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AN EXPLORATORY COMPARISON OF THE INFERENTIAL ABILITY OF EFL AND ESL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The ability to access and interpret information is a very important component in generating knowledge. However, people are not always able to discover information, quickly evaluate the importance of the information and access it (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970; Chatman, 1991; Sligo & Williams, 2002). Especially in a tertiary academic setting, the ability to access information and integrate information from various sources to infer what is not overtly stated in a text is an essential skill during the reading process (Kintsch, 1994; Barnes, Dennis, & Haefele-Kalvaitis, 1996; Cain, Oakhill, Barnes, & Bryant, 2001).

Because of differences among people's educational background, existing pools of knowledge and communication abilities, the ability to access information will affect their inferential ability in the reading process (Alexander, 1994; Ericsson, 1996; Mckoon & Ratcliff, 1992). Although inferential ability is to be of consequence for academic functioning, very little research has been done on the comparison of inferential ability among students with English as their first language and those with English as their second language.

This study examines the relative extent of text inferential ability among students with English as a first language (EFL) and students to whom English is a second language (ESL), employing the knowledge gap hypothesis, and assesses its implications. Using a procedure to assess inferential ability, this thesis compares the differences in inferential ability demonstrated by EFL and ESL students, employing cloze tests.

This study found that EFL students' performance on the inferential ability and cloze item completion task is significantly better than that of their ESL counterparts via the first two scoring methods (Methods A and B). However, the inferential ability of ESL students is almost as good as their EFL counterparts when assessed by the third scoring method (Method C). The research findings suggest that Sligo and Williams (2002) are right in terming the knowledge gap as an amalgam of knowledge, comprehension and

inference (p.6). Subsidiary analyses of the source of inference failures revealed different underlying sources of difficulty for both EFL and ESL students.

The results of the research provide insights into the nature of gaps in accessing information and inference making. Education in a tertiary institution may or may not reduce gaps. Though both EFL and ESL students improved from their original starting level, the gaps of inferential ability between EFL and ESL students in the two tests, especially via Methods A and B, widened. In the second test, both EFL and ESL students made progress in inferential ability. Yet there still remained a gap between the two groups of students in test two as the knowledge rich individuals improved at a similar rate as the knowledge poor.

The present study supports the contention of Sligo and Williams (2002) that there is an unexamined area at the heart of the knowledge gap hypothesis literature. The findings of the present study suggest the correctness of the proposal by Sligo and Williams (2002) that what knowledge gap hypothesis researchers call knowledge gaps should in fact be better described as some amalgam of gaps in knowledge, and/or inferential ability. This is the most significant finding of the present research.

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