Reading Comprehension :
An Active Engagement or a Passive Experience?

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English Reading Comprehension in Thailand

As most teachers of English in Thailand will admit, Thai students all too often fail to comprehend English texts. How often have we heard them complain "This is too difficult!" This is a very real problem in a world where English is increasingly becoming a global language, a command of which is vital in virtually every field of human endeavour.

Thai students' difficulties in English reading comprehension can be summarized as being due to several factors. A fuller understanding of these problems will lead to improvements in their level of reading comprehension, as none of them are very difficult to remedy once they are understood. Here the problems will simply be outlined - while the solutions will be inferred by the reader as he or she reads through this introduction, and will be described more explicitly at its conclusion.

Problems

Firstly, the texts that are used in Thai schools often have little or no connection to what the student does in his or her everyday life, what he or she sees on television or reads about in magazines and newspapers, and to what is genuinely important and interesting. Texts are too often abstract and dry, so that even if one understood them, one would hardly wish to pay a great deal of attention to them.

Secondly, English reading comprehension in Thailand has generally been based on the system of translating each sentence, word by word, into Thai rather than trying to read it as an English sentence, thinking about its meaning, and evaluating its relationship to other sentences. When students have laboriously translated a sentence word by word into Thai, probably using English/Thai dictionaries that are unreliable or even misleading, what is the result? They are bored and tired because the process of translating every word like this is boring and tiring, so they develop a dislike of English. As for the results of their labours, students end up with a sequence of Thai words which may not make any sense at all, and if it does, it is highly

unlikely that the end result will reflect the meaning of the original English.

Thirdly, Thai teachers too often use Thai throughout a lesson instead of using English. This results in the students thinking in Thai rather than thinking in English. The students' concept of the English language remains totally abstract, instead of having the vitality and reality in the classroom which it possesses in everyday life around the world.

Fourthly, it is all too true that many teachers simply tell their students to read a text (and translate it word by word), after which the students are told to do the exercises. There is little or no attention paid to pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading activities. The students face the repetitive and mechanical process of translating the text word by word and then answering questions which are often too literal.

Fifthly, Thai teachers of English often put on a kind of performance for their students. They explain everything (translating it into Thai, of course), and they tell the students what to write. The lesson is in fact teacher-oriented, and the students are merely passive observers.

One needs to ask oneself the following question:

> Is language something that can be learned passively, as a collection of facts (such as history), or is it something that needs to be learned by an active process, just as one learns to swim by getting in the water and actually trying to swim?

Clearly, most forward-looking teachers would agree that it should be a more active process - one of engagement. The truth is that the performance of students is not nearly as good as it could be, and students who are discouraged by past failures will not succeed in the future unless the reasons for those failures are understood and addressed. Students who are bored will not learn English. Presently, there are a large number of Thai students who are convinced that they will not be able to adequately comprehend an English text, and that only a privileged few are good at English. The truth is, however, that these bored students can also become successful learners.

These are the basic problems concerning English reading comprehension in Thailand. We shall now look at a theory of reading comprehension so that we can better understand what happens in the students' minds and see how such an understanding is necessary if the goal of a higher standard of reading comprehension in English in Thailand is to be attained. At this point the teacher may be thinking: "Why do I need to learn about a particular theory concerning reading? I am a practical person who does not need to know about theories."

However, it is recognized around the world that modern theories of reading are essential for improvements in the teaching of reading comprehension. A sound theoretical base can go a long way towards enhancing a teacher's efficiency as an instructor.

Theories of Reading

Currently, theories (or models) of reading may be described as falling into three groups,

which are generally referred to as 'Top-Down,' 'Bottom-Up,' and 'Interactive.' These names are indicative of the way in which information flows during the reading process.

An understanding of these theories will enable teachers and students to work together in a more effective way, as they can be used to influence the way students read and to help them read in such a way that their level of comprehension improves. In Thailand, a lot of attention is paid to giving tests and recording test results, but not enough thought has been given to the reading process itself, which in fact determines those test results.

The Bottom-Up model has been mentioned already as the one generally used in Thailand (whether or not teachers realize that what they are doing in the classroom actually follows this model). It can be described as a text-based or data-driven model since according to this view of the reading process, reading is simply the recognition of words. In Bottom-Up processing there is a hierarchy of processing from the letters forming a word to the words themselves, and from there on to decoding of word sequences involving more and more words until the text is comprehended. (As already noted, in Thailand this involves word by word translation.)

This view of reading has been popular because it seems to be common sense. In reality, however, reading is not simply a process of building letters into words, words into phrases, phrases into sentences and so on, as though the reader were making a wall of bricks. Everybody brings prior knowledge to any piece of reading. For instance, if students in Thailand had to read an English text dealing

with the different stages of growing and harvesting rice, students living in the countryside who have worked in rice fields in their holidays would have an advantage over urban students in comprehending the text, in that they would have memories of the relevant actions which they could relate to it. They could test sentences against these mental pictures and find which sentences fit which pictures. Comprehension can be seen as the confirmation of a tentative hypothesis about what prior knowledge is relevant by finding the slots into which the details of events can be fitted. We will return to this important idea and consider it in more detail in the section on schema theory.

All too often in reading research, there has been too much emphasis on words, as though a text were a kind of coded message that had to be decoded and then recoded.

Bottom-Up theories, by concentrating on the text, do not pay sufficient attention to the role of prior knowledge.

With the Top-Down theory, the emphasis is reversed. Supporters of this model, which is also known as the psycholinguistic model, claim that readers begin with a general concept of the text's meaning, and attempt to predict what the text will contain.

This can be defined as the process of interaction between the reader's experiences and expectations and the text which in turn results in comprehension.

The use of Top-Down processing has been criticized because it can result in a loss of detail, in addition to which, if the reader makes too many assumptions, he or she may even misinterpret the text. Despite this possible

drawback, it is important that Thai teachers and students do not ignore Top-Down models. Indeed, the Thai system of teaching has relied so heavily on the Bottom-Up mode of processing that students and teachers should now make a conscious effort to make use of the Top-Down mode, while of course remaining aware of the danger of misleading assumptions.

If there are disadvantages to the exclusive use of either the Bottom-Up mode or the Top-Down processing mode - disadvantages which both the teacher and the student need to understand - what is the most suitable mode for us to use when we read? The answer is surely that we need to use features from both the Bottom-Up and Top-Down processing modes and synthesize them into what is known as Interactive processing.

Interactive processing means that the reader not only processes the text, but also makes use of his or her own experiences and expectations, with both sources of information modifying each other.

In the Interactive processing mode, Bottom-Up and Top-Down processing should occur simultaneously - that is, the reader should pay close attention to the text, but at the same time he or she must draw on pre-existing knowledge and form concepts and expectations which he or she can then test against the text and either verify, modify or discard.

By using Top-Down processing, the reader will be able to better understand concepts which he or she has anticipated, and by Bottom-Up processing the reader will be better able to completely assimilate new information. The combined use of both is known as Interactive processing. This is not simply some esoteric theory, of interest only to linguists or psychologists, but a mode of processing text which can be taught, learned, and put to practical use.

In Thailand we need to move away from the idea of understanding a text word by word. We need to move towards the concept of using our intelligence to consciously interact with the text by using two processing modes, both of which - with practice - we can master. We also need to understand the vital role of prior knowledge, which can be best discussed within the framework of schema theory.

Schema Theory

Schema theory offers a strong model for interaction with any given text. Firstly, we shall very briefly outline some of the landmarks in the history of this theory.

Although Bartlett (1932) is recognized as being the first psychologist to use the word schema in the sense of prior knowledge, the sense in which it is still used today, the Gestalt psychologists developed similar ideas earlier. Gestalt psychology emphasized the holistic properties of the human brain. That is, it regarded the human mind as a whole instead of breaking it down into separate functions and ignoring the way they interacted. Reading comprehension too can best be regarded as a holistic process rather than as merely a collection of separate processes.

The most important point about this model is that we only fully comprehend what we read when our schema, or prior knowledge, is activated by the words on the page. To take another simple example, consider a

supermarket. Most people living in Bangkok have probably been in a supermarket, so they have prior knowledge, that is a schema, of what it is like to shop in such a place, whereas somebody living in a small village in a remote part of Thailand might never have been to a supermarket, and might not have a schema they could apply to a text dealing with supermarkets. If the text reads: "The first trolley we took had a squeaky wheel, so we could not use it," urban Thais can activate their supermarket schema and imagine the shopping trolley without difficulty, whereas someone without a usable schema might be confused by the reference to a trolley. If they look up the word in a dictionary, they might even confuse it with a tram or with a drink wagon. Similarly, bar codes, sell-by dates, electronic tills, security guards - and all the other features of a supermarket already exist in the schema which the reader activates when he or she reads a text dealing with a supermarket, thus gaining an advantage over anyone without a usable schema (just as the rural person gained over the urban resident in the earlier example of a text dealing with rice planting and harvesting). If a supermarket is mentioned in a text, it is highly unlikely that the writer will explain the features of a supermarket, because he or she assumes that the reader has a supermarket schema that can be activated by the appearance of the word supermarket.

Schema theory is not something complicated or strange, but simply common sense. We all bring schemata to everything we read and try to comprehend. Even the simplest and shortest story will activate schema in our minds.

This is an example of a generalized story, the kind of story which we all have in our minds and which we constantly apply when we read texts relating to rich men, pollution, industrial development, etc.

> A rich man wanted to be even richer, so he opened a factory which caused a lot of pollution and made people ill, but he did not care because he bribed politicians and police so they would protect him.

A story like this, formed of generic concepts, can be just as important a form of schema as something we have formed in our minds from our own experiences, like planting rice or going to the supermarket.

To summarize, we use prior knowledge and generalized concepts in all our dealings with the world, including reading.

Practical Applications

We can use our knowledge of schema theory in a practical way. Nisai Kaewsanchai wrote in a paper accompanying a workshop he gave in 1991 at the International Conference organized by Chulalongkorn University Language Institute that in helping students to read better, *how* they read should be emphasized and that the focus should be on the process rather than on the product.

The teacher needs to use pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities rather than simply telling the students to read a text and then do the exercises.

The purposes of pre-reading activities are to build new schemata and to activate existing

schemata, so that the student will have the necessary world knowledge ready to help him or her to comprehend the text. Before someone reads a text, he or she should have prior knowledge, that is, a usable schema, which may come from experience, general knowledge, or from the pre-reading activities organized by the teacher.

The aim is to create what the cognitive psychologist Ausubel (1968) called *advanced organizers*. There are many ways to work towards this aim, and the following ideas are by no means intended as an exhaustive study of the topic, but rather as suggestions which can stimulate the teacher to try his or her own methods for creating and activating schemata.

It is, however, very important to realize that the students may possess three kinds of prior knowledge, i.e., knowledge that is 1) incorrect, 2) in conflict with the text, and 3) related to the text

The teacher needs to get the students to reveal their existing schemata (prior knowledge) and then build on the third kind. As for the first and second kinds, the teacher should never mock a student who contributes these kinds of prior knowledge to a classroom discussion, as this will inhibit the students from admitting prior knowledge in the future. It is important that the teacher make the students feel good about contributing even the first and second kinds of prior knowledge.

Alvermann, Smith and Readence (1985) make it clear that prior knowledge of the first and second kinds is often given preference by the student over the text that is being read. In other words, the student will often believe incorrect prior knowledge rather than the text

being read in the classroom. Lipson (1982, 1983) found that children do not often use a text read in the classroom to update their own prior knowledge, especially when that knowledge is in conflict with information in the text. Spiro (1977) also found that children generally believe that what they have learned in the *real world* is completely separate from what they read in school. This explains why it is vital for the teacher to bring out each student's prior knowledge and explain, without belittling the students, which items are incorrect or in conflict with the text.

As an example of prior knowledge which is in conflict with the text, consider the word "interest." A student may have prior knowledge of this word in the sense of "interesting" and "taking an interest." In the text, however, the word might be used in the sense of "paying interest on a loan."

The student may then interpret the phrase "buying the TV cost her a lot in interest," as meaning "that she missed out on a lot of interesting activities by watching TV" or "she was very interested in watching TV so her electrical bills were high."

To summarize, in order to achieve the goal of reading comprehension, teachers must not only activate prior knowledge (schemata) in students, but also encourage students to express incorrect or *conflicting* prior knowledge and gently lead them to correct it, while remembering that any teasing or belittling of a student will cause him or her to hide his or her prior knowledge in the future, which would be detrimental to the aims of the teacher, as well as to the needs of the student.

At this juncture, I would like to make what I consider to be an important point for Thai teachers: schemata can best be activated by the use of the English language in the classroom - by the teacher and the students. The teacher who uses Thai rather than English when teaching is often afraid of making mistakes. But in fact it would be better if the teacher spoke English during the lesson more often, despite any mistakes he or she might make, as it would fulfil the important goal of getting students used to the sound of English. A sincere teacher can explain this to his or her students, and even invite them to correct any mistakes they detect. This will take a degree of courage on the part of the teacher, but the more intelligent students will respect the teacher more for displaying this courage, rather than looking down on their teacher for making mistakes in the use of English. The teacher can also explain that the students might, for the first week or so, have trouble in understanding what the teacher is saying in English, but that after this period, their understanding of the teacher's English - and their own use of English - will improve dramatically.

Many teachers will say this is too radical, or difficult, but in fact the current situation is frequently ludicrous; the teacher might say the traditional "Good morning students," and the students reply "Good morning teacher," in English, and then everyone will revert to Thai for the rest of the lesson. An Englishman once told me that one day, when faced with a new class, he asked them to open their books at page thirty-two. Not one of the students understood what to do until he repeated the request in Thai. These were fifteen-year-old students, so they had been learning English for several years, but they were incapable of understanding the simplest phrase in English, a phrase which their Thai teachers should have been using in every lesson.

Reading Activities

At each stage there are a number of activities designed to stimulate students' interest and enable them to get the most out of the reading passage without becoming bored or frustrated.

Pre-Reading Activities

Pre-reading, or warm-up activities, are essential in that they help to stimulate students' interest in the topic at hand. If the students are not interested, it is highly unlikely that they will be able to form usable schemata. When approaching a text, therefore, the teacher should have a strategy that will help the students take an interest in the topic by making it relevant. In teaching a passage on the thinning of the ozone layer, for example, the teacher could bring in a spray can and ask the students to note down all the different types of spray cans they have in their homes. The teacher could ask them to list the advantages of this invention, and the disadvantages or dangers. This should lead on naturally to the subject of the ozone layer and to the fact that thinning will increase the rate of skin cancer and reduce crop yields. Now the students have made the discovery that it is not merely an abstract concern, but something which involves us all. The realization that we are all responsible for a problem that may result in millions suffering from deadly skin cancer, or

from cataracts that may make them blind, helps to *personalize* the problem.

The teacher can help the students to realize how the subject of a passage relates to the lives of people everywhere, including their own. To this end, realia (such as the spray can), photographs from magazines, short films or video clips can be used, together with the right kind of questions, to elicit from students what they already know. In this way, the teacher also learns whether or not each student possesses a ready-made schema in which to insert new facts or knowledge, and whether or not that schema is valid.

Another pre-reading activity could consist of the following. The teacher could get the students to jot down, in note form, all they know about a particular subject; this could be the subject of the passage itself, or a topic designed to guide the students towards the subject, while at the same time helping them to fit it into existing schemata.

It should be clear, that far from being an option or a nice change, pre-reading activities perform a vital function in terms of orienting one's students towards the subject matter. Students who possess special knowledge of the topic under discussion may be invited to share their experiences with the class, whether these seem directly relevant to the text itself or not. Furthermore, since many students perception of the world is shaped by the media, particularly television, a discussion of relevant programmes can also help to activate students' schemata.

New or difficult words, particularly those words which are vital to the comprehension of the topic of the text as a whole, may be written on the board. If possible, they should be incorporated in a sentence which provides sufficient clues for the students to be able to guess the meaning from the external context. Wherever possible, students should be encouraged to provide synonyms in English, and only as a last resort to give an answer in Thai. Gradually, with the teacher's help, a list of these words can be constructed on the board, together with the most useful or common synonyms - or antonyms. In this way, students will gain confidence if they can equate the unknown word with a synonym or antonym which is already familiar to them.

Narrow reading, i.e. reading about the same topic as in the passage (perhaps using short, simple articles of the type found in such publications as "Bangkok Post's Student Weekly" - a magazine produced specifically for Thai students in secondary and tertiary education - may be used to activate students' existing schemata, or to provide them with new ones. It can also help to introduce them to new items of vocabulary they will encounter later in the main text.

Cultural allusions need to be discussed, and if necessary, explained, since these often prove more confusing to students than anything else, as their own schemata may be deeply rooted in their own cultural expectations. Consequently, there should be discussions of any cultural differences, which many students may already be aware of through watching foreign movies or through reading. Again, by doing so, the teacher will be helping students to activate existing schemata as well as to form new ones.

Pictures related to the passages can be shown to the students, and used as a visual aid to encourage students to come up with English words that are normally used when talking about the topic they represent. In addition, one could show the students a short video clip to prompt a discussion of the topic at hand or elicit vocabulary pertinent to the topic. On TV, for example, there is a two-minute advertisement by the "Save the Tiger Foundation," which shows the number of tigers that are left in the world (5000) and then announces that these will disappear in 2000 days. There are images of tigers being hunted, killed and skinned, all of which provide fertile ground for any discussion of endangered species. Whatever visual aid one chooses then it becomes the schema itself or activates existing schemata.

During-Reading Activities

As noted before, Thai teachers all too often teach while their students, at best, sit and make notes, or at worst, doze off. This is a tendency that needs to be fought at all costs. To use an old idea, students need to learn by doing. It is necessary, therefore, to get one's students working in pairs or small groups and encourage them to co-operate with one another in fashioning a collective response to the question at hand and in filling in the gaps in each other's knowledge. Traditionally, classes have always consisted of *good* students and *weak* students. The weak students sit in isolation, having lost confidence in their ability to learn English. Many of them have given up and merely go through the motions of making

notes. Group activities can put an end to their isolation.

Shy students will speak out in smaller groups in a way they would never think of doing in a large class, thereby gaining confidence. Poor students will benefit from interaction with better ones, and these good students will feel they are making an important contribution by helping their weaker classmates - an exercise that will also help to sharpen their minds.

The conventional Thai classroom model of bored students translating an English text into Thai, each one isolated, passively listening to the teacher talking in Thai, has outlived its day; it has failed. The alternative - pair work or group work - may prove a challenge to some teachers and may require practice, but such activities are pedagogically sound and will eventually bear fruit.

Group activities should involve the use of English as much as possible. However, even if students discuss the task at hand in Thai among themselves, they should use English when presenting their views or findings to the class as a whole.

One approach is for the teacher to form the students into pairs or groups and assign different tasks to each pair/group. Each group, for instance, could concentrate on one paragraph of a text and then present a report on that particular paragraph to the class as a whole. Or, with groups of three students - two of the students could discuss the text and offer contrasting interpretations of it, while the third takes notes. The group could discuss the title and the first paragraph of a text for ten minutes or so, after which the teacher notes down all

their ideas on the board and invites further discussion. The teacher might ask a question, or series of questions, about each paragraph and give each group a different set of questions to discuss, after which there would be a general discussion - involving the entire class - of the questions and answers.

These are merely suggestions of course; the possibilities for these kinds of group activities are virtually limitless.

Before tackling the text itself, however, it is vital that students understand the concepts of Bottom-Up and Top-Down processing. In other words, in addition to being taught English, students need to be taught how to read. It is also vital that students understand the techniques of skimming and scanning and the ways they relate to Bottom-Up and Top-Down processing.

Skimming involves the reading of material quickly to get the gist, or main idea, of a passage, without pausing to look up unknown words in a dictionary and painstakingly translating every word into Thai. Skimming is the form favoured in Top-Down processing.

Scanning, on the other hand, is the form most favoured in Bottom-Up processing. This technique involves studying the details of a portion of text to find specific, detailed information. This is the method with which most students and teachers are already familiar as a cooperative effort. Teachers can also form students into groups to get them "doing the exercises."

During-reading activities can also include filling in outlines of the passage, perhaps by stating the main idea in each paragraph. The

students can practise making notes of important points as well. Calling upon each member of class in turn, the teacher could ask each one to read the passage out loud a sentence or a paragraph at a time, while the teacher and the other students could ask questions about the section that has just been read, which could be answered or discussed orally.

In addition, there are also many kinds of mapping activities (i.e., presenting information from a text in graphic form) that can be used either in during-reading or post-reading activities. These can be in the form of flow charts, hierarchies, pictorial displays, timelines, or any other form of visual display in which students can portray information, thereby helping to clarify the text as a whole.

Post-Reading Activities

Post-reading activities should be thorough, so that the student is not left with the all-too familiar feeling that he or she did not understand the passage and is unlikely to understand the next one either. Students who have failed to comprehend a certain passage should be helped by having the answers to multiple choice and true/false exercises explained to them in as much detail as they need. Students who get the answers correct can explain to weaker students how they reached their conclusions, with frequent references to the text.

In general, the teacher might consider the point that it is much better to spend a long time in fully understanding one passage than it is to hurry through two or three passages simply in order to meet a set quota, and leave many

students feeling inferior, dissatisfied and bored because they did not understand the texts. In other words, quality should be emphasized above quantity.

Above all, it is vital that students remain motivated throughout. They need to be made aware that English is not some exotic or difficult subject, of use to only a handful of people, but a language of global importance. English movies, pop music and television programmes are all part of what is becoming an increasingly global culture. The teacher should also remind students that English is needed in a wide variety of jobs, perhaps by showing them the classified section of "The Bangkok Post" or "The Nation" to drive home the point.

Hopefully, this article has provided some ideas about the problems of reading comprehension in English for Thai Students, some theories of reading--schema theory in particular, and some ways in which these ideas can be of benefit when applied to the reading process. It is not intended as a definitive statement, but rather as a means of provoking new ideas and fresh interest. An understanding of schema theory and a gradual movement away from traditional classroom methods can, I believe, make reading comprehension in English more interesting and enjoyable.

Learning should be interesting and enjoyable. If it is neither, then the likelihood is that no learning is taking place at all - the classroom is merely a way of killing time.

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