

Using Subject Positioning Theory to Investigate Reading Engagement among University Students

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Highlights

This study underlines the impact of subject position formation towards reading engagement that students experience when processing the information during reading

ABSTRACT: The core of this study is subject positioning that students develop when interpreting reading input a textbook. It is important as the ideological stance that the students develop from the interpretation of information they received. Adopting a qualitative phenomenology case-study approach, the authors set out to investigate the magnitude of reading engagement by technical engineering undergraduates. Six bachelor's degree students were chosen as purposive samples based on observed active roles as class representatives and as active learners in an English course that they have previously taken. Two chapters from a compulsory textbook of a mandatory course from the undergraduates' technical engineering programme called Innovation Management were chosen to explore their subject positioning and reading engagement aspects. The undergraduates were requested to actively read, interact and scribble notes if necessary during reading while their engagement via think-aloud protocol were recorded. The recordings were transcribed and analysed for evidence of subject positioning and knowledge processing with inter-rater and expert verifications on the identified themes. The findings show that the undergraduates actively undertake subject positioning to align and disalign with subject matter and information put forth by the textbook authors as evidence of moderate to active reading engagement and knowledge processing. Input from previous reading, general knowledge, current experience and previous work experience intertwine in functioning as sources of subject positioning and knowledge processing during the reading engagements.. These recommended efforts from this study will yield great benefits for undergraduates in their learning curve at the academia.

Keywords: Reading Engagement, Subject Positioning, Knowledge Processing, Undergraduates, Higher Education

Introduction

Engaged readers get immersed in their reading when they read for pleasure as well as to satisfy their curiosity. The information and knowledge discovered help them learn and achieve personal objectives as well as their strategic purpose either for enjoyment or for motivation (Guthrie et al., 2012). All these make reading become an effortless cycle of continuous improvement. Reading engagement refers to the state of being fully immersed intellectually and emotionally in a text and it is often discussed in educational circles albeit its importance often not receiving full cognizant from educators. Regardless of the inadequate treatment it is

receiving, engagement with a text is one of the most vital aspects of effectively teaching languages and many other subjects. Students with strong intellectual and emotional connections to a text will likely engage in substantive and meaningful class discussions and activities (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). These make studying more effective and enjoyable for them. Students who are engaged with a text are also much more willing to do extra work by reading advanced or difficult texts. The concept of 'subject positioning of self' by Davis and Harré (1990) develops into a reading thought process which comprise two categories namely alignment and disalignment. These two constructs represent readers' stance towards the material presented in a reading source and the author of the content. Additionally, positioning scaffolds the reader's decision to approve or disprove the theme or ideology construed in the visual and textual component of the material, and with the author of the material. Subject position encapsulates the overall impression and/or opinion expressed by the readers which could be identified from the visual text (illustrations, diagrams etc.), verbal text (words, sentences, numbers) that triggers responses. In relation to this, Cope and Kalantzis' (2015) 'knowledge process' refers to eight main categories of thought process that readers experience in order to develop responses to reading texts and information sources. They are commonly used to identify and gauge quality of reading. Finding ways to tap into this sort of passion and engagement can help students successfully complete difficult texts in the classroom or tasks given. Studies show that students will work hard to read a text above their current reading level if they find it enjoyable and engaging (Ryan & Deci, 2009; Taboada-Barber & Klauda, 2020).

Luke (2003) highlighted that multilingual societies face cultural and linguistic diversity challenge in understanding educational participation and achievement of students. This is due to the assimilation, in terms of cultural and linguistic aspects which students bring with them to the classroom and to the learning process. This requires attention in the form of foregrounding in policies, material designs and instructions within the schooling system. This research context is highly relevant for many countries with multicultural societies like Malaysia as it focuses on the response towards teaching material selection and design. As proficiency is one of the indicators that assist researchers in understanding student comprehension of text during reading, it is important to consider the role of diverse proficiency level in reading comprehension.

There is also a need to emphasize the importance of researcher's awareness, as highlighted by Luke (2003, p.3), whereby the 'Others' or underperforming students of the post-war period does not reflect the same group or population in the mainstream education system of the 21st century especially with the emergence of digital technologies and multi-literacies. When entering university, students experience a great shift towards autonomy in English language learning as English is no longer secluded to the language class but has become a medium of instruction for other courses as well. This forms a predicament faced by Malaysian university students as the language shift in the medium of instruction affects their motivation, self-esteem, and increases the fear of failure among others, as they embrace their independence as learners during tertiary studies and are expected to maintain the agency as autonomous learners when entering the workplace.

Educators often neglect reading engagement training and planning due to several constraints. It is one of those terms often discussed in educational circles, but whose importance is marginally treated as it might be perceived as an additional load to the many other existing demands on teachers' time and energy. The core of this research is analyzing the subject position that students develop when interpreting the input a textbook. Subject position can be understood as the ideological stance that the students develop, which is considered similar to beliefs that resulted from the interpretation of information they receive. It may also change over the course of a reading activity as subject position are not a fixed matter due to the influence of words, images and layout designed by the authors to attract the attention of the readers. The textbook utilised in this study is a Technopreneurship textbook entitled *Innovation Management* (Katan et al. 2015), written fully in English. The textbook is part of Technopreneurship (the integration of technology, innovation and entrepreneurship) course that all students of Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) must take as a compulsory university course to graduate. Even though content information and examples have been acclimatized to focus on Malaysian issues, transmission of information using English (i.e writing and presenting) may pose as a challenge for some students.

The research aims to understand how students, as the subject of the reading process, are able to position themselves in agreeing or disagreeing with the ideological theme of the textbook and indirectly of the authors'. This is undertaken by exploring reader engagement of a Malaysian university textbook entitled *Innovation Management* (Katan et al. 2015), written for a technical engineering university undergraduates. Specifically, the focused research questions are as follows:

- 1) What strategic knowledge do middle level proficiency students draw upon when reading?
- 2) What are the ways in which middle level proficiency students construct meaning from texts?

With reading engagement being central to this research, the definition of 'engagement' needs to be clarified first. Among the forefront of reading engagement research, Guthrie and colleagues (2012) had developed a reading engagement framework whereby engaged readers are defined as devoting time and effort to read and use strategies in reading together with background knowledge to learn from the text. Students with high levels of reading engagement are those who (a) are motivated to read, (b) use strategies when reading, (c) use reading as a way to construct meaning from texts, and (d) participate in social interactions around reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). This affects the motivation readers have during reading which leads to the expression of values, beliefs and goals related to the reading activity (Guthrie, et al., 2012). Taboada, Barber, Klauda and Wang (2021, p.3) further extend the specificity of engaged reading being that the individuals actively process text and effortfully manage reading challenges. This refers to the situation of an individual who is engaged in reading when they apply the skills and strategies from the current experience to shape the attitude toward future reading occurrence and to strengthen the rate of reading success.

For readers to engage with the text, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) believe that they may read with motivation when comprehension as part of the key criteria, is present. Therefore, Snow (2002, p.11) defined comprehension as the "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language". This

definition elevates the importance of understanding variability in linguistic knowledge and skills (proficiency) among readers. Primarily, differences in proficiency level opens for greater research encapsulation of learners' comprehension (successfully comprehending or otherwise) and production of the target language (Gaillard & Tremblay, 2016).

The concept of 'positioning' by Davis and Harré (1990) started with conversations as a point of analysis in which the conversational event illustrates how the individual places himself or herself as the 'agent' that may face social interactions and continue interacting in their social environment. The agent goes through the 'various discursive practices that they participate, observably and subjectively produce their narratives as coherent participants' (p.48). The unconscious habit of positioning is due to the intricate relationship between cognition and the construct of knowledge from individual experiences. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) suggest, that there are multi-functions in the subject positioning goals readers intend to achieve. Affirming this, Van Dijk (2007) states that the position individuals are placed in is driven by socio-cultural factors where they decide to conform or deviate from the social group identity that one wishes to associate. Through speech acts and conversational events, positioning theory appears more 'visible' as one expresses their chosen identity through the choice of words or linguistics styles that can be understood by others and affirmed of their association. However, Woolfe and Williams (2018) argue that belief change also occur through reading. This begs the question of the metacognitive awareness of individuals when they experience belief change after reading a text. Belief change usually occurs when one is confronted with a text inconsistent to his or her beliefs. The inconsistent texts more often than not, alter readers' beliefs or may trigger change of opinion as a result of their reading encounter (Murphy et al. 2003). Based on the positioning theory we could understand that in conversations, self-positioning relies on the role(s) that the speaker would like to assume based on his or her evaluation of the support present in the surrounding. This involves the inclusion of some people and exclusion of others (e.g. he/she/they, male/female/other/non-binary, father/daughter), the positioning of self into categories (e.g. as girl and not boy, or good girl and not bad girl) and recognition of other membership characteristics. Nevertheless, the concept should not be viewed as dissimilar in the realm of reading. Reading the chapters, students are placed as main subjects of the process (of reading), in which they will position themselves in *alignment* (agreement) or *disalignment* (disagreement) with the theme, idea arguments, or concepts, that the authors have designed and composed for the textbook chapters. In the think aloud sessions employed for data elicitation in this study, the students as respondents position themselves as readers and also 'dialogue' with themselves, and indirectly with the authors, to negotiate and eventually decide whether to accept or not, the information that they had read. If readers were uncertain to agree with the statements in the chapters, this is considered disalignment (disagreeing with author) due to not being entirely convinced of the truth or reliability of the information while having missing some other piece of information to it (Szarvas et al., 2012). The processing of disagreement of the information during reading may also engage domains of reader's literacy and knowledge, which assists the evaluation of reading engagement through the strategies deciding the position to assume. Hence, this research grounds the importance of evaluating reading engagement through a qualitative

approach with its objective to investigate reading engagement of students based on the subject position they developed when reading the two chapters of the textbook.

Method

Reading engagement can be investigated via qualitative study research design. Lee, Jang and Smith (2021) examined a range of methods where reading engagement is explored qualitative analysis, most common through the use of interviews (Schaefer, 2017), observations (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007) and self-reports by participants (Applegate et al. 2014). The collected data from these methods then go through coding and identification of themes that surface from the responses of the teachers, students and the researchers' reading activity observation notes. Based on the think aloud responses as the main data source, the responses will be coded based on the themes of (i) subject positions developed and (ii) strategies applied during the reading experience (e.g. making inferences, utilizing background knowledge, critical analysis of information). From here, the pattern of subject positions and the employment of reading strategies will be evaluated through the engagement of cognitive processing that the students experience.

Courses like Innovation Management, Entrepreneurship and Technopreneurship are offered in line with the university's aim to grow as an entrepreneurial technical university and producing enterprising global technopreneurs as graduates (UniKL, 2022). From the 13 chapters included in the textbook, two chapters were selected based on the differences these chapters possess in terms of the visual and verbal elements included. As defined by Tan and O'Halloran (2012, p.2), visual elements refers to components that are represented 'in the form of visual images, such as photographs, drawings, graphic art and so on'. Verbal elements are texts in the form of words, sentences, phrases that may include headlines, slogans, brand and product names. Thus, the two chapters contrast where Chapter 2 exhibits highest visual texts presence and Chapter 12 highest verbal text presence. With the selection of two chapters from the textbook, the research utilized Davis and Bistodeau's (1993) think aloud protocol to evaluate students' engagement with the text by analyzing the subject position formed when they read the information in the chosen chapters.

Participants

The purposive sample for this study comprise six university students (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6) who had completed all bachelor's level English courses required by the university. They were selected for a think aloud session of reading two chapters of Innovation Management textbook. They have varied English proficiency level (high to low) but all were observed as active class representative and participative in the previously undertaken English courses. The variation in proficiency skills is pertinent as (i) the textbook is fully written in English which necessitates basic English language competence and (ii) to capture the reading engagement of students from a wider range of proficiency

Procedures

The students were given practice think aloud session to help them get adjusted and become at ease having to read out loud and record and the same time. The students had all opted for audio recording as they felt more comfortable and were not distracted by the presence of video recording device in the room. The practice sessions were done a few days before the actual recording using the selected textbook. They were also given the freedom to annotate during the reading session whether on the textbook pages or on a separate sheet. Based on Davis and Bistodeau's (1993) think aloud protocol, the students were encouraged to focus their comments on (i) the triggers of interest (verbal or visual), (ii) the current sentences' information value and the role of (i) or (ii), or both play in the understanding of the topics in the chapters. There was no time limit set and the students were taught how to use the recording device (start, pause and stop). This is due to the researchers not being in the room with the students when the think aloud session starts as per request of all participants. Nevertheless, this benefits the methodological aspect in avoiding research bias and reducing participant anxiety during the recording process (Berg, 2001). The students' think aloud responses were transcribed and categorized according to the subject positions *alignment* (agreement) and *disalignment* (disagreement). The two positions do not strictly point to one area of agreement or disagreement as the responses were analyzed to detail out the aspects of contention or agreement expressed towards truth value of the information and/or layout of the information in the chapters.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The section of the article presents the aggregated findings unearthed from this undertaken study and its relevant discussion. Firstly, each of the student participant's demographic characteristics and criteria are described as below;

Table 1
Students Respondents' Profiling & Traits

Student	Profiling & Traits			
S1 (Male)	Malay language & English mastery	Average writing but orally fluent (B+)	Could code-switch	Has work experience (telecommunication).
S2 (Female)	Good mastery of Malay language & English/Kadazan	Good in speaking & writing (A)	Able to do multi lingual code-switch	Use full English with rich terminologies.
S3 (Female)	Good in social science & technical	Good in speaking & writing (A)	Refrain from codeswitching (bilingual)	Youngest in class , spent only 1 year preparatory.
S4 (Female)	Malay language & English mastery	Good in writing (A-) but poor in oral	Struggle to speak –impromptu. Avoided code-switching	worked hard , showed multiple drafts before submitting completed assignment.
S5 (Male)	Bilingual (Malay language & English)	Good in technical courses. Needs more practice & prompts during English classes (B+).	Selectively engaged in background knowledge in Chapter 2.	When prompted, he was able to elaborate better than other students' initial responses.

S6 (Female)	Bilingual (Malay language & English)	Weak in writing and speaking English (B-).	Write drafts & practice presentations before deadline.	Oldest - 26 years old. Spent 2 years in Diploma studies. Worked for 1 year as a factory technical assistant.
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Subject Position and Application of Strategies

As derived from the concept of self-positioning by Davis and Harré (1990), the positioning that students experience as readers in this research is termed as subject position, whereby the reader is the ‘subject’ in charge of the reading act and thought process that develops from it. Table 2 displays the subject positions of students when reading the information in the chapters. More importantly, to arrive at the specific positions, students had predominantly engaged their awareness of current events, past experiences and general knowledge during the think aloud sessions. This concurs with Cope and Kalantzis’ (2015) study that the known experiences (experiencing the known) of the students are integral in the formation of their voice and the building of their literacy towards the subject matter.

Table 2
Frequency of Subject Positioning (Think Aloud Responses)

Subject	Alignment (Agreement)	Disalignment (Disagreement)	Total Responses	Main Strategies Utilized
S1	5	3	8	Rely on previous reading, general knowledge, current experience, field expertise and previous work experience
S2	4	1	5	
S3	2	4	6	
S4	6	2	8	
S5	3	2	5	
S6	1	7	8	

Discussion

Alignment through background knowledge engagement

The definition of background knowledge from Kintsch (1998) refers to ‘all of the world knowledge that the reader brings to the task of reading’ (p. 216). Within it, Alexander and Jetton (2000) included that there exist a more specific and precise subset of background knowledge which is referred to as *domain knowledge*. In the think aloud responses, it presents how firstly, the students are engaged to retrieve information outside of the text towards prior knowledge; and secondly, the specific domains in their prior knowledge such as academic courses taken, historical knowledge and financial experience in daily life.

At university level, the students were able to read the chapters with the mixture of Malay language and English. In the process of developing their stance towards the truth value of the information, the think aloud responses recorded agreement with information when students utilize their prior knowledge. S1 exhibited his agreement when similarities of information overlapped with what he learned in previous semester’s course.

S1 R1: “*Process innovation, process innovation can be in the form of producing the steps taken to produce existing products of processes*”. *Oh, this is just like, uh the, this is just like what we learn in design, Design for Manufacturing, DFM.*

The alignment is clearly expressed even though ‘process innovation’ is something new to his knowledge. This term or topic may be something that he might not have been familiar with but as he continued reading, the detection of similarity with Design for Manufacturing course allowed for agreement of information to quickly happen. McNamara and Magliano (2009, p.302) attributed this as the manifestation of inference generation whereby the students connect the current information in the text (e.g. current sentence) to knowledge that is not in the text. This is called knowledge-based inferences. When knowledge-based inferences occur, especially that linked to student’s life experience, they displayed more exact reading responses or critiques.

S1 R2: Yes, innovation is the most vital weapon in increasing productivity of a country. This one I agree a thousand percent agree. Just look at how Japan rose, after they were attacked, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bomb attack by the U.S. After that they rose, they rose the country by innovating they're technology.

Further accessing his prior knowledge, S1 exerted the effort to recognize the prior information that he has accumulated about Japan’s post World War 2 history in order to develop relevance in his agreement. He accessed knowledge beyond the textbook, to extend his evaluation with a significant example such as Japan, having first disclosing the detriment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing and after, mentioning technology as the component of innovation success for the nation to prove his point. Besides historical information, students also accessed their individual knowledge and experience to shape their agreement towards the information in the chapters. S4 showed background knowledge engagement in a greater detail after reading Chapter 2 about ‘Service Innovation’ which stated:

Excerpt 1 (Katan et al. 2015, p.20)

Service innovation is as important as product innovation, although not as popular. It is usually in the form of new service applications. This is because where innovation is concerned, it has always inclined towards product rather than service. Companies develop new business models or upgrade their existing business models by incorporating innovation on services rendered to their customers.

She responded as below,

S4: Like for me I'm using, I'm using this one company of telecommunication and nowadays, I'm using the bills. So nowadays I don't even have to, actually I'm never yeah. I went to the shop to pay my bills but most of the time I will just pay my bill online and even nowadays for the electric or water bill at my home I just said to my mother that no, you don't need to go to their office to pay your bills. You just can give it to me and I will pay it to you through online. Like it is much more easier, it is much more reliable.

When making sense of the idea about service innovation based on Excerpt 1, S4 conceptualizes her agreement by extending it further with examples from her daily life experience managing her bills. The *company* is replaced with ‘this one company of telecommunication’ and the *innovation on services rendered to their customers* is represented by her experience of paying her bills online instead of physically going to the company’s office to make her payment. Additionally, she provided evidence of utility companies such as water and electricity companies which also go through the process of service innovation, and other actors involved (i.e her mother) and the review of the experience being *easier* and *reliable*.

As Smith et al. (2021) argued, when accurate knowledge can be retrieved from the reader’s schemata, less time and effort for retrieval is required. This is vital in the understanding of reading engagement because of the influence it has on cognitive load of readers. Additional demands of active processing to retrieve information from memory increases the cognitive load during reading as readers are preoccupied in processing the text which may lead them to miss out on observable cues in the current sentences. In the case of S1 and S4, their ability to swiftly recall and make inferences of relevant background knowledge reduced the load in actively processing the text. Thus, it enables them to create a positive reading experience where the knowledge is evaluated as significant as they are able to critique the text they read. Afflerbach and Harrison (2017) emphasize this centrality towards engagement as readers, especially the students as they need to be situated within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) to promote motivation and engagement. Subject position may not seem like an elaborate process that these students thought of, and rather looks automatic, such as the response by S5 below :

S5: We can use social media for marketing purpose, yah obviously. This era need Facebook to market our business.

The knowledge of social media application seems obvious to S5 as he is a frequent user of social networking sites such as Facebook. However, the rationale is understood not just by him, but also supported by agreement when S3 similarly mentioned it in her response.

S3: ...companies could deal directly with customers via social network applications because social network applications are only used to advertise their product or service. But ah they deal with the customers with other telecommunications platform (too) such as WhatsApp or email.

S5’s awareness of the importance of social media to market is based on the prominence that Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms play in marketing. This is evident from the sponsored advertisement banners that appear in social media homepage or ‘news feed’. S3 extends this awareness with the inclusion of WhatsApp which is a messaging and news sharing friendly application that is also pervasively used in today’s consumer behaviour. The multidimensional interaction of marketing and customer service (*deal with customers*) engages the students’ awareness of their current environment and network of bonds among the

knowledge, strategies that they know of. This also includes their role in the social community namely being customers and users of social network applications. Thus, as Guthrie et al. (2000) state, this diminishes the reading anxiety of information unfamiliarity and instead engages the readers in the area of future investigations of oncoming information in the text.

Disalignment via utilization of current experiences/mastery in certain fields

All of the students involved possess varying levels of proficiency in English. From the think aloud responses, the researcher observed different respects of disagreement expressions among the mixed proficiency group of students. When reading Excerpt 1 (Katan et al., 2015, p.20), S1 developed a disaligned subject position with the information with strong affirmation based on his current working experience.

S1: Service innovation, service innovation is as important as product innovation, although not popular, service innovation is as important as product innovation, although not popular. This is not true because apart from being a student I am, I am a part time businessman as well and I provide service, and I provide innovation service but in my opinion this is quite popular, popular innovation part.

He addressed the misconception of information present here as he reaffirmed this using his current work experience as justification. Although in disagreement with the author's statement that product innovation holds more weight, this does not negatively affect his engagement to the text. S1 proceeded to carefully select the suitable argument to explain why he disagreed and invested to strengthen the argument. He mentioned his positions, as a student and a working adult, to purposefully analyse the value of both product and service innovation in the real world context. The construction of reality is built upon what individuals choose to notice, such as their positive characteristics or mastery in certain skills or field (Liao & Wang, 2011).

Here, the duality of being a student who works part-time provided S1 with empowerment as the skills that he possesses at the time fits into the argument presented. He demonstrates willingness to utilize the mental effort to comprehend and form his subject position, disagreeing with the information, to accomplish his perspective of comprehending the text. Guthrie et al. (2012) highlighted that cognitive engagement presents itself when students are invested in the reading, being purposeful and willing to exert the necessary effort to achieve comprehension of the text. It is therefore important to highlight that students' reading engagement is also stimulated even when in disagreement with the information that they read. The students in their reactions to the subject matter of the chosen text utilized main strategies namely utilizing current experience, general knowledge, previous reading and work experience and relying on mastery in certain field.

Conclusion

The findings from this present study on subject positioning and knowledge processing in gauging readers' engagement has a lot of transferability to other tertiary situations with similar contexts. The study shows that reading engagement can be viewed as operating in a continuum

with different levels. At each of the level, the reading engagement components may shift based on various aspect such as the background knowledge and experience of the readers. Reading engagement is crucial to reading enjoyment, and it is a vital component towards success in learning. The findings also justify the reasons for reading engagement to be very significant and it needs to be cultivated in students. It should also be encouraged by educators as part of the content and activities within any designed curriculum and lessons.

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