

Enhancing Academic Literacy among Tertiary Learners: A Malaysian Experience

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Abstract

A vast majority of Malaysian tertiary learners find reading, interpreting and critically evaluating an academic text, the cornerstone of much tertiary study, simply overwhelming especially when they have to rise to the challenge of presenting their understanding in a written or spoken form. The question that needs to be asked and answered now is what we, as educators, can do to help our learners cope with this demanding task ahead of them. An understanding of what difficulties learners face with academic literacy of this kind required in a tertiary institution will help us identify best practices to adopt to enhance academic literacy levels among these learners. This paper draws from a case study that set out to identify strategies learners employ to read an academic text for the purpose of presenting an oral summary of the text. Data was collected using think-aloud protocols, semi-structured interviews and a background questionnaire. The protocols were transcribed and analyzed for strategy use while information from the interviews and questionnaire help validate the strategies learners employed. The findings reveal that learners are not analytical or critical when they read and tend to use surface level processing of text all of which suggest they are not read to cope with academic literacy. The paper ends with suggestions on measures to help prepare learners for academic literacy.

Introduction

The face of tertiary education is undergoing change with the availability of education for all; (with the setting up of Open University, virtual university and distance learning) and the lowering of entrance requirements. This 'massification' (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002:15) of education does not ensure that learners who enter university are sufficiently equipped to cope with academic literacy demands. This is because literacy demands in university are different from those in school where exposure to academic literacy has been limited. There is an immediate need to look beyond the skills based approach learners are equipped with, as a result of training for

school literacy and the assumption that learners will be able to ‘pick up tertiary literacy practices’ (Hirst, 2002:3) and start thinking of how best to support learners in their engagement with tertiary literacy.

Academic literacy has been established as an important enabling tool for tertiary learners as the ability to read, interpret and critically evaluate texts can help a learner participate effectively in the comprehending of academic texts and the writing of assignments. It is also commonly established that a successful learner is often a successful reader (Shih 1992). It is an undeniable fact that reading empowers a learner and enhances the learning and thought processes. An examination of learners’ literacy experiences in school and in university will help outline the existent gap between these two literacies.

Background Literature

School Literacy

Reading in the Malaysian ESL school classroom is a fairly straightforward affair with the learner having to read a text for the purpose of answering comprehension questions mostly of the multiple-choice variety. The teaching of reading in schools focuses on literal comprehension skills such as word or sentence recognition (Ponniah 1993). More often than not learners use the comprehension questions to understand what is important in the text. School literacy has left learners with an insufficient inheritance in that they have minimal reading skills and strategies and are ill equipped to handle demands of academic literacy (Kaur 1996, Ramaiah 1997).

Rarely is the learner required to go beyond the information in the text relate new information to background knowledge and to have a holistic understanding of the text. These learners do not question what they read because there is no need to, so they generally believe and accept everything they read. Kanagasabai (1996), Ramaiah (1997) tell us that our learners lack a questioning mind because of the training provided by the classroom.

Tertiary Literacy

From this training ground, the learner moves to the university where she is required to read, interpret and critically evaluate an academic text and process that information in a written or spoken form. In the university the learner is required to understand lengthy texts, compare and relate ideas to background knowledge and reach a holistic understanding of the text so as to perform various cognitive and procedural tasks (Shih 1992). Spack (1997) talks about tertiary literacy as a process of actively engaging with what is read, finding information and understanding this by thinking through it and lastly interpreting the content to suit prototypical academic writing tasks like summarizing, presentations and discussions.

It is a commonly accepted belief that tertiary learners should know how to read and access knowledge from texts. This is because of the long relationship learners have with reading which spans kindergarten, primary and secondary schooling. The reality is however, many students who enter tertiary institutions are not prepared for the demands placed on them (Pressley, Yokoi, van Meter, van Etten & Freebern 1997).

Ramaiah & Nambiar (1993) studied the comprehension monitoring of undergraduates in a local university and concluded that these learners focus on micro-level issues and not macro level messages. Their learners also faced difficulty in understanding texts because of the tendency to view texts as bits of information rather than as a complete text. Ponniah's (1993) work with tertiary learners also highlights the superficial understanding learners have when understanding texts.

When one considers what the learner is trained to do in school (school literacy) and what is required of the learner in the university (tertiary literacy), it is clear there is a gap between the two kinds of literacies imposed on the learner. If the school emphasized reading for comprehension, using a skill based teaching to reading, and an unhealthy focus on examinations; the university expected learners to read critically, challenge information in texts, go beyond information in texts and relate it to schematic knowledge.

Strategy Use

How then do learners cope with the demands placed upon them in their path to literacy attainment? It has been hypothesized that using the appropriate strategies will help inform and improve learners' reading efficiency (Urquhart & Weir 1998). When learners employ suitable strategies effectively they are able to read and understand texts much more efficiently (Nambiar 2005).

It is an accepted fact that learners come with a host of strategies that help them to function as active and effective learners (Cohen 1998). Learning strategies have been identified as one set of strategies that a learner can exploit to help make learning easier, faster and more enjoyable (Oxford 1990). The most commonly used taxonomy of

learning strategies is that of Oxford (1990) where strategies are clustered into 6 groups – memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective groups. Each of these strategy groups was further divided into different sub strategies to be used by learners in varied ways to help them in the completion of a task. From this taxonomy Oxford(1990) developed an inventory called the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL. The SILL came in two versions Version 5 for speakers of other languages and Version 7 for speakers of the English Language.

The inventory used in this study was developed using the SILL Version 7 and Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies. This inventory was labeled the Descriptive Language Learning Strategy Inventory or DeLLSI (see Appendix for DeLLSI). The original categorizations of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategy groups were maintained but a thorough perusal of the various strategies was undertaken to see if all would be applicable based on earlier work with learning strategies done by local researchers (Mah 1999, Sarjit Kaur & Salasiah Che Lah 1998 Nambiar 1996).

An understanding of the strategies learners use to help them read and comprehend a text will help highlight the difficulties the learners have when carrying out a prototypical tertiary literacy task – reading to summarize. This is because the strategies the learner employs will indicate the kind of preparation received from school and at the same time reveal how much more has to be done to help the learner in the new environment.

The Study

This study set out to examine how learners were coping with one academic task i.e. reading a text to present an oral summary - by identifying the strategies they were using to help them comprehend the text and identify main ideas. The following research question informed the study:

What are the strategies employed by learners to read and summarize an academic text?

First year undergraduates majoring in English Language Studies volunteered to participate in the study in return for information on how they could improve their comprehension of academic texts. Each learner met with the researcher individually in the latter's room for the data collection. The text selected for the study was around 1500 - 2000 words in length and similar to the kinds of texts these learners had to read for their courses. Two members of faculty who had taught the learners helped to ensure the text was suitable for these learners to read.

Data was collected using the think aloud protocol, semi structured interviews and a background questionnaire. The learners were provided with the text to read and they were reminded to identify main ideas which they would use to present an oral summary of the text. The learners were also given access to the use of dictionary if they needed to refer to unfamiliar words in the text. The think aloud process was audio-recorded and the protocols transcribed and analyzed for strategy use using the DeLLSI (see Appendix) while the information from the interviews and questionnaire helped validate the strategies

the learners employed. Doubts and uncertainties arising from the protocols were clarified during the interviews to help enhance the data from think aloud protocol.

Results and Discussion

Learners, it was found tended to rely heavily on the cognitive strategy of using the dictionary to help them read and understand a text. They rarely made an effort to understand the unfamiliar word using contextual clues and were quick to look into the dictionary and this hampered the reading process. To quote from one learner, *“If the word is difficult, I take the dictionary book and find out the meaning”*. This strategy was often used together with the cognitive strategy of using emphasis by the learners. For instance, whenever they came across an unfamiliar word they would underline or highlight the word and write the meaning in the text, after consulting a dictionary. For many learners the importance of vocabulary, especially understanding unfamiliar words was indicated in the markings on the text. To quote from the learners,

“I underline what I think is important”

“Usually I write the meaning of the word on top of the word to help me read and understand”.

Learners find the kinds of academic texts they have to read in university conceptually and syntactically difficult. In addition, their poor understanding of vocabulary hampers their reading ability. This is especially alarming when we consider what Alderson (2000), Liu & Nation (1995) say about vocabulary being a key indicator of a reader's comprehension ability. Interestingly, considering vocabulary knowledge is

lacking among learners it is surprising they do not have clear dictionary skills in that, they avoid using the dictionary to look up unfamiliar words.

The cognitive strategy of analyzing and note taking was not commonly practiced among the learners when, in reality these strategies are extremely useful in helping construct meaning from texts. The learners were only applying surface level processing in their reading and therefore did not see the need to be critical of what they read. Not having to critique and question information in the text meant there was no need to be analytical in the reading as well.

The learners often used the compensation strategy of avoidance and guessing while reading the text. Whenever they came across a part of text they could not understand they would choose to disregard it. It was common to hear learners say, “*I don't know so I just skip*” and “*Actually when I don't know, I just ignore lah*”. This is a typical strategy with learners who choose to make learning simpler and more manageable by simply ignoring what they could not understand whether it was important to the understanding of the text or not.

When learners came across parts of a text that were conceptually or syntactically difficult they would choose to ignore the part or at best adjust the information in the text to make it more manageable. When learners adjusted the information in the text to simplify it they were also consciously choosing to ignore difficult parts of the text. This kind of selective reading was extended to words in bold and examples that illustrate information. By consciously choosing to ignore these bits the learners were sometimes

choosing to overlook important ideas in the text which in turn would lead to an inability to understand the main ideas of the text.

Learners, it was discovered tended to process text by identifying main idea and details in each paragraph from training provided in school, the learners continued to employ this practice in the university. Considering the fact that most university texts, whether chapters in books, articles, journal articles etc. are long texts, this paragraph level processing of the text usually means the learners have no idea of what they have read by the end of the long academic text. In addition, the learners do not evaluate what they have read against their background knowledge and make no attempt to critique it. This is largely because they lack the necessary schema to help them understand the text.

Tertiary literacy varies from school literacy as the former entails a process of identifying with a community by adopting similar practices and beliefs so as to be able to contribute effectively to that community. Most learners claim that they read, but their reading is confined to newspapers, magazines and novels. In fact some of the learners in this study did not even read the newspaper and their magazine selections were entertainment magazines like Cleo and Galaxie and not current and world affairs magazines like Time or Newsweek; while their novels were confined to Mills and Boon, Sydney Sheldon, Danielle Steel and even Enid Blyton. It is a rarity to find a learner who reads autobiographies or books on self-help. With the kind of easy reading learners indulge in, they are not prepared to read the academically challenging texts they encounter in universities.

Recommendations and Suggestions

This section will explore how academic literacy can be fostered in the tertiary classroom together with the teaching of summarizing skills and the need to raise metacognitive awareness among learners to help learners become better readers.

Teaching of academic literacy

Are we really teaching learners to read, interpret, and critically evaluate an academic text? We cannot assume they know how to read because they have been doing it for 12 years in school or because they obtained A1 for English at SPM level. In addition, we cannot give our learners a text and ask them to read it at home and come prepared to discuss it in groups the next day. The traditional linear relationship of reading-talking-writing cannot be practised in the Malaysian language learning classroom because our learners need guidance on how to become academically literate. Learners need to be taught how to reflect, analyze, evaluate and refine their ideas or simply critically think about what they are reading. As Hirst (2002) reminds us learners need to be supported in their engagement with literacy practices.

Learners need to be encouraged to avoid a paragraph-by-paragraph analysis and look to a more holistic understanding of the text. Learners need to be taught how to step back from a text so as to be able to present their understanding of the information in the text. In addition, learners should be taught the appropriate strategies to use to help them handle the complexities of academic reading.

Learners need direction to review their progress in reading and being metacognitively aware can help them understand how they learn (O'Malley et. al 1985). By making learners metacognitively aware we can help them develop effective strategies to help them read and comprehend texts. Academic reading can be the scaffolding on which the learner can develop academic literacy so it is important to design an appropriate course and also to deliver it effectively.

Teaching of summarizing skills

Summarizing is a cognitively demanding task and learners find this task extremely difficult. Summarizing is not an easy skill to perform because it involves the ability to reconceptualize material, which means the learner has to be able to move from a specific and local level to a more general or macro level. Studies have shown how graduates read in a linear manner rather than perceive the text holistically to extract main ideas (Holmes 1986 cited in Cohen 1990) and the emphasis on word level processing (Gimenez 1984 cited in Cohen 1990).

Summarizing requires the reader to move back and forth in the text and also between the text and the task to perform. The reader will have to identify the main ideas in the text, distinguish the super ordinate material from the subordinate material and also identify irrelevant information to exclude. They will then have to present this information in a clear and concise manner either in the form of a written or oral presentation.

The lack of understanding when reading a text is evident by the lack of cohesion in the summaries learners produce. Summarization involves the ability to read a text effectively and present that understanding in either a written or oral form. Learners need guidance in the reading and presenting of information from texts. For reading effectively the learner has to know which information is important and identify it correctly and this involves the ability to distinguish important information from trivial and redundant information. In addition, the learner needs to distinguish between superordinate and subordinate information in the text. For the writing, the learner needs to choose the important information to include, the redundant and trivial information to exclude, know how to synthesize and reconceptualize the important ideas into a cohesive piece.

Awareness raising sessions

There is sufficient evidence in the study to recommend critical reading to enable learners to be empowered readers (Ramaiah 1997). Learners should learn how to read texts critically and be aware of their thought processes (Fish 1980). Raising the level of metacognitive awareness, it is recommended can be one way of helping learners become 'constructively responsive' readers (Pressley & Afflerbach 1995) who read critically and attain higher academic literacy. It is recommended that awareness raising about learning strategies can raise the learners' level of metacognition and as such should be a regular feature in language classrooms. This can be done easily and efficiently by simply training instructors to conduct these awareness raising sessions.

Conclusion

The tides of change in tertiary education are here to stay and as institutions open their gates to the masses, we need to think of suitable measures to help alleviate the problems learners face with literacy education and help ease their transition into tertiary literacy. This paper has outlined measures educators can adopt to help learners bridge the gap between their own literacy practices and those of the academic community to achieve some measure of success. The suggestions provided here, however are merely a starting point to help empower tertiary learners and enhance their thinking and learning process.

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APPENDIX

Descriptive Language Learning Strategy Inventory (DeLLSI)

MEMORY STRATEGY

Strategy 1: Create mental linkages by grouping - Classify/reclassify language into meaningful units to make it easier to remember

Description of strategy:

Place a new word with other similar words in one group

Place new words in an arrangement – semantic mapping

Strategy 2: Create mental linkages by associating / elaborating

Make meaningful associations between new language and language in store

Description of strategy:

Link new language with what is already learnt using sounds, content, imagery

Strategy 3: Using keywords to apply images and sounds

Description of strategy:

Remember new language by using sounds or imagery

Strategy 4: Structured reviewing

Description of strategy:

Return to learned material at intervals to remember it.

Strategy 5: Reviewing well

Description of strategy:

Reading to commit to memory

Strategy 6: Employing action

Description of strategy:

Using physical action or mechanical techniques.

COGNITIVE STRATEGY

Strategy 7: Repeating a word, sentence or read a story repeatedly to understand it.

Description of strategy:

Practice saying or reading a word, expression or story to understand it.

Continued....

Strategy 8: Recognizing and using formulas and patterns

Description of strategy:

Using knowledge of formula and patterns to complete task.

Strategy 9: Recombining what is known in new ways

Description of strategy:

Use familiar words in different ways

Strategy 10: Practice naturalistically

Description of strategy:

Practise language by reading, writing, speaking or listening.

Strategy 11: Skimming and scanning

Description of strategy:

Read a text by skimming before going back for details.

Strategy 12: Use dictionary, reference books, and visuals to help in learning

Description of strategy:

Use reference materials, glossaries, and dictionaries to learn new language

Strategy 13: Reasoning deductively - from the general to the specific.

Description of strategy:

Apply general rules to new situations when learning language

Strategy 14: Analyze expressions

Description of strategy:

Understand expressions by breaking up into smaller units easier to understand.

Strategy 15: Contrastive Analysis

Description of strategy:

Applying L1 (BM) to understand new words in L2 (English.)

Strategy 16: Translating

Description of strategy:

Convert a target language expression to the native language or vice versa.

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Continued....

Strategy 17: Transferring -Use the L1 to produce the L2

Description of strategy:

Apply knowledge of words, concepts or structures from one language to another to understand or produce an expression in the new language.

Strategy 18: Take notes

Description of strategy:

Write down the main idea or specific points

Strategy 19: Summarize

Description of strategy:

Summarize a long passage to help understand better

Strategy 20: Use a variety of emphasis techniques

Description of strategy:

Underline, use brackets, arrows, circling words to focus on important information.

COMPENSATION STRATEGY

Strategy 21: Guessing intelligently using linguistic clues

Description of strategy:

Guess general meaning of unfamiliar words using clues from the target language.

Strategy 22: Guessing using non-linguistic clues

Description of strategy:

Guess meaning of unfamiliar words using knowledge of content, situation, text structure, world knowledge

Strategy 23: Switching to mother tongue when having difficulty expressing meaning

Description of strategy:

Use L1 to substitute a word that is unfamiliar.

Strategy 24: Asking for help from a fluent speaker of the target language

Description of strategy:

Asking another person for the right word to use

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Continued....

Strategy 25: Use a physical movement to indicate meaning of an unknown expression

Description of strategy:

Using movements to explain what is meant by difficult words.

Strategy 26: Avoid communication when difficulties are encountered or anticipated

Description of strategy:

Avoid communication when topic is too difficult or less familiar.

Strategy 27: Selecting topic to meet vocabulary and grammatical availability of learner

Description of strategy:

Direct the conversation to a topic which learner knows words.

Strategy 28: Adjust and approximate message to make it simple

Description of strategy:

Alter what is said because of a lack of suitable expression.

Strategy 29: Coin new words to communicate an idea

Description of strategy:

Make up new words to get a message across.

Strategy 30: Describe a concept or use a synonym to communicate meaning.

Description of strategy:

Using a different way or a synonym to express an idea.

Strategy 31: Going by the sound of it

Description of strategy:

If something sounds right it must be right

METACOGNITIVE STRATEGY

Strategy 32: Overview and Link with known material

Description of strategy:

Preview a lesson to get an idea of what it is about, how it is organized and how it relates to what I know.

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Continued....

Strategy 33: Make a deliberate attempt to pay attention to specific aspects and ignore distractions

Description of strategy:

Concentrate on what is learnt and ignore unrelated topics.

Strategy 34: Finding out about language learning

Description of strategy:

Find out how to become a better language learner

Strategy 35: Organizing the physical setting to optimize learning

Description of strategy:

Using the physical environment to help me understand my learning.

Strategy 36: Arrange learning around particular goals and targets

Description of strategy:

Plan what I am going to accomplish for my learning.

Strategy 37: Identify purpose of a task

Description of strategy:

Identify what I have to do i.e. the purpose of the task

Strategy 38: Plan for the task by understanding what it involves

Description of strategy:

Prepare for task by considering what needs to be done and what I know

Strategy 39: Seek and create opportunities to practise language in naturalistic settings

Description of strategy:

Look for ways to practise the new language

Strategy 40: Monitor errors and try to eliminate them

Description of strategy:

Know what errors I make and why.

Strategy 41: Evaluating progress in the language activity

Description of strategy:

Evaluate my general progress during the activity.

Continued....

Strategy 42: Self questioning

Description of strategy:

Questioning oneself as a way to evaluate answers

AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Strategy 43: Use laughter to relax

Description of strategy:

Using laughter when having a difficult or unsure time in language learning.

Strategy 44: Saying or writing positive statements to feel more confident

Description of strategy:

Encouraging oneself with positive statements to boost confidence.

Strategy 45: Pushing oneself to take risks

Description of strategy:

Allowing oneself to take risks despite fear of failure

SOCIAL STRATEGIES

Strategy 46: Asking Questions for clarification or verification

Description of strategy:

Check when in doubt or to see if something is correct

Strategy 47: Asking for Correction

Description of strategy:

Asking someone if what is said is correct.

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