

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

Unquestionably, English equals opportunity in our time. Apart from being an international language for business, information and technology, English increasingly gains its status as the actual world language. According to BBC News, within the year of 2010, the number of learners of English will reach two billion people (Coughlan, 2004).

In addition, English reading comprehension plays an important part in the lives of Thai secondary school students because major parts of the entrance examination concern reading. Nevertheless, for Thai students, acquiring English may not be as effortless as it seems. Bautista and Gonzalez (2006) claim that even though most students in Thailand study English at school, the majority of Thai students do not “succeed in acquiring much English proficiency” (p. 138). Furthermore, Amara Prasithrathasint (2004) finds out that Thai students possess poor English reading skills in general.

With myriad reading strategies introduced, and years in English classes, why do a great number of Thai students still miss the mark in English reading comprehension? Do students refuse to learn or do we, Thai teachers of English, not initiate effective reading instruction?

Therefore, this research topic was implemented because background knowledge and language proficiency have been long discussed in the field of L2 reading (Alderson, 2000; Carrell, 1987; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Chan, 2003; Grabe, 2002; Krekeler 2006) and the outcomes of this research investigation will benefit students, English teachers and the institution participating in this investigation.

Roles of background knowledge in L2 reading have been widely discussed for a long period of time (Anderson, 1999; Carrell, 1987; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Johnson, 1982; Moore, Readence, and Rickelman, 1993). Anderson (1999) denotes that background knowledge influences reading comprehension and even starts his famous strategies for consideration in teaching second language reading (ACTIVE) with the strategy of ‘activate prior knowledge.’ Alderson (2000) avers that reading will be an abstruse task if the readers do not possess any background knowledge. Furthermore,

several research studies (Johnson, 1982; Krekeler, 2006) substantiate that background knowledge plays a remarkable role in L2 reading comprehension.

As a result, many teachers use a number of pre-reading activities to activate background knowledge of L2 students and to prepare the students for the text to be read. Semantic mapping is a pre-reading activity which activates background knowledge and encourages predictions. Several research studies (Watcharaporn Khaenphao, 2005; Kang, 2004) confirm that semantic mapping can increase L2 reading comprehension. Watcharaporn Khaenphao applied semantic mapping in his study with Matthayomsuksa 1 students in Amnatcharoen Province, Thailand, and finds that semantic mapping can improve English reading comprehension and the reading scores of the subjects.

However, it is in doubt whether all L2 learners are able to make use of background knowledge or not. For example, Chan (2003) discovers that low proficient students are able to successfully exploit background knowledge in their reading tasks but language proficiency plays a more significant role for higher proficient students. So, is background knowledge useful to every individual L2 student?

On top of that, many studies (Aebersold and Field, 1997; Chan, 2003; Skehan, 1985) show that L2 proficiency also plays a crucial role in L2 learning/reading. Lightbown and Spada (1999) point out that L2 learners with high IQ have a tendency to be successful in reading, grammar and vocabulary, and those with extroverted personality tend to be better second language learners. Then, are L2 abilities a guarantee of L2 reading comprehension for Thai students?

The present study was therefore conducted at Benjamarachutit School in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand. Mathayomsuksa 5 students were the subjects of the study because they were close to the period of entrance exam and thus tended to be motivated in participating in this research study. Also, Mathayomsuksa 6 students may not have sufficient amount of time to put the research finding into practice. Thus, this study directly aims at benefiting English teachers in the English Department, Benjamarachutit School, as they can take advantage of the findings to further adjust or modify their lesson plans and teaching methods.

Therefore, four major reasons in conducting a research study regarding roles of background knowledge and L2 proficiency in L2 reading comprehension are as follows:

Firstly, English is not only a compulsory subject in Thailand but also the world language which provides innumerable opportunities for Thai students. Secondly, knowledge of English as a second language is highly valued in Thailand. Thirdly, English reading comprehension is necessary for Thai students as they can access a variety of texts on their own if their English reading skills are competent. In addition, the entrance examination plays an important part in the lives of secondary school students because of the fact that they have to take the entrance exam in Mathayomsuksa 6. Fourthly, the results of the study can assist teachers in the English Department of Benjamarachutit School in planning a suitable curriculum for teaching reading to students.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

This study attempts to obtain information to provide answers to the following research questions:

1.2.1 Are effects of background knowledge in L2 reading comprehension significant for the participants in this study at all?

1.2.2 Does L2 proficiency or background knowledge play a more essential role in L2 reading comprehension in the sample groups?

1.2.3 What is the reading behavior while taking the Reading Comprehension Test, and opinions on the passage, of the subjects in the sample groups?

## **1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study consists of two main objectives as follows:

1.3.1 To investigate whether there is any significant difference in L2 reading comprehension or not between subjects in the control group and the experimental group.

1.3.2 To investigate whether L2 proficiency or background knowledge play a more important role in L2 reading comprehension in the sample groups.

1.3.3 To investigate the reading behavior while taking the Reading Comprehension Test, and opinions on the passage, of the subjects in the sample groups.

#### 1.4 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Definitions of the terms of this study are the following:

**Benjamarachutit School** is situated in Muang Province, Nakhon Si Thammarat.

**Subjects** refers to selected Mathayomsuksa 5 students in the Science-Mathematics program in Benjamarachutit School who participated in the present study.

**L1** refers to first language.

**L2** refers to second language. In this research investigation, second language and English are used interchangeably.

**L2 reading (second language reading)** refers to reading in the second language. In this research study, L2 reading pertains to English reading tasks of non-native learners of English.

**Background knowledge** refers to prior knowledge especially in terms of content knowledge or content schemata. In the present study, background knowledge simply refers to general prior knowledge at times. However, in the pre-reading activities, the Reading Comprehension Test and the questionnaire, background knowledge denotes content knowledge or content schemata of the subjects regarding content of the passage in the Reading Comprehension Test.

**Second language proficiency (L2 proficiency/English proficiency)** refers to the English scores of midterm and final examinations of the subjects from the English Foundation course (Semester 1/2007) graded by English teachers in Benjamarachutit School.

**Control group** refers to 30 selected Mathayom 5 students (15 high proficient students and 15 low proficient students) in the Science-Mathematics program in Benjamarachutit School without background knowledge activation.

**Experimental group** refers to 30 selected Mathayom 5 students (15 high proficient students and 15 low proficient students) in the Science- Mathematics program in Benjamarachutit School with background knowledge activation through pre-reading activities.

**Reading Comprehension Test** refers to the 10-item reading test administered in the study only.

## **1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

1.5.1 This study was implemented with the sample selected from Mathayomsuksa 5 students in the Science-Mathematics program in Benjamarachutit School, Nakhon Si Thammarat, in the academic year of 2007. The total number of the subjects was 60 students.

1.5.2 This study aims at comparing the roles of the students' L2 proficiency with those of background knowledge in terms of reading comprehension only.

## **1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this experimental study is to assess significance of background knowledge and L2 proficiency toward L2 reading comprehension. Consequently, the findings of this study may be beneficial to English instructors in Benjamarachutit School, for those instructors may find some alternative teaching pedagogy to improve the English reading comprehension of students in Benjamarachutit School.

### **1.7.1 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

The study of roles of background knowledge and L2 proficiency in L2 reading in this paper is divided into five chapters as follows:

1.7.1 The first chapter, serving as the introduction of the study, explains the background, statement of the problem, objectives of the study, definition of terms, scope as well as significance of the study.

1.7.2 The second chapter reviews the literature concerning reading approaches, second language reading, background knowledge, pre-reading activities, semantic mapping and language proficiency, along with a summary of the chapter.

1.7.3 The third chapter reflects the methodology of the study including subjects, materials, procedure and data analysis of the study with the summary.

1.7.4 The fourth chapter recounts the results of the study.

1.7.5 The last chapter offers a summary of the study, a summary of the findings, discussions, pedagogical implications for L2 classroom reading instruction, conclusions and recommendations for further research.