The Effects of Different Types of Reading Instructions on Executive Summary Writing and Critical Thinking

Dr. Amporn Sa-ngiamwibool
Asst. Prof., EFL, CALL, CLL, C-R, English in Media, Krirk University

Abstract

The major question of this study was what type of reading instructions could enhance executive summary writing and critical thinking most effectively. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to empirically examine the effects of the different types of reading instructions - reading with task directions to notice main ideas, reading with questions, reading with key words, and reading with a vocabulary activity, and reading with information-sharing activity - on executive summary writing and critical thinking. The subjects were 172 second-year university students. The elicitation instruments included five reading instructions drawn from CALL, item-by-item and overall pretests and posttests on executive summary writing and critical thinking, an interview, and a field note. ANCOVA was chosen for statistical analysis. The study revealed these findings. First, an examination of executive summary writing suggested that students who read with main ideas produced significantly more changes than students who did not. Next, an examination of critical thinking drawn from critical reading part of GMAT test suggested that students who read with main ideas produced significantly more changes than students who did not. Then, data from the interview suggested that main ideas providing the gist of the text helped develop a summary. Lastly, data from the field note suggested that main ideas facilitated their analysis of arguments and thus helped develop their critical thinking skill. Future inquiry should replicate this study with other types of writing and higher-order thinking skills.

Background and significance of the problem

Main ideas play a vital role in reading comprehension but the question that reading with main ideas enhances summary writing and higher-order thinking skills is still debatable. Writing and thinking involves cognitive process; therefore, enhancing writing and thinking needs theoretical guidance that can help develop cognitive learning. As suggested by SLA/EFL theorists (e.g., Izumi, 2000; Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara, & Fearnow, 1999;
Jourdenais, 1998), one of the effective cognitive learning theories for enhancing SLA/EFL is consciousness-raising (C-R).

Prior research on consciousness-raising (C-R) (e.g., Alanen, 1995; Jourdenais, Ota. Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughtly, 1995; Leow, 1993, 1995, 1997) agreed that C-R which aims to specifically draw the learners’ attention to consciously focus on the target language can enhance language learning and development in SLA/EFL contexts effectively. To verify the effects of C-R in Thai contexts, Sa-ngiamwibool (2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010f, 2010g) has found that C-R had strong effects on various linguistic awareness skills and aspects. Although there are numerous studies on the effects of C-R in Thai contexts, the study that examines the effects of C-R incorporating with the effects of different types of reading on writing and thinking is scanty. This study, therefore, aimed to examine this issue with the following purposes of study.

**Purposes of the study**

The main purpose of this study was to examine the effects of different types of CALL reading instructions on EFL students’ executive summary writing and critical thinking, with six specific purposes of the study: (1) to examine the effects of the reading instructions on executive summary writing, (2) to examine the effects of the reading instructions on critical thinking, (3) to explore the readers’ development of executive summary writing, (4) to reflect the readers’ development of critical thinking, (5) to propose the instructions for enhancing executive summary writing, and (6) to propose the instructions for enhancing critical thinking.

**Technical terms**

Consciousness-raising (C-R) in this study is an attempt to raise learners’ awareness to (1) perceive a target, (2) notice it, (3) discover the relationship between the target and its context (s), and (4) understand the relationship. Under this theory, noticing is needed for language learning. Noticing, a necessary component of C-R, was incorporated with CALL in the first type of reading instruction (i.e. reading with task directions to notice main ideas).

CALL reading instructions in this study were drawn from English Discoveries Program, a computer-assisted program for language learning, consisting of 5 types of instructions: reading with task directions to notice main ideas, reading with comprehension
questions, reading with key words, reading with a vocabulary activity, and reading with information-sharing activity.

**Framework of the study**

1. The theoretical framework of this study was based on C-R, consisting of four components: perceiving, noticing, discovering, and understanding. Noticing, or consciously perceiving, was added into reading with main ideas.

2. The research framework of this study focused on the effects of five reading instructions - reading with task directions to notice main ideas, reading with comprehension questions, reading with key words, reading with a vocabulary activity, and reading with information-sharing activity - on two areas: executive summary writing and critical thinking. Below was the research framework of this study.

   Different reading instructions ➔ Executive summary writing achievement
   ➔ Critical thinking achievement

**Research methodology**

The population was second-year students at Krirk University in the first semester of the academic year 2010. The students who studied abroad or took GMAT tests were excluded. The subjects were 172 students randomly assigned into five different groups, each of which consisted of 32-38 students.

This study used an experimental design with five experimental groups, each of which were assigned these treatments: Group 1 (reading with task directions to notice main ideas), Group 2 (reading with comprehension questions), Group 3 (reading with key words), Group 4 (reading with vocabulary activity), and Group 5 (reading with information-sharing activity). All groups were taught by the researcher.

The data collection followed a pretest-posttest, experimental design. The data collection lasted for twenty weeks: sixteen weeks for quantitative data collection and four weeks for qualitative data collection. Each week lasted eighty minutes.

This study was triangulated; therefore, the data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. In scoring procedure for quantitative analysis, 1 point was given for a correct answer and 0 was for an incorrect answer. ANCOVA was chosen for statistical analysis to compare the effects of the different types of reading instructions and control extraneous factors (e.g. prior knowledge). For qualitative analysis, data from the interview and note were analyzed to draw the reflections on the learners’ writing and thinking development.
There were several elicitation instruments in this study: five reading CALL instructions, item-by-item and overall pretests and posttests on executive summary writing and critical thinking, an interview, and field notes. All types of reading instructions were drawn from English Discoveries Program, a computer-assisted program for language learning. Each of the reading instructions contained 50 passages.

Instruction 1: Reading with task directions to notice main ideas

This instruction gave task directions to notice main ideas of various reading passages. The task directions aimed to specifically draw the readers to consciously focus on the main ideas of the passages in pink.

Instruction 2: Reading with comprehension questions

This instruction enhanced reading ability with w/h and yes/no questions.

Instruction 3: Reading with key words

This instruction gave key words in red to enhance reading ability.

Instruction 4: Reading with a vocabulary activity

This instruction assigned the readers to fill in the gaps with vocabulary.

Instruction 5: Reading with information-sharing activity
This instruction assigned the readers to share information and discuss on main ideas of the passages. Unlike Instruction 1, this instruction did not give any clues to the main ideas.

**Pretests and posttests on executive summary writing**

These tests drawn from *English Discoveries Program* assessed executive summary writing achievement. There were two sets of pretests and posttests, each of which consisted of 20 passages: item-by-item and overall. These item-by-item tests were assigned before and after each week. The posttests were constructed in parallel with the pretests. The readers were asked to write a summary after reading each passage. The overall pretests and posttests assigned before and after the experiment were drawn from the item-by-items pretests and posttests, each of which consisted of 20 passages. The results of the overall pretests and posttests would be compared with those of item-by-item pretests and posttests to double check the results and control the retention effects.

**Pretests and posttests on critical thinking**

These tests drawn from the critical reading part of *GMAT* assessed the ability of analyzing an argument. There were two sets, each of which consisted of 30 questions: item-by-item and overall. The item-by-item tests were assigned to each group before and after each instruction assigned each week on different passages. The overall pretests and posttests assigned to each group before and after the experiment were drawn from the item-by-items pretests and posttests, each of which consisted of 30 questions. Below was a sample testing the ability to find an argument to support the given claim.
Pretest

Toughened hiring standards have not been the primary cause of the present staffing shortage in public schools. The shortage of teachers is primarily caused by the fact that in recent years teachers have not experienced any improvements in working conditions and their salaries have not kept pace with salaries in other professions.

Which of the following, if true, would most support the claims above?

(A) Many teachers already in the profession would not have been hired under the new hiring standards.

(B) Today more teachers are entering the profession with a higher educational level than in the past.

(C) Some teachers have cited higher standards for hiring as a reason for the current staffing shortage.

(D) Many teachers have cited low pay and lack of professional freedom as reasons for their leaving the profession.

(E) Many prospective teachers have cited the new hiring standards as a reason for not entering the profession.

Posttest

A proposed ordinance requires the installation in new homes of sprinklers automatically triggered by the presence of a fire. However, a home builder argued that because more than 90 percent of residential fires are extinguished by a household member, residential sprinklers would only marginally decrease property damage caused by residential fires.

Which of the following, if true, would most seriously weaken the home builder’s argument?

(A) Most individuals have no formal training in how to extinguish fires.

(B) Since new homes are only a tiny percentage of available housing in the city, the new ordinance would be extremely narrow in scope.

(C) The installation of smoke detectors in new residences costs significantly less than the installation of sprinklers.

(D) In the city where the ordinance was proposed, the average time required by the fire department to respond to a fire was less than the national average.

(E) The largest proportion of property damage that results from residential fires is caused by fires that start when no household member is present.
Interview

This interview elicited data concerning this question: *How much can the assigned instruction help you write summaries?*

Field note

The readers’ notes on analyses of argument were qualitatively analyzed.

Conclusions

This study revealed several major findings based on the purposes of the study.

First, based on the specific purposes 1 and 2, reading with task directions to notice main ideas had higher effects on executive summary writing and critical thinking than other reading instructions. The ANCOVA analysis on the total score on executive summary writing posttest of the group with main ideas yielded significantly higher main effects than the other four groups. This suggested that reading with main ideas had the strongest effects on executive summary writing. Similarly, the ANCOVA analysis on critical reading posttest of the group with main ideas yielded slightly higher main effects than the other four groups. This suggested that reading with main ideas had the strongest effects on critical thinking.

Second, based on the specific purpose 3, in exploring the readers’ development of executive summary writing, the interview revealed that almost all of the students who read with main ideas developed their summaries from the main ideas provided by the instruction. In developing their summaries, they either extended or shortened and then turned the main ideas into paraphrased summaries.

Third, based on the specific purpose 4, in exploring the readers’ reflection of their critical thinking development, their analyses of arguments suggested that their developed critical thinking skills included concept-analysis; problem-solving; inquiry; looking at the structure of an argument; comparing (e.g., comparing all alternatives), contrasting (e.g., contrasting all alternatives), predicting (e.g., predicting probable consequences); identifying parts of argument, etc.

Lastly, based on the specific purposes 5 and 6, the most effective instruction for enhancing executive summary writing and critical thinking was reading with task directions to notice main ideas. Drawing upon all prior purposes, it was obvious that reading with the task directions to notice the main ideas was the most effective instructions of all.

In conclusion, main ideas play a vital role in enhancing EFL learners’ executive summary writing and critical thinking as they do in reading comprehension. To enhance the
two skills, reading with task directions to notice main ideas may be the most effective one for Thai learners.

Discussion

The results of this study were consistent with those of the prior study (e.g., Alanen, 1995; Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara, & Fearnow, 1999; White, 1998; Jourdenais, Ota. Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughtly, 1995; Izumi, 2000; Jourdenais, 1998; Leow, 1993, 1995, 1997) that C-R either at the level of noticing can enhance EFL students’ language learning effectively. It also supported the studies in Thai contexts by Sa-ngiamwibool (2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010f, 2010g) who found that all groups with noticing outperformed the groups without noticing. The outperforming outcomes of the reading with task directions to notice main ideas over other reading instructions in this study may result from the effects of main ideas and noticing.

Recommendations

The findings of this study yield these two findings. Theoretically, this study lends support to prior study on the effects of main ideas and C-R. Pedagogically, since writing and thinking involves cognitive process, the instruction that enhances the skills most effectively is the one with task directions to notice the main ideas of reading passages.

Suggestions for future inquiry

This study should be replicated with other types of writing and thinking and in other non-native classroom or naturally communicative settings.

References


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