



Fostering reading comprehension skill among ESL tertiary level students through discourse engagement



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study presents how ESL tertiary level students' reading comprehension skill can be fostered when students were given the opportunity to share their thoughts in reading through discourse engagement. The purpose was to explore how by considering discourse as a strategy to facilitate the student's reading comprehension skill. The students were given opportunities to share their understanding and thoughts as they pen their ideas in a form of a letter with their peers. A class consisting of 20 third year degree students participated in this qualitative case study. Data were collected through class observations, semi-structured interviews and documents. The data were analyzed using the constant-comparative method. Findings showed that the students appreciated the opportunities to interact with the printed texts with their peers and the instructor. The experience does not only facilitate the student's reading comprehension skill but also enable them to strengthen their identity as readers. The research highlights the potential value of considering discourse engagement as a strategy in fostering student's reading comprehension skill.

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1. Introduction

Comprehension in a second language is far more complex than in a first language (Bernhardt, 2010). Koda (2005) stipulates that instructors of second-language students (L2) need to understand the challenges faced by the students because there are linguistic, processing and socio-cultural differences between first language (L1) and L2 reading (Grabe and Stoller, 2002), which causes the inability for second-language learners to interpret the text as efficiently as their monolingual English-speaking peers (Bernhardt, 2005; Koda, 2005; Nassaji, 2007).

1.1. Background of the study

Reading is an essential skill for students of English as a second or foreign language and for many, reading is the most important skill to master out of the four skills in a second language (Alvermann and Earle, 2003; Anderson and Cheng, 1999; Bernhardt, 2005; 2010). According to Stanovich (1986), Jetton and Dole (2004), when the

reading comprehension problem is not tackled appropriately the gap between novice students and the students who have acquired such skills will increase.

As a result, many L2 students are labeled as having low motivation and/or behavioral problems but in reality these students face problems in managing the nuances of academic texts (Garcia and Godina, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004). Failure to take into account the challenges faced by L2 students might render their views of reading as ineffective and demotivating process. Thus, reading instructors need to be aware and sensitive of the challenges faced by the students and provide avenues to interact facilitate and scaffold learning.

1.2. Problem statement

For L2 learners, the instructors of reading need to be selective in their pedagogical approach to teach reading and provide avenues for students to experience reading in an interactive manner (Grabe, 2009). In addition, the instructors also need to manage the students in a more tactful and understanding manner because of the learning complexities and intricacies students face such as language complexities, adjustment to academic literacy and the social adjustment of being a university student. All of these factors affect

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students' progress as effective readers (Bernhardt, 2005; Koda, 2005; Nassaji, 2011). Teaching and learning is not simple. It involves seeing the student through their lenses as they experience the learning process (Van Manen, 1991; 1994). Van Manen (2016) asserts educators need to observe the students pedagogically. In other words, through the suitable employment of pedagogical strategies the instructor needs to determine whether the students are learning what they are supposed to learn. The instructor monitors the total existence of the students' development through constant interaction and dialogue with them (Van Manen, 2007) to ensure that students become engaged readers.

One way to tackle this is by providing students with opportunities to experience reading in a meaningful manner through interaction and exposure to a range of texts. According to Duke et al. (2011), Guthrie (2004) and Van Manen (2007), to foster reading engagement students need to view reading as a social process.

1.3. The objectives of the study

The objective of this study is to explore the employment of discourse engagement as a strategy to foster reading comprehension skill among ESL tertiary level students. This study addresses the following two research questions: 1) What are the student's response to discourse engagement in the reading class? 2) How does discourse engagement foster the student's reading comprehension skill?

2. Review of related literature

Reading is one of those terms that are difficult to define. It is an elusive concept (Robinson, 1977; Willis, 2008) that defies attempts to provide a simple definition because the meaning depends on the context (Grabe, 2009; Smith, 1983). In fact, some have described reading as the four-component approach which constitutes: alphabetic, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Bernhardt, 2005; Droop and Verhoeven, 2003; McKeown and Beck, 2011). Additionally, some define reading as an act of powering response which impacts the reader and the text (Aebbersold and Field, 1997; Freire and Macedo, 1987).

As pointed out by Grabe (2009), Gough and Tunmer (1986), the complexity of defining reading is due to the concept of fluent reading which consists of having a purpose in reading, interaction between the reader and the text, ability to decode and interpret the meaning of the text and flexibility in employing strategies in reading. Thus, reading in general is "a complex cognitive skill, involving many sub-skills, processes and knowledge sources ranging from the basic lower level visual processes involved in decoding the print to higher level skills involving syntax, semantics and discourse" (Nassaji, 2011).

2.1. Importance of reading to tertiary level students

English language is seen as the language used in higher education, technology, and business (Graddol, 2006). In fact, currently, English is the medium for 80% of the information stored in the world's computers and over 80% of the world's scientific and social science literature. This indicates that those who are not proficient in English would find it difficult to comprehend the vast amount of scientific and technological literature available. Therefore, it is necessary for students to cultivate strategies and interact with the texts meaningfully when approaching reading tasks (Bernhardt, 2005; Koda, 2005).

Furthermore, according to Grabe (2009), Graddol (2006), Jetton and Dole (2004), Pugh et al. (2000) and Sivasubramaniam (2009), most of the reading materials at institutions of higher learning require students to synthesize the information found in the texts. However, the students are not compelled to read beyond the language printed in the text to be able to comprehend and get the gist of the information available. This may have hindered the students to construct meaning with the texts. As posited by Johns and Davies (1983) in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), texts are vehicles for information and not linguistic objects. They believe for readers to be able to read and comprehend written text, readers should focus on the information in the text and not on the linguistic form. However, the current teaching approach that is to extract information to answer the questions that follow the reading passages has hindered the students to experience reading as a meaningful process (Grabe, 2009).

In the context of higher learning, undergraduates are increasingly required to read numerous textbooks in English. Hence, success in undergraduate work is becoming more and more related to the ability to read the appropriate literature in English (Jetton and Dole, 2004). Sweet and Snow (2003) reminded that the importance of university students to equip themselves with good strategies in reading because reading comprehension provides the basis for a substantial amount of learning.

Thus, it is necessary for students to cultivate strategies when approaching reading tasks. Without the skills of reading comprehension, students' academic progress is limited and some may not be able to follow through their academic subjects successfully (Alvermann, 2004; Alvermann and Earle, 2003).

Based on the preceding discussion, there is a need for tertiary level students to be effective readers to succeed in academic pursuit. Thus, mastering English in order to fully understand reading materials available at the university is deemed necessary.

2.2. The current pedagogical approaches in teaching reading

The English language is highly valued in Malaysia. Thus, the English language subject is made a required subject from pre-school to the tertiary level. Nevertheless, in Malaysia, the secondary EFL curriculum does not seem to adequately prepare students for their academic reading (Harison, 2010). Subsequently, the lack of academic reading skill is strongly experienced among students where the medium of instruction in the higher institutions of learning is in English (David and Govindasamy, 2006). Additionally, the current pedagogical approach in teaching reading in Malaysia has also hindered the students' development as engaged readers. Nambiar (2005) noted that it is normal in the Malaysian L2 reading classrooms that the teachers' instructional focus is primarily on teaching students strategies to answer comprehension questions in order to prepare them for examinations. This is a typical comprehension-based in nature, where the main aim is for students to get the right answers. This has hindered students from experiencing reading as a meaning-making process.

As asserted by Klinger and Vaughn (2004), teachers or instructors of reading must be aware of the challenges the students face and the methods of teaching them to be effective readers in content-area classrooms. In fact, the IRA (2007) described a best practice for teaching reading is for the teachers to "connect literacy curriculum with the lived lives of students". In other words, allowing students to bring their lives or experiences at home and in the community into the classroom enables them to make connections and develop relationships with instructors and peers.

2.3. Engaging in discourse

Haynes (2009), Zamel (1992), and Kucan and Beck (2003) posited that engaging in discourse either verbally or through writing of a reading material improves reading comprehension. For effective reading instruction, instructors should allow students opportunities to interact and engage with the text in a meaningful manner (Grabe, 2009; Kucan and Beck, 2003; Puteri and Hashim, 2015; Pressley, 2002). According to Grabe and Stoller (2002), instructional approach in reading should create space for the students to interact and make meaning of the reading text. Additionally, the pedagogy employed should allow students' voices on the learning experience be heard which can be achieved through suitable pedagogical approach (Van Manen, 2007; Puteri, 2014). This is achieved by encouraging dialogue and ensuring equal participation among the learners.

They further posit that providing and encouraging dialogue fosters learners' critical reflection and autonomous thinking. Subsequently, the students feel comfortable to share their learning experiences with the instructor which in turn

enables the instructor to facilitate and scaffold the pedagogical instruction in order to meet the students' needs (Van Manen, 2007; Puteri, 2015; Von Worde, 2003).

Kucan and Beck (2003) conducted a study on the role of talking on reading comprehension. She did a study on seventh graders investigating the function of talk on expository texts. The finding illustrated that the students' performance of their posttest showed improvement. In addition, it was found that engagement with text is heightened when students were given opportunities to talk in a group or pair rather than individually. In other words, when the context of talk is between two or more people the students' thinking or intellectual process is facilitated. The result of the study suggests that the social context of learning may facilitate students' learning process.

A different study by Evans (2007) on 24 first-year university students showed that when students were given the opportunity to express their thoughts through reading reaction journals after reading a text their engagement with the text was facilitated. This was because the students had to undergo a deeper cognitive level before they began writing in the reading reaction journal. In other words, they had to activate their mind to read, reflect and be critical before they began writing in the journal. Both findings show that when students engage in discourse their comprehension level is facilitated. Allowing students to express their thoughts and share their voices on the interpretation of texts helps to promote engagement in reading. This substantiates Guthrie (2004), Mezirow (1997), and Vygotsky (1980) theory that learning is socially mediated.

2.4. Theoretical framework of this study

For the purpose of this study, four theoretical lenses which are Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Mezirow's transformative learning theory, Guthrie's reading engagement theory and Bernhardt's compensatory theory were employed. The choice of selecting these theories was influenced by viewing learning as cognitive and social processes. Cognitive learning processes focus on what goes on in the mind of the learner as new information is acquired, while the social process involves viewing learning as socially mediated.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study to explore the use of discourse engagement in fostering reading comprehension skill to 20 degree students in one reading class.

3.1. Participants

The participants were degree students in their third semester taking a reading course in the

university. The students were required to take the course as part of the university requirement. For this study, the instructor decided to divide the students into groups according to their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM-the Malaysia Certificate of Examination which is equivalent to the Cambridge "O" level exam). A grade 1 on the SPM is the highest grade (that is a distinction), and a grade 9 is the lowest grade (which is a fail). English language is one of the compulsory subjects for students to take in their SPM. Altogether, there were five groups; the instructor intended to purposefully select students from each of the groups based on the three different groupings of SPM English result: higher ability, average ability and lowest ability.

The purpose of having mixed ability participants is to ensure that the conclusions obtained are able to sufficiently represent the entire range of variation in that particular group of students (Maxwell, 2012).

Table 1: Participants' groupings based on their SPM English results

Group 1 (SPM English A2)	Group 2 (SPM English B3)	Group 3 (SPM English B4 and C5)
6 students	7 students	7 students
1 of the students voluntarily participated: Reo	1 of the students voluntarily participated: Kay	1 of the students voluntarily participated: Zie

Prior to the study, the instructor briefed the class on the purpose of the study and invited participation by explaining to them what they could gain from the research, how it would benefit them as students, and its benefit to other future students who would be taking the course. According to Creswell (2008), to obtain good data, the participants need to voluntarily take part in the study. He further noted that the participants must willingly provide information and have the ability to express their understanding of the task for the researcher to gain rich insights. After the explanation, volunteers from the students were requested. There were 3 students, Reo, Kay and Zie (pseudonyms) who had wanted to take part in the study.

For the selection of sample size, the researcher decided to adopt Patton (1990) approach that there are no rules in determining sample size in qualitative inquiry. As noted by Patton (1990), "The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size".

3.2. Data collection procedure

For this study, a number of techniques were employed to collect data in order to give a holistic picture on the practice of discourse engagement in a reading class. The triangulation of sources obtained from the techniques was employed in an effort to reduce bias in the data, which would enhance the internal validity (Maxwell, 2012). Thus, the techniques employed for this study were: observation, semi-structured interview and

Thus, having a range of participants with mixed ability allowed the instructor to understand the learning experience of this group of students as well as gaining the emic perspective from this different language ability group of students.

At the beginning of the class the instructor had assigned the students to their own small group. They were required to work and solve the tasks given to them in this respective group throughout the semester. As mentioned earlier, the selection of grouping was based from their SPM English result. For instance students of the same or equivalent SPM English result were grouped together that is students with a grade of B3 were put together as one group, while students with a result of B4 in another group. Altogether, there were five distinctive groups (Refer to Table 1: Students with the score of A in one group, B3 in two other groups and B4 and C5 with another two groups).

document mining (Borgdan and Bicklen, 2007; Creswell, 2008; Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 1998).

3.2.1. Observation

There were a total of nine observations of 2-hour lessons throughout the 14 week of the semester. The other 5 weeks were allotted for administration of tests. During the observations, the researcher observed and recorded the students' reaction toward learning and how they responded to the discourse engagement in the class and outside of class through the letter writing task. A designed protocol for class observation was also prepared as a guide for the researcher and other observers during the observation. The attributes for reading comprehension skill were also included. The technique used allowed the researcher to get firsthand information from the students as well as gaining in-depth understanding of their learning experiences.

3.2.2. Semi-structured interview

Besides observations, interviewing was another technique used in data collection. After the three participants for the study had been identified and they gave consent to participate in the study, the interview sessions were conducted. Prior to the interview session, the researcher prepared interview protocols and discussed the set of questions with experts in the field who have more than 20 years of teaching at university level. A few adjustments were made pertaining to the interview questions such as the language used must not to be too formal, and the way the questions were put forward should not be too direct in order to allow the participants to

express their truest thoughts and feelings. There were a total of 12 interviews; each participant was interviewed four times. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and it took place in a room suitable for the interview session. When there was no new information to be added to the existing themes, the researcher decided to cease the interview sessions. This term is referred to as data saturation (Creswell, 2008).

3.2.3. Documents

Another data collection technique used was document mining. There were five document sources used for the study that is from the instructor's lesson plan and reflective notes, in-class letters and out-of-class (OCL) letters, pre-teaching and post-teaching questionnaire. Merriam (1998) described how the 'review of documents is an un-obstructive method, one rich in portraying the values and beliefs of the participants in the setting' as it can be conducted without disturbing the setting in any way. Through this method, the researcher was able to gain rich insights into the participants' values and beliefs.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the findings related to the two research questions. The first research question was formulated to gain a better understanding of how the participants responded to the practice of priming interaction in a reading class. Participants were asked to provide responses with regard to what they think of their learning experiences. The themes and subthemes presented here were identified following extensive reading and re-reading of participants' data and identification of participants' interpretations as well as repeated viewing of videotaped classroom observations during the process of teaching and learning. The second research question deals with how the discourse engagement fosters student's reading comprehension skill.

4.1. Research question 1

Participants were asked to provide responses with regard to what they think of their learning experiences. The themes and subthemes presented here were identified following extensive reading and re-reading of participants' data and identification of participants' interpretations as well as repeated viewing of videotaped classroom observations during the process of teaching and learning. Under this section, two themes emerged explaining how the participants respond to this new mode of learning. They include (a) two-way communication and (b) appreciation for the style of teaching.

Prior to this study, the students in the class were given a pre-questionnaire on how they perceive reading. These participants who obtained average and below average score in their SPM English

language, expressed negative feelings and attitude toward English class prior to taking this class. For instance, Kay reported, "Honestly, I never like attending English courses". A similar view was echoed by Reo, who obtained a C3 in her SPM English; she expressed her feelings toward English class. She explained the reason, "Because it is boring, difficult!! I want to improve my English language but it is boring because I do not know how to understand". Her negative feelings influenced her perception and attitude toward learning the subject.

The participants reported that the difficulties and the mundane learning experience in their previous English classes made the participants unmotivated to learn. This aligns with Ellis (2002) and Storch (2005) notion that the level of language proficiency does influence the students' learning outcomes as well as Dornyei (2006) view on motivation to learn.

4.1.1. There is a two-way communication

A key finding common to all the participants in the study was their positive attitude toward the new mode of learning. Nonetheless, their initial perception changed after attending this class. This lends support to Mezirow (1997) notion of transformative learning. Transformative learning occurs when the students are able to experience a shift in their perception to learning that is viewing the process from information transfer to identity development (Keeling, 2004). In this study, the process of learning puts emphasis in approaching students as partners in learning (Mezirow, 1997; Van Manen, 1991). The instructor took the role of a facilitator in guiding and scaffolding the process of learning. This is in line with Vygotsky (1980) socio-cultural theory. This was reflected in the weekly lesson and observation. For instance, the data from observation showed that the instructor did not take the center-stage rather she facilitated and scaffolded the learning by modeling the employment of the reading strategies. In addition, she created spaces for the students to interact and dialogue with her through small-group tasks.

This excerpt was taken from observation of week 4 lesson.

Task 1

She distributed exercises on finding main idea. She requested the students to go into their assigned group to discuss the task together. She informed students of the need to support reasons for their selection of titles. She asked students to provide title for the tasks set, leading the topic for the day that is identifying the main idea. She facilitated Kay's group.

Kay's group

Instructor: What is the answer?

Kay: Retina

Instructor: How did you manage to get the answer?

Reo: The word "retina".

Fiza: It is bolded and because the word is repeated several times in the text.

She continued and moved from one group to another to monitor and scaffold the students' learning.

This excerpt (above) shows that the instructor provided space for students to interact with their peers as well as space for her to interact and monitor the students' learning development. The students preferred this type of learning. To them, it is more personal and they felt more comfortable to interact with their peers and the instructor in the class. In maintaining Guthrie's, Mezirow's, Bernhardt's and Vygotsky's perspective on the social aspect of learning for this study, the instructor structured the learning to enable students to dialogue openly with her. Reo affirmed this when he stated "In this class, it is different where there is a two-way communication. I am no longer afraid to ask question when I do not understand".

When the participants expressed enjoyment in learning and reading, they displayed they are motivated to learn and have the desire to be good readers (Guthrie, 2004). This was accomplished when the instructor created a learning environment that builds on trust and care, which is consistent with Mezirow (1997) transformative learning theory. She provided space for the students to interact with her both in the class through the in-class letter, small-group task and outside of class through the out-of-class letter. The data from ICL (in-class letter) also corroborates this.

Kay shared her views: "What I like in the class is the instructor always guides us to settle the problems we faced. I like it! The activities for today also help me to improve my reading skills. The last one we need to identify the subject, purpose and main idea was difficult but interesting".

Additionally, the participants too used the out-of-class letter (OCL) to interact and dialogue with the instructor. They openly shared their thoughts and the challenges they faced with the instructor. As shown in the excerpt:

"It is actually a very interesting article but sometimes the words used by the author are quite difficult to understand, so it has totally affected my passion to read the article. In my opinion, this article is trying to give us some information about the life of wolves which mostly not everybody knows about them. The author also tried his best to express his feeling but sometimes he failed to use the appropriate explanation about his story, especially when he came out with Angeline and George. I am a bit lost when he talked about these two names. Are they wolves? And how come he has the name for both of them?"

4.1.2. Appreciation for the style of teaching

A finding common to all the participants was their appreciation for the style of teaching. The theme on the style of teaching keeps emerging from the participants when they provided responses on their perception of the reading class. Data from the

study showed the instructor's style of teaching also plays a role in influencing students' motivation to learn and to read. This is consistent with Guthrie (2004) theory and Mezirow (1997) learning theory. The participants compared this class and their previous English classes, both in their formative years of schooling and at the university.

Initially, most of the participants have stereotyped English classes as being difficult, boring and they dislike how the subject was taught. However, their initial perceptions changed after attending the class. For example, Azhan said, "I feel that I understand English language much better now. Her style of teaching makes me easier to understand and follow". He described the teaching as enjoyable and easy to understand.

Findings from the post-teaching questionnaire and interview from other participants also affirmed this. The other participants expressed positive feelings on the interaction used for the class. For example, Kay and Reo described they prefer this style of teaching. Kay expressed her view in her letter to the instructor. She uttered she prefers the method employed and described the teaching approach as stimulating.

The first time Madam taught us, I found her teaching approach interesting. So, I began to have interest to enter English class. Before this, I do not have any interest. There is no interest at all. Now, I feel that her approach is different. We find it interesting.

Kay's explanation on the subject matter she said:

From the aspect of teaching, learning and activities, all of them are interesting for me. Maybe, I never feel like this in the English class before. The instructor tried to teach us, but I was not interested. I do not know why. If compared to this class, it is different. This is the first time I am interested to attend English class.

The participants reported they found the class to be different from their other English classes. They reiterated the teaching style has stimulated their interest in learning. Being L2 students who face difficulties in understanding the nuances of linguistic terms in academic texts, they claimed the class permitted them to develop as engaged reader progressively. This is consistent with transformative learning theory. They have described the approach used as effective. The participants tend to compare their past learning experience with the current class. They claimed the instructor has approached them in a more understanding manner

4.2. Research question 2

The second research question was formed to investigate the role played by discourse engagement in contributing to participants' reading comprehension skill. The findings illustrated that the practice of discourse engagement in the reading classroom fostered the students' reading comprehension skill. This is consistent with the theories chosen for this study. The interaction which

were primed strategically through discourse activities permit students to experience reading in a more engaging and meaningful manner. For the second research question, there are two themes observed: (a) employment of reading strategies and (b) motivation to read.

4.2.1. Employment of reading strategies

For instance as observed in one of the activities on determining main idea, Kay's group started doing the task given to them.

The instructor reminded them to apply what they had learnt the week earlier. They read the article silently. As they read they began to underline the important ideas in the text. One of them was unsure of the main ideas of the third paragraph. She posed question to the group members. Kay responded and said, "Look at the words which are bold in color." Another student interjected by saying: "Find the words which are constantly being repeated in the paragraph".

The learning space is defined as giving opportunities for students to grasp the reading strategies taught. This was established through the small-group task. As the students discussed in the small-group, they were the opportunities to apply what was taught to them. They completed the task assigned in the group. As they read, they started discussing and sharing their ideas with their group members. They took charge of their own learning. For instance, data from observation 4 as illustrated above showed Reo and another student in the group managed to remember what to do when locating the main idea. When they read, they began to read strategically, the students processed and engaged with the text in meaningful manner. Data from Reo's third interview too illustrated this. An excerpt from the interview session is shown below.

Interviewer: What does the word "don" mean in the passage?

Reo: Carry.

Interviewer: Can you explain how did you get the answer?

Reo: The sentence after the word "don" and the clue of "or." I have used the strategies taught by the instructor to identify meaning of word using clues.

The word after "or" in the sentence shows another meaning to the word "don."

Interviewer: What do you think of the strategies?

Reo: It is beneficial. Before this, I just read and when I do not know the meaning of the word I will stop or look at the dictionary. Now, I do not have to do that.

The data showed Reo is progressing to become engaged readers because as she read she employed strategies. This substantiates Guthrie (2004) notion on engaged readers. Reo acknowledged the benefit of learning and employing the reading strategies to progress to the status of engaged reader.

When they approached the text strategically, they were activating their mind to read at a deeper level such as questioning and clarifying what is in the text. They employed the reading strategies taught by the instructor. Subsequently, their interest in reading is heightened because they continued to read even when they do face challenges as they approached the text. This substantiates Guthrie (2004) reading engagement theory. The reading strategies taught enable the students to view reading as a cognitive process. They are aware that as they read they need to approach the text in a strategic manner rather than reading at a surface level.

4.2.2. Motivation to read

Motivation to read is another tenet of reading engagement. Students who are motivated are willing to take up the challenge to continue reading even when they admitted facing difficulty in understanding the printed materials. This lends support to Baer (2003) and Guthrie (2004) notion on motivation to read. In fact, the students would embrace the challenges they faced and took delight in learning. Thus, the instructor's role under the pedagogy is to create the possible avenues for students to experience reading in a meaningful way. In other words, the pedagogical instruction provided does not limit the students' reading experience which causes them to provide only shallow interpretation of the reading text. Subsequently, the process hinders the students from experience reading as something more thoughtful and consequential.

As shown in one of the class observations, the instructor monitored her students' understanding of the lesson taught by moving from one group to another.

When the students were discussing, she listened and only interjected when necessary. She patiently listened and provided feedback. She complimented groups which managed to complete the task and encouraged other groups to continue until the task was completed. If the students raised their hands, she went to the group and listened to what the students tried to explain. She did this with every different group in the class. She scaffolded the learning until they managed to take charge on their own.

The excerpt below showed one excerpt from the activities conducted in the class. The instructor noticed that one of the groups faced problems in completing the task. She went to the group.

Instructor: Okay, how are doing with the task?

Zie: I am unsure how to do this. What does hardy men mean?

Instructor: Do read the paragraph again? (She waited for the students to read the paragraph again). Now, tell me what is the main idea of the paragraph?

Kay: Tells about the difficulty of the workers building the bridge.

Instructor: Why did you say they faced difficulty?

Zie: The pressure of the compressed air. It is not easy when you are not used to work[ing] with that kind of environment.

Instructor: Good you are in the right track. Try talking out loud what you think as you read the paragraph.

The students continued doing, while the instructor watched and only interjected when necessary. When [she] was satisfied with her students' progress, she then moved to another group.

In the class the instructor used the space in the small-group task to provide feedback to the students. From the observation data when the students faced challenges as they approach their task, the instructor did not immediately responded. She gave the opportunity for the students to explain the difficulty they faced. In addition, she did not immediately provide answer. She encouraged and motivated the students to process the learning on their own. Her role was to facilitate and scaffold the learning. The feedback she gave encouraged the students to take charge of their own learning and they felt good about their own achievement. The students did not cease reading. They continued read even when faced challenges.

This substantiates [Mezirow \(1997\)](#) learning theory as well as [Vygotsky \(1980\)](#) theory on Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and More Knowledge Other (MKO). The participants too affirmed the notion. For example, Reo voiced his opinion on this; he uttered:

The instructor put us into different groups and checked our work. When we have questions to ask, we are not afraid to ask. There are certain instructors when we asked he will say "When you go back did you review your notes?" If we did ask her even when she has just taught the lesson the week before she would not hesitate to respond either personally or to the whole class.

Findings from in-class letter (ICL) also substantiate this.

The instructor gave some exercises to make sure that we understand about what we have learned. We worked in a group, so it is easier for us to share our knowledge and the learning becomes effective.

To the participants this type of learning in a small-group allowed them to be comfortable and at the same time have fun in the class. This is because the way the instructor provided feedback in a positive and encouraging manner did not hinder their interest to learn. This affirms the study by [Zoghi et al. \(2010\)](#), [Berne and Clark \(2006\)](#) on group work. In addition, the students in the study were no longer afraid to pose question to the instructor because she provided feedback willingly. They observed that the instructor was not easily disturbed even when they posed questions on a lesson recently taught. This made the class fun and easy to understand. As a result their motivational level to progress as skilled reader is fostered.

5. Conclusion

The findings in the study illustrated that the participants responded positively to learning through interaction. The findings of the present study are consistent with the perspectives of the four theories selected for the study-socio-cultural theory, transformative learning theory, compensatory theory and reading engagement theory. When the students experience active personal involvement with the text, their peers and the instructor, their interest to learn is heightened. In addition, when students experience a different approach of learning whereby two way communications between the instructor and the students are established and their voices are considered, transformation in learning is likely to occur.

The participants admitted that the new experiences were stimulating, especially when they received responses from the instructor both in and outside of class through small-group task and letter writings. The result confirms [Vygotsky \(1980\)](#) theory on learning as socially mediated and the role of the instructor as More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) in scaffolding the learning. This also supports [Van Manen \(1991\)](#) view that the elements under pedagogical approach should encourage students to develop a positive view of learning. This can be achieved when the students know that the instructor's presence is to facilitate them in learning and when they are able to see the purpose of learning. This confirms [Keeling \(2004\)](#), [Guthrie \(2004\)](#) and [Mezirow \(1997\)](#) affirmation that the selection of pedagogical approach would either hinder or facilitate student learning.

Another key finding in the study is the students acknowledged the importance to be cognitively active when approaching reading. This is in line with [Guthrie \(2004\)](#) reading engagement theory. Initially, the participants perceived reading as a passive exercise. To them, reading is only a way of retrieving important information found in the text and providing answers to the questions at the end of the reading text. This is consistent with [Bernhardt \(2010\)](#) compensatory theory and [McElvain \(2009\)](#) assertion that L2 readers perceive reading as a process of memorizing discrete skills with minimal purpose of making meaning of the text. In other words, it is just a chore for them to complete tasks as requested by their teachers which limit the students making meaning with the academic texts in a meaningful manner. Thus, they became disengaged with the act of reading because they claimed they did not see the purpose of learning and did not understand what was taught to them.

In addition, the current style of teaching reading in educational setting in international and in Malaysia has also hindered the students from being more analytical and critical when reading ([Bernhardt, 2010](#); [Klinger and Edwards, 2006](#); [Nambiar, 2005](#); [Smith and Goodman, 2008](#)), which has resulted in viewing reading as a chore to complete the questions related to the text. This was

evidenced in the finding from the pre-teaching questionnaire before the participants were exposed to reading in this classroom. The finding affirms the assertion made by Grabe (2009), Klinger and Edwards (2006), Olson (2007) and Zamel (1992) that when reading is taught in a static manner, students are not encouraged to process and activate their minds as well as make meaning with the reading text.

Most of the participants reported they faced difficulty in understanding reading materials in English. This lends support to the report by the American College Testing (ACT) in 2005 (Cantrell and Carter, 2009) that many university students perceive reading as a static process as the task is only to lift information to answer the questions at the end of the reading passage. They do not possess the necessary cognitive strategies to approach and comprehend text, which lead to students facing difficulties across other subject areas because they are not engaged with the reading text.

In short, the overall findings show that discourse engagement can be implemented in a reading class among L2 tertiary level students in order to foster the students' reading comprehension skill.

6. Limitation

Although the study has made some contributions to the field of L2 reading comprehension, it has limitation too. The limitations of the present study are: The research method used for the study. The study employed a qualitative case study which focused on exploring the phenomenon in a bounded context in order to gain an in-depth understanding with no intention of making claims and generalizations. Because of the research design, it is not possible to generalize the findings of this study to other populations.

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