

Chapter I

Introduction

Rationale and Significance of the Problem

Reading is vital and necessary at all levels of studying English as a foreign language, especially at the college level. Students use reading as a tool for learning and acquiring knowledge and information. Students have more opportunities to use reading in daily life in Thailand when compared with other skills such as listening, speaking, and writing skills. Finocchiaro and Bonomo (1973) state that for undergraduate students, fifty percent of teaching English in the classroom has been put on reading skills. Augsaranukrat (1989) clarifies that reading is the most widely used skills in many occupations in Thailand.

As students further their study at the university level, they need good reading skills. Apparently, there is a lot of research which shows that Thai students' reading abilities in English do not meet the required standards of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of University Affairs. For instance, Wongsotorn's research (1988) reports that students' reading abilities at the lower secondary, at the upper secondary, and at the undergraduate level, were rather low. Besides, Youngjermjantra (1994) studies students' reading abilities at the upper secondary level. The findings reveals that not only students' reading

abilities but also their reading comprehension skills such as identifying main ideas and supporting details, and predicting outcomes, were below the eighty percent criterion. Moreover, Jankrin's study (1992) states that most students still used memorizing and translating rather than comprehending texts. Although new teaching reading methods have been used in classrooms, students still have problems in reading comprehension. At the college level, Sutta (1994) also finds that even the reading abilities of first-year graduate students in the Master of Arts in teaching programs at Kasetsart University, Bangkok, did not reach the eighty percent criterion.

According to Aumpayap (1990), both elementary and secondary teachers do not teach reading strategies. Teachers assume that students know how to read English texts the same way as they do in Thai. Being able to choose appropriate reading strategies is very important for readers. However, it is not enough for readers simply to know what reading strategies are. Readers must also know how to use reading strategies successfully and be able to apply them interchangeably (Anderson, 1991, p. 19). Metacognitive strategies encourage readers to regulate their own reading process. When readers do not understand the text, they can use different reading strategies to help them to have better comprehension (Collins, 1994, on-line serial). Metacognitive strategies also help students to choose appropriate reading strategies while reading. Besides, schema or background knowledge involves the development of reading strategies. The schema theory emphasizes readers to connect what they are reading with what they already know. Readers use schema to help them to have better

understanding as well as to form new concept of ideas for further reference (Anderson & Pearson, 1993, p. 31-45).

At Payap University, undergraduate students in the five faculties: Humanities, Social Science, Science, Business, and Accountancy Finance and Banking, are required to take four Fundamental English courses. They are Fundamental English I (AE 101), Fundamental English II (AE 102), Fundamental English III (AE 201), and Fundamental English IV (AE 202) consecutively. In the first semester of the 1998 academic year, only Fundamental English I (AE 101) and Fundamental English III (AE 201) are available. The reason the researcher selects the students who are taking Fundamental English III (AE 201) to be the subjects of this study is because they have taken two Fundamental English courses (AE 101 and AE 102) already. They are assumed to have some knowledge of using reading strategies. If the results show that they cannot use reading strategies properly, the instructors of Fundamental English IV (AE 202) can emphasize how to use reading strategies more.

The course description of Fundamental English III (AE 201) states “A comprehensive course in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, stressing the development of reading comprehension and writing skill” (Payap University, 1998). One of the course objectives focused on reading skills includes: (1) using English-English dictionary efficiently, (2) reading and understanding lists, charts, and passages efficiently, (3) identifying meanings of words from contexts, sequence, and main ideas of articles, (4) indicating

references and giving specific information, and (5) drawing conclusions and making inferences. The students who are taking Fundamental English III (AE 201) are supposed to have more opportunity to practice using reading strategies to achieve the reading comprehension skills stated. Besides, the researcher has interviewed the two instructors (Sriwichai, 1998; Thepwong, 1998) about the second-year students' reading abilities. They state that in reading subject students have problems in some reading comprehension skills such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, making predictions, and drawing conclusions. Therefore, the researcher wants to know about: (1) students' reading abilities in the scope of the four reading comprehension skills, and (2) reading strategies the students used while doing the reading comprehension test.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this research was to investigate the English reading abilities and reading strategies of the second-year Payap University students.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study will help instructors to see the relationship between reading abilities and reading strategies. Providing instructions on using reading strategies should be emphasized in order to help students improve their reading abilities.

Limitation of the Study

Since the researcher, as a non-native speaker of English, constructed the test on her own, there may be some weaknesses in the language structures in the test.

Scope of the Study

1. Reading abilities is the language competence readers use to comprehend the text. The students' reading abilities is focused on the use of four reading comprehension skills: identifying main ideas, making inferences, making predictions, and drawing conclusions.

2. Reading strategies is the mental process which readers use intentionally in accomplishing their reading tasks. Reading strategies in this study is adapted from Cohen (1990).

3. The population was the second-year Payap University students who were studying the Fundamental English III (AE 201) in the first semester of the 1998 academic year. They were from five different faculties: Humanities, Social Science, Science, Business, and Accountancy Finance and Banking.

Definition of the Terms

1. Reading abilities refers to reading comprehension skill that students use to identify main ideas, make inferences, make predictions, and draw conclusions. Reading abilities is measured by a reading comprehension test.

2. Reading strategies is the mental process students use to enhance their reading comprehension skills measured by a questionnaire, and an interview. They are fifteen reading strategies which are adapted from Cohen (1990).

3. Reading comprehension test is a set of questions which is focused on the four reading comprehension skills: identifying main ideas, making inferences, making predictions, and drawing conclusions.

3.1 Identifying main ideas refers to the skill by which students use either key words which lead to topic sentences or the topic sentences of the paragraphs and/or texts to obtain the main idea.

3.2 Making inferences refers to the skill by which students use context clues and their background knowledge to gather information and draw the final or proper meaning.

3.3 Making predictions refers to the skill by which students use their background knowledge and given information to tell about events or ideas they will encounter in a particular text.

3.4 Drawing conclusions refers to the skill by which students logically use main ideas and/or supporting details in order to come up with potential possibilities.

4. AE 201 stands for the Fundamental English III which is a required course for Payap University students.