

บทความวิจัย

การศึกษาความสามารถและปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ ของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ ของมหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ

English Reading Abilities and Problems of English-major Students in Srinakharinwirot University

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Abstract

This research was conducted to study reading abilities and problems of English-major students in the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University, and to compare reading abilities of the English-major students in BA program and those in B. Ed program. The present study was also concerned with causes of reading problems of these English-major students. The participants consisted of 84 students in the BA program and 22 students in the B. Ed program, all being first-year English majors. The research instruments were an English reading test and a set of questionnaires.

The research findings showed that:

1. On average, reading abilities of all English-major students in the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University, were in the medium level. Their major problems in reading English were finding topics and main ideas.
2. On average, reading abilities of English-major students in the BA. Program were in the medium level. Their problems in reading English were finding topics and main ideas.
3. On average, reading abilities of English-major students in the B. Ed program were in the poor level. Their problems in reading English were finding topics, main ideas, details, references, vocabulary and purposes.
4. Reading abilities of English major students in the BA program were significantly different from English-major students in the B. Ed program. Students in the BA program had better reading abilities than students in the B. Ed program.
5. The results indicated that the major causes of their reading problems were their lack of reading. They spent little time reading English.

Keywords : reading, reading English, English reading abilities, English reading problems, English-major students, causes of reading problems

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาความสามารถและปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ ของภาควิชาภาษาตะวันตก คณานุยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทร์วิโรฒ และต้องการเปรียบเทียบความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษในหลักสูตรคิลปศาสตรบัณฑิตกับนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษในหลักสูตรการศึกษาบัณฑิต นอกจากนี้งานวิจัยนี้ยังศึกษาสาเหตุของปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษอีกด้วย ประชากรที่ใช้ในการศึกษาในงานวิจัยนี้เป็นนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษชั้นปีที่ 1 ทั้งหมดของภาควิชาภาษาตะวันตก ซึ่งเป็นนิสิตในหลักสูตรคิลปศาสตรบัณฑิต จำนวน 84 คน และเป็นนิสิตในหลักสูตรการศึกษาบัณฑิต จำนวน 22 คน

เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยคือแบบทดสอบการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ และแบบสอบถาม ผลการศึกษาปรากฏ ดังนี้

1. นิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษทั้งหมด ของภาควิชาภาษาตะวันตก คณะ
มนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ มีความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษโดย
เฉลี่ยอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง ปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ คือการหาหัวข้อเรื่อง และการ
จับใจความสำคัญ

2. นิสิตหลักสูตรคิลปศาสตรบัณฑิต มีความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษโดย
เฉลี่ยอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง ปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ คือการหาหัวเรื่อง และการ
จับใจความสำคัญ

3. นิสิตหลักสูตรการศึกษาบัณฑิต มีความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษโดย
เฉลี่ยอยู่ในระดับอ่อน ปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ คือการหาหัวเรื่อง และการจับใจความ
สำคัญ การหารายละเอียด การหาคำอ้างอิง และการหาจุดประสงค์ของผู้เขียน

4. นิสิตทั้งสองกลุ่มมีความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษแตกต่างกันอย่างมี
นัยสำคัญ โดยที่นิสิตหลักสูตรคิลปศาสตรบัณฑิตมีความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษดีกว่า
กว่านิสิตหลักสูตรการศึกษาบัณฑิต

5. การศึกษาครั้งนี้ใช้ให้เห็นว่าสาเหตุสำคัญของปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษของ
นิสิตคือ นิสิตไม่อ่านหนังสือ และใช้เวลาเพียงเล็กน้อยในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ

คำสำคัญ : การอ่าน การอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ ความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ
ปัญหาในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ นิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ สาเหตุของปัญหาการอ่าน

Background and Rationale

Reading is a necessary skill to be successful in life. People with high reading abilities seem to have principles that lead them to succeed. On the other hand, according to Richek, et al. (1996), a child who is poor in reading often suffers from low self-esteem, and as this child matures, he/she finds that the doors to personal enrichment and career opportunities are closed.

Similarly, reading skills are important for students to complete their study; however, not every student succeeds. The reason for students'

failure is not that they want to fail. In fact, all students want to finish their studies because they have invested their money and time. Like all students, the ones with the lowest ability want to complete their education as soon as possible. However, they need to read well to complete their studies successfully. As Johnson (1994: 2) points out, high reading ability is the advantage that helps students to succeed in their college education.

To succeed in their studies, students majoring in English require higher reading abilities than other students because they have to read in English. Moreover, their departments assume that the students admitted possess adequate reading abilities in English because they passed the school and university entrance examinations. However, as Alderson (2000: 1) states, despite this specific need for reading in English, it is common that most students fail to learn to read adequately in English. Very frequently, students reading in English seem to read with less understanding than one might expect them to have, and to read considerably slower than they reportedly read in their first languages.

Some students majoring in English can learn to read in English when they pass on into colleges or universities, where they are plunged into new reading situations. However, many of them cannot; they fail in their attempt to cope with their reading problems. As Alderson (2000: 1) says, they naturally cannot adjust to the increased and varying demands of reading on the higher levels. Some are even without adequate facilities in the mechanics of reading (word recognitions); others possess this but have not acquired such skills as finding the topic of the reading passage. Others may have acquired the fundamental reading skills but have never had training or practice in the efficient use of them. Because of these deficiencies, remedial or corrective instruction is necessary in order to help students succeed in their studies. However, before finding a method to help them, their abilities and their problems need to be known.

Unfortunately, in Thailand reading abilities and problems of

English-major students are rarely studied. Most researchers focus on teaching reading. For example, Tangmeteekul (2004) compared students' English reading comprehension, interpersonal relations and inquiry behavior before and after being taught through KWLH Instruction via E-learning. Recently, Koohawan (2005) studied English reading ability of the first year undergraduate students by using authentic texts with a communicative approach.

As a reading instructor, the researcher would like to study reading abilities and problems of English-major students in the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University. The result of this study can help reading instructors improve their teaching methods.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

1. To study reading abilities and problems of all English-major students in the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University.
2. To study reading abilities and problems of English-major students in the BA program, the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University.
3. To study reading abilities and problems of English-major students in the B. Ed program, the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University.
4. To compare BA students' English reading abilities with B.Ed students'.
5. To study causes of reading problems of English-major students in the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University.

Definition of Term

English reading abilities refer to the ability to understand what one reads. They include seven skills: topics, main ideas, details, references, vocabulary (guessing meaning from context), purposes and meaning of the sentence (understanding relations within the sentence).

Review of Literature

The review of literature was divided into 3 categories: the nature of reading, reading problems and reasons for failure in reading

1. The Nature of Reading

There are many theorists interested in reading process and there are many different definitions of reading. For example, Hood, Solomon, and Burns (1995: 3) states that reading is the way we use language in daily life in order to communicate with each other. Reading always occurs in a context. Heilman, Blair and Ruply (1990: 3) say that reading is a basic communication skill and primary means of learning in our society and reading is a complex process. It depends on a variety of factors, such as experimental and conceptual backgrounds, word recognition strategies, reasoning abilities, purposes for reading, environment, motivation and text complexity. Rosenblatt (1983) interpreted reading in a different and interesting way. She said when people read, they actually construct their own meaning of a text. In other words, people create their own mental version of what they read. The readers, the material, and the reading situation all contribute to the meaning that is constructed.

In conclusion, reading is a complex process of thinking. It is the way the readers use language in daily life in order to communicate with each other. It is a process of understanding a message through a written text. It is not a passive activity, but it is a thinking process where readers employ their background knowledge or past experience and the

information sources in the reading materials to comprehend the text.

From the above discussion, comprehension is the essence of the reading act. Many reading theorists agree that there are many levels of comprehension or understanding. Alderson (2000) suggests there are three levels of understanding: a literal understanding of text, an understanding of meanings that are not directly stated in text, and an understanding of the main implications of text. Similarly, according to Gray (1960), there are three levels of understanding: 'reading the lines,' reading 'between the lines,' and reading 'beyond the lines.' The first refers to the literal meaning of text, the second to inferred meanings, and the third to readers' critical evaluations of text.

The discussion of levels of understanding leads to the idea that it is more difficult to reach a critical understanding of text than it is to infer meanings, and that both of these are more difficult than understanding the literal meaning. Also, these levels of understanding are ordered. Readers first learn how to understand text literally, then to infer meaning from text, and only later do they learn how to approach text critically, to evaluate text, and so on.

2. Reading Problems

According to Richek, et al. (1996: 43), to determine whether students have reading problems, instructors need to determine at what level a student is reading and to compare this to the level at which that student should be reading. That is, instructors compare the student's current reading level to the student's appropriate reading level. The appropriate level refers to the books and stories that are used in the students' classroom, both for reading and for content area instruction. Usually, appropriate materials mean those at students' grade level. Students who can read at appropriate level, with acceptable word recognition and comprehension do not have reading problems. However, if students cannot read appropriate materials, there are reading problems.

3. Reasons for Failure in Reading

Reasons for students' failure in reading are classified under these six major categories: individual factors, physical factors, psychological factors, socioeconomic factors, language factors and educational factors.

3.1 Individual Factors. Many reading problems stem from individual factors. For example, Searls, Mead and Ward (1985) examined the relationship of students' reading skills to television watching, leisure-time reading and homework. They reported on data including those gathered by NAEP during its 1979-80 evaluation assessment of reading skills of nine-, thirteen-, and seventeen-year-olds across the United States. In this survey, more than 75,000 students answered questions about their backgrounds. The findings showed that students did not appear to benefit much from television watching. Spare-time was associated with higher reading-achievement scores. Interestingly, the highest achievement levels occurred among students who combined one to two hours per day of spare-time reading with what appeared to be the optimal amount of television viewing for their age group.

3.2 Physical Factors. Many studies indicated that students having reading problems had some sort of visual difficulty. For example, Robinson (1946) indicated that 63.6 percent of the students she studied had some sort of visual difficulties. Moreover, she found that some of her cases had auditory difficulties. Studies such as those of Shearer (1968) and Capobianco (1967) are in general agreement with the findings of Cohen and Glass (1968), who studied 120 subjects in the first and fourth grades. Half of their samples were defined as "good" readers and half were defined as "poor" readers. The study showed that good readers were more likely to be "normal," and poor readers were more likely to be confused in their knowledge of left and right.

3.3 Psychological Factors. A number of studies have been conducted to determine the relationship of various psychological factors to

reading disability. Robinson (1946) reported that 40.9 percent of her disabled readers had a significant degree of emotional maladjustment, but she believed that it was an anomaly that caused reading failure in only 31.8 percent of her class. Harris (1972: 42) pointed out that the relation between intelligence and reading is low to moderate at the beginning level, but increases as children get older. As the nature of the reading task becomes more one of comprehension and interpretation, intelligence becomes a stronger determining factor. The self-concept and its close relationship with teacher expectation is a psychological factor that should not be overlooked in the diagnosis of a disabled reader. Pryor (1975: 359) states “Changing a poor reader’s self-concept by bolstering his feeling about himself is perhaps the first step toward improving the academic problem.”

3.4 Socioeconomic Factors. The home, social, and cultural environments in which children grow can also influence their ability to read. Robinson (1946: 104) reported that maladjusted homes or poor intrafamily relationships were found to be contributing causes. Robinson believed that we often underestimate the importance of this factor. Factors often studied, however, are presence of the father in the home (or broken homes), ethnic background and its social relationships, economic level, dialect, presence of books or stimulating reading materials in the home, sibling relationships, and parent-sibling relationships. “Apparently, who lives in the home is more important than how many.” Ethnic background and its social ramifications are also important influences on reading achievement.

3.5 Language Factors. Knowledge of language is also related to reading problems. Inadequate language development is undoubtedly a factor in reading failure. According to Richek et al. (1996: 200-1), language abilities are critical to success in reading. When students first learn to read, their greatest challenge is to recognize, in print, words that they use

in everyday speech; then high-level words and concepts start to be introduced when they study at higher level. Students who have a rich language background cope well with this new challenge, but those who lack higher-level language do not. Many have developed problems as the material they have to read becomes more complex. Many low-achieving students lack a solid language base for building reading achievement. There are three major causes of problems with language: language disability and delay, lack of reading and lack of rich language environment.

2.6 Educational Factors. A number of school factors or conditions often influenced or were conducive to reading failure. Among these factors were teachers' personalities, methods of teaching reading, school policy on promotions, materials available, and class size. Ekwall and Shanker (1988), who expressed the viewpoint that more than 90 percent of our reading failures could or should be blamed on poor teaching. In the absence of a complete analysis of skills necessary for reading, there is a danger that the teacher may omit teaching important skills because he/she does not realize they are essential; or falsely assuming that certain skills have already been mastered, he/she may not teach them; or he/she may teach non essential skills believing they are important.

The review of literature discussed above was applied to design instruments in this study.

Research Methodology

1. The Participants

Because the main purpose of this research was to study English reading abilities and Problems of English-major students from the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University. Therefore, the participants in this study were all first-year students majoring in English in the 2006 academic year. There were two

undergraduate programs offered by the Department of Western Languages: the BA program and the B. Ed program, and the number of all students in each program are not the same. In 2006, the number of students in the BA program was 84 and in the B. Ed program was 22. All of the BA and B.Ed students participated in this study.

2. Instruments

The instruments used in this study are described as follows:

2.1 The English Reading Test. This test was designed by the researcher to study the reading abilities and problems of the students. It consisted of 4 passages with 30 questions. In each question, there were 4 multiple-choice answers. The objectives were to read for topics, main ideas, details, references, vocabulary, purposes, and meaning of the sentence. These four passages were selected from magazines, books, and authentic materials. The researcher asked three specialists in English to review the suitability of the test. When the test was returned, the researcher improved the test as advised by the specialists. Also, the test was tried out with students in English for Career program.

2.2 A Questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed by the researcher to study the causes of reading problems of the participants. The questionnaire was written in Thai to ensure that all respondents could understand all of the questions. Three specialists were asked to examine the questions included in the questionnaire and determine if the questions were appropriate and valid. Once the specialists had commented on the questionnaires, it was revised

3. Data Collection Procedures

3.1 In the second week of the first semester, the researcher asked three English instructors in the Department of Western Languages to give the English reading test to the participants and to collect the

English reading test when it was completed. Then the English Reading Test was returned to the researcher.

3.2 In the fourth week of the first semester, the questionnaires were given to the participants by four instructors in the Department of Western Languages and were returned to the researcher when completed.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 The data obtained from the English reading test was analyzed by percentages (%), mean scores (\bar{x}), standard deviations (S.D.), and the t-test.

Percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations were used to study the abilities and reading problems of the participants. Scores of students in each skill were calculated to find a mean score and a standard deviation. Then the mean scores of each skill were changed to percentages. The level of English reading abilities were determined from percentages by using the following criteria:

1%-20%	=	very poor level
21%-40%	=	poor level,
41%-60%	=	medium level
61%-80%	=	good level
81%-100%	=	very good level

The t-test was used to determine if there is any difference between the BA students' reading abilities and the B. Ed students'.

4.2 The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed by percentages to study causes of the participants' reading problems.

Findings

1. On average, the reading abilities of English-major students of the Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University were in the medium level. The result showed that their skills in finding topics and main ideas were in the poor level, their skills in finding details and references, vocabulary and purposes were in the medium level, and their skill in finding meaning of the sentence was in the good level. Therefore, their problems in reading English were finding topics and main ideas.

Table 1: The reading abilities of English-major students

Skill	\bar{X}	S.D.	Full Marks	Percentage	Level
Topics	.74	.81	3	24.67	poor
Main ideas	.80	.73	3	26.67	poor
Details	2.97	1.22	7	42.43	medium
References	2.22	1.07	5	44.40	medium
Vocabulary	2.24	1.12	4	56.00	medium
Purposes	1.32	.99	3	44.00	medium
Meaning of the sentence	3.12	1.20	5	62.40	good
Total	13.41	7.14	30	44.70	medium

2. On average, the reading abilities of English-major students in the BA. program were in the medium level. The results revealed that their skills in finding topics and main ideas were in the poor level. Their skills in finding details, references and purposes were in the medium level. Their skills in vocabulary and finding meaning of the sentence were in the good level. Therefore, their problems in reading English were finding topics and main ideas.

Table 2: The reading abilities of English-major students in the BA. Program.

Skill	\bar{X}	S.D.	Full Marks	Percentage	Level
Topics	.76	.81	3	25.33	poor
Main ideas	.86	.73	3	28.67	poor
Details	3.19	1.21	7	45.57	medium
References	2.31	1.05	5	46.20	medium
Vocabulary	2.47	1.07	4	61.75	good
Purposes	1.44	.99	3	48.00	medium
Meaning of the sentence	3.30	1.20	5	66.00	good
Total	14.33	7.06	30	47.76	medium

3. The reading abilities of English-major students in the B.Ed program, at the average level, were in the poor level. The results indicate that their skills in finding main ideas were in the very poor level. Their skills in finding topics, details, references, vocabulary and purposes were in the poor level. Their skill in finding meaning of the sentence was in the medium level. Therefore, their problems in reading English were finding topics, main ideas, details, references, vocabulary, and purposes.

Table 3: The reading abilities of English-major students in the B. Ed program

Skills	\bar{X}	S.D.	Full Marks	Percentage	Level
Topics	.68	.83	3	22.67	poor
Main Ideas	.59	.73	3	19.67	very poor
Details	2.27	.98	7	32.43	poor
References	1.95	1.13	5	39.00	poor
Vocabulary	1.54	1.01	4	38.50	poor
Purposes	.95	.90	3	31.67	poor
Meaning of the sentence	2.57	1.14	5	51.40	medium
Total	10.55	6.72	30	35.17	poor

4. The reading abilities of English major students in the BA program were significantly different from English-major students in the B. Ed program. Students in the BA program had higher reading abilities than students in the B. Ed program.

5. When looking at the causes of their reading problems, the results showed that individual factors were the main cause: the English-major students did not read a lot. The majority of English-major students in the BA program spent their free time on reading only 1-2 hours per day, and more importantly, most texts they read were in Thai. Students in both programs spent little time on English reading, and they mostly enjoyed reading short stories and novels. On the other hand, the majority of students in both programs spent a lot of time watching television, and the programs they watched were in Thai. Also, they spent a lot of time on computers. The majority of students did not use computers to read news or articles but to chat with their friends. Furthermore, most of students believed that their knowledge of English was good enough.

The findings revealed that the cause of their reading problems did not stem from their environment. The results showed that their family encouraged and supported them to read. In addition, the findings also showed that students in both programs had positive attitudes toward English and thought that English reading was important. In addition, they thought that reading instructors helped and encouraged them to read and activities in class and texts assigned to read were interesting.

Discussions

Many people assume that the abilities of reading in English of English-major students are good or very good. The results of this study was opposite to the assumption. At the average level, the English reading abilities of all students majoring in English from Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University were not in

the good level but in the medium level. The BA students were in the medium level while the B. Ed students' English reading abilities were in the poor level. In addition, their problems with reading English were finding topics and main ideas. However, these two skills are important because they are basic skills in reading comprehension. This means that English-major students' basic reading skills were not good enough. Therefore, educators and reading instructors need to look at the curriculum again. Instead of forcing English-major students to face reading critically, reading instructors need to help them have enough basic reading skills, reading literally, before assigning them to read "between the lines" and to read "beyond the lines."

The findings about the causes of reading problems were similar to the findings of many reading theorists. English-major students' reading problems stemmed from individual factors. They did not read English extensively and the majority of students spent time watching television and using computers. However, reading instructors can help students (especially students with reading problems) improve their reading abilities. According to Richek, et al. (1996: 88), essential components of an effective reading include reading experiences and strategy instruction. Students should be encouraged to read more. Therefore, the most important principle of teaching low-achieving students is to provide extensive opportunities to read. Like Grabe's idea (1991), students need to read extensively and that students need to learn by reading. What is extensive reading? Extensive reading is an approach to the teaching and learning of language that involves students reading large quantities of material in the new language. The goal is to improve students' overall language proficiency and their attitudes toward reading and motivation for learning. Reading instructors might make a new course, add extensive reading to an existing course or establish an extensive reading club that meets after school.

Although the findings showed that the home environment was not the main cause of English-major students' reading problems, it cannot be overlooked. The findings indicated that their family did not encourage and support them in the high level but in the medium level. For example, most students (41.38%) answered that their family and they talked about books in the medium level. Many also said that members in their family read books for them when they were young in the medium level. This means that their home environment was not really rich in literacy activities. As Richek, et al. (1996: 5) suggest, a home environment that is rich in books and literacy activities fosters success in reading. Therefore, when parents are unable to provide reading experience at home, instructors must nurture a love of reading during instruction. Classrooms filled with different types of books and magazines show students that reading is important. Also, instructors should give students time to browse through and share these materials. Moreover, instructors can read to students on a regular basis, asking them to share their own thoughts and feelings about the selections.

Although the result showed that reading instruction was not the cause of the problems, it was not in the satisfactory. Most students (58.82%) answered that they liked English reading class in the medium level while most students (44.83%) like English in the high level. Also, most students answered that their teachers cheered them up when they could not understand texts in the medium level. Similarly, the majority of students (50.57%) thought that their instructors taught them with interesting activities in the medium level. This means that reading instruction need to be improved too. As Grabe (1991) suggests, the relationship between students and teachers is crucial. Building rapport includes accepting students, providing a secure environment and helping students to feel successful. The findings also showed that students liked to use their free time on computers. Therefore, computers could be good

tools that help students to gain the reading skills they need, through independent, motivational practice. Reading instructors might assign students activities that require students need to use computers to find out information from the Internet, such as film reviews and biographies of their favorite stars and singers.

In addition, the materials assigned to students to read are significant. As the findings showed, students loved to read short stories and novels. Therefore, reading instructors might choose short stories and novels suitable for students to read.

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