Promoting Learner Autonomy through an Extensive Reading Program among Second Year Undergraduate Students of Naresuan University

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Abstract

This research explored extensive reading (ER) instruction integrated within a framework of learner autonomy training strategy, which was specifically designed to suit Thai students' characteristics. Thus, the main objective of this study was to investigate students' learner autonomy strategies and English reading ability in an extensive reading program. Thirty-seven undergraduate students who enrolled in the Reading Academic English course were classified into high and low proficiency groups based on their general English reading pre-test mean scores. Quantitative data were then collected through a general English reading ability pre- and post-test and a learner autonomy training strategies questionnaire. After the 10-week ER program, the test scores showed that the students' English reading ability was significantly improved at the .001 level. The findings from learner autonomy training questionnaires indicated students' frequent use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in ER as well as an increase in their positive attitudes toward both reading and learner autonomy. As a result, it can be concluded that ER enhances reading ability and promotes learner autonomy enabling learners to become more autonomous readers.

Introduction

The English language plays a crucial role in our increasingly globalized world, especially in the present era of expanding internet access, multinational trade and worldwide investment. Consequently, English proficiency has now become a necessity in most labor markets. In particular, the importance of the English language in Thailand will become even greater in the future after the realization of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 by ten ASEAN member countries. The English language is now taught as a foreign language in the national
curriculum of Thailand but most Thai students’ English proficiency and their test scores (based on TOEFL and TOEIC scores) are low in comparison with their counterparts in other ASEAN countries (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore) (Wiriyachitra, 2002; Khamkhien, 2010). Thai students’ reading scores in computer- and paper-based TOEFL were at a low level (Educational Testing Service, 2007). In this regard, Thai university students’ poor reading skill and performance hinder their fulfillment of higher education’s demands. They may thus encounter a number of problems in their reading proficiency improvement leading to their frustration in reading activity. Nonetheless, it can be said that the effective reading skill is especially important for them because it is required not only for successful use of English language but also for their pursuit of higher education and future career.

In the EFL context, it is suggested that one way to improve reading skill in English is to read extensively (Nuttall, 1996). This means that the affective variable, in particular motivation, is crucial to students’ success in reading. Interactive reading activities may lead to improved motivation to read more (Day and Bamford, 2002). In other words, students’ commitment to read with enthusiasm and their true interest in reading are essential for higher reading effectiveness. When they read extensively, they will gain more background knowledge, which is one of the reasons for reading extensively. Extensive Reading (ER) is thus central for students’ improved reading skills because it is believed to enable them to read meaningfully and strategically (Nuttal, 1996; Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Day and Bamford, 2002; Grabe, 2009).

Besides extensive reading, it is also found that English reading comprehension can be improved by integrating autonomous modes of learning into classroom practice (Matsubara & Lehtinen, 2007; Imrie, 2007; Swatevacharkul, 2006). Carrell and Eisterhold (1989) argue that there is a significant relationship between autonomous learning and reading skills, and that knowledge gained in this way readily transfers for real use in real life. Hence, it is important for language teachers to assist students in strengthening their reading skill in order to develop them into independent readers outside EFL/ESL classrooms. In other words, students should be able to apply in-class learning techniques and strategies for use beyond the classroom setting.
**Extensive Reading (ER)**

ER is “the reading of large quantities of material for information or pleasure” with “the immediate focus on the content being read, rather than on language skills” (Lituanas, Jacobs, and Renandya, 1999, p. 4). Thus, an important feature of ER is that students can enjoy reading based on their interest and preference and choose what they want to read given their linguistic competence. ER creates a positive learning environment by offering a selection of books suitable for the students’ reading capacity to imbue their good reading habit.

In contrast to the normal or passive-learning classroom, extensive reading is an interesting alternative allowing students to interact and take an active role in their reading classes, while the reading materials are chosen based on their preference and interest. In order to enable them to enjoy reading extensively with strategies selected on their own, students are trained to focus on main ideas instead of the convoluted article structure line by line. They are also encouraged to discuss with their classmates the topics they are reading. Such extensive reading enhances students’ confidence in reading without fear or anxiety of making mistakes or being frustrated by unsatisfactory reading outcomes (Day and Bamford, 2002) and increased motivation in reading that results from this approach can lead students to spend more time reading.

Teachers switching between varieties of roles are another keys component of extensive reading. The teacher may take on the role of a ‘provider’ and ‘facilitator’ who creates and provides students with a chance to actively engage in reading classes within a pleasant environment in which students are encouraged to select books or reading materials they feel interested in so as to make them feel ‘confident or efficacious as readers’ (Deng, 2007; Guthrie, 2010). In this regard, Goodman (1972: 117 cited in Sinhaneti, 2008) argues that “readers should be encouraged to select material on the basis of their own criteria of interest ...a major aspect of joyful reading is that students should be able to choose what they read both in terms of genre and, crucially, level. They are much more likely to read with enthusiasm if they have made the decision about what they read.”

Teachers should play a leading role in promoting students’ active participation in reading and motivate them to move away from being passive learners. In order to facilitate, this appropriate support or advice should be available for them when necessary. The teacher should understand how to teach in ways that best correspond with students’ various needs.
and educational backgrounds and help students recognize the significant role learner autonomy can play in achieving improved language proficiency (Yang, 1998; Sert, 2006).

Therefore, it can be said that the purpose of extensive reading is to encourage students not only to read extensively material which interests them but also to develop cognitive and metacognitive skills for reading comprehension improvement. Once students read broadly, they may acquire a broad range of background knowledge, which is an indispensable element for students to engage in reading activities in a meaningful way and to become autonomous readers who can read and make self-evaluation on their own. Thus, students’ motivation to read for purpose is promoted to enable them to become the independent readers who can enjoy reading autonomously beyond the classroom (Hedge, 2003 cited in Alyousef, 2005: 147).

Hence, for successful implementation of extensive reading in Thailand, attention to factors which may improve students’ motivation is imperative in addition to strengthening their background knowledge or reading skills. Indeed, “the more knowledge and skills the students possess, the more confident they are likely to feel when asked to perform independently; the more confident they feel, the more they are likely to be able to mobilize their knowledge and skills for improved academic performance” (Littlewood, 1996). The promotion of students’ confidence and capability in assuming their own responsibility by means of extensive reading program may thus lie at the heart of increasing their motivation to read. In this way, the students may gradually recognize their potential and have greater motivation to read alone or with less teacher control. With their improved motivation, it can probably be expected that the students may become independent readers who can read on their own for pleasure or for academic purposes.

**Learner Autonomy**

Learner autonomy has become a key concern in the foreign language instruction context in recent decades due to the gradual change from traditional classroom settings in which students are passive learners to more communicative and learner-centered approaches. The focus should be on learning processes in which students have an exposure to real language use, for example, they are able to enjoy reading the authentic texts chosen according to their preference or to engage in active learning activities so that students may
then be able to engage in life-long learning. Language instruction is not merely knowledge transmission, but a challenging and active experience (Kohonen, 1992).

Various teaching techniques have been introduced to improve the effectiveness of language instruction and to reduce the complexity of L2 acquisition. Practitioners of linguistics have put great effort into turning students from passive into active learners and to enhancing students’ confidence in a target language by promoting their active role in the learning process. In Thailand, however, teacher-centered language instruction has long dominated classroom practice. Teachers remain determiners, respected sages and sometimes facilitators who carry both ultimate responsibility and authority in classroom, while students tend to learn passively and have no active interactions for fear of making mistakes or suffering embarrassment in spite of the long-recognized significance of in-class engagement to the development of their linguistic proficiency and successful target language acquisition (Nuttall, 1996).

Teachers may help students not only to acquire the target language successfully but also to behave responsibly so that they can make an active contribution to their learning process. Indeed, the learner autonomy promotion is not merely telling the students to become autonomous learners but, in fact, the focal points of learning, teaching and assessment strategies should be changed from passive to active approach in order to facilitate the students’ development of necessary skills for their successful adoption of autonomous learner (Railton and Watson, 2005). In this way, they are allowed to take some responsibility for their language acquisition because learner autonomous is one of the important key to the success of students (Little, 1995: 175) and, when compared to non-autonomous approach, autonomous learning tends to be more effective (Benson, 2001).

The pedagogical concepts on the implementation of learner autonomy in responding to the Thai learning contexts have been explored in many research papers. For example, Vanijdee (2003) explored learner autonomy in a distance education setting in Thailand based on the data collection through the questionnaire distributed nationwide students, Think Aloud Protocols and interviews. The results of this research were translated into the conclusions about recommendations for distance language course development. Additionally, Nantachaipan (2004) studied the effects of learner autonomy in an English Oral Presentation course. A specially designed lesson plan focusing on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies promoted oral presentation skills and learner autonomy. The results indicated the
success of learner autonomy promotion and the progress of students’ presentation skills. Other classroom research investigated the extent to which learner autonomy could be fostered in a blended learning situation involving the integration of a course management system into a traditional face-to-face English class (Sanprasert, 2010). The research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings suggested that the course management system played a prominent role in the creation and development of four aspects of learner autonomy: perception, autonomous behavior, autonomous strategy and interdependence. Nonetheless, many classroom researches conducted in Thai EFL educational context also aimed at fostering Thai students’ live long learning. The empirical knowledge based on the autonomy in Thai language education in relation to extensive reading and learner autonomy remains somewhat dearth. Therefore, more research should be conducted and this study was undertaken in responding to that necessity.

**Reading Strategies to Promote Learner Autonomy**

The instruction of reading strategies may probably be regarded as an important factor for the success of learner autonomy. This is due to the fact that reading strategies are the “actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use, often unconsciously, to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2” (Oxford, 1990: 1). With suitable knowledge of those reading strategies, students may probably become less dependent on the teacher and have more knowledge and greater awareness of the significance of reading strategies to the success of extensive reading program. In other words, the instruction of strategies may aim to enhance students’ active involvement in reading activities instead of the dependence on their teacher; therefore, apart from promoting reading comprehension, reading strategies may then become a key factor that increase students’ motivation to read extensively based on their knowledge of strategies (Ciaran, 2000; Chamot, 2005).

The success of learner autonomy may also require the understanding of how to use different reading strategies effectively and efficiently. Hence, learning and practicing is necessary accordingly. Benson (2001: 75) argues that “…fostering autonomy does not imply that we simply leave learners to their own devices, but that we actively encourage and assist them to take control of their learning.” The teacher, for example, could train students on how to use various reading strategies to deal with different type of reading texts. In this way, students manage to read strategically and confidently by themselves and ultimately develop their learner
autonomy as the readers who possess certain reading proficiency levels to pursue reading activities on their own (Bosma and Blok, 1992; Day and Bamford, 1998; Yamashita, 2008).

Zhang and Wu (2009) conducted a study with Chinese high school students in light of their degree of metacognitive awareness of EFL reading strategies, which are measured through their reported use of EFL reading strategies. Firstly, despite the fact that a wide range of strategies were used by students, the differences between good- and low-proficiency learners in respective strategic knowledge were noticeable. The former was able to make a plan for reading, monitor their comprehension, and select appropriate strategies. Meanwhile, the latter may still need teacher coaching, especially the informed metacognitive strategy training course to lead them to think about their reading processes, identify their weaknesses, and take remedial measures. Also, it was revealed that some students in this study could use reading strategies quite well due to their increased opportunity to have frequent exposure to English through various kinds of channels such as Internet-based reading materials and English multimedia materials. Therefore, these findings may then reflect the benefit of the change of learning environment with poor language input to the one with active and more exposure input.

To sum up, the possession of reading strategies was an essential factor for students to be successful in reading activities and to have better reading comprehension. It may also be necessary for teachers to provide suitable guidelines and recommendations to students, especially those with lower reading proficiency. In particular, reading strategies may help promote students’ learner autonomy because they may have greater enjoyment and motivation to read inside and outside the classroom once they possess more extensive knowledge of reading strategies. Apart from the improved reading proficiency, students may use those reading strategies while reading autonomously on their own resulting in greater learner autonomy in the long term.

**Purposes of the Study**

In Thailand, empirical knowledge on the pursuit of ER instruction for learner autonomy promotion is still vague; thus, moving away from the theoretical proposition to the actual pedagogy, especially learner autonomy promotion through the reading process is a challenging issue. The purpose of this study is to find out whether autonomous learning strategies integrated into ER results in changes in students’ perceptions toward autonomous
learning and autonomous learning practices. Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. To what extent does ER improve the general reading ability of second year undergraduate students of Naresuan University?
2. Which autonomous learning strategies are utilized by Thai university students while participating in ER?

Operational Terms

Learner autonomy training strategies are to imbue learner autonomy focusing on the methodological and psychological preparations. The former involves cognitive and metacognitive strategies, while the latter concerns the attitudes. Therefore, learner autonomy training strategies are the process of articulating students’ attitudes toward personal responsibility and learning capacity. This is to motivate the students’ active participation in the learning process and to encourage them to learn responsively and independently.

Research Methodology

Participants

The participants in this ten-week study were 37 second-year undergraduate students from the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences majoring in Cardio-thoracic Technology at Naresuan University (NU). A simple random selection of participants was made among those students who enrolled in the ‘Reading Academic English’ course in the second semester of the 2011 academic year. The participants were then classified into high and low proficiency groups based on their pre-test scores. Students in the high proficiency group had +0.5 SD above mean score, while their counterparts in the low proficiency group had -0.5SD below mean score. The middle-level proficiency students continued participating in ER but were excluded from the learner autonomy strategies training questionnaire because their use of strategies was unnoticeable. There were ten students each in high and low proficiency level groups (high: Mean = 26.80, SD = 3.33, and low: Mean =16.40, SD = 1.58).
Instruments

The General English Reading Ability Test

The general English reading ability test used in this study was specially developed by the researcher to assess students' pre- and post-treatment reading ability. There were 45 items in a multiple-choice format focusing on different aspects of reading comprehension, e.g. referencing, finding main ideas and details, predicting, using a dictionary, and identifying purposes. The same test was used as both a pre- and post-test. The reliability coefficient of this test was .72; therefore, the test was considered moderately reliable. A dependent sample t-test was used to study the changes of students’ general English reading ability.

Learner Autonomy Training Strategies Questionnaire

A learner autonomy training strategies questionnaire was developed to measure the students’ use of autonomous learning strategies. This questionnaire was adapted in part from Oxford (1990) and O’Malley and Chamot (1990). The questions were divided into three main categories, and each category had subscales—cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and attitudes (personal responsibility, personal capacity). Before the questionnaire was administered to the participants, it was translated into Thai and validated on the basis of Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) by three experts from a Thai university who have the expertise in English language instruction and learner autonomy research realms. In this regard, the content validity of the questionnaire was 0.93 and its reliability coefficient was .90.

Bookworm’s Diary

A Bookworm's Diary was designed to capture the students’ progress in ER and learner autonomy strategy training process, which concern three phases: planning, self-monitoring, and evaluation. For planning, students set up their weekly reading goals and monitored their own learning by keeping a record of the reading strategies they used and problems they encountered. They also reported their success and failure in the strategy use, planned the next lessons as well as reflected on self-evaluation. The Bookworm's Diary was in both English and Thai versions. The data were encoded and categorized in order to investigate students' progress.

Research Procedures

The ER program used in this study was part of the Reading Academic English course for second-year university students at Naresuan University. It was a ten-week program that
aimed to encourage students to read extensively both in and out of class, to enhance their motivation and positive attitudes toward reading in English, and to allow them to read and be exposed to comprehensible input through extensive reading at their own pace and within their linguistic competence. Learner autonomy training strategies were also incorporated so that students could master both the learning process and product simultaneously. Students learned how to gain control over their learning and became more autonomous learners, while also improving their overall reading comprehension ability.

In the beginning, the participants took the general reading ability test and completed the learner autonomy training questionnaire. In each week, the class was divided into three standard consecutive periods of 50 minutes. The first period was the intensive reading-based (IR-based) instruction focusing on the integration of reading skills and strategies (e.g. skimming, scanning, guessing word meanings, finding main ideas, finding supporting details, using references, etc.) and the cognitive learning strategies (e.g. resourcing, deduction, imagery, keyword method, transfer, inferencing, translation, summarizing, etc.) for learner autonomy promotion. The second part concerned ER activities (e.g. selecting appropriate books, introducing books to friends) and learner autonomy training strategies (e.g. building up cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies—planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation). Lastly, it was devoted to the sustained silent reading session in which the students are allowed to borrow and return books and recommended them to their friends. They spent time on reading own their own pace and shared their information with their peers.

Graded content readers on a wide length of topics were available for students to choose based on their interest and proficiency levels. They were also regularly encouraged to read in their own time, and to read at least one book weekly or as much as possible. As the semester progressed, they were encouraged to read more complex or difficult articles to challenge their reading ability and increase their vocabulary knowledge.

During the course of the experiment, students kept a record of their own reading behavior in the Bookworm's diary including their weekly reading plans, reading time, reading strategies, problems and solutions, brief summary, and self-evaluation of their reading performance. The purpose of this was to encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning process within their own learning capacity. This agrees with a concept proposed by Day and Bamford (2002) who claimed that after the students’ exposure to the extensive reading over a period of time, they tended to have greater confidence in reading and learning.
The confident learners are likely able to manage their knowledge and skills so they ultimately perceive themselves as the autonomous learners who are capable of learning and taking control over their own learning process (Littlewoods, 1996). Therefore, all activities conducted in this research were under learner autonomy training strategy frameworks, which included the instruction of cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and affective considerations. The students thus learned about reading strategies. All at the same time, they were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning based on their own reading plans, while keeping track of their learning process by monitoring and evaluating their reading performance based on diary entries. At the end of the semester, post-test and post-questionnaire with the same contents as the pre-test and pre-questionnaire were distributed to the students for the evaluation of their progress and performance.

Data collection and analysis

The scores obtained from the pre- and post-tests were statistically compared with a t-test using the SPSS version 17.0. The questionnaire was analyzed in terms of means and standard deviations. Those scores signified the differences in the reading ability and the pre- and post-experiment use of learner autonomy strategies. The Bookworm’s Diary were coded and categorized in order to investigate student’s progression in learner autonomy.

Findings and Discussions

1. ER and general reading ability of second year undergraduate students of Naresuan University

Post-test mean scores of the students’ English reading ability were significantly higher than their pre-test mean scores \((t (36) = 4.12, p < .001)\). The effect size calculated by Cohen’s \(d\) suggested that the improvement was medium \((d=.68)\), so it could be said that extensive reading was likely to have a moderate impact on the students' general reading ability, as shown in Table 1 below.

The performance of the high proficiency group on the General English Reading Ability post-test was not significantly different from that of the pre-test \((t (9) =.218, p > 0.05)\). The effect size also indicated that the difference in the mean scores between the pre- and post-English Reading Ability Test was small \((d = .07)\). In contrast, the low proficiency group had a significant effect size on the English ability post-test \((t (9) = 5.071, p ≤ .001)\). This effect size
was large. Nevertheless, since this study was a one-group pre- and post-test design, generalization of the results was limited and should be interpreted with caution.

**Table 1: Students’ Reading Ability before and after the implementation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ER</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21.35</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>4.121</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>27.32</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26.80</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.218</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.832</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.40</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>5.071</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td>7.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.30</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\[P \leq .001\]

The findings indicated that the English reading ability of the students in the low proficiency group pre- and post-test mean scores were increased dramatically. This implied the positive impact of ER on low proficiency students’ reading ability. Many other studies (Kirin and Wasanasomsithi, 2010; Pratontep and Chinwonno, 2008; Yamashita, 2008; Tanaka and Stapleton, 2007; DoHuy, Hull and Tepsuriwong, 2006) also revealed that reading comprehension was enhanced through ER-based ESL classroom. According to the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), ESL learners’ reading comprehension improved once they were exposed to comprehensible input for a period of time. Anderson (1996) also claimed that the amount of reading substantially correlated with reading comprehension improvement. In other words, the more students read, the more improvement they gained as time went by.

Thai ESL students tended to have only fairly limited exposure to English reading due to low language proficiency, and a lack of both resources and reading habit. All these factors may hinder their reading improvement. Thus, ER provided them with a valuable chance to uncover their reading ability along with the promotion of positive attitudes toward English reading. ER was basically a meaning-focused rather than form-focused process so the students kept reading at their own pace without being worried about unknown or difficult words. When they read extensively in ER-based classrooms in a stress-free environment, they gained more reading experience and competence, while their vocabulary knowledge was broadened.
Importantly, students with poor reading skill may begin to recognize that reading was not a difficult task and gradually developed an active reading habit. All these factors may be a foundation for their long-term reading ability improvement.

However, some have argued that for ESL learners, extensive reading may not be effective if it is implemented only for a short duration. Grabe and Stoller (2002) argued that observing benefits from extensive reading in a short period of time was difficult, so extensive reading was often excluded from the curriculum before the real outputs were recognized by L2 teachers. Krashen and Smith (2006, cited in Pratontep and Chinwonno, 2008) recommended that, to observe progressive results from reading comprehension, the implementation of ER should be longer than seven months. Due to the time limit of this study, the pre- and post-tests revealed that the reading ability of the high proficiency group increased slightly but clear improvement may not be observed within the ten-week program. However, if students continue reading for a longer period of time, their progress toward ER and their reading ability may increase. In this regard, to observe an improvement of high proficiency students’ performance, they may be challenged, for example, by being assigned more complicated reading materials, which are relatively beyond their actual reading proficiency level.

On the other hand, the pre- and post-test mean scores of the low level proficiency group were significantly improved so it was possible that ER especially benefitted students with lower reading ability. This phenomenon concurs with previous studies on ER (Protonate and Chinbone 2008; Sheu 2003; Tanaka 2003). Thus, students with a low proficiency level of reading ability should participate in ER in order to maximize their reading skills and comprehension. According to Day and Bamford (1998), ER is a very enjoyable and motivating way for enhancing language input. Based on this notion, students with a low level of reading ability will be able to practice their reading strategies that they had learned without academic anxiety. They will also be motivated to read and study more at the same time. After a period of time, their English skills, in particular their reading skills will be reasonably improved.

2. Learner autonomy strategies used by second year undergraduate students of Naresuan University while participating in ER

Learner autonomy strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and affective.
Cognitive strategies

The use of learner autonomy learning strategies by the high and low proficiency groups was revealed. Both groups often used imagination and summarizing strategies. The use of ‘making inferences/guessing strategy was high in the high proficiency group, while the low proficiency group frequently used the translation strategy. On the other hand, the mechanical means to store information and note taking strategies were rarely used by either the high or low proficiency groups (See Table 2 below.).

Table 2: Learner Autonomy Strategies in ER Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Low (n=10)</th>
<th>High (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Cognitive strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Using background knowledge</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Summarizing</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Predicting</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Making inferences/ Guessing</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Using resources</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Using imagination</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Taking notes</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 Using mechanical means to store information</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9 Transferring</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10 Using key word to find information</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11 Using translation</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.12 Self-talk</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Metacognitive Strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Planning</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Monitoring</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Self-evaluating</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Affective Strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Sense of Responsibility</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Sense of Personal capability</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05 (Test value = 3.50; 1.00-1.05 = very low; 1.51-2.50 = low; 2.51-3.50 = moderate; 3.51-4.50 = high; 4.51-5.00 = very high)

While participating in ER, students in both groups, especially those with inferior reading skills, tended to look at pictures in texts, and imagined what the texts would be about from those images. They also summarized the information mentally or in writing for their own understanding. However, students in the high proficiency group reported that they
usually tried to guess the contextual meaning of unknown words rather than use a dictionary. On the other hand, students in the low proficiency group often translated texts into Thai while reading. In particular, both groups rarely took notes or made new-word lists for later review.

The findings from the learner autonomy training strategies questionnaire showed that students from both groups reported using learner autonomy learning strategies to manage their learning process in similar ways. However, the high proficiency group employed learner autonomy strategies less deviously than the lower one. In the cognitive phase, both the high and low level proficiency groups frequently used imagination and summarizing strategies. When these students were exposed to massive amounts of different input with various degrees of text complexity, the easiest way for them to overcome this problem was to look at pictures in the text to help them predict and understand the story. Indeed, this strategy was much utilized by the low proficiency group because of their limited reading proficiency. While participating in ER, students were required to complete a self-report in diary form and summarize the texts they had read. This could explain why the summarizing strategy was frequently used compared to other strategies. The summaries indirectly enabled students to review key ideas from what they had read and served as the assessment tool for the teacher (Barfield, n.d.).

In addition, making inferences/guessing was the most popular strategy among students in the high proficiency group. Generally, ‘meaning’ was the focal point of ER, not the form, so in the ER-based classes, students were encouraged not to use dictionaries when they did not understand words, as using dictionaries would slow down reading speed and disrupt the whole reading process. Impatient readers may then become bored and stop reading. Extensive reading was a chance to continue reading, and thus to practice such strategies, such as guessing at or ignoring unknown words or passages, going for the general meaning, and being comfortable with a certain level of ambiguity (Day and Bamford, 2002).

On the other hand, low-proficient students struggling with text-meaning opted to use translation strategies when they read extensively even though, as Pressley and Afferbach (1995 cited in Zhang & Wu, 2009) asserted, such translation slows reading speed. However, translation strategies help in clarifying meaning when comprehension broke down. Students with low proficiency had difficulty in terms of text meaning; they solved this problem by translating English into Thai for text comprehension. This strategy held up their reading
process, but it was an initial stage for unskilled readers to begin with. Once they became familiar with comprehensive texts, their reading speed would accelerate eventually.

With respect to the note-taking strategy, the students rarely took notes or made vocabulary word cards while reading because they may believe that doing such things reduced their reading speed and interrupted their reading concentration. Therefore, it will be necessary for the teacher who takes the role of ‘reading counselor’ in ER-based classes to give advice on how to effectively take notes or make word cards for future review.

Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies, which involved planning, monitoring, evaluation, and manipulation of cognitive processes, refer to how learners manage those processes for achieving their desired learning objectives and optimal learning outcomes (Paris, 2002; Veeman et al., 2006). Therefore, readers could choose proper strategies suitable for their own reading purposes and cognitive style, given that they had good metacognitive awareness. They also did a self-evaluation of reading comprehension and effectiveness of chosen strategies so that they could adjust those strategies in a proper manner (Cohen, 1998; Hudson, 2007; Zhang and Wu, 2009). In this particular study, the students’ use of metacognitive strategies were enhanced through the implementation of ER integrated with learner autonomy training strategies in order to enable them to become autonomous learners in the long term.

Therefore, according to the findings, the high proficiency group used strategies to regulate metacognition more often than the low proficiency group (See Table 2). Both groups usually employed self-monitoring strategies, which included an awareness of reading performance, recognition of strengths and weaknesses in the learning process, identification of problems and solutions, and keeping track of learning outcomes.

According to Anderson (1996), both high and low proficiency L2 readers may use the same strategies, but more proficient readers tend to use a higher number of different strategies and can efficiently optimize their use. Hence, from the findings, it was evident that there was frequent use of metacognitive strategies among the high proficiency group, due to higher reading proficiency, as well as the low level proficiency group. That is, characteristics of active readers were found among these groups of students. They were aware of the metacognitive process and could use a wide range of reading strategies when reading to achieve understanding. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Hadwin et al.,
2001; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Zhang et al., 2008) claiming that effective and successful ESL readers were conscious of what reading strategies should be used.

**Affective strategies**

After the ten-week implementation, it was found that both groups had positive attitudes towards learner autonomy, and took greater responsibility for their own learning. The students reported that their reading ability improved after reading extensively and they were also pleased to take charge of their own learning. They were able to follow their reading plans that they had set before hand and completed the reading tasks by themselves.

The above findings conformed to one of the main purposes of this research, which was the promotion of the students’ reading enjoyment through the implementation of the affective strategies, which were allowing students to choose their preferred books and to stop reading if the book was uninteresting or failed to satisfy their expectations. Indeed, in ER programs, the learners are usually motivated to read (Bell, 1998 cited in DoHuy et al., 2006) so that they become eager readers (Mason and Krashen, 1997, cited in DoHuy et al., 2006).

In conclusion, the findings showed a significant gain in English reading ability. If the students were provided with autonomous learning strategy training through reading a range of their preferred reading materials, they may gain optimal benefit from the exposure to reading texts and learning strategies, which they could apply in the future. It was revealed that low proficiency groups may greater benefit from reading extensive English texts than high proficiency groups. Thus, Thai students in general should be trained to take charge of their own learning process and to develop their use of reading ability strategies.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Firstly, it is recommended that Thai students or EFL students be exposed to ER to enhance their reading ability; therefore, ER should be incorporated into curriculums, for example by integrating sustained silent reading with reading for pleasure. In this way, they could gradually develop their reading skills and good reading habits. Moreover, students could develop their reading competence at their own rate when they are allowed to read what they chose themselves and enjoy. Once students’ different needs and interests are satisfied, an increase of their reading motivation should be expected. This would in turn benefit their target language acquisition greatly.
The success of ER in this study depended first and foremost on the initiatives of teachers who understood the students’ English proficiency level in order to design suitable reading tasks and materials. For high proficiency students, teachers should challenge their ability by encouraging them to choose/read articles beyond their actual level of English proficiency and create an active learning environment to motivate them to read more, for example, hold group discussions where students can share their reading experiences with their peers. Meanwhile, the low-proficiency ones need more support from their teachers in terms of reading strategies and motivation. They should start reading according to their proficiency level and gradually increase the difficulty level once their language competency improved from time to time throughout the semester. By doing this, students will not feel that reading is a burden but it will become an enjoyable activity. Indeed, Leung (2002) suggested that the motivation of learners to read in the L2 could be enhanced if they were provided with interesting materials at a suitable difficulty level.

Secondly, students should be permitted to take responsibility for their own learning in order that they could learn independently and, ultimately, become autonomous learners. However, it was not merely implied that students were allowed to read on their own because they tended to have limited experience of learner autonomy at the beginning. Therefore, proper training was the key. The students should learn how to apply ER strategies in selecting suitable reading materials and developing good reading habits to enhance their reading habit in the long term. Benson (2001) argued that the teachers should not leave the learners to engage in learner autonomy alone but they should actively encourage and provide the necessary supports for the learners to enable them to take control of their learning. Hence, the teacher was a key factor in the success or failure of students’ learner autonomy development so training sessions (e.g. reading methodology, extensive reading activities, and learner autonomy strategies) before ER implementation were also essential for the teachers. As a result, it could be said that ER integrated with learner autonomy training strategies in this particular research was an alternative way for teachers to apply for the greatest benefit of Thai undergraduate students and, importantly, for their long-term improvement of English proficiency as a whole.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated students’ use of autonomous learning strategies and English
reading ability in ER. The findings supported the contention that ER had the positive effects on students’ reading ability, especially for low-proficiency readers. Since ER was primarily a private and individual activity (Day and Bamford, 1998), the students had to select their own books, read silently by themselves, and took the responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, they were expected to go along the path toward the learner autonomy improvement to a certain degree. By the end of ten-week program, the students had better understanding of learner autonomy learning strategies and, from their reading experience, could draw what steps they should take to achieve their reading goals or to evaluate their reading performance. Once students could be responsible for their own learning, they were ready to become autonomous learners sooner or later.

This study was subject to several limitations. One was related to research design, which was limited to one treatment of participants from a homogeneous group in terms of educational background, age, and level of language proficiency. Besides, the sample size of the study was relatively small. For this reason, generalizability of findings was thus limited. Another limitation concerned the time constraint; the semester could not be extended for a longer period of time; hence, students’ improved reading abilities and learning performances could not be clearly revealed. Therefore, further research should promote ER instruction in a broad range of classrooms over a longer continual duration, which may contribute to more substantial learning outcomes.

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