

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background, the purpose and the significance of the study, together with the research questions and the scope of the study. Definitions of terms are also presented at the end of the chapter to ensure mutual understanding of the key terms used in this study.

Background of the Study

Today's world is developing very fast and becoming increasingly globalized, creating a world of communication without boundaries. Sumtum Parisutthiman (2000, p. 22) state that there are many reasons why this process is known as "globalization". First, people can purchase a wide range of products and services online, pass information along to others, in addition to learning via the Internet, which connects us to other people, both domestically and internationally, via satellite. Consequently, we need to use similar language to communicate with others around the world, and since is the *de facto* medium of information technology, it follows that for many Thais, English has become a part of daily life. Robinson (1980, p. 65) suggests that students can learn many things from their environment and their daily lives, and in doing so they

will discover how important English is to them. Wanna Chongdarakul (2003, p. 57) points out that many grocery labels, foods and places are English language, including product manuals, radio and television programs, etc.

“Even though not all people all around the world are able to speak English, most people agree that English is the *de facto* international language for communication. For example, as Lert Kesornkam (1994, p. 1), points out, trading nations such as Japan and Germany use English for communication, advertisements and product instructions, and Thailand is just one of many countries to follow this global trend. Thus, Thais need to know and use the language in order to communicate with other people around the world and to further develop the country. Besides, Natenapit Korsuwan (2001, pp. 1-2) mentions, “In Thailand, study of the English language began in the reign of King Rama IV, and has since played a major role in political, commercial, academic, and technical affairs.” In fact, English has become increasingly important from that point in time until present day. In 2006, a research project was conducted by Chulalongkorn Language Institute which revealed that graduate students’ score on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) was quite low. Since most Thais believe that the progress made by members of the younger generation will determine the future of the country, it is clear that Thai adults need to find a better way to instruct their young in order that they might achieve the requisite fluency and accuracy in the English language. Suchada Panichying (1997, p. 56) adds that the Thai government fully realizes the fact that it is necessary that everybody learn English. In this regard, they need to improve students’ abilities all four skills-reading, writing, speaking and

listening-to better evaluate the level at which they can effectively communicate in English.

In fact, of all four skills in which improvement is sought, the most important is reading because students have to read texts and understand the information they contain by Kururak Piromrak. (1998, p. 65) points out that reading is the most influential skill in that it is vital to the search for knowledge. “Reading skills are important, so students need to improve their reading ability continuously,” suggest Beatrice and Linda (1996, p. 1); Kijja Kamhang and Kriengsak Syananonth (2006) also concur that reading is an important means of improving one’s general language skills in English.

Of course, there have been numerous surveys regarding young Thais’ knowledge of English, some of which have found that most of them do not know very much at all. In a very real sense, therefore, Thailand may be considered underdeveloped and less competitive in the global marketplace.

In theory, there are three factors for improving comprehension reading skills that interest the students, namely: affective factors, cognitive factors and behavioral factors. Hadley (2001, p. 75) and Malee Nitsaisook (2003) suggest that there are other elements more important than the reader, such as age, aptitude, attitude, motivation, personality, cognitive style and preferred learning strategies. Consequently, research needs to use all of these factors to determine whether reading comprehension theory should be learned or applied to a second, or foreign, language.

It is true that readers need strategies for comprehension. Galloway and Labarca (1990, p. 141) note that readers’ tactics are the strategies or techniques

they use for achieving comprehension, as well as for storing, retrieving and collecting information for planning, regulation, or assessment. Rigney (1978) and Oxford (1990) also proceed to explain that reading strategies mean the process in mind or behavior that language learners improve from storing, retrieving and collecting information.

Many reading experts divide reading strategies into several categories. For example, Auerbach and Paxton (1997, p. 259) suggest that there are three main types of strategies, namely pre-reading strategies, during-reading strategies, and after-reading strategies, all of which can further subdivided into twenty-one sub-types as follows. Firstly, pre-reading strategies include prior knowledge, writing about one's experience related to the topic, and asking questions based on the topic, etc. During reading strategies are skipping unknown words, guessing from context, identifying the main idea of each paragraph, etc. Finally, after-reading strategies include pre-reading expectations, making an outline chart, map, or diagram of the organization of the text, recalling what one thinks the author is saying, etc. Auerbach and Paxton divide the reading strategies into three parts: what strategies readers use before reading, what strategies readers use during reading, and what strategies readers use after reading.

Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) compiled a questionnaire entitled "The Survey of Reading Strategies" (SORS). They divided the "SORS" into three types, all of which are interrelated. The first type is "Global Reading Strategies" (GLOB), a technique for readers to read carefully for controlling or managing about reading such as reading with a purpose in mind, thinking about what they know to help them understand what they are reading (pre-information),

and gaining an overview of the text to see what it is about before reading it by noting certain characteristics including length and organization. When reading, they can then decide what to read closely and what to ignore, using tables, figures, pictures, context clues, typographical features, as well as the information presented in the text, to increase understanding, checking understanding when reading, and checking to see if guesses about the text are correct. The second type is called Problem-Solving Strategies (PROB). These are the techniques readers use while actually reading the texts. They use the strategies to solve problems when they occur during reading, such as reading slowly, trying to get back on track when concentration is lost, adjusting their reading speed, paying closer attention to difficult material, stopping from time to time and thinking about what they are reading, trying to picture or visualize information, re-reading and guessing the meaning of unknown words or phrases to assist them in remembering and in increasing understanding. The last strategy is Support Strategies (SUP); these are used to lend readers support, helping them to better understand the text they are reading, for example by using the dictionary, taking notes, underlining or marking information in the text, etc. (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002)

Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002, p. 4) suggest that the “SORS” questionnaire is suitable for studying learners’ reading strategies while they are studying in the university.

There is another strategy that is similar to the above, namely bottom-up and top-down processing by Hayashi. Hayashi (1999, p. 120) explains that bottom-up strategies are data-driven, for example translating into one’s native

language by using the dictionary. Top-down strategies, on the other hand, such as predicting and making inferences, are conceptually driven.

The researcher is interested in reading strategies because reading skills are one of many skills that are important in language learning. Students who have the ability to read effectively will have an advantage over others. They will have a chance to read and search for the information they require from resources throughout the world. There are many reading strategies, so if readers know which one is best suited to their own individual needs, they will be more likely to be successful in their reading. Thus, the results of this research will be useful for all readers who want to be successful in reading.

Statement of the Problems

Having an opportunity to know many second-year English major students at Thepsatri Rajabhat University, I have found that some students do not possess sufficient ability in terms of their English reading skills. Their foundation with regard to the study of English also falls below average, thereby rendering them unable to clearly comprehend English texts, newspapers, magazines and so on. Although they all know how to speak, listen, read and write in English, they still lack comprehensive reading experiences. Dickson (1999) notes that basic readers in college already know how to read English well enough for pleasure, but they lack the schemata and experience to read challenging, nonfiction texts in a crucial manner.

This paper documents the methodology used in, and the findings derived from, a case study the characteristics of the English reading skills of second-year English majors studying at Thepsatri Rajabhat University and Phetchabun Rajabhat University. The term “reading skills” includes integrated abilities ranging from reading comprehension to critical reading.

This study was conducted to investigate why the English reading test scores of some students were lower than expected, and did not match teachers’ perceptions of student’s reading abilities. Related to these issues are the reading assessments and the current curriculum provided for English reading instruction. It is necessary to identify the exact reading problems the students have with regard to reading skills such as scanning, skimming, using reference items, context clues, finding the topic, the main idea and identifying major and minor supporting details and comprehension.

The Purposes of the Study

Because of the significance of English reading skills and their importance to students taking communicative English, it is, therefore, necessary to conduct a case study on this topic. The purposes of the study are as follows: (1) to identify how efficient the students are in reading, (2) to compare the English reading performance among second-year English majors, and (3) to determine the reading skills of the second-year English majors and the problems they encounter when exposed to reading materials.

The Research questions

The research questions were as follows:

1. How well do English majors perform in using reading strategies?
2. How efficient are the second-year English majors when they read English texts?
3. What problems do second-year English majors encounter and which reading skills do the students use when reading?

Significance of the Study

This case study of students' English reading skills is only a guideline for those people who are involved in using English as a communicative medium. It will be useful to explore if other skills, such as cognitive skills, might arise from using English. English reading is a skill which each person should practice individually. Although language (especially one's own) is an innate ability, the student of the English language may gain a number of benefits from this study; the answers to the above questions should provide a great deal of useful data for further research regarding the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

The participants consisted of 70 second-year English majors at both Thepsatri Rajabhat University and Phetchabun Rajabhat University in semester 2/2009, who had already studied English for Communication and Study Skills course. There are two research instrument used in this study was in the form of the English reading test which consisted of 9 passages (70 items). Another tool was the questionnaire to determine the Frequency with which students used English Reading Skills and Answering Strategies, which consisted of 7 reading skills and strategies that measured the level of the students' English reading skills.

Definition of Terms

A number of specialized terms used in this particular study are complex and diverse in meaning; therefore, they need to be clearly defined. These terms are listed below, together with their respective definitions.

Reading skills means the abilities that are essential in decoding and interpreting meaning while reading a text.

These abilities are defined as the following sub-skills:

Scanning means to read something quickly in order to understand its main meaning or to find a particular piece of information.

Skimming means to read something quickly to find the main facts or ideas.

Finding the topic means to look for the subject that the writer is talking about.

Main ideas and details are the statements made about the topic which are supported by details that tell the readers more about the topic they are reading about.

Context clues are the hints provided in text which lead the reader to infer the meanings of certain words. The four types of context clue that are most commonly used are definition, restatement, exemplification and contrast. Reference words are pronouns, words or phrases that writers use to avoid using the same nouns etc. over and over again in the text.

Reading comprehension is the degree to which readers understand what they read. They use reading comprehension skills to gather information from the text.

The sample consisted of two groups of English majors studying in their second year at Thepsatri Rajabhat University and Phetchabun Rajabhat University during the academic year of 2009.

The reading test was the test designed for second-year English majors regarding reading skills.

English Reading Skills and Frequency with Which Strategies Are Used is the questionnaire that was designed for the second-year English majors.

Reading strategies are study techniques based on prior knowledge or input. A combination of the learner's prior experience and previously introduced information helps students solve problems and read more productively and comprehensively.

TRU students are the group of students who studied at Thepsatri Rajabhat University.

PRU students are the group of students who studied at Phetchabun Rajabhat University.

Organization of the Paper

This paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is concerned with the introduction, background of the study, the purposes and the scope of this paper and the definition of terms. The second chapter contains theories and concepts from the relevant literature. The third chapter contains the methodology of this case study, and describes the participants, the research instruments, the construction of the instruments, the procedures involved in the development of the research instrument and the procedures involved in analyzing the reading test and the results of the reading skills and strategies survey. The fourth chapter comprises the results and the analysis of the data, while the fifth chapter contains the findings and recommendations.

Summary

The contents presented in this chapter are the background to the value this paper. Moreover, three purposes of the study are listed and the significance of the study is mentioned. The scope of the study is described, and finally,

the definitions of the key terms are provided in order to ensure common understanding of their meanings throughout the paper.