Journal of
Applied Sciences

Using Transactional Strategies to Improve English Reading Comprehension and Summary Writing Abilities of Students in English for Arts and Design Course

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Abstract: Reading and summary writing skills are tools which learners use to explore the realm of knowledge as they are required to read more English content and write in English at university level. Hence, there should be a teaching method which helps them understand what they are reading, summarize what they have read. The current research was conducted to compare students' English reading and summary writing abilities before and after being taught through transactional strategies and study the opinions of students on learning with transactional strategies. The target group was 62 Fine Arts students, enrolled in English for Art and Design course in the second semester of the academic year 2010 at a private university. The instruments consisted of the reading comprehension tests, summary writing tests which were administered to the students before and after the experiment and an opinion questionnaire. Data were analyzed by using mean, standard deviation and percentage. The findings revealed that after the students learned through transactional strategies, their English reading and summary writing abilities were higher than those before learning. It was found that 90.3% of the students had higher language competency than the set criterion. In addition, the students expressed a high level of opinion towards this learning.

Key words: Transactional strategies, reading comprehension, summary writing, language ability, teaching method

INTRODUCTION

Learners without good English reading and summary writing skills will experience difficulties in their English-based learning process. They will not be able to make notes in-class, understand what they are reading, summarize in writing what they have read or produce the required piece of work as assigned by the instructor from course materials and the various online sources (Charoenwongsak, 2005).

Recognizing the importance of reading and summary writing skills, Language Institute incorporated them as a core content of all English courses. Nevertheless, it appears that a sizable number of students remain without good summary writing skill. Their summary would usually be a repetition of sections of the read article without thorough understanding of it. Given this lack of ability to write summaries, students would feel dejected to read and develop negative attitude towards writing. As such, it is necessary to find a useful teaching method which can help students develop their reading and summary writing skills (Kitchakarn, 2010).

A review of literature has highlighted the English language Instruction based on transactional strategies as proposed by Casteel *et al.* (2000) to be quite effective at the improvement of learner's English reading and summary writing skills. The strategies offer definitive instructional management process which can be used by the learners as a tool when they are reading and writing summaries. Transactional strategies correspond with the learner-centered learning model with emphasis on thinking process, discovery of answers and learners' involvement (Dulin, 2011). Goodman (1994) referred to these transactional strategies as a theory which requires the readers to have the ability to identify the relationships within the read article in order to decipher and understand the message. These strategies allow learners to identify and select the reading techniques they feel are compatible with them and practice those techniques with a variety of reading content for comprehension.

The core of transactional strategies instruction (TSI) is the theory that readers must be able to transact with text to gain meaning (Goodman, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1994). With TSI primary to secondary students are able to access meaningful content material. Therefore, TSI enables students to think about comprehension strategies, utilize comprehension strategies proficiently and engage in reading to construct meaning from a variety of genres. Under these strategies, learners would be trained to organize their thoughts in the

following steps: (1) explanation and modeling which involves predicting, monitoring and fix-up, (2) practice and coaching which involves question answering and organizing through a concept map and (3) transfer of responsibility which involves summarizing and applying information.

Furthermore, a research on transactional strategies-based instruction management by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2001) has revealed that 80% of the learners at secondary education level who use transactional strategies in their learning process have achieved higher reading and summary writing scores in English language learner's knowledge assessment tests. This is consistent with the research of Brown (2001) who studied the use of transactional strategies with secondary school students and found them to be useful in the development of reading and summary writing skills. Pressley and Wharto-McDonald (1995) and Brown (1996) found that students who were taught with transactional strategies developed an awareness of the reading process and acquired more information from text. These strategies provide students with an array of strategies, increased readers' comprehension and developed independent readers. The findings of Rodulfo (2004) and Julapho (2008) all support the use of transactional strategies with secondary level learners experiencing learning difficulties in order to improve their reading and summary writing skills. The concept maps used in several researches are found to be viable tools to improve the reading and summary writing skills of learners as well (Nachiangmai, 2004; Kitchakarn, 2010).

Having realized the benefits of the said transactional strategies, the researcher has used them as a tool in an attempt to improve the reading and summary writing skills of Fine Arts students enrolled in the English for Arts and Design course. This particular course is chosen as its English is specific to the field and the level of difficulty is higher than general English course. Students have to progress from reading general texts to those with direct implication with their own field. Further, despite having studied three basic English courses previously, they exhibit manifested problems with English reading and summary writing. Therefore, I conducted a study with aims to (1) compare the English reading and summary writing abilities of Fine Arts students before and after the use of transactional strategies, (2) compare the language competency of the students against the criterion set and (3) to study the opinions of students on learning with transactional strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: This study was of experimental design. The target group used in this research was 62 students from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Bangkok University, enrolled in English for Arts and Design course in the second semester of the academic year 2010. As there were not many students taking the course in this semester, all students were participants in this study. It consisted of 25 males and 37 females.

Variables: Two variables were studied as follows:

- Independent variable was the use of transactional strategies in the teaching
- Dependent variables were English reading ability, English summary writing ability and opinions on the learning process where the transactional strategies were used

Research instruments: The tool used in the experiment was lesson plans. The tools used in the data collection were the English reading comprehension tests, the English summary writing tests and the questionnaire examining students' opinion on learning with transactional strategies.

Lesson plans: Ten lesson plans were developed for the ten weeks of teaching in accordance with the concept of Casteel *et al.* (2000). The plans were modified from those of Julapho (2008) with three stages as follows:

Stage 1: Explanation and modeling: The instructor asked the students to read the first two paragraphs and raised some questions to determine their understanding. Then the instructor checked the reading techniques which the students used in their reading. Once those techniques were determined, the instructor further explained them as well as introduced some new reading techniques and invited them to read the remaining content before asking them how the learning techniques have helped with their reading comprehension

Stage 2: Practice: Once the students read the content and understood the techniques they used in their reading, the instructor asked them to complete an exercise where they had to prepare questions based on the read content and answer those questions themselves. Students were later asked to draw the compare and contrast chart, the sequence chart and the main idea and supporting details chart

Stage 3: Transfer of responsibility: In this stage, the instructor had explained the topic, main idea and

important details and how to write a good summary before the students were allowed to summarize the content provided in their own words to the length of five to seven sentences. The summaries were discussed in small and large group discussions in terms of accuracy, along with students' exchanging opinion on the benefits they reaped from the content read. Students then wrote their personal response to the article read in order to apply what they learned from their reading and the opinions exchanged in-class

English comprehension reading tests: An English reading comprehension test was developed to determine the students' ability before and after learning. Covering literal understanding, interpretative understanding, conscious reading and creative reading, the test offered 30 questions with four multiple choices each. This English reading comprehension test was reviewed by three English language lecturers of the Language Institute, Bangkok University before using with 40 students enrolled in English for Arts and Design course who are not the target group in the first semester of 2010 in order to find out the level of difficulty and the appropriate time to complete the test. Difficulty (p) and discriminant (r) values of the reading comprehension were determined using the 25% of the high and the low groups and the Kuder-Richardson (KR-20) reliability index was examined before the test was used with the actual target group. Reliability coefficient value of reading comprehension test was 0.89. The pre-experiment and post-experiment reading comprehension tests were essentially the same, with the switched order of choices only.

Summary writing tests: Two summary writing tests were developed for pre-learning and post-learning use. With a score of 20 points each, each test involved reading of an approximately 500 words text and the summary writing of the said into five to seven sentences. The level of difficulty across the stories was assessed by three experts. The tests were then used with 40 students of English for Arts and Design course in the first semester of 2009 to determine the relevance of the scores. The writing criteria of Rinehart *et al.* (2004) were used, covering five areas with four points each: main idea, supporting details, freedom from repetition, formulation of new sentences, linguistic correctness.

An opinion questionnaire: The last instrument was a questionnaire examining students' opinion on learning

with transactional strategies. It comprised 10 items with a choice of five rating scale response which were developed by the researcher and examined by three teachers from Language Institute to assume language accuracy and content validity. To ensure validity, the items containing IOC value from 0.50 to 1.00 were acceptable. Then the questionnaire was piloted with 40 undergraduate students during summer semester of academic year 2009 at Bangkok University and calculated for proper reliability. The value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.95.

Data collection: The English reading comprehension and summary writing tests were given to the students before the treatment. Then the target group was taught with the ten lesson plans developed in accordance with the transactional strategies. Each plan was designed for one 70 min session. The reading comprehension and summary writing tests were given to the students again after the treatment.

Data analysis: Statistics were determined in the data analysis process as follows:

- The pre-learning and post-learning English reading comprehension and summary writing scores were compared by determining average and standard deviation
- The competency score of the students were compared with the criterion of 80% of the full score with the objective that more students would meet the criterion following the conclusion of the experiment
- Mean and standard deviation were determined from the scores of students' opinion on learning with transactional strategies in order to classify into levels

RESULTS

Analysis of pre-learning and post-learning English reading comprehension scores: Table 1 compares the mean score of English reading comprehension. From the full score of 30, the pre-learning mean score is 14.37 while the post-learning average is 20.16. The pre-learning standard deviation is 4.48 while the post-learning standard deviation is 3.63. The English reading comprehension score has obviously improved after learning.

Table 1: Comparisons of mean score (μ) and standard deviation (σ) of reading ability

Score	Students	Full score	Lowest score	Highest score	μ	σ
Pre-learning	62	30	6	26	14.37	4.48
Post-learning	62	30	14	29	20.16	3.63

Analysis of pre-learning and post-learning English summary writing scores: Table 2 compares the ability to write summaries of the students before and after learning with transactional strategies. From the full score of 20, the pre-learning and post-learning average scores are 8.05 and 11.50, respectively with standard deviation (σ) of 3.43 pre-learning and 3.17 post-learning. The mean score of summary writing ability after learning is higher than that before learning. That is, learning with transactional strategies can improve students' writing ability.

Analysis of pre-learning and post-learning English competency against specified criterion: In this study, the criterion set required students to have a minimum total score of 50% or 25 points out of the 50 full score, with the expectation that at least 80% of the students would meet this criterion. The pre-learning evaluation of reading and summary writing skills has suggested that 18 students (29.03%) meet the criteria while 44 other (70.97%) do not. The number of students meeting the criteria has increased to 56 (90.30%) as hoped. There are, however, six students (9.70%) who do not meet the criteria eventually (Table 3).

Analysis of students' opinion on learning with transactional strategies: Table 4 highlights the opinions students have of the transactional strategies which are in an overall very good rating (4.05). When reviewing the

individual statements, it is found that the students have a high opinion of all. The three statements with highest mean scores are "This form of learning has helped improve my reading and writing skills in a systematic manner." (4.23); "This form of learning has helped me become a more enthusiastic learner." (4.11) and "This form of learning has helped me exchange views with my classmates." (4.08). The item with the lowest mean score is "This form of learning has made reading and summary writing less boring" (3.80). The last one is still in the high level, however. The findings indicate that students see the effectiveness of the strategies taught in this class which does not include only writing skill development, but also being more enthusiastic learners and having more interaction with peers.

DISCUSSION

The outcome from the use of transactional strategies in the teaching of reading and summary writing skills to Fine Arts students can be discussed as follows:

- The higher post-learning reading score of the students was probably influenced by the teaching process where the students learn the different strategies to aid with their reading for comprehension. The practice they have carried out also motivates them to become more interested in reading in English. This finding of the research is consistent with those of Rodulfo (2004) and Julapho (2008) where these transactional strategies have helped learners overcome difficulties in their improvement of reading and summary writing skills. The improvement is likely due to the fact that the lessons Fine Arts students learned have helped them become more aware of the use of appropriate reading strategy for the article at hand. It is a consequential effect from the teaching process where students are taught how to plan and manage their thoughts while reading. Improved understanding eventually leads to better score. This significant improvement suggests

Table 2: Comparisons of mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ) of summary writing ability

Score	Students	Full score	Lowest score	Highest score	μ	σ
Pre-learning	62	20	2	18	8.05	3.43
Post-learning	62	20	6	20	11.50	3.17

Table 3: Comparisons of students meeting and not meeting the criteria

	Students meeting the criteria		Students not meeting the criteria	
	Persons	Percentage	Persons	Percentage
Pre-learning	18	29.03	44	70.97
Post-learning	56	90.30	6	9.70

Table 4: Mean (μ), standard deviation (σ) and interpretation of the students' post-learning level

Statement	μ	σ	Level
This form of learning has helped me improve my reading and writing skills in a systematic manner	4.23	0.73	High
This form of learning has helped me attain better understanding of the principle of summary writing	3.86	0.73	High
This form of learning has helped me exchange views with my classmates	4.08	0.48	High
This form of learning is particularly helpful when reading to summarize	3.97	0.71	High
This form of learning has given me the techniques for further application	4.06	0.89	High
This form of learning has helped me become a more enthusiastic learner	4.11	0.68	High
This form of learning has helped me improve my collaborative skills	4.05	0.51	High
This form of learning has improved my reading and summary writing skills	4.06	0.76	High
This form of learning has made reading and summary writing less boring	3.80	0.76	High
This form of learning has given me more confidence when reading and writing summaries	4.06	0.48	High
Total	4.05	0.50	High

that students with poor reading skills can enjoy meaningful improvement as well if given regular lessons on transactional strategies

- Improvement in summary writing can be partially credited to the students' practice of the concept map technique which is a part of the instruction. Concept map is a process where the students distill what they understand from their reading into a map of relations which is tied to the content. It is a powerful tool to aid with understanding as confirmed by the researches of Nachiangmai (2004) and Kitchakarn (2010). Summary writing itself can be viewed as a viable process where the students' own understanding is rechecked. In the actual teaching process, the lecturer would assign students to work in smaller groups to present their answer in front of the class in a discussion. This encourages the students to participate in the discovery process and to exchange views with other members from the same group as themselves and from other groups. Once they learn of the other's response, they would be able to compare those with theirs and further improve their writing before submission to the lecturer for scoring. These techniques can help students become more interested in their learning, achieve improved understanding and maintain their determination to continue writing

- Additionally, the transactional strategies also take into account the schema or the feeling occurring to the students while reading a subject that touches upon their previous experience. This is a process where the facts they discover from the writing are applied and transferred in a manner where the learners themselves can appreciate the article even more deeply

- The students' overall high rating of the transactional strategies can be partially attributed to the systematic instruction process. This begins when the students are asked to make guesses about the content of the story from the visual or the title shown in the lesson. Next, the instructor would teach the students various reading strategies for them to practice before asking them to prepare questions about the subject read and to provide relevant answers. The students are then taught about the various forms of concept map and to draw them with the objective of compiling data obtained from the matter studied. The last process is where the students write a summary and present their opinion in the form of a personal response. This last process enlightens the students and gives them the impression that reading and summary writing are no longer a difficult task. This is different from the translation of each sentence in the story for the students as to do so would deprive the students of the chance to analyze the content and arrive at an answer on their own. Fine Arts students who are already not interested in English subjects can then become bored. On the other hand, this method of teaching motivates the students to learn and is consistent with the students' high level of opinion; they agree with the potentials to improve their reading and writing skills in a systematic manner

CONCLUSION

The significance of this study and its contribution to the academic literature suggests that transactional strategies be taught in EFL classes. With a variety of strategies, students are able to access meaningful content material. They will become engaged in reading and will attempt more challenging text. This path will lead students to become interactive readers. The real benefit of such an instructional design is not just making students more willing to learn, but rather making them more confident in reading and writing, also improving their English proficiency.

IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE

This instruction pattern is rather time-consuming, so teachers should be mindful about time constraint. Some processes may be used occasionally such as the allowance of learners to express their opinion on the read article in writing. Additionally, instructors should encourage learners to participate in a small or large group discussion in order to exchange views which will benefit their summarization and expression of opinion on the content read.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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