

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

In Taiwan, most educators have focused too much attention on regular high school students' English learning and neglected that of vocational high school students. Meanwhile, much has been said about the bi-polarity phenomenon in English learning (*United Daily News*, Feb. 15, 2005), and unfortunately, the vocational high school students belong to the lower polarity. However, few educators have really taken positive action to do the research necessary to solve this problem, perhaps afraid of the high possibility of failure in doing this kind of research on vocational high school students, especially the lowest students among them. Despite this, the improvement of their English reading ability should be accelerated because there is an urgent need to help vocational high school learners to survive in this high-tech global village (See Note 1), especially on the Web.

As a member of the English Counseling Group for Taipei Vocational Schools, this researcher is willing to shoulder the responsibility of finding ways to improve the level of vocational high school students' English. Though the work is difficult as mentioned in the previous paragraph, the moral of the movie *Stand and Deliver*, never giving up on any student (See Note 2), has been a great influence on and inspiration to this researcher, helping her to summon up the courage necessary for this mission-impossible job.

This research mission may seem impossible due to the fact that vocational high school students' English level is unacceptably lower than that of students in regular high school. The main reason for this is lack of motivation. Most of them have lost interest in learning English since they first began studying it. At the beginning learning stage, they couldn't catch up with their peers and gave up immediately. How to get these students motivated is the main concern

of this researcher.

Their lack of motivation partly originates from the dull reading materials together with uninteresting pictures in their textbooks. As a textbook editor, this researcher knows quite well that vocational high school textbooks have not been the focus of much attention because their materials are not authentic. That is, some articles are irrelevant to the learner's daily lives, outdated, or just plain boring to the youth of today. As a result, a high percentage of students are not listening in class, and so the teacher is putting on a one-man show. Beyond this, students' personal reasons or their learning attitude may also contribute to their low motivation to learn English.

Under these conditions, Web-based reading tasks incorporated into regular courses may make up for the disadvantages of the textbooks and arouse student interest when used as supplementary reading materials. Many Web-based reading tasks provide readers with articles accompanied by lively music and animated pictures. This kind of material certainly gives students a pleasant, relaxing, comfortable, and exciting atmosphere for learning. Better yet, the speed at which Web-based materials pop up is much faster than that of paper dictionaries or reference books. More importantly, articles on whatever field one can think of are presented within a couple of seconds with merely a quick click. Best of all, all the materials are authentic and extensive.

How could those dull textbooks be more attractive than animated information or articles on the Net? Web-based reading tasks surely will motivate vocational high school students; thus, they can learn by themselves through the use of the Net, achieving the final goal: student autonomy, as expected by this researcher.

This researcher hopes that her exploration into Web-based tasks will really help her own students with effective reading strategies and provide other vocational high school teachers with pedagogical implications.

## 1.2 The Purpose of the Study

Krashen (2004) points out that sometimes teachers feel students have moved from illiteracy to literacy, but the less literate students have failed and left school. At times, there is a strong possibility of getting rid of these less literate students. This is partly true of vocational high schools here in Taiwan. However, some private school authorities keep them as milk cows by streaming them and letting them fool around all the time learning nothing at all. However, most of the less literate students here in Taiwan are still teachable except for the few seriously mentally handicapped, if they are provided effective reading strategies and properly motivated.

However, what are “effective reading strategies”? In this computer age, one possible answer is the use of the Web on computers. The computer skills of the less literate students are, on average, good. To them, paper print exposure may not be so attractive as the computer screen and the Web. Besides, learning English only with textbooks is actually not enough to prepare them for survival in their future careers. This is why this research focuses on using Web-based reading task materials as supplements for the less literate students under this researcher’s instruction in a vocational high school in Taipei.

In this attempt to enhance vocational high school students’ reading ability, a possible answer is to use Web-based reading tasks. Most educators agree that teenagers are crazy about anything concerning computers and the Web, such as computer games, MSN, e-mailing, Net surfing, wiki, and blog. Therefore, Web-based reading tasks are possible good sources for English learning besides textbooks. At least, students don’t mind sitting in front of computers. Besides, some English-instruction Web materials are free and easy to access with any Net service. To cater to their interest and to make them learn actively, Web-based reading tasks are one kind of learning tool for students with low motivation. Then, it is this instructor’s responsibility to map out a usable, intriguing, and beneficial supplementary reading plan for their guidance in class and for them to learn even more at home. To implement this plan, the

researcher, who is also a language teacher, thinks it vital to have a better choice of appropriate Web-based reading tasks.

However, choosing good, helpful, and suitable Web-based reading tasks needs the instructor's clear insight into the task materials. Whether they are appropriate or not depends on the instructor's personal experience and his or her students' learning needs.

Reading ability is the main focus of this research. The obtaining of information on the Net relies on the student's reading skills. This study is designed to conduct research on reading strategies to improve vocational high school students' reading comprehension. This researcher intends to find out which kinds of tasks are intriguing to vocational high school students, which kinds of tasks are more appropriate to them at different levels of difficulty, how well they can learn reading skills actively through computer-based learning, and how to select suitable reading tasks for levels of different reading ability.

### **1.3 Significance of the Research**

It is hoped that the findings of this research can draw the attention of language instructors to the significance of the application of Web-based reading tasks to vocational high school students in Taipei in terms of teaching learning. Further, this research will provide the language instructor a miscellany of reading strategies. These strategies include such possible practices as using online dictionaries, browsing skills on the Internet, and Web conferencing. The incorporation of the hi-tech Net will make language teaching more attractive, meaningful, and modern. Most importantly, this study has a pedagogical concept steeped in learning actively—facilitating language acquisition through real-life communication and exposing the learner to authentic materials on the Web both with interesting content and beneficial sources for learning reading strategies.

It is also deeply hoped that the findings of this research can be applied to nationwide vocational high schools, not just those in Taipei. This is also the sincere hope of the current

Taipei City Mayor, Ma Ying-jeou.

## **1.4 Definition of Terms**

### **Web-based reading tasks**

“Web-based reading tasks” is a broad term which includes the use of online English-Chinese and English-English dictionaries and other Web application in this research.

### **Authentic materials**

In language teaching, materials such as magazines, newspapers, advertisements, news reports, or materials on the Web were not originally developed for pedagogical purposes. Such materials are often thought to contain more realistic and natural examples of language use than those found in textbooks and other specially developed teaching materials. Materials in magazine, newspapers, advertisements, news reports, and on the Web are called authentic materials.

### **Wiki**

Wiki is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser. Wiki supports hyperlinks and has simple text syntax for creating new pages and crosslinks between internal pages on the fly.

The first ever wiki site was created for the Portland Pattern Repository in 1995. That site now hosts tens of thousands of pages.

### **Blog**

A weblog (usually shortened to blog, but occasionally spelled web log or weblog) is a Web-based publication consisting primarily of a personal diary. Users may go to other

people's blogs to read them and to leave comments.

### **MSN vs. Web conferencing**

MSN is one of the instant messengers which offers P2P (peer to peer) chatting. Other instant messengers are AIM, ICQ, and CICQ. Over 300 million users are using AIM while MSN users are only 9 million. AIM (American Instant Messenger) is very popular in America now. ICQ and CICQ are out of date. All of these messengers are chat rooms.

Web conferencing is somewhat different from IM (Instant Messenger) though both of them have the chatting function. It is a Server-Client Architecture which offers a center server and can accommodate a certain number of Web users to come and talk on a certain topic at the same time. Users can set up different conference rooms on one server while IM cannot.

## **1.5 Organization of the Thesis**

The organization of this thesis includes five parts.

Chapter One is the overview of this research, including the background, the need for investigation, the purpose and the significance of the research, and the organization of this research.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on the reading rationale, including reading process and skilled and less-skilled readers, technology and language learning, reading and Web-based reading tasks, and most important of all the research questions.

Chapter Three describes the participants involved in this research and their English reading abilities prior to this research. It also includes Web-based tasks selected, designed, and used in this research. The procedures and data analysis of the research are also presented.

Chapter Four further discusses the results of the pre-test and post-test used in this research, background and feedback questionnaires, pre-test, and post-test. The effects of applying English Web-based reading tasks as vocational high school supplementary reading

will be presented as well.

The concluding part, Chapter Five, consists of a summary of the results, their pedagogical implications, and limitations and suggestions for further research.