

Designing Task-Oriented Online Reading Activities:

Taiwanese EFL Students' Experiences and Views on Online EFL Reading Activities



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This research aims to explore 81 EFL students' views on EFL task-oriented online reading activities. Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data. Task-oriented online reading activities were found to help broaden students' world knowledge, enhance interest, facilitate peer cooperation, and increase extensive reading opportunities. Students employed a mix of strategies, including comparing the translated texts in L1 and L2, reading about the topics in L1, and looking at pictures to activate their schema and assist comprehension. Designed tables were reported to help students focus their search, and served as the scaffolding that allowed students to practice locating and categorizing the information. Students also reported development of online English reading habits and learner autonomy after taking part in the activities.

The advantages of extensive reading to EFL students include improvement in reading skills, vocabulary, spelling, writing, and language competence, as well as higher motivation (Krashen, 1993; Sun, 2003). Day and Bamford (1998) suggested that using materials within the readers' competence helps to develop readers' sight vocabulary, general vocabulary knowledge, and topical and world knowledge. Since the 1990s, the widespread use of networked computers has expanded the potential of CALL (Chapelle, 2001, Warschauer, 2000a). The Internet offers access to an abundance of authentic material and exposure to meaningful content (Stoks, 2002). While exciting, reading on the Internet can also engender anxiety (Yang, 2001). Without proper guidance and appropriate reading activities, students may find hypertext, in particular, intimidating and disorienting. The present research aims to explore students' views on online reading activities to gather insights and suggestions for improvement.

Literature Review

Features and structures of hypertext

The World Wide Web offers a growing array of rich resources for language learners (Slaouti, 2002; Stapleton, 2003). One feature of hypertext is the nonlinear organization of information, which liberates readers from a "linear concept of text" (Slaouti, 2002) and allows multiple links to other relevant information. Readers can control their reading process and path by clicking on the links, which may serve to

guide readers or distract them from global reading. As active engagement in the reading process may lead to deeper processing of information, reading from a screen with multiple links is seen as "a self-conscious act of creating knowledge from a variety of sources" (Warschauer, 2000b, p.521). The other feature of hypertext is its complex combination of multimodal elements: text, pictures, graphics, audio, and video (Kress, 2003).

Reading Strategies and Skills

Strategies have been a focus of EFL reading research. Huang, Chern, and Lin (2009) explored online reading strategies and identified four major strategies students used: global strategies (top-down strategies), local strategies (bottom-up, problem-solving strategies), support strategies, and socio-affective strategies. Global strategies were found to be most efficient in assisting comprehension when reading more challenging texts and were used by more high achieving learners. However, students tended to use a fixed set of strategies and relied heavily on support strategies possibly due to a lack of awareness of other available strategies. Teachers need to provide strategy awareness training, especially explicit instruction on global strategies, before students engage in online reading (Huang et al., 2009).

Akyel and Erçetin (2009) recorded students' actual online reading processes and suggested processing strategies for hypermedia reading are not different from those used in printed texts. However, certain strategies that are commonly used

in conventional reading may not be used for hypertext reading. For example, guessing the meaning of words, instead of consulting a dictionary may not be necessary as a glossary is provided through hypertext. Readers can then build schemata by referring to annotations and other web pages. Self-monitoring also becomes an essential strategy, as readers need to make decisions concerning their reading path and not become distracted from their reading purposes (Akyel & Erçetin, 2009). Park and Kim (2011) also discovered readers tend to use hybrid online reading strategies: they incorporate, adopt, and modify their paper-based reading strategies and invent new strategies to facilitate their meaning-making process.

Previous studies (Akyel & Erçetin, 2009; Huang, et al., 2009; Park & Kim, 2011) focused on recording students' online reading strategies with a one-off test using online reading programs with support functions. However, not all the support functions may be provided while reading authentic web materials in a real life situations. Aside from introducing and developing students' awareness of strategy use, it is important that teachers provide engaging online reading materials and design interesting tasks so that students can put the strategies into practice. Providing scaffolding in orienting the learners to the task is also important to the successful implementation and integration of online reading into the class (Yang, 2001).

Research Method

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods (questionnaire and interviews) were adopted in this study. The research was conducted in the Department of Applied English in a university in southern Taiwan. The participants were 41 students who took the first-year reading course and 40 students who took the second-year reading course. Among the 81 students who completed the questionnaires, 14 were male and 67 were female. In the first hour of the two-hour 18-week classes, the instructor first guided the students through the reading articles in textbooks from the *Reading Explorer* series by Cengage Learning. The topics ranged from geography, psychology, animals, food, art and music, to science. In the second hour, students logged into the Blackboard system, where online reading tasks and links related to their earlier reading topics were provided. Students could work together in pairs or work individually to fill in tables

and write short paragraphs in response to open-ended questions.

Results

The results reported are based on both the quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews. Questionnaire results showed that online reading activities were considered by the students to be helpful in broadening their world knowledge (93%) and increasing their English ability (95%). Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended questions also revealed that online reading activities helped to arouse interest, enhance active participation, facilitate peer cooperation, promote discussion related to topics, and increase Extensive Reading opportunities.

The websites provided were considered comprehensive and educational, and the majority of the students (83%) liked the topics of the online reading activities. Topics relevant to students' life experiences, such as food and animals, were considered meaningful and interesting. Students also showed interest in reading topics about current news and events. Most students (81%) reported the English of the websites matched their English level. However, less able students found the content difficult as the websites contain ungraded materials.

All students agreed that the pictures on the websites helped them to understand the texts. The interview data also revealed that students considered pictures one of the major advantages of online reading. Looking at pictures was reported to be a useful global strategy as visual information helps readers predict the content, increases interest, and helps activate schemata.

According to interview data, more able students reported that they could transfer conventional reading strategies (global, local, support, and socio-affective) to online reading and used a combination of strategies to achieve comprehension. Utilizing translation functions, comparing the translated texts in L1 and L2, and reading about the topics in L1, were also strategies less able students used to activate their schema and assist comprehension.

The non-linear structure of online reading was considered challenging by less able students. To complete the assigned reading tasks, students had to guess the content from the links, choose their reading path, and browse to evaluate the usefulness

and level of the web content. They also needed to avoid information overload, overcome anxiety, and synthesize information to fill in the tables and organize knowledge for open-ended questions. However, students reported that the tables helped them to focus their searches and served as scaffolding to support practice with searching, distinguishing and categorizing skills. Filling in tables was seen as less demanding as it required a lower level of transformation of knowledge and was favoured by more students (81%) than open-ended leading questions (77%). For students of higher ability, open-ended questions provided them chances to practice organizing and representing skills. However, questions had to be carefully designed to avoid overly general items that could lead to confusion. Other types of tasks, such as drawing diagrams and pictures, were also suggested by the students.

Students also reported that they developed the habit of reading English websites (70%) and became more active learners after taking part in the activity. According to the interview data, more able students welcomed the opportunities to acquire new words through meaningful tasks and extensive reading. However, less able students found vocabulary a major challenge, and constantly consulting their electronic dictionaries slowed down their reading speed. Students suggested that support functions such as online translation and vocabulary definition could be provided so that new words could be looked up conveniently.

Qualitative data showed that students' anxiety levels were affected by both their English ability and previous online reading experiences. More able students considered the activities anxiety-free and interesting. However, less able students considered the activities stressful and suggested that the instructor should demonstrate searching processes and skills.

Even though some students reported that they felt stressed while searching (43%) and writing the answers (35%), a majority of the students (91%) reported a feeling of achievement. A majority (67%) reported they were positively involved in completing the tasks. A majority (78%) also reported they would like to have online reading activities for future classes. Students also reacted positively to pair work as this allowed them to conduct meaningful communication with peers (from qualitative data).

On the negative side, stricter assessment and self-reporting of responsibilities was needed to avoid some students relying on partners to do the work. In addition, half of the students complained about eye strain as they did not know how to adjust the window size to enlarge the text.

Discussion

Since less able students found the content of authentic web materials difficult, educational web pages for teenagers can be included for students of lower ability. Grading of the websites, annotation, and introduction of the links were requested by students so they could tell the level of language difficulty, predict the content before clicking on the links, and start with easier texts to build up confidence.

Pictures were considered one of the major attractions of online reading. As Nelson (2006) pointed out, the "increased semiotic richness and hybridity" may positively affect intellectual and affective development. Websites containing pictures are recommended for use with EFL online reading tasks.

At the beginning stage, filling tables served as a useful activity that helped to scaffold and orient students' online search and reading processes. However, as students move to higher levels, more open-ended questions can be included in the tasks.

To help students reading authentic online texts to cope with vocabulary problems, dictionary applications and online dictionaries can be introduced so that new words can be looked up conveniently. Instructors can teach students to adjust window and font sizes to reduce the problem of eyestrain. To reduce their anxiety, students can start their tasks in the class so they can ask the instructor and classmates for help. They can also choose to complete the task at home and hand in their reports the following class if they wish to consult more websites, develop more ideas, and organize the presentatin of the report to its highest quality.

To conclude, with carefully chosen websites and appropriately designed tasks, students are provided with a goal and given a direction on their journey of online reading. Online reading activities can be meaningful, motivating, and beneficial for English learning.

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