

Reading Academic Text: Awareness And Experiences Among University ESL Learners

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Abstract

Studying in the university for the first time may involve a sudden change in the way of learning for most students. These initial experiences of higher education may have a profound effect on whether these students are able to successfully complete their course of studies. The review of literature on students' approaches to learning has often described students as either deep or surface learners. A deep approach is associated with intrinsic motivation and a focus on understanding the meaning of the learning material. In contrast, a surface approach focuses on memorizing discrete items in isolation resulting in superficial understanding of the learning material. Although these studies have provided information on the different approaches in various contexts, little research has been conducted within an ESL context. Accordingly, through phenomenography, the aim of this paper is to describe the reading process of six ESL learners within a Malaysian educational context. Findings will reveal that there exist 'variations' or 'qualitative differences' in these ESL students' approaches of reading an English academic expository text.

Introduction

Studying in the university for the first time can be quite a traumatic experience for most students. Numerous researches on students' initial experience of higher learning have identified many complex factors encountered by students in their transition from learning at school to learning at the university. For example, problems with "academic over-compliance, rigidity in learning styles and dependence on routines and teachers" (Wankowski, 1991:62), subject difficulty (Beard and Hartley, 1984), lack of motivation and unorganized study skills, lack of academic and intellectual competence (Upcraft et al, 1990), and 'excessive and overwhelming' workload (Chambers, 1992; Meyer, 1991) have been mentioned as factors contributing toward academic failure at the university.

Some Malaysian educationists have expressed similar concerns. Farida (1995) finds that most Malaysian students were not independent enough while Sarjit and Salasiah (1996) add that students would usually expect to be "spoon-fed" with information and notes, which they would 'memorize to death'. Ellis (1996) points out that many Malaysian students at tertiary level are unsuccessful in their studies due to lack of effective study skills and habits that include reading, writing, time and stress management skills. Similarly, Mashkuri (1995) added that due to their lack of proficiency in the English

language, the students are better at memorizing facts rather than applying the principles that they have learned.

A possible explanation of why such variations have surfaced would lead to the argument that students differ in the way they go about learning, or otherwise known as 'approach to learning' (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden, 1992; Marton and Saljo, 1997). The pioneering work of Marton (1975) and his colleagues in Gothenburg led to the introduction of the term 'approach to learning'. This study investigated in detail one of the main types of learning demanded in higher education – reading academic articles. Students were asked to read an article in their own time and were later questioned on what they learned from the task and how they approached the task. The analysis looked at the process of reading the text and 'levels of understanding' (qualitative differences) that students gained after reading the article. These qualitative variations of understanding, also known as different categories of 'learning outcomes' (Dahlgren, 1997), were the result of influences by students' 'approaches to learning' (Marton and Saljo, 1997) that were based on the distinctive intentions that students had before starting the task and the process that they used in carrying out the task. Two categories of approach to learning that were first identified included 'deep approach', where students began with an intention of understanding the meaning of the article and would then interact actively with the task until maximum meaning was extracted, and 'surface approach' where students' original intentions were to satisfy course requirements, resulting in memorizing information without 'developing any significant understanding of it' (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Entwistle, 1997).

Without doubt, in any academic or higher learning context, reading is perceived as the most prominent academic skill for university students. It is through reading that these learners will learn new information and are able to synthesize, evaluate and interpret to learn more about their subject matter. But yet, most often, many students who enter institutions of higher learning are found to be unprepared for the reading demands placed upon them and they encounter difficulties. Factors such as low level proficiency of the English language, poor reading strategy knowledge, perceptions of reading and low interest are those often mentioned by researches as contributing towards students' problems in approaching reading (Ramaiah and Nambiar (1993); Ramaiah (1997); Faizah et al (2002).

Most of these factors derive from the shortcomings of school learning as high percentages of passes are emphasized in the teaching and learning in schools. To gain good marks, these learners concentrate on answering comprehension questions of which they have been rigorously taught to do by their teachers in schools. As a result when they enter the university, they encounter problems whereby they are unable to perform demanding cognitive tasks such as evaluate and critique a text. Depending on the task requirement, academic reading demands both the surface and deep approaches. However, the surface approach remains the dominant approach of most learners across a wide range of courses (Chalmers and Fuller, 1996).

Without proper guidance and assistance, these students may fail to adjust accordingly, or may continue to adjust inappropriately to the demands of undergraduate study. Although there have been numerous studies focusing on students' learning approaches in different contexts, little has been done within an ESL context. Thus, the primary purpose of the present paper is to describe six ESL students' experiences of reading an academic expository text that would provide data on the different ways of how the text is read. Accordingly, through phenomenography, this study will describe in greater detail the qualitative differences of the approaches of reading an academic expository text within a Malaysian ESL educational context.

Theoretical framework

Students' experiences of their learning approaches have been studied both qualitatively and quantitatively (for example, Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Biggs, 1987). Most of the qualitative studies have employed phenomenographic methods whereby learning is studied from the learner's perspective and based on qualitative analysis of interview data. The term 'phenomenography' is derived from Greek, meaning 'appearance' and description, and first appeared in Marton's (1981) seminal paper. It focuses on variations or differences on how people understand or experience aspects of their world. Thus, the objective of phenomenography is to investigate and describe these differences, which are presented in the form of 'categories of descriptions'. Although the learning approach construct was originally conceptualized in the context of reading from texts, it has been extended to include other learning tasks such as writing (Biggs, 1987) and problem solving (Laurillard, 1997). Based on the students' accounts, two qualitatively different approaches to learning have been identified: surface and deep approaches. The defining characteristics of these approaches have been described by Ramsden (1992), Marton (1983) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999). In essence, the learner who adopts a deep approach are intrinsically motivated, focuses on understanding the content of the learning material, relates parts to each other as well as new ideas to previous knowledge. On the other hand the surface learner is extrinsically motivated, focusing on memorizing for assessment purposes and seeking to meet the demands of the task with minimum effort.

Students adopt different learning approaches as a result of various individual or personal as well as situational or contextual factors. For example, Marton (1983) and Entwistle (1997) emphasize the importance of the contextual factor (example, nature of task, learning context and perceptions of institutional requirement) in determining the type of approach to learning. They do not consider the approach as an individual characteristic, but rather as a response to a particular situation. On the other hand, Biggs (1987) believes that in addition to the situational factors, personal factors such as motivation, attitudes, cognitive and prior knowledge also affect the quality of learning outcome via the learning approach adopted.

Marton and Booth (1997) have used a structure of awareness, to describe the relationship between a way of experiencing a phenomenon and approach to learning. The theory suggests that awareness is made up of three overlapping areas: the margin, the thematic

field and the theme. Those aspects which are non-related aspects of the phenomenon make up the margin of awareness. Simultaneously, those aspects which are present in awareness are collectively known as the thematic field. The theme refers to the aspects or a number of related aspects that become the focus of awareness. Hence, experiencing a whole phenomenon would involve individuals discerning several aspects of that whole simultaneously (theme/thematic), while other parts are neglected (margin). The context in which the phenomenon is being experienced will determine the aspects that are focused. Thus, a different context may bring about a different thematic field or theme. For example, in the context of reading in ESL, the aspects related to this phenomenon may comprise reading strategies, schema, motivation, metacognition, vocabulary knowledge as well as attitudes. If the learner discerns more aspects of the phenomenon simultaneously, thus the phenomenon is experienced in a complex way. The deep approach would require the learner to look for relationships between the different aspects of the phenomenon, while trying to see how the parts form the whole as well as relating their learning to other parts of the subject and their personal experiences. Thus, the structure of the awareness becomes richer in relationships making the experience more meaningful. However, students who adopt a surface approach are highly unlikely to experience a complex way of learning. Since there is no intention to seek relationships, the aspects of the phenomenon experienced are limited as they are unsure or vague in seeking the relationships between the aspects. Thus, the structure is less complex and learning is mundane.

Methodology

The students who constitute the sample population in this study are six second-year Bachelor of Arts students, majoring in English Language Studies (ELS) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). These students have completed two semesters of ELS courses, which included proficiency courses on academic skills of speaking, reading and writing, as well as introductory courses on content areas such as linguistics, literature and ELS. The selection of sample for this study was based on 'purposeful sampling', which according to Patton (1990) lies in "selecting information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance of the study in depth" (p.52).

Phenomenography is a type of qualitative research that focuses on the subjective experience of the individual. Hence, the defining characteristic of a phenomenographical study is aimed at 'descriptions, analysis and understanding of experiences' (Marton, 1981). In this study, the researcher relied on the method of 'individual in-depth interview' to collect data. Marshall and Rossman (1995) quote Kahn and Cannell (1957) in describing in-depth interview as 'a conversation with a purpose'. In addition, Glesne and Peshkin (1992:65) point out too that the special strength of interviewing in qualitative enquiries is it presents an "opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see." Through this method, "the participants' perspective on the phenomenon of interest is unfolded as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Thus, to ensure a 'subjective view' of the matter, the researcher uses the 'general interview guide approach', also

known as the semi-structured interview. According to Patton (1990:111), the interview guide “provides topics or subject areas about which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject”. Hence, the interviewer is free to word the questions spontaneously and establish a ‘conversational style’, yet at the same time, would maintain the focus of the interview and allow ‘individual perspectives and experiences to emerge’. All interview sessions were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by a second individual.

The text used in the present study to describe the ESL students’ approaches to reading is an academic expository text and it was chosen for the main reason that these students were constantly in contact with texts of this nature during their course of study at the University. Although expository texts have been used quite extensively in a multitude of phenomenographical studies to describe students’ experiences of learning, no studies have been conducted within an ESL setting.

Results

After a vigorous analysis of the interview transcripts, following the guide provided by Marton (1994) in analyzing the data, the researcher found the following deep and surface categories (Table 1)

Table1: Categories of reading approaches

APPROACH	CATEGORIES
DEEP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intrinsic motivation• Interacting actively with the text• Using various strategies in identifying key words and main points• Identifying the link between paragraphs to understand what text is about
SURFACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extrinsic motivation• Poor application of strategy use• Focus on identifying gist of each paragraph• Anxiety of text

Discussion of Analysis - Deep Characteristics

The first ‘deep characteristic’ identified was having an intrinsic motivation in reading the text. Motivation can be considered as the most essential component within the reading process as it starts with the purpose or motive of reading a text that would lead the reader to be actively involved in the reading process. According to Bandura (1986:107-109), intrinsic motivation is defined as “the desire to perform or take part in activities without such external inducement or reward”. In this study, the intrinsic motivation was revealed

when some of the subjects indicated that their motive or purpose of reading the text was for personal gain. It was further explained by one reader that whatever 'new' information' that she could get from reading the text would give her a better understanding of the topic presented in the text. Furthermore, the students' motive or purpose of reading was enhanced if they could relate the topic to their own experiences or if the 'new information' had some relevance to a course that they were taking, thus they were more interested to read the text as shown in the following statements:

...quite an eye-opening experience because we are doing that in socio linguistics as well (A1/17-18)...

...there's a bit of it relevant..so I really treat it like..I'm going to gain something from the text so I really read it like..this is one of my reading material(A1/22-25)

...based on my last experience..maybe I can..I have some ideas on this two (code switching and interference) terms (a bit) so I relate my past, I mean past knowledge with this one..just connect (E1/178-181)

These statements reflect that students do not only see what they read as new information but at the same time they are relating what they read to previous readings. They also depend on past knowledge to understand what the text is about. According to Singhal (1998), there is a consensus to acknowledge the importance of background knowledge and that content schema plays an integral role in reading comprehension. In other words, if students identify content, which are familiar to them, there would be a higher level of comprehension in their reading process. Furthermore, these deep learners intend to use whatever 'new' information gathered from reading the text for future purposes. This data provide support that these readers interact actively with the text by relating past knowledge to help them understand what they are about to read.

The researcher also discovered that there was consistent usage of various strategies in identifying the key words or main points in the text. These key words reflected the words that were in the title or throughout the text and they would either highlight, underline, or even writes short notes or the word itself at the side of the text to acknowledge that the paragraph refers to that particular key word. The strategies included looking at title of text, underlining, bracketing, highlighting, numbering and writing notes. The following statements reflected the use of strategies mentioned above:

...the first thing I do is look at title.. (E1/242-247)

...I just look at the topic..then its something I'm familiar with the code-switching..it should be ok for me(C1/78-80)

...I saw the topic is about interference..so I figured maybe has something to do with interference..so I looked over about anything about interference (B1/185-187)

The students made use of the title to get a gist or an idea of what the text discussed. Deep readers would adjust their knowledge of the topic by first familiarizing themselves with the topic and relating it to previous knowledge. While reading, these readers identified any 'new' information that could be added to their current knowledge of the topic.

Sometimes, they preferred reading the first paragraph to get an idea of what to expect as in the following statements:

...I saw the first paragraph..it has something like thesis statement..the gist of the whole article(D1/107-108)

...usually the first sentence, for example, when it mentions 'reasons'..usually I focus on the word 'reason'..because we will know that the next sentence is something to do with the reason..reason of something..what are the reasons(E1/714-717/721)

More importantly, the deep learners will also link the keywords or main ideas in each paragraph as they read to keep the meaning of the passage in mind while reading. This way, they are then able to keep track or make sense what the author presented and would then be able to identify the author's main point of argument in the text. The following statement characterizes this characteristic:

...so its like I read it paragraph by paragraph and then after one paragraph, I get a glance through, then the second time I read it, I'll just highlight those main points and then I'll go to the next paragraph, and when I read the next paragraph, I'll try to link it with the with the first paragraph so there's a sort of unity in reading it (A1/82-86)

The researcher also found deep learners use strategies like mind mapping and building frameworks to organize their notes as noted in the following statements:

...sometimes I do summarization because I do it in rangka (framework)..I don't really like learn it in paragraph so I just make it into rangka..because rangka (framework) is much more easier to see..this one a bit difficult to see..so I transform this wording into a rangka (framework) (E1/333-337)

...uh..the notes are basically..main ideas..some of it..I'll link one idea to another idea. So, you can see a lot of arrows going down all sorts of things because its like the first idea contributes to the second idea...(A1/111-115)

It was interesting to note however, that in this study only the deep learners used this approach. For some readers, the 'frameworks' or 'diagrams' is a form of transcoding information into a more manageable way of organizing the information. Through the use of these 'devices', these readers were able to follow how the information was presented, how the ideas were linked from one to another and how the writer presented his arguments in the text.

Discussion of Analysis – Surface Characteristics

When asked what their purpose of reading the text was, the surface learners reflected an extrinsic motive, such as “able to answer questions, able to do well in exams and relevant to the course”. According to Pittman and Boggiano (1992:3), extrinsic (or instrumental) motivation refers to “the learner's desire for achievement for an external reward such as to pass exams or to get a job”. The following statements reflected these surface purposes:

...because you ask me to read so I just read..but I know maybe you going to ask me a question so just to make sure whether which one is important for me, then when you ask questions so that I can answer (C1/53-55)

...if you ask any question about the text and then if I cannot answer then, so I have to remember some things, I have to really understand the text, so I could answer it (B1/101-102)

The statements above reflected a range or a continuum of factors that influenced the purposes of reading a text for the surface learners. Interestingly though, these purposes of reading were strongly influenced by different forms of assessment for example to be able to answer the teacher's as well as examination questions.

The most noticeable characteristic that was discovered from analyzing the data was the anxiety that these surface learners experienced when they first approached reading the text. It is quite understandable for language learners to have these feelings toward an academic reading text written in a second language. In reading these types of text, these students do not only have to cope with the language that the text is written in, which is English, but also the level of English used to write the text which in most cases is of a higher level. In addition, they need to deal with the content presented in the text, in order to understand the points or arguments presented by the writer. Their responses showed that these students were anxious of the length of text and also the 'vocabulary' which they commented that there were 'too many words'.

Although the surface learners applied certain strategies to help them understand the text, it was discovered that they were unsure whether what they underlined or highlighted were the key words or main points. Although there were similar support strategies employed by these students, the purpose of doing so was to avoid missing out on important points. Further more when it came to summarizing or paraphrasing the ideas presented, these students were afraid to do so because they felt that they might not get the actual idea, as the following statements reflect:

...I just read and then which I think is important or I don't understand I just ..uhm..put a line ..that all(C1/80-81)

...if the reasons take a long sentence then I just underline they all (B1/245)...tengok kat notes..kan kalau kita tukar..kalau kita paraphrase..takut idea ni tak boleh nak convey..sebab idea tu kita tak..just not familiar with that term..so I found that if I ambil the same word dalam ni..its better for me..(F1/306-308)

(translation: if you look at the notes, I'm afraid that if I change or paraphrase, then I'm not able to convey the exact idea..not familiar with the terms..so I found that if I take the same words, its better for me..)

...I have to make sure that this text and what I write..ahm..the ideas should be the same or almost the same..so that I wont like...menyimpang (go astray) from the real meaning of the text (E1/605-608)

The responses above demonstrate that the surface readers read from paragraph to paragraph without any attempt at linking the ideas presented throughout the text. It was

also discovered that the surface learners would focus and concentrate on identifying what each paragraph was about. In fact when they wrote notes, it was according to what they have underlined, hence, these surface readers would then resort to remembering the individual points for each paragraph without any linkage of ideas. The following statements reflect their experiences:

...notes ni actually untuk reading. I want to make sure I understand it better..so memang kalau tengok..I answer everything kan..but not really..i get the general idea..what I'm underlining is after general idea..transfer it to this style..short notes..to make sure that I understand..(F1/292-295)

...I just wrote whatever I underline, sometimes I just rephrase something that I wrote..but I was just too lazy to rephrase it..(B1/373-375)

...I just take the main points and put it back on the side of the paper and then..eh..next time..if I need the..need to read it again, I just read what's the main point for each paragraph. So it's like I don't really have to look for the points (D1/400-403)

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study have revealed that there exist 'qualitative variations' in these students' reading approaches of an academic expository text. Through phenomenography, the categories of description reflected differences in motives and purposes in reading, reading strategies and anxiety levels that would shed further light on the variations that exist in the reading process of the ESL learners. More importantly, through the structure of awareness, this study has revealed the 'themes' that are closely related or have affected the ESL students' approaches of reading the text the most.

In comparison to findings of previous studies (example, Marton and Booth, 1997), this study has also discovered similar as well as different categories in the reading approaches of the academic expository text (Figure 1). The similar categories within the deep approaches included intrinsic motivation, the employment of various reading techniques and strategies and the linking of ideas to facilitate their reading. Within the surface approaches, the similar categories included extrinsic motivation, poor application of reading techniques and strategies as well as focus on gist of paragraphs. Despite these similarities, some differences in the reading approaches within an ESL context were also discovered. One example is the 'anxiety' factor toward the text – in fact, almost all (five out of the six subjects) mentioned that they 'feared' texts which are lengthy and 'wordy'. Long passages can be quite daunting for ESL learners and the students may initially perceive it as difficult to read. With this negative perception of the text, it is no wonder that they approached it at a 'difficult' level which would be their first reaction and impression of the text even before they started to read the text. According to Krashen's (1982) 'filter hypothesis', students would put up a filter if threatened in any way. In this case, having a high filter affected their reading and understanding of the text.

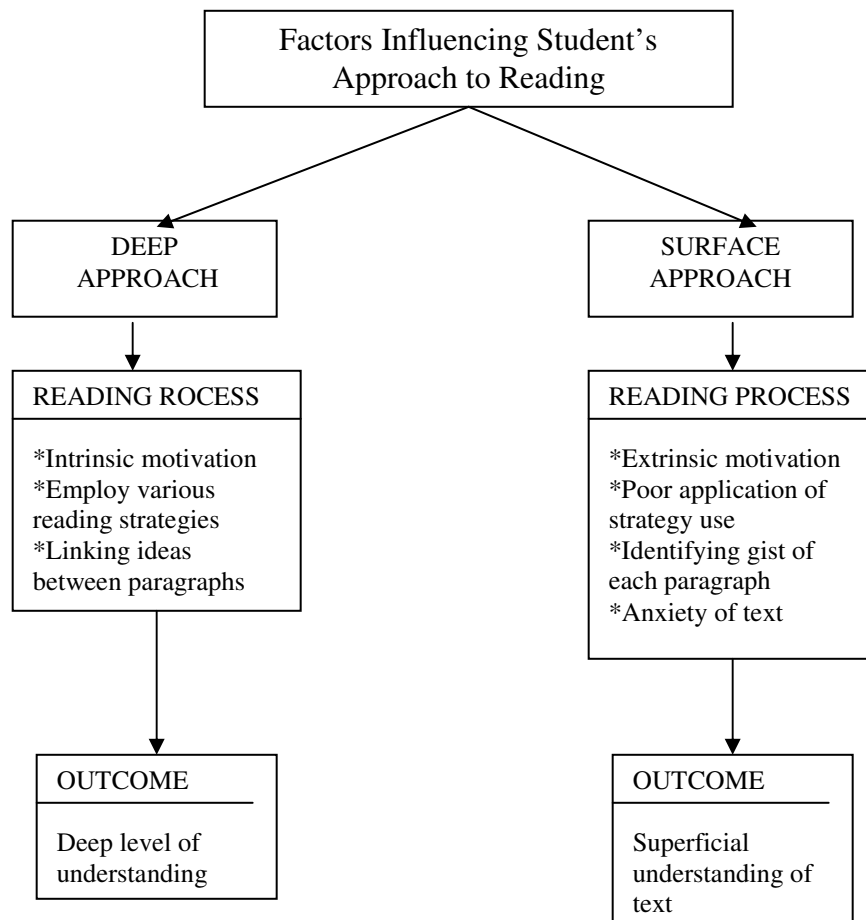


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of an ESL student's approach to reading an academic expository text

Another different category discovered in this study is the use of advance organizers in facilitating the reading of the text. It is interesting to note that only the deep readers were found to utilize such 'frameworks' in their reading. One possible reason for the application of such organizers could be the influence of previous study strategies which these readers have indicated to apply similar strategies in other readings.

The findings of this study also have important implications in regards to the outcome of reading. How (process-approach) these students go about reading the text will definitely influence what (outcome-meaning) they have understood. Biggs and Watkins (1995) emphasized that students who adopted a deep approach to learning would be involved in an active, transformative process of learning. Hence, they would develop a deep level of understanding. On the other hand, those who pursue a surface approach are highly likely to develop a superficial or incomplete level of understanding.

It is important that ESL students are made aware of their reading approaches. However, this is only possible if teachers themselves initiate the first step by questioning and understanding their students' reading process. To improve students' learning, or in this case, reading in higher education is not an easy task. Ramsden (1992, p.268) explains, "if we understand how to help students, we understand how to improve teaching". Therefore, by learning about how students go about learning, we take control of improving our teaching which will help our learners become better readers.

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Biodata

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