

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The ability to read English as a foreign language is fundamental to the language proficiency of junior high school (JHS) students. Though most JHS students have learned English for several years, they are seldom trained to learn reading strategies in order to improve their reading comprehension. In order to examine the effects of reading strategies instruction on JHS students' English reading comprehension, the current study is conducted.

1.1 Motivation and Goal

The importance of reading English for EFL language learners can not be overemphasized. It is widely recognized that reading is one of the most important skills for ESL/EFL learners to master. As Anderson (2003a) stated, the mastery of reading skill could help ESL/EFL learners achieve success not only in English learning but also in other content-based classes where English reading proficiency was required. Reading has played a crucial role in overall development in language skills and even in academic success for decades (Cochran, 1993). Reading is one of the important skills for learners to expand their knowledge of the language, cultures, and the world. Learners can get more information that they need through reading different materials, such as magazines, newspapers, novels, books, journals, and so on. With strengthened reading skills, EFL readers will make greater progress and attain greater development in all academic areas. Among these reading skills, appropriate reading strategies will facilitate learners' reading comprehension, especially for L2 readers.

However, the major difficulty encountered by JHS students in Taiwan when they read English texts is the inability to employ effective reading strategies (Hsu,

2004). In other words, JHS students in Taiwan seldom use reading strategies to facilitate their reading comprehension. Most JHS students tend to apply their perceptions of learning Chinese to reading an English text. Due to teachers' grammar-translation teaching style, most JHS students just read word-by-word, or sentence-by-sentence, and they do not use appropriate strategies to access to the comprehension. It is partly because students are not informed of how to use effective strategies to comprehend a text effectively, or they do not successfully transfer the use of their first language reading strategies (Sarig, 1990). To be more specific, JHS students tend to concentrate on the individual word meaning rather than using reading strategies to make the meaning of the reading. Smith (1971) explained that letter-by-letter or word-by-word reading will prove extremely harmful because the meaning of one word will be forgotten before the next word is built.

Many researchers have noted that strategy instruction is beneficial to enhancing effective reading (Alfassi, 2004; Beckman, 2002; D'Arcangelo, 2002; Grabe, 2002; Janzen, 2002; Keer, 2004; Rhoder, 2002; Thompson, 2000). Oxford (1990) emphasized that appropriate language learning strategies would result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence, and that learners who received strategies training generally learned better than those who did not. As Thompson (2000) stressed, incorporating strategies into instruction would help enhance reading comprehension and move students from passive learners to active learners. Therefore, teaching junior high students how to use strategies successfully is a prime consideration in the English reading classroom.

However, Tsao (1992) pointed out that reading instruction in Taiwan has not been effective in training students to become strategic readers who can use both bottom-up and top-down strategies flexibly to achieve effective and efficient reading. As Chang (1998) stated, the focus of reading instruction in Taiwan was mainly on

word recognition and structure analysis. Thus, reading behaviors of Taiwanese students tend to be more bottom-up than top-down or interactive (Chiang, 2002). In other words, they are often passive decoders who usually read in the bottom-up model of information processing.

Coady (1979) examined the changes in process strategies used by ESL/EFL readers and indicated that ESL/EFL readers would shift to a greater reliance on syntax, lexical meaning, contextual meaning, and higher-order processes as they advanced. However, Fischer-Kohn (1986) stressed that in China; English was taught intensively through bottom-up processing style, which emphasized lexical, morphological, and syntactic skills only. Therefore, top-down strategies including proposition-making, and integration of ideas were neglected. Kern (1989) also argued that L2 readers often processed texts in a bottom-up manner. In addition, Field (1985) claimed that advanced Chinese students did not actually achieve fluent reading in English. These show that ESL/EFL readers may not follow Coady's model. Consequently, ESL/EFL students need to receive strategy training, especially that of top-down strategies, to improve their integration of both bottom-up and top-down strategies for better comprehension. Besides, readers should be aware of their use of reading strategies so that they can use them appropriately in processing the text.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

A great deal of research has been conducted on L1 and L2 reading strategy training. It is assumed that success in reading mainly depends on appropriate strategy use and that unsuccessful readers can improve their reading ability by being trained to use effective strategies (Dansereau, 1985). Many studies have shown that reading strategies can be taught to help students improve their performance in reading comprehension tests (Carrell, 1985; Chen, 2005; Palincsar & Brown, 1989; Pearson &

Fielding, 1991; Song, 1998). Much research has been done on reading strategies for senior high school students and college students. However few studies have reported on the effects of English reading strategies instruction on JHS students. In order to enhance JHS students' reading comprehension, it is essential not only to teach them basic reading strategies but also to help them monitor their reading process through teachers' explicitly direct explanation and modeling of reading strategies.

According to Cohen (1998), learning will be facilitated by making students aware of the range of strategies from which they can choose during language learning and use. The most efficient way to strengthen learner awareness is to provide strategy training - explicit instruction in how to apply language learning strategies - as part of the foreign language curriculum. The effects of reading strategies on JHS students' reading comprehension are worthy of being investigated. Since a variety of strategies are needed for effective reading, learners need to be exposed to more strategies and explicitly taught those they do not know about. Learning how to evaluate the effectiveness of strategy use is an important skill to develop. Hopefully, the students can become strategic readers who can read more effectively.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of the explicit instruction of reading strategies on junior high school students' reading comprehension. The selected instructed strategies include skimming for the main idea, scanning for important information, making predictions, making inferences, guessing the meanings of unfamiliar words from context, and self-monitoring. These strategies are taught to students in an explicit strategy instruction. In the study, the researcher also intends to examine students' use of English reading strategies. What is more, the researcher hopes to find out whether the strategy instruction is effective in improving students' comprehension of different types of questions, and whether the strategy instruction is beneficial to them.

1.3 Significance of the Study

It is hoped that both teachers and students may benefit from the results of the study as follows. First, this study may highlight the effects of the explicit instruction of reading strategies on students' reading comprehension. Thus, EFL teachers may take it into consideration to incorporate the explicit instruction of reading strategies into their reading instructional programs. Second, the investigation of students' perceptions of using reading strategies may provide EFL teachers with an understanding of junior high school students' knowledge and use of reading strategies. Thus, teachers may help students learn to use the strategies they are not familiar with or those they seldom use. They may consider implementing strategies instruction to help students have more positive attitudes toward English reading. Last but not least, this study may show the effects of the strategy instruction on students' comprehension of different types of reading comprehension questions. In this way, teachers can check whether students are able to apply their acquired strategies to reading comprehension tests. Besides, teachers can examine which types of reading comprehension questions students can perform best from the strategy instruction and provide more strategies instruction and practice for students to improve their comprehension for those questions more difficult to them. To sum up, we can see the feasibility of implementing a reading instruction program and helping EFL students to use reading strategies more effectively to enhance their reading comprehension.

1.4 Definition of Terms

Reading strategies: According to Duffy (1993), reading strategies refers to the plans for readers to solve problems encountered in constructing meaning from texts. Pressley et al. (1989) described that reading strategies are conscious, instantiated, and flexible plans readers apply and adapt to a variety of texts and tasks. D'Arcangelo

(2002) indicated that reading strategies are tools which allowed readers to be more actively involved while reading. As Barnett (1988) explained, reading strategies are the mental operations involved when readers approach a text effectively and make sense of what they read.

Reading comprehension: It is defined as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning (Sweet & Snow, 2003). Specifically, reading comprehension is the ability to understand information in a text and interpret it appropriately (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Tonjes and Zintz (1987) indicated that the process of comprehension is viewed as an interactive one, where the readers comprehended through what they already know about the topic as they interact with the text. In short, it is the interaction between the reader and the text.