

Previewing and EFL Reading Comprehension

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Previewing refers to the activity in which previews are provided prior to reading to equip readers with background knowledge essential for understanding the subsequent reading selections. Previews are introductory materials characterized by such information as thought-provoking questions, description of characters, setting, and plot up to the point of climax, directions for reading, and definitions of difficult vocabulary. In the current study, 68 EFL students read a difficult story either with or without the previewing treatment provided in advance. Immediately afterwards, all of them took a multiple-choice posttest that assessed their comprehension of the textual ideas. Independent t-tests performed on the results revealed that the previewing treatment significantly improved students' overall comprehension and comprehension at different levels. Furthermore, students generally embraced positive feelings towards the previewing treatment. In light of these findings, two pedagogical implications are then proposed.

Key words: reading, previewing, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Previewing refers to the activity in which a written and oral preview is presented to students before they read a reading selection (Graves, Prenn, & Cooke, 1985). According to Graves, Cooke, and LaBerge (1983), previews are "introductory materials presented to students before they read specific selections" (p. 264).

Previews serve two main functions. First, they supply an organizational framework to students within which they are in a better position to access appropriate schemata (Graves & Prenn, 1984). Second, they render specific information about the contents of the material, leaving less new information for students to deal with (Graves & Palmer, 1981). Therefore, presented to students immediately before they read the text, previews do not merely help students relate the new material to their existing prior knowledge (schemata) but also lower the information load of reading for them.

Over the past few decades, several researchers have investigated the effects of previewing short stories on the reading comprehension of L1 learners with varying ages (Graves & Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983; Graves & Palmer, 1981). These studies demonstrated that the previewing did avail to the comprehension of the students at elementary and high school levels. Neuman (1988) also confirmed the facilitative effects of previewing on the comprehension of fourth graders.

However, the aforementioned studies were all conducted with L1 readers as the main subjects. Thus far, few attempts have been made with EFL readers as the target participants. In other words, researchers to date know little about whether the employment of previewing can also lead to strengthened comprehension for EFL readers, given the fact that there is a tremendous discrepancy between the English ability of L1 and EFL readers. Drawing on this paucity of relevant research, coupled with the benefits of previewing, the current researcher thus set out to examine the effects of previewing on Taiwanese EFL students' comprehension of difficult narrative texts. In so doing, he attempted to ascertain whether the previously-reported superior effects of previewing would also hold for EFL students and as such bring to light an empirically-validated method to inform EFL reading instructional practices.

PREVIEW AND PREVIEWING TREATMENT

As noted above, a preview is an introductory passage provided to students in advance of their actual confrontation of the reading selection to help promote comprehension. With respect to its content, Graves, Prenn, and Cooke (1985) specify five requisite components to be included in the preview for a narrative text. First, it should begin with a few thought-provoking questions that arouse students' interest and relate the theme of the text to students' prior experience. Second, a discussion question should then follow to encourage students to actively participate in the brief discussion pertaining to the main theme of the story. Third, immediately afterward, it should present the introduction of the characters, the depiction of the setting, and the description of the plot up to the point of the climax. Fourth, a few questions motivating students to read the story and directions for reading should be given. Finally, it should end with the definitions of words deemed to be difficult for students. As for the length of a preview, an A4-sized page should be the rule of thumb.

In terms of the previewing treatment, it usually starts with the instructor orally reading aloud the thought-provoking questions on the preview and eliciting responses from the students. Next, the instructor invites students to share with one another their opinions on the discussion question. As the discussion draws to an end, the instructor reads out loud the remaining text of the preview while students silently read along. Finally, students are allowed some extra time to re-read the preview in its entirety at their own rate. As regards the duration, a ten-minute allotment would suffice.

THEORETICAL GROUNDS

The employment of previewing to facilitate reading comprehension on the part of students can find support on three theoretical grounds.

First, previewing can promote meaningful verbal learning. Meaningful

verbal learning, as held by Ausubel (1963), can lead to enhanced reading comprehension and retention; yet it occurs only as a result of the mobilization of the subsumption process, which relates new knowledge to relevant old knowledge in the cognitive structure in order for the meaningfulness of the new knowledge to emerge. However, whether the subsumption process will come into play hinges chiefly on the availability of the relevant old knowledge in the cognitive structure. As Ausubel (1978) suggests, to make available the relevant old knowledge in the reader's cognitive structure prior to reading, advance organizers, "the introductory materials at a higher level of abstraction, generality, and inclusiveness than the learning passage itself" (p. 252), could be best utilized. Furnishing a general overview of the more detailed material in advance of the reader's actual confrontation with the text, advance organizers activate readers' relevant antecedent knowledge in the cognitive structure prior to reading, thereby triggering the subsumption process which in turn sets meaningful verbal learning in motion (Ausubel, 1963). Previews parallel advance organizers in that they also activate relevant background knowledge by providing a synopsis of the subsequent reading text. Furthermore, previews present specific information directly related to the reading material, instead of at a higher level of abstraction. Therefore, they might enable readers to call up background knowledge directly related to the reading texts and thus are able to permit comprehension just as well as advance organizers, if not better.

Second, previewing can ignite in the reader an interactive-compensatory model of text processing. Interactive models of reading, incorporating both top-down and bottom-up processing, hypothesizes that skills at all levels are interactively available to process and interpret the information from multiple knowledge sources, such as orthographic knowledge, lexical knowledge, syntactic knowledge, semantic knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge (Eskey & Grabe, 1988). That is, the comprehension of the reading text stems from the synchronous joint application of processing skills at all levels, not purely top-down nor merely bottom-up. Having the tenets grounded in this concept, Stanovich (1980) propounds the interactive-compensatory mode of text

processing hypothesis for reading, maintaining that “a deficit in any knowledge source results in a heavier reliance on other knowledge sources, regardless of their level in the processing hierarchy” (p. 63). That is to say, having additional information from one knowledge source will compensate for lacking information from another. For instance, readers with more knowledge as to the background of the about-to-be-read text prior to reading can devote their attention to obtaining information from other knowledge sources, such as lexical knowledge or syntactic knowledge (Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983). In concert with this hypothesis, previewing, by operating bidirectionally, is capable of triggering this type of text processing. For one thing, previewing, acquainting readers with the background knowledge of the upcoming text immediately preceding reading the text, allows readers to direct more of their attention to tackle such input as unfamiliar vocabulary items, novel sentence structures, and the like. For another, previewing, by defining unfamiliar vocabulary items for readers in advance, frees readers’ attention for gaining access to the background knowledge called for to better grasp the theme of the reading text. As can be seen, previewing is able to engage readers in an interactive-compensatory mode of text processing.

Third, previewing can reduce the reader’s cognitive processing load, resulting in strengthened comprehension and retention. Humans are innately endowed with a limited cognitive capacity (Broadbent, 1958, as cited in Britten, Holdredge, Curry, & Westbrook, 1979). This limited cognitive capacity, or alternatively, cognitive processing capacity, refers to “the limited pool of energy, resources, or fuel by which some cognitive processes are mobilized and maintained” (Johnston & Heinz, 1978). As considered in the milieu of reading, due mainly to such reading sub-processes as letter recognition, identification of word meanings, syntactic processing, inferential processes, and comprehension of main ideas, a person’s cognitive capacity is often distinctly imposed with tremendous demands while engaging in a reading task (Guthrie, 1973; Marshall & Glock, 1978-1979). In particular, when the reading texts at hand introduce topics or structures which go beyond the reader’s current ability, the reader may, as is often the case,

experience cognitive processing overload as there is so much information to attend to at once. As a result, agitated with this cognitive processing overload, readers often end up being prone to focusing on small parts rather than the whole (Graves & Cooke, 1980). Consequently, reading comprehension suffers and retention is retarded. Previewing, by supplying specific information about the text such as characters, story background, and plots up to the point of the climax, somewhat familiarize readers with the text in advance, thereby efficiently confining cognitive load to be within manageable limits for them. Further, left with a reduced amount of information after previewing, readers can thus focus their attention mainly on the processing of the new, unfamiliar information awaiting them. Accordingly, equipped with the background knowledge of the text gained from previewing and textual knowledge derived from the processing of the new, unfamiliar information, readers may thus be able to better comprehend the text.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

While the terms “previewing” and “previews” were frequently used in the reading literature (e.g., Chia, 2001; Garber-Miller, 2006; Golembesky, Bean, & Goldstein, 1997; Hodges, 1999; Manz, 2002), they usually denoted different activities in different research endeavors. For instance, the previews in Garber-Miller’s (2006) report did not represent introductory passages as they did in the current study but referred to the strategies designed to acquaint readers with content area textbooks, such as name-that-feature, textbook-timelines, and so forth. This being the case, the following review thus brings into focus only those studies that operationalized previewing and previews in the same way as the present study. Furthermore, since all of these studies were published during the 1980s and 1990s and were not followed up by any similar attempts in the subsequent years, this review thus discusses each of them at length.

Effects of Previewing on L1 Readers' Comprehension of Narrative Texts

In the past few decades, reading researchers have invested efforts to study the effects of previewing on native English speakers' reading comprehension of narrative texts (Grave & Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983; Grave & Palmer, 1981; Neuman, 1988). These studies all shared two common characteristics. First and foremost, they all emphasized the premise that previewing should be practiced only when the text at hand goes beyond readers' current linguistic level. Secondly, they all made use of previews crafted to involve the five sorts of information enumerated earlier. Namely, the previews all begin with rhetorical questions to pique interest and a discussion question to generate student involvement, continue with a description of characters, setting, point of view, and the plot up to the point of the climax to familiarize readers with the story and directions to guide subsequent reading, and finally conclude with a list of difficult vocabulary or phrases to enhance comprehension.

The earliest empirical attempt to study previewing was made by Graves and Cooke (1980). Investigating whether previewing would pave the way for efficient comprehension of difficult short stories, they engaged 92 eleventh-grade students in the reading of two short reading selections, both of which were written at a level higher than the students' current reading ability. While reading, students received a previewing treatment for the first selection but tackled the second without any assistance. Following reading each selection, they were assessed by an 18 four-option, multiple-choice comprehension test; at the end of the study, students responded to a questionnaire and a short-answer question that elicited their attitude toward the previewing treatment. The results suggested that students scored significantly higher when reading with the previewing treatment. As to the attitude questionnaires, the vast majority of students reacted positively to being given previews and indicated that previews should always be given before most difficult stories. As for the short answer question, characters, setting, preview, plot, and difficult words

were the most frequently mentioned information they would like to be given before reading a story.

Another previewing study was attempted by Graves and Palmer (1981). Forty fifth-graders and forty sixth-graders took part in the study, half with high reading ability and half with low reading ability. All of them read two short stories, one with preview and the other without. Immediately after reading each story, they were instructed to take an 18 multiple-choice-questioned test that gauged their comprehension. The ANOVA operation performed on the data revealed that students with previews did significantly better than without.

Later in 1983, Graves, Cooke, and LaBerge carried out another empirical study to scientifically inspect the effects of previewing by means of two distinct types of measurements, multiple-choice questions and oral recalls. To serve this purpose, two experiments were conducted. In the experiment that capitalized on multiple-choice questions, 32 eighth-grade students read two stories with the previewing treatment and read another two without such assistance. After reading each story, they answered a 14-item multiple-choice test associated with the story. Results derived from the ANOVA and Newman-Keuls procedures disclosed that the previews significantly increased students' scores on the multiple-choice tests. In the experiment that centered on oral recalls, 40 seventh-grade students received the previewing support for one of the two stories they read but not for the other one. Immediately after reading each story, students, instead of taking the tests, completed the attitude survey. The next day students were asked to give oral recalls in terms of what they read. One day later, students were all required to orally respond to the short-answer questions and open-ended questions. This experiment yielded three results. First, students recalled twice as many propositions when they received previews as when they did not. Second, students scored significantly higher on the short-answer questions when supported by the previewing treatment. Third, most students responded favorably to the previewing treatment.

In contrast to these studies in which the control groups received no

instruction at all before they read the stories, Neuman (1988) undertook a study to determine the impact of previewing in a setting where the control group received typical instruction prior to reading a story. Seventy-one fourth-graders were randomly assigned to either a control group or a previewing group. Both groups were required to read two stories. For the control group, the first story was preceded by an introductory passage related to the theme of the story and a teacher-generated discussion while the other story did not come with such assistance. For the previewing group, they approached both stories with the previewing treatment provided to them ahead of time, but the first previewing treatment was reinforced by teacher guidance while the second treatment went without such additional support. Upon finishing reading each story, students from both groups were tested on the content of the story via a ten-item multiple-choice test. The statistical analyses revealed that the previewing group scored significantly higher than their control counterpart. Furthermore, in the absence of teacher assistance, previewing failed to produce a significant effect on reading comprehension.

Effects of Previewing on L1 Readers' Comprehension of Expository Texts

The only studies which examined the efficacy of previewing expository texts on reading comprehension were reported by Graves and Prenn (1984) and McCormick (1989), both of which centered attention on L1 readers. In Graves and Prenn's (1984) study, 156 eighth graders were selected into either a previewing group or a control group on a random basis. Depending on their group membership, they read two social studies passages, either with a preview provided ahead of time or without. All students took a test upon finishing reading each passage and completed the attitude survey at the end of the experiment. Results generated by the ANOVA operations illustrated that only average and above average students scored significantly higher when receiving a preview. In addition, 67% of the students indicated that previewing helped them read and understand the passages and 80% of them

indicated that previewing should be given before difficult passages.

These favorable results were later replicated in McCormick's (1989) study. In this study, 76 fifth-graders read four social studies passages, with two of them preceded by the previewing treatment and the other two without. Following the reading of each passage, students were tested on its content by 12 four-option multiple-choice questions. Results surfacing from the ANOVA procedures suggested that both the more skilled and the less skilled readers obtained a statistically significantly better reading performance when reading with the previewing treatment, further corroborating the facilitative effects of previewing on the comprehension of expository texts unveiled by Graves and Prens (1984).

Effects of Previewing on EFL Readers

To date, the only previewing study targeting EFL readers was undertaken by Chen in 1993. In her study, 243 non-English-majored college students perused two reading selections after being randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups, that is, the previewing group, the background knowledge group, the combined group, and the control group. Each group followed a different experimental procedure. For the previewing group, students lent their ears to the teacher who orally read aloud from the preview passage and then read the selection. For the background knowledge group, the teacher engaged students in the silent reading of the selection after s/he orally read aloud from an expository passage. In the combined treatment, students proceeded to read the selection as soon as the teacher finished the reading aloud of the combined passage. In the control treatment, students simply read the selection without receiving any prereading assistance. Upon finishing each selection, all students completed the posttest of 15 short-answer questions and 15 multiple-choice questions. At the end of the experiment, attitude questionnaires of different versions were administered to students with reference to the groups to which they belonged. A three-way repeated measures ANOVA and the Newman-Keuls procedure were

performed to analyze the obtained data, yielding several major results. First of all, for the short-answer questions, the three prereading treatments made statistically significant improvements on subjects' performance, and, most notably, the previewing group and combined group scored higher than the background knowledge group. Secondly, for the multiple-choice questions, the combined group significantly outperformed the control group and the background knowledge group. Third, as to the attitude questionnaires, most students responded favorably to the three prereading treatments. In light of these results, Chen arrived at the conclusion that the previewing treatment elevated EFL readers' comprehension of narrative texts in a quantitatively significant way, and EFL readers, in general, enjoyed and welcomed the previewing treatment.

Taken together, the empirical studies in the literature provided immense support for the utility of previewing. First of all, studies with L1 readers illustrated that previewing proved to guide native speakers of varying ages and reading ability onto the avenue leading to increased comprehension of narrative texts and expository texts. To add to this, the study with EFL subjects also demonstrated that previewing enabled nonnative readers learning English in a foreign context to relate the stories to their prior knowledge, which in turn allowed for improved reading performance.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The present research attempts to lend further empirical support to the literature pertaining to the effects of previewing on EFL reading comprehension and to validate this teaching technique as an effective tool for EFL reading instructional practice. Proceeding from these purposes, this study puts to empirical test the following research questions:

- 1) Does previewing enhance EFL students' overall comprehension and comprehension at three different levels, that is, comprehension of main

ideas and details, vocabulary learning, and comprehension at the inferential level?

- 2) Do students have positive attitude towards previewing?
- 3) What information do students think will facilitate their comprehension of the subsequent story if given prior to reading?

Participants

Sixty-eight English-majored juniors from a technological university in Taiwan participated in the current study. Among them, 60 are females and eight are males. Aged between 21 and 30 at the time of study, they had garnered at least eight years of formal English instruction in junior high schools and junior colleges before advancing the education ladder to university. Further, the average score they obtained on the English Placement Test developed by the University of Michigan was 63.54, which suggested a low-intermediate English level.

Experimental Materials

Experimental materials included a personal information form, a reading selection, the preview for the selection, two attitude questionnaires, and an open-ended question. First, a personal information form was given to each student to gather such information as their gender, the class they belong to, their year of birth, the junior college they graduated from, their majors in junior colleges, and so on.

Second, the story *The Open Window* penned by H. H. Munro in 1914 constituted the reading selection for this study. Approximately 1,200 words in length, this story portrays how a naughty but witty girl skillfully made fools of all grown-ups. The choice of this particular selection stemmed from the fact that it is difficult for the participants. As determined by the Fry Graph (1977), this narrative text was written at the seventh grade level; according to the informal discussion the current researcher performed with

three teachers who had taught English to technological university students in Taiwan for more than five years, such a text would emerge as difficult and challenging for most EFL students at technological universities in Taiwan. Besides, when asked to judge the difficulty level of this story on a five-point scale, around 86% of the students indeed considered it to be a very difficult one.

Third, a preview passage was constructed in accordance with the guidelines formulated by Graves, Prenn, and Cooke (1985). Adhering to his suggestions, the preview thus consisted of four different sorts of information. First, it began with a brief paragraph attempting to arouse students' interest in the story and to relate the theme of the story to their lives. Next, a paragraph was provided that narrated the main characters, setting, and plot up to the climax. Third, some intriguing questions were given so as to motivate students to find out what happened next in the story. Finally, a vocabulary list of 12 difficult words and their Chinese equivalents were provided. This passage ended up around 350 words in length (see Appendix A).

Fourth, 15 four-option, multiple-choice questions comprised the comprehension test acting to measure students' reading comprehension of the story. As the present researcher was designing these questions, he took great care to discount the possibility that they could be answered solely on the basis of the information contained in the preview. As a corollary, nowhere can the answer to any of these questions be found in the preview. With intent to measure students' comprehension at different levels in addition to their overall reading comprehension, the 15 questions were crafted to fall into three different categories. First, nine questions required students to identify main ideas and details from the reading text. For the questions concerning main ideas, they were designed based on the story map of the story written following the suggestions provided by Beck and McKeon (1981). For the questions regarding details, they asked about details of the story. Second, three questions asked students to decide, referring to the given context, the exact meanings of three words. Third, the remaining three questions were inferential questions for which students had to make assumptions about what

was not directly stated in the text.

Fifth, to tap the extent to which readers embraced positive attitudes towards previewing, two different attitude questionnaires were mapped out, one for the previewing group and the other for the control group. The questionnaire for the previewing group was divided into two parts. The first part offered the definition of previews whereas the second part included nine statements. Among the nine statements, five were positive statements that supported the previewing treatment; two were negative ones that stood against the employment of previewing; the other two statements asked about the perceived difficulty level and interestingness of the story. Six of these statements were adapted from Chen's (1993) study while the others were constructed by the present researcher.

In terms of the questionnaire for the control group that read the story without previews provided in advance, it also consisted of two parts. The first part recounted what a preview was like while the second was made up of five statements. Amid the five statements, three statements concerned the previewing treatment while the other two statements explored students' perceived difficulty level and interestingness of the story.

For the second part of both questionnaires, students needed to respond to all the statements on a five-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree. To eschew potential language-induced misunderstandings, both questionnaires were presented in the students' shared native language, that is, Mandarin Chinese.

Sixth, an open-ended question was given at the end of the study to elicit the students' opinions about the information that they regarded as helpful in facilitating readers' comprehension if given right before reading a story. Students were invited to write down as many items as they wished and rank the effectiveness of each item. As was the case with the questionnaires, this question was also presented in Mandarin Chinese. This question was phrased as follows.

What kind of information about a story do you think would help readers better understand

a story if given immediately before they read it? Please rank the effectiveness of your answers using 1, 2, 3, and so on. You may write in English, in Chinese, or both.

Procedure

The researcher first randomly and equally assigned the participating students to the previewing group and the control group. After giving their consent for participation, students were then instructed to fill out the personal information form. After that, a colleague of the researcher's administered the experiment to the control group whereas the researcher took charge of the previewing group.

Prior to reading, the previewing treatment was offered to the previewing group. The researcher first distributed a written preview to every student. Next, he read aloud the first paragraph from the preview and elicited responses from the students. After that, the researcher then read aloud the remaining text except for the vocabulary list, while students silently read along. As the researcher finished the oral reading, students were told to reread the preview as many times as they pleased. This previewing treatment took around ten minutes to complete. For the control group, no pre-reading was provided at this point.

Immediately following the previewing treatment (the previewing group) or the completion of the personal information form (the control group), students engaged in the silent reading of the story. Upon finishing the reading of the story, students then took the 15-item multiple-choice comprehension test. As soon as they turned in the test, they responded to the attitude questionnaire in light of their experience of participating in this experiment. Finally, they reacted to the open-ended question by enumerating the helpful information to be supplied prior to reading a difficult text.

Data Analysis

The data gleaned in this study were reported or analyzed in the following

manners. First, students' background gathered from the personal information form was simply reported. Secondly, participants' performance on the comprehension test was manually scored and then statistically analyzed. The researcher and his colleague first tallied the number of items each student correctly identified and then awarded points accordingly. Since the test was comprised of 15 multiple-choice questions, the perfect score was thus 15 points. Next, the researcher submitted the scores to several independent t-tests to quantitatively examine if any statistically significant difference existed between the two groups' performance in terms of overall comprehension, comprehension of main ideas and details, vocabulary learning, and comprehension at the inferential level. Third, in regard to the questionnaires, students' responses were calculated and converted to percentages to numerically represent their attitudes toward the previewing treatment. Fourth, with respect to the open-ended question, students' responses were reported in narrative fashion.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the statistical and qualitative analyses performed on students' reading performance and their attitudes towards the previewing treatment. For the statistical analyses, the minimal level of significance was set at .05.

Analysis of the Comprehension Test

Table 1 outlines the results of the four independent t-tests that compared the mean difference between the control group and the previewing group in terms of overall comprehension, comprehension of main ideas and details, vocabulary learning, and comprehension at the inferential level. As this table makes clear, the previewing group outperformed its control counterpart not merely on the overall comprehension level but also on all the three specific

levels of comprehension. Moreover, these mean differences all emerged to be significant at least at the .05 level. As evinced in Table 1, the mean difference achieved the .01 level of statistical significance for overall reading performance ($t(66) = -3.37, p < .01$), vocabulary learning ($t(66) = -3.08, p < .01$), and comprehension at the inferential level ($t(66) = -3.27, p < .01$) and reached the .05 level for comprehension of main ideas and details ($t(66) = -2.25, p < .05$).

As illustrated by these positive results, there is much justification in stating that the employment of previewing indeed significantly enhanced students' overall comprehension, led to a substantial increment on students' comprehension of main ideas and details, helped students decide the exact meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary items, and increased students' ability in making correct inferences.

TABLE 1
Mean Difference: Results of Independent T-tests

Comprehension	Group	N	M	SD	<i>t</i> (66)	p
Overall	Control	34	8.26	3.49	-3.37	.00**
	Previewing	34	10.56	1.91		
Main ideas and details	Control	34	4.44	2.31	-2.25	.03*
	Previewing	34	5.56	1.74		
Vocabulary	Control	34	1.79	.73	-3.08	.00**
	Previewing	34	2.26	.51		
Inferences	Control	34	2.00	1.18	-3.27	.00**
	Previewing	34	2.74	.58		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Attitude Questionnaires

Table 2 summarizes the previewing group's responses to the second part of their questionnaire. As illustrated in this table, overall, students reacted to the previewing treatment in a rather favorable manner. To be specific, more than half of them believed that the preview helped them understand the story and made reading the story enjoyable; concurrently, they considered the employment of the preview made them feel interested in knowing what

happened in the story. Furthermore, 72% of them endorsed the statement that before reading difficult texts, previews should always be given. As for the story itself, 66% of the students considered it interesting and 85% thought of it as a very difficult one.

TABLE 2
Results of the Attitude Questionnaire for the Previewing Group

	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. The story is interesting	4%	62%	26%	8%	
2. The preview really helped me understand the story	17%	70%	13%		
3. The preview made me feel interested in knowing what happened in the story	8%	70%	22%		
4. The preview made reading the story enjoyable	8%	75%	13%	4%	
5. The preview made reading the story boring because it gave away too much of the story		8%	30%	57%	4%
6. Before reading difficult texts, previews should always be given	26%	48%	22%	4%	
7. The information provided by the preview was not enough for me to fully understand the story		4%	22%	61%	13%
8. The vocabulary list really helped me understand the story		31%	26%	43%	
9. The story is very difficult	22%	63%	15%		

Table 3 displays the control group's responses to the second part of their questionnaire. A look at this table immediately reveals that the control group embraced a very positive attitude toward the provision of previews. For example, 89% of the students indicated that reading a text would be easier if

a preview were given in advance and all of them supported the idea that previews should always be supplied before reading difficult texts. When it comes to the story itself, 32% of the students thought it was interesting and 86% agreed it was a very difficult one.

TABLE 3
Results of the Attitude Questionnaire for the Control Group

	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. The story is interesting	3%	29%	44%	24%	
2. Reading a text would be easier if a vocabulary list were given in advance	26%	56%	15%	3%	
3. Reading a text would be easier if a preview were given in advance	15%	74%	11%		
4. The story is very difficult	27%	59%	14%		
5. Before reading difficult texts, previews should always be given	41%	59%			

The Open-Ended Question

The open-ended question invited the students to generate information that they considered as helpful in facilitating readers' comprehension of a story when given right before the reading of a story. They were also required to rank the information items to reflect their relative importance. In the manual tallying of the responses, summary, vocabulary lists, and characters emerged as the top three information items students would like to be given. To be exact, 45 out of the 68 students preferred having summary, 44 favored the provision of a vocabulary list, and 38 sided with the description of the characters. Table 4 sketches out the results of this open-ended question.

TABLE 4
Results of the Open-ended Question

Information Item	Ranking					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Summary	29	9	6	1	-	45
2. Vocabulary lists	5	18	15	6	-	44
3. Characters	10	14	11	3	-	38
4. Story background	5	3	3	2	1	14
5. Story title	4	6	-	-	-	10
6. Genre	1	1	4	-	-	6
7. Background of the author(s)	2	-	1	1	1	5
8. Related pictures	-	1	1	3	-	5
9. Intriguing questions	2	1	1	1	-	4
10. Purpose of writing	-	2	-	-	-	2
11. First paragraph	1	-	-	-	-	1

DISCUSSION

The Comprehension Test

As shown above, the previewing treatment exerted a substantial effect on students' overall comprehension and their comprehension at three different levels. These positive findings readily substantiate and extend the previous findings suggesting that previewing greatly smoothed the way for comprehending narrative texts for L1 elementary school students, L1 high school students, and EFL college students (Chen, 1993; Graves & Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983; Graves & Palmer, 1981; Neuman, 1988).

To account for the facilitative effects of previewing on overall comprehension, the three theoretical advantages assumed for the employment of previewing treatment might be cited. Firstly, there are good reasons to assert that previewing, by prefacing the reading text with information sharing a parallel level of abstraction, generality, and inclusiveness, constructs in readers the most pertinent subsuming concept by which the new and unfamiliar

information presented in the subsequent text can be efficiently subsumed and in turn comprehended. Second, previewing allows readers to process the coming reading text in an interactive-compensatory manner; that is, the information introduced in previews patches up readers' deficiency at either lower-level processing such as word recognition or higher-level processing such as gaining access to the background knowledge, in the end giving rise to better comprehension of the reading text. Concurrently, previewing, by supplying the background knowledge and the vocabulary list of a story in advance, lightens the cognitive demands imposed by the processing of a story, making available additional cognitive resources that can be allocated to other processes and thus allowing for better reading comprehension.

With regard to the substantial impact of previewing on the comprehension at different levels, for comprehension of the main ideas and details, it is surmised that, possibly, with the unfamiliar vocabulary introduced in the preview, students were in a better position to devote more of their cognitive resources to grappling with the main ideas and details of the story. With respect to vocabulary learning, it is speculated that the background knowledge rendered by the preview constructed a cognitive framework to which students were likely to subsume ideas and details presented in the story, thus efficiently preventing information overload from taking place and promoting lower-level processing which, as a corollary, reinforced students' ability to accurately assign meanings to unfamiliar words. On the side of comprehension at an inferential level, it is inferred that the preview, furnishing both the background knowledge of the story and the list of unfamiliar vocabulary items, probably engaged students in a bi-directional processing of the story which in turn aided them in better understanding the story, eventually fostering in them the enhanced ability to generate accurate inferences.

Attitude Questionnaires

The result reported earlier indicated that a vast majority of students

responded favorably to the adoption of previewing in advance of reading difficult stories to maximize reading comprehension. This result also concurs with the previous previewing studies (Chen, 1993; Graves & Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983).

To interpret, students' positive attitudes towards previewing might be traced to two reasons. For one thing, students welcomed the idea of providing previewing treatment prior to reading due heavily to the fact that they indeed benefited from it in the course of the experiment, which was clearly reflected in their superior performance on the comprehension test. For another, it is not uncommon to see students panic when they are asked to read a text without the slightest idea as to what the text is about. Previewing, a preparatory device that equips students with the knowledge of the key elements of a story in advance of their actual confrontation with the story, may effectively relieve their fear for comprehension failure. Thus, following from these lines of reasoning, it is conceivable that students would embrace positive feelings towards previewing.

The Open-Ended Question

The open-ended question, which solicited information that the students regarded as helpful in facilitating their comprehension of the reading texts if given prior to reading, produced an array of suggestions. Among them, the three most frequently mentioned information items included summary, vocabulary lists, and characters. This result is roughly commensurate with the findings reported by Chen (1993), Graves and Cooke (1980), and Graves, Cooke, and LaBerge (1983).

The following reasons might underlie this finding. First of all, in terms of summary, the fact that a summary gives away the theme of the story might account for this result. As Stanovich (1986) contends, knowing the theme in advance would dispense students' attention from probing the main ideas of the story to processing unfamiliar words, complicated sentence patterns, and so on, eventually helping them capture better comprehension. Thus, this

might underlie students' preferences for summary. Second of all, as to vocabulary lists, this result might have something to do with the teaching technique with which Taiwanese EFL teaching practitioners undertake reading instruction. In Taiwan, in English reading classes, it is often the case that the presentation of a reading text is preceded by the introduction of difficult vocabulary items. Therefore, predictably, the students in this study, accustomed to approaching reading materials this way, would expect the availability of the vocabulary lists before they come to terms with the reading text. Third, regarding students' fondness for characters, it might, again, spring from the way Taiwanese EFL teachers practice reading instruction. As is often observed in reading classrooms, students are guided to approach a story by tackling five wh-questions, namely, who-questions, what-questions, when-questions, why-questions, and where-questions. As a rule, who-questions mainly deal with characters. Therefore, this reason may account for students' liking the provision of the introduction of characters prior to reading. Besides, another plausible account may be related to affective reasons. That is, familiarity with characters would relieve the nervousness experienced by students prior to reading (Sasaki, 2000).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study investigated the effects of previewing on EFL students' reading comprehension of narrative texts and explored the extent to which they possessed positive attitudes towards this treatment. Following the statistical analyses of the comprehension tests and qualitative examination of the questionnaire responses, four major results sprung forth. First, the previewing treatment gave rise to a significant improvement on students' overall comprehension. Second, the previewing group demonstrated significantly better performance at all three levels of comprehension, namely, comprehension of main ideas and details, vocabulary learning, and comprehension at the inferential level. Thirdly, the previewing treatment was met with an immense

acceptability and strong preference. Last but not least, from the students' perspective, summary, vocabulary lists, and characters top the list of important information items to be given prior to reading a story.

On grounds of these results, two pedagogical implications are proposed. First, it is advised EFL reading teachers practice the previewing treatment on a routine basis as a way to promote students' reading comprehension. As shown in this study, the powerful effects of previewing on the comprehension of L1 readers can be successfully extended to EFL readers. More importantly, the presentation of previewing treatment calls for less than ten minutes to complete. Referring to these results, the practice of previewing treatment seems to be an appropriate method to induce efficient comprehension on the part of the students and is thus highly recommended for EFL reading instruction. Second, EFL textbook writers are encouraged to precede their reading lessons with previews. In light of the conclusion arrived at in the current study, incorporating previews into reading lessons may enable readers to gain access to germane background knowledge before they set eyes on the reading material and, therefore, put them in a better position to grasp the textual ideas presented in the reading materials. Additionally, such a textbook design would also work to benefit those who engage in self-study.

Since this study acts as but one attempt to examine the effects of previewing on EFL college students' reading comprehension of difficult stories, more research is warranted in order to assert its utility with greater confidence. As such, the suggestions for future research are presented as follows.

First, a larger number of participants should be recruited. The current study only worked with a group of 68 EFL students, which somewhat limited the generalizability of the results. Thus, to make the findings more generalizable to the targeted population, a bigger group of participants should be sought.

Second, the current study only focused on the effects of previewing on students' comprehension of stories, or alternatively narrative texts. However, apart from stories, expository texts pertain to another genre that students come to grips with at every turn in their school lives. Therefore, whether the profound effects of previewing derived in the present study would hold up for

EFL students' comprehension of expository materials deserves further consideration in the future research.

Third, in the past several decades, studies in the quest of experimentally validated methods to promote reinforced overall reading comprehension have been nothing less than explosive. As such, a battery of methods are thus available in the literature, such methods as headings, mental process modeling, questioning, advance organizers, pictorials, thematic organizers, prereading plans, just to name a few. Hence, empirically comparing the relative effectiveness of previewing with these proposed methods to throw light on the issue as to which method would best contribute to students' comprehension constitutes another viable area for further exploration.

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Appendix A – The Preview

Have you ever tried to deceive strangers just for fun? Or have you ever lied or made up stories just to make a fool of someone?

The story which you are about to read is called "The Open Window." In the story, the main character was a girl named Vera who was very witty as well as naughty. She was very good at making up stories in a short time. This time she made up two stories, or to put it another way, she told two lies.

When a man named Framton Nuttel came to visit Vera's aunt, Mrs. Sappleton, for the first time, Vera received him because her aunt was still upstairs. Learning that Framton Nuttel had nerve problems, Vera immediately decided to do something to scare him for fun. Thus, within seconds, she made use of the French window and made up a terrible tragedy about her aunt.

She told Framton Nuttel that Mrs. Sappleton kept the French window wide

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open every evening because she believed that her husband, two younger brothers, and a spaniel that had been killed 3 years before would come back someday. Finishing the made-up story, Vera pretended to be trembling.

After listening to the story, Framton was very frightened and began to regret this visit. In the meantime, Mrs. Sappleton finally came down to the room and greeted him with kindness.

Now, read the story and find out what the conversation between Mrs. Sappleton and Framton was about, how Framton reacted to what he saw after the conversation, and what the second story Vera made up was.

self-possessed	鎮靜的	duly	適當的	treacherous	奸詐的
bog	沼澤	shudder	戰慄	infirmity	虛弱
imminent	逼近的	chant	唱	headlong	頭朝前的
snarl	吠	foam	吐白沫	dash	急衝