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## Meaning-making in the first and second language: reading strategies of Malaysian students

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### Abstract

Malaysian secondary school students, often proficient readers in their L1, are not necessarily good readers in the L2 (English). This study investigated L1 and L2 reading strategies of nine selected technical secondary school Malaysian students from three levels of English proficiency. The students responded to a reading strategy questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings showed that advanced proficiency students used more strategies reading in L2 compared to the other group of students. There was an overlap in the types of strategies used for both L1 and L2 reading across proficiency levels. Implications for ESL/EFL reading strategy instruction are provided.

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Keywords: meaning-making; reading strategies; first language; second language; Malaysian students

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### 1. Introduction

The consensus among reading educators and experts is that reading is a complex, interactive process that involves features of readers, texts and tasks (Bernhardt, 1995; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Maarof, 1998; Rumelhart, 1977 in Singhal, 1998; among others). In the reading process, the reader is an active participant, constructing meaning from clues found in printed text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Bernhardt, 1991; Carrell, 1991; Grabe, 1991; Rumelhart, 1980). In other words, meaning is not inherent in texts, rather texts have the potential for meaning (Widdowson, 1984). Reading is also an individual process that often entails different interpretations for different readers. The focus of past and present research revolves around the question of whether reading in one's first or native language (L1) is similar or different. Are similar strategies used in reading in L1 and L2? Researchers also attempt to examine any relationship between L1 and L2 reading processes. A much debated issue is whether reading in L2 is a reading or a language problem (Alderson, 1984). Are the strategies used by proficient L1 readers transferable to reading in an L2? Both reading in L1 and L2 involve the use of various strategies that assist readers in understanding what is read (Carrell, 1991; Bosser, 1992; Nambiar, 2009). What are the strategies used in reading in L1 and L2? Several recent studies show that both readers' L1 reading ability and L2 language proficiency contribute to L2 reading comprehension (Carrell, 1991; Bosser, 1992). Researchers have proposed a number of hypotheses about the

processes and relationship of reading in L1 and L2 (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995). Clarke (1980) earlier argues that when readers lack proficiency in the target language, this limitation “short-circuits” good learner strategy use of the L1 when reading in L2. The assumption is that the reader’s L2 proficiency should be beyond the linguistic threshold before good learner strategies are transferred into L2 reading (Alderson, 1984). Cummins (1979, 1983) proposed the idea of a common underlying proficiency whereby it can be suggested that a reader proficient in the L1 should be able to read in the L2. Enright et al (2000, p. 7) describes L2 reading as different from L1 reading in three basic ways: (a) L2 readers build on prior L1 reading experience, (b) their reading processes are cross-linguistic, involving two or more languages, and (c) their reading instruction usually commences before adequate oral proficiency in the target language has developed. They further point out that four other factors distinguish these readers from L1 readers: (a) transfer of L1 reading skills and strategies, (b) facilitation from L1–L2 structural similarity, (c) cross-linguistic interactions during L2 reading, and (d) processing constraints imposed by limited linguistic knowledge. Studies on L1 reading comprehension also suggest that reading skills such as cognitive and meta-cognitive skills are transferable to other reading contexts (e.g., Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Guthrie, 1988). L2 acquisition studies have shown that linguistic and meta-linguistic factors are transferred from L1 into L2 oral and written production, communicative strategies, and pragmatics (e.g., Hakuta, 1976; Cohen, 1986; Irujo, 1986). Investigations on these issues in L1 and L2 reading has continued to be research agendas until the present day. Although findings have been inconclusive, many educators persist with the practice of teaching reading strategies in the effort to help learners read L2 texts with comprehension.

In Malaysia, the English language is an important second language, second to the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. The ability to read in English is crucial not only for academic purposes, but also for one’s upward mobility in the job market. Although the English language is learned as a subject throughout primary and secondary schools, it continues to be particularly relevant for higher education such as in colleges and universities. Reading instruction in educational settings includes teaching learners various reading skills and strategies. Because the education system involves the use of both English and Bahasa Malaysia, reading strategies acquired in the L1 can be an asset to learners learning English as an L2. It is important to examine the reading strategies used in reading L1 and L2 texts to help the poor language learners improve comprehension of L2 texts they deal with in both academic and non-academic contexts. If reading strategies used in reading a Bahasa Malaysia text (L1) helps the reader to comprehend the message conveyed, then perhaps the strategies can be likewise used for English texts. In addition, when students are aware of the various successful reading strategies, they will be motivated to keep reading any material either in their L1 or L2. Thus in light of this, learners’ reading strategies need to be examined to determine any similarities or differences of strategy use when reading in L1 and L2 to not only raise their awareness about strategy use, but also to assist them in enhancing their comprehension of L2 texts.

Thus, the study was conducted to address the following questions:

1. What are the common reading strategies of advanced, intermediate, and low proficiency students when reading in L1?
2. What are the common reading strategies of advanced, intermediate, and low proficiency students when reading in L2?
3. Are there any similarities or differences in strategy use among the learners reading in L1 and L2?

## 2. Related Literature

Past studies on reading in a second language showed that: (a) Reading strategies assist understanding of texts read (Mi-Jeong Song, 1998; Brown & Palinscar, 1984; Oxford, 1990; Reinhart and Isabell, 2002; Salataci & Akyel, 2002); (b) Good readers are better at monitoring comprehension than poor readers (Block, 1986; Hosenfeld, 1977; Kong, 2006; Sarig, 1987; Block, 1992; Nambiar, 2009); (c) There are similarities and differences in L1 and L2 reading in terms of strategy use (Kong, 2006; Nambiar, 2009; Singhal, 1998). Learner strategies are the cognitive steps learners use to process second language input and first language input. These cognitive procedures include retrieving and storing new input. According to Brown (1994), strategies are the specific “attacks” that learners employ when faced with a problem. More specifically, reading strategies are the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read. This process may involve skimming, scanning, guessing,

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