

1-1-2008

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Comchaiya, C. and Dunworth, K., Curtin University of Technology, Australia Identification of Learning Barriers Affecting English Reading Comprehension Instruction, as Perceived by ESL Undergraduates in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Facility in English language reading comprehension is essential for learners of English as a second language, since English is the international language of written (as well as spoken) communication for business, science and technology. In Thailand, as acknowledged in the literature, learners of English as a second language often experience considerable difficulties with reading. There are many reasons for this, but, given the importance of reading to the development of language proficiency, it is of great importance to identify ways in which student learning can be enhanced. This paper reports on a project that sought to obtain specific information from Thai undergraduate students about their experiences when undertaking formal reading classes in a higher education institution. The study was part of a larger project to identify ways in which student learning could be enhanced. It involved the application of focus group techniques to elicit information about students' experience of the reading classroom in Thailand. The findings indicated that while students appeared to be motivated to develop their English language reading comprehension, they experienced barriers to learning which included an educational approach which did not foster independence and autonomy; materials that were not always engaging; and a classroom environment which was not optimally conducive to learning.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, English language

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension can be described as the interpretation and evaluation of a written text in order to ascertain the message of the writer (Bond et al, 1989); and facility in it has long been recognised as an essential skill which second language learners need to acquire if they are to attain mastery of the language that they are learning. The construct of reading comprehension is, however, a complex phenomenon which involves psycholinguistic factors which relate to schemata and text processing (Grabe & Stoller, 2002); linguistic and sociolinguistic factors, which also include an understanding of pragmatics and discourse organisation; and a knowledge of a particular range of reading strategies (Koda, 2004) including the active utilisation of background knowledge (Westwood, 2003).

Comprehension is achieved by the bottom up approaches of decoding at word, phrase and sentence level as well as the top down approaches of predicting content and drawing on existing schemata to create meaning (Anderson, 2003). As issues connected with any one of these factors can impact on a student's facility in reading comprehension, it is important that they should all be addressed in the reading classroom. The study described below therefore sought to elicit data to discover the extent to which this appeared to be taking place.

Numerous studies, including those from Thailand (e.g. Intratat, 2004; Piromruen, 1993; Suknantapong, Karnchanathat & Kannaovakun, 2002), have indicated that attaining facility in second

language reading comprehension can be a problematic process and that many learners experience considerable difficulties in developing their expertise in reading. The reasons for this are numerous and include issues with first language reading ability, low level decoding skills, lack of cultural knowledge of the material, lack of motivation to learn, lack of diversity in teaching materials, over-dependence on the teacher and a concomitant lack of learner autonomy, lack of opportunities to read and inadequate exposure to reading materials. Classroom pedagogies can also impact on reading comprehension (Nuttall, 2005). Having identified the issues as presented in the literature, the study described in this paper sought to identify which, if any, of them might apply in the context of the Thai university being investigated.

It follows from the above that activities which will encourage students to develop their full reading potential will involve the facilitation of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the development of learner autonomy and engaging forms of instruction. Intrinsic motivation has been described as the sense of satisfaction which learners obtain from their performance and extrinsic motivation as factors which encourage participation in the classroom (Deci et al, 1991). Autonomous learning, also known as self-directed or independent learning (Ciekanski, 2007:112), can be described as the capacity of learners to manage and self-monitor their learning processes (Abdullah, 2001). Given the range of factors described above which can impact on the development of student reading proficiency, it is of great importance to identify specific ways in which student learning can be enhanced.

THE STUDY

The study was a preliminary investigation intended to inform the production of a subsequent survey instrument to be administered to a large cohort of participants to address this issue of how student learning in reading instruction classes in Thailand could be enhanced. The preliminary investigation described in this paper took the form of a group interview or focus group conducted with nine learners from four different English language classes at one Thai university. The participants were broadly similar in terms of their English language levels, educational experience and age since ‘groups that are relatively homogenous are more productive and “work better”’ (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007: 10). They were also drawn from the population to which the final survey instrument would be administered. The focus group interview was deliberately selected because of its particular properties of entailing communal discussion. It was believed that the interaction of the members of the group would generate a depth of data through the synergies of the group that would not necessarily be elicited in individual interviews; the data which emerged would then be used to assist in the development of the main survey instrument to follow. A discussion guide, comprising a total of thirteen open ended questions, had been prepared prior to the session, with the intention of eliciting information about students’ attitudes to reading as an activity in both Thai and English, their views of and frequency of reading outside the classroom environment, their experience of English reading textbooks used in their classes, and the issues they had personally experienced with regard to reading in English, their learning environments and their English instruction.

The process was facilitated by the researcher, whose goal was to ensure that the group encouraged participants ‘to share perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus’ (Krueger & Casey, 2000: 5). Participants were made to feel at ease through an icebreaking activity and the provision of refreshments, and assured that confidentiality would be maintained and their anonymity guaranteed in reports. The session was recorded in two ways, as recommended by Bertrand, Brown & Ward (1992), to ensure completeness of the data obtained: through a reporter, who took notes but did not participate in the study, and, after obtaining permission for its use from the participants, through a sound recording device. The presence of the note-taker permitted the recording of paralinguistic features such as body language and provided a source of triangulation for the researcher’s impressions of the direction of the discussion, thus ‘supplementing the oral text and enabling a fuller analysis of the data’ (Rabiee, 2004: 656). To achieve this, the researcher and note-taker engaged in a debriefing session immediately following the focus group session, as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000). The researcher transcribed the interviews, which were held in Thai and

subsequently translated into English. In order to minimise researcher bias and to ensure the greatest accuracy of the translation, a second translator with expertise in the teaching of English to Thai students was also subsequently used.

While precautions were taken to reduce the impact of the researcher on the data, it is nevertheless acknowledged that it is a characteristic of qualitative research of this type that it involves the co-construction of the data by both the researcher and the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), and that any kind of research that is based on spoken genres means that ‘utterances are always preceded by and followed by other utterances that help constitute the meaning of the utterance in focus’ (Melles, 2005: 24). There is, therefore, subjectivity involved in the development of the interaction and the linguistic output, as well as in the subsequent analysis. For this reason, ‘confirmability’, to use the term adopted by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in their seminal work on qualitative research, is an essential component of the qualitative approach. For this study steps were taken to establish confirmability within the focus group through the use of both oral and written recordings of proceedings, through the presence of both the researcher and note-taker in the actual session, both of whom contributed to the data to be analysed, through the use of two translators of the recorded data from Thai to English, through the contribution of a second researcher at the data analysis stage, and through the use of rigorous data analysis processes.

The questions presented to the participants moved through the following stages: (a) general questions about participants’ general reading habits, asked in order to elicit data on intrinsic motivation to read; (b) questions about the participants’ English language classes, including those related to pedagogy, tasks, materials and environment, asked to elicit data about participants’ classroom experience; (c) questions about any difficulties experienced by participants in their classes, asked to elicit data about possible barriers to learning; (d) a final question about how reading classes could be improved, asked to elicit data that would inform the next stage of the research.

The data analysis process followed the steps identified by de Wet & Erasmus (2005): a close reading of the data, a summarising coding process, the identification of ‘clusters and hierarchies of information’ (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005: 33), and the identification of relationships, patterns and explanations. The first stage involved an unusually intensive engagement with the data, because the main researcher not only transcribed the recording but acted as one of the translators of the material from Thai into English. This involved close examination of each word, phrase and sentence to best capture in translation language which it was believed represented the intended meaning of each speaker. From this detailed reading (involving the transcripts in both languages) the first preliminary ideas emerged.

The second stage involved separating out the data and reducing it into categories. For this step two different approaches were used: a colour-coding process conducted on an intact transcript, and an electronic version of the standard ‘cut and paste’ technique, in which phrases, sentences or paragraphs were organised into groups according to theme, a process which was continued until the entire text had been exhausted. Using this procedure, the data were organised primarily into a set of descriptive contrasting dyads which reflected the positive and negative comments participants had made about reading in general, reading in English and reading in the classroom. At the third stage, the data within each of the categories were summarised and grouped according to the overarching issues that had been identified, so that the process of explaining the data could begin.

FINDINGS

The initial questions had sought to establish whether these particular students were intrinsically motivated to read at all, and if so, what kinds of texts they found most appealing. In a world in which young people have instant access to multiple forms of information through a range of media, it was considered possible that reading per se might not be seen as an appealing exercise. However, there was a general consensus in the group that reading was an enjoyable activity, with only one participant

expressing any reservations. Group members were, it appeared, intrinsically motivated to read. Specifically, enjoyment was gained from the topic if it was related to the reader's own interests.

Travel, health, sport, beauty tips and general knowledge were identified as particular topics of interest; politics, on the contrary, was considered one to avoid. In addition, enjoyment came from the capacity of reading material to draw the reader into a new world or to induce the trance like state identified by Nell (1988) – as participant 4 commented: “เหมือนกับเราได้เปิดโลกเหมือนเขาแนะนำพาเราไปท่องเที่ยวด้วยนะครับ” [it seems like I travel with the author when I read it] - and from the capacity of reading texts to develop the reader's imagination. Novels such as the Harry Potter series and Lord of the Rings were described as examples of the kind of literature that was appealing.

When it came to reading in English, all those participants who commented indicated that they were also intrinsically highly motivated to read for enjoyment, the word ‘fun’ being used by many of the participants. Husman & Lens (1999) suggest that there are two dimensions for motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic goals, and immediate versus future goals. Among the group members involved in the focus group study, in addition to the immediate pleasure gained from reading, there seemed among some of the participants to be a sense of future oriented motivation. Most were aware of the value to their everyday lives of having strongly developed English skills, to which reading would contribute; one mentioning that English was the language of computers and another that English was the language of instructions in mobile phones. One participant made a direct connection between English and her future career goal, which was “to be an ambassador” (participant 3).

The ability to communicate in English was valued by participants particularly as they were able to experience it in their daily lives as an immediate need. For example, participant 2 was concerned that “we might be asked for directions by foreign visitors”, and participants 2 and 9 commented on the need to be able to understand song lyrics. The connection between reading and the development of English language proficiency more generally was one which was frequently observed, and appeared to be a factor that motivated their desire to read. In particular, four of the participants made reference to reading as a source of new vocabulary which could then be applied in daily life, and three to the availability of texts which were written dialogues that could authentically be used in actual situations, particularly in conversation with foreigners. One participant (participant 9) referred to his friends and family members as being “hua muang nok” – which can loosely be translated as fanatical about ‘Western’ culture. As the participant was an English major he was often approached to provide translations of cartoons and song lyrics.

In fact, encouragement of the participants by family and friends, whether implicit or overt, appeared to play a role in promoting learning. One participant's parents, for example, bought her English language newspapers; the same participant watched the television news on an English language channel in Thailand. Another participant watched films with English soundtracks with an aunt and uncle. When questioned about how they addressed the difficulties they experienced with reading in English, several participants responded that they asked their parents or friends. One participant had foreign friends who were consulted because they were also able to speak some Thai. Nevertheless, in spite of the availability of this support, on the whole the participants did not engage in much deliberate reading in English outside the classroom for its own sake; where they were exposed to English language texts it tended to be incidental or instrumental, for example through advertising billboards, cell phone instructions and computer software.

The classroom experience of the participants was another key area explored in the focus group, generating comments on both pedagogy and the experience of learning English through reading. A recurring comment was that participants felt discouraged when confronted by texts which contained too much vocabulary that was unfamiliar or had not been internalised, even if it had been previously presented to them in their classes. Additionally, as participant 7 pointed out: sometime words have

'one meaning in one context and have a different meaning in another context'. Idioms, too, caused difficulties, particularly when they could not be directly translated. Other comments seemed to indicate that some of the texts used in the classroom did not align with students' schemata: one participant complained about what appeared to be an inexplicable and incomprehensible use of abbreviations, and another about the use of italic script for emphasis rather than a bold typeface. The absence of a familiar schema can act as a barrier to comprehension (Carrell, 1987; Irwin 1991) and should therefore be an important consideration when classroom texts are selected.

The participants' comments may also have been an indirect comment on the pedagogical approaches used in the classroom. First, it might indicate that students were being presented with material that was set at a level too high for their capabilities. The concept of 'comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1981), which argues that optimal input for language learners should consist of content that is just beyond the learner's current level, has been broadly accepted by language teaching professionals as a valid approach for over twenty-five years. Second, it seemed from these and subsequent comments that students had not been made aware of any strategies they could use to address their difficulties with vocabulary, other than those which least promoted self sufficiency and autonomy: most who offered an opinion commented that they used their dictionaries or asked those around them in order to find out the meaning. Only one suggested that by continuing to read beyond an unknown word the meaning of that word might become clear.

Participants' attitudes towards particular texts were also influenced by the format and genre in which they were presented. Illustrated texts and cartoons were identified for particular comment, because they were, as participant 1 put it, "fun and relaxing". This was not an unexpected finding, given the importance of visual presentation in much of the media available today. Participants were not motivated to read materials that comprised dense text, were not illustrated, or were not in colour. As participant 5 commented: "it is boring to read the textbook that is black and white and has no illustrations. If the book had some illustrated pictures and was colourful, I would feel like I was reading a magazine. It would be more attractive to study". Such a viewpoint was reiterated by others at various stages of the focus group interview and appeared to be a key source of dissatisfaction, when it was expressed, with some of the instructional materials they were issued. This also extended to the types of font used, some of which appeared to be difficult to read. The use of italics came in for particular criticism, bold or highlighted text being a preferred way of indicating emphasis. At the same time, there was some diversity of opinion. Participant 1, for example, stated: "the book used in my class is quite good. There are some illustrated pictures which help me capture the main idea". This, along with other, similar, comments, indicated that the types of materials used varied between classes, even though there was a set textbook.

One aspect of the participants' commentary on the materials they used was their selection of expressions to describe what they did with the texts. The participants' choice of verbs of obligation reinforced the fact that the materials were imposed on them and implied a lack of engagement or ownership of the process. For example, comments included: "we read in groups... everyone **had to** read it" (participant 5); "the teacher usually **assigned** us to read the news, and then we **had to** present and summarise..." (participant 6); "you **had to** answer the questions about what was going on in the text" (participant 1).

As might be expected in any language teaching institution, the activities used in the reading classes varied and some teachers appeared to manage their classes and hold their students' interest more effectively than others. Tasks included reading in groups, reading to the class, summarising texts, conducting role plays (particularly where the texts were written transcripts of oral interaction), and playing games. Computer assisted language learning (CALL) did not play a part in the classes of any of the participants; something, according to their comments, which they would have found beneficial. This omission is surprising, given the Thai Government's promotion of technology in education (Office of the National Education Commission, 2003), the ubiquity of computers as an educational tool, and the growing body of literature that identifies CALL as a promoting positive attitudes to

language learning (e.g. Levy, 1997; Liu, Moore, Graham & Lee, 2002). With the exception of their identification of this particular educational aid, however, when they were asked to identify ways in which their classroom reading experience might be improved participants did not focus primarily on the kinds of activities they would like to undertake, but on the teachers and teaching approaches (e.g. the desire to have a single teacher over an extended period of time, the desirability of having only English spoken in the classrooms, the benefits of having ‘native speakers’ of English as teachers) and on the materials.

With regard to classroom management, one particular issue identified was the disruption caused by students who were inattentive and talked among themselves. In Thai classes there can be as many as 50 students, so for some of the participants disruption was a major source of disquiet simply because of the noise generated – one participant even stated: “my friends are very noisy in class. They psychologically harass me” (participant 9). The same participant went on to describe her experience of studying as “miserable” because of the clamour made by her classmates. The experience was not universally shared, however, as some participants observed. In general, the quality of the experience in this regard appeared to depend on the ability of the teacher to manage the learning environment, as most participants related the noise levels, either directly or indirectly, to the teacher’s level of control.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This focus group study was held in order to yield data that would inform the development of a subsequent survey instrument. It was hoped that the results would assist in the identification of particular areas of concern to the students themselves so that the subsequent instrument could investigate in more detail the reasons why Thai students do not in general attain high level reading skills even if they have a positive attitude and a high motivation to study (Suknantapong, Karnchanathat & Kannaovakun, 2002).

The results seem to support the findings in other studies in Thailand that students experience difficulties in reading because they have not developed reading skills such as using context clues or locating main ideas (Sroinam, 2005) and that they have problems decoding words. Of course, at the same time, readers who are able to recognise the meaning of words automatically are more able to develop their reading comprehension than those who spend longer seeking to define words from contextual or other clues in the text (Westwood, 2003). This is because, in relative terms, readers who spend time on defining words may lose concentration while reading, and therefore not retain the key points from the texts they read (Irwin, 1991).

The study also indicated that a factor which might relate to students’ difficulties in reading is the lack of encouragement of autonomous learning. The members of the focus group mainly depended on teachers, parents, friends and dictionaries to solve their reading issues; they did not seem to have been armed with strategies that would make them more self-reliant, or to have been presented with materials or choices in the classroom that might assist in developing an intrinsic desire to read. This is a pre-requisite to the successful development of high level skills. Studies conducted on Chinese students strongly link motivation and success in the classroom; with highly motivated students showing a greater level of confidence, interest in participating in reading activities and willingness to make a greater effort to comprehend texts (Gan, Humphreys & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Lau & Chan, 2003).

Central to developing that motivation appeared to be the educational environment in which students were expected to study and the materials with which they were presented. Visually unappealing materials, such as those with extended texts and an absence of illustrations and colour, did not sufficiently engage the participants and encourage them to study; this, compounded with distractions in the classroom such as excessive noise, was a source of some considerable dissatisfaction for the members of the focus group.

In conclusion, the research confirmed the findings of other studies conducted in Thailand: that for many students the classroom was not in general a place in which conditions for learning were optimised. The participants' intrinsic enjoyment of reading and their motivation to learn, which they seemed from their input to possess in abundance, were not being utilised as tools to promote their second language reading capabilities in the classroom. On the contrary, many of the participants had experienced formal reading instruction in a way which reinforced barriers to learning in the many ways which have been previously identified. It was clear that for this particular group of students, at least, in some cases new approaches to learning needed to be brought into their classrooms; it will be the next stage of this study to investigate which approaches are most likely to be successful in the context of undergraduate English language education in Thailand.

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