Thai EFL University Students' Reading Strategy Use to Comprehend

Academic English Texts: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

This study was purposed to explore differences in reading strategy use of Thai EFL university students when they read academic versus non-academic texts in English. One hundred fourteen students in total participated in this study. The students consisted of freshmen (37), sophomores (20), juniors (9), and seniors (48). Fifty nine students were females and 55 students were males. The research instruments for data collection included: (1) Survey of Reading Strategy (SORS), and (2) modified SORS. The statistics for data analysis included, mean, standard deviation, and independent samples t-test. The significant difference was set at the level of .05. The findings revealed that indicated that the Thai EFL university students reported using reading strategies with high frequency when they read expository texts in English. They reported using problem solving strategies more frequently than global strategies which were used more frequently than support strategies. The overall use of the reading strategies by Thai EFL university students was not significantly related to their reading comprehension ability. The combined use of the three strategy categories by Thai EFL university students was significantly related to their reading comprehension ability. The use of the global strategies and the use of the support strategies were significant predictors of Thai EFL university students' reading comprehension ability. The levels of enjoyment of reading English materials were not related to Thai EFL university students' overall use of the reading strategies. However, Thai EFL university students who enjoy reading English materials reported using global strategies significantly more frequently than Thai EFL university students who do not enjoy it.

Keywords: Thai EFL University Students, Reading Strategy, Academic English Texts

Introduction

The Thai universities take a variety of different approaches to ensure college students obtain a strong level of English proficiency during their education. In an effort to achieve this goal, many classes at the universities choose an authentic imported textbook originally written for native English speakers as the textbook for their academic studies rather than textbooks written in Thailand. The number of the classes and universities that prefer to choose the authentic textbook is increasing. Accordingly, Thai university students' English reading comprehension ability is now a necessary component for their academic success in Thailand, especially in comprehending the academic language used in their new textbooks. However, the students are seldom exposed to authentic academic textbooks in English before college. To put it in another way, the students do

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not have a chance to develop their academic English reading skills and strategies before college, but they are forced to read authentic academic texts in English for their academic success as soon as they enter college. As a result, although they have a certain level of English reading ability in general, they may have difficulties in comprehending academic texts which require different reading skills and strategies from reading non-academic texts. Thus, it is critical for EFL educators in Thailand to improve students' academic English reading proficiency, specifically at the university level.

There have been useful studies on reading comprehension of language learners, such as 'how to develop or improve it', in the research fields of first language acquisition and second/foreign language acquisition. In particular, many scholars have been interested in understanding what skilled readers typically do while they read and identifying the types of strategies they use, how they use those strategy, and under what conditions they use them (Brantmeier, 2000, 2002; Wu, 2005; Lee, 2007). In L1 reading, researchers have emphasized two factors potentially influencing readers' processing strategies: the type of material to be read and the purpose or goal for which a text is to be read (Lorch, Lorch, & Klusewitz, 1993). A distinction between reading academic texts and non-academic texts can be directly related to reading purposes. The purpose of reading academic texts is more likely to be for studying while reading non-academic texts is more likely to be for entertainment. The distinction between reading academic texts and non-academic texts can be also related to the type of material to be read. Academic texts, such as textbooks and journal articles, are more likely expository/technical texts, whereas non-academic texts, such as stories, are likely narrative. Researchers have empirically shown that the text which students read influences their text processing strategies in L1 (Kucan & Beck, 1996). Several studies have been conducted to investigate how different reading purposes or text types influence reading strategies or comprehension in L2 reading (Chang, 1997; Abdulmajid, 2000).

Research Objective

This study was purposed to explore differences in reading strategy use of Thai EFL university students when they read academic versus non-academic texts in English.

Research Question

This study addressed a research question as follows: Are there any significant differences in reading strategy use of Thai EFL university students when they read academic texts versus when they read non-academic texts?

Research Methodology

One hundred fourteen students in total participated in this study. The students consisted of freshmen (37), sophomores (20), juniors (9), and seniors (48). Fifty nine students were females and 55 students were males.

The Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) was slightly modified in order to measure text-specific reading strategy use (i.e., academic text vs. non-academic text). The SORS consists of 30 items, each of which uses a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("I never or almost never do this") to 5 ("I always or almost always do this"). The SORS measures three broad categories of reading strategies: namely, global strategies (GLOB), problem solving strategies (PROB), and support strategies (SUP). GLOB is intentional, carefully planned techniques, PROB is localized, focused techniques for comprehension problems, and SUP is basic support mechanisms (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Unlike the original SORS with a 5-point Likert scale, the modified SORS had "Yes" or "No" response choices to measure text-specific reading strategy use. "Yes" or "No" responses reflected whether the participants did or did not use the strategies on the immediately preceding reading texts. The participants read two different passages in English. One was excerpted from an authentic academic text and the other one was excerpted from an authentic non-academic text. For the academic text, the passage was excerpted from a book titled "The Classical True Score Model". For the non-academic text, the passage was excerpted from "All You Have to Do Is Ask'". The passage for academic text reading was followed by three comprehension questions (True or False) based on contents of the. The passage for non-academic text reading was followed by questions asking participants' opinions about the text rather than comprehension. An informative expository text was selected for the academic text, and a narrative text was selected for the non-academic text.

Results

This part presents the findings of this study. The results of this research are described in the following order: (a) responses to modified SORS for reading academic and non-academic text; (b) paired samples t-test (N = 114); and (c) differences in reading strategy use between academic & non-academic text (N = 114).

Table 1 Responses to Modified SORS for Reading Academic and Non-academic Text

Text Type	GLOB		SUP		PROB		Overall		N
	$\overline{X}$	S.D	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	
Academic text	0.64	0.21	0.50	0.21	0.76	0.19	0.63	0.17	114
Non-academic text	0.59	0.22	0.44	0.24	0.75	0.22	0.59	0.19	114

As shown in Table 3.1 above, it contains means and standard deviations of responses to the modified SORSs of the participants following academic text reading and non-academic text reading. Overall the participants used reading strategies more frequently when they read the academic text than when they read the non-academic text. Regarding to the use of each strategy category, the participants used all three strategy

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categories more frequently when they read the academic text than when they read the non-academic text. To provide useful information as to the paired samples t-test of the strategy use of the academic and n0n-acadmeic texts, Table 3.2 below summarizes the information contained in the previous table according to the interpretation key explained.

Table 2 Paired samples t-test (N = 114)

Modified SORS	Strategy	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	t	df	Sig.
Academic Text	GLOB	0.05	0.18	2.458	113	.015*
	SUP	0.06	0.19	3.320	113	.001*
Non-academic Text	PROB	0.01	0.19	0.394	113	.695
	Overall	0.04	0.14	2.817	113	.006*

* significant difference at .05 level.

According to results of paired samples t-test shown in Table 3.2, statistically significant differences were found in the use of the Global strategies and the Support strategies between reading the academic text and reading the non-academic text, while no significant difference was found in the use of the problem solving strategies. In other words, the participants' use of the global strategies, use of the Support strategies, and overall use of reading strategies were significantly greater when they read the academic text than when they read the non-academic text. However, the participants' use of the problem solving strategies was not significantly greater when they read academic text than when they read the non-academic text.

The responses to each strategy item of the modified SORS for reading the academic text and the non-academic text is summarized in Table 3.3. In order to determine a difference of text types in the use of individual reading strategies, a paired samples t test for each reading strategy was performed.

Table 3 Differences in Reading Strategy Use between Academic & Non-academic Text   (N = 114)

Strategy	Academic Text (N =114)		Non-academic Text (N =114)		t (N=113)	p- value
	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	$\overline{X}$	S.D.		
1. I have a purpose in mind when I read.	0.80	0.40	0.76	0.43	0.82	0.42
2. I take notes while reading to help me understanding what I read.	0.33	0.47	0.26	0.44	0.72	0.09
3. I think about what I already know to help me understand what I read.	0.72	0.45	0.68	0.47	0.84	0.40
4. I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.	0.68	0.47	0.56	0.50	2.24	0.03*
5. When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to myself to understand what I read.	0.35	0.48	0.32	0.47	0.65	0.52
6. I analyze whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose.	0.47	0.50	0.46	0.50	0.38	0.71
7. I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading.	0.78	0.42	0.75	0.44	0.78	0.44
8. I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and rganization.	0.60	0.49	0.55	0.50	0.93	0.38
9. I try to get back on track what I lose concentration.	0.88	0.33	0.82	0.38	1.35	0.18
10. I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.	0.74	0.44	0.58	0.50	3.44	0.01*
11. I adjust my reading speed according to what I am reading.	0.72	0.45	0.68	0.47	1.00	0.32
12. When reading, I decide what to read closely and what to ignore.	0.68	0.47	0.63	0.48	1.14	0.26
13. I use reference materials (e.g. a dictionary) to help me remember it.	0.41	0.49	0.40	0.49	0.19	0.85
14. When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading.	0.89	0.31	0.90	0.30	-0.28	0.78*
15. I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding.	0.53	0.50	0.42	0.50	2.09	0.04*
16. I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading.	0.56	0.50	0.61	0.49	-1.00	0.32
17. I use context clues to help me better	0.82	0.39	0.72	0.45	2.15	0.03*

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understand what I am reading.

18. I paraphrase (restate ideas in my own words) to better understand what I read.	0.41	0.49	0.34	0.48	1.52	0.13
19. I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read.	0.43	0.50	0.54	0.50	-1.97	0.06
20. I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information.	0.50	0.50	0.51	0.50	-0.16	0.87
21. I critically analyze and evaluate the information presented in the text.	0.31	0.46	0.18	0.39	2.53	0.01*
22. I go back and forth in the text to find relationship among ideas in it.	0.84	0.37	0.72	0.45	2.72	0.01*
23. I check my understanding when I come across new information.	0.74	0.44	0.72	0.45	0.41	0.68
24. I try to guess what the context of the text is about when I read.	0.81	0.40	0.89	0.32	-1.82	0.07
25. When text becomes difficult, I reread it to increase my understanding.	0.91	0.28	0.82	0.39	2.59	0.01*
26. I ask myself questions I'd like to have answered in the text.	0.28	0.45	0.32	0.47	-0.68	0.50
27. I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong	0.61	0.49	0.61	0.49	-0.18	0.86
28. When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases.	0.85	0.36	0.86	0.35	-0.28	0.78
29. When reading, I translate from English into Thai.	0.54	0.50	0.54	0.50	0.26	0.80
30. When reading, I think about information in both English and Thai.	0.61	0.49	0.53	0.50	1.75	0.08

As shown in Table 3.3, it was revealed that seven strategies showed the significant difference, and the number of the participants who responded 'Yes' (i.e., used the reading strategy) was larger in reading the academic text than in reading the non-academic text. There were some strategies showing that 'Yes' responses were larger in reading the non-academic text than in reading academic text, but no significant difference was found in those strategies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The result of this study showed that Thai EFL university students used reading strategies more frequently when they read the academic text than when they read the non-academic text and a significant difference was found. One possible explanation for this result is that reading the academic text might have been more cognitively demanding than reading the non-academic text. Thus, reading the academic text might have required Thai EFL university students to use a larger variety of reading strategies for their comprehension.

In addition, Thai EFL university students used global and support strategies significantly more when they read the academic text than when they read non-academic text. However, they did not show a significant difference in the use of problem solving strategies when they read academic text versus when they read non-academic text. In terms of difference in using reading strategies according to the type of texts, the result of this study is partially similar to Abdulmajid's (2000) study, examining Malaysian ESL college students' strategy use in reading academic (a passage from textbook for class) and non-academic texts (a passage from a magazine). According to Abdulmajid, the Malaysian ESL college students activated a certain strategy, for example, using background knowledge, more often when reading the textbook than when reading the magazine, even though some strategies used by the students when reading the textbook and the magazine were similar.

Furthermore, in both reading academic and non-academic text in this study, Thai EFL university students used Problem Solving strategies most frequently, followed by global strategy category and support strategy category. Thai EFL university students seem to use direct and localized (i.e., problem solving strategies) reading strategies frequently when they read both the academic and non-academic text in English. Probably those strategies seem to be fundamental ones for ESL/EFL learners when they read L2 texts. In other words, as EFL learners, Thai EFL university students seem to employ those fundamental strategies frequently, regardless of the type of texts.

Looking at the difference of text type in the use of individual reading strategies (see Table 3.3), seven strategies showed significant difference, and the number of the subjects who responded 'Yes' (i.e., used the reading strategy) was larger in reading the academic text than in reading the non-academic text. There were some strategies showing that 'Yes' responses were larger in reading the non-academic text than in reading academic text, but no significant difference was found in those strategies. To put it in another way, Thai EFL university students seem to employ certain reading strategies—for example, 'previewing text before reading', 'underlining information in text', 'using context clues', 'analyzing and evaluating what is read', 'going back and forth in text', and 're-reading for better understanding'—more frequently when they read academic texts than when they read non-academic texts. Probably with their own experiences of reading academic texts and non-academic texts, Thai EFL university students might be aware of which strategies they need more and which strategies are more helpful for their comprehension according to text types. That is, based on the awareness, they might employ those strategies more frequently for comprehending the academic text or less frequently for comprehending the non-academic text.

Suggestions

        This study showed that Thai EFL university students use larger variety of reading strategies when reading academic texts than when reading non-academic texts, and they use certain reading strategies more frequently when reading academic texts than when reading non-academic texts. Therefore, it is suggested that Thai EFL teachers help their students who are not familiar with authentic academic English texts be aware that they need larger variety of reading strategies than they used to employ, and they need certain reading strategies that they have not often employed previously in order to comprehend the authentic academic texts. Especially college freshmen, who are forced to read authentic academic English texts as soon as they enter college, might have problems to comprehend the texts with their linguistic knowledge and reading strategies that used to be effective enough for non-authentic, non-academic texts. After all, Thai EFL teachers should help the students recognize that they have to be active strategic readers to comprehend their demanding academic texts and to achieve academic success in their college lives.

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