

## An investigation of the reading strategies employed by high-ability learners when reading expository texts

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### Abstract

*Students in a talent development class at Secondary 4 were under-performing at reading comprehension tests, which resulted in the following questions being raised:*

- 1. What assumptions have we made regarding the students' abilities to read a text?*
- 2. What specific strategies and approaches do students use at any point in time when answering reading comprehension questions?*
- 3. Do students read effectively?*
- 4. What metacognitive skills are in operation at any point in time by students working on the text? How do they determine the precision of an answer?*

*This study aimed to investigate the reading strategies of 19 students. The students generally demonstrated great effort in regular timetabled class discussions on ways of reading and understanding a reading comprehension text. They were able to pick out key ideas and summarise their overall understanding of the purpose of the text. However, the assumption was proven wrong that students of a talent development class would therefore also demonstrate a clear understanding of question requirements and be able to provide very good and precise answers vis-à-vis the specifics of each reading comprehension question.*

### Introduction

Students read to answer questions on literal meaning, inference and vocabulary use when attempting comprehension exercises. As comprehension is part of our English Language syllabus, it was imperative at the time of this research, that the team examine the approaches and methods used by the students to analyse the comprehension questions along with the contexts in the paragraphs related to each of the questions. This would encourage future teacher action and intervention to effectuate precise responses.

### Literature Review

Baker and Brown (2002) draw a connection between metacognitive skills and reading effectively. The authors discuss the two clusters of activity that take place when one reads, the first demonstrating the readers' cognition, and the second demonstrating the regulation of that cognition through self-regulation and correction. They emphasise that it is necessary to see the relationship between reading for meaning and the monitoring of comprehension.

Whimbey (1975) also suggests that an active comprehension process, through which students engage relevant metacognitive skills in order to articulate the skills they use while reading, helps the student to detect failures, and to respond effectively; this sees the reader proceeding from seeking clarification to probing and analysing specific parts of the text, even at sentence and phrase level, to obtain the exact requirement.

Brown (1980) and Baker and Brown (2002), among others, suggested sets of metacognitive skills a reader needed in order to effectively decode meaning in a text. The team developed a similar set of six based on their work for use in the study.

1. Clarifying the purpose of reading; understanding the demands (both implicit and explicit) of the task
2. Identifying key aspects of the writer's message
3. Focusing on major content in the text
4. Monitoring the process of comprehending the text
5. Self-questioning in order to reach comprehension
6. Taking corrective action when gaps in comprehension are detected

The investigation was carried out with this set of metacognitive skills used as the analysis framework, and aimed to examine the process the students took to making sense of the expository text that had been assigned to them.

## **Methodology**

### *Samples*

The participants were the full cohort of 19 high ability Secondary 4 girls from the Humanities Programme class in 2016. Students with a passion for Language, Literature and the Humanities and who do well in Language Arts at the Secondary 1 and 2 levels may choose to be in the Humanities Programme at Secondary 3 and 4. By the Secondary 4 level, students from this class will have studied a range of texts, and, as a result, are expected to be able to handle expository texts. One of our investigators taught the class at Secondary 4 and was puzzled as to why these students were underperforming in reading comprehension tests.

### *Intervention*

The students spent three lessons (three hours) working on the activity given below in their cooperative learning groups with no teacher facilitation; this was to allow for full and authentic responses from the students themselves. Teacher observers sat at the back of the classroom and observed their interaction, but did not interfere with the group discussions.

The first part of the investigation saw the students in a reading circle activity during which they analysed and answered questions on a given text. They were divided into four groups with a student facilitator in each. The teacher did not suggest any particular reading strategy they could use in attempting the reading comprehension task, but rather explained that the objective of the task was for the students to work in groups and complete the set of questions.

### *Data collection*

The three teacher researchers (including the English teacher of the class) observed and made notes on the behaviour of each group, taking note of how they approached the task of answering specific questions.

Audio recordings of the group discussions were also made for the purpose of a close analysis of the discussion as was also done for the group interviews that took place during the post activity. The two teacher observers who did not teach the class conducted these group interviews. Student representatives from the various cooperative learning groups participated in the interviews.

Transcripts were then analysed and coded. The investigating team worked on surfacing general themes that explained the frequency of use of the key strategies the students used to craft an answer. Brown's (1980) and Baker and Brown's (2002) sets of six metacognitive skills a skilful reader needs to have were adopted as a reference in coding the group discussions.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Coding of Students' Group Discussions*

The team adapted Brown's (1980) and Baker and Brown's (2002) sets of metacognitive skills to begin coding the students' discussion. See Table 1 on page 4 for the number of times each skill was encountered.

However, the team encountered a few problems during the first round of coding using the initial set of metacognitive skills. While most of the group discussions could be easily categorised into the six metacognitive skills, there was evidence that certain parts of the group discussions did not fall into any of the six skills.

The students were seeking clarification and making inferences with their peers during the lesson. Hence the team adapted the set of metacognitive skills by adding other observed methods and behaviours that the students used during the group discussions to make the list more specific and comprehensive. The first two categories in the list on page 2 were expanded to include the following:

#### **1. Seeking Clarification**

- a. Clarifying the writer's intent
- b. Clarifying the meaning of the words
- c. Clarifying the word choice
- d. Clarifying the purpose of reading
- e. Clarifying the demands of the task

#### **2. Making Inferences**

- a. Inferring the message of the text; and/or synthesising different interpretations of the writer's message
- b. Inferring writer's intent (different from 1a, which refers to attempts to use contextual clues to derive the writer's intent, whereas 2b is characterised by uncertainty regarding what the writer's intent is)
- c. Justifying points made by the writer, in order to understand accurate inference

Students were paraphrasing and summarising the text in addition to the six skills in Baker and Brown's (2002) set. The team added these two points because they serve their purpose in the various strands of reading comprehension.

**7. Paraphrasing points made in a text**

**8. Summarising points of discussion in the process of comprehension**

With the expanded set, a tabulation was done to see what the students did in order to comprehend the text.

Table 1

*Skills used by the students*

| Strategies used                                                                                          | Count |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Seeking Clarification                                                                                    | 47    |
| Clarifying writer's intent                                                                               | 2     |
| Clarifying meaning of the words                                                                          | 9     |
| Clarifying word choice                                                                                   | 1     |
| Clarifying the purpose of reading                                                                        | 2     |
| Clarifying demands of the task                                                                           | 32    |
| Clarifying nature of the text                                                                            | 1     |
| Making Inferences                                                                                        | 44    |
| Inferring the message of the text; and/or synthesising different interpretations of the writer's message | 20    |
| Inferring writer's intent                                                                                | 7     |
| Inferring meaning of words in the text                                                                   | 14    |
| Justifying points made by the writer, in order to derive at accurate inference                           | 3     |
| Focusing on major content                                                                                | 3     |
| Monitoring process of comprehension                                                                      | 40    |
| Self-questioning                                                                                         | 15    |
| Taking corrective action                                                                                 | 47    |
| Paraphrasing points made in a text                                                                       | 26    |
| Summarising points of discussion in the process of comprehension                                         | 8     |

### *Seeking Clarification and Making Inferences*

The team started the analysis with the highest occurring skills.

It was observed that a few students turned to look at the questions, and tried to answer some of them without reading the passage at least once through. It was also noted that the students spent an almost equal amount of time on clarifying the tasks and inferring the message of the text and the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text in order to answer the questions.

*I would say that, it's just to – because like what we summarised just now, the first paragraph is about, how generosity is viewed, like, if viewed superficially, it basically means, it's something that is very negative, because it incurs a loss on your side, when you give something to somebody else. So, the author's use of the word, 'seemed' in line one, is to say that this is a very superficial view of generosity.*

From this, the team could see that the student had inferred the meaning of the word 'seemed' in order to understand the writer's intent. However, it was done focusing on the use of the word alone without looking at the context of the text. Hence the focus of reading comprehension became more answer-centric, focusing more on getting an answer rather than uncovering the meaning of the passage or appreciating the text and coming to a logical conclusion.

What was also evident was that students spent a considerable amount of time on seeking clarification from one another during the group discussions. This clarification was more than just *clarifying the purpose of reading, or clarifying the demands of the task*. Students also clarified the meaning of words, or word choice, and the nature of the text. This showed that the students knew what to look out for when trying to unpack a chunk of text, which was a positive sign. However, what was worrying was that students often did not come to a conclusion confidently, choosing to move on to the next question without answering.

### *Monitoring Process of Comprehension, Self-questioning and Taking Corrective Action*

According to Whimbey (1975), a good reader is able to bring the smooth reading process to a halt the moment he senses he has missed an idea. The team observed the students doing that as they spent a relatively equal amount of time monitoring their reading. This monitoring included stopping the discussion and returning to an earlier idea that had been discussed, re-reading the question a bit more carefully, and probing phrases for a more accurate meaning.

Holt (1964) cautioned that, at times, it was not that readers did not possess these skills and strategies, but that they might be less willing to admit that they had failed to understand. We noted that this might be true to a certain extent, as the students who were constantly monitoring their process of comprehension tended to be the better readers. This then informed us that it may be crucial for us to help develop our students' confidence in their reading abilities, and create safe environments for them to admit that they had failed to understand.

### *Paraphrasing or Summarising, Focusing on Major Content*

There was some evidence of paraphrasing and summarising focusing on content. The team observed that students used these skills in understanding the text, usually in accompaniment with other skills. Paraphrasing or summarising were mainly used when students needed to take stock of what they had understood before moving on to employ other skills.

## Group Interviews

After analysing the group discussions, the team conducted group interviews with two groups of students. These took place a few days after the reading comprehension lesson. A set of questions based on reading strategies was crafted. (See the Appendix.) During the interviews, the team found that the students were aware that, in order to achieve comprehension, appropriate reading strategies such as analysing the questions and breaking down the passage had to be employed.

However, even though the students could articulate these strategies because they had been taught the skills and the metalanguage as part of the lower and upper secondary English syllabus, the students said they approached the reading comprehension in a spontaneous way, making use of gut feeling and instinct to understand the passage and the demands of the questions.

It was noted that the students were unsure of how successful their strategies were as one student likened the success of her strategy to a 50:50 gamble. The team hypothesised that the task of answering comprehension questions might hinder the students from having an appreciation and understanding of the text.

One student said that “if I read the questions first, I feel like maybe I would know what to look out for in the passage...”. Even though this is a valid reading strategy, the team felt that the students had taken a narrow view of this strategy by focusing only on answering the questions. Hence they tended to look at sections of the passage in isolation without considering the passage as a whole.

## Conclusion

The team came to the conclusion that the students see the reading comprehension task as an experience in answering questions, not an experience in reading. One suggestion would be for teachers to re-think the way reading comprehension skills are taught. Another suggestion is that the passage can be given to the students without the questions to get them to truly read, and to understand and appreciate the text and the nuances of the language used before they answer the questions. These suggestions would require further investigation and research.

Furthermore, teachers should also direct the students to focus on metacognitive skills in order to obtain an accurate understanding of the text. As indicative from the team’s interviews, students used rather haphazard methods to analyse the passage and spent more time on clarifying the task demands and taking corrective action than on focusing on the content of the passage, and reading for meaning.

## References

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- Whimbey, A. (1975). *Intelligence can be taught*. New York, NY: Dutton.

## Appendix: Group Interview

### Questions

General Questions (Ask 1 or 2 to begin)

1. What is your view of comprehension practices?
  - a. What skills are required?
  - b. Is there a certain disposition one must have in order to do well in comprehension?
2. What do you find most difficult about reading comprehension?
3. Do you attempt to resolve some of these problems you think you might have? What do you do?
4. Explain the steps you would take in answering comprehension questions.

Zooming in (Must deal with all 4)

1. When dealing with questions that require you to explain the author's use of a word, how do you derive the answer?
  - a. In particular, you could look at the author's use of "seem" in line 1.
2. What is crucial, in order for you to be able to understand the author's purpose in using a particular phrase?
  - a. In particular, you could look at Q4 (What is the author hinting at by his use of the words "this is a sociological fact"?)
3. What do you find most challenging about 'in-your-own-words' questions?
4. How do you go about finding appropriate replacements for in-your-own-words' questions? As in, do you find word-for-word replacements or adopt another approach?

Conclusion (Must ask question 3)

1. What are some of the reading strategies you are aware of, have been taught, or have attempted to use?
2. Have you attempted any of these?
3. Have you continued to use any of these strategies? Why or why not?