



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter includes five parts. First of all, the background and the motivation of the present study are presented. Second, the purpose of this study is indicated. Third, the research questions of this study are addressed. Fourth, the significance of the study is pinpointed. Finally, the terms used in this study are defined.

Background and Motivation

Reading has been a crucial and indispensable element in language learning. As Bright and McGregor (1970) mentioned, “Where there is little reading, there will be little language learning” (p. 52). Some studies have proved that reading plays an essential part not only in overall development among the language skills, but also in academic success (Johnson, 1981; Ostler, 1980). Moreover, according to Sims (1996), reading was the most important part among the four skills for most EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) learners and ESL learners are able to read English before they can master their English oral ability (Hudelson, 1984). Also, Chen (2003) indicated that the written form of a foreign language is an important input source for foreign language reading and learning in Taiwan, an EFL environment where English is not the official language. Therefore, the significance of reading cannot be overemphasized.

Nowadays in Taiwan, English learning is becoming a countrywide activity and countless language cram schools line up the streets both in cities and in towns.

Many people, regardless of their ages, are eager to learn and master English. In addition, it has also become a required subject in every elementary school since the first semester of the academic year 2001 (China Times, February 4, 2000). Besides that, reading comprehension comprises 20% to 30% or so in almost all the major examinations in Taiwan, such as the Basic Competency Test (BCT) for junior high school students, Scholastic Aptitude English Test (SAET) and Department Required English Test (DRET) for senior high school students, Technological & Vocational Education Joint College Entrance Examination for vocational high school students, and General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) for all the people over twelve years old. From all of the above, reading ability becomes a much more important skill for EFL learners in Taiwan whether for doing well on the examinations or for the overall development of their language proficiency. Therefore, it is a must for language teachers in Taiwan to equip their students with better reading ability.

Among ways to improve learners' reading comprehension, two top priorities are to find out reading problems and to use strategies. First is to diagnose the reasons why learners have difficulty in reading. As Schallert (1982) indicated, one factor to influence learners' reading comprehension is their prior knowledge of the topic. Additionally, Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) pointed out that if readers do not have the schema expected by the author, they will have trouble understanding what the author is trying to convey. Similarly, Stahl, Jacobson, Davis & Davis (1989) concluded that providing information related to the about-to-read unfamiliar text helps readers' overall comprehension. Still, culture is also a crucial aspect when it comes to reading (Lono, 1987; Nelson, 1987) and cultural-specific prior knowledge is necessary for understanding a text (Pritchard, 1990). Some researchers gave evidence that culture-related texts are easier for readers to comprehend than those of culture-unrelated ones (Carrel, 1981; Johnson, 1981; Steffensen, Joag-dev, &

Anderson, 1979). That is, readers can comprehend a text well if the text is culturally related to their own. When they encounter culturally familiar reading material, they will have relevant schemata about the reading content and do not have to make efforts to predict the content. In contrast, if they meet a text that is different from or even does not exist in their culture, they lack the schemata related to the text and may fail to read between the lines. Accordingly, prior knowledge has a great impact on reading comprehension (Adams, 1990; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Aron, 1986; Carrell, 1983a, 1983b, 1991; Grabe, 1991; Rmelhart, 1980; Ulijn & Salager-Meyer, 1998; Weaver, 1994). A lot of other empirical studies (Anderson, Spiro, & Anderson, 1978; Aron, 1986; Carrell, 1987; Floyd & Carrell, 1987; Henk, Stahl, & Melnick, 1993; Johnson, 1982; Levine & Haus, 1985; Lipson, 1982; Lipson 1983; Marr & Gormley, 1982; Pritchard, 1990; Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, & Anderson, 1982; Roller & Matambo, 1992; Sasaki, 2000; Stevens, 1980) also showed that prior knowledge related to the content of the reading passages helps both L1 and L2 learners to perform better on the comprehension tests coming immediately after the reading passages, such as cloze, recall, and multiple choices.

Second, strategy use is necessary. Casanave (1988) indicated that both the ability to use content and formal schema and the ability to monitor the understanding of the reading material and employ proper strategies contribute to successful reading. Among proper strategies, providing pre-reading activities is one of the most useful and efficient methods for language learners to better understand the reading texts. There are many kinds of pre-reading activities, such as raising pre-reading questions, giving previews, showing pictures, introducing new vocabulary, and so forth. What's more, some researchers (Graves & Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983; Graves & Palmer, 1981; Neuman, 1988) demonstrated that previewing is a good learning strategy to facilitate L1 learners' reading comprehension. Carrell

(1988c) further suggested that reading teachers experiment a number of pre-reading activities to build students' background knowledge. The pre-reading activities she offered include giving lectures, viewing movies, slides, pictures, or demonstrations, inspiring real-life experiences, having field trips, class discussions, debates, plays, skits, or role play, and providing text previewing, introduction and discussion of the key vocabulary, key-word or key-concept association activities or prior reading of related texts (Carrell, 1988c).

However, though prior knowledge greatly affects readers' reading comprehension, to comprehend well, a reader should connect his or her background knowledge to the reading material. In the light of Rumelhart (1977) and Stanovich (1980), reading is a process in which the readers and the text interactively perform on the meaning. That is to say, the readers relate their own knowledge to the text and give birth to the comprehension of the meaning about the text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Carrell, 1984a; Rumelhart, 1980). Pritchard (1990) pointed out that it is more likely that readers use their prior knowledge and also tend to combine more quickly their local understandings when they read culturally familiar texts. Afflerbach (1990) also concluded that expert readers easily access well-developed schemata when they read texts of which the topics are familiar to them and they can apply the relevant schemata to the text at once. A conclusion can be made from the above discussion that culturally familiar texts are easier for readers to comprehend because readers already possess the background knowledge about the topic of the texts and they can easily connect their existing knowledge to the new information in the texts. If it is so, supplying readers with background knowledge before they read culturally unfamiliar materials might also improve their reading comprehension and make their reading more efficient. In other words, no matter what readers read, culturally familiar or unfamiliar material, offering them background information about the

material will facilitate their reading comprehension. In fact, giving prior knowledge for learners before reading has been tested to be efficient on their performance of reading comprehension (Britton, Glynn, Muth, & Penfield, 1985; Hall, 1990; Marino, Gould, & Haas, 1985; Pan, 2003; Simonsen & Singer, 1985). One way to supply learners with background knowledge is to implement pre-reading activities. Some pre-reading activities have been mentioned above; among the pre-reading activities, previewing has been tested efficient and helpful to L1 readers' reading comprehension on difficult short stories (Graves & Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983; Graves & Palmer, 1981; Neuman, 1988). As for the effects of previewing on EFL readers, only two studies completed by Chen & Graves (1995) and Huang (2003) examined the efficacy of previewing on university learners' comprehension of difficult stories. Both studies gave the positive and effective results of previewing on students' reading comprehension and performance.

Although the positive effect of previewing has been shown in previous studies (Chen & Graves, 1995; Graves & Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983; Graves & Palmer, 1981; Huang, 2003; Neuman, 1988), it is pre-reading questions, which, according to Pan (2003), make short the distance between the readers and the text and make the readers focus on the main idea of the reading passages, that are the most commonly used pre-reading activity in most English textbooks (published by the Far East Book Company, Lungteng Culture Company, and SanMin Book Company) available for senior high school students in Taiwan. No previewing before a short story has ever been employed in English textbooks for senior high school students as pre-reading activities. Nor has previewing ever been tested on Taiwanese senior high school students' reading comprehension of short stories. Therefore, the researcher would like to employ previewing as an advance organizer and empirically test the two pre-reading activities, that is, pre-reading questions and previewing, on

Taiwanese EFL senior high school students' reading comprehension of American short stories, to find out their relative effectiveness and provide some suggestions for classroom practice.

Purpose of the Study

This present study aims to explore the effects of pre-reading questions and previewing on reading comprehension taken by EFL learners in a senior high school in Taiwan. From previous studies, it is clear that prior knowledge has an important effect on reading comprehension and helps readers understand reading material better during the reading process. In this study, the pre-reading questions and the previewing provided by the researcher could serve as not only helpers to trigger the participants' prior knowledge but also advance organizers to offer the learners some important cues or background information relevant to the reading texts. Specifically, the present study has the following purposes.

- (1) To examine the effects of pre-reading questions and previewing on Taiwanese senior high school students' reading comprehension.
- (2) To find out Taiwanese senior high school students' attitudes toward the two pre-reading activities, i.e. pre-reading questions and previewing.
- (3) To offer instructors and textbook writers ideas for designing different pre-reading activities.

Research Questions

Based on the purposes of the study, some research questions were asked to test the effects of pre-reading questions and previewing on senior high school students' reading comprehension of American short stories. The research questions are listed below.

- (1) Are there any differences among the three groups, that is, the Control Group, the Pre-reading-question Group, and the Previewing Group, in reading comprehension as indicated by the results of recall?
- (2) Do pre-reading questions facilitate Taiwanese senior high school students' reading comprehension as indicated by the results of recall?
- (3) Does previewing facilitate Taiwanese senior high school students' reading comprehension as indicated by the results of recall?
- (4) Which pre-reading activity is more helpful to Taiwanese senior high school students' reading comprehension, pre-reading questions or previewing?
- (5) What are Taiwanese senior high school students' attitudes toward the two pre-reading treatments?

Significance of the Study

This study examined the effects of pre-reading questions and previewing on Taiwanese senior high school students' reading comprehension. The findings of this present study are significant in the following ways.

First, it is hoped that the findings of the study will serve as empirical evidence to help better understand the effects of pre-reading questions and previewing on EFL Taiwanese senior high school students' reading comprehension of American short stories.

Second, the results of the study may provide senior high school teachers in Taiwan with some ideas and guidelines on story-reading instruction and on presentation of pre-reading activities before students read a reading selection.

Third, the results of the study offer instructors, textbook writers, material developers and publishers some information about designing pre-reading activities for short stories in English textbooks or language learning books.

Definition of the Terms

(1) Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is an interaction between the reader and the reading text. It includes the acts of decoding the linguistic cues, retrieving prior knowledge, integrating new and old information, and guessing or predicting from the context. Comprehension will be achieved by the understanding of not only the literal meanings but also the connotations embedded in or between the lines.

(2) Pre-reading Questions

In this study, pre-reading questions were made up by the researcher and were presented to the subjects before they read an appointed short story. Pre-reading questions either pointed out the topic of the short stories or consisted of points that are related to the subjects' real lives or personal experiences. The researcher read each question for the subjects and asked them to try to think of the answers to the questions.

(3) Previewing

According to Graves, Prenn, & Cooke (1985), previewing refers to activities of written or oral previews, which are defined by Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge (1983) as "introductory material presented to students before they read specific selections," offered to learners before they read a reading text. In this present study, previewing was a written script, related to the topic or content of the about-to-read passage to improve the subjects' comprehension of the upcoming story, and ended before the climax of the story. The researcher read the previewing to the subjects and asked the subjects to try their best to predict the following plot in the short stories.

(4) Background Knowledge

Background knowledge is also known as schemata, prior knowledge or existing knowledge. Bartlett (1932) referred to schemata as the preexisting cognitive

structures readers and listeners use to understand inputs. In other words, schemata, prior knowledge, background knowledge, or existing knowledge, is knowledge in memory comprehenders utilize to decode and interpret printed symbols. These terms meant the knowledge that was relevant to the content of the three reading selections in this study.

(5) Recall Protocols

In the present research, recall protocols, one way to measure learners' reading comprehension, were referred to as the subjects' written recalls of the three short stories.

(6) L1

It is referred to as a person's first language or mother tongue.

(7) L2

It is identified as a person's second language. It is defined by Richards, Platt and Platt (1988) as a language "which is not a native language in a country but which is widely used as a medium of communication and which is usually used alongside another language or languages" (p. 180). For example, English is known as a second language in Singapore.