FACTORS AFFECTING FIRST-YEAR AP STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION AT THAINGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Hoang Thi Thu[*], Phung Thi Thu Ha
University of Technology - TNU

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study on investigating the factors affecting first-year AP students' reading comprehension at Thai Nguyen University of Technology (TNUT). It is more reasonable to compare and contrast the effects of some specific variables against each other to see whether specifically vocabulary knowledge, syntax knowledge, reading strategies or background knowledge was a more influential issue to academic reading comprehension. 30 students from K53AP participated in the survey questionnaire. The findings reveal that syntax knowledge and reading strategies are not strong predictors of reading comprehension for students. It is vocabulary and background knowledge that have more influence on students' reading comprehension. It is advisable for the teachers to choose reading materials suitable for students' level of competence, design vocabulary exercises at pre-reading stage and learn how to activate their background knowledge before any reading task.
Key words: *factors; reading comprehension; vocabulary; syntax; reading strategies; background knowledge*

CÁC YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN KHẢ NĂNG ĐỌC HIỂU TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TIÊN TIẾN NĂM THỨ NHẤT TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KỸ THUẬT CÔNG NGHIỆP THÁI NGUYÊN

Hoàng Thị Thu[*], Phùng Thị Thu Hà
Trường Đại học Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp - ĐH Thái Nguyên

TÓM TẮT

Bài báo trình bày nghiên cứu về khảo sát các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến khả năng đọc hiểu tiếng Anh của sinh viên chương trình tiên tiến năm thứ nhất tại trường Đại học Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp - ĐH Thái Nguyên. Trong bài báo này, tác giả so sánh ảnh hưởng của các yếu tố cụ thể như từ vựng, cú pháp, chiến lược đọc và kiến thức nền để từ đó xem yếu tố nào có ảnh hưởng nhiều hơn đến việc đọc hiểu. Tham gia vào khảo sát này gồm có 30 sinh viên của K53 chương trình tiên tiến. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy cú pháp và chiến lược đọc không phải là yếu tố gây ảnh hưởng nhiều đến khả năng đọc hiểu của sinh viên. Yếu tố ảnh hưởng nhiều đến quá trình này chính là từ vựng và kiến thức nền của sinh viên. Vì vậy giáo viên cần lựa chọn giáo trình đọc sao cho phù hợp với trình độ của sinh viên, thiết kế các bài tập về từ vựng cho phần trước khi đọc, và biết cách khai thác kiến thức nền của sinh viên trước khi làm bất cứ bài tập đọc nào.
Từ khóa: *yếu tố, đọc hiểu, từ vựng, cú pháp, chiến lược đọc bài, kiến thức nền*

* Corresponding author: *Tel: 0989 256067; Email: hoangthutn@gmail.com*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is not only an important means to get knowledge but also a means of further study. According to Anderson, reading is one of the most important skills to master. "With strengthened reading skills, ESL/ EFL (English second language/ English foreign language) readers will make greater progress and attain greater development in all academic areas" [1]. In other words, EFL students who become efficient readers can access and gain more knowledge in many fields.

However, reading and comprehending texts in the native language is different from in a foreign language. Grabe suggested that students begin reading in a second language by using a different knowledge base compared to when reading in their native language. He stated that most of the mother tongue readers already know many words and a lot of basic grammar before they start to read, whereas most of the second or foreign language readers are new to the language and do not have those abilities [2]. Goodman defined reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" [3] or "a process in which the reader picks and chooses from the available information only enough to select and predict a language structure which is decodable" [4]. Moreover, comprehending words, sentences, and entire texts needs not only linguistic knowledge but also includes one's knowledge of the world [5]. Coady also supported the need for interest and background knowledge for enabling students to comprehend and involve themselves in the text despite their syntactic difficulties [6]. Consequently, a problem can occur when ESL/EFL students do not have sufficient knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge and motivation, which affects their reading comprehension.

Reading is significant for AP students who learn English as a foreign language because most educational and professional academic texts are available in English. Therefore, AP students are required to read written English resources in order to obtain such knowledge in their higher education. As a result, AP students who are studying cannot avoid reading. However, in spite of the efforts of the students, the teachers often find their students' reading skill disappointing, which does not meet the requirements of the university. So far there has been no official study into the factors which affect the students' reading comprehension. Hence, in this paper, I would like to find out the factors which affect the reading comprehension in English of the students to find the answers to the following questions:

What are the factors affecting reading comprehension of AP first-year students at TNUT and what is the relationship among the factors?

THE STUDY

The subjects

The participants in the study were 30 first-year AP students majoring in electrical and mechanical specialties, including 4 female student and 26 male students. They have learnt English at school for seven years and then at university for two terms.

The instruments

The study was conducted with a combination of the two main data collection instruments including a questionnaire and interviews with the teachers.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was partly adapted from Sajeerat's study. It consisted of three questions, two of which were closed-ended based on five-point Likert scale. The last question was open-ended. Besides, there was a Vietnamese version of the questionnaire to avoid possible misunderstanding.

Interviews

Interviews were done with three teachers who usually teach reading skills for AP students to

gather information on the students' attitudes towards reading practice activities, factors affecting their reading comprehension.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was administered with all the 30 students and it was returned within one day. The data was analyzed through the descriptive statistical procedures of SPSS Version 20.

RESULTS

Results from questionnaire

The findings collected from the questionnaire are presented and discussed in two categories: students' attitude towards reading, factors affecting students' reading comprehension.

Students' attitude towards reading

The results revealed that most of the students highly appreciated the importance and necessity of reading in English learning.

Table 1. *Students' attitude towards reading*

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	S. D
importance	30	1	5	4.30	.794
necessity	30	2	5	**4.43**	**.679**
like	30	1	5	3.10	.803

Factors affecting students' reading comprehension

Vocabulary knowledge

It can be seen from Table 2 that Item 2 (terminology) got the highest mean (M = 4.13, SD = .730). The lowest mean fell into Item 4 (meaning of polysemantic words) (M = 3.37, SD = 1.033).

Table 2. *Vocabulary knowledge*

	Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D
1	newword	30	2	5	3.77	.803
2	term	30	2	5	**4.13**	**.730**
3	phrase	30	1	5	3.63	.964
4	mean	30	1	5	3.37	1.033

Syntax knowledge

It is revealed from Table 3 that the highest mean belongs to Item 2 (Organisation of the text) (M= 3.40, SD = .855). The lowest mean was Item 3 (substitution), which got 2.80 points.

Table 3. *Syntax knowledge*

	Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D
1	structure	30	1	5	2.87	1.008
2	organisation	30	2	5	**3.40**	**.855**
3	substitution	30	1	5	2.80	1.126

Reading strategies

From the table, we can see that item 2 (guess the meaning of new words) got the highest mean (M=3.67, SD=.959), while item 1 (guess the content of the text) got the lowest mean (M=2.8, SD=.805).

Table 4. *Reading strategies*

	Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D
1	guesscontent	30	1	4	2.80	.805
2	guessword	30	1	5	**3.67**	**.959**
3	wordbyword	30	1	5	2.83	1.053
4	implication	30	1	5	3.43	1.04

Background knowledge

As can be seen from table 4, item 1 (different background) got the higher mean than item 2 (limited background).

Table 5. *Background knowledge*

	Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D
1	different	30	1	5	**3.70**	**1.149**
2	limited	30	1	5	3.50	1.042

Rank order of factors based on the average mean

Table 6 shows that item 1 (vocabulary) got the highest mean (M=3.72) and item 2 got the lowest mean (M=3.02).

Table 6. *Rank order of factors*

	Item	N	Min	Max	Mean
1	vocab	30	1	5	**3.72**
2	syntax	30	2	5	3.02
3	strategies	30	1	5	3.18
4	background	30	1	5	3.60

Recommendations from students

Some of the participants offered recommendations to the teacher on reading textbooks. They suggested that the reading topics be familiar with their real life, the level of difficulty be suitable to student's competence and there be a wordlist at the end of each lesson.

Results from interviews with teachers

Two out of three teachers interviewed answered that students don't like reading because it is boring and theoretical. They also listed the factors affecting students' reading comprehension such as: reading skills, vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, reading habits. Their suggestions were nearly the same as recommendations from the students.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTED IMPLICATIONS

Students' attitude towards reading

Satisfactorily, all of the students taking part in the study were aware of the importance and necessity of reading, expressing that it plays a significant role in English learning. This is easy to understand. After the first year, they will learn all major subjects in English. They have to deal with written materials very often so reading is practised more than other skills. However, they were in doubt whether they like reading or not. So the problem is how to raise their interest in learing reading.

Factor of Vocabulary knowledge

In the field of vocabulary, students agreed with three out of four items which have influence on their reading comprehension. What hinders them most is the terminology used in the text. They have to deal with texts of different themes. Sometimes there are terms which they even don't find the equivalent meaning in their native language. Similarly, new words and phrases prove to have equal effect on the students in their learning reading. It is advisable for the teacher to design vocabulary exercises for students to do in pre-reading activities, helping them understand the content of the text better. At the end of the lesson, there should also be a wordlist and their explanations or meanings for them to self-study at home.

Factor of syntax knowledge

In general, the students were in doubt whether syntax knowledge affects their reading comprehension with the mean score ranging from 2.8 to 3.4. It seems that they can partly cope with the problems of the structures, organisation of ideas in the text, eclipsis and substitution used in the text without misunderstanding. This is easy to understand because English teaching in most schools is grammar-based, the respondents have had an extensive exposure to English grammar for at least 7 years.

Factor of reading strategies

Reading strategies are very important to the understanding of a text. If ones mastered some of reading strategies, they could deal with the texts easily and do the exercises quickly. Students agreed that the unability to guess the meaning of unknown words, recognise the implication and give inferences impacts the comprehension of the text. However, they were not sure whether they can predict what will come next in the text or they have to read word by word from the beginning to the end of the text to understand the whole text. Advisably, teachers should give out more exercises about finding the meaning of the words based on context clues. To recognise the implication and give correct inferences, students must be good at critical thinking. They need more time to practise this skill because they had few opportunities to do this exercise at school.

Factor of background knowledge

Most of the students had the same idea that background knowledge affects their reading comprehension. They are confused when what they have known is different from what the author intended in the passage, so they choose the wrong answers to comprehension questions. Additionally, the readers' world knowledge is inadequate, they find it difficult to understand what is new or unfamiliar to them. This reflected that teachers should activate students' background knowledge before giving each reading task to students.

Rank order of factors

In sum, out of four major factors investigated, vocabulary is the issue which has the most influence on students' reading comprehension. Background knowledge ranks the second. Teachers should pay more attention to these problems when choosing reading materials. Syntax knowledge is the least influential one.

CONCLUSION

In the paper, a number of factors which influence the students' reading comprehension have been explored. The results show that students have the most problems with words, terminology and background knowledge. They are not sure whether they have problems with items related to syntax or reading strategies such as structure, substitution and guessing the content of the text. In order to improve the quality of reading practice activities, teachers should consider the reading texts which are appropriate to students' level. They must also activate students' background knowledge before giving any reading task in order to develop students' reading skill, helping reduce the difficulties in comprehending the academic texts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES
[1]. Anderson N.,*Exploring second language reading: Issues and strategies,* Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999.
[2]. Grabe W., "Current developments in second language reading research", *TESOL Quarterly*, 25, pp. 375-406. Retrieved November 15, 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3586977, 1991.
[3]. Goodman K. S., *Reading: A psycholinguistic guessing game*. Retrieved November 8 2018, from http://uascentral.uas.alaska.edu/onlinelib/Fall-2007/ED674-JD1/Goodman_article.pdf, 1967.
[4]. Goodman K. S., "Analysis of oral reading miscues: Applied psycholinguistics", *Reading Research Quarterly*, 5, pp. 9-30. Retrieved November 9 2018, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/747158, 1969.
[5]. Anderson R. C., Reynolds R. E., Schallert D. E., & Goetz E. T., "Framework for comprehending discourse", *American Educational Research Journal*, 14, pp. 367-381, 1977.
[6]. Coady J., A psycholinguistic model of the ESL reader. In R. Mackey, B. Barkman, & R.R Jordan (Eds.), *Reading in a second language: Hypothesis, organisation, and practice* (pp.5-12). Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1979.
[7]. Sajeerat Wutthisingchai, *A survey study of English reading comprehension problems in academic texts as perceived by Mathayom 5 students in the English program at Thai Christian school, 2011*.