The Effects Student - Led Questioning on Student Confidence, Motivation, and Engagement Reading English - Language Short Fiction Texts in a Secondary School in the Lower North of Thailand

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to learn the effects that student-led questioning could have on the attitudes of a group of secondary school students towards reading English language texts. The participants in the study were 10 Mattayom 4 students in an English Program in Phitsanulok Pittayakom School, a large campus in the lower north of Thailand. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, class instruction and two stages of interviews were conducted online with the results showing that the students held favorable opinions towards asking and answering their own questions while reading. Afterwards, class discussion further revealed that they not only observed how this process could improve their comprehension of a story, but that they also appeared to enjoy the act of reading more. Additionally, they collectively agreed that the previous structure of reading tasks where the end result was to answer pre-determined questions had a negative impact on their interest towards reading. They felt that these tasks

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ignored their curiosities and instead turned reading into something they *had* to do rather than something they *wanted* to do.

Keywords : Learner Autonomy, Student Engagement, Questioning Strategy

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อการเรียนรู้ผลลัพธ์จากการตั้งคำถามของผู้เรียน ที่อาจส่งผลต่อทัศนคติของกลุ่มผู้เรียนระดับชั้นมัธยมศึกษาต่อการอ่านเนื้อเรื่องภาษาอังกฤษ โดยกลุ่มตัวอย่างของการศึกษาครั้งนี้คือ ผู้เรียนชั้นมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 4 จำนวน 10 คน จากกลุ่ม สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ โรงเรียนพิษณุโลกพิทยาคม ซึ่งเป็นโรงเรียนขนาดใหญ่ในภาคเหนือ ตอนล่างของประเทศไทย และเนื่องจากสถานการณ์โควิด 19 กระบวนการสัมภาษณ์ทั้ง 2 ขั้นตอนจึงดำเนินการทางออนไลน์ โดยผลการศึกษาครั้งนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่า ผู้เรียนมีทัศนคติที่ดีต่อ การถามตอบคำถามของตนเองขณะอ่าน หลักจากการอภิปรายร่วมกันในชั้นเรียนแสดงให้เห็นว่า ผู้เรียนไม่เพียงแต่เห็นว่ากระบวนการตั้งคำถามเหล่านี้จะช่วยพัฒนาในด้านความเข้าใจในการอ่าน เนื้อเรื่องภาษาอังกฤษ แต่ผู้เรียนยังรู้สึกสนุกสนานกับการอ่านมากขึ้นด้วย นอกจากนี้ ผู้เรียน ยังเห็นพ้องกันว่า รูปแบบการอ่านโดยผู้สอนเป็นผู้กำหนดคำถามไว้ล่วงหน้านั้นส่งผลกระทบใน ด้านลบต่อความสนใจ ความอยากรู้อยากเห็นของผู้เรียนขณะอ่าน และควรเปลี่ยนการอ่านจากสิ่ง ที่ผู้เรียนต้องทำ เป็นสิ่งที่ผู้เรียนต้องการทำ

คำสำคัญ : การพึ่งพาตนเองของผู้เรียน การมีส่วนร่วมของผู้เรียน กลยุทธ์การตั้งคำถาม

Introduction

Relying on the old model of classroom reading instruction is no longer an acceptable, default practice in these rapidly changing times. The idea that students need only to read a text, answer pre-written questions, and complete vocabulary exercises, belongs to the previous century. This passive approach to reading does not prepare students for engaging with modern discourse where critical thinking skills are necessary (Chu, Reynolds, Tavares, Notari, & Lee, 2017). Though L2 readers must overcome several challenges before they can comprehend a text (Grabe, 2009), their reading practice should not be limited to the situation described above, which has found to be demotivating and

counterintuitive to the goals of classroom reading instruction. Instead, students should be encouraged to pursue their own curiosities when reading a text, whether it be a work of fiction or non-fiction, or even a post on a social media platform. This is partly due to how modern communications technology (i.e., smartphones, tablets, and laptops) has made it so that we are never far from texts, meaning that students are free to pursue what interests them rather than be guided by instructors (Koechlin & Zwaan, 2014), and it is also due to idea that by pursuing their own curiosities, by asking and answering questions while they read, that students position themselves on the pathway towards understanding or comprehending what they are reading. As Koechlin and Zwaan (2014, p. 8) write: "Students cannot be expected to think critically and creatively about the ideas and knowledge of others unless they possess that magical chemical ingredient—the question—to kickstart the process".

The importance of questioning while reading cannot be understated. Questioning, itself, "is among the social competencies that students bring with them to their school" (Moreillon, 2007, p. 58). However, questioning in school typically takes a teacher-centered turn and many students begin to see questions as things to be answered rather than asked. This affects the reading process by limiting how students approach a reading text, placing them in a performance goal orientation mode in which the "valuing of ability and normatively high outcomes [is valued over] the process of learning" (Ames & Archer, 1988, p. 260). Instead of reading to understand, students read for the singular purpose of finding information that they can use to answer questions either created by their teacher or printed in the textbook. Additionally, students should be urged to ask questions that challenge their critical thinking skills. Although it is important that students be able to answer knowledge-based questions after reading a text (Koechlin & Zwaan, 2014), it is necessary to encourage students to use questioning strategies while reading, especially if the endgame is for students to understand what they have

read on a deeper, critical-level, not to mention motivate them to pursue reading outside of the classroom.

Furthermore, since understanding is an important component of learning, what does it mean to understand? According to Nickerson (1985, p. 217) "[It] is an active process. It requires the connecting of facts, the relating of newly acquired information to what is already known, the weaving of bits of knowledge into an integral and cohesive whole". Encouraging students to ask their own questions and search for the answers nurtures the development of active readers, encouraging engagement throughout the reading process (Chin, 2002). As Amalia and Devanti (2016, p. 82) explain: "Proficient readers question the content, the author, the events presented, the arguments, and the issues and ideas in the text". Therefore, if L2 students are to become fluent and critical readers of English or any language, they should be encouraged to use questioning strategies that promote the use of higher order thinking.

This brings us to the problem motivating this study. According to Kongkerd (2013), reading instruction in Thailand typically involves the teacher reading aloud to students who are then tasked with answering comprehension questions. Other variations of this would involve students taking turns reading sections or paragraphs of a text out loud to their classmates while the teacher corrects their pronunciation before students begin answering the questions that follow the text. Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021) describe this style of instruction in greater detail, arguing that intensive reading (IR) places limits on what learners can do with reading texts, reducing the act of reading to a series of classroom tasks guided by the instructor. Sawangsamutchai and Rattanavich (2016) argue that this form of reading instruction fails to foster motivated, critical readers, which is a serious problem moving forward in the current century where the definition of literacy is rapidly evolving, not to mention the ability of modern technology to connect to texts in an instant. And although extensive reading (ER) is often considered a way of counteracting the limitations of intensive reading practices, there are issues

concerning this practice as well such as teaching techniques and assessment (Yamashita, 2008; Watkins, 2018; Maipoka & Soontornwipast, 2021). This is not to say that there have not been any discussions on how to approach ER (Day & Bamford, 2010; Grabe & Stoller, 2013; Charumanee, 2014; Pongsatornpipat, 2021), but that implementing ER into a teacher's instructional practice requires both resources and commitment by teachers who often prefer a teacher-centered approach versus embracing learner autonomy. Therefore, the situation in Thailand is such that students are often not motivated to read English language texts because they fail to see how reading can benefit them (Hayikaleng, Nair, & Krishasamy, 2016; Pongsatornpipat, 2021).

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to investigate how empowering students to ask and answer their own questions affects their confidence, motivation, and engagement during the reading process.

Research Methodology

This research involved a group of 10 Upper Secondary English Program students. Each of the participants was a student in Mattayom 4 and a member of the EP's so-called "Language Group" meaning that their studies focused primarily on developing their language skills as opposed to the sciences. Language Group classes are typically small, which limited the sample size for this study.

Furthermore, this research was conducted online over a period of several weeks and was divided into two separate stages. The first stage began with a discussion on the elements of a story, such as plot, setting, and characters. This was done in order to prepare students for reading works of fiction. Next, students were tasked with reading "The Old Man at the Bridge" by Ernest Hemingway and answering questions that were pre-prepared by the teacher. The reason why this text was chosen concerns Hemingway's use of simple language, which should allow for students to engage with authentic materials while mostly avoiding the need to use translation tools to help them understand the story. After the instructional and activity periods of this stage, interviews were conducted. While these interviews were taking place, students were instructed on asking different types of questions before, during, and after reading. Afterwards, students were tasked with reading Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" as well as asking and answering their own questions. Throughout the reading of this story, the students were given the freedom to pursue their own understanding of the text, with instruction focusing on the use of symbols and irony in narrative fiction as well answering questions they had about the story. Then, students were interviewed individually before taking part in an online group discussion.

Due to the challenges presented by Covid-19, interviews were conducted using email or social media applications like Facebook or Line according to the preference of the participants. All students were asked the same questions, and all questions were created by the researchers for this study.

The students were asked the following questions during the first stage of interviews:

1. What are the elements of a story? Describe them.

2. Do you think knowing what these elements are helps you identify them in the story? Why or why not?

3. Does being able to identify the elements help you better understand what you are reading? Why or why not?

4. Describe your experience answering the questions provided by your teacher.

5. How did those questions affect your understanding of the story?

The students were asked the following questions during the second stage of interviews:

1. Describe your experiences asking and answering your own questions.

2. What is your opinion about asking and answering your own questions?

3. How would you compare asking and answering your own questions to answering questions given to you by your teacher?

4. How did asking and answering your own questions affect your understanding of the story?

Research Results

This section will include select responses from the ten participants in this study. The responses will be reported alongside the questions. The responses have not been corrected, therefore any grammatical or vocabulary errors are the output of the students themselves.

Stage 1

Question 1 : What are the elements of a story? Describe them.

Student 1 : Plot is a series of event and character action. Character is a person who take part in the action. setting is the time and place in which it happen.

Student 3 : The elements of a story are plot, setting, character. They to work together to make a story. Plot is about describe the story. Setting is the time & where   the story takes place. Characters are the main person in the story.

Question 2 : Do you think knowing what these elements are helps you identify them in the story? Why or why not?

Student 2 : Yes, because if I know what they are I can understand the story better

Student 4 : Yes, because if I know what these things are in the story I can understand the story better. I can determine the characters role in the story, if they are the main character or the protagonist, and follow them in the story. This help me understand the plot better than I don't know.

Question 3 : Does being able to identify the elements help you better understand what you are reading? Why or why not?

Student 5 : Of course! If I know the character and the setting it is much more easy   to follow the plot, I think.

Student 6 : Yes, because if I read and can find the character and setting I can know the plot and this will help me understand what the story is try to tell me.

Question 4 : Describe your experience answering the questions provided by your teacher.

Student 7 : It's normal I think. I read the question first and then try to answer them while I am reading. Searching for the answer helps me read and understand the story. But sometime the question is too hard for me to find the answer and I am confused by what its want to say.

Student 9 : I think this experience is okay but sometime the teacher question is too difficult for me. I can answer the easy question about the story element but sometime I don't understand the vocabulary in the story.

Question 5 : How did those questions affect your understanding of the story?

Student 8 : I really don't like answering these questions because sometimes I wanna be lazy! :) When I read I like to ask my questions. For example, when I meet a character for the first time I ask "who is this character?" I want to know the character's motivation and more about their life. But when I have to answer questions I read to answer the question instead.

Student 10 : My understanding of the story is affect well because sometime I can answer those question and sometime I can't. If I don't be able to answer the question, I don't know if I understand the story.

Stage 2

Question 1 : Describe your experiences asking and answering your own questions.

Student 2 : I was reading adult literature names "The Hunger games" I made a question why she have to do this" I obviously saw how character changes and I made a question If I am her How I will do I understood completely about her mind and her struggle to survive.

Student 5 : I usually made my own questions when I didn't get about something. I would find the answers of those questions by thinking about them hardly to discover. Even though, if I couldn't find them out, I would search on the Internet or a library.

Question 2 : What is your opinion about asking and answering your own questions?

Student 3 : I don't like to asking and answering my own because I always think about an easy question and easy answer so I don't have to read all the story to answer on   question.

Student 8 : I think asking and answering my own questions similar to playing chess or card with myself. It likes I have already known how to win this game because I play with myself. Same as asking and answering my own questions, I have already known how to answer questions that I asked because I asked myself.

Question 3 : How would you compare asking and answering your own questions to answering questions give to you by your teacher?

Student 4 : Asking my own question is easier because I create questions by the details that the story has given to me absolutely, I know the way to answer them because those are my questions but with the questions that are given by the teacher, I can't guess the answers because they come out from my teacher's

thought not me so then I have to look at the details of the story again for the answers.

Student 9 : Questions given by teacher   When teacher gives a questions to me. I'm not   reading all the story but I only find the answer of my teacher's question. My own Question I read all the story completely, to make my own question and when I think about an answer I think more quickly and can answer it well.

Question 4 :

Student 1 : It makes me understand more deeply and I think more about every detail that the author give me

Student 7 : When I didn't understand a part in a story, I would ask myself about it. I would find out on the Internet or the library until I could answer my own questions.

Conclusion and Discussion

The responses received from the students revealed that they found answering questions assigned to them to be an experience that challenged their motivation as learners, and that this had a negative effect upon their understanding of the story as they had not been reading for themselves (Guthrie, 2001). During a class discussion, a student commented: "I feel boring because I have to read the story and try to understand it to answer the teacher question. But I don't get the meaning from the story". Other students provided similar answers, and these responses revealed that answering questions that were given to them put them in the performance goal orientation mode (Ames & Archer, 1988). In other words, they were more focused on answering the questions provided than developing a sense of understanding that was beneficial to their ability to interpret the elements within a text (Guthrie, 2001). However, their ability to answer the questions correctly was contingent on their being able to accurately

identify the elements of literature within the text. That the students were mostly able to do this without assistance, as determined by both their answers to the questions given to them and their summaries of the story, indicated that they understood on a basic level how the elements fit within the structure of a story (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 37).

When the students were asked to produce their own questions, they were highly intrigued. In the second set of private interviews, they seemed to agree that asking their own questions would help them understand better. Their enthusiasm indicated that they viewed the task before them as a shift towards a classroom that valued their individual voices and that allowed them to engage with the text on their own accord as they were free to pursue their own interests (Guthrie, 2001). Furthermore, they saw it as an opportunity to lead their own learning, a sentiment mirroring the following statement: "Students with learning goals seek to understand content, master skills, and gain competence" (Guthrie, Wigfield & VonSecker, 2000, p. 332). This means that they viewed the act of asking and answering their own questions as liberating from the traditional, teacher-centered classroom that they were more commonly used to (Guthrie, Wigfield & VonSecker, 2000). During their assignments, the majority of the research group required prompts to help stimulate their questioning, and these prompts helped guide their questioning until they were no longer necessary (Von Glasersfeld, 1989, p. 2). In contrast, a few of the students insisted on completely developing questions without any assistance, and demonstrating that freedom of choice has the potential to increase student motivation during reading tasks (Guthrie, 2001). Furthermore, the act of asking their own questions had an empowering effect on the students, and a majority of them saw it as a useful tool to carry over to other subjects with one student commenting: "When I don't understand a subject, I'll ask myself questions to find the answers that will help me understand." Collectively, the students saw how questioning techniques could be a key factor in the development of their understanding outside of language-focused study.

Through the act of producing their own questions, they were able to separate the different literary elements and begin developing their own understanding of a text. In other words, they were able to begin conceptualizing their knowledge about story grammar without the teacher explicitly identifying each of the different elements in the text for them, demonstrating their "operational awareness" of story grammar (Von Glasersfeld, 2001, p. 8). This led to the students being able to correctly identify the themes of several texts. Furthermore, it allowed them to begin asking open questions that enabled them to explore identifying and explaining different symbols within the text, and it helped them understand how the symbols worked within the context of story by giving them a clearer path towards their understanding of what they were reading. During a class discussion, one student commented: "It's helpful because by asking question I can focus to the main answer in the text and can cut off the useless details in the text." This involved using prior knowledge to construct understanding, and allowed for this construction to occur within an independent framework controlled by each individual learner (Von Glasersfeld, 1998). Their work and responses during the interviews and group discussions demonstrated that their own questioning had provided them with a tool that had made navigating the abstract concepts taught in class on their own a simpler proposition, and a more motivating learning experience overall (von Glasersfeld, 2001; Guthrie, 2001). This presented understanding as something that did not require the presence of an overbearing teacher, but instead as something that could be achieved on their own, illustrating the notion that learning is a lifelong process that extends far beyond the classroom (Von Glasersfeld, 1998). Furthermore, it also allowed them to check their understanding on their own. As one student remarked during the class discussion: "If we understand, we can make a question and answer it."

However, not all students found asking their own questions to be a useful tactic. One student complained that they did not see the benefits in asking and answering their own questions. During the second stage of interviews, this student stated: "Asking & answering questions help me understand the story. but I understand only the elements of that story not all the details of the story." In other words, they often preferred asking easy questions that they felt did not help them understand the story. Although, this student later admitted that their lack of confidence in their own language ability impacted their efforts, this presents a challenge to any attempts to create an instructional focus on students asking their own questions while reading.

The majority of the findings of this research seems to point towards students asking and answering their own questions as an activity that can both motivate and benefit student understanding. Additionally, the research revealed that self-questioning had a motivating effect on students and it required the use of prior knowledge to construct an understanding of different literary texts, demonstrating the positive link between constructivist theories and students asking and answering their own questions (Das, 2014). Ultimately, this research also proved that "all understanding [involves] connecting, ordering and appraising of things encountered, believed or known" (Cooper, 2000, p. 384), something that is done instinctively during the questioning and answering process. Finally, research on the effects of students asking and answering their own questions is an area worth exploring in the future as the benefits of students-led questioning appears to hold clear benefits throughout the learning curriculum.

Suggestions

General Suggestions

The readings used for the purposes of this research were viewed as difficult by a small number of the students. They found the vocabulary in the story to be challenging and were often frustrated whenever they came across a word that they did not understand. Based on this information, one suggestion would be to include a vocabulary section with readings where students can track words they do not know and begin the process of developing their vocabulary knowledge according to their own needs and knowledge gaps. However, research in this area should be conducted before employing this strategy.

Further Suggestions

1. A suggestion for future research would involve studying the effects of student questioning on a larger group of students to see a wider range of opinions and to better decide future applications.

2. A final suggestion would entail exploring the types of questions students preferred to ask, such as "Wh-", open, and closed questions, and analyzing their ability to answer them.
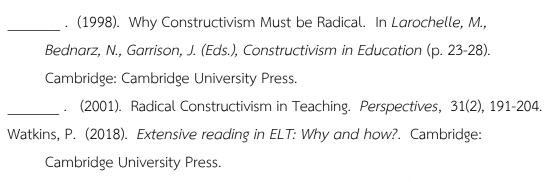
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