A CASE STUDY OF TAIWAN’S THREE SENIOR-HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AS A READING STRATEGY

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This paper mainly challenges the myth that “the more we read, the more we improve our English reading proficiency,” which is, indeed, inadequate. EFL/ESL students’ understanding level to English language texts is determined by how much they can control not the amount of reading they are given within EFL/ESL classroom. Instructors must facilitate students with capability to enhance their reading level of understanding towards given texts. Reading involves a certain process of self-reflexivity and self-awareness for EFL/ESL students towards given texts. Textual analysis which contains comparison and contrast is undertaken by three Taiwan’s senior-high-school students and observed and conducted by the researcher (their instructor simultaneously) so as to examine students’ improvement for acquisition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). One of them are about to take entrance exam for universities while the others to take intermediate-level GEPT. This research is to scrutinize the discrepancy to understanding of targeted texts between the instructor and students in EFL/ESL context before and after the instructor’s guidance. I will demonstrate how senior-high-school students make a progress to reach their goal of effective reading. There are three major dimensions which constitute this noteworthy research paper: a.) the discrepancy of understanding to the targeted text between students and instructor before and after the work of textual analysis; b.) the finding of students’ deficiency to a certain aspect of English acquisition (lexicons, sentence structures, or semantic connotations…); and c.) a student-centered self-reflection for students to be aware of improvement.

Keywords: Textual analysis, Paragraph summary, Comparison and contrast, Reading strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past ten years, Taiwan government has initiated a series of programs that help train ESL/EFL students’ proficiency and required that students should learn English since their childhood (namely the third grade students in primary school and they are around nine years old). A series of programs comprise enhancing non-English major college students’ English proficiency, and supporting students with an access to ESP (English for Specific Purpose) attainments. Taiwan government’s purpose is to prepare students with an opportunity: the much earlier students start to learn English, the much higher their English proficiency would become elevated.

EFL/ESL students’ foreign language acquisition, at particular English learning, has long been discussed for its interrogation of finding effective methods specifically for non-native
speakers. This phenomenon has prevailed in Taiwan no less than ten years and draws countless feedbacks and reactions from both EFL/ESL instructors and academic researchers. This research aims at those whose goal of English learning is to a). get advanced education from junior high school, and senior high school to college or university and b). procure any foreign language certificate and credential.

Since 1990, Taiwan citizens have involved in a wave of English-learning maniac due mainly to the rise of GEPT. It is the first language testing system for recognizing Taiwan dwellers’ English proficiency. Critics and scholars reach a certain consensus that GEPT is an authentic language testing system because it is designed for EFL/ESL students in Taiwan. With special considerations, GEPT language testing system is designed on the basis of Taiwan’s background as a major context. It contains four aspects to test EFL/ESL students’ foreign language proficiency: listening and reading (at the first stage), and speaking and writing (at the second stage). This research paper focuses on the instructor’s (the researcher simultaneously) reflection and observation to discuss one of most significant problems that EFL/ESL students in Taiwan face.

Numerous reading materials could be found via the Internet. Quite a few meet Taiwan EFL/ESL students’ need for a specific level and for a specific purpose of English training. EFL/ESL students must be facilitated by the instructor with selected reading materials. For example, students about to take the entrance exam for college or university should be given articles which range from 5,500 to 7,000 vocabularies in depth and various topics in width.

However, targeted texts with one level plus (A+1) given to EFL/ESL students is not enough to help students improve their English reading proficiency. As the instructors observes, students must be given targeted texts one-level more difficult than their English proficiency and be guided by the instructor in advance with a wide range of methodologies as back-up stimuli. It is impossible to have students read English articles extensively and intensively by themselves.

Finding effective methods for non-native speakers to improve their English proficiency lies in distinct pedagogy based on theoretical approaches applied to second language acquisition. A particular theoretical approach provides instructors and researchers with an angle to explore how EFL/ESL students learn English well but simultaneously creates a blind spot which needs to be conquered. Also, employing effective methods for non-native speakers is not a one-two-three formula. One effective method of foreign language acquisition for this student might not fit for another.

This prejudiced presupposition states that EFL/ESL students enhance their reading proficiency mainly through both intensive and extensive reading. Intensive and extensive reading strategies are two fundamental concepts, as most of the instructors and researchers in Asian contexts believe, but also breed a myth. Such critics of TESOL would probably argue that “the more EFL/ESL students read, the more they can improve their English reading,” or “the deeper EFL/ESL students go through reading, the likely they are to succeed in English reading.” However, I argue that “the more EFL/ESL students read, the more they could improve their English reading proficiency” is a myth which deserves further exploration. As I assert, English reading, if merely facilitated by intensive and extensive reading, is actually not enough. In other

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1 In 2000, The Language Training and Testing Center has developed a full-scale language testing system of which beginning, intermediate, and high-intermediate levels are set up. Since than, English learning and teaching have boomed in Taiwan.

2 Professor Han-liang, Chang, distinguished professor of National Taiwan University, was once the director of GEPT language testing system.
words, students cannot enhance their English proficiency by intensive and extensive readings at
the very beginning of being guided by in a classroom setting.

Below is three Taiwan’s EFL/ ESL students’ respective response to the instructor about how
they view reading English as an inevitable EFL/ ESL classroom activity. Before students are
guided by the instructor with a certain reading strategy of textual analysis which involves
comparisons and contrasts, they tend to give up reading. Or at least they regard reading as a
torturing activity in classroom setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ Self-Reflection to Given Texts before Instructor’s Guidance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>instructors give me each time. I think I cannot handle the given text even if I look up words from</td>
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<td>dictionary. I know I should read more articles but it does not work. I am lost in reading as a self-</td>
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<td>starter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>however, I think I cannot handle it. The more I am about to read, the less I am motivated to read</td>
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<td>and reading, above all, becomes my nightmare.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>words from Chinese-English dictionaries so as to find out their meaning (without knowing whether meanings the he finds out from the Chinese-English dictionary match the unknown words).</td>
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</table>

Given that one’s English reading proficiency remains at a beginning level, how could he/ she
enhance reading proficiency by self-starting both intensive and extensive reading? Limited
numbers of vocabulary, phrases, grammar, and sentence patterns lead a student not able to read
English articles on his own with intensive and extensive reading methodologies until his English
proficiency of reading moves upward a certain level, namely intermediate-level English reading
ability. Therefore, both EFL/ ESL instructors and academic researchers should understand
students’ proficiency of English reading when they design language curricula and courses. This
research paper partially redefines and partially challenges an assumption pointed out by EFL/
ESL critics who premise that “the more we read the more we improve our English reading
proficiency.”

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploring how students acquire second language as a process of unconscious learning, we need
to go back to take a look at theoretical approaches to illustrating first language acquisition from
which we might shed a new light on improving second language acquisition. As Douglas, H.
Brown in Principles of Language Learning and Teaching argues, “…Skinner called a behaviorist
because he added a unique dimension to behavioristic psychology”(Brown, 88). In the 1940s and
1950s, “Behaviorism,” (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) one of major dominated theoretical
approaches prevailed especially in the United States. As both Lightbown and Spada argue,
“traditional behaviorists believed that (first) language learning is the result of imitation, practice,
feedback on success, and habit formation” (Lightbown& Spada, 1999). Noam Chomsky argues
that “innatism” determines a child’s cognitive development when that child is young and
exposed to the environment in which he is continuously influenced by language. Chomsky
believes that any child has a particular system in his body when he is born and the cognitive system in his body initiates to work.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

In this case study, the instructor who has taught English for ten years observes five senior-high-school-level students who are about to take entrance examination of university in Taiwan. All of them remain at beginning level and set up a goal to achieve, at least, the intermediate level English acquisition. In other words, their goal corresponds to GEPT’s intermediate-level English proficiency, which requires that they should have at least 5500 to 6500 English lexicons. All of them have learned English for, at least, four to five years. They have commenced their English learning experience as a second language learner since they were junior-high school students and they had had more or less learning experiences in cram school before they entered secondary schools. At this moment, three participants prepare for the entrance examination of university. Three students are offered with intermediate-level English articles. The instructor tracks their drill of doing summary for six months. During six months, students are repetitively doing a series of drills and exercises with distinct English articles.

During six months, students are given both intermediate-level texts in English. Topics range from biology, chemistry, zoology, archaeology to architecture. At the first stage, for example, a student reads an article relevant to zoology but cannot understand its overall significance ranging from “who,” “what,” “why,” “when,” “where,” and “how.” Below is the section in which I discuss the common problems that EFL/ESL students encounter with during the time when they keep reading. Also, how three students are required to do “effectively” reading will be demonstrated.

3.2 Procedures and Instruments

After the instructor makes sure that their English proficiency stands at the beginning level by assessing what level they are at on the basis of replacement tests, all three students are given certain instructions as a guideline to effectively reinforce English reading ability. The instructor communicates with them about what and how they think of reading articles in English. Their answers corresponded to the instructor’s preoccupied thoughts towards how EFL/ESL students, generally, feel when they face the situation of reading articles in English. They all have the similar problems. In the first place, they usually have no idea about how to read and handle an English article without being disturbed by lexicon semantics, sentence structures, and grammatical focus that they do not understand. Second, they normally read an article word by word and look up the meaning of new word from dictionary as soon as they encounter with a new lexicon. In other words, they invariably focus on the smallest unit of reading and never progress into the larger scale of reading, namely the meaning of a sentence, the summary of the whole paragraph, and the central idea of the given article.

They make acquaintance with new vocabulary instead of truly reading an article. In other words, they learn vocabulary instead of truly reading an article in English. Quite often, they

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3 “GEPT” stands for General English Proficiency Test.
continue reading an article with three to four hundred words in total over twenty minutes without coming to an end. Also, they are not certain of meanings they get from the dictionary to see if the definitions they found match their new vocabulary they encounter during the process of reading. Third, they specifically focus on meaning of each vocabulary without knowing “the whole picture.”

As soon as the instructor knows their problems, he gives a certain instructions. In the first place, three students are instructed not to look up any information relevant to the vocabulary that they do not comprehend but to underline that vocabulary. This is the first stage and this stage requires that each of three students goes through the given text with underlining any information including vocabulary, phrases, grammar, and sentence structures that they do not comprehend. Basically, they need to go over the given text twice as initial/ primary reading. As for the second stage, three students were led to give a summary to each paragraph they earlier went through in the article. One thing to be noted is that this stage must be carried out before the instructor in the classroom leads students to reading the article which has been practiced on their own.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

This section demonstrates the preliminary finding that the instructor observes from EFL/ ESL students’ practice of doing the summary. What three senior-high-school students have done is a set of repetitive drills in a series of self-reflexive process. It shows the significant growth of EFL/ ESL students’ English proficiency. For example, all students are given an article whose the topic relates to an African indigenous tribe. The article contains such information as how the aboriginal people build their house and why they have to build this kind of house for accommodation. And what raw and natural materials the aboriginals can obtain so as to build their houses is further explained.

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<tr>
<th>Before Instructor’s Guidance</th>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
<th>Student C</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Comprehension to Intermediate-Level Article: 20%</td>
<td>Percentage of Comprehension: 10%</td>
<td>Percentage of Comprehension: 10%</td>
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<tr>
<th>After Instructor’s Guidance</th>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
<th>Student C</th>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of Comprehension to Intermediate-Level Article: 60%</td>
<td>Percentage of Comprehension: 60%</td>
<td>Percentage of Comprehension: 75%</td>
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4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

One of the major findings of this research paper lies in an amazing outcome. The hypothesis proposed by former critics who argue that “the more EFL/ ESL students read, the more they could improve their English reading proficiency” leaves a gap for students whose English ability is at beginning level. There is a bridge between the beginning-level students and the expectation for the beginning-level students to make a progress on English reading to the intermediate-level English proficiency. EFL/ ESL students cannot simply be directed to the route where they just read a variety of topics in English articles. Below is the self-reflection by each student whose English proficiency progresses after the instructor’s guidance.

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<th>Students’ Self-Reflection after Being Guided by the Instructor Student</th>
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5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This research mainly devotes to bridging the gap lying between EFL/ ESL students whose English remains at beginning level and expectation from EFL/ ESL instructors towards them to improve English reading. EFL/ ESL students are always and almost suggested by the other instructors, during their learning process, to read extensively and intensively on their own without any further guidance. This proposition is, to a large extent, problematic. In fact, a beginning-level student cannot enhance his English reading proficiency without being equipped with a certain number of, for example, lexicons, vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures. Moreover, EFL/ ESL students need the instructor’s guidance because they a). have no clear picture towards what reading an article in English is, b). have no effective method to examine how much percentage of the article they can control, and c). lack an opportunity to interrogate their summary before and after reading an article. EFL/ ESL instructors should understand that beginning-level students are so versed enough to command English learning by themselves. Therefore, instructors should: a). employ the effective method—comparison and contrast of textual analysis as a reading strategy, b). become much more aware of the fact that students need the instructor’s further guidance, and c). become more sensitive to students’ improvement and impediment toward English reading in EFL/ ESL context, at particular in Taiwan and Asia.
REFERENCES


