

**USING AN ADAPTED VERSION OF RECIPROCAL TEACHING
TO TEACH READING COMPREHENSION TO LOW ENGLISH
PROFICIENCY LEARNERS**

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my beloved father,
Tan Sri Datuk Amar Lee Hun Hoe,
former Chief Justice of Borneo

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether the adaptations made to reciprocal teaching would be more effective than the traditional approach of pre, while and post reading activities when teaching reading comprehension. The study measured and compared the performance of two groups of Form Four students at a secondary school in Kuching, Sarawak.

The respondents were given pre and post-tests on comprehension passages to find out whether there was an improvement in the reading comprehension of low English proficiency learners after being taught an adapted version of reciprocal teaching. The other pre and post-test on cloze passages was to find out whether there was an improvement in the general English language proficiency after being taught the adapted version of reciprocal teaching. In both cases, there was some improvement in the mean scores but the increase in scores was not statistically significant.

Participants were also asked to write comments on student feedback forms. Comments from the participants were positive and encouraging. The results of the study suggest that the adapted version of reciprocal teaching can be used as a teaching strategy to improve reading comprehension, as there was some improvement in the mean score in the post-tests. Besides that, the students reported that the adapted version of reciprocal teaching gave confidence and the opportunity to cooperate with each other when working on the reading passages.

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini ialah untuk menelitikan sama ada adaptasi yang dibuat terhadap ‘reciprocal teaching’ adalah berkesan apabila dibandingkan dengan cara tradisional untuk mengajar kefahaman. Kajian ini mengukur dan membandingkan prestasi dua kumpulan pelajar Tingkatan Empat di sebuah sekolah menengah di Kuching, Sarawak.

Responden diberi pra-ujian dan pos-ujian mengenai kefahaman petikan untuk menentukan sama ada terdapat kemajuan dalam kefahaman petikan di kalangan pelajar yang kurang fasih dalam Bahasa Inggeris selepas diajar dengan pendekatan ‘reciprocal teaching’ yang diubahsuaikan. Pra-ujian dan pos-ujian yang satu lagi mengenai ‘cloze passage’ adalah untuk menentukan sama ada terdapat kemajuan dalam kefasihan Bahasa Inggeris secara keseluruhan selepas diajar dengan pendekatan ‘reciprocal teaching’ yang diubahsuaikan. Dalam kedua-dua kes itu, terdapat peningkatan skor min untuk pos-ujianya. Akan tetapi, peningkatan itu didapati tidak signifikan.

Responden juga diminta untuk memberi komen dengan menggunakan borang maklum balas. Komen daripada responden menyokong cadangan bahawa ‘reciprocal teaching’ yang diubahsuaikan boleh digunakan satu strategi pengajaran untuk meningkatkan penguasaan kefahaman kerana terdapat penokokan skor min dalam pos-ujian. Selain daripada itu, responden berpendapat bahawa ‘reciprocal teaching’ yang diubahsuaikan itu memberi mereka peluang untuk bekerjasama antara satu sama lain dan keyakinan semasa membuat kefahaman.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

LEP	Low English Proficiency
RT	Reciprocal Teaching
L2	Second Language
L1	First language

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Learning to read is one of the greatest accomplishments in childhood because it is the foundation for learning and academic achievements (Paris, 2005). In the world today, the ability to read English fluently will be useful particularly if one needs to obtain information from internationally-based references and materials. As students gain wider access to electronic data bases through the Internet, it is reading, more than any of the other English language skills, that offers access to information. The ability to read has long been considered by literate societies to be one of the basic building blocks affecting commercial exchange, cultural advancement and personal independence. High levels of literacy are even more important as we move through the 21st century. In fact, we are now exposed to more information that requires reading and synthesizing. Now we depend on our reading abilities in every area of our life: our careers, assembling household items as well as being an informed citizen. The demands on students to read, comprehend and evaluate complex information have never been greater. Jobs in technology, information and management dominate the workplace, leaving few opportunities for the uneducated. Students in schools today require a strong foundation of literacy to enable them to participate in an increasingly educated workforce.

A survey on the reading profile of Malaysians was conducted in 1996 by an international-based research company, Frank Small and Associates on behalf of the National Library of Malaysia. Information for the study was collected by a household survey sample and survey respondents were persons aged 10 years and above. One of the findings of the survey found that Malaysians read an average of 2 books a year.

Background knowledge plays an important role in understanding reading of a text. Readers comprehend the texts better when they are able to relate to the text as it is culturally familiar. When the text is culturally unfamiliar, it is important that teachers activate background knowledge by the use of text previewing which can be in the form of various types of pre-reading activities leading learners towards a better understanding of background knowledge.

Reading comprehension today emphasizes the coordinated use of multiple strategies while students seek to comprehend texts. Students learn to engage with texts strategically through a process of teacher modelling, teacher scaffolding and support and gradual independent use to strategies to comprehend the text better (Grabe, 2004). There are many approaches that are commonly referenced as effective combined strategies instruction that improves reading comprehension. Reciprocal Teaching is one of such instructions. It presents a more open framework for instruction in which multiple types of tasks and activities are included.

1.2 Background of the study

LEP learners do not realize that the ability to read well is essential in order to survive in today's world. It is difficult to discover any activity that does not demand some form of considerable reading (Bond & Miles, 1973). Many do not realize that reading will continue to be an indispensable tool for acquiring knowledge, advancing one's social and economic status, improving oneself and

developing new insights and perspectives (Vacca & Vacca, 1986). Reading should be treated as a purposeful activity (Nuttal, 1996).

Reading is an interactive-constructive task (Winch & Hoogstad, 1985). The reader makes sense by interacting with the text and brings it to life by constructing it anew. Learning to read is not an easy task and is probably the most complex mental activity we have to do in our whole lives. It is a slow and difficult process and takes time, effort and practice. It goes without saying that the more practice we have the more competent we become as readers. Learning to read is a complex cognitive task demanding a high level of integration and maturity of a wide variety of abilities and skills (Moyle, 1969).

Reading is an integral part of any secondary curriculum. If students lack the skills to read as a way to learn then schools must provide students with the opportunity to develop appropriate and useful reading strategies. The current research on strategic reading instruction centres on the use of and training in multiple strategies to achieve comprehension (commonly include summarizing, clarifying, predicting, forming questions, using prior knowledge, monitoring, and evaluating) for example, the use of reciprocal teaching which will be discussed later.

We do not have to look far to realize the apparent lack of interest and problems in reading. The low proficiency English language learners in our classrooms are proof of this growing concern. The problem is so common that we have grown accustomed to seeing them struggle to comprehend written texts. In our classroom today, low proficiency English learners find it a struggle to comprehend the reading comprehension that they need to do as they lack the necessary skills required to understand the passage given to them. These low proficiency English learners are unable to read and comprehend texts found in textbooks and other materials provided by the teacher. There is a tendency by the teacher to spoon-feed information to the students in order to 'cover' the required

syllabus. This, no doubt will lead to the downward spiral of low English proficiency learners as they will continue to not read effectively enough to be successful, independent learners in school. Teachers have a gargantuan task in trying to teach reading skills to students. Low proficiency English learners do not act as though they are in control of their reading. They may realise when they come across unfamiliar concepts that they are not getting the meaning of what is being read, but they do not know how to go about helping themselves to understand the text better. Competent readers are able to use their background knowledge to make certain expectations about the texts before they read them.

One method that has been explored is reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown, 1984). Reciprocal teaching approaches reading as a problem solving activity which uses four comprehension strategies: questioning, summarizing, clarifying and predicting.

The reciprocal teaching model teaches students how to use some of the strategies that can help low English proficiency learners become effective readers. Following the reciprocal teaching procedures, students work in small groups with an adult to practise the strategies of predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarizing in order to become more aware of their own reading comprehension skills. Reciprocal teaching seeks to break down the reading process for students so that they can better understand what they read. Education's ultimate goal is to create independent life-long learners. Students need a variety of skills to succeed beyond the classroom. Schools need to teach and encourage the use of these skills so students' reliance on teachers decreases as they progress through the school system. Having the ability to comprehend a complex reading passage is important to becoming an independent learner.

In this project, changes were made to the reciprocal teaching procedures to make them easier to implement while maintaining the positive results that other researchers have found in traditional reciprocal teaching. This may encourage more teachers to use the adapted reciprocal teaching approach as it is less time consuming and yet may just be as effective. But are all four strategies really necessary? Were Rosenshine et. al (1996) correct in concluding that the same results could be obtained with only questioning and summarizing?

1.3 Statement of the problem

Low English proficiency learners are reluctant to read citing various reasons like being too involved in school activities to going for tuition after school hours. Whatever reasons have been given by the low English proficiency learners, one thing is clear. The majority of our learners are unable to understand written texts. Our students are struggling with written texts as they lack the necessary skills to read and comprehend the texts. The problem is so common that we have grown accustomed to seeing them struggle to comprehend written texts.

There is a lack of systematic approach to developing reading skills as teachers go through the reading comprehension sometimes by reading the texts and then asking the students to answer the questions. Teachers attempt to assist these low English proficiency learners by giving them as much help as possible. The 'help' given by teachers is usually to provide them the answers after some unsuccessful attempts to 'teach these students. The process of 'helping' these low English proficiency learners will result in them not acquiring the necessary skills to become independent learners and being able to take charge of their own learning.

To add to this problem, is the fact that each class consists of students of mixed abilities in the English Language as students are often streamed according to their overall achievement. It is indeed a struggle for English language teachers to teach learners of mixed abilities. It is frustrating for both good and poor learners. The good learners will have to work at a much slower pace in order to allow the slow learners to finish their work. With most schools having class size of over 40

students in a class, it is indeed a gargantuan task to demand that the English language teacher is able to handle both groups of learners. It is possible but will it be effective?

Clearly in such a situation, the conventional teacher-centred large group teaching would not effectively meet the different needs of each student. Thus teachers may have to explore new methods of teaching in order to arrest the downward spiral of many students who cannot read effectively enough to be successful, independent learners in school. Through readings of various methods of teaching reading comprehension, one such method is the reciprocal teaching approach. Reciprocal teaching is an instructional technique developed by Palincsar and Brown (1984) and described by them as a dialogue between teachers and students for the purpose of jointly constructing the meaning of text. Students are taught how to use some of the strategies that help people to become effective readers. By working in small groups, students practice the strategies of predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarizing with an adult. They learn to become more aware of their own reading comprehension skills.

There have been numerous articles written about reciprocal teaching on the success rate of using this method found in Lysynchuk, Pressley and Vye (1990), Bruce and Chan (1991). Using the strategies recommended, the success rate of the low English proficiency learners should be just as good. During panel meetings in school, it has been discovered that not a single English Language teacher in SMK St. Teresa, the site of this study is using reciprocal teaching to teach the low English proficiency learners in their class. One of the reasons could be because teachers are not aware of such a teaching method to teach reading comprehension. Using an adapted version of reciprocal teaching on low English proficiency learners can be one of the instructional strategies to teach reading comprehension.

1.4 Purpose of the study

This project aims to investigate whether an adapted version of reciprocal teaching will improve the reading comprehension ability of low English proficiency learners. Following the Reciprocal Teaching procedure, students work in small groups with an adult to practice the strategies of predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarizing in order to become more aware of their own reading skills.

In this research, an adapted version of reciprocal teaching with fourth form students to determine if the procedure would help them better understand what they read was used. Additionally, this research would show if changes made to reciprocal teaching procedures to make them easier to implement, would improve the reading comprehension ability of the students.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This project attempts to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate whether an adapted version of reciprocal teaching will improve the reading comprehension ability of low English proficiency learners
2. To find out whether an adapted reciprocal teaching approach will improve the general language proficiency of low English proficiency learners
3. To examine the reactions of low English proficiency learners to an adapted version of reciprocal teaching procedures

1.6 Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Does an adapted reciprocal teaching approach improve the reading comprehension ability of low English proficiency learners?

Ho : There is no significant relationship between the teaching of adapted version of reciprocal teaching and an improvement in the reading comprehension ability of low English proficiency learners.

H1 : There is a significant relationship between the teaching of adapted version of reciprocal teaching and improvement in the reading comprehension ability of low English proficiency learners

2. Does an adapted reciprocal teaching approach improve the general language proficiency of low English proficiency learners?

Ho : There is no significant relationship between the teaching of adapted version of reciprocal teaching and an improvement in the general language proficiency of low English proficiency learners.

H1 : There is a significant relationship between the teaching of adapted version of reciprocal teaching and improvement in the general language proficiency of low English proficiency learners

3. What are low proficiency English learners' reactions to an adapted version of the reciprocal teaching approach?

1.7 Scope of the Study

The study investigates the effect of reciprocal teaching on only two aspects of language development, that is, reading comprehension and general language proficiency and not the productive skills. General language proficiency was measured using a cloze test and no attempts would be made to investigate changes in specific areas of language proficiency such as syntax, vocabulary etc. In this study, an adapted version of reciprocal teaching procedure is introduced to twenty (20) Form 4 students from SMK St. Teresa, Kuching.

The study was a quasi-experimental study involving two groups of students. One group comprising twenty low proficiency English learners were given the treatment which is the adapted version of reciprocal teaching procedures. The researcher taught the experimental group. The other group, comprising twenty students from Form Four would be the control group. The control group was taught by an English language teacher using the pre, while and post reading approach to teaching comprehension. This study of reciprocal teaching lasted two weeks (8 reciprocal teaching sessions) in late July to early August 2006. The control group was given two weeks of comprehension lessons which comprises 8 lessons. A pre and post- test on reading comprehension ability was given to the students (refer to Appendix A). Students were given a pre and post-test on cloze passages to determine the students' general language proficiency before and after the adapted version of reciprocal teaching was taught (refer to Appendix B).

1.8 Definitions of terms

For the purpose of this study, the terms used are defined as follows:

1.8.1 reciprocal teaching

This is a cognitive reading strategy developed by Palincsar and Brown (1984) designed to help students better comprehend when reading texts and better monitor their own comprehension.

1.8.2 reciprocal teaching strategies

There are four strategies that comprise reciprocal teaching:

predicting – students make predictions about what might be upcoming in a text based upon heading, subtitles or previous reading.

clarifying – students ask questions to better understand terms and concepts

questioning – students ask questions similar to ones a teacher might ask them about a section after they have read to try to get at the main idea of the section.

summarizing – students offer short summaries of the text section read before moving on to the next part of the reading.

1.8.3 adapted version of reciprocal teaching strategies

This comprises two strategies of questioning and summarizing. The definition of terms for the two strategies are given.

1.8.4 low English proficiency learners

These are students who have not achieved a pass in their pre test (marks below 50). These students have been streamed according to their academic ability in SMK St. Teresa and are all found in the last two classes of Form Four. There are seven classes of Form Four in the school.

1.9 Significance of the Study

The importance of identifying a limited number of powerful reading comprehension strategies cannot be overestimated. Instructional time is limited and teachers must be trained in those strategies likely to have the most positive effects on student achievement. Reciprocal teaching studies demonstrated that a model based on questioning, clarifying, summarizing and predicting was remarkably effective in improving students' reading comprehension skills. But are all four strategies really necessary? Were Rosenshine et. al (1996) correct in concluding that the same results could be obtained with only questioning and summarizing?

The reason for using reciprocal teaching to teach reading comprehension is because almost 20 years of research exists to support its effectiveness as a method for improving the ability of students to comprehend what they have read. It is important to use an instructional strategy that works as that there is a proven track record of the success rate of reciprocal teaching.

Another reason for the interest in reciprocal teaching is whether an adapted version of RT can improve the reading comprehension ability of LEP. RT has not been adopted by English Language teachers in schools in Kuching. This could be because English language teachers have not been exposed to this strategy of teaching reading comprehension. Considering the 20 years of research in reciprocal teaching and its effectiveness on poor readers, it is indeed surprising that it has not been introduced in schools in Kuching or perhaps even the whole of Sarawak.

Reciprocal teaching appears to offer a solution to students who have reading problems and cannot comprehend reading texts. Two strategies of questioning and summarizing in an adapted version of reciprocal teaching would be used to teach the low English proficiency learners. The intention of using an adapted version rather than the traditional method of reciprocal teaching is to see whether it can just be as effective. If so, then English Language teachers might be more inclined to use it.

The traditional approach to reciprocal teaching is quite time consuming as it uses the four strategies mentioned earlier. Would an adapted version of reciprocal teaching be more palatable to local teachers if it is less time consuming? From studies by Marks et al. (1993) three teachers used adaptations of reciprocal teaching as they were frustrated with conventional reciprocal teaching. Teachers may have been drawn by traditional reciprocal teaching because of its effectiveness in teaching reading comprehension. However, it is time-consuming and may be one of the reasons why teachers are reluctant to use this method even though it has shown to be effective.

Reading is an important skill and students should be trained in effective reading skills. This study investigates the effectiveness of one approach to teaching reading skills. An investigation into reciprocal teaching will add to the repertoire of teaching approaches available to teachers. Perhaps an adapted reciprocal teaching approach might be more acceptable to teachers than conventional reciprocal teaching. Marks and Pressley (1993) were struck by the many tales they were told of teachers receiving training in reciprocal teaching, trying it, and then abandoning the method. It is hoped that this adapted version of reciprocal teaching will result in more English Language teachers to use it when teaching reading comprehension to their readers. Most practicing English Language teachers would be encouraged to use an adapted version of reciprocal teaching especially if it is just as effective as traditional reciprocal teaching.