READING IN ENGLISH: WHAT PROBLEMS DO STUDENTS FACE IN THE SOUTH OF THAILAND?

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating current English reading problems of undergraduate students by using two government universities in the south of Thailand as case studies. The research was designed as a mixed-methods study which employs both quantitative and qualitative methods in data collection. The interview data was used as a supplement to the survey results. There were a total of 377 students who responded to the survey and afterwards the purposive sampling was used to identify twenty students to be interviewed. The findings indicated that the student participants' reading problem was clearly related to vocabulary. (M=2.63). The participants appeared not to have trouble with sentence structures and other problems: applying necessary skills in reading, connecting prior knowledge to a reading text, or being overwhelmed with negative feelings towards a difficult reading passage. Consequently, this research study suggests that although a current trend of reading strategies instruction has been introduced to the field of L2 reading, language knowledge, particularly vocabulary, should not be underestimated when finding solutions to English reading problems in this context.

Keywords: grammar; L2 reading; problems in reading; reading comprehension; vocabulary

Introduction

For a decade, many research studies in the field of reading have focused on strategies namely cognitive and metacognitive as the focal points to improve reading comprehension among students. Many of these studies affirmed that by integrating reading strategies, particularly metacognitive ones in reading lessons, students' reading comprehension would be improved and developed (Alsamadani, 2011; Al-Alwan, 2012; Khalaji & Vafaeeseresht, 2012; Talebi, 2012; Ahmadi, Ismail, & Abdullah, 2013; Akkakoson, 2013; Zhang & Seepho, 2013). Nonetheless, applying helpful tools like reading strategies into learning would be more effective if strategies are the only problem to tackle. Certainly, not just strategies, there is much more trouble out there for students to go through when reading in L2. The current study; therefore, aimed to investigate current English problems based on perspectives of undergraduate students. The findings were expected to present a current situation of English reading problems and be the guide for teachers and researchers to a straightforward solution to the students' obstacles found from the south of Thailand.

English reading problems

Considering Thai students, the participants in this study, National Reading Statistics says Thai students read only eight lines per year (Chonmaitree, 2011). This is a shocking fact and a critical situation if young people do not read as much as they should even it is in their own language. Needless to say when reading is in another language; it becomes even more complex. Therefore, problems in reading could be expected to emerge more from this complexity.

Language competence

It was proposed by Alderson (1984) that foreign language reading ability is closely related to foreign language competence; this supported the idea that says reading problems can occur because of language problems. It was asserted in his study that problems in reading as a foreign language are those concerning word meaning and suggested that readers have to achieve some language competence to make it possible for reading abilities in L1 to

transfer. His study affirmed at that time that problems occurring in reading as a foreign language could be both language problems and reading problems. However, it is language problems when the focus is on readers with lower language competence. This is true according to Auerbach and Paxton (1997) who presented that the student participants regarded lack of L2 proficiency was the biggest problem and felt insecure in L2 reading. This makes it difficult for them to comprehend the reading text and leads to boredom and finally staying away from reading.

Lack of phonic skills could be another source of problems in reading for students who learn to read in another language. Students who read English as a second or foreign language could begin their study in reading at any age or any grade but processes that they need to go through will be similar to those of native speakers (Lems et al., 2010). It was explained that the process of learning to read is a long one before students could change from learning to read to be reading to learn and phonic skills are important in reading English. Thus, students need enough time to attain phonic skills before they could master their reading in another language.

Language knowledge

Other possible problems related to language were also proposed in Nation's work: word recognition, vocabulary, and grammatical knowledge (language-focused) while it could also be problems from other causes, such as background knowledge and motivation. It was emphasized, in his book, that students could have a difficult time in their reading because they do not have enough vocabulary (2009). This point was also in line with Grabe and Stoller (2002 as cited in Walter, 2003) who stated that skilled readers need to know 95% or more of the words in a reading text to be able to read it without difficulty. The significance of vocabulary was affirmed by Jung (2009) who summarized that researchers agreed that vocabulary was viewed as a prerequisite for and a predictor of L2 reading comprehension.

Not only could vocabulary hinder reading comprehension, grammar is also discussed to be one among those possible problems in reading. It was proposed that readers with better grammatical knowledge would have better reading comprehension (Akbari, 2014). Admittedly, it was recently revealed

that reading problems of undergraduates at a university were mainly related to three groups of difficulties: word recognition, failure to build words to higher-level meaning and complex grammatical structures in the passage (Endley, 2016). It was concluded at the end of the paper that reading strategies using training alone may not be able to solve reading problems particularly for those who were less proficient readers.

Considering reading problems in more detail, Nezami (2012) presented four reading comprehension problems observed by language teachers at different colleges in Najran University, Saudi Arabia. The first problem was found to be *vocabulary*. Students who lack this knowledge often struggle to achieve comprehension and this makes them feel frustrated and ultimately leads them to avoid reading. To have sufficient words before reading is important to achieve reading comprehension. The other three problems could be grouped into another different aspect of problems which is reading skills.

Skills in reading

Presented in the study of Nezami (2012), there were other three reading comprehension problems which are related to reading skills: skimming and scanning, prediction of text with prior knowledge and text summarization. Skimming is reading for a gist of the reading material, for example people skim the reading text to see if it is of interest to them. It is done at a faster speed than normal reading. Scanning, at the same time, is reading fast to look for key words, ideas, or a particular answer in a particular text. Learners who are incompetent in skimming and scanning also are found to have trouble achieving reading comprehension. The next point is prediction of text with prior knowledge. It is usual to connect one's prior knowledge (what we already know) with new knowledge to construct meaning. Readers also apply their prior knowledge to the reading process by predicting the passage they are reading. EFL learners are likely to have problems in connecting their previous knowledge with the reading text so this makes them unable to predict the possible meaning of the text and unable to enhance their comprehension. The last one is text summarization which is critical for students as it could help them with the overall comprehension of the reading text. Although it seems to be a difficult skill, it is worth teaching and

improving the students' ability to summarize and synthesize the passage: what is important and what is not. Without this skill, reading comprehension problems could be predicted.

Emotions

Emotions are also considered to affect students' reading comprehension and also cause problems in understanding the reading text. Three major emotions that affect reading comprehension are boredom, frustration, and confusion which are proposed by Graesser and D'Mello (2012). Boredom may arise when the reading text does not meet the reader's needs. It is also possible that the text level is much beyond the reader's ability or it appears to be too easy so that the reader does not concentrate much on it. Meanwhile, the reader might feel frustrated when they find the reading text appears incoherent or does not match with his or her goals. This occurs especially in academic contexts where the reader has no alternative but to be forced to engage with the text. The other emotion presented in the same work is confusion which is a predictor of learning and comprehension as it affects thinking and reasoning. This emotional state happens when the reader encounters unfamiliar information or when there are knowledge gaps between the reader and the reading text.

As reading is considered a complex skill, so problems could arise from various sources (Nation, 2009). Problems found when reading in another language possibly arise from many aspects due to the complexity of reading itself. Issues in reading are extremely complex because reading encompasses different factors of learners: their first language background knowledge, similarities between L1 and L2, the learning context, different ages, and prior literacy: this is why there is only a small body of research to supply this area (Koda & Zehler, 2008). Due to the above overview of various possible reading problems, this paper will discuss and explain the findings based on two main aspects of problems: language and non-language based problems.

Methodology

This research was designed as a mixed-methods study. Data was collected through the survey, while the interview was used as a supplementary tool to

enhance rich and dense in-depth descriptions. The survey was implemented in two big provinces in the south of Thailand: Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani, at two medium-sized government universities where English reading has been taught as a foreign language. These two universities were chosen due to their similar settings and contexts. Many students at these universities are from the south and here they have a similar learning environment where learning English opportunities are mostly limited in classrooms.

The student participants were those who had experienced English reading at the tertiary level to some extent. The first year-students were excluded from this study because they had not been involved in any English reading courses yet. The sample population, second to fourth year, was randomly selected. The respondents' English reading grades ranging from A to E or F: 157 students obtained A, B+ and B and 214 students got lower than B. There were six students who did not provide their grade information in this part.

The questionnaire was expected to reveal reading comprehension problems faced by the participants based on their experiences. Based on the literature review, there were two studies that demonstrated good knowledge of this area so the questionnaire items were developed and adapted based on the studies of Nezami (2012) and Graesser and D'Mello (2012). The questionnaire was written in Thai and was translated back into English by the researcher. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean, and standard deviation (SD) were summarized and presented. First, the questionnaire was piloted with 50 students who had similar characteristics with the prospective participants at another university in December 2014. The questionnaire's reliability was .95 based on Cronbach's Alpha score. Later, the actual questionnaire (400 questionnaires: 200 at each university) was distributed in March 2015 and 377 of them were returned (94.25%).

The other research instrument in this study was a semi-structured interview which was a supplement to the quantitative data. This type of interview allows an interviewer to prepare some key questions beforehand; simultaneously the interviewer would be able to ask further questions if any interesting and relating points came up during the interview. The interview was conducted after the survey was performed. The purposive sampling was

used to identify twenty informants based on their English reading grades: 10 students had obtained A, B+ and B while the other 10 students got lower than B.

The interview data which were drawn from twenty students were transcribed and coded by the researcher. This research conformed to the sequential explanatory strategy in which the quantitative and qualitative data are sequentially collected and integrated later during the interpretative phase of the study (Creswell, 2003, p. 215). With this procedure, the qualitative data was used to explain the quantitative results especially when there are any unexpected themes emerging from the quantitative data.

Results and Discussion

Based on the survey, there were four sub categories of problems: English competence, reading skills, prior knowledge, and emotion. Table 1 presented some possible problems that students could encounter when they were required to read a passage in English with the statistical information. Each category was presented based on their statistical results and accompanied by the interview data.

Table 1: Problems in English Reading

Statements	Frequency and Percent				Mean	Std. Deviation
	Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**		
English competence						
I know a few words so it is difficult to understand a reading passage.	40 (10.6%)	173 (45.9%)	150 (39.8%)	14 (3.7%)	2.63	.721
I avoid reading because the sentence structure is too complex for me to understand.	27 (7.2%)	145 (38.5%)	182 (48.3%)	23 (6.1%)	2.47	.718
Reading skills						
I don't know how to skim the text.	20 (5.3%)	146 (38.7%)	190 (50.4%)	21 (5.6%)	2.44	.682
I don't know how to scan the text.	17 (4.5%)	146 (38.7%)	191 (50.7%)	23 (6.1%)	2.42	.676
I can't summarize the reading text into my own words.	18 (4.8%)	109 (28.9%)	221 (58.6%)	29 (7.7%)	2.31	.681
Prior knowledge						
I can't connect the previous knowledge with the text.	12 (3.2%)	114 (30.2%)	228 (60.5%)	23 (6.1%)	2.31	.631
I can't predict what the passage will be about.	14 (3.7%)	128 (34.0%)	197 (52.3%)	38 (10.1%)	2.31	.702
Emotion						
I feel confused because I'm not familiar with the information in the reading passage.	14 (3.7%)	143 (37.9%)	196 (52.0%)	24 (6.4%)	2.39	.664
I feel bored when the reading text does not match my ability.	30 (8.0%)	157 (41.6%)	160 (42.4%)	30 (8.0%)	2.5	.755
I feel frustrated when the reading passage doesn't match my goal.	32 (8.5%)	145 (38.5%)	166 (44.0%)	34 (9.0%)	2.46	.775

1. Language-focused problems

1.1 English competence

The first group of reading problems was English competence. The result from the survey presented that 45.9% of the participants (M= 2.63) agreed that they had problems in reading because of unknown words in English. They confessed that they knew just a few words so this condition made it difficult to understand a reading passage. Meanwhile, 48.3% of the participants (M= 2.47) stated that they would not give up reading despite the reading passage being difficult due to language use in the passage-such as the sentence structure was too complex.

This result was clearly supported by every student (20/20, 100%) in the interview sessions who expressed agreement that vocabulary made them struggle in reading. Twelve of them stated that their reading problem was mainly related to unknown and unfamiliar words, technical terms and difficult words. Based on their experience, they solved these problems by consulting dictionaries, asking their friends, and guessing the meaning from context. Pete, a second year student from the Economics Program, stated that a dictionary is what he always needs to have with him when he reads in English.

Even though the participants denied they would not avoid reading due to the complexity of sentence structures, some of them mentioned grammatical problems in their interview. Kat, a second-year student from the ASEAN Studies program, said that knowledge of grammatical rules could also cause a reading problem. She said that if there were some grammatical rules she did not recognize in the reading text, it would be a problem because sometimes different grammatical rules convey different messages. Thus, lack of grammatical knowledge could also hinder reading comprehension as readers could not properly comprehend what the text says.

1.2 Skills in reading

The second sub category of reading problems in this group was reading skills. Unexpectedly, the results demonstrated that more than half of the participants did not have problems regarding reading skills; they knew how to skim, scan, and summarize the reading text, as shown by their disagreement to all these problems (M=2.44, 2.42, and 2.31 respectively). 50.4% of the

students said that they knew how to skim, 50.7% of them knew how to scan and 58.6% of them could summarize the reading text into their words. All these three skills were basic but important for readers to read effectively. These results indicated that they were able to read and skim for the main idea, they were able to read and search for needed information, and lastly, they could read and make a summary at the end of their reading. In other words, the mean values proved that, based on the result of the survey, reading skills are not one of the participants' reading problems. Meanwhile, from the interview, Green, a third-year student from Medical School, was the only one whose information was related to this aspect of problems. She stated that when she could not translate the reading properly from English to Thai; it became quite difficult for her to comprehend the text and to summarize it into her own words.

2. Non-language focused problems
2.1 Prior knowledge

This sub-category means the connection between background knowledge of readers and the reading text. In other words, readers could comprehend the reading better if their experience is linked to the passage. The survey result (M=2.31 for both statements in this group) presented a disagreement among the participants regarding problems with background knowledge. It was interpreted that 60.5% of the students could make use of their experience by connecting it to the reading passage while 52.3% of the participants could predict what the reading passage would be about. It was proved from these results that more than half of the participants did not have problems of connecting their prior knowledge to their reading. Supportively, the interview data reflected that no one included this topic in their expressions. Thus, many student participants in this study did not regard prior knowledge as one source of reading problems.

2.2 Emotions

The last sub-category manifested problems regarding the emotion of readers. The results of the three statements all presented disagreement with emotional problems (M= 2.39, 2.5, and 2.46 respectively). 52% of the students stated that they would not feel confused even if they were about to

read an unfamiliar passage. 42.4% of the participants did not feel bored although the reading did not match their ability and 44% of the participants would not be frustrated even though the reading passage did not match their goal. These results could imply that a number of students, though they have to read a passage that is difficult and does not match their interest or goals, as readers they are able to go though it without being overwhelmed with negative feelings. Simultaneously, the interview data revealed that there was just one informant who talked about this issue. Pattie, a second-year student from the Economics Program, reflected her feeling that when she could not understand what the reading passage tried to communicate, together with vocabulary problems, this situation completely demotivated her to continue reading and this ultimately put her under pressure.

The results of this study provided a picture of a current situation of students as readers, regardless of their reading proficiency with a wide range of reading grades. It was clearly demonstrated from the survey that one main problem is related to vocabulary, which is regarded as a prerequisite for L2 successful reading comprehension and one predictor of L2 reading ability (Jung, 2009). Possessing limited vocabulary could block readers from effectively initiating their reading and makes it more difficult to achieve reading comprehension. This is true as Yang (2006) proposed that students in EFL reading should be equipped with enough basic language knowledge first before instructing them on reading strategies. Simultaneously, the interview data clearly supported the survey results in the same direction as vocabulary was proved to be the biggest problem among the interviewees. Additionally, grammatical knowledge was also added into reading problems based on the interview data. Thus, within this context, these problems should be taken into consideration when teachers design or plan their reading courses.

Vocabulary was mentioned as an obstacle in reading by everyone who participated in the interviews. The students agreed that mainly vocabulary was trouble for them. University students who do not have large vocabularies usually struggle to achieve comprehension (Nezami, 2012). The other problem reflected from the interview is related to grammar. This point was discussed by three student participants who agreed that grammar was important and sometimes became one of the problems because different rules of grammar

communicate different ideas. Additionally, arrangement of words in a sentence which was different from their mother tongue made it even more difficult to understand the idea. If readers lack this knowledge, it could be a hindrance to comprehend the message from the reading. This is true as Alderson (2002, cited in Zhang, 2012, p.37) stated that knowledge of syntactic structures or the competence to work on them is important for comprehending the text in L2 reading. In the same vein, Jung (2009) asserted that the construction of meaning from the reading text is based on abilities to identify syntactic roles of words, divide sentences into meaningful chunks, and know the syntactic structure of a sentence.

From the overall information above, the data undoubtedly presented that most of the participants from the two universities were trapped in language-based problems. This may signify that they could not move further to reach a higher reading goal: reading comprehension, if they still could not overcome these problems, especially vocabulary. It is theoretically true that students may understand a reading text without knowing every word and without consulting a dictionary by applying reading strategies. Namely guessing unknown words from the context. Nevertheless, it is also true that they need to possess sufficient vocabulary (particularly key words in that text) to be able to guess unknown vocabulary effectively. The findings in this study supported Endley (2016) who proposed that the training of reading strategies may not be enough to assist students going through their reading problems.

Conclusion

In the light of these problems, it is clear that the biggest problem for the students is related to vocabulary, which is part of language problems. This problem should be reduced when learners are at an advanced level or have better language proficiency as students with higher language proficiency have fewer chances to face language problems in reading (Alderson, 1984). In addition, as Rumelhart and McClelland (1981) proposed, reading is an interactive process which is the integration both between linguistic and nonlinguistic aspect. The students, here in this context, need assistance to overcome their problems regarding the linguistics aspect (limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge). Though they possess enough background

information (nonlinguistic aspect) to work on the reading text, insufficient vocabulary (linguistic aspect) or some other problems concerning with grammatical knowledge could be troublesome for their reading comprehension. It could be implied that the students, in this context, do not possess enough vocabulary, so they could not go through reading effectively though they possess some fundamental reading skills and strategies such as skimming and scanning.

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, reading strategies are considered important as reading tools to help students achieving their reading goal. At the same time, to make the students in this context read English better, vocabulary, which appears to be the biggest obstacle in their reading, should be tackled first. This situation demonstrated that the students needs appropriate language knowledge particularly a proper number of vocabularies before they could go through reading on their own. Effective use of strategies is one thing to improve reading comprehension, but possessing a proper number of vocabularies is another thing that could not be overlooked for the students in this context. Consequently, this study suggests a harmonious blend of reading strategies and language knowledge in class to develop the students into both strategic and efficient readers. With this remedy, our learners will be much more prepared for reading in English**.**

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