

Students and Teacher's Views on a Multimodal Approach to English Reading Skill Development of Thai EFL Students in a University Context

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the students' views from Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University (NPRU) on how the teacher taught English reading skills through a traditional teaching approach and a multimodal approach, and to understand what the teacher has experienced from the use of the two approaches. The study employed mixed methods for data collection – questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview. The findings revealed that most of the students felt very uncomfortable when learning English reading through the traditional teaching approach and became more engaged in the multimodal approach. Accordingly, the teacher was more favorable towards the benefits of using the multimodal approach to teaching English reading as the students were more motivated. Students with less reading proficiency preferred to learn English through the traditional approach. On the contrary, those with more reading proficiency revealed that the approach was not interesting and they expected to see the teacher teach actively with a variety of teaching materials because they could significantly support and increase their learning achievement. Research implications drawn from the findings could be contributed to a combination of the two approaches integrated in the teaching and learning of EFL reading in Thai university contexts.

Keywords: a multimodal approach, a traditional approach, reading skill, teaching English reading, Thai EFL students

1. Introduction

The English language is considered as an important communication ‘tool’ for people who have different mother tongues and is also widely used as an official language of many countries around the world. Accordingly, people who are proficient in English are likely to have more advantages in not only business but also education (Crystal, 2003).

Among the four skills of English, reading is an important skill for learning the language and acquiring knowledge (Yoosabai, 2009). In addition, it is one of the skills included in the Thai curriculum. Nita and Ridha (2017) remarked that having good reading skills could help learners to have more understanding in what they are learning. Nevertheless, from the National Statistical Office, Homtaintong (2016, April 6) reported that the average of Thai people’s reading time in a day is very short.

Many students of Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University (NPRU), the context where this research was carried out, have problems of English comprehension. Even though they can read any text sources in English, they are unable to interpret meanings of what they have read. From the researcher’s observation, one of the reasons could be that students are not well aware of how to use appropriate reading strategies when reading English texts whereas it is possible that teachers may choose inappropriate teaching methods. According to the university policies, students in all majors have to enroll in at least 2-3 English courses and take an exit English test before graduating. Nevertheless, their reading performance scores are apparently the lowest compared with other English skills. To support this, Perez et al. (2018)’s research on reading comprehensive skills of NPRU students found that the students lack English reading skills. Remarkably, they did not know much vocabulary; as a result, they were unable to comprehend what the text meant or guessed the vocabulary’s meanings. Even worse, the students in English majors were less proficient in reading comprehension (Jirapa Sriniam, personal communication, February 25, 2018).

Many scholars in EFL teaching and learning have conducted research on the use of a multimodal approach in EFL classrooms. Archer (2006), for example, investigated the advantages of modes used in a science classroom. It was found that there were potentials and limitations of each mode used for representing meanings. Moreover, Lirola (2016) postulated that using a multimodal approach could help students not only to understand multimodal texts

and other instruction materials, such as videos and images, but also to make the most of their learning process.

This study attempted to explore an application of the multimodal approach to teaching English reading. Through this approach, the teacher could combine the main reading text with other dynamic modes of teaching materials, such as photographs, power point presentations, or media, added to reading lessons rather than using only one mode (text reading materials) for teaching English reading.

The purposes of this study were to explore 1) the NPRU students' views on how the teacher taught their English reading through a traditional teaching approach, 2) the NPRU students' views on how the teacher taught English reading through a multimodal approach, and 3) what the NPRU students and the teacher experienced from using the two different approaches.

2. Literature Review

The research framework underlines multimodal literacy and the application of multimodality to teaching English reading. According to Jewitt (2014), multimodal literacy generally refers to language study which combines more than one mode of meanings and originates from a social semiotic theory. The term 'multimodality' identifies approaches to understanding of communication practices with the use of modes (media) to compose texts. In accordance with this, Mills and Unsworth (2017) explained that modes include verbal and non-verbal languages such as speech, gestures, music, photograph images, written texts, moving images, and so on. These can be considered dynamic and generated by language users in different cultures and communities.

A multimodal approach can be referred to as an application of various semiotic modes of resources for teaching English reading (Jewitt, 2014). The approach, according to Lauer (2009), is a term developed by the New London Group in 2000 who believed that all the modes could be used for meaning making in many ways. For this reason, this approach is a useful teaching style as it helps students to learn or acquire knowledge from the information presented in multiple modes – both visual and auditory (Chen & Fu, 2003).

Considering the use of multimodality in pedagogy, many researchers have employed this as an approach to improving students' literacy, both plain and media texts (Jewitt, 2014). For example, the study of Martinec and Salway (2005) and Royce (2007) focused on the way in which images in reading texts which were used for teaching English reading constructed

meanings. Images and meanings were related; images constructed meanings of multimodal texts.

Bahareh and Narjes (2015) studied the impact of multimodal texts on reading achievements of Iranian secondary school students. Four groups of students received different instruction approaches: linear texts, multimodal printed texts, non-printed multimodal texts, and both printed and non-printed multimodal texts. The results showed that the approach of using multimodal texts helped the students to comprehend the reading texts better than other approaches with non-multimodal texts. Moreover, Lirola (2016) examined the importance of promoting a multimodal teaching approach in Spanish EFL classrooms instead of using the text-based teaching approach. The mode employed included a variety of reading texts with colours, pictures, sounds, and so on. With the combinations of presentations, the students rated that the multimodal approach was one of the most interesting approaches which teachers should adopt and use in EFL classrooms.

3. Methodology

The research samples of this study were 32 students and one teacher in Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University (NPRU). The student participants studying in the second year of a business English major were purposively chosen for the study. The teacher participant was the only one English teacher who volunteered to participate in this study. He had been teaching English subjects to NPRU students for 10 years and was currently the teacher teaching English reading to the student participants. For the interviews, only three out of the total number of 32 student participants were selected. However, all the 32 student participants were required to take part in the questionnaire survey. The most favorable rating appears to be the use of a multimodal approach.

This mixed-method research employed a sequential explanatory design. Quantitative data had been collected before moving onto the qualitative data collection which are expected to further explain and triangulate the quantitative findings from the questionnaire survey (Creswell, 2015). Two questionnaires were administered for collecting the students' views on how the teacher used a traditional approach and a multimodal approach to teaching English reading. Subsequently, the semi-structured interviews with the students and the teacher were carried out to draw on their views towards the use of two different teaching approaches and to help probe the students' responses to the questionnaire.

Before the data collection procedure, the researcher had sent the consent form to the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University (NPRU) to ask for permission for data collection. All the student and teacher participants were informed about the research objectives. After that, the first questionnaire focusing on a prior use of a multimodal approach was distributed to all 32 student participants who were given enough time (1.30 hrs.) to complete all the question items. Then, the teacher participant started to teach English reading with the use of a multimodal approach. The teaching and learning sessions with the use of multimodal approach lasted two weeks. The lessons which the teacher taught in class were mainly about folk tales. To assure that the teacher really used a multimodal approach in accompany the teaching of English reading, the researcher informed and explained to the teacher a variety of modes to be used such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips to support the reading lessons. After that, the researcher was a teaching assistant (TA) and an observer in the reading classes. Later, the second questionnaire focusing on teaching practices after using a multimodal approach was distributed to all 32 student participants who were given enough time to complete all the question items. When the researcher finished collecting quantitative data from the questionnaire survey, three student participants were selected for the following interviews.

The quantitative data were analysed and compared by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The data were then reported in frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation (SD). The researcher collected the qualitative data from two open-ended questions in the two questionnaire surveys concerning English reading teaching through a traditional approach and a multimodal approach. The data were also derived from the teacher and the students' views in response to the semi-structured interviews. To answer the research questions, the collected data were coded and categorised into themes. For ethical consideration, a consent form was given to the dean of the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences to ask for ~~a~~ permission to collect data in the context and the research objectives were explained to all the participants. All the participants' names were made anonymous and were given codes (S1, S2, and S3). When the researcher finished transcribing the interview data, the transcription was sent back to the participants for member checking. Language experts were asked to translate the interview transcription from Thai to English.

4. Findings

Based on the research questions, the findings from questionnaires and interviews will be presented in the three following sections.

4.1 The students' views on how the teacher taught English reading skills through a traditional teaching approach

The researcher used an SPSS program to analyse the students' rating in response to all 38 statement items in the questionnaire in order to investigate the students' views (N=32) on the use of a traditional approach in the reading class. As shown in Table 4.1, more than half of the students agreed that the teacher's traditional teaching approach was interesting (M = 3.72) as the results of statement item 27 show. However, in response to statement item 28, the students were likely to have less agreement with the way they were taught.

Table 4.1 Students' Views on Teaching and Learning English Reading with the Use of a Traditional Approach (N=32)

| Item | Statement | Level of Agreement | | | | | Mean |
|------|--|--------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------|------|
| | | Strongly Agree | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | |
| 27 | The teacher's teaching method is interesting. | 8 (25.0%) | 11 (34.4%) | 6 (28.1%) | 4 (12.5%) | 0 (0.00%) | 3.72 |
| 28 | I enjoy studying English reading with the use of the current teaching method. | 3 (9.4%) | 7 (21.9%) | 13 (40.6%) | 8 (25.0%) | 1 (3.1%) | 3.09 |
| 31 | I like the way in which the teacher translates the text word by word. | 4 (12.5%) | 10 (31.3%) | 8 (25.0%) | 5 (15.6%) | 5 (15.6%) | 3.09 |
| 38 | With the use of the current teaching (traditional) approach, students and the teacher can have more interaction which is helpful for reading skill practice. | 2 (6.3%) | 10 (31.3%) | 13 (40.6%) | 6 (18.8%) | 1 (3.1%) | 3.19 |

Half of the students were lenient to another teaching approach which could be more interesting while a quarter of them were undecided and another quarter did not want to learn English reading with another approach. Interestingly, in response to statement item 28, with a mean score of 3.09, 13 students (40.6%) were undecided whether or not they enjoyed studying English reading with a traditional approach. The same number of students giving responses to statement item 38 (40.6%) were also undecided if a traditional approach could encourage them and the teacher to have more interaction and this would be helpful for reading skill practice ($M = 3.19$). With the highest disagreement, the students' responses to statement item 31 indicated that only one third of the students strongly disagreed with the way in which the teacher translated word by word when teaching English reading (15.6%). The second most disagreement went to statement item 28 which showed that 28.1% of the students did not enjoy the traditional approach when studying English reading.

During the interview, three student interviewees agreed that using a traditional approach was useful for the students who had very limited vocabulary and had no confidence to read aloud themselves. With the use of this approach, the students did not have to worry about making any mistakes. The teacher could be a facilitator who helped guide how to pronounce vocabulary correctly, indicate meanings of sentences, and lead them to comprehend the reading texts. As one student (S1) explained,

I like the way in which the teacher asks me to repeat the sentences after him (the teacher) because I do not have to worry about making any mistakes.

However, all the student interviewees gave negative comments on the use of a traditional approach and wanted the teacher to use another teaching approach which could help motivate and encourage them to read more, resulting in developing their reading abilities and becoming more proficient readers. One student (S1) suggested:

I do not enjoy or have fun in the reading class with the use of a traditional approach. The students are truly passive learners waiting for the teacher to fill them with some knowledge. I prefer the way in which the teacher lets the students start reading themselves and corrects them if they make any mistakes. Of course, using teaching material only from the textbook is not interesting anymore. Thus, I want the teacher to change to the way which can help encourage me to read more and motivate me to develop my reading skills.

4.2 The students' views on how the teacher taught English reading skills through a multimodal teaching approach

This section illustrates the quantitative and qualitative findings in relation to students' views on learning English reading with the use of a multimodal approach.

Table 4.2 Students' Views on Teaching and Learning English Reading with the Use of a Multimodal Approach (N=32)

| Item | Statement | Level of Agreement | | | | | Mean |
|------|---|--------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------|------|
| | | Strongly Agree | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | |
| 27 | The teacher's teaching materials that include various kinds of modes such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips are interesting. | 19 (59.4%) | 8 (25.0%) | 4 (12.5%) | 1 (3.1%) | 0 (0.00%) | 4.41 |
| 28 | I enjoy studying English reading with various kinds of modes such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips. | 17 (53.1%) | 12 (37.5%) | 3 (9.4%) | 0 (0.00%) | 0 (0.00%) | 4.44 |
| 30 | The various kinds of modes such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips encourage me to study English reading. | 17 (53.1%) | 14 (43.8%) | 1 (3.1%) | 0 (0.00%) | 0 (0.00%) | 4.50 |
| 31 | The various kinds of modes such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips motivate me to study English reading. | 13 (40.6%) | 18 (56.3%) | 1 (3.1%) | 0 (0.00%) | 0 (0.00%) | 4.38 |
| 34 | When teaching reading skills through various kinds of modes such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips, it is necessary that the teacher uses not only the main | 16 (50.0%) | 16 (50.0%) | 0 (0.00%) | 0 (0.00%) | 0 (0.00%) | 4.50 |

| Item | Statement | Level of Agreement | | | | | Mean |
|------|--|--------------------|-------|-----------|----------|-------------------|------|
| | | Strongly Agree | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | |
| | textbook but other sources and teaching materials. | | | | | | |

Table 4.2 interestingly showed that most students agreed with the statement that a multimodal approach was interesting and the teaching materials (texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips) helped encourage and motivate them to learn English reading and read more (statement items 27, 30, and 31). Moreover, with the highest mean score of 4.50, all of the students (100%) agreed with the statement item 34 that when the teacher taught English reading through various kinds of modes such as texts, pictures, sounds and video clips, it was necessary for the teacher to use other sources and teaching materials rather than only the main textbook. Furthermore, with the mean score of 4.44, almost all of the students (90.6%) enjoyed - various modes of teaching materials such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips when studying English reading (item 28). Accordingly, in response to the statement item 31, almost all the students (96.9%), except only one, either strongly agreed or agreed that they were motivated to study English reading through various kinds of modes ($M = 4.38$). Overall, this section showed significant agreement with very little indecision and almost no disagreement.

The researcher developed the interview questions in order to gain more details from the three student interviewees. The qualitative data were derived from the semi-structured interviews focusing on the teacher's use of a multimodal approach to teaching English reading. It was interesting to note that all the three could see how the multimodal approach was supportive for finding a main idea, a topic sentence, and references in a reading text. Also, these modes helped them to better comprehend what the text meant and the reading became more interesting. One student (S2) elaborated:

Sometimes, I don't understand the reading text because I don't know where the topic sentence is or what the main idea is about. With the use of pictures, sounds, and video clips, I can find the main idea, topic sentence, and references more easily because of the tone of the sounds and the details from the pictures and video clips.

Another student (S3) supported:

Using various kinds of modes such as texts, pictures, sounds, and video clips to teach reading motivates and encourages me to read, listen, and watch more. I feel that it helps the passages from textbook become more interesting.

4.3 The teacher's views from the use of the two different approaches

The teacher mentioned two different points concerning the two teaching approaches: classroom environment and students' motivation. Most of the students had positive views towards the use of a multimodal approach because there were many kinds of teaching materials and the students became more attentive in the class. As a result, the reading class was lively and fun. Some students who had positive attitudes toward a traditional approach were always those who lacked vocabulary and had low reading skills because they preferred having the teacher as a learning facilitator. This was the reason why the classroom atmosphere was different. Furthermore, the multimodal approach helped motivate the students to focus more on the reading lesson because the class activities in class and interesting teaching modes were more supportive.

When teaching with the traditional approach, the teacher revealed that the students always waited for the teacher to move on and they did not show much motivation, encouragement, or inspiration to learn. As a result, the teacher was extremely exhausted. To solve this problem, the teacher explained:

I always ask the students to sit in groups or work with a peer. A student with poor reading ability will be encouraged to sit with another one who is more proficient. After that, all the students share ideas derived from the reading texts such as main idea, topic sentence, and word references with their classmates. This helps them to be more active and the teacher could be less tired.

Furthermore, when the teacher taught with the multimodal approach, he revealed that some other teaching materials with new technology were not compatible with the original reading texts which seemed to be outdated. Also, the new teaching materials were so technologically advanced that the teacher found that they were not available in the countryside teaching context like this university. Thus, the only way to solve this problem was to use the traditional approach. He explained:

Sometimes it is hard to find suitable teaching materials such as pictures, sounds, and video clips to support the original text due to the fact that the reading topic is out of date. When I

found out that the multimodal method didn't work properly, I decided to stop using it and carry on teaching English reading with the traditional one instead.

It would be useful to move on to the differences between classroom management to see if there were any different points in controlling the classroom. The problem of classroom management when using a traditional approach was that there were more than 30 students in each classroom, which became an obstacle for the teacher to call every student's attention to the lesson. Thus, it was not easy to have them focus on the reading and comprehend the text. Contrary to this situation, the teacher revealed that he did not find any problems in managing the classroom with the multimodal application because it was the approach which included many teaching materials or modes for drawing the students' attention while the traditional approach had only the reading texts from textbooks. The teacher elaborated:

When I teach with the traditional approach, it is impossible for me to ask a large number of students in class to read, move along and comprehend the text. Since I tried the multimodal one, I have not found any problems so far in managing the classroom because the students have been interested in the teaching materials.

5. Discussion

From the research findings, most of the students showed negative comments about the use of the traditional teaching approach. The way in which the teacher read and translated every word, phrase, and sentence made the reading lessons become even more boring. They learned nothing except knowing a few new vocabulary words. This is in accordance with Chandavimol (1998) and Soonthornmanee (2002) who supported that the teaching method used in Thai EFL classrooms was based on reading and translation of the texts rather than focusing on reading comprehension. This traditional instruction approach, to some extent, interrupted Thai EFL students' development of reading abilities.

Notably, the students supported the use of the multimodal approach in English reading class. Reading was commonly considered as a boring practice, especially when students did not have any background of a reading topic. As a result, the topic was not interesting and sometimes, to some degree, the topic was not consistent with the current interest of readers. Using various teaching modes such as pictures, sounds, and video clips could help promote readers' imagination along with the topic. To this point, Yimwilai and Phusri (2015) described that the multimodal approach was a useful approach which appealed to all learning styles (e.g., visual, auditory, and kinesthetic). Also, it supported students' understanding of the subject and

led them to better academic achievement. Therefore, the students were likely to have more positive attitudes toward English reading. For teachers, they could motivate their students to participate in the lesson and the classroom could be more manageable.

The qualitative findings gave an interesting insight to be discussed; both teaching approaches had their own strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps, they could be used collaboratively in the reading class. The students had positive comments about the use of the multimodal approach and showed their approval of the use of pictures, sounds, and video clips to help support the passages from the textbooks and increase the students' motivation to learn English reading in class as well as to read outside class by themselves. To support this, Ganapathy (2016) commented that a multimodal approach helped promote students' positive learning outcomes surrounded by teaching and learning with the use of many teaching materials. Likewise, Bao (2017) postulated that a multimodal approach helped encourage students' motivation and inspiration to learn both outside and inside the classroom, especially in English reading class. Accordingly, Lee (2014) emphasized that students could be discouraged when a teacher used a traditional approach whereas using multimodal learning practices increased students' motivation and confidence. Furthermore, teaching English reading with the focus on multimodal pedagogical practices could help promote students' learning autonomy in and facilitate various learning styles (Malini & Saundravalli, 2016). Thus, the students in the context of this current study preferred participating in the reading classes where the teacher used the multimodal approach as the approach could make them more motivated, encouraged, and autonomous to learn and practice English reading. As a result, they could better develop their reading skills and to read more effectively.

To focus on the differences between the two teaching approaches used in the context of this study, the teacher reported that there were two major points of differences concerning students' motivation and classroom environment. The students with positive comments on the multimodal approach explained that they were more motivated to learn with the new approach, while the traditional approach was not helpful for this. Respectively, the reading class with the use of various modes of teaching was lively and fun because both teacher and students could enjoy different teaching materials while another class with the traditional approach was likely to be more tedious and the students always waited for the teacher to be a class leader who initiated every activity (Ashman, 2016; Li, 2016).

6. Implications

The findings revealed that using a combination of a traditional approach and a multimodal approach could help support each other in EFL reading class. Possibly, the teacher should decide whether to use a traditional approach when the various kinds of teaching materials were not available in the context. Thus, the strengths of each teaching approach should be considered to help support one another. For example, as Boumova (2008) suggested, the teacher may make use of some teaching materials such as pictures and video clips to introduce a reading topic. Then, after the students get an idea of what the reading topic is about, using a traditional approach could be useful; the teacher may use translation method to help students comprehend English reading texts presented in difficult sentence structures and expressions.

7. Limitation of the Study

This study was proceed only in a small scale focusing on a particular Thai university context. Thus, the findings of this study may not be generalised to other university students' and teachers' views on the particular issue of teaching approaches to English reading development. However, the result of this study will be a useful resource for other researchers to carry out further research studies in other similar contexts.

Moreover, this study does not include a questionnaire survey of the Thai EFL teachers; as a result, the quantitative data of the teacher's views will not be obtained. Rather, interview data were derived from both the teacher and the students whose views are specific and cannot be generalised to wider contexts. Hence, future studies on this issue could be expanded by exploring more data from a wider range of population in other EFL university contexts.

8. Conclusion

The results from the use of questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews showed that many students felt the traditional approach which mainly uses only the text from the textbook was not interesting while most of them enjoyed the use of the multimodal approach. The major difference between the use of the two approaches was that the teacher used a variety of teaching materials to teach English reading, such as pictures, sounds, and video clips. Hence, the students were encouraged by those modes which motivated them to learn English reading. Likewise, the teacher shared his favorable view that it was very easy to encourage and motivate students with the use of dynamic teaching materials instead of using

only one mode of teaching material. The multimodal approach gave the teacher and students a wider range of experience for teaching and studying English reading.

Some of the views related to the two approaches were related to the reading level of the students. Some students who had low reading abilities expressed their opinions that they liked the teacher to use the traditional approach. On the other hand, those who had higher reading abilities felt that the traditional approach was boring and they needed the teacher to use a lot of teaching materials to motivate, encourage, and inspire them to learn and read more by themselves. These students gave views that the multimodal approach could help them develop their reading abilities. Thus, teachers must decide which approach needs to be used depending on the level of their students and the materials and technology available because each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses.

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