

Scaffolding Approach with Reading Strategies in Teaching Reading Comprehension to Rural Year 3 ESL Learners in Malaysia

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Received: April 30, 2019; **Accepted:** May 7, 2019; **Published:** May 11, 2019

Abstract: Reading is deemed to play a key role in the learning of English as a second language (ESL) among rural learners who have limited opportunities to hear or speak the language. However, they often come to ESL classrooms with the ability to read the text fluently, yet fully comprehend it. The past literature illuminate that these less skilled readers can be taught to employ appropriate reading strategies to construct the meaning from the text, and eventually aid their comprehension. Henceforth, this action research was conducted to explore how the twelve-week explicit strategy instruction via scaffolding approach helps improve eleven Year Three ESL learners' reading comprehension in a rural primary school in Sarawak, Malaysia as well as their perspectives towards the use of six research-based reading strategies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, teacher's reflective observation notes, and pupils' work before being analysed using qualitative analysis and thematic coding. The findings of this study revealed that all the six strategies play their own role in helping the participants to become active agents in creating meaning from the texts given, and thus enhancing their reading comprehension. Besides, the learners believe that the use of the strategies learnt improves their reading comprehension, promotes their higher order thinking skills, as well as motivates them to read. It is recommended that the explicit strategy instruction can be incorporated in teaching comprehension to primary ESL learners to aid their reading comprehension, and eventually achieve desirable level in Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) reading proficiency test.

Keywords: explicit strategy instruction, reading strategies, rural primary ESL learners, reading comprehension, reading motivation.

Citation: Sharon Wong Min Ying and Azlina Abdul Aziz. 2019. Scaffolding Approach with Reading Strategies in Teaching Reading Comprehension to Rural Year 3 ESL Learners in Malaysia. International Journal of Current Innovations in Advanced Research, 2(5): 6-26.

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Introduction

Malaysian rural ESL learners are deemed to have lower English proficiency level as compared to their urban counterparts (Hazita, 2016; Abdul Rahim and Lee, 2017; Rosli and Edwin, 2018) due to the fact of that they have limited opportunities to hear, speak, or use the language which resembles that of a foreign language than a second language (Rajasekaran and Anburaj, 2015). Henceforth, reading seems to play a vital role in their English language learning (Gomathi, 2014; Nation, 2014). It is believed that the more ESL learners read, the

more they would become proficient in English language. Acquiring successful reading enables them to speak fluently (Jacob, 2016; Sadiku, 2015), have a good master of grammar, possess a large vocabulary and improve their writing ability (Mermelstein, 2015; Yaghoubi-Notash, 2015) as well as think creatively and critically (Burchiellaro, 2013; Lightbown and Spada, 2013; Habib, 2016).

Reading is always known as a multifaceted, cognitively demanding process (Stanovich, 2000; Grabe and Stoller, 2011; Yaseen, 2013; Grabe, 2014; Jeon and Yamashita, 2014) which requires active interaction between reader, text, and reading strategies. Readers must be able to decode the words, phrases, and sentences in lower-level processing first before they can derive meaning from the text given using reading strategies and resources in higher-level processing (Durkin, 1993; Alkabi, 2015; Boyt, 2015; Savic, 2016) to achieve cohesive reading comprehension, i.e. the core of successful reading. However, Shea and Ceprano (2017) address that poor reading comprehension among learners is one of the challenges that reading teachers are most likely to encounter in the classroom. These less skilled readers are deemed to have difficulties in using comprehension strategies and activating their background knowledge to approach the text given as well as recognising the text structure (Spear-Swerling, 2016). Consequently, learning to read seems to be the most frustrating activity for ESL learners, and thus results in their lower reading proficiency particularly in comprehension.

In line with the Result Report Cambridge Baseline (MOE, 2013) which highlighted the reading failure among Malaysian primary ESL learners, I observed that my rural Year Three ESL learners have difficulties in comprehending what they have read as well as answering the “how” and “why” questions despite of being able to read the texts fluently. This is in parallel with the findings of Dewitz and Dewitz’s (2003) study which demonstrated that the learner could read with accuracy, fluency, and expression at the independent level, yet he failed to answer reading comprehension questions. This implies that being able to read fluently does not promise readers to be able to perform well in their reading comprehension (Applegate *et al.*, 2009; Yaseen, 2013). Hence, there is a dearth need to plan and implement reading intervention in helping my rural Year Three ESL learners improve their reading comprehension as researchers (Noli *et al.*, 2013; Suggate *et al.*, 2013) have called for effective intervention in the early grades so that learners will become proficient readers by the end of third grade.

Reading strategies

The scholars (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995; Torgesen *et al.*, 2007; Prichard, 2014; Frankel *et al.*, 2016; Hansen, 2016) emphasise that for one to become a proficient reader, he needs to select and employ multiple appropriate reading strategies before, during, and after reading as well as develop metacognitive reading ability to monitor the use of strategies in a coordinated manner to undertake meaning making process successfully. Reading strategies are defined as conscious, flexible techniques which teachers can use to help readers improve their reading performance through compensating their comprehension breakdowns on specific reading tasks and in specific contexts (Harvey, 2012; Souhila, 2014).

Researchers (Ahmadi and Gilakjani, 2012; Kuru-Gonen, 2015; Sari, 2017) discovered that utilising reading strategies helps readers to identify the important ideas, clarify unclear words, phrases, or sentences, infer hidden messages as well as summarise the main ideas of the text to compensate comprehension breakdowns. As these strategies aid readers to overcome difficulties which they have encountered in their reading, it is deemed that it will motivate

them to think abstractly and build their metacognition (Harvey, 2012). Besides, reading strategically also helps promote higher order thinking skills among readers as they are transforming information and ideas to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information in the text (Kucukoglu, 2013; Mohd Sirhajwan, 2016; Wu, 2016). Eventually, they will be able to create new knowledge from the text and further develop deeper comprehension so that they can become avid and independent readers. Moreover, when readers are highly engaged in using reading strategies, it will motivate them to be more eager to read to learn and thus improve their reading comprehension (Pezhman and Moomala, 2013; Norbaiyah *et al.*, 2014; Korthof and Guda, 2016; Muijiselaar *et al.*, 2017).

Likewise, the importance of learning reading strategies is also being highlighted in Malaysia primary KSSR English Year Three English syllabus that as “pupils begin to read words, phrases, and then move on to simple sentences, their skill or strategy to read should be supported by appropriate reading materials which will further develop their reading ability” (MOE, 2012, p. 9) so that they can understand texts read more effectively and efficiently. Seeing the crucial role of reading strategies in enhancing one’s reading comprehension, readers should be taught reading strategies explicitly via instruction (Zafarani and Kabgani, 2014; Roit, 2016). Explicit strategy instruction involves the explanation of instructional strategies plus modelling as to how, why, and when to use them (Dewitz and Dewitz, 2003) as well as scaffolding by teachers and opportunities for readers to apply the reading strategies learnt in group work, pair work, and independent practice (Roit, 2016). As readers practise interacting with the text using a repertoire of appropriate reading strategies more often, these strategies will become more automatic (McNamara, 2009), and ultimately the better their understanding towards what is being read will be cultivated (Block, 1986; Souhila, 2014; Chang and Ku, 2015; Habibian, 2017).

As there are different classifications of reading strategies, it has become a concern that which reading strategies should be taught to primary ESL learners during the explicit strategy instruction due to their limited linguistic knowledge. The outcomes of three systematic reviews (National Reading Panel, 2000; Shanahan *et al.*, 2010; Roit, 2016) indicated that six major research-based reading strategies namely (1) predicting/ activating prior knowledge, (2) questioning and finding answers, (3) visualising, (4) inferencing, (5) summarising, and (6) making connections play their own role in cultivating different kinds of thinking which help improve one’s reading comprehension. Evidently, these six reading strategies constitute the framework of recent studies conducted (McKown and Barnett, 2007; Acosta and Ferri, 2010; Yusfarina *et al.*, 2012; Kucukoglu, 2013; Daza and Casas, 2016; Gonzalez, 2017) and were found to be effective in improving reading comprehension of ESL/ EFL learners of different proficiency levels.

Past related studies

In recent years, several studies have been conducted to explore the use of reading strategies in reading comprehension. Despite adopting different notions of instruction, i.e. single strategy instruction (McKown and Barnett, 2007) and multiple strategy instruction (Acosta and Ferri, 2010; Kucukoglu, 2013; Parr and Woloshyn, 2013; Gomaa, 2015; Daza and Casas, 2016; Gonzalez, 2017) in teaching reading strategies, the results of these studies in the foreign context evidenced that strategy instruction when incorporated explicitly via scaffolding approach, it helps improve EFL/ ESL readers’ reading comprehension including young readers with limited reading proficiency. By employing reading strategies, readers are deemed to be engaged in a complex thinking process which requires them to decode, analyse, assess, and generalise the information to derive meaning from the text (Daza and Casas,

2016; Gonzalez, 2017). Eventually, it helps readers to resolve comprehension difficulties, reach a higher level of thinking, build metacognition, and increase motivation as active agents in their reading process (Gomaa, 2015; Gonzalez, 2017).

Though it is evident that employing reading strategies helps improve reading comprehension, the findings of both studies (McKown and Barnett, 2007; Daza and Casas, 2016) had shed light on the reading strategies which young struggling readers seem to find more useful. The findings of these two studies demonstrated the same outcome, i.e. young struggling readers find it useful to employ three reading strategies namely predicting, making connections, and visualising. Conversely, they need more teacher modelling and prompting in using questioning, inferencing, and summarising as they think that these strategies are difficult. This is in concordance with Kucukoglu (2013) who emphasises in his study that teacher should guide and monitor the learners in every step of the reading process especially for questioning, inferencing, and summarising strategies. Though the inferencing strategy seems difficult, the participants in Daza and Casas's study (2016) acknowledged that the strategy is essential in helping them to infer the meaning of unknown words and ideas to comprehend what they have read.

However, the evidence of implementing the explicit strategy instruction in teaching reading comprehension to Malaysian ESL learners is much limited. To date, only three studies which examined the effectiveness of teaching reading strategies with secondary students via multiple strategy instruction were reported (Tan *et al.*, 2011; Yusfarina *et al.*, 2012; Humaira *et al.*, 2015). The findings of Tan *et al.*'s (2011) study with 68 Sixth-Form low proficiency students indicated that the majority of the respondents found the reciprocal strategies effective and interesting as it provided them a platform to work in group discussion, connect new information with their experience, construct meaning from the text, and enhance their reading comprehension.

The positive results of pre-and-post reading comprehension tests in Yusfarina *et al.*'s (2012) study with 90 Form 2 students from Selangor demonstrated that the multiple strategy instruction helped the experimental group to promote their inferential thinking, and thus facilitate their reading comprehension. The findings of the preliminary study by Humaira *et al.*, (2015) with 14 Malaysian Form 2 struggling readers suggested that implementing the reciprocal teaching strategy had challenged the readers to monitor their comprehension as well as their peers' comprehension.

All these three local studies (Tan *et al.*, 2011; Yusfarina *et al.*, 2012; Humaira *et al.*, 2015) conducted were quantitative research which provided little evidence of how these reading strategies should be taught explicitly with Malaysian ESL learners.

Henceforth, this current study was embarked with the aim to fill in the research gap and to explore the explicit strategy instruction in teaching reading strategies to my rural Year Three ESL learners in Julau, Sarawak via scaffolding approach and discover their perspectives towards learning and using different reading strategies in their reading comprehension. This study, therefore, attempts to answer two research questions as follows: (1) How does the explicit strategy instruction via scaffolding approach help improve reading comprehension among rural Year Three ESL learners? and (2) How do rural Year Three ESL learners perceive the use of six research-based reading strategies (predicting, making connections, questioning, inferencing, visualising, and summarising) learnt via the explicit strategy instruction in their reading comprehension?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach particularly action research. Action research was selected because the design which is diagnostic, reflective, and action-oriented (McNiff, 2002; Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Creswell, 2014) enabled me to be engaged in a systematic inquiry into my own teaching practices (Harland, 2010) and focus on the teaching issue, i.e. poor reading comprehension among my rural Year Three ESL learners, which was problematic yet could be changed through exploring the explicit strategy instruction. Evidently, previous action research studies conducted in the foreign context (McKown and Barnett, 2007; Acosta and Ferri, 2010; Kucukoglu, 2013; Daza and Casas, 2016; Gonzalez, 2017) had successfully illustrated the findings of how teaching reading strategies via explicit strategy instruction contributes to EFL/ ESL readers' reading comprehension.

The contemporary Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) action research model which constitutes five disciplined and systematic steps in a research cycle was adopted in this current study. I observed and reflected on the issue, i.e. poor reading comprehension among the participants, acted out the explicit strategy instruction as planned for twelve consecutive weeks to get the participants practise employing the six research-based reading strategies in their reading comprehension, monitored and evaluated the effectiveness of the instruction as well as explored participants' perceptions towards the use of reading strategies via data collection and data analysis, and continued to work on the next cycle to improve my intervention in the light of new information about the field of action obtained through modifying my original plan (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Goh, 2012).

Participants

The sampling design utilised in this action research is purposive sampling. The eleven participants who aged 9 years old and are currently studying in a rural school in Julau, Sarawak were selected purposively due to the certain characteristics they possess which help achieve the purpose of the research (Etikan *et al.*, 2015). They were chosen on the basis that they had experienced difficulties in answering "how" and "why" questions during their reading lessons despite having achieved reading fluency. To improve the trustworthiness of this action research, it was conducted in an ethical manner. Written permission from Ministry of Education, Julau District Education Department, the school headmaster, and the parents were obtained prior to the study. The nature of the study as well as its purposes were also being explained to all the participants. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, their responses were kept anonymous.

The explicit strategy instruction

The explicit strategy instruction which incorporates direct explanation, teacher modelling, scaffolding, whole class practice, small group practice, and independent practice as outlined in the past literature (Shanahan *et al.*, 2010; Parr and Woloshyn, 2013; Daza and Casas, 2016; Roit, 2016; Gonzalez, 2017) was implemented in this current study to collect data in responding to the two research questions established. All the six research-based strategies namely predicting, making connections, questioning, inferencing, visualising, and summarising were taught through eleven narrative texts and their respective comprehension tasks adapted from Hindes and Switzer's (2003) "Critical Thinking and Classic Tales: Fables" to make the content more accessible to the participants with lower proficiency level. This is in line with Lasmiatun (2016) who affirms that stories which are amusing and entertaining can help readers to deal with actual vicarious reading experiences in different ways, making the text easier to understand. Multiple strategy instruction was implemented in

the first cycle to teach all the six research-based strategies. Meanwhile, the single strategy instruction was implemented in the second cycle later to teach the reading strategies which the participants were observed to need more guidance.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each participant individually after the intervention of the explicit strategy instruction to yield the data to explore how the reading strategies learnt helped them improve their reading comprehension and their perceptions towards the use of the reading strategies. Semi-structured interviews were employed as it grants me permission to adopt a flexible approach to the sequencing and the wording of the questions (Bullock, 2016) and allows the participants to shape the flow of information when being prompted with follow-up questions (Brenner, 2006) and answer questions in their own words. The open-ended questions used for semi-structured interviews were adapted from the survey as employed in Daza and Casas (2016) along with translating the research objectives of this current study.

Teacher's reflective observation field notes

Participant observation and teacher's reflective observation field notes were also being utilised in this study to record useful information about the physical environment, activities, and the participants' behaviours directly (Mills, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Phillippi and Lauderdale, 2017) during the explicit strategy instruction. It enabled me to gain first-hand experience of the participants' use of different reading strategies, their responses and reactions as well as the difficulties they experienced throughout the intervention. This concurs with Cohen *et al.*, (2011) and Bui (2014) who advocate that observations help researchers to gain intuitive understanding of the meaning of data collected and address problems that are simply unavailable to other data collection techniques.

Pupils' work

The participants were engaged in answering all the types of questions namely "True/False questions", alternative questions, multiple-choice questions, wh-questions including how and why open-ended questions as outlined by the scholars (Day and Park, 2005; Nuttall, 2005) in the reading comprehension tasks given during the post-reading stage in each session. It served as a form of integral formal assessment to evaluate readers' performance in comprehending the text read (Pearson and Hamm, 2005; Rupp, *et al.*, 2006; Siti Noor Suzanni, 2009). These reading comprehension tasks were then compiled and used to identify their reading progress after every reading session. This corroborates Goh (2012) who conjectures that pupils' work can clearly demonstrate the development of their understanding. Considering the limited proficiency level, the participants were allowed to use their mother tongue in constructing answers for comprehension questions as Nuttall (2005) contends that struggling readers might not be able to express themselves adequately in their second language.

Data analysis

The data collected throughout the study were analysed qualitatively in response to the two research questions established as Bogdan and Biklen (1998) explain that qualitative analysis allows researchers to approach the setting and participants without a predetermined hypothesis. Triangulation was held with the integration of all the research instruments used to collect data with the aim to verify data validity and reliability. According to Creswell (2014), triangulation is "the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of

data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research” (p.13). The common themes among the data collected were then inductively analysed and coded by giving each them an abbreviation. Similar information, ideas, concepts, and categories in the data were further arranged in a systematic order (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The codes would be reread, rechecked, and refined into a concise number of categories, patterns, and themes that would help draw conclusions (Creswell, 2014). The entire process of analysing and interpreting qualitative data in this current research adhered to the process recommended by Creswell (2014) which includes organising data for analysis, exploring and coding the data, grouping the codes to form broader themes that are used for key findings, representing and reporting the findings, and interpreting the findings by making comparisons between the findings and literature.

Findings and Discussion

Reading strategies learnt via the explicit strategy instruction play different roles in aiding readers’ reading comprehension

This section highlights how six reading strategies learnt via the explicit strategy instruction play different roles in engaging rural Year Three ESL learners in the meaning-making process and thus improve their reading comprehension.

Predicting helps one makes intelligent guesses of what happened next in the story

From the data gathered via teacher’s reflective observation field notes and semi-structured interviews, it was noted that using the predicting strategy throughout the explicit strategy instruction helped the participants in making intelligent guesses of what happened next in the story. As reflected in teacher’s reflective observation field notes dated 16th August 2018, “The pupils predicted that the crow would put stones into the pitcher...they thought of their experience of having meal in the café that the water level will increase when ice-cubes are added into the glass.” This illustrated that the predictions made were not wild guesses as the participants were able to clarify why they came up with such predictions. Besides, they did not just stop at making predictions, instead, they would confirm, verify, and revise their predictions based on the new information they had encountered. From the interview response, Havana remarked that, “I would check if my prediction was correct or false to make sure my prediction was correct.” This is in line with Afflerbach (1990) who advocates that verifying and modifying predictions helps setting up a reading purpose so that readers can reconstruct the possible content and create meaning from the text when they encounter new information. All these findings concur well with the findings in the studies (Acosta and Ferri, 2010; Daza and Casas, 2016) whereby the participants commented that making predictions enables them to anticipate the content and the topic of their reading, verify and revise their predictions as they read, and thus comprehend the story better.

Making connections helps one to relate the story with one’s personal experiences

The data gathered also demonstrated that the use of the making connections strategy helps readers to relate the story with their personal experiences. During the interview session, majority of the participants claimed that they used the making connections strategy learnt to relate the story read with what they had experienced in their daily life. According to Andrew, “I would use my own experiences when using the making connections strategy...so that I can understand the story.” Stephy also gave similar remark in her interview session that, “I would use the making connections strategy to relate myself with the characters in the story...so that... I could understand better.” Besides, most participants claimed that they found using the making connections strategy makes the text more interesting, helps them to remember the important points in the text, and eventually enables them to comprehend the story better. This

could be because relating the story with one's personal experiences allows readers to reason why something happened in the story based on their prior knowledge. All these findings conform with the findings in the studies conducted by Acosta and Ferri (2010) and Gonzalez (2017). Acosta and Ferri (2010) discovered that readers tend to be thinking more about the topic and generating more ideas through activating their prior knowledge when they are employing the making connections strategy, and this enables them to see the links between what they already know and the new information encountered. In Gonzalez (2017), the making connections strategy was reported to allow ESL learners to create a bond with the text, motivate them to read, and activate their prior knowledge to comprehend the text.

The findings from this current study as well as in Acosta and Ferri (2010) and Gonzalez (2017) have shed light on the importance of activating one's prior knowledge in reading. This is purported by the schema theory in reading (Ahmad, 2006; Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011; An, 2013) that one's comprehension depends on his prior knowledge. Likewise, Torres (2017) contemplates that activating readers' prior knowledge helps them to associate it with the new information gained and hence makes them understand the concept better. Thus, it is believed that using the making connections strategy in reading will help to activate readers' prior knowledge and eventually contribute to their reading achievement.

Visualising helps visualise what happened in the story

The explicit strategy instruction also seems to help develop readers' knowledge of using the visualising strategy to visualise what happened in the story. Evidently, both Ric and Nica mentioned in their interview session that they "imagined what happened in the story" as they used the visualising strategy. The responses given by the participants were further confirmed by teacher's reflective observation notes whereby it was observed that the learners would utilise the strategy to create mental images pertaining to the important events in the story via thinking aloud, drawing pictures, or acting the scene out. These findings mirror the findings of the studies conducted by McKown and Barnett (2007), Kucukoglu (2013), and Gonzalez (2017) which highlight that creating images encourages readers to activate their schemata and eventually enables the text read easier to be interpreted and understood.

Inferencing helps readers infer meaning of new words and draw inferences of why something happened in the story

The data gathered also highlighted that the use of the inferencing strategy helps readers to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and draw inferences of why something happened in the story to pick up the information that may have been missed. Samban pointed out in her interview session that, "I used the inferencing strategy to replace the words which I do not understand..." Meanwhile, Havana commented that, "I would use the inferencing strategy to find answers for missing details in the story." All these corroborated teacher's reflective observation notes which revealed that the participants would resort to the inferencing strategy to guess the meaning of new words encountered or derive reasonable inferences of explaining why something happened in the story especially when they had to respond to inferential questions which the answers cannot be located in the text. These findings support the results of the study conducted by Daza and Casas (2016) that the inferencing strategy taught helps readers to deal with their lack of vocabulary through inferring the meaning of new words using the contextual clues to gain the complete ideas in the text, and ultimately improves their reading comprehension. The findings of this current study are also parallel with Jumiatty's (2014) findings in that drawing inferences motivates readers to activate their prior knowledge, connect their knowledge of the explicit and implicit information, develop inferential reasoning; this eventually, helps them to understand the text better. It is because

often not everything is stated explicitly by the author and this requires readers to gather the information in the text together with their prior knowledge to work out the possible intended meaning, clarify the missing details, and understand the text as a whole (McNamara, 2009; Roit, 2016; Nunez, 2017). Subsequently, it encourages readers to think deeper about the text and helps promote their higher order thinking skills as inferencing is categorised as part of “analysing” in Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Wilson, 2016) that readers have to find evidences to support the generalisations made from the text.

Questioning helps readers to ask and answer wh-questions

Apart from that, the findings of this current study also seemed to illuminate that the fifth strategy learnt, i.e. questioning motivates readers to ask and answer wh-questions and allows them to gain knowledge of brainstorming both literal comprehension and inferential questions. As expressed by Samban in her interview responses, “I used the questioning strategy to ask questions when I did not understand. I would try answering the questions once I had asked the questions. I think it is easier to understand the story.” Likewise, Syella stated that, “I have used the questioning strategy to ask and answer questions so that I can understand what I am reading better. I have also applied higher order thinking skills (HOTS) to answer questions.” Most of them agreed that using the strategy had helped them understand the story better through asking questions related to the text read and build their confidence in answering wh-questions by applying their HOTS. This corroborated classroom observations done whereby it was observed that the participants actively employed the questioning strategy to brainstorm different types of wh-questions as well as construct meaning from the story to think of possible answers. Besides, it was observed that majority of them were able to differentiate between literal comprehension or inferential questions and structure both types of questions with minor grammatical errors independently.

As reflected in 14th teacher’s reflective observation notes dated 25th September 2018, “each pair came up with different types of questions...Bado and Nica said that they came up with a ‘Think and Search’ question... How the tortoise’s friend apologised? They knew that they had to think beyond the text to answer it...” The data from the teacher’s reflective observation notes were substantiated by the data collected from semi-structured interviews. For instance, Bado remarked in the interview session that, “I had brainstormed the questions when, where, why, what do you think, do you think... because I want to know more about the story.” It revealed that asking both literal comprehension and inferential questions seems to help readers to comprehend the text better. All these findings concur well with the findings in Parr and Woloshyn (2013) that the questioning strategy encourages readers to ask questions before, during, and after reading, ultimately helps them to formulate and share new ideas while gathering other perspectives. Apart from that, the findings of this current study are also paralleled with the findings in Acosta and Ferri (2010) and Raina Deeb (2015) that asking questions helps readers to have clarity about the text read, think beyond the content, and eventually facilitate their high thinking abilities. Noticeably, the experimental group in Raina Deeb (2015) showed great improvement in synthesising and evaluating skills and medium improvement in analysing skill as they utilised the questioning strategy. Hence, readers should be empowered with the knowledge of asking and answering literal comprehension and inferential questions with the goal to improve their reading comprehension and higher order thinking skills.

Summarising helps readers grasp the main ideas of the story

The findings of this study also indicated that the summarising strategy learnt via the explicit strategy instruction helps readers to grasp the main ideas of the text read better. To

summarise the main ideas, it was observed that the participants in this study would retell the important points in the story either in written form or orally using their own words instead of lifting the whole chunks directly from the text. Andrew had this to say during the interview, “I used the summarising strategy to summarise the story on my own.” These corroborate the findings of the studies conducted by Khoshisma and Tiyyar (2014) and Zafarani and Kabgani (2014). Both the studies validated that the summarising strategy requires readers to evaluate and distinguish the main ideas from the unrelated ones and paraphrase in their own words, which in turn improving their reading comprehension as well as contributing to their higher order thinking skills, i.e. evaluating and synthesising (Roit, 2016). Henceforth, it can be summed up that the explicit strategy instruction is vital in helping rural primary pupils especially those with lower proficiency level to become strategic readers by developing their knowledge of when and how to employ six research-based reading strategies namely predicting, making connections, visualising, questioning, inferencing, and summarising effectively to construct meaning from the text read and improve their reading comprehension.

Learners’ perceptions towards the use of reading strategies in their reading comprehension

This section explores rural Year Three learners’ perspectives on the use of different reading strategies learnt in their reading comprehension.

Employing reading strategies helps improve reading comprehension, enhance higher order thinking skills, and motivate one to read

Learners’ belief of employing reading strategies helps improve their reading comprehension, enhance their higher order thinking skills, and motivate them to read is one major finding of this research. The participants in this current research perceived that all the reading strategies learnt play vital roles in helping them to create meaning from the text, repair their problems in reading comprehension via cognitive effort, and eventually enable them to comprehend the text read better. For instance, Duri remarked in her interview session that using the strategies had helped her to “understand the story better through inferring the word meaning, predicting what happened next, and relating the story with my personal experiences”. Meanwhile, Stephy commented that using the strategies had helped her to “comprehend the story better through predicting, filling in the missing details, and summarising the story.” This belief is reflected in their reading comprehension tasks which illustrated their progress in reading comprehension competence as shown in the following table.

Table 1. The Results of Participants’ Reading Comprehension Tasks

| Participant | 1 st task | 2 nd task | 3 rd task |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Havana | 44.4% | 72.2% | 88.9% |
| Cale | 50.0% | 61.1% | 72.2% |
| Duri | 61.1% | 72.2% | 88.9% |
| Ric | 16.67% | 55.56% | 83.33% |
| Bado | 38.9% | 44.4% | 88.9% |
| Stephy | 22.2% | 44.4% | 77.78% |
| Nica | 38.89% | 50.0% | 77.78% |
| Syella | 33.33% | 72.2% | 88.9% |
| Andrew | 16.67% | 55.56% | 77.78% |
| Samban | 33.33% | 61.11% | 88.9% |
| Aneng | 27.78% | 50.0% | 77.78% |

Table 1 depicts all the participants showed improvement in their reading comprehension performance from the first reading comprehension task given during the first session of the intervention to the last reading comprehension task given during the second cycle of the intervention. This is in consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Daza and Casas (2016). In their study, Daza and Casas (2016) highlighted that the instruction improved learners' reading comprehension by building their own path to read, comprehend the main ideas in a text, locate new information and relate to their personal experiences, as well as overcome the lack of vocabulary. Hence, it is deemed that employing reading strategies effectively will help readers to compensate their comprehension breakdowns and further develop their reading potential (Korthof and Guda, 2016; Kuru-Gonen, 2015; Sari, 2017).

Apart from improving reading comprehension, the participants also believed that employing reading strategies especially questioning and inferencing has encouraged them to think critically beyond the text, and hence enhances their higher order thinking skills. According to Andrew during the interview session, "using the reading strategies helps me to think deeper." Similarly, Bado claimed that using the reading strategies had helped him to "think more about the text read...the inferencing strategy helped improve higher order thinking skills." The present findings seem to be consistent with the results of other studies (Yusfarina *et al.*, 2012; Parr and Woloshyn, 2013).

Yusfarina *et al.*, (2012), in their study, noted that reading strategies help readers to delve into deeper comprehension and promote their higher order thinking as they integrate readers' schemata and strategized action. Likewise, the participants' weekly reflections in Parr and Woloshyn (2013) revealed that the reading strategic processes helped the participants to focus on the text to retain more information and synthesise information from different sources, and thus promoted their higher-level processing as well as engaged them further in reading comprehension. It is deemed that enhancing readers' higher order thinking skills in reading comprehension will allow them to function at the analysis, synthesis and evaluation levels of Nuttall's (2005) Reading Taxonomy (McKown and Barnett, 2007; Roit, 2016; Wu, 2016) and deepen their comprehension towards the text (Nourdad *et al.*, 2018; Sullivan, 2018).

Besides that, the findings of this present study also seem to indicate the participants opined that learning reading strategies motivates them to read more as it enables them to gain more knowledge through reading. Most participants found the text relevant to their life and easier to be understood as they employ reading strategies to create meaning from the text, which ultimately stimulates their reading interest. As pointed out by Duri in her interview session, "using reading strategies helps me to read in a fun way... and I gain a lot of knowledge and I can relate the story with my own experiences." Syella concurred with Duri's statement as she mentioned that, "I like reading English stories because the strategies help me a lot...it helps me gain knowledge and learn new words." The findings of this research are comparable to Acosta and Ferri's (2010) findings in which the participants were reported to find their readings more interesting, informative, and relevant as they utilised seven reading strategies taught to work with the texts given. Similarly, Gonzalez (2017) also noted in her study that employing reading strategies helped her students to enjoy the process of relating the new information with their personal and meaningful experiences, comprehending the stories read by interacting with the text, the author, and their peer to create meaning, as well as increased their motivation to read. Thus, when readers are highly engaged in reading strategies and pose questions, it will motivate them intrinsically to take active role in reading and eventually improve their reading comprehension (Norbaiyah *et al.*, 2014; Fahrurrozi, 2017; Muijiselaar *et al.*, 2017).

Questioning, inferencing, and making connections are difficult yet effective

Though most participants responded positively towards the use of reading strategies in their reading comprehension, the findings of this study also seem to implicate that less skilled readers need more guided practices in learning how to employ three reading strategies namely questioning, inferencing, and making connections appropriately and effectively. As reflected in teacher's reflective observation notes 10 and 11 dated 12th September and 13th September 2018, majority of the participants remarked that they still had difficulties in utilising the questioning, inferencing, and making connections strategies more. This could have been caused by the fact that the participants were new to these reading strategies which require them to be engaged in higher-level processing in reading (Grabe and Stoller, 2011; Shahnazari and Dabaghi, 2014) and they were less confident. The findings of this study concur to some extent with McKown and Barnett (2007) and Kucukoglu (2013) who concluded in their studies that teachers should guide and monitor young learners in their use of questioning, inferencing, and summarising strategies. Similarly, Saw (2012) observed in his study that majority of his primary year 4 ESL students still needed scaffolding in employing the making connections, questioning, inferencing, and predicting strategies after the explicit reading-strategy instruction.

Despite having difficulties in employing the questioning, inferencing, and making connections strategies, the participants also found these three reading strategies effective in cultivating better understanding towards the text read. This partially agrees with the findings in McKown and Barnett's (2007) study that readers with higher proficiency level favoured questioning and summarising strategies while learners with lower proficiency level favoured making connections, predicting, and visualising strategies. This finding also contradicts Acosta and Ferri (2010) who noted that their participants preferred making predictions over other strategies as it allows them to express their thoughts. However, the finding corroborates the responses given by the participants in Daza and Casas (2016) of that the inferencing strategy is essential in helping them to comprehend what they read especially when they use the strategy to infer the meaning of unknown words and ideas.

All these findings seem to imply that readers have their individual preferences of the reading strategies to be employed in tackling and comprehending the text given. Henceforth, it is crucial that readers need to be taught and equipped with the knowledge of employing a wide range of reading strategies as well as metacognitive strategic competence to monitor their use of reading strategies (Afflerbach *et al.*, 2008; Prichard, 2014) because not all the reading strategies will apply to one reader. This is substantiated by Afflerbach *et al.*, (2008), Yukselir and Harputlu (2014), and Cassata (2016) who contemplate that reading strategies which are found effective might not always be successful especially when they are inappropriate for the reading task given. Thus, any reading strategy instruction to be implemented must be personalised to meet all learners' diverse learning needs and preferences (Redding, 2013; McCarthy and Schauer, 2017) so that they can choose reading strategies appropriately based on their purposes of reading and employ them effectively to fix their breakdowns in text comprehension (Labara, 2012).

Conclusion

The present study was designed to add to the literature and contribute to an undeveloped area of research in the Malaysian primary ESL context by exploring the explicit strategy instruction in teaching reading comprehension to rural Year Three ESL learners. It also explored the learners' perspectives towards the use of six research-based reading strategies in their reading comprehension.

In conclusion, the explicit strategy instruction via scaffolding approach helps less skilled readers in a rural primary school to develop their metacognitive awareness of employing and monitoring their use of reading strategies with the text read, and eventually improves their reading comprehension. It is deemed that all the six research-based reading strategies play different roles in aiding less skilled readers' reading comprehension. By using the reading strategies to predict upcoming content in the text, visualise the main events, relate the story with personal experiences, infer the meaning of unknown words and ideas, ask and answer wh-questions, and summarise the main ideas of the text, it helps readers to actively interact with the author and the text to create meaning from the text. This research has also indicated that young ESL learners hold positive perceptions towards the use of reading strategies in their reading comprehension as they believe that it will improve their reading comprehension, enhance their higher order thinking skills as well as motivate them to read. Hence, teachers should be prepared to design and implement explicit strategy instruction with the goal of teaching reading strategies to readers of different proficiency level via either single strategy instruction or multiple strategy instruction in helping them to improve reading comprehension and further develop their reading potential. The findings that emerged and potential limitations found in this study offer room for recommendations for further studies in this area. The scope of the study can be enlarged by adopting other appropriate research designs with a larger number of participants and over a longer duration so that the study could be more valid and in depth. It is recommended that the research can be expanded to urban schools to compare the effectiveness of reading strategies instruction in teaching reading comprehension with urban ESL learners and their rural counterparts. As the participants in this present study opined that the explicit strategy instruction helps enhance their higher order thinking skills, future research can also explore on how the instruction can help promote readers' higher order thinking skills more in depth.

In short, rural ESL teachers should plan an explicit instruction which incorporates teacher's direct strategy explanation, modelling, thinking-aloud, and scaffolding with purposeful activities to guide their young learners in building their knowledge of utilising and monitoring appropriate reading strategies in reading any text type given to facilitate their reading comprehension (Ortlieb, 2013; Todd-Meyer, 2015; Shippen *et al.*, 2017). Teachers need to be trained and equipped with pedagogical knowledge in teaching reading strategies through professional development so that the reading strategies which skilled readers employ in creating meaning from the text can be taught to other less skilled readers to help them improve their reading comprehension. Henceforth, the procedures in teaching six research-based reading strategies as described in this present study can be adopted or adapted in teaching reading comprehension to young ESL learners, depending on their language proficiency level and learning needs.

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