

READING AND WRITING RESEARCH IN THAILAND

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Abstract

The Regional English Language Center (RELC) in Singapore held a seminar on "New Trends in Language Design". Many educational institutions have shown interest in the communicative aspects of the English language which was widely discussed at the seminar. Since then, many attempts have been made to make English more communicative. However, there is still some misunderstanding that the communicative approach can be applied only to the teaching of oral skills. Therefore, not so much change has taken place in the teaching of reading and writing in most schools.

The elective course in which specific skills are emphasized have, however, provided students with more communicative tasks. Although there have been many attempts to improve the teaching of reading and to foster the reading habits in Thai students, it must be confessed that these habits are very hard to attain for students. In addition, competition with television, especially cable TV and video, has further reduced the opportunity to turn to reading. Moreover, Thai students, on the whole, are examination oriented. Many students read only what they expect to find in the test papers. The examination which plays the most important role in shaping the teaching and learning of reading and writing in secondary schools is the university entrance examination. This examination virtually determines how English should be taught. The English entrance examination is a compulsory paper for all university applicants, amounting to 100,000 - 150,000 per year; therefore, objective tests are employed, mainly because of sheer number of students. It is unavoidable that secondary school teachers should feel that their teaching aim is to help their students to pass the entrance examination and get admitted into university. Coaching for the English entrance examination has become a lucrative business for many English teachers.

In conclusion, despite attempts to improve the teaching of reading and writing, the limited need to read English in real life and the objective test formats have resulted in students studying reading and writing to pass the test. It can be said that many examinations used in Thailand have hindered individual growth of the reading and writing skills. With writing, the impact is even stronger because students have become accustomed to the habit of passive learning which is choosing the correct answers rather than producing pieces of writing.

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READING AND WRITING RESEARCH

Research studies in teaching English as a foreign language have been compiled and synthesized by several researchers from 1990 - 2000. It was found that most studies were done by master's degree students. The rest were conducted by universities' lecturers. Slightly over half of the studies (50.45%) deals with the teaching of English in secondary schools and almost half of them (46.57%) are survey research. The greatest number among the 14 major research areas is reading.

READING RESEARCH

The majority of research studies on reading in Thailand falls roughly into five areas :

- (1) reading methods and techniques.
- (2) reading ability.
- (3) reading problems.
- (4) correlation with other language skills or components.
- (5) critical reading.

Reading Methods and Techniques

Some descriptive and comparative studies dealing with methods and techniques of teaching reading in secondary schools included :

- 1) the analytical reading approach and the traditional methods
- (2) peer teaching and self - study
- (3) pair work activities and regular classroom activities
- (4) realistic activities and sourcebook activities.
- (5) learner- centered and teacher- centered

approaches

- (6) individualization and translation
- (7) top - level structure and translation
- (8) psycholinguistic- based instruction and translation
- (9) low level questions and high level questions
- (10) use of tape recorder and the traditional method
- (11) summary , theme and related questions with computer assisted instruction
- (12) context clues and translation
- (13) close tests and translation
- (14) student- generated questions and teacher-generated questions.

The findings showed that no single method was statistically superior to the others, but it was found that a combination would seem to work better.

Reading Ability

There have been studies concerning the reading ability of learners and teachers especially teachers in teacher training colleges. The studies on teacher's reading ability showed that those holding a master's degree obtained higher reading scores than those with a bachelor's degree. But there was no difference in the reading achievement of teachers who received the master's degree abroad and those who received the master's degree in Thailand.

It was found that students in the lower secondary level could read at the mechanical

level. The reading communication, and school students were teacher training course equivalent to grade

Reading Problem

Problems in reading to exist from the elementary university level were vocabulary, idioms, school students had of transfer, communication and cultural knowledge hindering reading students in teacher ability equivalent Correlations with components

The correct language components

- (1) The reading school students understanding of
- (2) At the and some correlation markers;
- (3) Reading with understanding
- (4) Knowledge sentences have a low
- (5) Reading a low correlation
- (6) There reading and writing

level. The reading ability at the level of transfer, communication, and criticism of upper secondary school students was low. First year students in teacher training colleges has a reading ability equivalent to grade 6 American students.

Reading Problems

Problems in reading which have been found to exist from the elementary school level to the university level were knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, idioms, and expressions. Secondary school students had problems reading at the level of transfer, communication, and criticism. Vocabulary and cultural loaded texts were other factors hindering reading comprehension of third year students in teacher training colleges have reading ability equivalent to grade 6 American students. Correlations with Other Language Skills or Components

The correctional studies of reading and other language components showed that :

- (1) The reading ability of upper secondary school students correlated highly with their understanding of idioms ;
- (2) At the university level, reading ability had some correlation with knowledge of discourse markers;
- (3) Reading speed had some correlation with understanding of cue words.
- (4) Knowledge of the structures of the sentences have a low correlation with reading speed;
- (5) Reading for main ideas and details had low correlation with literature ;
- (6) There was a low correlation between reading and writing.

Critical Reading

Studies on critical reading have been made from the upper secondary level to the tertiary level. It was found that upper secondary level students who had been trained to read critically obtained higher scores in critical reading tests. Another research which analyzed the English critical reading ability of Thai students revealed that undergraduate students in their final university years lacked adequate critical reading skills, but they were strongest in distinguishing between fact and opinion. It was found that third year English major students in teacher training colleges had low critical reading ability. They were reading at the frustration level both in Thai and in English. Their weaknesses were reading for conclusion and interpretation.

WRITING RESEARCH

Fewer research studies have been done with writhing. Most of the studies have been conducted in three areas :

- 1) Methods of teaching writing
- 2) Writing ability
- 3) Writing problems.

Methods of teaching Writing

Several studies in secondary schools comparing various methods of teaching writing with traditional writing instruction yielded no significant difference these included :

- (1) Dictation
- (2) Communicative writing
- (3) Writing based on language function
- (4) Practices in combining sentences

(5) Integrated writing exercises

(6) Writing by objectives.

At the university level. The most widely used methods of teaching writing was controlled writing, such as gap filling of paragraph writing from given topics. These methods of teaching writing in secondary schools and universities have produced students with average writing ability.

Writing Ability

Research studies on writing achievement of lower secondary and upper secondary school students showed that those in the lower secondary schools could write at the mechanical and knowledge levels. Those at the upper secondary level could also write at the knowledge level. It was also found that the writing ability of students in government school was poor, with most students achieving lower than the set criteria. University students were also found to have poor writing ability.

Writing Problems.

The most recurring problems in writing from the secondary to the tertiary levels were tenses, word order, subject-verb agreement, conjunctions, and punctuation. These writing problems were found to occur as the result of underdeveloped language skills and the problem of language transfer. Many students simply translated literally from Thai into English.

Important language-based tasks

The 10 tasks seen by the faculty and students as most important for study in the College are listed in the order of priority :

1. Reading textbooks;
2. Writing up lab reports/lab assignments;
3. Following lectures;
4. Reading instructions for labs and assignments;
5. Listening to instructions for labs and assignments;
6. Reading course and lecture handouts;
7. Note taking in lectures;
8. Listening to presentations and participating in the discussion;
9. Preparing projects;
10. Preparing answers to questions from textbooks.

Conclusion

In view of the reading and writing research conducted in Thailand, and electant approach to teaching reading and writing would seem to be more successful than any one single approach. It can be concluded that one of the weaknesses in the educational system the over- emphasis on examination, which somehow limits the students' learning growth. Teachers have repeatedly complained that students are more interested in passing the examination than in learning. Greater flexibility in the use of examinations should be seriously considered to allow for more individual differences in the learners' needs, ability, and rate of learning. A change in attitudes should be instilled in the learners to make them aware that the examination should not be an end in itself, but a means to strengthen the ability to read and write for the purpose of the communication of ideas. □

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