Students' Perceptions on the Use of Reading Strategies, Reading Difficulties, and Factors Affecting Their Reading Performance: A Case Study of a Technical English Class[*]

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Abstract

This case study explored Thai university students' perceptions regarding the use of reading strategies, reading difficulties, the factors affecting their reading performance. Thirty-one students participated in this study. The research instruments were students' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The students reported that they used a variety of reading strategies learnt in class, gained a better attitude toward reading English, and improved their reading ability when they practiced reading English texts and wrote about their reading experience in their reflective journals. Their reading problems were inadequacy of vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and L1 interference in translation. The results will

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[*] This article is a part of a thesis entitled "An exploration of Thai university students' perception on the use of reading strategies, reading difficulties, and factors affecting their reading performance: A case study of technical English (Forestry and Agriculture) class" supervised by Miss Jiraporn Dhanarattigannon, Ph.D.

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help teachers to better prepare reading instructions and activities to enhance students to become better readers.

Keywords: technical English; reading skill development

บทคัดย่อ

กรณีศึกษาชิ้นนี้สำรวจการรับรู้ของนิสิตไทยที่มีต่อการใช้กลวิธีการอ่าน ปัญหาการอ่าน ปัจจัยที่มีผลกระทบกับความสามารถในการอ่าน กลุ่มตัวอย่างในงานวิจัยนี้มีทั้งสิ้น 31 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการศึกษาได้แก่ งานเขียนอนุทินสะท้อนการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษและการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งมีโครงสร้าง นิสิตรายงานว่าได้ใช้กลวิธีการอ่านที่เรียนมาอย่างหลากหลาย มีทัศนคติต่อการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษที่ดีขึ้นและมีการพัฒนาการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษเมื่อได้ฝึกและสัมผัสกับภาษาอังกฤษผ่านการเขียนอนุทินโดยใช้กลวิธีการอ่านที่เรียนมาปัญหาเกี่ยวกับการอ่านที่พบในงานวิจัยนี้คือ การขาดแคลนความรู้ในเรื่องของคำศัพท์ ปัญหาการออกเสียงและการแทรกแซงของภาษาแม่ในเรื่องของการแปลผลการวิจัยครั้งนี้จะช่วยให้ผู้สอนได้เตรียมการสอนและกิจกรรมได้เหมาะสมเพื่อช่วยให้นิสิตเป็นนักอ่านที่ดีขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาอังกฤษเฉพาะด้าน; การพัฒนาทักษะการอ่าน

Introduction

EFL students often struggle with English reading despite its being an essential skill for developing productive skills and gaining knowledge (Carrell, 1998; Oxford, 2003) due to their inability to find main ideas, inadequate vocabulary, and other reading comprehension problems (Yimwilai, 2008; Chawwang, 2008). All studies related to reading strategies and reading problems seem to suggest that although reading strategies have been taught to L2 students to help them overcome their

reading problems and improve their reading skills, the problems tend to remain (Lornark, 2010). Most previous studies used questionnaires and comprehension tests as the main tools for determining how students employ reading strategies. However, such instruments do not indicate how reading problems are resolved. Thus, the present study focusing on the students' perception which was found in a few studies will reveal how they use the strategies to solve their problem. Students were encouraged to share their attitudes towards reading English and English reading problems and their thoughts on the use of reading strategies and factors affecting their reading performance. As Nunan (1989: 177) pointed out, "*no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centred unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account.*" The findings of this study can assist teachers in developing more effective reading lessons to facilitate development of reading skills.

Research questions

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the students' perceptions of English reading strategies and English reading problem. It also aimed at exploring factors affecting students' reading performance. The research questions were as follows.

1. What were students' perceptions of their use of reading strategies?

2. What were students' perceptions of their reading difficulties before and after taking this reading course?

3. What were students' perceptions of factors affecting their reading performance?

Literature review

There are a few studies focusing on students' perception on English reading. Salli (2005) carried out a study to discover the perceived reading strategies used by first year students in eastern Mediterranean University when they read academic or non-academic English texts. Three hundred forty students in this study were from Turkey, North Cyprus, Iran, African countries, Pakistan and Russia. The instrument in this study was a questionnaire consisting of 3 parts; background information, period of English studying, and self-rated language proficiency and reading ability. The third part was adapted from Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002) and Online Survey of Reading Strategies (OSORS) (Anderson 2003). SPSS was used to analyze the data. The results show that students were aware of the benefits of reading strategies before and while reading the text to help with comprehension.

Chen (2009) also investigated 287 Taiwanese students' perception onstudents' reading motivation and their English reading achievement. The instruments were motivation reading questionnaires of Wigfield and Guthrie (1995, 1997) and semi-structure interviews. Only 10 students selected from the top 5% and bottom 5% of English reading grades of each class were interviewed for their perceptions of English reading. The results revealed that students had considerably intrinsic motivation towards English reading. Additionally, their reading motivation and reading achievement are significantly correlated.

Although there are some studies on students' perceptions of English reading, scant research investigates both on the use of reading strategies and reading difficulties. Thus, the present study investigated on

students' perceptions of the two aspects in order to contribute the better understanding for reading instructions. Importantly, focusing on the students' perception will provide the insight information in which students are aware of their use of reading strategies and reading problems as well as factors affecting their reading performance.

Methodology

1. Participants

The participants of the study were 31 students from two faculties: three students from the Faculty of Agriculture and 28 students from the Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University. The participants enrolled in Section 10 of the course 01355224 Technical English (for Agriculture and Forestry) in the second semester of the 2010 academic year (November 2010 – February 2011). Their average age was 21. They reported they had studied English for approximately 12.5 years and did not have to read many English texts (only 2.7 on a scale of five) for their coursework in their faculties. Nineteen of them said they liked reading, and 12 said they disliked reading.

2. Technical English Class

This Technical English class focused on promoting students ability to use reading strategies to cope with English texts in the field of their study (Forestry and Agriculture). The teaching approaches were lessons about some reading strategies, assignments regarding reading strategies, presentation, and reflective journals. The main assignment in this classroom was the reflective journal.

3. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were students' reflective journals, and formal and informal interviews. In addition, a questionnaire was used to obtain information on the students' personal and reading backgrounds, and their perception of this Technical English class focusing on reading activities, assignments, and their reading performance after taking this course.

The reflective journal was an assignment in reading practice and self-monitoring submitted every week. The students were required to read an English text and to describe their reading processes, their problems, and how they applied their reading skills and strategies while reading in Thai or in English. The reflective journals were used to explore students' perceptions of their use of reading strategies and their reading problems while reading English texts. The teacher graded and gave feedback to the journal weekly in Thai. For this study all journals with teacher's feedback were collected at the end of the semester.

The semi-structured interviews of the 31 students, conducted individually, in pairs, or in groups of three, were used to gain in-depth information about their use of reading strategies, problem, and reading performance as well as to clarify any unclear information in the reflective journals and the questionnaires.

The questionnaire used in this study to survey students' background information, their reading behavior, and their perceptions on the activities and assignments in classroom. The first part of questionnaire was used to ask students background information. The second part was used to explore their reading behavior, and the last part was open-ended

questions about their perceptions on three main activities in classroom which are comprehension question exercises, reflective journal, and presentation. The questionnaire was constructed according to the purpose of the use questionnaire and the objective of this study. The first draft of the questionnaire was checked for face and content validity by the advisor. Also, the questionnaire was examined and approved by experts in research methodology to ensure the creditability before distribution.

4. Data Collection

The students were given the questionnaire to complete at the end of the course. Copies of each student's reflective journals were collected at the end of the course and were read by the researcher. The semi-structured interviews were held during the final examination period by the researcher.

5. Data Analysis

This qualitative study employed two methods for analyzing data. The data from the first part of the questionnaires was quantitatively analyzed using Excel to obtain percentages. A coding method adopted from Kumar (2005) was used in analyzing the descriptive data from the open-ended questions in the second and third parts of the questionnaire, the reflective journals, and the semi-structured interviews. The data analysis credibility formula by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the coding method. About 30% of the coded data from the reflective journals were cross-checked by the inter coders. The agreement between two coders was found to be 81% of credibility (See the appendix). Additionally, the triangulation method was used to

establish creditability and transferability of the data gained from the questionnaires, the reflective journals, and the semi-structured interviews.

Results and Discussion

1. Research Question 1: What were students' perceptions of their use of reading strategies?

The results reveal that the students perceived a change in their use of reading strategies and attitude toward English reading. **Before taking this course**, the students always depended on English-Thai dictionaries when they had difficulties in reading English texts. They tried to translate word-for-word and in the end felt they did not understand the result. The sole solution to their reading problem is **to use dictionary**. They also commented that they **lacked reading strategies/techniques** to help them understand English texts as can be seen in the following excerpts.

It is not that I am illiterate but I do not have a technique to help understand the text better, said S-16. (Interview-2)

I do not have any technique to cope with the problem, S-27 explained. (Interview-3)

However, when they were introduced to reading skills and reading strategies, they started to change. Through the reflective journal assignment, the students were encouraged to try using the strategies. **After taking the course,** they found that they had more tools to cope with their reading problems, particularly with unknown words. They perceived that using the strategies helped them read better and so they tended to use the strategies more. They reported that they were able to

deal with unknown words by **1) guessing the meaning of the word by using context clues, 2) using word analysis (prefix-suffix), and 3) using punctuations**. The following extracts show their perceptions on the use of word attack strategies.

> S-22: *I cannot translate a lot of words so I solve the problem by guessing from the context as suggested in the classroom…* (Reflective journal-3)

> S-12: *When I experienced difficulties, I thought of what I learnt and took a look at the textbook about prefix-suffix, comma, and brackets. I tried them first because I know their functions.* (Interview-8)

> S-28: *I guessed from a root. For instance, "infrastructure", the word "structure" means* โครงสร้าง *[structure] and the word "infra" means under when combining together, it means* ระบบโครงสร้างพื้นฐาน *[infrastructure].* (Reflective journal-7)

> S-1: *I could understand the text more when I understood about the meaning of the word in brackets.* (Reflective journal-13)

When dealing with text comprehension problem, the students reported **the use of background knowledge (schema)** to cope with the problem as follows.

> S-29 explained, "*It is easy to read a text about something I have been exposed to a lot and is related to my major subject because*

I have background knowledge…it is easier because I have previous knowledge." (Interview-5)

S-25 suggested, *"I tended to read texts that I have some background knowledge about. It is easier to read texts like that because I could apply my experience to the particular piece."* (Interview-5)

In conclusion, students reported that they use the following strategies regularly: 1) guessing the meaning of the word by using context clues, 2) using word analysis (prefix-suffix), 3) using punctuations, and 4) using background knowledge (schema).

The application of the reading strategies enabled the students to understand the text better without resorting to their former solution, an English-Thai dictionary, which did not provide much assistance. This suggests that practicing reading strategies frequently such as through the reflective journal activity offered a more effective way for these students to become more self-reliant and to improve their reading performance. The results of this study support the findings from previous study (Salli, 2005) that students are aware of the use of reading strategies while reading text to help with text comprehension.

2. Research Question 2: What were students' perceptions of their reading difficulties?

The results in response to this research question showed that there were three reading problems that students generally faced while reading. The problems were limited vocabulary, L1 interference, and pronunciation.

In this study, unknown words continued to be a problem as students tended to have small English vocabularies, and although they perceived that they read better, their lexical capacity did not seem to increase. Even though the students had techniques to deal with unfamiliar words, these were not enough for a contextual understanding of the word. The vocabulary issues were widely reported in students' reflective journals and in the semi-structured interviews.

> S-25*: This technical English class provided me a lot of reading strategies; however, it is important to know the meaning of the vocabulary to be able to understand the text better."* (Interview-9)

> S-29: *I have a problem with vocabulary that I have not seen before such as the words neglected, harmoniously and squabbles.* (Reflective journal)

Translation was also considered an issue particularly when an English word had many possible Thai equivalents. This occurred when students knew the meaning of the word, but they did not know how to select a suitable Thai word.

> S-5 reported, *"the word can be translated in Thai in many words and it is confusing."* (Interview-17)

> *For example, the word "make" can be translated to [ทำ] "do", but in Thai we have another word for it like [สร้าง] "create" and that results in a strange meaning,* said S-7 (Interview-9).

Another problem is that I know the meaning of the
word but I cannot adjust the word, so the meaning I
got may not be fit the story, S-23 said. (Interview-8)

In addition, the students noted that if they could pronounce a word correctly, it would help them memorize the word and its meaning better. For instance, if they had heard the word and its meaning once, when they found that word in a text, they could not pronounce the word properly, and they did not recognize it or its meaning. The students explained that when they were familiar with the pronunciation, it helped them with the translation of the word.

Researcher: [pointing out the word "brochure" to S-4], can you
pronounce the word?

S-4: It is bar something
Researcher: It is "brochure" /broʊʃʊr/
S-4: Oh I see
Researcher: If you know the pronunciation of the word, will you
know the meaning?
S-4: Yes. I had no idea this is how the word "brochure" is written
although I have heard the word many times. (Interview-16)

Thus, vocabulary deficiency, L1 interference in translation, and pronunciation skill were the primary problems for the students in this study. The results of this study support the results from the previous studies (Chawwang, 2008; Lornark, 2010; Yau, 2010) that vocabulary deficiency and L1 interference are considered English reading problems.

3. Research Question 3: What were students' perceptions of factors affecting reading performance?

The study found that three factors affecting students reading performance are the teacher's feedback, the students' attitude, and motivation. The first factor that changed students' reading performance was **the teacher's feedback**. The teacher of the Technical English class gave informative feedback on the students' self-monitoring in their journals to help students understand their reading processes and solve the reading problems that they raised in the journals.

S-28 explained his self-monitoring in one of his reflective journal entries.

"The vocabulary in this text was not difficult; however, I was confused by the word "lahar" and I was not sure if it was lava."

The teacher then explained the word "lahar" which was mentioned in S-28' journal entry as:

The meaning of lahar was explained in the article. …Something that occurs before an eruption. It is made ………, (moving under the ground). I also thought it was lava but we call it lava when it is already out of the volcano if it is still underground it is called lahar (according to the article).
The teacher did not just tell me the meaning of the word I asked but she explained the way to find the meaning… Her suggestions helped me develop in the use of reading strategies, said S-12 (Interview-14)

Personally, I think it is good to get the teacher's feedback. The fact that she explained it in detail even though I did not completely understand it made me feel good because the teacher was paying attention to what I read and trying to help. I could apply her comments to the next assignment, S-18 explained. (Interview-14)

This can be explained in terms of the theories of the zone of proximal development theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976). The teacher's modeling and scaffolding helped students reach better capability and develop their use of reading strategies (Yang and Wilson, 2006).

The students' attitude towards English and English reading was another factor affecting the students' reading performance. The results showed that a negative attitude also affected the students' reading performance; students with a bad attitude towards English reading tended to avoid reading (Yamashita 2004). Before taking this course, the students avoided reading because they did not like English. However, the course gave them a lot of exposure to English, and they became more familiar with English texts through the reflective journal assignments every week. Consequently, with the use of reading strategies, their attitudes became positive.

Before, when I encountered difficult words, I stopped reading instantly. Now I continue reading…I pay more attention to reading because of the reflective journal; I get to practice reading, S-20 explained. (Interview-8)

I have changed since I started this course; I have better attitude towards English, especially reading. It has provided me more (reading) techniques, I read faster and I can understand more. I have learnt how to use surrounding words to help with reading. Before, I did not pay much attention, but when I had learnt reading strategies, I used them. Now when I see unknown words, I tend to memorize the word or translate the word. I want to know the meaning, and that will help increase my vocabulary skill, S-24 explained. (Interview-10)

Motivation was also a factor students considered affected their reading performance. In this study, the teacher gave students freedom to select texts they wanted to read. This increased the students' motivation to read. The excerpts below show how the freedom to choose texts affected readers' motivation and it affects their reading performance as the students tend not to avoid reading and try using strategies when they read.

I feel like if I get to choose what I want to read, it has an impact on my reading motivation. I want to read and translate and make an effort to translate, S-2 stated. (Interview-5)

I chose the text that interested me. It made me want to read it, S-5 reported. (Interview-11)

As evident from the journals, students found the freedom to choose reading material they were interested in for their lessons to be both motivating and more comfortable. The free choice of personally relevant

material improved the students'eagerness to read (Gardner and Lambert, 1972) and allowed them to use their background knowledge to help them understand the texts better (Grabe, 2004; Koda, 2004).

So, the results found in this study are in line with Krashen's (1981) hypothesis that a classroom environment and a task that lower the students' negative attitudes and increases their motivation can encourage students to use reading strategies and enhance their reading skill development.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate that students used a variety of reading strategies taught in class in order to solve their reading problems. In addition, the results indicated some factors affecting students' English reading performance. These included the teacher's feedback, the reader's attitude, and freedom to choose texts in relation to motivation. However, there were three reading-related problems that students encountered while reading and remained unable to cope with: vocabulary deficiency, L1 interference in translation, and pronunciation.

Pedagogical Implications

This study explored students' use of reading strategies, reading difficulties and factors affecting their reading performance. The results suggest that in order to help Thai students improve their reading skills, they have to be taught reading strategies. At the same time, teachers have to provide them more chances to practice reading authentic English texts and allow them to choose their own texts. Reflective journals were considered by the students in this study as a

useful activity to encourage them to read English more and allow them to practice their use of reading strategies effectively.

The teacher's feedback on students' reading self-monitoring is another way that the teacher can model the use of reading strategies and assist students while they are trying out strategies. With feedback, students are encouraged to take risks, deal with problems more confidently, and try to use strategies more to enhance their reading skills.

Since it appears that pronunciation is a hindrance for students when they read, teachers may provide guidance on how to use a dictionary to help with pronunciation problems. They may, for instance, introduce an online dictionary which has a speaking feature so that students can listen and learn the pronunciation of words.

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Appendix

Data Analysis Credibility Calculation

The formula according to Miles and Huberman (1994: 64) is as follows.

$$\text{Credibility} = \frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{total number of agreements + disagreements}}$$

Inter coder 1

$$0.94 = \frac{81}{81+5} \quad \text{or 94\% (0.94 × 100)}$$

Inter coder 2

$$0.68 = \frac{59}{59+27} \quad \text{or 68\% (0.68 × 100)}$$

$$\text{Total reliability from the two inter coders} = \frac{94+68}{2} = 81$$