “are efficiently decoded into their spoken forms without comprehension of the passage taking place” (Stanovich 1986: 372) word calling occurs. This idea of word callers has gained popularity despite a lack of evidence that applies “to an appreciable number of poor readers” (Stanovich 1986: 372). On the other hand,

Stanovich defines “gap fillers” as readers with low accuracy and high comprehension. These readers are able to use contextual clues to decode the text. They are able to extract meaning from the text using their knowledge, experience and intellectual abilities. They are not text bound and are able to read beyond the words to achieve a more global understanding of the text.

### **Reading Strategies**

According to Kellerman (1977), a strategy is a well-organized approach to a problem. Jordens (1977) asserts that strategies can only be applied when something is acknowledged as problematic. In terms of reading Carrell (1993) uses the term "strategies" deliberately rather than the term "skills" because the focus is on the actions that readers actively select and control to achieve desired goals or objectives, although there are different claims in the literature as to how much conscious deliberation is involved in these actions. Paris, Wasik and Turner (1991: 611) define "strategies" and "skills" accordingly:

*Skills refer to information-processing techniques that are automatic, whether at the level of recognizing grapheme-phoneme correspondence or summarizing a story. Skills are applied to a text unconsciously for many reasons including expertise, repeated practice, compliance with directions, luck, and naive use. In contrast strategies are actions selected deliberately to achieve particular goals. An emerging skill can become a strategy when it is used intentionally. Likewise, a strategy can "go underground" [in the sense used by Vygotsky, 1978] and become a skill. Indeed strategies are more efficient and developmentally advanced when they become generated and applied automatically as skills. Thus, strategies are "skills under consideration."*

Therefore one can say that reading strategies are applied in the reading process to attain comprehension as well as to overcome problems during the comprehension process.

Each reader possesses individual reading strategies. However, a good reader is one who is able to achieve a balance between comprehension (ends) and the reading process (means) via a vast repertoire of strategies. He/she understands the alphabetic system of English to identify printed words; have and use background knowledge and strategies to obtain meaning from print and read fluently (Snow, Burns and Griffin 1998 cited in Lee 2002: 39 - 40).

A weak or poor reader may need to adjust his comprehension to the text. If the reader decides to adjust his reading only to the text, he is text bound (Carrell 1993) Within the text, if the reader is faced with textual comprehension problems, he may be forced to adjust his reading by reducing comprehension even more than before. The reduction will lead to word by word processing and difficulties in sound-to-sound correspondence.

A range of strategies are necessary to develop students' interest and pleasure in reading as well as their reading skills to help them overcome their reading problems. The English teacher should be skilled and knowledgeable enough to select those strategies most appropriate to the needs of his/her students. This is because ESL learners need to efficiently recognise and at the same time understand the meaning of the words automatically (Lee 2002: 65).

### **Building students' background or prior knowledge**

Readers rely on their prior knowledge and world knowledge to make sense of what they read. They need to be exposed to content to give them the context for understanding what they read. Working with students before they begin reading a text helps them to get more involved. First, students learn background information to activate useful schemata (Johnson and Pearson 1982). They then recognize textual landmarks as they meet them. Confident students are more likely to take risks in guessing word meanings and anticipating text content. They will be better strategy users while they read. According to Tierney and Pearson (1985 cited in Devine 1987:186), the teacher needs to be sure of the students' prior knowledge of the topic and the genre of the text before actually implementing the reading lesson. Intelligent selection and preparation before reading can also make the students' reading more efficient and enjoyable.

Activating relevant, prior knowledge before, during and after reading texts enhances comprehension. ESL reading teachers can select or assist students select texts that they are interested in and familiar with and of a linguistic level just beyond their students' current level of reading competence. Hence, reading materials used in the reading class should also possess content matter that is familiar so that students can relate and make associations using their acquired as well as new knowledge.

### **De-emphasizing oral reading**

One major difference in the theory and practice of first language (L1) and (second language) L2 reading concerns reading aloud and the relationship of pronunciation and

comprehension in the teaching of reading. The ability to pronounce words correctly often seem to be a predetermine in assessing students' reading competency. Unless the L2 reader is already orally proficient in the target language, the ability to sound out words correctly is not especially helpful in the comprehension process. For example, students asked to read aloud during introductory stages of a reading lesson concentrate on sounds to the detriment of meaning.

Brenhardt's (1983) study indicates that comprehension of passages read silently is higher than that of passage read aloud. Several other studies also argue that students taught to read using an audio-lingual, decoding-to-sound method do not outperform those who learn to read without active oral participation on their part.

Hence, reading aloud can be considered one of the reading skills that help students read fluently and gain confidence in the language. It cannot, however, solely be assumed as an indicator of reading success.

### **Using cloze to teach reading**

Using cloze to teach reading gives students practice in the essential skill of guessing from context, congruous with Smith's (1978 in Barnett 1988) psycholinguistic theory of reading in which the development of the ability to guess meaning from context is seen as the key to successful reading. This context includes not only the words on the page, but also the reader's knowledge of the language of the subject matter of the text being read. By deleting words from a passage on a regular basis, cloze brings out into the open students' guessing strategies, thus allowing learners, then teachers, and their peers a chance to help learners increase their guessing ability. This increased ability may lead to greater comprehension and also faster reading speed as the time needed to decode each word is reduced and reading is more efficient.

Teaching the skill of contextual guessing may improve reading comprehension and speed (Van Parreren and Schouten-Van Parreren 1981 cited in Barnett 1989). However, this method may be effectively used by advanced readers, but not necessarily appropriate for beginning L2 readers (Jarvis 1979 cited in Barnett 1989).

In L2 reading, readers are not penalized for making errors. They are encouraged to use contextual clues and employ reading strategies that will enable them to grasp the meaning of a text without resorting to word by word decoding. This will help the readers to be more independent in their reading and to gain greater confidence in seeking information from the text. They will not be afraid of unfamiliar or difficult words and use effective reading strategies (guessing skills) to unravel the meaning of the text.

Other strategies to help problem readers include generating visual images of what is read, getting them to react or respond to the content of the text pictures as well as text features (e.g. headings) and text structures (e.g. narrative).



## METHOD

### Participants

This a qualitative based study where responses from a participant is analysed. The participant is in service teacher. The respondent had taught in different primary schools mainly in rural areas for sixteen years. She taught for two years at a lower primary level. She enjoys teaching reading especially at lower primary. However, her preference is teaching listening and speaking skills because she can evaluate students in the two skills there and then. According to the respondent, her parents first started reading to her bedtime stories both in Bahasa Malaysia and English. They used pictures and books to help her recognize and/ or read the names of animals, objects or colours when she was four years old. She did not attend kindergarten but at seven years, she was learning to recognize words in the newspapers and using the dictionary to look up meanings of difficult words.

At school, she had easy access to storybooks set up by the English language teacher. The emphasis was on grammar rules and sentence structures. Text length and word difficulty increased with age and by Year 4, she was more confident and could read aloud fluently although she still made mistakes in answering comprehension questions.

It was her father's wish for her to be a teacher. After completing a three-year basic certificate course in English language teaching, the respondent taught English for five years in a primary school in Kelantan. Her students were mostly the children of farmers. Later, she taught in a FELDA school in Pahang. It was here that she initiated the first English camp in the state. It was the "best school" compared to more urban schools that she was to teach in later (in Johore and Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur). Her students, from different states, showed much interest and cooperation.

The respondent attended a one-year Diploma in TESL in Universiti Malaya. She also received training in the Malaysian Trainer Development Programme (MTDP) for three weeks, and attended a three-day Newspaper In Education workshop and a two-week Big Book Project at state level. Other related experiences include her involvement in judging story telling and public speaking competitions at zonal level.

### Instruments

A fact sheet was used to obtain the respondents' background information, training/involvement and experiences in reading. A semi-structured interview consisting of open ended questions were asked to enable the respondent to elaborate and clarify her explanations .

### Procedure

The following illustrates the data collection procedure conducted in the study.

<i>Procedure</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Briefing by the researcher.	A briefing was carried out to inform the respondent on her role in the study. Fact sheet was distributed to the respondent to fill in details pertaining to her biodata and work experiences .
Semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher.	This semi-structured interview was conducted to elicit data on what the respondent perceived to be young ESL readers' problems as well as the strategies used to overcome these problems. The interview is carried out on a one-on-one basis so that a more detailed and comprehensive account of reading problems and teaching strategies could be obtained.
Second/follow-up interview by the researcher	This semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain background information, training or involvement and experiences in reading.
Written reflection by the respondent	The respondent was asked to reflect in writing what she thought were her young ESL readers' problems and the strategies used to overcome these problems.

### **Data Analysis**

The semi-structured interviews aimed to capture the respondents' ideas and concerns regarding young ESL readers' problems as well as their reflections on the types of strategies employed to solve the problems. The interviews were audio-taped and the data obtained transcribed to allow the researchers to offer their insights accordingly. The data were interpreted and categorized according to types of reading problems and strategies. These were then discussed in an analytical manner. The categories of problems and strategies were not based on a priori categories where a framework with predetermined domains is used to categorize the data. Rather the analysis is based on the respondent's account and reflection as there was no observation of actual classroom practice.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Respondent's Definition of Reading**

The respondent identifies two different schools of thought on teaching reading – “read aloud the words, pronounce the words correctly” (Interview, circa June 2002: line 347) and “meaning-making process” (Interview, circa June 2002: line 348). To the respondent, “Reading is looking at words. OK and then pronouncing it” (Interview, circa June 2002: line 98). This definition affects how the respondent approaches and teaches young ESL learners reading. Reading is primarily about reading aloud as “... they pronounce their words correctly while reading something. The pronunciation is the most important thing, right? So I think we should stress more on reading” (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 28 – 30).

Assessing reading ability, to the respondent, means “reading aloud ... Reading and pronouncing the words” (Interview, circa June 2002: line 351). However, answering comprehension questions is perceived as an exam-oriented goal “... in terms of exams ... we teach them to read to understand the text ... because they have to answer questions ...” (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 351 – 352).

### **Respondent's Perspective of Her Students' Reading Problems**

Various reading problems were identified. One is “of course, the pronunciation. Second is the stress, intonation and then the exclamation marks, the full stops, commas ... intonation and everything” (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 446 – 447). Other problems include linguistic deficiency, poor reading aloud skills, lack of prior knowledge and interest in reading.

#### **Poor reading aloud skills**

The respondent considers reading aloud of major importance in the macro skill of reading. Testing students' reading ability seems to be via “reading aloud ... Reading and pronouncing the words” (Interview, circa June 2002: line 351). It also includes stress and intonation. To the respondent, not being able to read means not being able to read aloud. A text is considered difficult if, for instance, the students could not pronounce the words. However, in terms of exams, promotion becomes secondary, the respondent did not indicate teaching of phonics or pronunciation skills in her reading lesson although instruction in decoding “could be a useful intervention” (Lee 2002: 130).

### **Linguistic deficiency**

Students often do not comprehend a text simply because of their linguistic deficiency in the target language. "... they have problems in understanding ... Because they've what you call ... their knowledge of the language is not good enough" (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 37, 39). According to the respondent, students need to understand a passage "in terms of exams" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 351). Many face vocabulary problems and cannot understand what is told. When they come across difficult words in a passage, they "don't understand the meaning" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 47). The ability to answer comprehension questions is particularly critical in Years 5 and 6 in view of the national examination – the Primary School Assessment Test or "Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah" (UPSR). When asked questions about a reading text, her students respond in the mother tongue, which in this case is the Malay language. They also resort to the Malay language if they do not know the meanings of words. Some students in Years 4, 5 and 6 do not want to read because they actually "can't read". They are afraid to "expose their weaknesses" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 278) as weak students are required to attend remedial classes where different levels of materials are used, such as "short sentences" and filling in the blanks. "They don't really recognize the word"

(Interview, circa June 2002: line 283). For the purpose of answering comprehension questions, sub-skills such as scanning and skimming are given particular emphasis by the respondent as students need to look for main ideas and supporting details.

### **Lack of prior knowledge**

The respondent finds that her students lack prior knowledge especially in the pre reading stage in understanding interesting texts with foreign content. For example, the lack of background knowledge and information about the nature and uses of buildings in Indonesia such as the Borobudur can make reading difficult. In this case, the respondent created her own story about the places she went to and the things she saw there to explain about the buildings.

### **Lack of interest / motivation in reading**

Students who lack interest in the reading lesson are also unwilling or uncooperative learners. These are mainly weak students who often do not voluntarily get involved or participate in classroom activities.

Some are weak in reading. What prevents them from attempting to read in class is their lack of confidence and fear of being embarrassed by other students. These are the shy ones who are quiet and afraid of making mistakes should they be called upon to read aloud. "You have to take them to the library ... guide them" (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 487 – 488).

## **Respondent's Teaching of Reading Strategies**

The process of learning to read involves decoding and comprehension. The respondent points out that she helps to increase her students' understanding of meaning of words, phrases, sentences and text mainly through explanation, visuals, read-alouds, questions and summary writing.

### **Explanation of meaning and content**

The respondent usually explains difficult words or the meaning of a text first before directing the students to read the passage aloud. During the pre-reading stage, the respondent often explains unfamiliar content to the students or tells a story, real or otherwise, to arouse interest and make reading easier. For example, in a typical reading lesson on "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", the respondent starts off with a recording of the sounds of bears and a brief explanation about bears and difficult vocabulary, followed by questions students need to answer to show their understanding of the text. To make the reading lesson meaningful to her students, the respondent tries to contextualise with examples or illustrations and explanations of difficult words: "I've to relate the text in the way they can understand it" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 413).

Students are encouraged to use the dictionary to search for difficult words that they encounter in their reading. They copy down any difficult words they come across into a small note book and write down the dictionary meanings.

### **Visual support**

The respondent particularly liked using texts with lots of visuals such as pictures in Big Books and video tapes. Her students find that pictures and actions of characters aid their understanding. She thinks "the most relevant way of teaching (certain topics in the syllabus) is through video tape. These young ESL learners tend to enjoy looking at

pictures and at the same time listening to stories too. Pictures can also focus students' attention on important information as they read. As the respondent reads, the students follow the storyline with the help of pictures.

Based on the pictures, various questions could be asked to help students think aloud what they see and describe their reactions to the picture(s). The pupils also try to follow the words in the sentences. Weaker students enjoy looking at pictures and "are more eager ... to see the actions" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 392) on a video tape. The respondent enjoys explaining about pictures and a great deal on visuals to foster students' interest in a text and aid their understanding. "It's of a more friendly ... they feel that you're near to them so, in that way, I think they'll understand better than leaving them to do their work on their own" (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 83 – 86).

### **Read-alouds**

The importance accorded to reading aloud influences the respondent's classroom practice, that of getting individual students to read aloud. The emphasis is on stress, intonation and pronunciation. Hence the respondent considers it imperative to ensure correct pronunciation as she believes that "the pronunciation is the most important thing, right?" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 29). However, pronouncing it right does not warrant that all students understand the meaning of words.

The respondent subscribes to the idea that making mistakes is part and parcel of the process of learning especially in reading aloud. One way to promote reading is to be always patient and tolerant of errors made by other students. She is relatively tolerant of errors among her students as she subscribes to the idea that errors are part of parcel of the learning process.

### **Use of questions**

Questions are regularly used to assist students' understanding of a text. The respondent notes that "... we get the main ideas from the question itself, right? So, in the question itself it's stated where they're supposed to find the answer ..." (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 403 – 404). In this respect, focusing on certain key words in a question is considered an important skill as "... the key word from the question will be the answer" (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 406 – 407). However, this is considered the "worst technique" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 405) by the respondent. The use of questions is for the purpose of meaning-making and learning, though it is not regarded by the respondent as a skill of reading.

### **Summary writing**

A common task given by the respondent is summary writing. This is to gauge whether students understand the books they select in the library. In this task, individual students get to share their summary by reading them aloud when they are back in the classroom. The respondent felt that getting her students to find "words that they don't really understand and look up for the meaning" (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 66 – 67) and to write down a short summary work because she will "know if they understand the story or not" (Interview, circa June 2002: line 69).

## **CONCLUSION**

The profile of the experienced ESL primary school teacher reveals that she is fairly well trained in TESL methodology. She graduated with a one-year Diploma in TESL, received three weeks' training in the Malaysian Trainer Development Programme (MTDP) and was involved in projects such as the Big Book Reading Project and the Newspaper in Education (NIE) workshop. The types of problems and strategies identified

by the respondent are based on her experience and understanding of reading and reading problems. This understanding in turn affects her approaches in teaching reading.

In her sixteen years of teaching, the respondent enjoyed teaching at the lower primary level where she taught for two to three years. Her definition and understanding of reading is centred mainly on reading aloud to develop fluency. She believes that pronunciation is important and becomes secondary only “in terms of examination” (Interview, circa June 2002: line 356). So her usual classroom practice of teaching reading is to get individual students to read aloud paragraphs of a text and correct any mispronunciation. This may embarrass students who make mistakes or encourage others to read or think about something else while others are reading aloud. No doubt mouthing out words helps young readers correct pronunciation but the respondent does not demonstrate how read-alouds could be made more meaningful and enjoyable. There is also no mention of how classroom instruction and activities can develop phonological awareness. This seems to be the respondent’s interpretation of the sub-skills of reading specified in the primary English language syllabus (Ministry of Education 1995):

- 3.2 Acquire word recognition and word attack skills
  - recognise words on sight
  
- 3.4 Read aloud expressively and fluently
  - observe intonation, stress, rhythm, pause
  - in meaningful chunks

According to the respondent ‘Reading is looking at words. OK and then pronouncing it’ (Interview, circa June 2002: line 98). The focus is on word level decoding and literal comprehension. However, reading is more than focusing on words, trying to say all the words. Silent reading also needs to be encouraged for faster reading and to facilitate comprehension. Improving students’ comprehension abilities is essential to academic learning in all subject areas as well. However, the goal of improving reading comprehension, to the respondent, seems to be preparing Years 5 and 6 students for Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR). The concerns over examinations in the primary schools have inevitably led to “teaching to the tests” (Nutall 1995). Hence, classroom practice focused on the attainment of examination results in UPSR as it reflected effective English language teaching in the primary school.

The respondent mentions skimming and scanning for main ideas and details. Higher order reading skills, for example, making inferences are not mentioned. Perhaps, the respondent finds it more difficult to teach students to use information from various parts of a text to infer meanings that are not explicitly stated. Other strategies used to monitor comprehension or meaning such as rereading or looking back to earlier parts of the text are also not mentioned by the respondent. Neither did she give explicit instructions on how to answer except for identifying the key word in a question which she thinks is the worst technique. Student-generated questions could be encouraged to build comprehension as it requires readers to tie new information to prior knowledge. The

quality of questions and feedback to reader response is also critical to good comprehension.

To teach comprehension skills, students could paraphrase and summarize works. Summarizing requires readers to actively clarify meaning, condense information, select what is important and combine selected ideas in a new form. The respondent does not elaborate how she teaches her students to integrate ideas and generalize from information in the texts. There is no mention of structures for organising information that would make review, retelling or summary of a text read easier.

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in reading. The respondent emphasized understanding the meaning of difficult words in a passage and the use of a pocket chart as a ‘good way of letting them to know the words because ... knowing the meanings of the words then they’ll understand the story or the sentences’ (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 89 - 90). She thinks her students need to know the meaning of individual words first before guiding them ‘to pronounce the words’ (Interview, circa June 2002: lines 93 - 94). Difficult words are considered a pre-requisite to the comprehension of the overall meaning of a text. Teaching vocabulary is one of the sub-skills in the primary English language syllabus (Ministry of Education 1995):

- 3.5 Acquire a wide range of vocabulary
- synonyms

Many ESL readers encounter vocabulary problems. Their one constant resource is the dictionary to help improve their understanding of the meanings of individual words. However, using the dictionary while reading makes fluent reading difficult. The use of contextual clues, vocabulary puzzles, mnemonic techniques and the teaching of spelling rules help readers to effectively guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. However, the respondent believes her students should look up the dictionary for the meanings of difficult words perhaps because that was how she learnt difficult words under the guidance of her father.

The respondent also relies a lot on visual support to help aid comprehension and motivate struggling or weak readers. She seems adept at using pictures to foster students’ interest and response. For these readers with limited knowledge of content, the respondent provides verbal explanation or creates stories which she sometimes makes up as she believes her students would not be able to tell the difference. Instead of filling in blanks, the respondent could give her students story blanks to focus on important elements of a story and anticipate what might happen next. Moreover, she could use text features such as headings and sub-headings to activate and build students’ prior knowledge. Graphic organizers such as story maps also help familiarize students with the use of text structures, for example, a narrative or guidance in understanding how a narrative text is structured to enable students to ask questions and make connections as they read.



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