

Decipherment or Whole Language Approach: Empirical evidence

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Abstract

With the low reading rate of 7 lines/Thai person/year exacerbated by the current *lingua franca* status of the English language in the educational realm, labor market, and AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) era, numerous academic institutions are striving every way possible to encourage their students to achieve a higher degree of English proficiency. In this descriptive article, the two instructional approaches—“decipherment” and “whole language”—of an academic reading course at a graduate school in Thailand are explored. Garnered from the triangular sources of data—questionnaires, student evaluation forms, and student performances—the findings reveal that most students prefer a combination of both pedagogical approaches, ensued by the “whole language” only. A significant suggestion is that this higher-education institute should provide *all* newcomers with a pre-test. As global villagers, the subjects in this study proposed that it be better for the school to provide English in a more sensible way, e.g. writing as required by the manpower market; reading for TOEIC (Test of English in Communication); and English for job employment, promotion, and success.

Keywords: reading, decipherment, whole language, Thai graduate students.

บทคัดย่อ

อัตราการอ่าน ๗ บรรทัดต่อปีของคนไทยกลายเป็นจุดที่ทำให้คนไทยด้อยลงเรื่อยๆ พร้อมกับอิทธิพลของภาษาอังกฤษที่เพิ่มขึ้นในฐานะภาษาสากลทั้งในด้านการศึกษา ตลาดแรงงาน และยุคประชาคมเศรษฐกิจเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ สถาบันการศึกษาหลายแห่งได้ทุ่มเทความพยายามทุกวิถีทางที่จะกระตุ้นนักเรียนนักศึกษาให้มุ่งมั่นเพิ่มทักษะภาษาอังกฤษให้สูงขึ้น

บทความเชิงพรรณานี้ได้รับการจัดทำขึ้นเพื่อศึกษาวิธีการสอนอ่าน ๒ วิธี ประกอบด้วย “วิธีการสอนอ่านแบบแยกองค์ประกอบ” (decipherment) และ “วิธีการสอนอ่านแบบองค์รวม” (whole language) ในหลักสูตรการอ่านเชิงวิชาการ ณ สถาบันการศึกษาระดับบัณฑิตวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย แหล่งข้อมูลในการศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้มี ๓ แหล่งอันได้แก่) ๑ (แบบสอบถาม) ๒ (แบบประเมินผลการเรียนของนักศึกษาเมื่อจบภาคการศึกษาและ) ๓ (ผลการสอบของนักศึกษา ผลการศึกษาพบว่านักศึกษาส่วนใหญ่ พึงพอใจให้ใช้ทั้งสองวิธีการร่วมกันในการสอนอ่าน ตามด้วยการสอนแบบ “การอ่านแบบองค์รวม” เพียงอย่างเดียว ข้อคิดสำคัญที่ได้รับจากการศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้คือ สถาบันการศึกษาระดับบัณฑิตศึกษาควรจัดให้มีการสอบวัดระดับก่อนเข้าเรียน (pre-test) แก่นักศึกษาใหม่ทุกคน ทั้งนี้ กลุ่มเป้าหมายในการศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้ได้เสนอแนะในฐานะประชากรโลกว่า สถาบันควรจัดหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษที่เหมาะสมมากกว่านี้ ยกตัวอย่างเช่น การเขียนภาษาอังกฤษที่จำเป็นตามความต้องการของตลาดแรงงาน การอ่านเพื่อการสอบโทอิค (TOEIC หมายถึง การสอบเพื่อวัดความสามารถในการสื่อสารด้วยภาษาอังกฤษ (และภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการว่าจ้างงาน การเลื่อนตำแหน่ง หรือการประสบความสำเร็จ เป็นต้น

คำสำคัญ : การอ่าน การถอดรหัส ภาษาโดยรวม หมายเหตุไทย

Introduction

“Why do we need to learn English this way?” “Why do we need to know what the abbreviation of S [for Subject] is?” “Why don’t you speak louder? We can’t hear you.” “I don’t like the way you teach; it’s old-fashioned. Nobody’s gonna learn English this way anymore.” “Do we really, really need to learn grammatical elements? I obtained 850 TOEIC score without any need to learn these lessons.” A plethora of these burning questions were yelled at the second author of the current study, particularly before the midterm test. Some even screamed furiously that they did not understand anything at all as they had left school years ago. They could not even recall the prepositions “toward,” “according to,” and “beside” when they were mentioned in the class. With this shocking experience, the two authors, who always update their pedagogy and curriculum, decided to work together to find a better solution for the course.

Many instructors may see this phenomenon as natural as Thai students become more expressive due to their English and western studies or abroad experience. Many may even suggest that the two researchers should let these problems fly away in the wind. Therefore, feeling on the brink of disaster, the co-authors looked into their students' frustrations, initially in terms of the textbook. Their first investigation revealed that the textbook for a graduate studies' reading course (Graduate School of Language and Communication, 2014) was uninteresting and outdated for most students (*see* Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a). Despite 63% of the participants considering the textbook appropriate, all of them stated in the open-ended questions that the book's contents should be brought up to date in line with the latest economic/social/political/etc. issues. Also, a good amount of the content seems superfluous to swathe around a 45-hour class, leaving the instructors scurrying to finish it (Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a). In the subsequent semester of the same year, the two authors further researched the pedagogical approach—reading aloud. In their second study, they found that, because of a huge gap in their students' English proficiency, some low-performing students felt discouraged to speak in front of the class and even became upset when being called on and/or made fun of (Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013b). This led to the next imperative of quality education: What can EFL (English as a foreign language) reading instructors do to help their students comfortably navigate the course? Exactly what are the problems that hinder their attaining their goal of learning English? Why does such rage seem to increase and deepen?

Current Status of English in Thailand

The meaning of English to Thailand can be traced back to the Chakkri dynasty. According to the National Identity Office (2005), the English language was primarily introduced into Thailand under the aegis of King Rama IV, or King Mongkut (1851 – 1868), who hired and assigned many foreigners, one of whom was Ms. Anna T. Leonowens, to teach English to the royal children, including his first son who later

became King Rama V, or King Chulalongkorn (p.13). With the economic boom of the 1980s, English was both a means to access modern technology and a key to career success because of it being an essential requirement for communication with foreigners (Fasold, 1987 & 1994). Fasold also remarked that even though Thailand has never been colonized, English had been instilled in people as a foreign language chiefly for economic reasons. Subsequent to the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the number of international elementary/secondary schools/universities had been on the increase in Thailand (Office of the Education Council, Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Thailand, 2004, 2007 & 2011). Subsequently, at the dawn of the upcoming full forum of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the necessity for English education is expressly mentioned in the Eleventh National Economic and Social Development Plan 2012-2016. That is, to respond to the rising *lingua franca* status of English in the Southeast Asian region, Thailand—a state member—has to adjust itself to harmonize with other nations (Office of the National Economic and Social Development, 2013). Hence, English education has come to the forefront again. Incidentally, for more historical detail on English education in Thailand, see Chanseawrassamee (2007) and Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee (2013a).

Despite such constant endeavor to cope with global and regional shrinkage, the studies focusing on how to teach English reading were of especial importance among Thai professors and educators. Professor Dr. Wichit Srisa-an, in the Thai Education Minister Forum in 2007, mentioned research findings which divulged that a Thai person read approximately 7 lines per year. Such an appalling statistic makes it almost indubitable that the reading rate of Thai students becomes the prime target for almost all educators. Likewise, many TV commercials and educational TV programs/news recurrently mention the low reading proficiency of Thai people in general, compared to neighboring countries' citizens. Many "one-minute," "one-word," "vocabulary" or "one-hour" English programs are abundant on all TV channels. Undoubtedly, from the viewpoint of the concerned parties, including parents, schools, education ministry, and the students themselves, there is agreement that English is essential to their current life. Of

course, the key factor in English competency is truly not the professors/educators/regulators, but the students themselves.

In other words, the attempts of the institute may not completely fit the requirements and/or expectations of the new generations of students. Furthermore, because a lack of high English proficiency may affect students' job hunting success or even cause their grades to suffer, the institute has to work at an improvement in their students' English, particularly in the domains of pedagogical method and materials. To contend with the new demands of learners in the AEC, according to the most recent global changes, everybody needs to be well-equipped with English (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2009). "ASEAN conducts its meetings, formulates its correspondence, records its proceedings and decisions, issues its statements, and undertakes its other interactions in English. As an association, it has no translation or interpretation service" (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010, p. 46). The situation may become more intense at the higher education setting because, on the one hand, weak students may think English proficiency can open a door for them to be employed. Without good preparatory English courses, these graduates may be unemployed even though they obtained their master's degree with honors. On the other hand, for those with high English proficiency, prerequisite English courses may be unchallenging, resulting in boredom and torpor. Conversely, those who have had no exposure to English over a long period may need more lessons to refresh their skill. Additionally, both groups of students need to be appropriately grouped, thereby being educated more effectively with lessons which speak to their individual English proficiency level. This paper is hence aimed to address such frictions as well as suggest possible ameliorations, thereby accelerating students' learning process.

Prior to the upcoming full forum of the AEC in December 2015, all businesses are welcoming new recruits who display high English proficiency. The test which is being used to evaluate applicants is called the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). In fact, many private companies in Thailand started using TOEIC in their recruitment process many years ago. Such companies include Air France, Thai

International and Bumrungrad International Hospital, companies not only in Thailand but around the world. Many nurses at public hospitals are paid extra if they can communicate with foreign patients in English. Nowadays, many state enterprises have started to use TOEIC instead of their own English test or other kinds of test; for example, Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and TOT Public Company Limited. Therefore, during this current study, many subjects mentioned TOEIC tests as a way to revise the reading course.

Notwithstanding, the idea of conducting a research study about reading instructors' exertions to find the best solutions for the subject's problems is not new (*see* Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a & 2013b). Prior to the co-authors' present attempt, there had been a few other studies undertaken by Chalaysap (2009) and her fellow lecturers.

At the outset, Chalaysap (2009) scrutinized her reading students' sentence comprehension. Students' competence of syntax and reading strategy was compared and the findings revealed that several students disregarded the significance of connectives, thereby misinterpreting the texts. Soon after, in a subsequent research study, all the reading lecturers mutually probed their students' participation in producing academic reading materials (Chalaysap et al, 2010). Remarkably, students relying on their individual readings achieved higher scores than those who did not. Learners' participation in text generation was found to promote higher reading proficiency. Even though participation may be a feasible option for teaching English reading, it should be opportunely fostered. In the most recent study, students' outside-class reading behaviors were surveyed and the results proportioned in terms of gender difference. Specifically, whereas females are inclined to read more English textbooks, males prefer real-experience-related ones. The study then recommends that the institute use real-world texts rather than the grammar-oriented ones (Chalaysap, 2011). In this present study, the co-authors hence used Chalaysap's (2011) study to obtain a deeper insight into students' preferences, if any, for "whole language."

A vital point that can be discerned from the three preceding studies is that since 2009, most, if not all, reading lecturers have paid attention to their pedagogical process while endeavoring to better the course for their students. However, the frustration over the textbook and grammar-related pedagogy has also become increasingly apparent. The co-authors believe that the participants' answers to the open questions in the questionnaire, as well as their online evaluation will provide some convincing reasons. As well, since the grammar-related textbook must inevitably permeate the pedagogical method, the co-authors in this study will first discuss the two major methods of teaching learners to read—"decipherment" in opposition to "whole language"—in the following section.

Decipherment versus Whole Language

In reading pedagogy, there are two major approaches: "decipherment" or "decoding," or "code emphasis" and "whole language" (*see* Nunan, 1999; Crandall, 1979; Heymsfeld, 1989; Liberman & Liberman, 1990; Crandall & Peyton, 1993; Burt, Peyton & Adams, 2003, *for example*). Theorists of both approaches have their own rationale.

The former group deem reading as a process of the decoding type (Child, 1988; Nunan, 1999; Mikulecky, 1990; Musumeci, 1997). In particular, decipherment is essentially an activity where form is more important than content (Child, 1988, p. 128). In the former times, with a minimum number of exceptions, ESL (English as a Second Language) readers usually learned to make sense of the text through decoding rather than learning to read it as a whole. According to Heymsfeld (1989), the "decipherment approach" focuses on the "subskills of reading, such as decoding, finding details, identifying main ideas, understanding cause and effect, and making inferences" (p. 65).

In the reading course for graduate studies - the course under examination and a prerequisite for all students at a master-degree level – the course contents contain all skills for new students to be able to read academic English texts and articles. This reading course is deemed a must for all these newcomers to adapt and prepare themselves for the essential texts in accord with their particular fields of study. The textbook in this course

was produced by the instructors at the Graduate School of Language and Communication (2014) in Thailand. In accord with Heymsfeld (1989), the textbook tends to place a greater emphasis on the “decipherment” approach. To delineate, there are four units in the textbook. The first two units pave a solid foundation for students about how a sentence, a paragraph, a passage, or even the whole chapter itself is formed. This part is thus regarded as the decipherment approach. In the remaining two units, students learn how to preview, predict, skim, and scan to find main ideas and make conclusions and/or inferences. This latter part also belongs to the “decipherment” approach. Since such code awareness can be taught and predict learners’ reading achievement (Lieberman & Lieberman, 1990), the two instructors/authors tried their best to educate their students. Unfortunately, the students began to feel frustrated with the former portions of the course and/or textbook. As earlier mentioned, frequently a majority of the students in the class lack a strong foundation in English grammar. Unfamiliar with the form, the subjects were unlikely to crack the code and/or relationship of different sentence elements/parts/types.

Using a theoretical approach, Mikulecky (1990) focused on the formation and correspondence of letters, sounds, words, and parts of speech. Considering the reading course for graduate studies—which covers the sentence level comprising types of phrases, clauses, and sentences—students who do not have a strong foundation in the parts of speech are consequently unable to reach a certain level achievable to those who do. Being devoid of such basic understanding inescapably led to a failing proclivity. Despite a preference for decipherment, the claim of the participants in the current study that there should be a pre-test to classify and group students according to their English proficiency level is thus partially reasonable.

Musumeci (1997), another decipherment researcher, jostled that it would be beneficial for students to be capable of grammatical and syllabic rules, and clarified that learning how clauses and sentences are constructed can help students to make meaning and master the English language. According to Musumeci (1997), nonetheless, as each student distinctively progresses, there should be no rigid schedule for English acquisition (p. 51). In opposition, allowing students to learn at their pace may be somewhat

problematic for degree curricula. Nevertheless, should we as lecturers take into account students' learning rate and goals? Or, do we focus strictly on our prevalent goal of teaching?

Although Mikulecky (1990) highlighted that a bedrock of English grammar should first be required of students and Musumeci (1997) conceded that students' development is to be left at their own disposal, there are some educational experts who propose otherwise. Such authorities would include Rigg and Kazemek (1993), Savage (1993), Nunan (1999), Anderson (1999), and Perego & Boyle (2001).

From the other perspective, theorists favoring a "whole language" approach present supporting proof which confirms that a good majority of English speakers and learners are, by and large, able to comprehend the texts without any reading readiness prerequisites. "For native English speakers and English learners alike, many reading readiness subskill prerequisites turned out to be unnecessary hindrances to literacy development" (Perego & Boyle, 2001, p. 153). "Reading is a process of reconstructing meaning rather than decoding form" (Nunan, 1999, p. 253). These notions match those of Rigg and Kazemek (1993) who divulged a whole language approach is the most suitable for adults (p. 35). Savage (1993) asserted that learning should be unswervingly connected with real application. As the name suggests, "language" must be taken as a whole because all parts/elements are interconnected. When separating the language into small units, be they "grammatical, vocabulary lists, or phonics families," such separation devastates the language (Rigg and Kazemek, 1993, p. 35). "Language must be kept whole or it isn't language anymore" (Rigg and Kazemek, 1993, p. 35).

From his perspective, Anderson (1999) proposes that reading should be considered as a vigorous and effortless process which allows the reader to make meaning and finally comprehend the texts themselves. A "synergy" originating from perusing texts can link what is read to the reader's background knowledge and experiences (Anderson, 1999, p. 1). Anderson's (1999) acronym "ACTIVE," stands for: (1) activate prior knowledge, (2) cultivate vocabulary, (3) teach for comprehension, (4) increase reading rate, (5) verify reading strategies, and (6) evaluate progress. To facilitate their students' achieving their

reading goals, teachers should embrace in their instructional plan these five factors: time, progression, student groups and cooperative learning, variety, and students' needs, interests, and abilities (Anderson, 1999, p. 114). Aligning with Anderson's principle, the co-authors examined their students' attitudes toward the two pedagogical methods—decipherment and whole language.

Between the two polar approaches, there lies a middle means proposed by Heymsfeld (1989). She explicitly states that as the two methods—whole language and decipherment have strong points—teachers should use a combined approach. Stahl, Miller, and Pagnucca (1994) also confirmed the positive effect of such a combination on reading achievement. After studying the progress of their subjects for over a year, the researchers found that a combination of the whole language and the decipherment approaches proved to be an excellent way to improve both reading achievement and attitude. In this study, the subjects were taught with both methods, resulting not only in reading effectiveness but also a positive attitude toward reading. According to Stahl et al (1994), it is quite impossible to teach learners to read only in the whole language mode. Even in the whole language classroom, teachers still need to incorporate explanations of how English letters and elements are brought together in order to provide meanings as a whole.

Adhering to these theorists, the co-authors' main purpose in the current study is to present the students' preferences for decipherment and/or whole language approaches. If any predicaments arose from taking the reading course for graduate studies, the co-authors undertook as their responsibility to address those annoyances and to seek solutions for their students.

Methodology

A. Nature of the Reading Course

As elucidated in their previous research studies (Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a and 2013b), the reading course for graduate studies is a 45-hour non-credit course. It is a course which has been provided to language graduates for

years. Throughout such time, the textbook has been revised according to the period of time and the students' ongoing demands for updated erudition. Covering a 15 week semester, the class generally runs every Tuesday afternoon between 1 and 4 pm. The course is offered to all new full-time graduate students in the Thai regular program at a graduate school in Bangkok. The original intent of the course is to advance students' understanding of academic English. With its considerable emphasis on the "decipherment" approach, the course is believed to positively facilitate students to understand, construe, as well as discern long and complicated sentences, to mention a few of its goals.

The particular reading course which forms the focus of this present study was provided between August 19 and December 9, 2014. During the first part of the semester, before the midterm examination, students studied by decoding basic sentence patterns; phrases, clauses and sentences; headwords and modifiers; sentence comprehension; among other topics. The midterm test took place on October 14 from 1 to 4 pm. This concluded the decipherment portion. The second part began on October 21, when students learned how to identify main ideas, movement of thoughts, and making inferences. Alongside the course, interesting worksheets of a vast variety of types—extra vocabulary exercises, grammatical lessons, and reading assignments—were provided. The TOEIC reading tests were periodically used for students' reading pleasure. The textbook, which more or less affected the co-authors' pedagogy, will now be explicated in detail.

B. Nature of the Textbook

As noted in the co-authors' previous papers (Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a & 2013b), the reading course for graduates is provided by a school of language to all new master-degree students undertaking its regular program. The 200-page textbook with a decipherment approach was specifically designed to equip these students with the academic English reading proficiency necessary for their master studies (Graduate School of Language and Communication, 2014).

The textbook is a black and white print version with no illustrations. It has been

edited and improved over time, and the current version used for the present study was revised in late 2013, being introduced for use in the 2014 academic year. The book is divided into four chapters: Chapter I: Sentence Structure, Chapter II: Context Clues and Sentence Interpretation, Chapter III: Paragraph Elements, and Chapter IV: Previewing, Skimming & Scanning. Fuller details of each chapter can be also found in the co-authors' prior works (Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a & 2013b). To summarize, in line with Heymsfeld (1989), the textbook thus belongs to the "decipherment approach."

Although the textbook and reading-aloud approaches had been examined in their two previous research studies (Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a & 2013b), subsequently many other issues arose, especially in the responses to the open-ended questions. For that reason, the researchers believed that in a culture, such as Thailand, where losing-saving face matters, additional interviews, following a in written format, should be undertaken. An analysis of the questionnaire was conducted after it was completed by the respondents at the end of the course (December 2, 2014). The questionnaire focused particularly on the students' attitudes toward the course's pedagogical methods - a consequence of the textbook. Such discussion highlighted the students' feelings and opinions of their semester experience. It was felt that such suggestions may contain viewpoints which may better the course to some degree. Indeed, a combination of the findings of the reading course, a search for effective materials and student feedback can help generate an enviable impact upon students' learning process or not (Connolly, 2009). Students' feedback, it is held, will help to find answers to all such questions (Stone & Heel, 2014).

The results coming from the student questionnaire in combination with the student evaluation form — a protocol stipulated for education quality assurance by the Office of the Higher Education Commission — are strongly believed to reveal material which will enhance the course. In short, there are always two key decision makers to deal with any problem; likewise, in the classroom, the students and the teachers are the two people who can be both feedback takers and givers (Stone & Heel, 2014). Here, in the current study, students are feedback givers who can help manage the reading classroom.

C. Participants

On the last day of class, questionnaires were dispatched to and filled out by 70 students (male: 29; female: 41) from a class total of 76. The age range was from 22 to 43, with an average of 25 years old. Also, the respondents were asked to evaluate the course, lecturer, and his/her pedagogy at the end of the course as part of education quality assurance. The respondents came from the two sections taught by the co-authors. These sections comprise students from the four Graduate Schools of Public Administration, Business Administration, Applied Statistics, and Human Resource Development. Chalaysap (2011) found significant difference between males and females in the type of reading English text preference; that is, females had a propensity for English grammar-related textbook, while males preferred real-experience-related ones. To faithfully replicate the Chalaysap study, the co-author also investigated the difference of preference in percentage, if any.

To enroll in a program at this graduate school, the admission policy varies from one student/program/school/etc. to another. Some applicants passed their school's requirement based on their written examination scores, some through interview only, while others with their undergraduate degree honors. As a result, there were no participants' admission tests which could be used as pre-tests for this study. Similarly, the final exam results showed that 56 out of the 76 participants in the present study, or the equivalent to 73.68%, passed the course. As the questionnaires were distributed to the participants before the final exam and the grade announcement, their answers were considered impartial. The only factor that might influence the outcome would be the midterm test.

D. Nature of the Questionnaire

As lecturers of the reading course in this study, the co-authors also participated in this academic analysis. Cognizant of the fact that disciples are the hub in determining whether or not a course is proceeding in a correct academic direction, students' assessment is indispensable. Participants were asked to select the best teaching methods: decipherment, whole language or both. However, the more specific answers came from

the open-ended answers. Without students' feedback, there would be no continuous monitoring in order to improve the textbook. Consequently, the inclusion of learners' aspects on the course is considered valuable. Responding in either Thai or English, the respondents answered the disseminated questionnaires. Almost all of them responded in Thai as Thai is their stronger language. Finally, the participants were specifically asked to choose which method they preferred, the decipherment, whole language, or both ways of teaching them to read.

Percentage of each option was then counted and turned it into a percentage. Open questions for their free articulation of comments were also provided. As aforesaid, the finals took place on December 14, 2014. The questionnaire was distributed on December 2, 2014, though it was taken into account that the mid-semester test results, rather than the finals or the final grade, may be a factor agitating the respondents to some degree. Opportunely, all the comments are found constructive to the course betterment.

E. Nature of the Student Evaluation Form

Further to the co-authors' questionnaire, the participants were required by the Institute to complete an evaluation form online. The lecturers will learn the evaluation results two months after the course is over. This standard evaluation is separated into two major parts: the lecturer and his/her pedagogy. In appraising the lecturer, students have to identify whether or not and how well the lecturer is able to transfer knowledge, answer questions, behave, and be punctual, etc. The lecturer's pedagogical method involves his/her teaching plan, course objective compliance, sequences of lessons, his/her research inclusion, material and media used in the classroom, group activity, etc.

Findings and Discussion

A. Quantitative and Qualitative Results Based on the Questionnaire

According to Neuman (2003), ways to calculate the outcomes of a research study are legion. Based on the percentage of each choice, the majority of participants in the present

study (58.6%) were found to prefer the third choice (both approaches: decipherment and whole language), followed by whole language (25.7%) and decipherment (15.7%), respectively, as shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 Students' Preference for Instructional Approaches Based on 3 Choices

Gender	(1) Decipherment	(2) Whole Language	(3) Both Approaches	Total No. of Males and Females
Male	3 (10.3%)	12 (41.4%)	14 (48.3%)	29 (100%)
Female	8 (19.5%)	6 (14.6%)	27 (65.9%)	41 (100%)
Total	11 (15.7%)	18 (25.7%)	41 (58.6%)	70 (100%)

As Neuman (2003) put it, a critical question in standardizing the data is what base to use. "Different bases can produce different results" (Neuman, 2003, p. 195). On the surface, the above Table showed that the majority of students—both females (65.9%) and males (48.3%) alike—preferred both approaches (Choice 3), based on how the lecturers applied the theory into practice. In fact, some students mentioned that they loved both methods because the teacher could keep them awake and motivated to learn. The preference for decipherment seemed to be greater in females than in males to some degree. While males appeared to like the "whole language" approach, a fairly similar percentage is found in choice 3—a combination of two approaches. For both female and male students, numerous respondents commented that decoding or decipherment seemed to be useful for lengthy sentences, while many said that they can generally understand the texts without decoding or decipherment. Those who prefer the whole language method emphasized the importance of real-life communication and TOEIC. The co-authors dug deeper into these figures by calculating with a different base (i.e. the number of choices), noting the difference in the total number and a clearer propensity in the student preference.

With a different way of calculation, the total number of choices in Table 2 will somewhat differ from the figures calculated from the number of respondents in Table 1.

When considering the number of options each student made, the total number of the first and second choice was added by the “both approaches” choice. When added by the sole choice—either decipherment or whole language—the number for each choice can apparently differentiate the preference of males and females, thereby producing another interesting result as follows:

TABLE 2 Students’ Preference for Instructional Approaches Based on 2 Choices

Gender	(1) Decipherment + (3) Both Approaches	(2) Whole Language + (3) Both Approaches	Total No. of Choices
Male	17 (39.5%)	26 (60.5%)	43 (100%)
Female	35 (51.5%)	33 (48.5%)	68 (100%)
Total	52 (46.8%)	59 (53.2%)	111 (100%)

When looking through a different lens, that is, regarding the choices of each approach, it is far more apparent that male students prefer the “whole language” approach (60.5%) more than the “decoding” one (39.5%). Females, on the contrary, preferred both approaches with only a slight difference in the percentage (51.5% vs. 48.5%). These findings confirmed Chalaysap’s (2011) study that males prefer real-experience-related texts rather than females who tend to be more passive—learn what they are asked to (Chalaysap, 2011). This is why her study recommended that the institute should focus more on daily life texts rather than grammar-oriented ones (Chalaysap, 2011). Another explanation is that a good number of students may need to seek a job after graduation. For that reason, TOEIC might be their ultimate goal. The “whole language” method absolutely serves such need. Overall, the first choice for the participants in this study is the “whole language” approach.

Those preferring the “whole language” approach, the English text should be understood as a whole, made the following comments.

- I prefer the whole language method because I can understand the entire text without separating each element. Doing so needs us to understand the text in detail, I don't see any necessity.

- I can apply this approach to our daily life experience. It is appropriate for reading English-language articles. I think newspaper articles should be introduced and read in class.

- I think the whole language method helps me to remember vocabulary more than the decipherment.

- For graduate studies, English for specific purposes (English in a particular field of study) should be taught. As the School did not group students according to their English proficiency, those with low English proficiency will feel bad.

Those preferring the “decipherment” approach, mentioned the following comments.

- “Decipherment” helps me to identify each element. It enables me to see the structure more clearly. The decipherment is necessary for long sentences.

- Short or simple sentences are not my problem, but long sentences are. Therefore, decipherment helps me to understand long and complicated sentences and texts.

- Decipherment helps me to review my grammatical knowledge. When we are good at grammar, we can understand the whole text more easily.

- Understanding of grammar can help me understand the text better and more clearly.

Others who prefer both approaches in their reading emphasized that a combination of both approaches can help them understand the textbook more.

- I think all teaching methods can help students to learn or get better. At this point, it may be too fast or too difficult for those without strong grammatical foundation. However, when time passes, both ways can help students to read better. I appeared to understand the text and the aim of the course more after the mid-term test. I really think that to help solve this problem, there should be a pre-test.

- To find the main idea, we may need to read as a whole. However, decipherment helps me to understand each grammatical element. This knowledge helps me to understand the text as a whole much more.

- Both are good ways for learning English. Both help to create skills in learning. Students are alert to learn and search for information more. I think both are useful.

- I have found that sometimes I feel that I already understood the text. After I learned how to identify each part of a sentence, I learnt that I missed some information or even misunderstood it. Because grammatical structure in English has its own meaning, I think decipherment is a must.

- With different levels of English proficiency, I think the teachers should pave a strong foundation for English grammar first so that all students have the same skill level.

In the open-ended part, where participants were asked to add some more suggestions and comments, the participants mentioned the three dimensions of the course deserving improvement: (1) a wide gap of student's proficiency, (2) old-fashioned textbook (grammatical elements), and (3) the current requirements of the labor market in an AEC context.

(1) Apropos of the grouping issue, some participants in the present study suggested the following solutions:

- Students come with diverse proficiency levels, so they really need different amounts of time to understand the text. I don't know why the school just grouped students according to their school.

- As there is a huge gap among students in the same class, there should be a pre-test to identify each student's English proficiency. Students should be grouped and taught according to their proficiency.

- There should be a pre-test to identify the weaknesses and strengths of each student. That is, those who are weak in grammar should go to grammar classes and be taught with the decipherment method. Those who cannot understand the text as a whole should go to the "whole language" classroom.

- A pre-test can help the teachers to know weaknesses of students in terms of grammar. The pre-test can help the teachers to provide right lessons to the right people, not all the same as it is now. Strong students feel bored with the S for subject, V for verbs, blah, blah, blah.

(2) To improve the textbook, some participants raised the following points.

- The first part—the decipherment—is hard to understand. If students return to school after many years, it is impossible for them to catch up with their classmates who have just received their bachelor's and pursued their master-degree studies right away.

- Decipherment is not really helpful. When reading texts, the most important thing is the context, not types of clauses, phrases, or even sentences.

- The textbook is too difficult for some students; as a result, some more explanation and translation in Thai should be provided.

- The 45-hour period of time is too short for the course with a lot of lessons like this reading course. Each person has a different learning style and amount of time needed to make meaning from the texts.

(3) To meet a new requirement like AEC, some subjects mentioned other ways to learn English.

- It's a waste of time learning English this way. It's just like learning to pass the test. There should be more fun than just learning grammar. People with low proficiency can feel bad as they can't catch up with the others. Some even can't pronounce a word like “diversification.” We're joining the AEC, guys.

- I think Thai people focus more on grammar which is unnecessary in real-life communication; we should emphasize the importance of vocabulary, writing, and conversation.

- I want to learn to write. In the AEC context, I have to be able to catch up with correspondence in English.

Based on the above responses, it can be concluded, at this point, that some of the students had difficulties in learning to read for the following reasons: low reading

proficiency and low grammatical knowledge. These lessened any chance for enjoyment in learning to read at their master's level.

B. Qualitative Results based on the Student Evaluation Form

For education quality assurance, all students at this school are asked to fill in the evaluation form online. As a consequence, the evaluation is harmless, but constructive for all concerned parties. Similar to what was found in their questionnaires, students mentioned that they should have been prepared more appropriately in terms of English proficiency. Such preparation for the course was quite necessary because it would reinforce weak students for better understanding of the English academic texts. Without such preparations, students felt confused at first. After two months, things changed and improved. It took too much time for that adjustment. Again, the necessity for student groupings based on their individual English proficiency level was echoed.

As found in the questionnaire, similar answers were found from the online evaluation forms, as follows:

- I want the course content to focus on speaking, listening, and writing—not just grammar. These skills can be used in daily life and work.
- Pedagogical method was quite weird to me at the beginning, but I like the additional exercises the lecturer provided us.
- The content was overwhelming, too difficult, and unsuitable for the 45-hour course. The examination was too hard for the students to do. There is no reason to measure students' performance this way. The exam should comply with the content in the textbook.
- Academic writing should be provided.
- Student participation is good, but the lecturer should spend more time delivering lectures.
- A summary of each lesson is good, thanks to the lecturer.

It can be seen that both sources in this study confirmed the co-authors' findings from their previous studies that the students tended to dislike the old-fashioned, grammar-

oriented textbook. As the lecturers, in some way, need to conform to the textbook, their pedagogy was deemed old-fashioned. Some students obviously mentioned this.

- The lecturer can teach well, but the course content was old-fashioned, leading to some obstacles.
- Some PowerPoint slides should be provided.
- The lecturer is very attentive and dedicated to teach, understands students as they are, and makes the class fun.

In this case, four students suggested the introduction of the course content and exercises for further practices online.

As with the first source—the questionnaire—the findings from this source also confirm that students require more grammatical preparations. Therefore, it may be not the course content per se, but the students' background knowledge that is not strong enough for them to understand the text by identifying each element in a complicated sentence.

There is another source for this paper analysis. Chalaysap (2009) examined the reading students' sentence comprehension to categorize their reading strategy and the reason why they misunderstand the academic text. In this paper, therefore, the co-authors will look into the students' sentence comprehension in the mid-term and final examinations as this is identical in both examinations. A difference in the students' performance in the two tests may be another source of students' irritation caused by the decipherment approach.

C. Qualitative Results based on Student Performance

In the mid-term examination and the finals, there are two similar parts: sentence comprehension. In the tests, the students must be able to give a specific answer to the questions. It is worth mentioning here that the two major differences between the mid-term text and the finals are: (1) fill-in vs. multiple-choice and (2) the mid-term test comes in as a sentence but the finals come in the form of a passage. In the co-authors' opinion, the most grueling part may come from the fact that the mid-term test contains the fill-in-the-blank part—where there are no multiple choices given. Students may be familiar with

the multiple-choice text; therefore, they feel frustrated with the blank completion format. If this is the case, their frustration might come from other reasons like the pattern of the test.

In the following examples of student performance, it can be discerned whether or not the co-authors' claim is reasonable. Below, the co-authors will present some examples of student performance in a comparison of the fill-in mid-term examination and the multiple-choice finals formats.

Example 1: Mid-term examination

Text: "Humankind faces an extremely complex set of challenges in the twenty-first century: climate stabilization, energy security, sustainable land use, and equitable development."

Problem: What are the challenges mentioned in the sentence?

In the mid-term examination, only one or two students could deliver a completely correct answer. Simply to make sure that they will gain some points, the students' answers ranged from the perfect one like "climate stabilization, energy security, sustainable land use, and equitable development" to "in the twenty-first century: climate stabilization, energy security, sustainable land use, and equitable development" and the entire sentence. Knowing that there is no specific choice to select, the participants in this study may have felt distressed, thereby disliking the decipherment.

In the co-authors' opinion, the problem of frustration about grammatical pedagogy, to some degree, may not be caused by the decipherment or decoding per se, but the characteristics of the mid-term test. To be exact, choices generally help their cognitive process and decision-making. Many students may even have had the rare experience of a fill-in-the-blank test. Specifically, students with low English proficiency can never do a fill-in test because they do not know what to put in the blank. Therefore, they feel frustrated by the grammatical test. In the finals, the question is not so different from that in the mid-term examination.

Example 2: The finals

Text: “...the first and foremost essential criterion for democracy is popular sovereignty.”

Problem: In order to have true democracy, which of the following is most essential criterion?

Choices: A. social justice **B. popular sovereignty** C. parliament
D. presidency.

This is an excerpt from a passage in the finals. The correct choice is B: popular sovereignty, which can be found in the passage. With only fair English proficiency, students can guess that the correct answer is B: popular sovereignty. Looking into the participants’ results in this study, 94.7% got this item correct while only 5.3% missed it. In the co-authors’ view, most students can do this item because the choices prompt them, making it easier for decision-making.

Example 3: The mid-term examination

Text: There was a view in the Soviet Union, under its leader Joseph Stalin that armed conflict with the West was inevitable, for the difference between capitalism and communism could never be resolved peacefully.

Problem: What was the view mentioned?

In the mid-term examination, without any choices, students may be unable to even identify what modifies “view” as the headword and the modifier are placed so far apart, not close together. Only 5.3% of the participants could answer it correctly = that armed conflict with the West was inevitable - while the other 94.7% answered incorrectly. The answers ranged from “The Soviet Union” to the entire sentence.

In the co-authors’ perspective, many students tried to gain the point; therefore, they just wrote something to include everything in their answer.

Example 4: The finals

Text: Today, with the opening and fast growth of the Indian economy, this “weakness” is turning into a big strength for international cooperation and investments. Much of the success of Bangalore, for instance, is attributed to the phenomenon of “reverse brain drain.”

Problem: What factor has led to the phenomenon of “reverse brain drain”?

- Choices:**
- A. the larger percentage of the IIT’s graduates
 - B. stronger international cooperation and investments
 - C. the opening and fast growth of the Indian economy**
 - D. more interest in engineering and applied science

This is an excerpt from a passage in the finals. The correct choice is C: the opening and fast growth of the Indian economy, which can be found in the passage. It is not necessarily always true that if students can find where the phrase “reverse brain drain” is, they can then select the correct answer. This is because Choice B is much closer than Choice C. For this item, an equal 50-50% of students responded correctly and incorrectly, respectively.

Example 5: Mid-term examination

Text: Since globalization is continuously redefining relationships between business organizations throughout the world, the role of culture has been the topic of numerous studies focusing on various aspects of human behavior

Problem: Why has the role of culture been the topic of numerous studies?

If students do not know the meaning of the transitional marker “since,” that it can share the same meaning with “because,” they cannot do this item at all. With the instructors’ emphasis on the use of “as, for, and since,” 78.9% knew the multiple functions and meaning of the word “since,” while 21.1% did not. Some students mentioned the helpfulness of the instructor’s teaching as follows:

- Grammar is hard, but with the instructions given by the nice teacher, I kind of understand English grammar more. I never knew that “as or since” could mean “because.”
- The instructor teaches me and I was never bored with English grammar like before.
- Teachers taught too fast. Wait for me; I can’t catch up sometimes!
- Teacher is a big part of this course because it is really hard to understand grammar and other stuff. If teachers explain to us well. I’m sure that we can get through this, whether it is difficult or not. [Questionnaire, December 2, 2015]

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Example 6: The Finals

Text: It is sometimes said that gross human-rights violations—such as genocide—are ‘irrational’ and beyond scientific explanation.

Problem: An example of gross human-rights violation is _____ .

Choices: A. **genocide** B. irrational explanation C. state behavior
D. social-scientific investigation

It is quite obvious that the correct answer is A: genocide. This is confirmed by the fact that 63.2% chose this item correctly, whereas the rest (36.8%) missed it. The co-authors had the impression that to find the correct answer, students must know the grammar structure of “appositive” or “noun in apposition.” There are three ways of forming this structure: a dash, the parentheses, and the commas before and after the noun phrase. Many students mentioned the usefulness of a combination of both decipherment and whole language in their learning to read as follows:

- Decipherment allows me to understand how each sentence is formed. When dividing the sentence into several elements, I understand how each part comes together. The whole language method makes me understand the overall meaning of a sentence. When I read, I can understand better than before. If I don’t understand any sentence, I separate it into subject and predicate. Then, I can understand it.

- Both ways are good and helpful. They help me to create my reading skills.

- Grammar rules are important especially in writing and translation. Teaching this way should be supplemented by teaching how to write and translate. Both decipherment and whole language can be useful in my real life.

- Understanding elements in a sentence makes me understand the text better and clearer. Before taking this course, I misunderstood many texts because I didn't know that each structure also has its specific meaning like modals used for probability and request. Vocabulary is also another important part, so prefix and suffix studies are also important. Separating each word part is as important as separating each sentence element. [Questionnaire, December 2, 2015]

In brief, when students showed some irritation toward the curriculum, the textbook, the lecturers, or even their pedagogy; lecturers should not feel terrible. Instead, they should conduct research because many times, the positive/negative reaction is just on the surface. Further digging should be undertaken to find the real cause. In the current study, in addition to the decipherment method in the first part, the testing way—written form—may be another cause of irritation for the students.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

The present paper reveals that the majority of respondents preferred the combination of both approaches of learning: decipherment and whole language. The information derived from both the student questionnaire and the on-line evaluation confirmed that both pedagogical methods are vital to their learning process as propounded by the gurus of both methods. This finding concurs with the positive effect of both approaches on language learning achievement which Heymsfeld (1989) and Stahl et al (1994) found. When looking at the data as a single choice, the preference for “whole language” or real-world texts is higher in males than in females, as was found in the work of Chalaysap (2011). Furthermore, the students' questionnaire and their on-line evaluation prove to be an excellent source of rich information (Connolly, 2009; Stone & Heel, 2014; Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a & 2013b). The co-authors thus hope that

the triangular sources including the students' preferences as well as their evaluations and performance may be, more or less, of interest and applicable to educators/course directors/lecturers, etc. when providing academic reading courses in an ESL/EFL context.

Nonetheless, in terms of limitations, this paper is highly descriptive and exploratory. The authors could have tested the subjects' grammatical knowledge and reading skills first to see if there was a correlation between the two variables. If it was demonstrated that those who preferred decipherment to the whole language approach had better reading skills and grammatical knowledge than those who opted for the whole language approach, a claim could be made that grammatical knowledge is crucial for reading proficiency and as such needs to be taught to those students with low reading proficiency. This study also leads to another suspicion that L2 readers start off as bottom-up readers and have gone through practices and frequent exposure to L2 reading materials before they have become advanced readers known to employ top-down or whole language reading strategies. If this is the case, there is every reason to focus on the decipherment approach for beginner and intermediate readers. Similarly, ignoring the details of each participant's educational background is another gap found in the current study. This gap could be substantially reduced by further research in this field.

The prime target of an English course anywhere worldwide is to enable students to read and write effectively in the language. Nevertheless, graduate students are no longer children and normally come to class with some expectations. The reaction of the students is thus extremely important to their instructors (Connolly, 2009; Stone & Heel, 2014). The response of the participants in the present study tends to concur with the findings of previous research studies in this field; viz., that students will learn what they find meaningful for themselves (*see* Child, 1988; Mikulecky, 1990; Musumeci, 1997; Chalaysap, 2009; Chalaysap et al, 2010, Chalaysap, 2011; Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a & 2013b). To be precise, despite their existing English competency, be it high or low, the majority of students enrolling in the reading course for graduate studies in this research still require reading readiness prerequisites—grammar preparation. Regardless of their preference for decipherment or whole language, most

students admitted that all students should take a pre-test so that they can recognize their own weakness, allowing the Institute to fill such a gap in a more efficient way. Therefore, the institute should positively respond to their request by providing a pre-test.

As consistently maintained in this paper, each student who applies for an educational seat is accepted through distinctive criteria: written examination only, written examination accompanied by interview, interview only, GPA and/or honors, occupational experience/position, etc. Hence, students in the English course may need more preparation for the reading course for graduate students, such as essential grammar rules, vocabulary, or even Thai subtitles. While an appropriate way of grouping should be based on the proficiency of each student, the topics to be learnt should be based on an individual student's weaknesses. If a student has a low vocabulary repository, that student should enroll in a vocabulary class. If some students are weak in grammar, they should take a grammar class. Those who are competent in both grammar and vocabulary should go for the "whole language" course. This will make the graduate reading course match the master-level students' specific requirements—whether for job employment or higher academic pursuit. In general, the lack of some essential basic grammatical lessons like noun clauses, vocabulary words, and main ideas was pinpointed. As was found in preceding research, many respondents called for an update of the textbook and a basic grammar course. As found in the co-authors' previous works, some students made a categorical statement that they needed Thai explanations (Jaturongkachoke & Chanseawrassamee, 2013a & 2013b). This confirms the low proficiency level of Thai readers. These findings should be taken on board by the institute administrators.

Fortunately, and most recently, the School through a directive of the Board of Regents, mandated all reading students to sit for the TOEIC test, as a pre-test, on January 13, 2015. This exercise might be a new way to help students to meet their expressed desire for English development in a more meaningful way because many participants mentioned that after graduation they will become job seekers. Schools are obviously regarded as the place for learners to come for their development and preparation for the next stages of their lives — be that their career or English expansion. This study outlines,

in general terms, how a school reacts to the expressed need of its students and the evolutionary process of its endeavor to gain academic success in a sustainable fashion.

Most importantly, relying only on students' responses in a multiple-choice test or questionnaire may mislead teachers in their evaluation of the students' level of English proficiency. A multiple-choice test and a fill-in test protocol needs to be further examined if it results in students' negative reactions to the course. Additionally, pedagogy may be influenced by students' misunderstanding of a teacher's methods – as the saying warns, don't judge a book by its cover. Nevertheless, despite all the limitations and shortcomings of this study but with the positive thinking and motivation of all parties involved, it will be instructive to see whether the learning objectives and goals of the reading course will shift from that of academic excellence (reading academic texts) to an employment tool (reading for TOEIC) in the same way as its teachers "shift from a fixed mindset to a growth one" (Stone & Heel, 2014, p. 191).

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