

CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

Chapter I of this thesis introduces the background, purpose, and questions of the study. After presenting the significance of the study, the chapter closes with overall organization of the thesis.

1.1. Background of the Study

A number of studies suggest that allowing students to self-select reading material increases reading motivation and leads to greater skills in reading (Bruckmann, 2009). The choice of text not only helps students become more willing readers (Lehman, 2011) but also increase the likelihood for deeper reading and greater use of cognitive strategies (Guthrie, et al., 2004), as well as improve scores on standardized reading tests (Offenberg, 2009).

However, it is not common for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes in Indonesia's colleges to allow students choose reading material. Particularly in teacher-centered (Zulfikar, 2009) or textbook-centered (Yembise, 2010) classrooms, instructors or course books dictate to students what to read during instructional time. This can reduce the likelihood of engaged reading, drops the quality of learning, and diminishes the development of English proficiency itself (Lawrence, 2011 citing Ur 1996, Lee1997, & McGrath 2002). Recognizing choice as “a widely acknowledged method for enhancing motivation” (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010:71), the current study aims at making use of students' choice and self-selection to increase reading engagement in EFL college classrooms.

At least three challenges arise from this aim. First, since the content of EFL college reading is often institutionally prescribed, applying choice and self-selection to such a reading material demands an application of certain strategy. This strategy is expected to counter boredom and disinterest toward the prescribed reading materials. Second, the product of reading instruction itself, i.e. the way students can demonstrate whether they have learned the key concepts and skills, usually takes the form of standardized tests (Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene, 2002). This also leaves fewer options for students to self-select ways to perform their learning result. Last, self-selection can be of little benefit if it is not related in some way to students themselves. Assor, Kaplan & Roth put the idea precisely, stating that “Choice is good, but relevance is excellent” (2002:1). Hence it is necessary to consider the relevant criteria used for offering self-selection that most pertinently can promote student’s engagement to reading activities.

A growing body of literature on a teaching philosophy called Differentiated Instruction (henceforth is DI) lends insights for the current study. DI enables teachers to strategically plan the instructional content, process and product to address learners’ needs, based on their profile, interest, and readiness (Tomlinson 2001). Self-selection can be conveniently harnessed into the DI philosophy, owing to the concept of flexible grouping that allows students to group and regroup for different learning purposes. Engagement is also an important concept in the DI philosophy, as understanding and engagement are two basic premises of DI. In reading, it means that for students to understand the reading materials, they have to be engaged (Miller, 2007).

At this point, self-selection of activities for engaged reading can be made available by adjusting instructional process – rather than adjusting the content or product – to one of the three aspects of DI, i.e. learner’s profile, interest and readiness level. Since the prescribed texts for college reading are generally of one specific interest (i.e. the content area), students’ interests and readiness levels are not easily represented in the self-selection. Therefore, it is more feasible to differentiate reading instruction toward the learners’ profile. Defined by Tomlinson (1999), learning profile is the way student learns best, shaped by elements such as learning style, intelligence preference, culture, and gender. Since the literature and instruments on Learning Style (henceforth is LS) have been growing rapidly, this study employs student’s LS as the key aspect for differentiating EFL instruction to promote reading engagement.

1.2. Research Purpose

The present study delineates its purposes as follows:

- a) identifying students’ learning styles and their compatibility to the reading activities that they self-select
- b) investigating students’ engagement to the self-selected reading activities

1.3. Research Questions

The present study is conducted to answer two research questions as follows:

1. Do students self-select reading activities that are compatible with their identified learning style?

2. How do compatible/incompatible self-selections play role in students' engagement while doing differentiated reading activities?

1.4. Significance of Study

The current study expects to contribute to three areas: the educational practice, the professional development of college instructors and the theory. To educational practice, this study advocates ownership in students reading activities to enhance engagement. Toward professional development, this study expects to empower EFL college instructors to use what they know about their students, and make informed decisions about some strategies to increase the quality of their profession. To the theory, the study enriches literature especially in differentiated instruction, learning style, and reading task engagement.

1.5. Organization of the Thesis

This thesis comprises five chapters. The introduction to the study is made by Chapter 1, consisting of background, purpose, question, and significance of the study. The ensuing Chapter 2 contains review of literature in five areas, namely the DI, self-selected grouping, LS, engagement, and EFL reading instruction in Indonesian tertiary education. Definition of key terms is also included at the end of the chapter. Chapter 3 describes the methodological aspects of the study, including the research design, the researcher and area of bias, the setting, participant, instruments, and procedures for collecting and analyzing data. Chapter 4 presents and interprets the data. Finally, conclusions, limitations of the study and ideas for future research are presented in the Chapter 5.