English reading strategies and proficiency:
A case study of Thai EFL teachers
กลยุทธ์และความสามารถในการอ่าน:
กรณีศึกษาครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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บทคัดย่อ

      การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษากลยุทธ์ที่ใช้ในการอ่านของครูผู้สอน
ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่มีความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษเชิง
วิชาการที่แตกต่างกัน โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์ดังนี้ 1) ศึกษาความแตกต่างในการใช้กลยุทธ์
ในการอ่านของครูผู้สอนที่มีระดับความสามารถในการอ่านสูงและต่ำ 2) ศึกษา
ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการใช้กลยุทธ์ในการอ่านโดยรวมและระดับความสามารถในการ
อ่านภาษาอังกฤษเชิงวิชาการ ผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยเป็นครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะ

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ภาษาต่างประเทศจำนวน 50 คน เครื่องมือในการวิจัยได้แก่ 1) แบบสอบถามเกี่ยวกับ
ข้อมูลพื้นฐานส่วนตัว พฤติกรรมการใช้กลยุทธ์ในการอ่าน 2) แบบทดสอบวัด
ความสามารถในการอ่านเชิงวิชาการสองประเภท และ 3) การสัมภาษณ์ผ่านเทคนิค
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ใช้กลยุทธ์ในการอ่านของครูผู้สอนทั้งสองกลุ่มซึ่งอิงจากผลคะแนนการอ่านเชิงวิชาการ
2) ครูผู้สอนที่มีความสามารถในการอ่านสูงใช้กลยุทธ์ในการอ่านโดยรวมบ่อยว่า
ครูผู้สอนที่มีความสามารถในการอ่านต่ำ และ 3) การใช้กลยุทธ์ในการอ่านโดยรวมของ
ครูผู้สอนมีความสัมพันธ์กับระดับความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษเชิงวิชาการใน
เชิงบวกอยู่ที่ระดับปานกลางอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ระดับ .01

คำสำคัญ: กลยุทธ์ในการอ่าน ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ   ครูผู้สอนที่มี
ความสามารถในการอ่านสูง ครูผู้สอนที่มีความสามารถในการอ่านต่ำ

Abstract

The present study explored the reading strategies used by Thai
EFL teachers with different English academic reading proficiency levels.
Its objectives were 1) to investigate the differences in the use of reading
strategies by teachers with high and low reading proficiency and 2) to
study the relationship between the teachers' overall use of reading
strategies and their English academic reading proficiency. The subjects
were fifty Thai EFL teachers. The instruments used in the present study
were 1) a questionnaire consisting of two parts—*demographic data* and
English reading strategy use, 2) a set of two comprehension test types,
and 3) the follow-up think-aloud sessions. The results showed that 1) the
subjects with high and low English academic reading proficiency

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employed readings strategies differently as statistically significant differences existed, 2) those with high English academic reading proficiency outperformed those with low English academic reading proficiency in their overall use of reading strategies, and 3) the subjects' overall use of reading strategies and their English academic reading proficiency were moderately and positively correlated ($p < .01$).

Keywords: Reading Strategies, EFL, high-proficient teachers, low-proficient teachers

Introduction

It has long been evidenced that without effective mechanics—reading strategies—second and foreign language learners found it problematic to overcome reading difficulties and achieve comprehension (Alderson, 1984; Bernhardt, 2005; Hammadou, 1991; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2001; Oxford, 1990). In order to strategically and responsively read printed materials, learners, especially those with less proficiency in English reading, should be encouraged and fostered to implicitly and explicitly engage in meaningful strategies-based reading activities which could enhance their repertoire of effective reading strategies (Hudson, 1998; Pookcharoen, 2009; Wan-a-rom, 2012; Zhang, 2005).

In EFL contexts, researchers often argue that the inadequacy of reading strategies is significantly related to EFL students' poor English reading proficiency (Aegpongpaow, 2008; Garner, 1987; Hung, 2001; Koda, 2005; Kuo, 2002; Sinthopruangchai, 2011). Even so, the teachers still

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inadequately employ reading strategy training in large-scale English reading classes in most Thai universities. They commonly assign reading materials, have students read, and assess students' comprehension through various means (Dorkchandra, 2010). Apparently, Thai EFL teachers postulate that their students already possess useful reading strategies and can effectively employ them while reading English texts (Anusornorakarn, 2002; Chinwonno, 2001; Wirottanan, 2002). On the contrary, some EFL teachers considered it a burden to encourage low proficient EFL students to engage in classroom reading activities that helped promote efficient use of reading strategies (Chamot & Keatley, 2003; Shen, 2003; Vanichakorn, 2003). Consequently, the students were seldom taught to use efficient reading strategies, leading to breakdowns in students' reading comprehension (Ekwall & Shanker, 1988).

To date, research studies worldwide have primarily centered on examining SL/FL learners' English academic reading proficiency influenced by the use of reading strategies (e.g., Shang, 2010; Su & Duo, 2012; Tilfarlioglu & Ciftci, 2011; Tilfarlioglu & Cinkaram, 2009; Lee, 2007; Munsakorn, 2012; Songsiengchai, 2010; Tobing, 2013; Wu, 2005; Zare & Mobarakeh, 2011). Within the wide-ranging studies conducted with EFL learners, less interest has been devoted to an investigation of EFL teachers' use of reading strategies. Without the teachers' involvement, it might be deemed impractical providing that research merely emphasizes learners' perspective and tries to motivate them to become strategic readers. With such circumstances, a question arises as to whether or not the teachers are aware

of effective use of reading strategies and capable of employing them in an effective and efficient manner while interacting with texts (Amer, Barwani, & Ibrahim, 2010; Tapinta, 2006; Tercanlioglu, 2003).

As discussed above, the previous studies on the use of reading strategies in relation to English academic reading proficiency were minimally investigated with EFL teachers, especially in the Thai context. The present study, therefore, aimed to identify Thai EFL teachers' use of reading strategies in reading English academic materials and study the relationship between the teachers' use of reading strategies and their English academic reading proficiency.

Purposes of the study

The present study was intended to:

1. Investigate the use of reading strategies by teachers with different reading proficiency levels.

2. Study the relationship between the teachers' overall use of reading strategies and their reading proficiency.

Definitions of key terms

1. Reading strategies

Reading strategies refer to any special techniques or tactics that Thai EFL teachers consciously employ in order to comprehend academic English reading materials. The present study, however, employs the classification system designed by Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002) because of its suitability and practicability for non-native English readers, especially

in EFL contexts (Amer, Barwani, & Ibrahim, 2010; Chen & Chen, 2015; Genc, 2011; Li, 2014; Magogwe, 2013; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Munsakorn, 2012; Pookcharoen, 2009; Sinthopruangchai, 2011; Tobing, 2013).

2. English reading proficiency levels

English reading proficiency levels refer to the subjects' different English reading performances as measured by English academic reading materials used in the present study. The subjects were divided into high and low reading proficiency levels. Those whose scores were at the top and bottom 33% were qualified. The subjects at the top 33% were considered as subjects with high English reading proficiency, while those at the bottom 33% were considered as subjects with low English reading proficiency.

Research methodology

1. Participants and instruments

Fifty Thai EFL teachers teaching at two large-sized schools, one in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province, and the other in Mueang Yala District, Yala Province. Their ages ranged from 27 to 55 years old. The subjects were recruited via purposive sampling where the school in Hat Yai represents the teachers of extra-sized secondary schools, while the other one in Yala represents those of large-sized secondary ones.

The subjects were stratified by using 33% technique based on their English reading test scores. Only those scores within the top 33%

and bottom 33% were targeted for investigation as subjects with high and low reading proficiency, respectively. As a result, 16 subjects were assigned in the high proficiency group and 16 in the low group.

The instruments employed in the present study included 1) a questionnaire dealing with the teachers' demographic information and reading strategy use, 2) two English reading comprehension test types, and 3) think-aloud protocols to shed some light on the difficulties and challenges the teachers encountered while reading.

The questionnaire comprised two parts: *demographic data* and *the teachers' use of reading strategies*. Demographic data included the teachers' gender, age, teaching status, length of teaching experiences, years of exposures to studying English, overseas experiences, etc.

The teachers' use of reading strategies was measured by using the modified Thai version of the original Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) established by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), covering the three categories of reading strategies, namely global reading strategies (GLOB) (e.g., *having a purpose in mind*, and *trying to guess what the content of the text is about*, etc.), problem-solving strategies (PROB) (e.g., *trying to get back on track when losing concentration*, and *visualizing information to help remember*, etc.), and support strategies (SUP) (e.g., *underlining or circling information in the text*, and *translating from English into the native language*, etc.).

Responses to items on the questionnaires were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The criteria for

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the three levels of use were classified as high ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.50 – 5.00), moderate ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 2.50 – 3.40) and low ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 0.00 – 2.40) (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002).

To determine the instruments' reliability, Cronbach's alpha was used. The coefficient values of the modified questionnaire of reading strategies exceeded the acceptable level, i.e. α = .929, N = 27; theoretically, the internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) in a range of .70 to .79 are considered to be acceptable (Sekaran, 1992).

English academic reading materials were employed to assess the subjects' English reading proficiency: 1) an academic reading passage accompanied by multiple-choice comprehension questions taken from the book entitled '*Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL): Practice Tests, Volume 1, pp. 42-44*', and 2) a cloze test in a form of gap-filling without any vocabulary provided taken from the Bangkok Post's Learning Section.

Three native English speakers and Applied Linguistics and Language Testing experts were asked to verify the reliability, validity, and feasibility of the selected reading materials.

Think-aloud protocols were conducted with the selected subjects in order to gain more in-depth information about the subjects' actual use of reading strategies while reading English academic texts and to shed some light on the difficulties and challenges the subjects encountered while reading English academic texts.

Think-aloud procedures can be categorized as retrospective and concurrent protocols. The former requires participants to verbalize their

thoughts after performing certain tasks, whereas the latter emphasizes talking and thinking aloud during the process of completing given tasks (Ericsson & Simon, 1984). In the present study, ten subjects, accounted for 20% of the participants (five representatives from the high-proficient group and another five representatives were from the less-proficient group) were chosen in a retrospective think-aloud in their mother tongue.

2. Data collection

Data collection took place during the second semester of 2015 academic year with fifty Thai EFL teachers teaching at two large-sized schools in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province and Mueang Yala District, Yala Province. The subjects were requested to provide their background information and respond to the questionnaire. They, then, took the reading test. Afterwards, selected subjects were recruited to participate in think-aloud sessions. Finally, all data gathered were statistically analyzed and interpreted.

3. Data analysis

The reading comprehension test scores collected from the reading materials and data gathered from the modified questionnaire of reading strategies were computed. Descriptive statistics were performed to identify the frequency, mean scores, and standard deviations (S.D.) of the overall use and the use of the three categories of reading strategies (GLOB, PROB, and SUP). Independent sample t-tests were applied to examine whether there were any statistically significant differences in the

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use of reading strategies between the two groups of teachers. A Pearson product moment correlation test was run in order to estimate the relationship between the teachers' use of reading strategies and their English academic reading ability. Data from the think-aloud sessions were analyzed qualitatively using qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) to allow for triangulation of the quantitative data from the questionnaire.

Results

1. The teachers' use of reading strategies

Table 1 Reading strategies used by subjects with different English reading proficiency levels

Category	High Prof. (N = 16)		Low Prof. (N = 16)		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Global	3.76	0.88	2.93	0.92	4.978	30	.000*
Support	3.76	0.89	2.84	1.03	5.206	30	.000*
Problem-solving	4.12	0.77	3.17	0.97	5.989	30	.000*
Overall	3.87	0.87	2.97	0.98	6.316	30	.000*
Frequency	High		Moderate				

.All differences in means were statistically significant at $p < .05$.

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Table 1 shows the results from the independent sample t-tests. Statistically significant differences in the use of overall reading strategies between the two groups of the subjects were found [t = 6.316, df = 30, p < .05, sig (2-tailed) = 000]. That is, the overall mean scores of reading strategies used by the subjects with high English reading proficiency were statistically higher than those with low English reading proficiency, indicating that the former was more aware of useful reading strategies than the latter.

In scrutinizing, we found that the subjects with high reading proficiency used overall reading strategies more frequently than those with low reading proficiency ($\overline{\textbf{X}}$ = 3.87, S.D. = 0.87, and $\overline{\textbf{X}}$ = 2.97, S.D. = 0.98, respectively). Regarding each reading strategies category, the subjects with high reading proficiency reported having used reading strategies from the three categories at a high frequency level, whereas those with low reading proficiency used them at a moderate frequency level.

Those strategies from the problem-solving category were perceived to be the most popular category to use among the high proficiency subjects ($\overline{\textbf{X}}$ = 4.12, S.D. = 0.77), followed by the support ($\overline{\textbf{X}}$= 3.76, S.D. = 0.89), and global categories ($\overline{\textbf{X}}$ =3.76, S.D. = 0.88). Likewise, those with low reading proficiency employed strategies from the problem-solving category the most frequently ($\overline{\textbf{X}}$ = 3.17, S.D. = 0.97) compared to those of the global ($\overline{\textbf{X}}$= 2.93, S.D. = 0.92) and support categories ($\overline{\textbf{X}}$= 2.84, S.D. = 1.03).

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Consistent with data from think-aloud sessions, most of the subjects mentioned that they could instantly decide to employ *problem-solving* strategies whenever they faced comprehension failure while interacting with the text. Unlike *problem-solving* strategies, *support* and *global* strategies led the subjects to establish more sophisticated or unfamiliar procedures or techniques during text interaction.

2. The relationship between the teachers' overall use of reading strategies and their English academic reading proficiency.

A Pearson's product moment correlation was performed to identify whether the teachers' overall use of reading strategies was related to their academic reading proficiency. Results are shown below (see Table 2).

Table 2 Correlations between the teachers' overall use of reading strategies and their academic reading proficiency

Category	English Reading Proficiency Levels		
1. Problem-Solving	.551**		
2. Global		.545**	
3. Support			.580**
4. Overall Strategies			.610**

**.Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows that the relationship between the subjects' use of reading strategies and English reading proficiency was moderately

significant and positive (r = .610, *p* < .01). It was also found that the subjects' reading proficiency was moderately and significantly correlated with the use of *problem-solving* (r = .551, *p* < .01), global (r = .545, *p* < .01), and *support strategies (*r = .580, *p* < .01)*. This shows that the more frequent use of reading strategies, the higher achievement in English reading test the subjects could attain.

In addition to the statistical results, data from think-aloud sessions revealed that those with high English academic reading proficiency resorted to a wide range of reading strategies to remediate reading difficulties compared to their counterparts. All of them also reported that technical terms, length, and text organization prevented them from grasping the gist. However, only those in the high proficiency group managed to solve the problem efficiently.

To recapitulate, statistically significant differences in the use of reading strategies between the two groups of the subjects were found. That is, the subjects with high English academic reading proficiency outperformed those with low English academic reading proficiency in their overall use of reading strategies. It was further found that the subjects' overall use of reading strategies and their English academic reading proficiency were moderately and positively correlated.

Discussion

Statistically significant differences were found in the use of reading strategies by those with different English reading proficiency

levels. Subjects with high English reading proficiency used reading strategies more frequently than those with low reading proficiency in all the three reading strategies categories. A further analysis also showed moderate positive correlation between the subjects' use of reading strategies and their reading proficiency, indicating that the more proficient in English reading, the more frequent use of reading strategies, and vice versa.

The findings are in line with previous studies (Al-Nujaidi, 2003; Anderson, 1991; Pimsarn, 2006; Rokhsari, 2012; Sinthopruangchai, 2011; Zhang, 2002) which found the statistically significant differences in the use of reading strategies by participants with different English reading proficiency levels and that the use of reading strategies was significantly and positively related to the participants' English reading proficiency.

Derived from the think-aloud sessions, subjects with high English reading proficiency reported having used reading strategies more frequently and systematically than their low reading proficiency counterparts.

Most of the high-proficient readers tended to preview what they were supposed to read by looking at the title and looking for headings (if provided). They thought about what they saw for the very first time and attempted to connect what they already had in their brains. The connection they formed helped them comprehend new things more easily. This also supports the fact that the high-proficient readers implement the strategy of, for example, *"using prior knowledge to help*

understand the text" considerably more frequently than those with low reading proficiency. Some high-performing readers added that using prior knowledge and experiences to overview the text made it easier to learn new knowledge. They could feel the close relationship between themselves and the reading text.

Additionally, they re-read the text once they finished their first reading. Nonetheless, they re-read only certain sentences in order to save their reading time. With this technique, they could get more accurate messages and better comprehension of the text.

Given that English is not their mother tongue and other strategies failed to facilitate their comprehension at that particular point, translation was reported to play a role. All the subjects resorted to translation when they encountered problems in reading. They did not translate the text word-by-word into the native language (Thai). Instead, they summarized the entire text into Thai upon finishing reading each paragraph, as claimed by a subject with high proficiency.

Almost half of the subjects with high English academic reading proficiency used *self-questioning* to shed light on their understanding not only during but also before and after the reading process. Before reading, asking questions helped them estimate what the academic materials would be about. During the reading, self-questioning could help correct their guess(s). Following that, they asked themselves questions in order to reassure their comprehension. On the other hand, those with low

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proficiency tended not to ask themselves questions as frequently as those with high proficiency.

Concerning reading difficulties, technical terms and academic registers could sometimes prevent the readers from grasping the gist. With the lack of specialized terms, most of the subjects could hardly take advantage from contextual clues. Nonetheless, they had certain effective strategies to solve the problem, for example, using connectives, schemata, or grammatical structures. However, embedded grammatical structures might interfere with the subjects' comprehension.

Reading speed was also decreased by the complexity of the sentences. The results were consistent with those in Chumpavan's (2000 cited in Pookcharoen, 2009) study, pointing out that second-language learners could easily get lost by unfamiliar vocabulary words and daunting grammatical structures. To perfectly understand the hidden meaning of the entire text, they had to master its grammatical structures first so that they could interpret the text more clearly and thoroughly.

Finally, regarding the length and text organization, almost all the subjects took more time to understand the key points of the text when reading unorganized texts. They added that long texts could directly weaken their motivation for reading, which made them lose concentration on the text being read. With the motivation being lessened, some did not even know where to start the reading. As a result, when reading obstacles arose before, during, or after the reading processes, some subjects had a negative attitude towards the reading

text. That resulted in them not attempting to exert themselves more in utilizing effective reading strategies to overcome the existing reading problems.

Recommendations

It is suggested in this study that activities covering all dimensions of strategies across diverse tasks be offered to learners in order to facilitate their comprehension and match the learners' interests. At the same time, task diversity could develop learners' positive attitudes and motivation towards reading English text. It is also suggested that teachers not rely on a fixed set of reading text types to avoid being distracted by different or unfamiliar reading demands.

It is also recommended that future research investigate the relationship between learners' motivation, learning styles, or self-efficacy and their use of reading strategies. Exploring the use of reading strategies by means of alternative assessments such as classroom observations, the use of portfolios or journal entries is also recommended. Finally, because age and gender differences were excluded from the present study, future research on these aspects could be of use to teaching reading.

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