

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale and Significance of the Problem

For many decades, English has been an important foreign language in Thailand because it is a global language. English is taught as a foreign language. Reading is of particular importance, according to Thearntanachock (1999), who states that reading is vital and necessary at all levels of studying English as a foreign language, especially at college level. Students have been reading English as a critical tool for learning and acquiring knowledge and information. Furthermore, Finocchiaro and Bonomo (1973) state that for undergraduate students, fifty percent of the effort in teaching English in the classroom has been focussed on reading skills.

Reading skills are also essential to the academic achievement of middle and high-school students. After seven or eight years of elementary education, many students still lack sufficient proficiency as readers (Holloway, 1999). To address this problem, Collins (1996) searched for underlying causes. She found that poor motivation is the cause of inadequate reading comprehension, lack of experience and egocentricity. She also concluded that students who were successful in the classroom had no experience with languages in a meaningful way.

In Collin's report (1996), the main focus is on intrinsic motivation, which involves having an interest in content and wanting to learn for learning's own sake. It is a theme that runs through research on improving adolescents reading skills. Teachers can help students regain their motivation and improve their reading performance by connecting reading assignment to real-world learning experiences.

Further research on teaching practice was done by Barry (1997, cited in Holloway, 1999) conducted a national survey on the status of high school reading programs and she discovered that schools rely heavily on standardized tests for program placement and evaluation however, she found that many content teachers resist their roles as reading teachers, citing a lack of time, skills and support.

Studies in Thailand have uncovered numerous problems.

Wirotanun (2002) stated that:

In a Thai educational situation, although Thai students are required to study English as a foreign language from kindergarten or an elementary level to a university level, a majority of university students who do not study English as their major do not develop sufficient reading competence to be considered skilled EFL readers.

According to the National English Curriculum (Wirotanun, 2002) from elementary level to high school level, grammar instruction is the main focus of reading. In contrast, grammar instruction and reading comprehension are the main focuses at a university level. When EFL students enter university, they are required to use more reading skills. Students in some faculties, such as Faculty of Engineering or Faculty of Medicine, are required to read textbooks in English. These students have not received adequate instruction in reading and so the

majority of Thai University students have problems in reading comprehension. The problems are an inability to understand sentences, to capture the main ideas of a text and to provide supporting details.

× Sosothikul (1992, p.1) states that many university students are “poor readers”. They read slowly and without realizing their purpose. Moreover, their reading background is poor and thus they are not able to understand the meaning of words and phrases in more advanced reading materials. She also suggests the way to improve students’ reading ability. First, they should be able to distinguish between the characteristics of good and poor readers. Second, they should know what kind of readers they are, efficient or inefficient. Then they should learn about effective reading skills and techniques. Finally, they have to practice reading regularly and purposefully.

✓ AE 203, the course under study, is a fundamental reading course for English major students at Payap University. The course description of this course says it is “A study of reading techniques to train the students to read a variety of selections to enhance their knowledge in various areas, with an emphasis on comprehension of sentence structure, contextualization, reading for gist and reading for specific details” (Payap University, 2002). The course objectives focus on reading skills such as using a dictionary, identifying the main ideas and supporting details of a paragraph. Based on the records of the English department, a high percentage of the students have failed this course.

To investigate this failure problem in a preliminary way, the researcher interviewed one instructor (Kongwannit, personal communication) about

students' reading problems. She stated that students had problems in the area of reading comprehension skills such as identifying the main ideas, finding the supporting details, making inferences, using a dictionary and applying schema knowledge.

This range of problems clearly merits further and wider investigation. Therefore, the research proposed is focussed on finding out what the major problems of reading are in more detail and how teachers should select the instructional materials and revise course design and methodology to better meet students' needs. It is hoped that this research will help teachers and students in their efforts to overcome students' reading problems.

1.2 Objectives of this Study

The main objectives which guided the research, are the following:

1. To investigate the reading problems among English major students.
2. To survey the students' reading strategies.
3. To recommend changes in the course.

1.3 Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is as follows:

1. **Target group:** The subjects are the second year students and the students who are enrolled in AE 203 in the first semester academic year 2003.
2. **Reading Problems:** The reading problems will be investigated through reading comprehension test, questionnaire, and interview.

1.4 Definition of Terms

1. AE 203: the Fundamental English Reading I which is a required course for second year English major students at Payap University
2. Students: second year English major students and the students who are enrolled in the AE 203 course
3. EFL: English Foreign Language
4. Reading Comprehension Test: a set of question which are focused on reading comprehension skills
5. Problems: reading problems that the students face with in AE 203 course
6. Teachers: English native and non-native speaking reading teachers
7. PYU: Payap University

1.5 Significance of the Study

The researcher expects the following benefits:

1. The students who study AE 203 will be aware of their reading problems.
2. The result of the study will reveal what causes students failure in AE 203.
3. The result of the study will help teachers to select and prepare appropriate instructional materials for students.
4. The result of this study will help teachers to improve curriculum, and teaching methods.