

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background and motivation

For many senior high school students in Taiwan, the Department Required English Test (DRET) is literally a nightmare. Administered only from 2002, the DRET has already posed a much greater challenge to the test-takers than the Scholastic Aptitude English Test (SAET), which most senior high graduates-to-be have to take in January for college admission. Aside from its larger vocabulary range (7000 compared with 4000 for the SAET) and shorter test time (20 minutes shorter than the SAET), the difficulty of the DRET seems to come from its inclusion of a new test mode, called the Discourse Structure (DS) test<sup>1</sup>. The DS test, first adopted in the DRET in 2002, involves a gapped passage in which five sentences are deleted but serve as items of alternative; that is, it involves a reading passage containing five gapped sentences. The DS test apparently poses greater difficulty than traditional cloze tests, in which single words or phrases are taken out of the sentence. The DS test seems to be more demanding with regard to the comprehension of the passage, effective reading strategies, and most of all, the awareness of English text structure<sup>2</sup>. Senior high students who are not proficient in English reading are easily overwhelmed by the DS test because they are not equipped with effective strategies for taking this type of test and thus have to struggle for meaning of the text before randomly filling in any item of alternative. Take the researchers' former students for example. In response to a survey, as many as 86% of them stated that they were not familiar with the strategies needed for taking the DS test and had to rely mostly on luck. Some of

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "Discourse Structure" test is the exact quote from Yeh (2002).

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the term "text structure," rather than "discourse structure," is used to refer to the unity and coherence of a written text, because what this study involves is written texts, not spoken discourse.

them went into a panic and even had to give up when faced with this task. Therefore, to help students overcome the fear of the DS test and improve their performance on such a test, we as teachers and researchers on English teaching feel it essential, and urgent, that a direct and explicit instruction of effective strategies be taught to them. But what are the so-called effective strategies? And how can students benefit most from instruction and learn to use this knowledge strategically? These are what this present study intends to look into.

Basically, the DS test is a reading test that requires comprehension and effective reading strategies. However, there seems to be more that the DS test aims at testing. As specified by Yeh (2002), the goal of the “Discourse Structure” test is to test the understanding and command of text structure, which definitely involves the unity and overall coherence of text. In Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) sense, a text is coherent because there are “ties” of cohesion that link sentences together. Halliday and Hasan (1976) state that cohesion occurs "where interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another” (p. 4). To put it differently, any sentence of a passage must in some way be related to the other sentences of the same passage, most obviously to the sentences right before and after itself. Therefore, it can be concluded that in taking a DS test, a student should at least be armed with the ability to detect the ties that link a gapped sentence with its neighboring sentences. This is in accordance with Yeh (2002), who suggests, in a description of the criteria for designing the DS test, that enough clue should be provided for each blank in the DS test. Besides the cohesive relation between sentences, test writers must also pay attention to the “unity” of the passage; that is, the passage adopted for the DS test must have all of its sentences stick to the “one and only” idea in content.

The relationship between awareness of cohesive relation in text and reading comprehension has been investigated (Bridge & Winograd, 1982; Chen, 1991; Geva,

1992; Higgins, Lawrie, & White, 1999; Robertson, 1968; Rodgers, 1974; Stoodt, 1972; Wang, 1998). It is found that the ability to capture cohesion within text is a necessary component of reading comprehension; that is, a lack of awareness of cohesive relation would hinder comprehension of the text. Therefore, explicit instruction of cohesive devices has been highly recommended to enhance the awareness of cohesive relation and to achieve better comprehension. So far, the effect of such an instruction has been proved positive (Rogers, 1974; Wang, 1998). Some researchers suggest that EFL teachers in particular should teach cohesive devices explicitly to promote students' awareness of the cohesion in English in order to avoid L1 transfer and to enhance reading comprehension since cohesive devices, like other components of language, operate at least somewhat differently in different languages (Chen, 2001; McCarthy, 1991). That is why this present study aims at exploring the effect of explicit instruction of cohesive devices on Taiwanese students' performance on the DS test.

In reading research, the think-aloud technique has been a popular tool for exploring the invisible reading process (Bereiter & Bird, 1985; Block, 1986; Olson, Duffy, & Mack, 1984). The data gathered from think-aloud protocols, which reflect the invisible cognitive activity while reading, provide information that would not be obtained otherwise or would have to be investigated indirectly. Besides, the think-aloud technique has been used as an instructional and learning tool and proved to be helpful, especially to poor readers (Chern, 1993; Hsu, 2002). Therefore, it is recommended that the think-aloud technique be introduced to students as a means to enhance comprehension monitoring abilities (Baumann, Seifert-Kessell, & Jones, 1992). Also, the think-aloud technique has been applied as a tool to model reading processes and the use of reading strategies (Bereiter & Bird, 1985; Block, 1986; Davey, 1983; Duffy, Roehler, & Herrmann, 1988). It is believed that by making visible the invisible reasoning processes expert readers employ as they comprehend,

mental modeling helps poor readers construct their own schemata for how to comprehend by providing illustrations of appropriate and effective reasoning. Even though some researchers are concerned about the potential limitations of think-aloud technique (see 2.4), it is still prevalent in the research of reading comprehension and is an effective instructional and learning tool for teaching and acquiring reading strategies because of the unique exploration and presentation of cognitive processes it provides. This is why this present study employs the think-aloud technique both as a research tool to investigate the strategies EFL learners use for taking the DS test and as an instructional and learning tool in teaching students how to deal with the DS test.

To sum up, the “Discourse Structure” test is a new test mode in want of exploration. Literally speaking, no empirical research has yet been conducted to probe into the nature of this test mode. A similar study is Higgins, Lawrie, & White (1999), which also involves making choice for the missing continuation. The result shows that being aware of the proper use of cohesive devices is crucial in comprehending the text. Also, as mentioned above, taking the DS test involves the awareness of text structure—unity and coherence (i.e. cohesive ties). The present study, therefore, aims to explore the nature of the DS test and the role the test-taker’s awareness of text structure plays in taking this type of test. In the study, an explicit instruction of text structure was administered in an attempt to promote awareness of text structure in taking the DS test. During the instruction, since coherence is a comparatively abstract concept, its manifestations—cohesive devices—were taught instead. Besides, as recommended by many reading researchers, think-aloud modeling was adopted in the present study to provide a clear example of how the strategies and cohesion mechanism work in the comprehension of a text. Finally, the think-aloud technique was used as a tool for taking the DS test to enhance comprehension monitoring abilities and to reveal students’ cognitive processes in taking the DS test. In other

words, this present study combined instruction of text coherence and think-aloud modeling followed by think-aloud practice into an integrated treatment to probe its effect on students' performance on the DS test, parallel to Bereiter and Bird's (1985) research, in which an explicit instruction followed by think-aloud modeling and think-aloud practice achieved the best effect.

## **1.2 Purpose and research questions of the study**

This study aims to explore the role that awareness of text structure plays in taking the "Discourse Structure" test. It attempts to address the following research questions: First, does an integrated treatment of instruction of text structure and think-aloud modeling followed by think-aloud practice help improve the participants' performance on the DS test? Second, does the integrated treatment enhance the participants' metacognitive awareness of text unity and coherence? Third, do the participants of different English proficiency levels demonstrate different degrees of text structure awareness in the undertaking of the DS test? Finally, what are the participants' perceptions of the instruction of text structure, think-aloud modeling and think-aloud practice?

## **1.3 Overview of this study**

This study explores the effect of an integrated treatment of instruction of text structure and think-aloud modeling followed by think-aloud practice on Taiwanese senior high school students' performance on the "Discourse Structure" test and on students' metacognitive awareness. It also investigates students' responses toward this activity. After this introductory chapter, related studies on the issues of coherence and cohesion, paragraph organization and the think-aloud technique are reviewed in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, the research method, including participants, instruments, data-collection procedures and means of data analysis, is described. Chapter Four presents the results of data analysis and the discussion of the results. In

Chapter Five, a conclusion of this study is presented, including a brief summary of the results of this study, some pedagogical implications from this study, limitations of this study, and suggestions for future studies.