

The Effect of Using a Task-Based Interactive Learning Program on English Reading Ability of Higher Vocational Certificate Accounting Students

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Abstract. The three purposes of this study were to study the effect of a task-based interactive learning program for learners' reading comprehension based on the standard criterion of 80/80, to compare the effectiveness of the task-based interactive learning program with the traditional teaching method for the first year higher vocational certificate students of E-Tech, and to examine the difference in learners' satisfaction between the standard reading program and a task-based interactive learning program. The informants were 40 first year Accounting students, who were divided by purposive sampling method into two groups of 20 learners, an experimental and control group with 20 learners in each group. The research instruments used for data collection were lesson plans, a task-based interactive learning program, learners' perception questionnaires, interview questions, and an achievement test (Pretest and Posttest). Quantitative data were collected and analyzed by means, standard deviations, and t-tests with SPSS. The interview data were read, reread, and then coded. Coding organized the raw data into meaningful categories. The results of this study indicated that the task-based interactive learning program was effective on the efficiency standard criterion E1 at 85.1% and E2 at 81.33%. The English reading ability of the first year Accounting students through the task-based interactive learning program after the experiment was significantly higher than at the pretest at the .01 level. From the questionnaire result, the overall students' satisfaction rate after using a task-based interactive learning program was "good." Additionally, the interview results showed that the students were positively satisfied with the task-based interactive learning program. Recommendations were made and presented in two categories: benefits for future practice and further research.

Keywords: Task-Based Learning, Interactive Learning Program, Higher Vocational Certificate Students, English Reading

Introduction

English is probably one of the most important languages in the world today in terms of international communication. Thailand, as a part of the modern world, has an authentic need to assimilate English into the daily lives of its citizenry. English in all its forms has a profound impact on the Thai educational system, economics, and many other aspects of life (Gene & Bada, 2005). The Thai education system tends to focus on the 'four skills' of English: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. However, it is found that among these skills, reading is quite often either overlooked or under-valued by teachers (Siwarak, 1997). Reading is often linked with other skills, thereby lessening the valuable role it should play in areas such as vocabulary building and critical thinking. Indeed, reading English plays an important role not only in self-development, but also in academic research, since most data are originally published in English. Reading is crucial for Thai people in a variety of careers. Reading is also very essential for students studying English as a foreign language (EFL), because most textbooks and the information are published in English. As a consequence, reading is the foundation of advanced studies which require reading abilities to access both textbooks and other reading sources. The English as

a Second Language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) students have problems in reading English texts. For instance, word difficulty, limited knowledge of lexis, complex sentence structure, and complex noun groups are the main causes of reading comprehension problems. In terms of vocabulary, the problem involves word difficulty, such as technical vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, and words with several meanings (Grave & Ryder, 1998; Nuttall, 2000). These groups of words could obstruct students' reading comprehension.

Besides, words with several possible meanings pose problems in reading. Students need to imply meaning by guessing from sentences or context. The main problem encountered by the students is word difficulty. Consequently, Thai students are generally not successful in reading, and their reading ability is unsatisfactory. The researcher realizes the students' reading problems concerning various aspects which are regarded as an obstacle to comprehend the text meaning. However, learning efficiency can be enhanced through focus on the learner. Therefore, it follows that both teachers and learners should participate actively in teaching and learning. Moreover, this approach also lends to a friendly and fun atmospheric dimension to learning, whilst not detracting from academic aspects (Wihokto, 2003). Task-based learning (TBL) gives learners a chance to use English in authentic situations and adds a performance/action dimension to the overall learning experience. TBL has been accepted as an alternative or additional methodology to resolve the current crisis in teaching and learning ESL, because of the "experience" it allows learners to participate or practice in the classroom (Ellis, 2003). In this study, the researcher designed the task-based interactive learning program to improve the learners' reading ability and motivate them to practice reading.

English test results indicated that teaching methods at Eastern College of Technology (E-Tech), Chon Buri from 2006 up to 2009 have not been as successful as anticipated. The test results are shown from 2006 to 2009 in Table 1. From 2006 to 2009, many students achieved lower than the minimum score of 50%. Furthermore, the average scores for English reading achievement were lower than for speaking, writing and listening. Therefore, the methodology used in teaching has not been successful.

Table 1. English Reading Achievement of the First Year Higher Vocational Certificate Accounting Students

| Academic Year | Number of Students | English Achievement 100 % | English Skills | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| | | | Reading 100% | Speaking 100% | Writing 100% | Listening 100% |
| 2006 | 180 | 50.80 | 49.50 | 69.77 | 50.28 | 55.26 |
| 2007 | 190 | 58.36 | 48.62 | 71.84 | 65.32 | 64.66 |
| 2008 | 200 | 60.54 | 47.48 | 69.52 | 61.80 | 58.37 |
| 2009 | 220 | 63.16 | 48.34 | 63.65 | 68.46 | 69.33 |

Resource: Annual Report of the School Year in the Year 2006 - 2009, Registration Department, Eastern College of technology (E-Tech).

Note: The first year higher vocational certificate students majoring in Accounting

According to Table 1, the researcher found that the average English reading achievement of the first year higher vocational certificate accounting students was less than 50%. The scores contained in the Annual Reports of the years 2006 to 2009 consistently show English scores in the very low to average range strongly, suggesting that teaching methods at E-Tech have not been successful in achieving the anticipated results. The researcher realizes that students' reading problems concerning vocabulary and sentence structure are regarded as a barrier to understanding texts. The limited knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure causes problems of reading comprehension.

Vocabulary knowledge is used to guess word meanings, whereas sentence structure knowledge is used to determine word order in sentences and patterns of language. These problems affect reading



comprehension. The students could not comprehend what they have read, because they lack the ability to understand the texts. With regard to problems with teaching and learning English experienced at E-tech, this study tried to improve the English skills by focusing on reading skills.

This study investigated the effectiveness of a task-based interactive learning program. The participants in this study were 40 first year, higher vocational certificate Accounting students. The learners were chosen by a purposive sampling approach into two groups of 20 learners. Each group, the experimental and control group, had 20 learners.

Purposes of the Study

This study aimed to isolate methods which could help to improve learners' reading skills through use of a task-based interactive learning (TBL) program. Therefore, the following purposes were set:

1. To study the effect of the TBL program for learners' reading comprehension based on the standard criterion of 80/80;
2. To compare the effectiveness of the TBL program with the traditional teaching method for the first year higher vocational certificate students of E-Tech; and
3. To examine the difference in learners' satisfaction between the standard reading program and learners using a TBL program.

Research Questions

The three central research questions for this study were:

1. How does the TBL program effectively improve the learners' reading comprehension?
2. Which program, the TBL program or the traditional teaching method, is more effective for first year higher vocational certificate students at E-Tech? (Lessons, exercises, pre-testing, and post-testing)
3. How satisfied are learners after they have used the TBL program?

Literature Review

Nowadays, there are many language teaching training courses. The need to teach a language is not categorized by skills of learning, but also by methodologies and levels. Language instructors should concern themselves with methodological approaches to maximize learning (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). With TESL instruction, the learners are immersed in an English speaking environment and learn English as an additional language to their own native language, such as teaching Thai students English in England (or any other English speaking country). The common objective of these programs is to develop and extend professional knowledge and understanding of theories, techniques, and practices for teaching English (Richard, 2002).

TBL is an alternative approach in language teaching, because a task may involve primary emphasis on meaning, authentic language usage and the four language skills. The TBL approach has been promoted by the Second Language Association (SLA) as an alternative to a purely linguistic approach on the grounds that it conforms to the acquisition processes (Ellis, 2003). According to Nunan (2004), TBL encourages child-centered learning, supports learning autonomy, and accommodates personal learning differences.

The TBL Framework

1. Pre-task prepares learners to perform tasks in ways that promote target language acquisition. According to Dornyei (2001), task-preparation should involve strategies for motivating learners to perform the task.
2. Task cycle is task-performance options. The learners might complete a task in pairs, or groups, using the language resources that they have, as the teacher monitors and offers encouragement.
3. The language focus has three main pedagogical goals (1) to encourage attention to form; (2) to encourage reflection on how the task was performed; and (3) to provide an opportunity for repeated performance of the task.

Reading comprehension is purposeful reading in order to build up knowledge on a given subject (Rattanawit, 1990). It is a basic level of reading that readers need to reach in order to understand the basic or primary meaning of the texts. The readers understand the text in more detail. Meanwhile, Meaunnin (1998) stated that reading comprehension is the ability to read and get the main ideas and content from texts, which includes main ideas, supporting ideas, and supporting factors. Mikulecky and Jeffries (2004) have listed reading strategies which are useful for both learning and teaching. A supplementary reading program is a set of lessons designed to improve the learners' English reading ability to be at a standard level. In addition, it encourages students to search for more information and gain more knowledge through reading techniques. It aims to improve students' reading ability and motivate them to enjoy reading. Massayaw (2000) stated that a supplementary reading program is a set of lessons designed to improve the learners' English reading ability to reach a standard level. According to Baigasuyee (1991), a supplementary reading program is content-based lessons based on a specific curriculum. The lessons are designed for the learners to read and search for information that matches their ages, skills, and abilities.

ILP or CAI is the application of computer programs to assist in the learning process through planning a course step by step and responding to learners. The program might review the lessons, initiate exercises, evaluate, provide feedback, interact with learners, or all of these. Kanchanapun (2000) also pointed out that ILP or CAI means a teaching strategy which focuses on interaction between learners and a computer to learn and memorize. In this study, the researcher designed a task-based interactive learning program to improve English reading ability of higher vocational certificate Accounting students as the target group.

Research Methodology

In this study the researcher designed the task-based interactive learning program. Moreover, this study was a developmental research using t-tests for independent and dependent samples to statistically compare the means of experimental group and a control group on the pre- and post-tests. Learners' perception questionnaires were also completed. Further interviews were conducted with the learners. The researcher used interview questions to support the findings of the questionnaires, transcript analysis, and documents as data sources. The participants were the first year Higher Vocational Certificate students majoring in Accounting. The participants were divided by a purposive sampling method into two groups. Each group had 20 learners: one was the experimental group, which was given the treatment, and the other one was the control group, which received the standard reading program.

Data Collection

The researcher designed a task-based interactive learning program, lesson plans, achievement test, perception questionnaires, and interview questions, and tested for reliability and validity by consulting experts and by doing a pilot study with Accounting students who were not a sample in this study in order to analyze reliability. The reliability of this study was 0.90. After receiving ethics approval, the researcher implemented a task-based interactive learning program at E-Tech. The whole experiment lasted for 8 weeks with a total of 16 sessions. During the 1st session, groups 1 and 2 took the pre-test. The scores were recorded. On the 2nd to 7th sessions, the experimental group received the treatment using the task-based interactive learning program, whereas the control group studied using the traditional teaching method (i.e., using textbooks and worksheets). In the last session, both groups (group 1 and 2) took a post-test. Then, the experimental group answered the perception questionnaires. Finally, the experimental group was interviewed. The interview findings supported the findings of the perception questionnaires.



Data Analysis

In this study, the data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, the scores on the pre- and post-tests were computed and converted into mean scores and t-tests were carried out using SPSS v.16. Second, the scores of the effectiveness of the TBL program were calculated for the efficiency of the exercises using the Efficiency Standard Criterion on an 80/80 basis. Next, the scores of perception questionnaires were analyzed in terms of means and standard deviation with SPSS v.16. Finally, for the interview questions, the responses were read, reread, coded, and categorized.

Trustworthiness refers to criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two dimensions of rigor or trustworthiness were applied in this study as follows:

Triangulation of data sources was applied in this research. The technique of comparing the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within this research was applied.

Authenticity checks conducted in this study were included, obtaining informed consent from all participants, and additional interviews with certain participants. Consent from all participants was obtained during the interview process.

Ethical considerations were involved in this study plans. Consent forms were also developed prior to data collection and used upon request. Participants were told the purpose of the study during the first request for participation. The researcher's responsibility to the participants included obtaining consent, ensuring confidentiality, and avoidance of harm. Participant confidentiality was maintained by using a number to represent each participant, rather than their names. All research-related documents were kept in a locked filing cabinet to make sure that they remained confidential and secure. The researcher had ensured that ethical issues were the first priority and had discussed the issue with each participant before the interview.

Results

The data output of the pretest and posttest scores and questionnaires were tabulated, and interview questions were coded and categorized to get results. The results were organized in the order of answering the research questions.

Table 2. Effectiveness Value of Exercises and Achievement test of Experimental Group (n = 20)

| Scores from exercises / Achievement test | Total Scores | Experimental Group | |
|---|--------------|--------------------|------------|
| | | Mean | Percentage |
| Scores from exercises (E1) | 90 | 76.65 | 85.17 |
| Scores from achievement test (E2) | 30 | 24.4 | 81.33 |

According to Table 2, the TBL program was effective on the efficiency standard criterion at 85.17/81.33. The efficiency value of exercises (E1) was at 85.17 % (Mean = 76.65), whereas the efficiency value of the test (E2) was at 81.33 % (Mean = 24.4). Therefore, the TBL program was found to be efficient and allowed learners to learn effectively on the efficiency standard criterion at 80/80 (Promwong, 2008).

Second, the results from research question two were presented as follows:

1. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores of the Experimental Group showed that the average reading achievement levels of the experimental group before and after receiving the treatment (Lessons on reading strategies) and the exercises were significantly different at the .01 level.

2. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores of the Control Group showed that the average reading achievement levels of the control group before and after receiving exercises and the exercises were significantly different at the .01 level.

3. Comparison of Pretest of Both Experimental Group and Control Group showed that the average reading achievement levels of the experimental group and control group were not significantly different at the .01 level.

4. Comparison of Posttest of Both Experimental Group and Control Group showed that the average reading achievement levels of the experimental group and control group were significantly different at the .01 level.

In conclusion, the average reading achievement level of the experimental group was significantly different at the .01 level, which means that the TBL program was more effective than the traditional teaching method.

Finally, the overall learners' satisfaction after using the TBL program was at the "good" satisfaction level. Additionally, the students demonstrated positive satisfaction towards the TBL program.

The qualitative data were divided into three categories. For the category of Learning Experience, participants expressed positive opinions towards the TBL program. On average, the students gained more knowledge and could learn at their ability level. Moreover, their reading skills were improved. They were able to pass the test and obtained higher scores. They also took more responsibility for their studies. Additionally, this program promoted student-centered learning for the learners. For the category of satisfaction, participants expressed positive satisfaction towards the TBL program. Participants expressed satisfaction in terms of the benefits of this program, the appropriateness of the program for learning, and the learning atmosphere. Finally, based on the suggestions of a TBL program, participants requested further development in terms of amount of details in the content, application of this program at different educational levels, and to be used for other subjects.

Discussion

According to research question one, the efficiency of interactive learning program (ILP) will be discussed below. The efficiency of the lesson was $E1 = 85.17\%$ $E2 = 81.33\%$, which was in accordance with the criteria set at 80/80. The efficiency of the interactive learning program lesson measured the percentage produced during the lesson, and then during post-test. The first 80 refers to the percentage for completing exercises correctly. The second 80 refers to the percentage passing the post-test. A higher number is considered to be more effective. The maximum value was 100%, and the minimum criteria for the interactive learning program lessons were 80/80. Falling within this range means the lessons were effective (Wattanarong, 1999).

According to research question two, the results show that the TBL program was more effective for the first year higher vocational certificate students. The reading achievement level of the posttest scores of the experimental group was significantly higher than at the pretest at the .1 level.

According to research question three, there were two findings, including findings from the questionnaires and the interview. The finding of learners' satisfaction, using the questionnaire after the participants have used the TBL program revealed that they were at the "good" satisfaction level, which means that learners were satisfied with learning from the TBL program. For the second finding, based on the interviews, students demonstrated a positive satisfaction towards the TBL program.

Recommendations

On the basis of the research results, recommendations on teaching and learning and further research recommendations are now made. The researchers provides these practical recommendations to inform instructors how to better adjust the context of the TBL program in order to address the needs of the students. The following practical recommendations are provided for instructors who are designing or planning to teach with an interactive learning program:



Identify learners' background: a task-based interactive learning program was very useful and helpful for students to improve their reading ability. Therefore, this program could be used or modified by the instructors who would like to improve students' reading ability. Instructors should provide and design the appropriate program for students in each educational level in order to achieve more effective outcomes.

Provide course orientation as early as possible: instructors should give students their user manual before the class begins. After that, the instructors should demonstrate how to use a TBL program and show students the step-by-step procedures on how to use it.

If the instructor assigns tasks, plan ahead early: when assigning students for tasks, it was best to start this in the early weeks to allow ample time for them to prepare for their lessons. Also, the researcher observed it was a good idea to allow students to get to know one another before they collaborated with their assignments.

The instructors should be more organized and conscientious than for conventional classroom teaching: to design the program the instructors should add more learning exercises and activities, like games, to reduce stress while the students studied.

Provide assistance, and require students to participate as much as possible: the instructor should provide assistance, give consistent and timely feedback, and allow time for students to study.

Both students and instructors should participate by summarizing every lesson, if possible: in order to encourage students to participate, the instructors should participate in every discussion. In this study, the researchers observed that the students rarely participated in summary discussions. The researchers recommend that the instructors lead a summary discussion in each of the lessons.

In addition, this study also could further assist educational institutions that are considering providing a TBL program.

Train each Department appropriately with technological skills: to benefit the instructors, this study could further assist educational institutions that are considering providing the TBL program. Additionally, the outcomes of this study can also assist educational institutions to sufficiently motivate and support instructors to teach the students using this program.

Provide adequate Interactive Learning Program teaching strategies: institutions might need to find departmental expertise to train the instructors how to design and use technology to handle the courses. Experienced instructors could provide assistance with teaching strategies, such as how to design the lessons and how to promote an interactive learning program.

Conclusion

Education is becoming more accessible and more learner-driven through technology. Information technology has also made a dramatic change in education in terms of creating a new method for teaching/learning and reaching out to students by using new methodology. This study aimed to isolate methods which could help to improve learners' reading skills through use of a TBL program. According to the research results of the study, the TBL program was very useful for the students to develop their English reading ability. In addition, this program is an innovation in the use of technology which could make teaching more effective.

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