

Journal Online Jaringan Pengajian Seni Bina (JOJAPS)

Applying The Interactionist Approach Towards Polytechnic Ibrahim Sultan's Students on Reading Comprehension

Siti Noraini Binti Hamzah, Mohd Rafiq Bin Mujilan & Siti Faezah Bt Ahmad Sazali

^a Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, KM10, Jalan Kong Kong, 81700 Pasir Gudang, Johor

Abstract

This study addresses the difficulty faced by English as second language (ESL) learners in reading comprehension. Hence, the current study aims to investigate the effect of interactionist approach on reading comprehension among tertiary ESL learners. This is done by applying negotiation for meaning (3C'S) in reading classes. Twenty (20) undergraduate learners were given pre-test, treatment and post-test. Results obtained by learners from pre-test and post-test were compared to check whether the treatment in which learners were exposed to comprehension check, clarification request and confirmation check taught by the teacher was effective in improving their reading comprehension in the target language. The findings reveal that ESL learners performed better when learners practice the usage of negotiation for meaning while doing reading comprehension tasks.

© 2020 Published by JOJAPS Limited.

Keyword: - Interactionist Approach, ESL Reading, Negotiation Meaning, 3c's.

1. Introduction

ESL learners are normally exposed to the target language in school during English as a second language (ESL) class. Malaysians are the non-native users of the language hence it is in fact challenging for learners to master the language. The final goal of English learning is to master the four main skills; they are reading, listening, writing and speaking respectively. Reading is a conscious and unconscious thinking process in which readers apply several strategies to reconstruct the meaning that the author is assumed to have intended (Mikulecky, 1990). In reality, most of ESL learners are having difficulty in understanding the text that they are reading. It is more challenging when learners are asked to complete reading tasks individually. According to Sari (2013), language learners perceive their limited range of vocabulary made it difficult for them to understand reading texts. This situation leads ESL learners to weak performance in reading comprehension, and eventually learners will be demotivated in reading in general.

The current study is intended to expose learners to the interactionist approach in order for them to achieve a better understanding when working on reading comprehension tasks. Interactionists view language as a communicative act and the language environment and the learner constitute a dynamic system (Hummel, 2014). Essentially, learners need to be involved in a conversation for a better understanding on the subject matter. Interactionist approach could possibly help learners to improve their reading comprehension as they are required to work cooperatively by communicating with peers. This will allow learners to exchange ideas and points of views, and finally come to a solution for the problem. In general, with the assistance of interactionist approach during reading lesson, it is hoped that learners will obtain better understanding on the reading texts that they are assigned to. However, there are only a few studies that have been conducted in correlation with interactionist approach and reading comprehension.

2. Literature Review

* Siti Noraini Hamzah. Tel.: +0132700329

E-mail address: sitinorainihamzah@gmail.com

Reading is the foundation of advanced studies which require reading abilities to access both textbooks and other reading materials outside the classroom (Roe, Stoodt and Burns, 1991). In general, it is important for one to be excellent at both academic and non-academic reading. (Vorhaus, 1984) acknowledges when readers read in their first language (L1), readers can easily develop their understanding with the reading context. However, the current issue among ESL learners is that they find it difficult at reading English materials mostly because they have limited vocabulary and poor grammar knowledge. Reading comprehension is the ability to understand what we read where words have context and texts have meaning (Roehl and Shiue, 2011). Hence, it is essential for one to develop reading strategies, such as skimming and scanning in order for one to become a proficient reader.

In increasing learners' understanding towards the reading text, a lot of research has been done to identify the factors that influence reading. Reading comprehension abilities are quite complex and vary in numerous ways depending on tasks, motivation, goals, and language abilities of learners (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). The ability to identifying a main idea is the most significant reading skill (Anderson, 1999). Generally, learners are required to grasp the overall idea of the text they are exposed to. A study conducted by (Alkiabi, 2015), he finds out learners apply reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, deducing meaning of unknown words, differentiating main ideas and supporting details, and understanding communicative function or value of sentences.

Keyton (2011) states that interaction is a process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. In ESL context, it simply promotes the exchanging of ideas and personal point of views among learners. (Muho and Kurani, 2010) in their study revealed that through oral discussion or interaction in the classrooms encourage learners to be more responsible towards their own learning. Interaction is essential in our everyday existence and our continued survival (Kohn, 1992). When learners have similar objective in the lesson, it will make it easier for them to achieve their goals through interacting with one another. Thus, by interacting orally when completing reading tasks or assessments, it will lead learners to a greater understanding of the reading text and later they will be able to finish up the task given to them.

Interactionist perceives knowledge develops first through social interaction and then becomes an internalized part of the cognitive structure of the learner (Sarem and Shirzadi, 2014). This suggests the importance of a language learner to be actively involved in a communicative activity to build up one's language capability. Input alone is not seen as sufficient, but learners need to interact to improve their understanding on the subject matter. There are several strategies that should be applied in improving L2 acquisition, one of them is through negotiation for meaning (Farangis, 2013). In negotiation of meaning, incidences of enquiries, replies enquiries, seek clarification, clarify, give instruction or state agreement through a series of interruptions should be present.

In Interaction Hypothesis, (Long, 1985 as cited in Foster and Ohta, 2005) said the most valuable input is made through interactional adjustments in acquiring a second language. Generally, input is believed to be comprehensible through negotiation of meaning. ESL learners are expected to interact directly to reach a mutual comprehension. This hypothesis emphasizes on the meaning of a message rather than focusing on the language form. Through interaction, learners' selective attention is directed to problematic features of knowledge through production (Gass and Mackey, 2007). This suggests that language is viewed as a communicative act, in which input alone is not sufficient for language acquisition.

The three (3) elements involved in negotiation of meaning are comprehension check, clarification request and confirmation check. (Long, 1985 as cited in Foster and Ohta, 2005) defines comprehension check as any expression by a native speaker (NS) designed to establish whether that speaker's preceding utterances had been understood by the interlocutor. Comprehension checks occur during the interaction and are normally in a form of tag questions, in which repetition of the exact same utterances. In other words, comprehension check refers to the act of NS checking on another interlocutor understanding on what is being said.

As for clarification request, Long concludes it as any expression by a NS to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterances, in which clarification request occur during negative feedback. In general, clarification request is the immediate response made by native speaker (NS) after another interlocutor (NNS) asked question to recheck the utterances heard by NS is correct. Short answers such as Yes/No is expected, in which it is unnecessary for NNS to give new information. According to Long, confirmation check is the immediate response made by native speaker (NS) after another interlocutor (NNS) asked question to recheck the utterances heard by NS is correct. Short answers such as Yes/No is expected, in which it is unnecessary for NNS to give new information.

The present study is supported by (Reza and Karimi, 2008) study, in which they investigated the role of input modification in text comprehension, and the findings show language learners negotiate meaning whenever necessary. This negotiation for meaning appears to have helped learners to achieve the greatest level of comprehension. This is in line with (Ellis, Tanaka and

Yamazaki, 1994) study, in which modified input through interaction led to more new words being acquired by learners. Additionally, (Behjat, 2011) in his study reveal that interaction during reading activities offers a greater comprehension among language learners on the reading text as a whole.

Due to the prevailing phenomenon, the present study aims to apply the interactionist approach in improving reading comprehension amongst undergraduate learners in reading skill. In particular, there are two research questions in this study:

- 1) Does the interactionist approach improve reading comprehension?
- 2) How frequent does' interaction actually occur during classroom discussion among learners?

3. Methodology

The current research was performed in Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan. Twenty (20) undergraduate students who enrolled for Bachelor of Graphic Design (BVC4A) were the respondents of the study. In order to answer the first research question in which the researchers wanted to find out whether the interactionist approach can improve reading comprehension, a pre-test was given to the respondents. In the pre-test, the marks obtained by the respondents were recorded in order to make a distinction between marks on pre-test and the post-test. Respondents were required to answer questions which emphasized on finding main points and supporting details from the particular article assigned to them. After that, respondents were given six treatment sessions with the researcher. In each session throughout the treatments, respondents were given an article. They were allowed to discuss with their peers to complete the questions that were prepared by the researcher. Finally, after six treatments with the researcher, respondents were given a post-test and the marks obtained were recorded just the same way with the pre-test.

Respondents were asked to work in groups of four (4) in which they were expected to have a discussion with their group members. The researcher was observing the respondents during the discussion to check whether they apply the 3C's elements (comprehension check, clarification request and confirmation check) in the discussion. In this research quantitative studies have been employed to answer both of the research questions. In order to answer the second research question that aimed to focus on the frequency of interaction occur during discussion among respondents, respondents were again required to work in groups to complete the reading tasks or activities given to them. There were six (6) treatments altogether. Before treatment sessions being carried out, the respondents were given input by the researcher. The input evolved around on finding the main points, supporting details and also on making enquiries and clarifications. The six (6) treatment sessions were observed by the researcher. During the treatments, respondents were expected to interact with each other in order to investigate the implementation of the interactionist approach in this study. The discussions done by respondents were tape recorded and transcribed, and later be included in the appendix of the study. The recordings and transcriptions were used to check the frequency of the 3C's elements (comprehension check, clarification request and confirmation check) used by respondents during their discussions. The frequency of 3c's were counted from the transcription of the tape recording which consist of students' interaction during treatment sessions.

4. Findings & Discussions

Quantitative analysis

Analysis of pre-test and post-test

This section discusses the results of the pre-test and the post-test done by the respondents. The pre-test were given to students before the treatment session began, to check on students' current capability on reading in general. Based on the results obtained by students in the pre-test, it gives clear information to the researcher on students' present understanding and knowledge of reading tasks. To this extent the background knowledge of the students was correlated with the course performance. Besides, the pre-test results also give students and teachers an early feedback on students' needs whether they requisite assistance through corrective action such as tutoring, extra homework assignments and other remedial helps. In addition, the pre-test results provide a benchmark for assessing teaching effectiveness of the instructor by the end of the course.

For post-test, the test was given at the end of the final treatment in which it was designed to measure the amount of learning the students acquired in a specific matter of subject. Questions concerning the topic which main focus was finding main ideas and supporting details of the text were taken into considerations. Essentially, the numerical score for both pre-test and the post-test were used to show differentiation of marks obtained between these two tests. By doing so will show the evidence of students' progress and improvement throughout the study, in which it was believed that the post test score ought to be higher than the pre-test score.

Based on the pre-test and post-test that has been conducted to the Bachelor of Graphic Design (BVC 4A), Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, these are the scores:

Table 1: Range of marks of BVC 4A acquired during pre-test (from 20 students 4 were absent from doing this test)

Range of Marks	No. of students
1-5	6
6-10	5
11-15	3
16-20	2

The students were given an article and they have to read through the article first. Then, questions were given to these students where the questions asked the students to find out the main points and supporting details in that particular article. Based on the result of pre-test in table 1 above, majority of the students scored low range of marks in this test, in which the number of students who got this range this marks are 6 students for 1-5 range of marks and 5 students got 6-10 range of marks (range between 1-5 and 6-10 marks) possibly due to low level of proficiency and they did not have any background knowledge on how to find main points and supporting details in a reading task. Only 5 students (3 students on 11-15 range of marks and 2 students are from 16-20 range of marks) are able to get high range of marks (range between 11-15 and 16-20 marks). Based on the marks obtained, we can assume that they might have high level of proficiency in English language than the ones who scored poor marks in the pre-test. There are four absentees during the pre-test, this is due to students having another program that they need to attend on that day.

Table 2: Range of marks of BVC 4A acquired during post-test (from 20 students 2 were absent from doing this test)

Range of Marks	No. of students
1-5	0
6-10	4
11-15	13
16-20	1

As for the post-test, the students were given an article and they were asked to read through the text first. The article for the post-test was not similar as the pre-test, however, the level of difficulties of the text was similar. This is because if we are given different level of difficulties to the students they will get confused and the target skills that we want to acquire from students will not achieved due to something which is similar to their level. The students need to answer the questions given to them which all the questions are based on findings the main points and supporting details from the article. Based on the results of post-test in table 2, most of students are able to get high range of marks (range between 11-15 and 16-20) which the number of students who got 11-15 range of marks is 13 students and 1 student able to get 16-20 range of marks. Based on the results, we can assume that there are improvements on students' performances in post-test result compared to pre-test result. This is because the treatments have been given to these students where they have been taught on how to find and distinguish between main points and supporting details from an article. Also, they have been involved in interaction between themselves where the teachers were giving them chances to interact with each other in the treatment session. By doing this they are able to discuss and helping each other to understand on how to find main points and supporting details from the article.

During post-test, students were not allowed to discuss and involved in any kinds of interactions because the main purpose of this post-test was to test their level of understanding of the topic and also the researcher wanted to know whether the treatment that have been given to them have bringing positive effects on the students or not. This has been shown by the result of post-test of students where there are improvements on their marks after they have done the treatment. But, from the result on the post-test 4 students are able to get low range of marks (6-10 range of marks). We can assume this would happen because students who get these marks have low proficiency in English. They have problems involving in interaction/discussion activities in class due to limitation of English proficiency. Also, there are some students who are not showing interest in involving these kinds of activities. It can be seemed where they are rarely involving in the discussion with their friends. They tend to remain silent and just listen on the conversation rather than giving contribution on the discussions. Then, we also can assume that the method of us giving instructions is not effective enough for some students. The method and the handouts given to them are not suitable for their level of proficiency.

Analysis of the frequency of 3C's elements

In this section, the results of the frequency of the 3C's (comprehension check, confirmation check and clarification request) in the experimental group are presented. A total of 6 treatments were given to the samples and in each treatment, input on reading

skills and the 3C's were given prior to the reading activity. Analysis of data was done for Treatment 1 and Treatment 5. The reason is because the researcher would want to know whether there exists any significant change in the frequency of the 3C's after 4 treatments were given to the samples. A group consisting of three girls' discussion on the reading article was tape recorded. The recorded tapes of the discussion were then transcribed in order to get the frequency of the 3C's in the discussion. In the transcripts of the discussion, the researcher then identified expressions related to the 3C's. The analysis of the frequency of the 3C's in Treatment 1 is shown in Table 1.0.

Table 3: Frequency of 3C's in Treatment 1
Treatment 1

	Clarification Request	Comprehension Check	Confirmation Check	Total
Student 1	3	1	5	9
Student 2	1	5	1	7
Student 3	1	1	1	3

In Treatment 1, Student 1 did a total of nine 3C's; Clarification request= 3, Comprehension check = 1 and Confirmation Check = 5. Student 2 did a total of seven 3C's; Clarification request = 1, Comprehension check = 5 and Confirmation check = 5. Student 3 did a total of three 3C's with one for each of the 3C elements. Student 1 and 2 are categorized with medium level of proficiency in English while Student 3 has low level of proficiency. Based on the table as a whole, not much usage of the 3C's was done during the discussion. This might be due to the fact that it was their first discussion which also contributes to the lack of their confident to interact actively on the reading article. Apart from that, lack of understanding towards the task itself and discussion might also cause the low frequency of the 3C's among the students.

Table 4: Frequency of 3C's in Treatment 5
Treatment 1

	Clarification Request	Comprehension Check	Confirmation Check	Total
Student 1	2	5	1	8
Student 2	3	3	2	8
Student 3	4	3	1	8

In Treatment 5, Student 1 did a total of eight 3C's; Clarification request= 2, Comprehension check = 5 and Confirmation Check = 1. Student 2 did a total of eight 3C's; Clarification request = 3, Comprehension check = 3 and Confirmation check = 2. Student 3 did a total of eight 3C's; Clarification request= 4, Comprehension check = 3 and Confirmation Check = 1. Based on Table 1, the number of frequencies of the 3C's in Treatment 1 and Treatment 5 for Student 1 and 2 did not differ much. This might be due to their level of proficiency however there is a sharp increase in the frequency of the 3C's used by Student 3. She displayed a greater willingness to communicate and thus participated more in the last treatment. The main factor that could contribute to this would probably be due to the improvement of her confidence to interact with her other groupmates. Four treatments were done before; therefore Student 3 would have probably been used to the reading activity and discussion hence improved her knowledge on reading comprehension which is proved in the post test marks. Based on the transcribed discussion, Student 1 often assisted Student 3 in trying to understand the article. An example of it can be seen below.

Table 5: Students' Transcription

Student 1: For the paragraph it shows the first step. For us to create a blog. Ok. How about the next one?
Student 3: What? [Clarification Request]

Student 1: The next step. Can you hear me? [Confirmation Check]
 Student 3: Ok. The condition is people who want to create blog they are stay from the plag..
 Student 1: *Plagiarism*.
 Student 3: Plagiarism and be aware of the copywrite inf..
 Student 1: *Infringements*.

Student 3 at times faced difficulty in pronunciation of words and Student 1 would offer help by repeating the correct pronunciation of that word which are in italics. The outcome of the discussion in Treatment 5 showed that these students were more active in the discussion as compared to Treatment 1.

5. Pedagogical Impact on Teaching

Based on this study, the results discussed in the findings concerning the students who participated in the study is not to be generalized to the whole ESL students in general. However, these findings may carry a few teaching implications for improving reading comprehension among ESL learners. Firstly, allowing students to interact with their peers in comprehending an article or text helps them to extend their knowledge with the help of scaffolding because they need to construct meaning with their peers through interaction. In social interaction where collaborative learning of comprehending a reading text takes place, it will help build their cognitive development, take responsibility of their own learning and most importantly they become co-constructors of knowledge.

Secondly, for them to negotiate meaning and extend their knowledge pertaining to reading task, teachers should do a balanced distribution of participation, grouping the learners with mixed level of proficiency comprising the low, mid and high performing learners. This will give the opportunity for the low performing learners to gain more knowledge on reading skills from their peers because scaffolding may take place. Grouping them in the same level of proficiency might defeat the purpose of expanding their cognitive development. For reading-related tasks, Student 1 and 2 seemed to be more engaged in the reading and discussion due to their level of proficiency in English and probably due to the type of reading materials that they received. The increased frequency of the 3C elements in their discussions are important contributor in enhancing their reading comprehension skill which is proven in the pre- and post-test results.

6. Conclusion

ESL teachers and instructors are constantly searching for ways to develop students' language reading skill. By integrating the interactionist approach in any reading class, learners will be given the opportunity to learn from their peers as it stimulates them to acquire the knowledge as well as maximizing and promoting autonomous learning. To comprehend an article, they will need to negotiate meaning with their peers to achieve mutual understanding of the reading text. This study indicated that through continuous interaction and discussion on the reading tasks, learners' reading comprehension skill may gradually increase. Integration of the interactionist approach in reading tasks may support and improve students' reading comprehension because students of mixed achievement levels would apply comprehension strategies by checking for understanding, teaching one's knowledge to others and would connect their prior knowledge with the present. Lastly, allowing students to interact and cooperate on reading materials will promote reading comprehension as it creates a positive learning atmosphere and promote effective reading comprehension.

References

- Alkiabi, A. S. (2015). The Place of Reading Comprehension in Second Language Acquisition. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*. 6, 14-22
- Anderson, N (1999). *Exploring Second Language Reading: Issues and Strategies*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle
- Behjat, F. (2011). Reading Through Interaction: From Individualistic Reading Comprehension to Collaborative Reading. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. 3, 239-244
- Ellis, R., Tanaka, Y., and Yamazaki, A. (1994). Classroom Interaction, Comprehension and the Acquisition of L2 Words Meaning. *Language Learning*. 44(3), 449-491
- Grabe, W. and Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and Researching Reading*. Harlow, England: Longman
- Hummel, K. M. (2014). *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Keyton, J. (2011). *Case studies for organizational communication: Understanding communication processes*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press
- Kohn, A. (1992). *No contest: The case against competition* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Mikulecky, B. S. (1990). *A Short Course In Teaching Reading Skills*. Longman.
- Roe, B. D., Stoodt, B. & Burns, P. C. (1991). *Secondary School Reading Instruction: The Content Areas*. Houghton Mifflin.

- Roehl, K. M. and Shiue, C. (2011). Developing Reading Comprehension Skills in EFL University Level Students. *TESOL Quarterly*. 23(3), 177-186
- Sarem, S. N. and Shirzadi, Y. (2014). A Critical Review of the Interactionist Approach to Second Language Acquisition. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*. 1(1), 62-74
- Sari, R. A. (2013). Students' Perception toward Their Reading Difficulties of Different Genres. *Lingua Didaktika*. 7(1), 44-57
- Vorhaus, R. (1984). Strategies for Reading In a Second Language. *Journal of Reading*. 27(5), 412-416