

CULTURAL SHIFTS: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF THE CHANGING READING PRACTICES OF THAI POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The importance of reading for academic study cannot be overemphasised. At the postgraduate level, in particular, students are faced with complex text interpretation processes. International students, in addition, have to make a significant cultural/study shift; not only do they have to become accustomed to the reading of academic texts using discipline-specific discourse patterns but often have to adjust to the different conventions used by authors from cultural backgrounds other than their own.

Despite the difficulties which international postgraduate students experience, reading problems and the expected outcomes have been cited as one of the most neglected areas of research (Smith 1998). In addition, little is known about international student reading practices and how they change during study at an Australian university.

This paper presents part of a longitudinal study which used metacognitive and framing theories to explore the adjustments and self awareness of adjustment when reading in English by Thai and Indian postgraduate students. The data presented here from Thai postgraduate students reveal significant changes in reading practices between first and third semester and the students' awareness of these changes. The research has implications for postgraduate supervision and curriculum development at the postgraduate level.

Introduction

In recent years many universities around the World have experienced a significant increase in the number of international students from a non-English speaking background (NESB). Despite the importance of international students to universities, both financial and cultural, there are gaps in expectations between academic staff and students which still need addressing. There is concern, too, about the lack of research and development in the field of postgraduate education of international students (Zuber-Skerritt & Ryan, 1998) and, specifically, about the teaching styles to which they have been accustomed (Zuber-Skerritt, 1994). In particular, reading problems and the expected outcomes have been cited as one of the most neglected problems facing international postgraduate students (Smith, 1998). While academic staff often express concerns regarding the learning/study approaches of international students (Ninnes, 1999; Zuber-Skerritt, 1994), and the English as a second language (ESL) literacy (Fitzgerald, 1995), few of these students have themselves been asked for their views on their learning, or specifically, their reading approaches. As a result, international ESL postgraduate students often find

themselves working with supervisors or in classes with lecturers with little knowledge of their international postgraduate students' learning styles, in particular, their reading practices or, if they do have some knowledge of their students' cultural-educational backgrounds they 'may lack specialist skills to help improve outcomes' (Cargill, 1996:177).

This paper, part of a completed doctoral study, focuses on the reading practices of international postgraduate students. Reading is a complex skill influenced by background knowledge, educational upbringings, cultural attitudes to reading and expectations regarding the purpose of reading. While international students from a non-English speaking background may read adequately in their own country to fulfil the educational expectations of their own country, they may find that these same reading practices do not fulfil the requirements of an overseas university. This is not to imply that their skills are deficient, rather to suggest that these students may encounter a system which rewards study approaches which are Western rather than international (Ninnes, 1999).

The objectives of this part of the doctoral study were to:

- Investigate the reading practices of Thai postgraduate students while studying at an Australian university during their first semester;
- Identify the socio-cultural and educational conditions prevailing in their home countries which may have influenced their reading practices during first semester at an Australian university;
- Investigate the reading practices of Thai postgraduate students while studying at an Australian university during their third semester and the changes that may have occurred since first semester; and
- Identify the changing socio-cultural and educational influences which may have produced changes in their reading practices between the first and the third semester.

Literature Review

Much of the reading research to date has tended to focus on what a reader comprehends, the product of reading, or on particular individual components of the reading process. Moreover, much of the research has focussed on reading activities which, while not named as such, are metacognitive in nature. This research has focussed on the four elements of metacognition: Knowledge of text structures, Knowledge of task, Knowledge and application of strategies and Knowledge of self as discussed by Armbruster et al. (1982) and other researchers.

I shall discuss here some of the reading research related to knowledge of text structures as this component of metacognition relates to intratextual framing, explained later. There have been a variety of studies incorporating the examination of the influence of text structure on reading. Some researchers, for example, have investigated the influence of text structure on ESL readers in conjunction with the good/poor variable (e.g. Anderson, 1991; Block, 1992; Carrell, 1989; Devine, 1988; Langer et al., 1990). Research with good and poor readers with regard to text structure has demonstrated that good readers seem to use the text structure to aid recall of the main ideas in the text as well as a means of facilitating comprehension (Leon & Carretero, 1995).

Another area of research has focussed on the difficulties experienced by readers related to the structures of academic texts (Bhatia, 1993; Clyne, 1981, 1987; Hinkel, 1994; Holm & Dodd, 1996; Swales, 1990; Taylor & Tingguang, 1991). Contrastive studies of discourse have demonstrated, for example, variations in text structures in different languages. A comparison of introductions to scientific papers by Taylor and Tingguang (1991) with Anglo-Americans writing in English, Chinese writing in English, and Chinese writing in Chinese, showed that there was an underlying rhetorical structure common to all language groups but that there were systematic variations, some of which related to the discipline rather than the language or nationality of the writers. Other variations, however, showed substantial differences between Western and Chinese writers, irrespective of language. The Chinese writers, for example, avoided elaboration, did not write at length and cited fewer references. Their overall conclusion was that, while there was 'an internationalization of scientific discourse, there were yet significant variations in both regional and disciplinary cultures' (p.332).

A difficulty for ESL students reading in a language other than their own is that 'L2 texts are usually written within the cultural assumptions of the speakers of that language, not within those of the readers' first language' (McDonough, 1995:42). McLoughlin (1995), for example, specifically designed a study to explore how cultural background knowledge and linguistic variables influence students' reconstruction of scientific texts. No differences emerged between the Australian and Singaporean students with regard to recall of main ideas or awareness of text structures. The Malaysian students in the study, however, recalled fewer main ideas and showed less awareness of the argument structure. Also problem-solution type texts seemed to produce greater difficulties than texts organized as comparison/contrast. The McLoughlin study did not assess *quality* of information recalled.

Overall, the results from the various studies, relating to text structure, highlight several issues. Good readers seem to use text structure to aid recall; the rhetorical structures readers from other countries are accustomed to, however, may be different from those used in academic texts they may read while studying in a

different cultural-educational context. The differing text structures they encounter can affect the type of information that is recalled and the temporal sequence of recall.

Methodology

The methodology for this study involved an ethnographic approach grounded in a theory of framing and metacognitive theory, drawing on data derived from individual interviews, pair think-aloud protocols and retrospective interviews conducted in the first and third semesters of the students' study and from field trips to Thailand by the author.

Framing And Metacognitive Theories

The researcher's desire to understand in detail the reading practices of postgraduate students from Thailand at two points in time led to the development of a conceptual framework for the study incorporating theories of framing and metacognition (see Figure 1).

Framing theory

The term 'frame' can be traced back to the work of the anthropologist, Bateson (1972), who introduced the term, and to others who built on his work, for example, the sociologist, Goffman (1974), the linguistic anthropologist, Gumperz (1982), and the social psychologists, Schank and Abelson (1977) and, more recently, Tannen (1993) and MacLachlan and Reid (1994). Tannen defines 'frames as 'expectations' and in recent work gave examples in which 'speakers reveal expectations about the context and activity in which they are taking part' (1993: 35). Reid et al. (1998) applied the concept of framing to reading practices. According to Reid, frame analysis assumes that 'interpretation presupposes an ability to recognise the framing devices (mainly linguistic) which convey metamessages – that is messages about messages' (Reid et al. 1998: xi). Four kinds of interpretative framing assumed to influence the interpretative process in reading have been outlined by MacLachlan and Reid (1994):

Extratextual framing which occurs when a reader uses his background knowledge and experience to interpret the text;

Circumtextual framing which occurs when a reader takes into account the cover of a book or journal, and peripheral features such as the title and the abstract to build a picture of the text;

Intertextual framing which is when a reader links other readings with his present reading to help make sense of the present reading;

Intratextual framing which is when a reader uses cues, such as headings and subheadings, cohesive devices etc. within a passage to interpret.

This paper focuses on the latter, intratextual framing and its relationship with self knowledge.

Framing theory enabled the researcher to identify the types of framing used by readers and enabled the identification of readers' expectations which guided their approaches to reading. Framing theory helped identify *how* readers approach text and the reasons for their approaches. Moreover, as the study was concerned with changes in reading practices over a period of time, framing theory was useful as it can help highlight the changes. The categories enabled the researcher, moreover, to identify patterns while bearing in mind that one must carefully consider what is 'significant and meaningful' (Patton, 1990: 406).

Metacognitive Theory

As mentioned earlier, this study used metacognitive theory in conjunction with framing theory. The main reason for using metacognitive theory in combination with framing theory is that metacognitive theory enables the

identification of participants' knowledge of such metacognitive reading features as knowledge of self, knowledge of task, knowledge of text structure and knowledge of strategies and their applications. It identifies the extent of executive control being utilised by the participants to produce efficient reading to fulfil their purposes. For example, it was envisaged that, as participants became more aware of academic text structures, they would adapt their current range of text-related strategies or develop new strategies to suit the new reading requirements. Urquhart and Weir (1998) argue that, while we have theories of careful reading, we have little information on how readers process text quickly and efficiently, extracting important information in line with their intended purposes.

This paper focuses on the changes in metacognition and framing, particularly changes in knowledge of self and intratextual framing by a cohort of Thai postgraduate students in their first year of study at an Australian university.

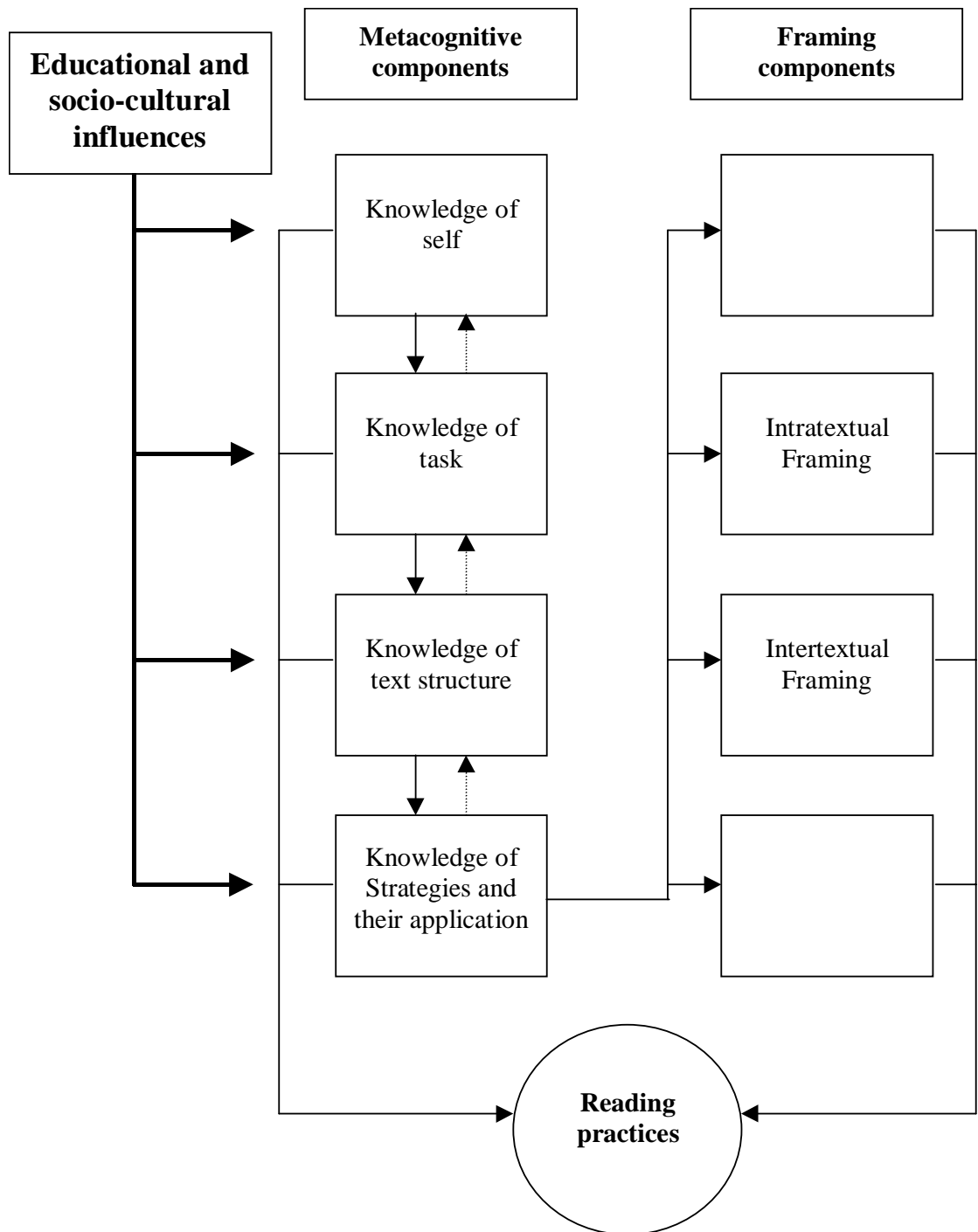


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Analysis

The data analysis incorporated seven phases. Firstly, data were coded and put into categories, broadly defined framing and metacognitive categories, from the individual interviews and the pair think-alouds. Summaries were written of the data and the researcher's observations to focus the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Schumacher and McMillan, 1993).

Secondly, the interviews were then grouped, compared and re-analysed; thirdly, the interviews and pair think-alouds were grouped together and re-analysed and interpreted to provide explanations of the students' reading practices. Through this three staged process, patterns of similarities were produced and differences were highlighted. The same process took place in the third semester, enabling a seventh phase, a comparison between the case studies in the first and the third semester, thus demonstrating a multi-case approach (Firestone and Dawson, 1988). The data were reported from the third and the sixth phases and then from the seventh phase.

Also considered were the influences, socio-cultural and educational – which impacted on the participants' reading practices. This helped in the understanding of *why* participants' reading practices were the way they were in the first semester and *why* they changed by the third semester.

Profile Of The Thai Students

The six Thai participants were chosen for the study because they had only just arrived in Australia to embark on postgraduate study. They had all completed their undergraduate study at Thai universities and the main language they used at home was Thai. These common aspects enabled the researcher to investigate the Thai socio-cultural and educational influences which might impact on their reading practices on first taking up their study at the postgraduate level. The researcher was then able to identify the changes in reading practices which were taking place as they progressed through their study.

Ages of participants ranged from 25 to 33. Four of the six participants had been lecturers in their disciplines in Thai universities. They reported that they had not written in English during their time of lecturing and only spoke English when there had been a visiting English-speaking lecturer. They had read to prepare for classes but had had no time for research.

The participants, based at the Australian universities, were identified as A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, and A2₂, B2₂ and B2₃ substitute participants for A2 and B2 who had to leave the university.

Knowledge Of Self

In first semester, the six Thai participants appeared generally aware of their reading abilities and they had assessed them in relation to their expectations of study at an Australian university. Early in their first semester, the Thai participants demonstrated, for example, an awareness of a mismatch between their reading practices and what they thought was expected of them at an Australian university. They were aware that they had not done enough reading during their undergraduate studies in Thailand to enable them to manage the reading requirements for their graduate and postgraduate studies in Australia with ease. They were also aware that the Australian teaching methods were different from those they had been accustomed to in Thailand. They had realized their difficulty in discussing these differences with their supervisors or fellow students due to lack of fluency in their oral English.

The participants also recognized that they were no longer reading to memorize facts for examinations; they were, however, still reading, as one participant stated, to ‘get’ ideas, i.e. reading for facts to ‘get ideas’ rather than to discuss or critique any texts they read. A1 pointed to the influence of the educational system in Thailand which encouraged reading to learn facts rather than reading to critique:

There is not much interaction [with Thai teachers]; we cannot ask about passage – that is the way of life – respect for teacher; we do not argue; we read for information.(sic)

The researcher experienced this respect for teachers firsthand when in Thailand. There were other reasons for lack of discussion of texts. Participants expressed concerns about their pronunciation, their practice of translation and their lack of confidence in their oral abilities. A1 explained that she not only translated when taking down notes at lectures but while trying to speak with her supervisor even though she was aware that translating was making her discussions a slow and difficult process:

Translating from Thai into English makes me feel confused about putting words together in the right order.(sic)

While using this strategy, though, A1 said she was, at the same time, memorizing technical terms in English, thus demonstrating a partial shift in strategy use to accommodate the learning of new terms.

Although there were opportunities to participate in some seminar discussions at their Australian university, A2 explained why this was challenging for them:

The lecturer is the leader and the students are followers. The Western students speak more and some of the mature age students who are older than the lecturer, speak most of all because they believe their experiences are more worthwhile ... The oriental students speak little because the talk is too fast and because of the special terms in the text.(sic)

The explanation shows evidence of a cultural expectation that the lecturer should lead and the students should be followers. At the same time, there was the desire by students to be self-directed and to participate on an equal basis with the other students. However, their oral capacity and lack of knowledge of technical terms inhibited them. A2, in particular, would have had much to offer from her varied professional background as teacher, researcher and journalist.

The six Thai participants appeared to be used to discussion among their peers in their home country. During my visit to a Thai university, I was invited to take some postgraduate classes in text analysis. It was evident that students were accustomed to working in informal groups and, in fact, it seemed almost impossible for them to work alone and offer comment on the text without first consulting with members of the class. They explained, too, how they found it difficult to express orally what they were thinking. One student expressed his difficulty in a rather charming way:

I don't speaking English but I smile! (sic)

Another observation was that these Thai-based students seemed to always read quietly out loud when presented with a text, pointing to a sound-system of learning. Pronunciation difficulties could, of course, disrupt this system of learning. In answer to the question, ‘what helps you to improve your reading?’, one Thailand-based student responded:

Practise more a[nd] lear[n] more (sic)

It was observed, too, that many students did not pronounce two consonants without inserting another vowel and often missed out the second consonant, as in the

response above – hence ‘I can’t go’ and I can go’ often sound the same. Pronunciation could lead then, it was thought, to difficulties with interpretation of text as well as discussion.

C1 summed up his observations of cultural difference and his awareness of multicultural perspectives:

Maybe the people of the world are the same, same ideas, same meaning of beauty, the same meaning of aesthetics but different culture ... (sic)

How was this self knowledge used when reading? A discussion follows of the relationship between participants’ self knowledge and their use of intratextual framing to enable understanding.

Intratextual Framing

The participants knew how to frame intratextually from their English language lessons in Thailand and so could use this skill in their first semester. They knew, for example, how to use the headings to find the main ideas and the first sentence in a paragraph to find the main theme. Even in the first semester, some of the participants were able to be selective in their reading. C2 mentioned, for example, that she only read the relevant headings.

All the participants mentioned that Thai authors used simple vocabulary and simple construction of sentences and they reported also that there was considerably more explanation to be found in introductions in the texts in their own country. In addition, the print was often larger.

A2 focussed on the conclusion due to past advice from her Dean of learning in Thailand:

If not sure, move your eyes – don’t worry about information and skim to next paragraph and find what text would like you to do. Don’t read line by line.

Best way to know about information, go to conclusion – the last sentence – and you can know more than 50% that writer would like you to know. (sic)

As well as looking at the text elements of introduction and conclusion, all the participants used intratextual cues such as headings, pictures, graphs and tables. One of the students explained that tables were easier to understand generally than the text although there were some tables she could not understand if the contents were not clarified within the text. B2 also reported that, while figures and boxes were useful, it was very important for international students to have the figures within detailed explanatory text.

Referring to the use of pictures, C1 (the art student) stated, with regard to his academic article, that pictures stimulated his imagination:

The author use example of famous picture or famous sculpture so I can imagine (sic)

C1 described his preference for relying heavily on visuals in texts:

Normally I like to read magazines, design; the nature of design or art is people to accept the visual picture more than try to understand the text so for the magazine is news and have some, a lot, of picture and a little bit of explaining – so easy. (sic)

Memorization

The difficulty with pronunciation was mentioned again in relation to memorization of texts, a strategy that had been much used in Thailand. The greater amount and complexity of the academic reading coupled with unfamiliar vocabulary, the participants soon found, made this an inappropriate strategy. As B2₂ explained:

Cannot pronounce one word, so how can you memorize, and if you don’t know the meaning how can you remember? (sic)

C1 explained that, in Thailand, children were generally taught English with Thai pronunciation and, by the time they were fifteen, when they knew it was wrong, it was too late to change.

Another participant mentioned the relationship between memorizing and vocabulary knowledge:

Sometimes, we can't to find the words that we want to speaking. Because English isn't my language, so we must to read a lot to make ensure that we can remember many words.(sic)

The greater amount of English vocabulary, however, contributed to their problems. B2 gave the example of the English words, 'good', 'excellent', 'fantastic'. In Thai, she explained there is only one word with all these meanings to remember. In order to aid memorizing, the participants were using a range of strategies – summarizing, sketching diagrams, highlighting and underlining useful vocabulary. B1, on the other hand, demonstrated that she was, even in the first semester, able to appreciate language for its own sake and was highlighting interesting phrases such as 'library without walls'.

A2₂, however, had decided that memorization was not a useful strategy:

If I don't use [vocabulary] will forget in two days so no point and it takes time so I read to understand.(sic)

A2₂ has given 'voice' to a significant cultural shift in his reading approach brought about by the different expectations of reading for his current study.

Translation

Translation was another strategy much used by the Thai participants. C1, however, explained the difficulties related to the Thai system of teaching by translation:

... we study English by translation in Thai, in Thai sentence; we don't study by understanding so we have the problem like when we, when I was five years old I study the ABC and about seven years old I start to make the sentence, study like this and the teacher give you ten sentence and as the homework tomorrow you translate into Thai, then tomorrow they give you the Thai sentence and you translate to English like that but when we study more advanced we found that the sentence is not the same as the basic study; some sentence is long sentence and have sub sentence inside it; is difference from Thai sentence.(sic)

Although time consuming, most of the participants still used this strategy because, as A1 explained, translation was necessary to 'find meaning'. She was trying now to take down some lecture notes in English but if the lecturers used long sentences, this affected her ability to listen and, she said, she 'loses consciousness'.

A1 mentioned another aspect of language transference. She acknowledged that she also had problems with the Thai language and used to spend many hours preparing for her own teaching, checking the Thai grammar and structures carefully. As she said:

I have never been interested in language: it makes me feel afraid. I must now give attention to language – find it very tiring.(sic)

In summary, the six Thai participants in first semester displayed awareness that their home country reading experiences and background knowledge had not fully prepared them for their postgraduate studies in the Australian environment. In particular, the participants found that the Thai teaching methods, reading practices, purposes and expectations influenced their reading in a way which was not necessarily appropriate in the Australian environment. They soon became aware,

moreover, that many of the reading strategies they had brought with them from Thailand were not effective for the amount and type of reading they had to tackle at the postgraduate level in the Australian environment. C1 explained that there had been little opportunity to acquire effective reading strategies. Reading to children in Thailand was not a common practice, he said. Children were often asked to read to a grandmother, especially if her eyesight was failing or she was old. He himself, he said, used to read books about plants to his grandmother. Although this practice may have been good in some ways, it did not allow children to acquire effective reading strategies because he said:

It is very boring for children and then they cannot understand what they read (sic)

The Thailand-based students described a range of difficulties they had with reading in English: lack of vocabulary, knowledge of meaning, grammar, structure and lack of time. One poignant comment said it all:

I can reading but I no meanings (sic)

Another important aspect demonstrated by the participants in Australia was that, apart from A2₂, they were content to read single, simple texts rather than try to compare texts, author views or question the material presented. As one participant said, she 'just read it'.

There was also a certain amount of despondency. The participants' perception of reading at an Australian university was that it was a solitary activity as seen from this statement by B2:

No-one going to tell you how to do that; no-one care; you have to do it [the reading] yourself – quite private. (sic)

Figure 2 shows the level of usage of knowledge of self and intratextual framing in first semester.

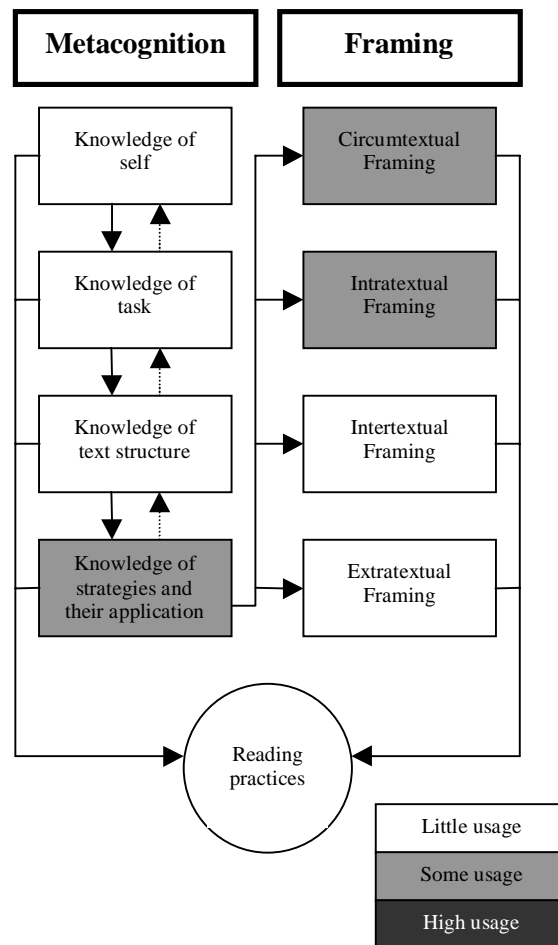


Figure 2 Metacognition (self knowledge) and Framing (intratextual) used in the first semester

Third Semester

In third semester all the Thai participants framed predominantly intratextually although there was evidence, too, of increased intertextual framing i.e. reading of other related texts, specifically in their academic reading.

One of the changes in intratextual framing was an increased awareness of text structure. At the same time, A1 was reading for understanding rather than focussing on only structure. She explained it this way:

If I concern about the English structures maybe forget what I would like to remember (sic)

This comment shows, too, the continuing concern with memorizing text.

All the participants demonstrated an increased awareness of specific intratextual features. Of particular note, was the changed order of reading; several read the conclusion first, using it as an overview. Nevertheless, even in third semester, all the participants still had not become fully accustomed to the lack of explanation in the introduction of an English authored text.

Some participants displayed increased metacognitive ability in that they were differentiating between the usefulness of intratextual features. C2, for example, although still using headings, reported that she did not necessarily use boxes, diagrams or tables as these 'can waste your time' trying to understand them. Only if they did not incorporate too much detail, did she use them.

It was shown in the third semester, too, that pictures were not necessarily useful. When shown a general text with pictures of a brain riddled with holes due to Creutzfeldt Jacob disease, the participants 'saw' different images. Two participants thought the picture depicted a needle pointing at the holes. Another recalled a snake bite and suggested that the 'needle' was more likely to be a representation of a rope because she knew from experience that one ties a 'rope or anything similar around a snake bite to prevent poison going to the heart'; this dialogue demonstrates that making associations with background knowledge can result in misinterpretation.

Changing Strategy Use

The strategies of reading on, looping back and making inferences, critical for academic study, were not mentioned to any great extent in first semester. After a further two semesters' of study, though, most of the participants demonstrated the use of these strategies in their pair think-alouds. The fact that readers may need to loop back and forth illustrates why the Thai participants were concerned about texts which are too long because the information may not be able to be held in short term memory.

Another continuing problem concerned discipline-specific discourse. B2₃ gave the example of the word 'fidelity' used in a text concerning educational change. When she encountered this word, she did not understand the concept and thought, she said:

Oh, I am very honest but I don't know about it [this term]. Very interesting English (laughing). (sic)

Compound words caused even greater anxiety. C2 provided the example 'exposures' from her academic text from the financial field. She could find this word in a 'normal' dictionary but did not know how it related to 'risk exposure', 'interest exposure', 'loan exposure'. She drew on the knowledge of the mother of a Thai friend who was in the money lending field.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation, too, was again mentioned as being a continuing difficulty. The author of C1's academic article was Charles Pickstone. 'Charles', C1 explained, was a 'normal' name but names like 'Pickstone' can cause problems because they are completely unfamiliar. He explained in this way:

I don't know how to pronounce and when I don't know how to pronounce I cannot pronounce in my mind so I cannot remember and that give me a lot of problem in lecture ... because the lecturer talking about somebody, some author; I don't know what he is talking about. (sic)

Not being able to visualize the name would make it difficult for C1 to find further readings by the author and, even if he could visualize it, there would still be the problem of memorizing a name with which he was unfamiliar; this would possibly impede his comprehension of a text.

Memorizing For Life-long Learning

Other changes in strategy use between the first and the third semester were reported by the participants to be centred around memorization and translation. Changed perceptions by the participants with regard to academic expectations, in particular, the need for substantial reading, led to changes in the use of the long-held strategy of memorizing. B2₃ reported that she could not remember material she had read but had realized this was not important:

In my country, we memorize a lot but here we learn how to get the information, how to access the information – life long learning.(sic)

Realizing that learning the *how* is just as important as, if not more so, than learning the *what* is a significant change in perception of the requirements of postgraduate study.

Translation

An important strategy, especially at the beginning of study in a second language environment is translation; this strategy was being relied on less in the third semester but was still required, not only for conceptual understanding but also for discussion of cultural differences. As explained by A1:

I cannot think everything in English so I cannot choose appropriate words to explain my idea to any other people and cannot summarize it in English ... reading in English, think in Thai, translate back to English (sic)

She further explained that, although it was easy to find a Thai word for an English word, it was difficult to find the appropriate English word for the Thai word because she could not understand ‘the deep meaning’ of English words and so could not use them. Once again, the influence of the grammar-oriented style of English teaching in Thailand was mentioned as the cause of this difficulty.

There was another difficulty with translation. A1 explained that when she read in English she could put words into Thai word order but when she translated from Thai she had to think of the most appropriate English word first and then put it in the correct order; so there are two stages that have to be accomplished in order to acquire a reasonable translation – finding the appropriate meaning and then using the correct word order.

Connected to translation is dictionary use; the responses revealed less reliance on English/Thai dictionaries because the participants were aware that often the most appropriate meaning could not be found in a dictionary. This was especially the case with discipline-specific terms. More reading of English texts, discussion with supervisors and Thai friends and sourcing of the Internet were strategies which were gradually taking the place of translation and dictionary use.

One participant, C1, however, still used an English/Thai dictionary although aware of the drawbacks of using an English/Thai dictionary:

I can use dictionary to know that but I don't know the correct meaning or the concept of this word (sic)

C1, however, had adopted another strategy. He now read the first two paragraphs of texts word-by-word because he now realized, he said, that an author often used the same terms over and over and therefore it was useful to find out the meanings in the early paragraphs. Thereafter, because of the detailed work with the first paragraphs, he said he could guess the content of the rest of the text.

Not only then had the use of intratextual framing significantly increased by the third semester but its form, too, had changed in that participants tried to make more connections within the text, used time-saving strategies of skim reading and paid

attention to visual cues such as graphs, tables and diagrams, at the same time discriminating between helpful and unhelpful intratextual devices. Headings were being used to select relevant parts of the text rather than to guide the reader through the whole text. Still some difficulties remained, for example, with in-text features, such as tables, diagrams and figures. The participants in this study reported the following reasons for their varying degrees of difficulty with these features: lack of explanation, too many statistics and lack of reference between some visual features and the text. The Thai teaching style and a background reading Thai texts were again cited as being considerable influences on their current reading. A1 explained that her English language classes focussed on 'correct or wrong grammar' adding 'but [we] don't understand what is the meaning'. (sic)

Changes In Knowledge Of Self

Participants' knowledge of self, as one would expect, had changed also. In first semester, the Thai participants had become aware of the need to change their reading practices in order to accommodate to their new study environment and had begun initiating changes in their reading practices. In the third semester, they had made significant changes; participants had increased the use of intratextual framing as discussed and also of intertextual framing i.e. were making connections with other readings. A major influence on these changes appeared to have been substantially increased self-efficacy. At the same time, increasing self-efficacy was a consequence of the more successful reading practices now being used by the participants.

The participants expressed their increased confidence in a variety of ways. They could all report that they were reading faster and with more understanding. One participant mentioned being able to read without having to always re-read. Another reported that she could 'pull out' the main ideas easier and faster; this meant that she could discuss her research with her supervisor much more efficiently than in her first semester.

With increased understanding came increased attempts to evaluate text content, text elements such as conclusions and implications. Still participants expressed disappointment at not being fully able to participate in seminars. This still required better knowledge, more fluent oral skills, better listening skills and more confidence.

Importantly, participants demonstrated awareness not only of their own increasing abilities, but also of where they lacked efficient strategies. A1 explained one of her limitations:

I only answer the questions that supervisor ask me; I don't dare to tell, to ask him first or to argue some points, you know.(sic)

For the other participants, it could be assumed that their increased self-efficacy was partly a consequence of being able to discuss reading materials and research with their supervisors. The main reason reported for increased self-efficacy by the participants was the safe, non threatening study environment. The changes in self knowledge and intratextual framing in the third semester can be seen in Figure 3. The figure shows the shift to high usage of knowledge of self and intratextual framing.

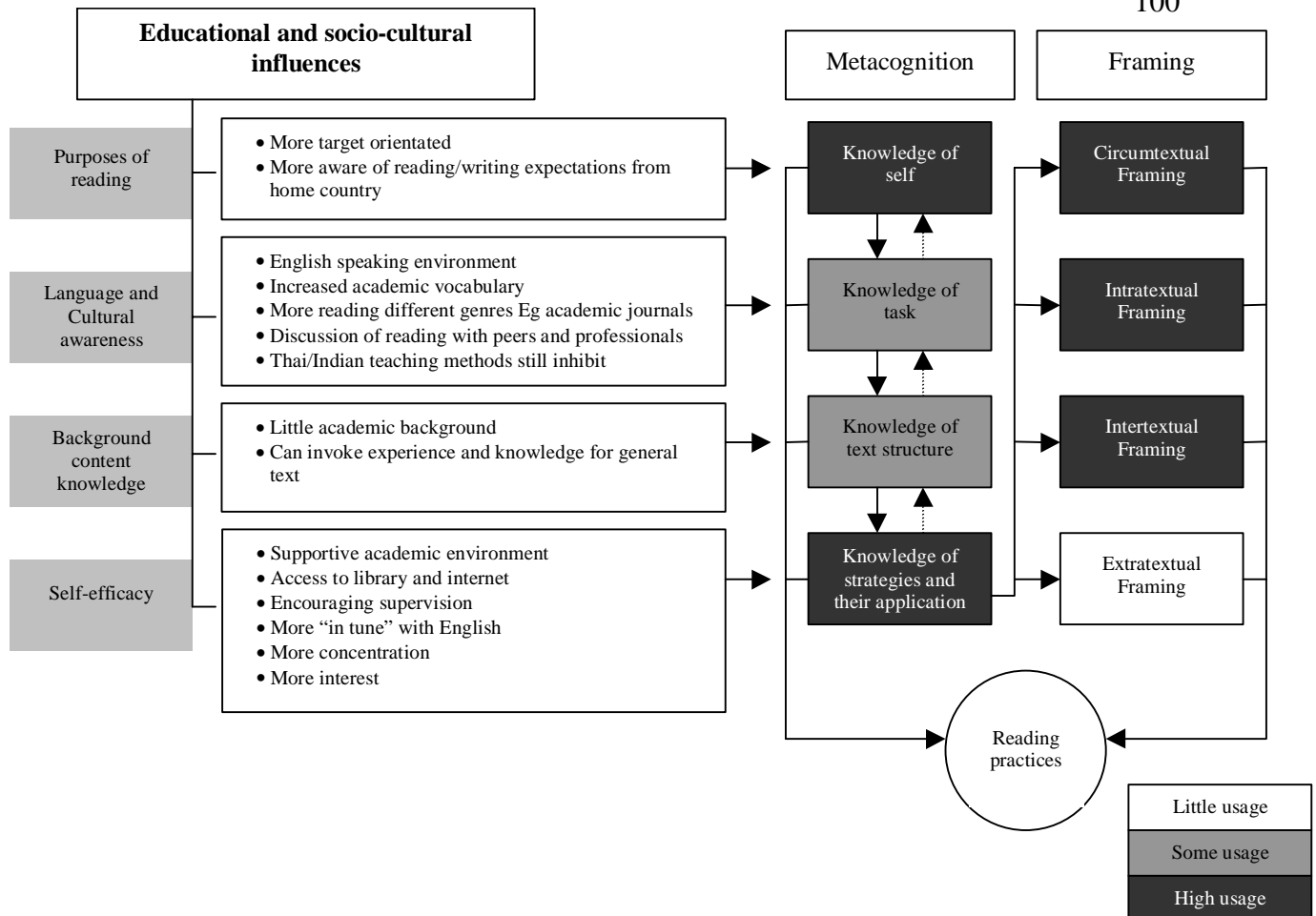


Figure 3 Socio-cultural and educational influences on Metacognition (self knowledge) and Framing (intratextual) by third semester

Various changing influences were identified during the course of the research as impacting on the participants’ reading of academic and general texts. The four main issues that emerged from the research were: the purposes of reading; language and cultural awareness; background content knowledge; and self-efficacy. The conceptual framework (Figure 3) also provides insights into the changing nature of the educational and socio-cultural influences and expectations from Australia and how they impacted on the reading processes of the selected student participants.

Students on arrival at an Australian university generally assume that they have the necessary linguistic competency for their study as they have sat an IELTS test and been accepted into the university. Only when they begin their studies do they realize that a) Australian English is different to the English they have learnt in their home countries and, as discussed earlier, the variety of English language they use is more appropriate for intranational use. The English expected by their Australian lecturers uses different conventions from those they are used to (Clyne, 1981, 1987; Hinds, 1990; Holm & Dodd, 1996; Swales, 1990) and is specific to the particular discipline in which they are studying (Becher, 1989; Kirby, Woodhouse and Ma, 1996).

The participants in this study arrived from their home countries with reading practices which were appropriate to the tasks they had to carry out in their own academic environments. This study showed that a variety of influences from the Australian environment, both academic and general, had impacted on their reading practices, in particular their self knowledge and intratextual framing.

All the participants, despite some mismatches in expectations between their home country universities and the Australian universities, proved without a doubt that they could demonstrate, in a relatively short time, considerable resourcefulness.

All of them, in fact, made considerable adjustments to become more self-regulated in their learning by the end of the first semester. This could relate to their bilingualism (Cook, 1992; Jimenez et al., 1996); being able to communicate in two or more languages, may have resulted in enhanced cognitive and metacognitive developments in a relatively short space of time. A bilingual strategic activity, for example, was the use of translation. From translation, the participants developed knowledge of differing structures, word order and the variety of meanings attached to the same vocabulary item in English. Another important strategy was discussion with peers in their own language. In this way, shared background knowledge helped in the interpretation of new concepts. The participants in this study also demonstrated that they could invoke their bilingualism through transference of reading skills learnt in their own countries. However, even in the third semester there were still substantial difficulties for some of the participants.

The findings lead to three main pedagogical implications suggested in part by the participants themselves. These are:

a) a pre-semester support program encompassing discussion of study expectations, Western academic conventions, Western text structures, academic discourse and discipline-related technical terms. Discussion of varying interpretations would also be important as students are often unaware of competing discourses and hence find it difficult to understand that there may be alternative interpretations to a text they are studying (Smith, 1999);

b) curriculum design with more focus on reading practices and perspectives of international students. As Wade, Buxton and Kelly (1999) found, international undergraduate students demonstrated more interest and motivation when the content related to their prior knowledge; and

c) supervisory support was highlighted in the study as being of particular importance especially when supervisors working with international students had a good understanding of the teaching systems and socio-cultural backgrounds of their students. Early support could include sending discipline-related texts to students before they arrive at a university in Australia, discussing readings with students and guiding a critical approach to their readings through helping them identify differences in argument and theoretical positions displayed in other texts and highlighting some of the academic writing conventions to be found in English authored, discipline-related texts from differing cultural backgrounds.

At the same time, consideration could be given to the fact that international students, like local students, are individuals (Moses, 1985). The findings indicated that, while, for example, all the participants used the strategy of translation, there were small differences in the extent to which this strategy was used in the first semester and there were more distinct differences in the extent to which translation was used by the third semester. It is, therefore, important to, somehow or other, accommodate individual differences such as these.

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