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Taiwanese College Students' Perceptions about Their English Reading and Writing Problems

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Abstract:
Part of the impact of globalization on Taiwan's English education has increased the important need to become proficient in English for academic and occupational purposes. To help EAP (English for academic purposes) or ESP (English for specific purposes) teachers to design suitable English curriculum, this study aimed to investigate how a group of undergraduate students in Taiwan perceived their English reading and writing problems. A survey and a semi-structured group interview were conducted to collect data. Results of self-reported data show that most of them were intermediate readers, but they were mostly less-experienced writers in English. In their response to the survey and the semi-structured interview, these EFL students also described their perceptions about their common reading and writing problems.

Keywords: EAP, needs analysis, EFL reading, EFL writing

1. English in Taiwan

Through globalization, since Taiwan where the dominant languages are Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese (Liu, 2005) is an export-oriented country, the importance of English proficiency, as part of the required abilities to pursue professional positions, cannot be overemphasized. Before the major educational reforms in Taiwan, rote memorization could empower students to pass college entrance exams, in which knowledge-telling seemed to the focus. Within the past two decades, Taiwan's education reforms have intended to make a paradigm shift from knowledge-telling to knowledge-transformation in order to better prepare future specialists or workers in most, if not all, professions. Rote memorization is not enough; English is no longer just a required subject for students for nine years. Nowadays, English is the major international language which professionals need to use to communicate for a wide variety of purposes, so, to most Taiwanese, outstanding English proficiency is of the requirements to be fulfilled for current or future professional purposes.

1.1. The Significance of Needs Analysis

To help equip students with necessary English skills in order to survive their future occupations, in upgrading their English to a satisfactory level, knowing students specific needs plays an important role. The families where the students come from vary greatly; some are well-off, while others are not. That is, students from affluent families with abundant resources, and they usually start learning English as young as kindergarteners, but students from less-privileged backgrounds may have zero experience about learning English when they reach the third-grade at elementary schools. Given the different levels of their English proficiency, teaching English at elementary schools can be a challenging job. That is, a teacher may need to work with a group of students with pretty different English proficiency levels; some may be fluent in listening and speaking, while some may not be able to spell 26 English letters correctly. College students can be of rather different English proficiency levels, too. Consequently, when designing appropriate courses to improve their English, learning what they need can be pivotal (Khajavi and Gordani, 2010).

Why is it more efficient to focus the instruction more on reading and writing than listening and speaking? One needs to learn all four language skills in English, but, due to the so-called "institutional constraints," a priority is required. Many Taiwanese universities only offer a certain number of English courses throughout the four-year education. For example, the fact that freshmen only take a weekly two- or three-hour course during a semester exemplifies such limitations students and teachers need to wrestle when trying to improve their proficiency level of this important medium for current college work and future careers. Despite the seemingly noble goals of Taiwan's educational reforms, most high school graduates can read, but not necessarily comfortable with their spoken English, very possibly due to their language transfer issues derived from limited English contact. Regardless of their specific needs, reading is often an inevitable journey that these young adults need to experience in terms of necessary English contact, especially in Taiwan where English contact is much more limited compared to places like Singapore or Hong Kong. These students can access English readings at their convenience. Moreover, many college students need to start reading English textbooks and even journal articles for certain courses, rather different from studying English as a subject, with a main focus on knowing more new words, collocations, translation, and sentence-level grammar. At this college, they need to learn to read "authentic" English to access information that they need. English reading comprehension has been one of the most required EAP (English for

academic purpose) skills in tertiary education (Jordan, 1997). Writing, compared to speaking and listening, can be somewhat less intimidating because writing offers language users more wait time to process information. Explicit teaching of writing can upgrade reading comprehension. Most importantly, working professionals, indicated in some previous studies (Male, et al. 2009; Evans, 2010; Spence & Liu, 2013; Tsai, 2009) that, out of the four language skills, reading and writing English inevitable in their work on a daily basis.

1.2. Research Questions
- How do the participants perceive their English reading abilities? How do the participants perceive their control over sentence-level grammar when reading English passages?
- How do the participants perceive their English writing abilities? How do the participants perceive their control over sentence-level grammar when writing in English?

2. The Study

2.1. The Participants, Data Collection Method and Procedure
A group of seventeen EFL (English as a foreign language) freshmen with a major in biomedical engineering at a Taiwanese university agreed to participate in this study. That they were required to read English textbooks for a few of their courses motivated them quite a bit to improve English in order to survive their first year in college. This study was conducted during the second term of their first year in college. And they signed up for a study group for six weeks which aimed to provide them additional room to upgrade their English, especially reading, writing, and grammar. To accurately detect what the perceptions of these students had about their frequent problems when reading and writing English texts, a triangulation of methods was used, including data from a survey, a semi-structured group interview, and field notes based on class observations of the six-week study group.

2.1.1. Survey Questionnaires
Information from a pilot study which was administered to a group of ten students at the same Taiwanese university helped to further refine the survey instrument, including five questionnaires. The first survey included questions about background. The second part included nine questions regarding how they perceived their English reading problems. The third part had five questions regarding how they perceived their control over sentence-level grammar when reading English texts. The fourth part had eight questions regarding how their perceived their problems when doing English writing. The fifth part had five questions regarding how their control over sentence-level grammar when doing English writing.

2.1.2. Semi-Structured Group Interview
At the end of the six-week study group, they completed the questionnaires and attended this group interview, intended to encourage
them to further explain the results from the questionnaire and class observation data. Two semi-structured interview questions, basically, were the two research questions of this study.
- What are your problems when reading English texts? How is your control over sentence-level grammar when doing English reading?
- What are your problems when writing English texts? How is your control over sentence-level grammar when doing English writing?

2.2. Data analysis
Survey data from this group of students was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The interview data, analyzed the same way, was to facilitate the analysis from a qualitative perspective. Coding for the interview data was adapted from Merriam (1998) to highlight recurring regularities in the data. First, we entered all the participants' responses as recorded by pen-and-paper during the interview into a table for each respective interview question. Second, we summarized each response. Third, we needed to decide if the responses were related to the specific question or the other questions. Fourth, if the responses were related to the specific interview question, we kept them for further analysis. If not, we removed irrelevant information. Fifth, we color-coded summarized information for visual analysis. Next, we checked the frequency of matching color-coded information. Last, recurring responses were reported with the other relevant information.

3. Findings

3.1. Participants' Background
This group of 17 participants included 15 female students and 2 male students. Regarding years of studying English, 88% of them (n=15) belonged to the 9-10-year group, and the remaining 12 % in the 10-12-year group (n=2). In Taiwan, English has been listed as one of the required subjects at elementary schools, so the results implied that most participants, 15 of them, started to learn English back then. The other two had studied English a little longer.

3.2. Level of Difficulties When Reading English Texts

How did these participants perceive their level of difficulties when reading English passages? As shown in Table 1, the students were asked to rank their level of trouble by using a Likert Scale. Most students had little trouble locating the theme and the thesis statement of an essay. Thirty-five percent found identifying the theme of an article very easy; another 53% claimed it was easy. Similarly, 29% found identifying a thesis statement very easy; another 59% reported it was easy. And, identifying the topic sentence of a paragraph was very easy to 41% of them; 47% found it easy. Eighteen found identifying the topic of a paragraph very easy; 71% found it easy.

This was the case for them to identify the theme of a paragraph. Eighteen percent of them found it very easy; 65% of them found it easy. In contrast, to identify the import details of a paragraph, 47% of them found it average, meaning, not easy. Summarizing was a real challenge to them, too; 47% of them found summarizing a paragraph difficult. Only 12% found it easy. Likewise, 47% indicated summarizing an essay difficult, and 23% found it was very difficult. These might show that these students seemed to be familiar with the general structure of a five-paragraph essay, but there is obvious room for them to upgrade their abilities in locating the topic, main idea, important details, and summarizing a passage.

1. Identify the theme of an essay.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
35	53	12		
2. Identify the thesis statement of the essay.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
29	59	12		
3. Identify the topic sentence of each of the body paragraphs.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
41	47	12		
4. Identify the topic of each of the body paragraphs.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
18	71	11		
5. Identify the main idea of each of the body paragraphs.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
18	65	17		
6. Identify the important details of each of the body paragraphs.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
12	29	47	12	
7. Identify the author's opinions, suggestions, or predictions.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
23	35	35	7	
8. Summarize an English paragraph.				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
12	24	47	17	
9. Summarize an English essay				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
18	12	47	23	

Table 1: Level of Difficulties When Reading English Texts (%)
Note: Figures in All Tables in This Article Are Given in Percentages

3.3. Level of Difficulties Regarding the Control over Sentence-Level Grammar When Doing English Reading

Based on the results of the pilot study and class observation, their control over sentence-level grammar was a real problem, especially long sentences. They were asked to rank what troubled them when trying to comprehend an English passage. Table 2 shows verb tense did not seem to be a challenge. Seventy-one percent found it very easy. Clauses to them were rather different. Thirty-five percent had no problems with clauses, but 29% found them difficult. Phrasal verbs were also challenging; 35% found them average. Only 24% found them very easy, but 22 % ranked difficult. Forty-eight percent reported that their level of difficulties of collocations was average, meaning not easy. Twenty-nine percent had no problems with this item. New words to 35% of them were difficult, and 53% chose average. To enhance reading comprehension, most participants needed extra help to upgrade their control over clauses, phrasal verbs, collocations, and vocabulary bank, when reading English articles.

1. Verb tense				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
47	12	29	12	(writing)
71	18	11		(reading)
1. clauses				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
	53	18	5	24	(writing)
35	12	24	29	(reading)
2. phrasal verbs				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
23	18	29	12	18	(writing)
24	17	35	22	12	(reading)
3. collocations				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
	23	12	41	12	12	(writing)
29	11	48	12	(reading)
4. new words				
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
	12	5	42	29	12	(writing)
	12	53	35	(reading)

Table 2: Level of Difficulties Regarding the Control over Sentence-Level
Grammar When Doing English Reading and Writing (%)

3.4. Level of Difficulties When Writing English Texts

Table 3 shows that English writing appears to be a tough task for these students. Fifty-three percent of them found generating ideas for writing was average, not easy, and 18% found it difficult. Only 18 % thought getting enough ideas to write about was easy. This may suggest most of these participants were not good at expressing their ideas. Fifty-four percent found choosing relevant information and making logical movement average, not easy. Eighteen percent reported that organization was easy, and only 5% did not have problems
with organization. The data here suggest that organization challenged most participants during the writing process.
Adding variety to their sentence structure was difficult to 35% of them, and another 30% did not think that writing English sentences of various sentence structures was easy. This means 65% of them needed additional scaffolding to upgrade this writing ability. In contrast, another 30% of them found it easy; only 5% reported that they had not problems with using various English sentence structures in their writing. However, using synonyms and similar phrases in writing was not easy to 60 % of the students, and another 35% found it difficult. Only 5% of them who should have a rather sufficient range of vocabulary had not problems in this aspect. This implied that most of them need to expand their vocabulary in order to upgrade their writing.

Their self-reported data shows a similar pattern about their control over sentence-level grammar. Eighty-two percent of them reported grammar was not easy; only another 13% found it easy. Table 2 showed that, except verb tense, more than 50% reported that use of clauses, phrasal verbs, collocations, and new vocabulary were not easy, and this pattern reveals these students admitted that they needed to upgrade their control over sentence-level grammar and expand vocabulary bank. In terms of Punctuation, only 30% did not have problems, and 47% reported that they might have few slight problems, in part possibly related to their somewhat limited control of sentence-level grammar.

The results about spelling are surprising. Only 5% of them reported that they did not have spelling problems; 29% reported that their spelling was usually correct. But 54% of them reported that spelling was not easy, which suggests that they had issues with correct spelling. Twelve percent even admitted that spelling was difficult. Forty-one percent reported that legibility and control over manuscript form were easy. Another 41% of them stated that such tasks were average, which could suggest they did not find these aspects easy. Only 18% of them were satisfied with these parts.

1.	generating ideas for writing			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
18	53	18	11	

2.	choosing relevant information and making logical movement			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
5	18	54	18	5

3.	Variety in sentence structure			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
5	30	30	35	

4.	Variety in words and phrases			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
5	60	35		

5.	Control of sentence-level grammar			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
5	13	82		

6.	Punctuation			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
30	47	18	5	

7.	spelling			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
5	29	54	12	

6	Legibility and manuscript form			
Very easy	easy	average	difficult	very Difficult
18	41	41		

Table 3: Level of Difficulties When Writing English Texts (%)

3.5. Level of Difficulties Regarding the Control over Sentence-Level Grammar When Doing English Writing

The results of table 2 showed almost half of the participants claimed that verb tense was very easy. Forty-seven percent had no problems with verb tense during the writing process; 71% had no such issues during their reading process. Reading, a receptive language skill, which serves as a decoding too, can develop faster than writing, as a productive language skill, which is to encode one's message via the English language system. The data regarding their use of clauses in writing shows that 53% had no problems and that 18% of them only had slight issues. Thus, 71% implied that the use of clauses was not a writing problem of theirs. In contrast, with their reading, 53% reported that clauses were part of their reading comprehension problems. A possible reason, based on our class observations, may be related to the fact that the variety of sentence structure used in students' writing may not be as sophisticated as the authentic English passages they need to comprehend. Phrasal verbs to 29% were not easy; another 12% found this part difficult. They were very difficult to another 18%. Hence, 59% of them reported the need to improve their language skills in this aspect. For their English reading, their reported levels of difficulties showed a similar pattern. Collocations were not easy to 65% of these students, as shown in table 5. Their perceived levels of difficulties in writing were similar to those in reading. Only 17% reported that they could take care of new words during the writing process, but the rest of the participants, 83%, reported that new words burdened their writing. That is, they needed to expand their vocabulary bank in order to improve their writing. Table 2 also shows 88% of them had obvious reading problems due to their limited vocabulary bank.

The semi-structured group interview which lasted for about one hour took place in a classroom at the university; 15 out of the 17 participants showed up for this meeting.

3.6. Interview Question 1: What Are Your Problems When Reading English Texts? How Is Your Control Over Sentence-Level Grammar When Doing English Reading?

Their self-reported data shows that they had rather limited trouble, if any, in locating the theme, the thesis statement, and the author's viewpoints of a five-paragraph essay and in identifying the topic sentence, the topic and the main idea of a paragraph. This fact showed that they had clear ideas about the general structure of a paragraph and an essay. What they needed to improve included identifying the important details of a given paragraph, summarizing a paragraph and an essay. When asked what troubled them when reading English passages, some of them mentioned about grammar. As stated earlier, their trouble with sentence-level grammar were often related to the use of clauses, phrasal verbs, collocations, and new words. The class observation showed that they usually relied on their smart phone to look up new word, if they did, though they had been strongly encouraged to use a dictionary to make sure that they had located the right interpretations for the new words or phrases in a given context. They were reluctant to do so because the convenience of using smart phone was too "tempting" to them. They used google or the other internet search engines to look up the meanings of the unfamiliar English words. This habit of relying on their smart phones, instead of a dictionary, obviously was a typical issue among them which could explain about their weakness in new words, collocations, phrasal verbs, and clauses. Although more explicit instruction and additional practice can help empower them to understand "authentic" long sentences with a few clauses, looking up information about the connectors which they were not familiar with could further enhance their understanding, especially by reading the example sentences in the dictionary. However,

to enhance one's understanding of the meaning of and the common usage of phrasal verbs, new words, and collocations, a dictionary, or an alternative electronic one would definitely help.

3.7. Interview Question 2: What Are Your Problems When Writing English Texts? How Is Your Control Over Sentence-Level Grammar When Doing English Writing?

The survey data revealed that, by and large, these participants who were not confident about their writing abilities had somewhat obvious signs of less-experienced writers. Except punctuation, the results showed that they had rather high level of difficulties in generating ideas for writing, choosing relevant information and making logical movement, adding variety to their sentence structures, words, and phrases, controlling sentence-level grammar, and even spelling. During the interview, some participants pointed out that their limited English proficiency burdened their composing process, which means that they thought and wrote very slowly. But they admitted that their writing plans were pretty rough and that they had similar issues when expressing themselves on certain controversial issues in Chinese due to their limited background knowledge. One of them raised issues about organization of information to be included in writing. She explained that one of the reasons why her writing was slow and challenging was related to the fact that usually she had difficulties in deciding the relevance and logical movement of her information. However, individuals with limited background information about the writing topic and did not make a well-thought outline, the writing plan, tend to struggle, facing frequent pauses, during the process of writing in a foreign language. Limited English proficiency could certainly be one of their main problems, but not the only one. When asked why they had problems with spelling, almost everyone in the room smiled. One of the students lamented that automatic spell check in Word had "reduced" their spelling abilities.

Furthermore, the survey data showed obvious room for them to improve their control over phrasal verbs, collocations, and new words in order to help them accomplish more eloquent, insightful writing in a more efficient manner. When being asked about their reluctance of using a "legitimate" tool—a good dictionary-- to look up new language expressions, some of them pointed out that using a dictionary to look up new words or phrases was too troublesome, so they preferred the option of the "concise" Chinese translation of the new language expressions. They agreed that "no pain, no gain," but the smart phone option was too "tempting" to give it up.

4. Conclusion

The traditional instructional approach in teaching English as a foreign language in Taiwan has an evident emphasis on knowledge-telling and is mostly text-centered and top-down. One of the effects of globalization on Taiwan's education is the increasing need to attain proficient English for academic and occupational purposes. With college students' different English proficiency levels, consulting them about their needs in learning English can provide EAP teachers necessary information to design the suitable English curriculum (Akbari, 2016; Leki & Carson, 1994).

The results of this study showed that the respondents were somewhat familiar with certain rhetorical structure, so they reported that identifying the theme of a reading passage was not difficult, but their rhetorical skills, including the organization skills and the ability to write clearly, were weak when writing an expository essay. Their self-reported data showed obvious signs of less-experienced writers who need to improve thinking skills, in relating to generating and expanding ideas, rhetorical skills, "task management strategies" (e.g., brainstorming, planning, outlining, drafting, revising, proofreading), managing sources (e.g., summarizing, reading) (Leki & Carson, 1994, p. 86). Furthermore, to become better readers and writers, they should improve their language skills, including grammar, vocabulary, collocations, and so forth.

Limitations of this study include the small number of respondents and the language in which the English survey was conducted. That English is not the native language for the participants implied possible comprehension problems for the participants. Further, the scope of the questionnaires was confined to some certain extent due to the use of preconceived classifications.

For this group of Taiwanese undergraduate students with a major in biomedical engineering, a preliminary curriculum was suggested, aiming to upgrade their language skills, such as grammar, collocations, vocabulary, and so forth, study skills, and language learning strategies. Language proficiency only develops through extended and repeated acts of language processing. Study skills and language learning strategies will equip them with essential met cognitive tools to monitor their learning process, paying attention to their problems and developing doable problem-solving solutions to enhance their confidence and motivation in upgrading their English.

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