

# A Study of Thai Students' EFL Reading Literacy

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## 1.1 What is EFL reading literacy?

EFL reading literacy is defined as the ability to understand and use those written forms of English required by society and/or valued by the individuals whereas English is taught, learned, and used as a

foreign language by the natives of that community. This ability was measured with two theoretical scales : the skill-oriented scale and the text-based scale. The skill-oriented scale consisted of six reading tasks as follows:

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**Verbatim reading :** A mental process or a reading subskill that requires the student merely to match the words of the test item with those of the text.

**Paraphrase :** A mental process or a reading subskill that requires the student to choose or compose an answer which is explicitly stated in the text, but is expressed in words different from that of the test item.

**Reading for main ideas :** A mental process or a reading subskill that requires the student to identify the main theme/idea or underlying message of the text or some specified part of it.

**Making inference :** A mental process or a reading subskill that requires the student to draw an inference of generalization from the text about some characters or events. The information required is not explicitly stated in the text.

**Locating information :** A mental process or a reading subskill that requires the student to search for and find some specified information contained in a structured document.

**Following directions :** A mental process or a reading subskill that requires the student to follow the directions contained in a structured document.

The text-based scale was made up of three subscales : narrative scale, expository scale and document scale. The narrative scale involved a domain of reading tasks associated with narrative prose. The expository scale referred to a domain of reading

tasks associated with expository prose. Lastly, the document scale was used for a domain of reading tasks associated with documents.

## 1.2 Purposes and Significance of the study

The study was conducted from the position that reading is an interactive and transactive process of communication between the readers and the texts by way of linguistic codes, text linguistic codes, as well as literary codes. The readers use both their linguistic and textual competence to decode the texts and, at the same time, interact, and transact with the texts so that they are able to construct meanings. That is they have to perform two cognitive tasks : forming an initial understanding, and developing an interpretation. To form an initial understanding, the reader has to provide an initial impression or global understanding of what is read. In developing an interpretation, the reader has to go beyond the initial impression to develop a more complete understanding of a text by linking information across parts of the text as well as focusing on specific information. This study of EFL reading literacy, thus, aimed at investigating : a) how well the Thai students in the target groups at the secondary level and the college level can read in English when assessed by the Grade 9 reading test for English native speakers; b) how often and what materials as well as topics they voluntarily read in

English, and 4) whether environmental variables, such as students' characteristics, students' family environment, students' beliefs and perception on reading strategies and instructional practices, etc., are associated with their reading achievement.

It is highly expected that the study will yield results that can be used as guidelines to modify the EFL curriculum with reading courses arranged in a sequence or hierarchy of cognitive abilities. They can also help EFL reading educators in improving the instructional practices, the diagnostic and evaluation instruments and procedures, the reading materials selections as well as the syllabus designs of EFL courses at different educational institutes. In addition, the implications of these research findings will certainly be useful for the teaching of EFL reading for academic purposes, the teaching of EFL reading for specific purposes and the teaching of Western literature to Thai students as well.

## 2. Procedures of the Investigation

### 2.1 Sample

The subjects of this classroom-based study were judgementally selected from four educational levels. The sample included 78 Matayom 3 students, 20 Matayom 6 students, 52 Rajabhat Institute English majoring freshmen, 40 Rajabhat Institute English majoring sophomores, and 92 University freshmen and sophomores

majoring in economics and mass communications.

### 2.2 Study Instruments

Two sets of instruments were used to collect the data.

#### 2.2.1 Reading test

The reading test constructed by the International committee of the project "IEA Reading Literacy Study", which was conducted by 31 countries during 1988-1992, was used. The test was aimed to measure the reading ability in the mother tongue of 14 year old students. The version of the test employed for this study was the English one used by the countries whose people were English native speakers, e.g. the United States, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, etc. The test consisted of 82 multiple choice items based on three types of reading materials: expository prose (27 items), narrative prose (30 items) and documents (34 items) and 9 open-ended questions. Each multiple choice item had four alternative answers from which the students could choose. In terms of skills-based view, the test items were categorized into six reading subskills: following directions (10 items), locating information (24 items), verbation (10 items), main theme (11 items), paraphrase (16 items) and making inference (20 items).

#### 2.2.2 Student Questionnaire

The student questionnaire, adapted from the one used by the IEA Reading

Literacy Study was used to collect the data about : 1) students' background; 2) school circumstances; 3) students' voluntary reading activities; 4) reading strategies; and 5) students' perception on the teaching practices of EFL reading.

### 2.3 Textual Analysis of Selected Materials.

All three types of material were analyzed in terms of readability and task difficulty. Two analysis approaches were used as to suit the nature of each text-type. The first approach focused on readability and the second one on task complexity. Both took into account the fact that performance on reading task depended to a large degree on material complexity and task difficulty.

#### 2.3.1 Readability

Readability analysis was attempted to identify the levels of material complexity. Due to the different natures of the three text-types, two procedures were utilized. The narrative and the expository passages were analyzed using the Fry (1977) readability formula which included a variety of linguistic dimensions concerning strings of serially connected words and sentences. The structural complexity of the documents were analyzed with a procedure developed by Mosenthal and Kirsch (1991). The procedures including measuring criteria and scoring rules were based on the different structures of information displayed in the documents. Four types of documents were

assigned to represent each document structure. The scores 1 to 4 were assigned to represent the structural complexity of each document type. Simple lists were assigned a score of "1", combined lists a score of "2", intersected lists a score of "3", and nested lists a score of "4".

#### 2.3.2 Task difficulty

Task difficulty referred to what the reader was asked to do with the material read. Questions and/or directives used on a test generally characterized task difficulty. Based on Kirsch and Mosenthal (1996 : 140-141), task difficulty was made up of three underlying variables : type of information, type of match, and plausibility of distracting information. A five-point scale was used to determine the difficulty levels of these variables.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to compute percentage, mean, standard deviation so as to obtain the results on the students' reading performance, voluntary reading practices, perception on teaching practices of EFL reading, utilization of reading strategies, and students' background and characteristics. T-tests were used to obtain the results on comparing the students' reading performance among groups. Correlation coefficients were calculated to obtain the results on the relationship between the students' reading performance and the other variables.

## 3. Major Findings

Concerning the framework of the study, the investigation obtained the major findings presented in the topics as follows :

a) textual analyses (readability and structural complexity) and task analyses (type of information, type of match, and plausibility of distracting information); b) descriptions of the students in the sample; c) students' reading achievement (level of performance, growth in reading ability, patterns of reading performance); d) students' voluntary reading patterns (how often the students voluntarily read English materials—what types, what topics, among group comparisons of the patterns); e) student variables and their relationship with reading achievement; f) instructional practices and their relationship with reading achievement.

### 3.1 Textual Analyses and Characteristics

#### of Tasks in the EFL Reading Literacy Scales

##### 3.1.1 Text readability

##### 3.1.1.1 Narrative and expository texts

The results of textual analyses have indicated the readability levels of three text domains. Based on Fry's (1977) readability formula, the selected narrative texts have a lower average mean of readability ( $\bar{X} = 4.2$ ) with a range from 1 to 6. The expository texts have shown a higher average mean of readability ( $\bar{x} = 5$ ) and a range from 4 to 8. These results seem to suggest that the texts included in the reading test of this study are

relatively easy because most of them are below Grade 9 readability level. In other words, most of those texts are composed of sentences with more simple syntactic structures and with a few complex ones.

##### 3.1.1.2 Document texts

The readability of the document texts is considered in terms of the structural complexity of those texts, which includes the number of the information items and types of document. The document domain consists of the texts that have an average number of items of 70.7 with a range from 16-154 items and an average value of type of document of 2.4 with a range from 1 to 4. That is the average level of readability of the document texts is in the moderate scale.

##### 3.1.2 Task difficulty

The average p-values of the three domain tasks, ranging from 99.9 to 49.4 seem to suggest that all tasks in the three domains are rather difficult even for Grade 9 American students. The narrative and expository scales consisted of more items with information of rather high abstraction (narrative mean = 3.6 and expository mean = 3.8). The document scale had more items with concrete information (mean = 2.00). Thus, in terms of type of information, the narrative scale and the expository scale are composed of more items with abstract information than the document scale. In other words, the two former tasks are more difficult than the latter one. Besides, it

should be noted that the narrative task has a slightly higher level of abstraction than the expository task.

When considering the task difficulty in terms of type of match and plausibility of distracting information, the analyses have yielded the same results as obtained in the analysis of type of information. The narrative scale is relatively more difficult than the expository scale. And yet, both preceding scales are more difficult than the document.

### 3.2 Descriptions of the students in the sample

The students' average age ranged from 14 years 8 months up to 19 years 3 months. Approximately 80% of the students were female and 2% were male. More than 70% of the parents had attained a Bachelor's degree or higher. More than half of the students were from affluent families with plentiful English materials available at home. About 50% of the students reported having a low amount of a parental involvement in their education, whereas approximately 30% had none. Almost half of the students started studying English at Pratum 1 and the rest started at Pratum 5. Approximately 60% of the students took tutoring English lessons, and around 80% of them took the lessons at a tutoring school and spent about 2-4 hours a week on average on such lessons. About 90% of the students never/regularly borrowed English books from their library. They

usually spent 36-47 minutes on silent reading in class. Approximately 50 to 70% of the students sometimes had writing assignments after reading, and around 14 to 22% frequently did. Approximately 48 to 76% rated themselves as fair readers, 14 to 34% as poor, and the rest as good readers.

### 3.3 EFL reading literacy achievement

The Mattayom 3 students attained the lowest overall reading achievement (34.48%). The Mattayom 6 and the Rajabhat Institute English majoring freshmen group, and the Rajabhat Institute English majoring sophomores group attained a higher achievement rate of 45.67% and 45.42% respectively. The Thammasart University freshmen and sophomores group demonstrated the highest achievement of 61.08%.

Concerning the text-based performance, all groups had significantly higher achievement of document reading than that of narrative and expository reading. All groups, except Mattayom 3, performed slightly better on expository than narrative. In terms of subskill-based achievement, all groups attained significantly higher on following directions and locating information than the four other subskills. The Mattayom 3 group had the lowest achievement—approximately 30%—on verbatim reading, paraphrase, reading for main ideas, and making inferences while all senior student groups attained significantly higher

achievement on these four subskills. However, reading for main ideas and making inferences appeared to be the most problematic for all senior groups. The Thammasart University students group obtained significantly higher achievement than the other three groups in all subskills except the Rajabhat Institute English majoring sophomores group on following directions, and on locating information.

Based on the IEA reading literacy developmental scale of 14 year old native English speaking students, the Matayom 3 group's EFL reading proficiency was placed at the elementary level, the Matayom 5 and the Rajabhat Institute English majoring freshmen group and the Rajabhat Institute English majoring sophomores group were at the competent level. In terms of EFL reading acquisition, the Thammasart University students group obtained a significantly higher level of EFL reading competency in narrative and expository than the Rajabhat Institute students groups.

#### 3.4 EFL voluntary reading

All groups of students reported that they infrequently read English materials in their leisure time. They all demonstrated low levels of EFL voluntary reading of all types of materials. Entertainment oriented topics in newspapers and magazines appeared more favorable for most of them. No associations between the students' EFL voluntary reading patterns and their reading achievement were found.

#### 3.5 Factors being correlated with reading achievement

The factors found to be correlated with the students' reading achievement were : a) students' age; b) parents' income; and c) ways to take extra tutoring English lessons.

#### 3.6 Strategies thought to be associated with reading achievement

Concerning ways to become a good EFL reader, the students in all groups believed that 'Learning the meanings of lots of words,' 'Liking to read English books,' 'Being able to concentrate well while reading,' and 'Having lots of time to read' were the most crucial ways to make them an efficient EFL reader. However, only 'Learning the meanings of lots of words' and 'Liking to read English book' were found to be significantly and positively correlated with the students' achievement.

As for the students' perception on reading strategies recommended by teachers, all groups reported that those reading strategies were sometimes-to-often recommended to be used. The reading strategies found to be positively and significantly associated with the reading achievement were : 'Form a picture in your mind,' 'Look back at what you read,' 'Discuss what you read with others,' 'Write about what you read from your own opinions,' but negatively and significantly associated was 'Compare what you read with your experience'.

Regarding the utilization of meta-cognitive strategies, all groups reported similarly that they seldom-to-often used them. The strategies found to be significantly and positively associated with the reading achievement were 'Review what you read,' 'Recall what you read' and 'Discuss what you read with others.'

As for the reading comprehension instruction strategies and activities, the results indicated that the skill-oriented and the strategy-oriented approaches were used more often, whereas the literature-based and the functional skills oriented approaches were rarely used. Concerning the students' involvement and the aims of teaching activities, it was found that the students got involved more often in 'Answering reading comprehension questions in writing,' 'Learning new vocabulary systematically and from text,' 'Reading silently in class,' and 'Listening to other students reading aloud'. The results showed that the students' involvement in 'Learning to use illustration,' 'Learning vocabulary systematically and from text,' and 'Discussing other students' writing' were significantly and positively correlated with the reading achievement while 'Reading dramas' was significantly but negatively associated with the achievement.

#### 4. Recommendations and Conclusions.

The findings of the investigation have yielded greatly fruitful suggestions for the field of EFL reading as the following:

4.1 Based on the results obtained from the textual analyses and the analyses of task difficulty, a few crucial points should be seriously taken into account when conducting a reading course and assessing students' reading proficiency. First, the readability of texts for EFL reading courses should correspond with the cognitive growth of the students and, at the same time, must enhance the growth of their reading ability. Second, the criteria set for EFL reading text selection as well as for construction of the reading assessment instruments should be based on and made congruent with the principles of accountability. That is the characteristics of texts, the goals of a reading course, and the assessment process should be accountable for the students' reading achievement and their growth in reading ability. Third, since reading entails various cognitive abilities, all cognitive aspects of reading—constructing meaning and elaborating and responding—must be taught, developed, and assessed hand in hand congruently.

4.2 English reading courses in all educational curricula should not be arranged with the hierarchical sequence of reading subskills or mental processes since the reading skill acquisition does not develop skill by skill, but rather is developed with the congruity of all skills. The content syllabus of each course, therefore, must be constructed in a manner



that all students have an opportunity to develop their reading ability after taking each reading course. Moreover, the objectives of each EFL reading course must be aimed at enhancing the reading acquisition by providing the students with great opportunities to experience a wide range of schema-based texts with an authentic use of language.

4.3 The finding about the text type-based performance has shed light on the construction of reading course syllabi. That is reading topics with adequate proportion of text types are to be included in each EFL reading course. Yet, it should be noted that document task is relatively easier to master than the other two tasks. The emphasis of the reading topics, therefore, should be put on the narrative and the expository texts. However, the document reading is still necessary for functional reading in daily life and academic tasks. It, therefore, cannot be eliminated from a reading course syllabus. Moreover, documents with a higher level of readability, e.g. combined lists, intersected lists, nested lists, should be included more in the reading materials.

4.4 The EFL reading instructors in all levels of education should create ways to persuade and encourage their students to read English materials for pleasure and with a wide range of types and topics, i.e. giving assignments that require students to read different topics from various kinds of English materials. Bringing the most interesting

and contemporary topics for class discussions have usually proved to be an effective and stimulating activity. In addition, EFL reading instructors should be aware of the principle that regular, plentiful reading is essential for attaining a high level of reading ability. The more often they read, the more reading skill they acquire.

4.5 No significant relationship between availability of English resources in the home and school and the reading achievement seems to reflect that the instructors of EFL reading never or rarely made use of those rich English reading resources to enhance the students' reading ability and indirectly sustain the reading habits. Thus, students should be taught and trained to make use of authentic English materials available to them to promote their reading ability acquisition. Such a practice must be carried on continuously and consistently throughout their school years.

4.6 In relation to the findings about the strategies for becoming a good EFL reader, a few recommendations are considerably beneficial to the EFL reading instruction as well as the EFL instruction in general. First, the lexical meanings of words must be taught systematically and consistently in accordance with what is mainly included in each English lesson in order that the vocabulary acquisition can be assured. The students' development in learning vocabulary must be systematically monitored and assessed throughout their English lessons in

all educational levels. Second, when selecting English materials for the students to read, the instructors must seriously consider the size of vocabulary the students must learn actively in authentic contexts of text composition. The simplified materials do not provide the students with vocabulary words they must acquire in real-life reading. Third, the EFL reading instructors must create the reading instruction situations that surely encourage and positively stimulate students to read English materials. However, to enhance students' reading interest and enjoyment does not mean that the instructors have to adopt an 'anything goes' practice. Instead, the instructors must have clear rules and possible expectations that the students share with their understanding appropriately.

4.7 Further investigations about those reading strategies is obviously needed in the field of EFL reading. A classroom-based experimental study is probably more appropriate to investigate further information on such matters. At present, we, as instructors of EFL reading, can only be aware that each reading strategy works differently with students of each particular cognitive level, with each type of reading tasks, and with each objective of reading.

4.8 Based on the preceding findings, it can be recommended that the metacognitive strategies must be introduced to the students, especially at the lower level of education, in order to promote their reading

ability. In addition, further study on the utilization of metacognitive strategies in EFL reading should be conducted more in the real-world classroom setting of EFL reading courses of different educational levels. Such an investigation should be aimed to yield more information about what metacognitive strategy will work best with whom for what reading tasks and for what reading purposes.

4.9 Concerning the EFL reading comprehension instruction, findings of such investigation have yielded highly fruitful suggestions to the field. Firstly, the results clearly repeat the fact that the instructors of EFL reading should adopt a variety of teaching strategies in order to satisfy the learning styles of their students. Secondly, the instructors should be aware which teaching activity tends to work best for students of each educational level, field of study, and level of cognitive development. It is, therefore, the instructor's responsibility to try out what strategy is likely to be effective for his/her students. Thirdly, to consider these findings conclusively, however, it is necessary that the instrument design needs some improvements. The item development should be congruent with the frame of reading theory—transmission, interaction, transaction, and social construction—so as to have a more systematic way in sampling the domain of instruction as well as in interpreting the findings. Fourthly, more studies on the effects of EFL reading

instruction strategies need to be conducted, especially in the form of classroom-based action research. In addition, the instructional strategies that will be included in any study should be aimed to yield the answers to the following reading problems: the schemata-related problems, the linguistic and reasoning problems, and the attention-related problems.

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