

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Teaching reading at the university has been unsuccessful because of the students' inadequate vocabulary knowledge, the lack of strategic reading skills, and the lack of exposure to extensive reading. Students at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University have low English language proficiency and negative attitudes toward English (Praphruitkit, 2001). According to an academic measurement of English reading for general purposes at a Rajabhat university in 1997, non-English major students gained average, low, and very low scores (Sangnatorn, 1999). Wongsathorn (1993) investigated the levels of English language skills of Thai university students and found that their reading and writing skills were fairly poor and needed improvement. Moreover, Prapphal and Ophanontamata (2002) studied the reading abilities of Thai graduates with bachelors' degrees from universities in Thailand and found from CU-TEP series in 2001 that the average English proficiency of graduates was lower than the international standard. It indicated an urgent development of their English knowledge and skills.

Statement of the Problems

In the traditional reading method, lessons are primarily based on textbooks of which the content begins with dictionary skills, morphological analysis, sentence structure analysis, and paragraph reading. It is a text-driven model of comprehension in which small chunks of text are absorbed, analyzed, and gradually added to the next chunks until they become meaningful (Barnett, 1989). Students learn to decode the text word by word. They spend a long time reading or translating the whole text and, finally, they lose the overall comprehension. As a result, they were unable to read the text and complete activities within the time allocation. To help students overcome the problem in reading comprehension, the teacher should include both extensive reading and writing in the instruction, in addition to the teaching of vocabulary and reading skills.

Cassidy, Garrett, Barrera IV (2006) surveyed the opinions of 25 literacy leaders on current trends in literacy in 2006. They reported that the balanced reading instruction, focusing on comprehension and vocabulary, and adolescent literacy, focusing on direct instruction, self-directed and collaborative learning have been in trend and should be explored further. Balanced reading instruction (Baumann & Ivey, 1997; Freppon & Dahl, 1998; Spiegel, 1999; Strickland, 1998; Weaver, 1998; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, Rankin, Mistretta, Yokoi & Ettenberger, 1997) refers to the combination of top-down and bottom-up reading models. It integrates the language into literature-rich activities as well as associates whole language experience with explicit teaching of word recognition.

The reading comprehension instruction developed in this study was based on Four-Blocks literacy framework (Cunningham, Hall & Defee, 1991). Four-Blocks literacy framework is a 'multi-level and multi-method' instruction. It provides beginning learners with a comprehensive reading instruction. The framework consists of the four blocks: (1) guided reading, (2) self-selected reading, (3) working with words, and (4) writing. In this framework, the 2½ hours of reading and writing time is divided among four different blocks of instruction with 30–40 minutes each. A thousand of Four-Blocks implementations were examined in elementary schools and kindergartens in the United States during the years 1995–2006. The results from reading and writing standardized tests revealed that students in Four-Blocks classrooms scored significantly above grade level and also moved above the national average in percentile ranks (Cunningham & Hall, 2002; Cunningham, Hall & Defee, 1998; Heckman, 2003; Poppelwell & Doty, 2000).

Besides the Four-Blocks literacy framework, 'repeated reading' is another evidence-based strategy designed to increase reading fluency and comprehension. Repeated reading is found to be correlated with the enhancing of word recognition, which, in turn, highly correlated with reading comprehension. LaBerge and Samuels (1985) theorized in their automaticity theory that the reader's poor decoding skill cause reading fluency problems. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Maxwell (1988) found that readers' fluency rates were highly correlated with their scores on a standardized reading comprehension test. Moreover, repeated reading yielded the positive effects and was suggested to be applied in a daily literacy instruction, as well as in independent reading time (Dowhower, 1987). Thus, the

Four-Blocks literacy

framework and the repeated reading together may improve students' reading comprehension.

The present study attempted to develop an instruction aiming to help university students learn to read with better comprehension. Most importantly, the instruction was structured as two modes: 1) teacher-directed, and 2) learner-directed. This study intended to investigate whether students improved their English reading comprehension proficiency after studying in each instructional mode. The study also investigated the relationships between English reading comprehension improvement in each instructional mode and levels of students' proficiency. Lastly, the study also investigated students' opinions on both instructional modes.

Research Questions

In order to examine the effect of FB-RR instruction on students' English reading comprehension proficiency, two sample groups were selected. One group received the teacher-directed FB-RR mode and the other group received the learner-directed FB-RR mode. Moreover, this study focused on specific subgroups of the samples. Students in each group were placed in high and low-proficiency subgroups on the basis of the pretest scores. The research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent does each FB-RR instructional mode (teacher-directed and learner-directed) improve students' English reading comprehension proficiency?
2. To what extent does the teacher-directed FB-RR group differ from the learner-directed FB-RR group in their English reading comprehension proficiency scores?
3. To what extent does each FB-RR instructional mode (teacher-directed and learner-directed) improve the English reading comprehension proficiency of the high- proficiency students?
4. To what extent does each FB-RR instructional mode (teacher-directed and learner-directed) improve the English reading comprehension proficiency of the low- proficiency students?
5. To what extent do the two instructional modes improve the English reading comprehension proficiency of students in both proficiency levels (high and low proficiencies)?

5.1 To what extent does the teacher-directed FB-RR improve the English reading comprehension proficiency of students in both proficiency levels?

5.2 To what extent does the learner-directed FB-RR improve the English reading comprehension proficiency of students in both proficiency levels?

6. What are the opinions of students in the teacher-directed FB-RR group and in the learner-directed FB-RR group on the instruction?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

1. To design two modes of Four-Blocks literacy framework with repeated reading, the teacher-directed FB-RR and the learner-directed FB-RR, for students at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University.

2. To investigate the effects of the two modes of Four-Blocks literacy framework with repeated reading on students' English reading comprehension proficiency scores.

3. To study students' opinions on the two modes of Four-Blocks literacy framework with repeated reading.

Statements of Hypotheses

To carry out the objectives of this study, the following hypotheses were tested.

1. Each FB-RR instructional mode (teacher-directed and learner-directed) significantly improves students' English reading comprehension proficiency at the .05 level.

2. The teacher-directed FB-RR group significantly differs from the learner-directed FB-RR group in their English reading comprehension proficiency scores at the .05 level.

3. Each FB-RR instructional mode (teacher-directed and learner-directed) significantly improves the English reading comprehension proficiency of the high-proficiency students at the .05 level.

4. Each FB-RR instructional mode (teacher-directed and learner-directed) significantly improves the English reading comprehension proficiency of the low- proficiency students at the .05 level.

5. The two instructional modes significantly improve the English reading comprehension proficiency of students in both proficiency levels (high and low proficiencies) at the .05 level.

5.1 The teacher-directed FB-RR significantly improves the English reading comprehension proficiency of students in both proficiency levels at the .05 level.

5.2 The learner-directed FB-RR significantly improves the English reading comprehension proficiency of students in both proficiency levels at the .05 level.

6. Students in the teacher-directed FB-RR group and students in the learner-directed FB-RR group have positive opinions on the instruction.

Scope of the Study

The study was confined in scope in the following areas.

1. The population of this study was limited to the second year students at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University.

2. The samples of the study included two classes of second-year computer sciences students taking English for Communication and Study Skills in semester two, academic year of 2005 at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University.

3. The variables in this study were as follows.

Independent variables were two instructional modes (teacher-directed FB-RR and learner-directed FB-RR) and students' proficiency levels (high and low proficiencies).

Dependent variables were the English reading comprehension proficiency scores and students' opinions on the two instructional modes.

4. The duration of the experiment was 12 weeks in the 2005 academic year. The instruction was implemented for 2½ hours each week.

Assumptions of the Study

This study was based upon the following assumptions.

1. The students in both groups, the teacher-directed FB-RR and learner-directed FB-RR, fully participated in the instruction.
2. Students in both groups reported their opinions honestly.

Limitations of the Study

This study had the following limitations.

1. The study was limited to the selected samples who were representative of the population of Phetchaburi Rajabhat University.
2. The study was subject to those limitations of reliability and validity inherent in the parallel form of SLEP® test developed by the researcher.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of the study, the following terms were defined.

Four-Blocks literacy framework

The original Four-Blocks literacy framework includes working with words, guided reading, self-selected reading, and writing. Within each block, there are following variations.

1. Working with words includes word walls, and phonic and spelling.
2. Guided reading includes any of shared reading, partner reading, coaching groups, Three-Ring Circus, book club groups, everyone read to (ERT), choral reading, echo reading, sticky note reading, picture walks, predictions, KWL, graphic organizers, doing the book, and writing connected to reading.
3. Self-selected reading includes any of teacher read-aloud, conferencing, and sharing.
4. Writing includes mini-lesson and teacher modeling, writing and conferencing, and sharing.

The daily instruction of all four blocks is a multilevel and multi-method framework which allows 30–40 minutes each day for each block. Each of these blocks contains various activities which the teacher integrates. The reading researchers concluded that there is no one best method of teaching reading and recommended the balanced reading instruction which is a combination of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to reading instruction. To meet these goals, Cunningham, Hall, and Defee (1991) developed Four Blocks for beginning reading instruction that combines both phonics or skill practice and extensive reading.

Repeated Reading (RR)

Repeated reading is a method of improving students’ reading fluency initially proposed by Samuels (1979). It is a procedure where a student rereads a short passage of 50-200 words while the teacher listens and charts progression towards the word per minute (WPM) criterion. After a passage is reread over and over until a specified level of fluency is reached, the student begins practice on a new passage. Documentation by Therrien (2004) suggests that the fluency effect size and comprehension gains will emerge significantly when the passage is repeated three to four times.

English Reading Comprehension Instruction

The English reading comprehension instruction refers to the two modes of the Four-Blocks literacy framework with repeated reading (FB-RR): the teacher-directed FB-RR and the learner-directed FB-RR. The teacher-directed FB-RR mode is the instruction where the lessons are presented by teachers. On the other hand, the learner-directed FB-RR mode is the instruction where students access the materials and study independently. The instructional process specifically focuses on Four-Blocks literacy framework by dividing a session into four blocks: guided reading, self-selected reading, working with words, and writing. In addition to the self-selected reading block, the repeated reading is incorporated. In both classes, 10 practical lesson plans are utilized in the English reading comprehension course.

University students

University students refer to the second year students studying at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University and enrolling in a foundation course 1500103 English for Communication and Study Skills in the second semester of the 2005 academic year.

English reading comprehension proficiency test

English reading comprehension proficiency test refers to two forms of a reading comprehension proficiency test. The Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP®) test was chosen instead of the TOEFL test because students at Rajabhat university have lower English reading proficiency. They are close to the community college students in proficiency.

The SLEP® test, form four, section two is a standardized test which was designed to assess the English proficiency of nonnative speakers at the secondary schools or community colleges around the world. Section two contained 71 items which measures reading comprehension. The KR-20 coefficient for the 71-item test was 0.5154. The test was administered prior to the treatment in order to evaluate students' reading comprehension proficiency, and to place students into the high and the low-proficiency subgroups. A parallel form of SLEP® test developed by the researcher was administered after the treatment to evaluate students' reading comprehension proficiency. The KR-20 coefficient for the 71-item test was 0.5711.

Significance of the Study

This study provides information about the modified implementation of the Four-Blocks literacy framework, which is a multilevel and multi-method framework of balanced reading instruction. In addition, the incorporation of the repeated reading as an important part of the Four Blocks supports the alternative method to reading instruction. With the teacher-directed and learner-directed modes, the study finds out the answer to which instructional mode works better for students both with high or low-proficiency. The findings can assist educators in evaluating the effectiveness of the instruction. It is useful to apply the instruction to Thai students who need to improve their English reading comprehension proficiency.