

AN INVESTIGATION INTO DIFFICULTIES IN ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH-MAJORED FRESHMEN AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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Received:	18/5/2023	Reading comprehension skill is considered one of the four fundamental language skills that students learning English as a Foreign Language must perform. Nevertheless, it is not a straightforward skill since most learners encounter many difficulties with reading. The purpose of this present work is to identify their reading problems and the possible reasons behind their difficulties in comprehending texts. A questionnaire and an interview have been employed as research instruments for English-majored freshmen at Hanoi University of Industry. The results reveal that most of the learners struggle with reading comprehension of texts regarding vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading strategies. The main reasons for the reading difficulties include a lack of reading habits, encountering unfamiliar types of texts, and a lack of motivation for reading. By identifying these challenges, this study provides valuable insights that can inform the development of effective interventions and instructional strategies to enhance reading comprehension among learners.
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TÌM HIỂU NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN TRONG ĐỌC HIỂU TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	18/5/2023	Kỹ năng đọc hiểu được coi là một trong bốn kỹ năng ngôn ngữ cơ bản mà người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ phải có. Tuy nhiên, đọc hiểu không phải là một kỹ năng đơn giản vì hầu hết người học gặp nhiều khó khăn khi đọc. Mục đích của nghiên cứu này là xác định các vấn đề đọc và những lý do đằng sau những khó khăn đó trong việc hiểu văn bản. Một bảng hỏi và phỏng vấn đã được sử dụng làm công cụ nghiên cứu cho sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Đại học Công nghiệp Hà Nội. Kết quả cho thấy hầu hết người học gặp khó khăn trong việc đọc hiểu văn bản liên quan đến từ vựng, kiến thức nền và chiến lược đọc. Những lý do chính dẫn đến những khó khăn trong việc đọc liên quan đến thói quen đọc, các loại văn bản không quen thuộc khi đọc và động lực đọc. Bằng cách xác định những thách thức này, nghiên cứu cũng gợi ý những cách thức và chiến lược giảng dạy hiệu quả để nâng cao khả năng đọc hiểu của người học.
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1. Introduction

Reading plays a crucial role in the process of language learning, including using textbooks for language courses, writing, revising, developing vocabulary, acquiring grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs [1]. Despite its critical importance, reading comprehension is often considered a challenging skill to master due to its complex nature, which involves both the text and the reader's cognitive and linguistic abilities, especially for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners [2], [3].

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process that involves the interaction between the reader and the text. It requires the reader to actively construct meaning from the text by drawing on their prior knowledge, language proficiency, and reading strategies [4]. In essence, reading comprehension can be understood as the ability to comprehend the stated or unstated writer's idea in the text and to connect the words and ideas conveyed. Hence, a strong reading comprehension skill is essential for learners to obtain and understand information effectively [5] - [8].

There are three main difficulties that significantly impact reading comprehension. Firstly, vocabulary-related difficulties hinder students' ability to decode words efficiently and comprehend texts. Vocabulary knowledge plays a vital role in reading comprehension, with a reciprocal relationship between the two [9] - [12]. Secondly, background knowledge emerges as a crucial factor, as inadequate prior understanding and contextual knowledge impede readers' comprehension. Readers' cultural awareness and appropriate utilization of prior knowledge are essential for successful text comprehension [13], [14]. Lastly, reading strategy-related difficulties are prominent among struggling readers. The investigation into the differences between good readers and poor readers in utilizing reading strategies has been a focal point for researchers. Findings indicate that good readers employ a range of comprehension strategies aligned with their reading purposes, while poor readers tend to read passively without utilizing effective strategies. Good readers also tend to rely on their prior knowledge to enhance text comprehension [15] - [18].

These aforementioned difficulties are attributed to three primary causes when reading English texts. Firstly, a lack of reading habits hinders students' English reading comprehension skills. Developing a reading habit is essential for accessing information, expanding knowledge, fostering critical thinking abilities, and promoting ideas and ideals that can contribute to socio-economic progress [19]. Without regular exposure to English content materials, students may struggle with comprehension tests and have limited proficiency in the language [20]. Secondly, unfamiliar types of texts pose challenges for EFL learners. Text form is a crucial factor that affects EFL learners' reading comprehension [21]. The impact of text types on reading comprehension has been recognized as a variable that requires further investigation. Different text forms, such as stories and essays, can affect non-native readers differently, requiring them to integrate information in a complex manner [22]. Lastly, a lack of motivation contributes to reading difficulties. Motivation serves as an internal drive that propels individuals to achieve their goals in language learning [23]. Qin Xiaoqing (2002) found out that motivation is a consequential factor that determines success or failure in second language acquisition since motivation can directly impact the frequency of utilizing learning strategies and perseverance in learning [24].

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the reading comprehension difficulties faced by English-majored freshmen at Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI). In line with this aim, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. *What are some common challenges encountered by English-majored freshmen at HaUI when reading English texts?*
2. *What are the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties?*

2. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The

questionnaire was administered to participants to gather quantitative data, while semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative data. By employing both methods, the study aimed to achieve a deeper understanding of the research topic and generate meaningful data that could be applied to a broader context. The use of a mixed-method approach helps enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire aimed to identify the factors influencing students' reading comprehension by exploring their preferences for English language skills, reading materials, reading goals, and reading strategies. Each question provided four to five options for the participants to select from. In addition, two open-ended questions were included to gather information on the students' difficulties when reading English and the underlying causes of those problems. Lastly, the frequency of the students' English reading was also assessed through the final two questions.

Semi-structured interviews

Based on the collected data from the questionnaires, the researcher selected 17 out of 170 students to answer some supplemental questions. The questions were not based on the available templates, but they were designed flexibly in order not to take much time. The researcher intentionally chose 17 participants to interview based on their answers in the questionnaires. The interview questions were used to explain the participants' previous multiple-choice answers, most of them in the form of Why-questions. For example, "Why do you think that inadequate background knowledge hinders your reading comprehension?" or "Can you explain more why you chose A, B, C, or D?"

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Data analysis of students' responses

3.1.1. Preferences in language skills: investigating students' favorite skill

When conducting a survey on students' favorite skills to learn English, the study obtained results in Table 1.

Table 1. *The Preferable Skill to Learn*

Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
22.2%	27.8%	33.3%	16.7%

The students' preferences for their favorite language skill were diverse. 33.3% of the learners favored reading, while 27.8% preferred speaking. Listening was the preferred skill, at 22.2%, while only 16.7% chose writing. These findings provide insight into learners' motivation to read in English. Additionally, many participants stated that learning English was important to them. Some enjoyed it because of its widespread use in various fields, while others appreciated it as a global language that expanded their general knowledge.

When asked about their reasons for valuing English reading, one participant (N3) said, "I think reading English can make me happy. English gives me access to multiple cultures, so I like it and have a passion for it." This perspective highlights the joy and cultural exposure that reading English brings to the learner. Another participant (N7) said, "Reading English helps me develop general world knowledge." This viewpoint emphasizes the role of English reading in enhancing the participant's understanding of global affairs and broader knowledge.

3.1.2. Reading material preferences: exploring students' preferred texts

When conducting a survey on the materials that learners best prefer, the study obtained results in Table 2. According to the table 2, the majority of participants enjoyed reading texts in newspapers (33%), followed by texts in short stories (29%), while texts in books received 24% of responses. Only 14% of the participants preferred reading other types of texts. The interview findings disclosed that most students considered reading materials such as books, journals, magazines, and

newspapers as the most affordable and easily accessible sources of knowledge and entertainment. Participants also agreed that reading is an effective way of improving their English skills.

Table 2. *The Materials that Learners Best Prefer*

Types of materials	Rate
Texts in Newspapers	33%
Texts in Books	24%
Text in Short Stories	29%
Others	14%

One participant (N8) emphasized the benefits of reading daily newspapers, stating, "Reading daily newspapers is definitely one of the best methods to improve my English." This statement highlights the participant's recognition of the value of newspapers as a means to enhance English language proficiency. Another participant (N5) expressed the advantages of reading stories, saying, "Reading a story helps me develop not only communication skills but also a good vocabulary." This comment highlights the participant's belief that reading stories contributes not only to language skills but also to the development of vocabulary.

The table 2 shows a clear preference among learners for reading texts in newspapers and short stories, indicating that English texts are not popular among the students. In fact, some participants admitted that they rarely read English texts because they found them difficult to understand. Additionally, a few mentioned other materials that they enjoyed reading, such as poems, proverbs, and magazines.

3.1.3. *The purpose of reading: examining students' motivations and goals*

When conducting a survey on the main goal of reading, the study obtained results in Table 3.

Table 3. *The primary goal of reading*

The primary goals	Rate
Enrich your general knowledge	53%
Improve your vocabulary	28.6%
For pleasure	6%
Others	12.4%

The provided data reveals that the bulk of English learners (53%) read to enrich their general knowledge, while some learners (28%) focus on improving their vocabulary and language skills.

"Reading is also vital for learning new languages, as non-native speakers gain exposure to words in context, which will ameliorate not only my vocabulary but also my knowledge." (N9)

"By developing the reading skills, I can diversify my field of knowledge which provides me with the chance to participate in fruitful discussion and decision-making processes." (N10)

Some students shared that reading was the best way to improve not only their vocabulary, but also grammar, and writing skills at the same time.

"The more I read, the more words I gain exposure to, and this is the way to enrich my everyday vocabulary." (N6)

Interestingly, a small percentage of learners (12.4%) reported that they read English to serve others' purposes such as sharpening their memory, analytical thinking, and attention span.

"Reading not only enriches my knowledge but also makes it sharpen to analyze and evaluate things in a better way. In this way, reading enhances my analytical thinking." (N15)

"When I read a book, all of my attention is focused on the story and I can immerse myself in every fine detail you're absorbing." (N4)

It is noteworthy that a few students (6%) read for pleasure as it is a great way to alleviate stress and entertain oneself.

"It helps me reduce stress, relieve tensions, and thus boost our energy. It carries me to the realm of dream and amusement – far away from the real complex world." (N17)

The purpose of asking this question was to explore whether the learners are extensive or intensive readers and understand why they read. It is evident that most of the students prioritize reading as a means to enhance their knowledge and improve their language skills. Nonetheless, reading for pleasure remains a viable option for a small percentage of students who appreciate its ability to reduce stress and provide entertainment.

3.1.4. Strategies for understanding challenging English texts: students' approaches and solutions

When conducting a survey on learners' strategies, the study obtained results in Table 4.

Table 4. Learners' strategies

Types of strategies	Rate
Use dictionaries	43.8%
Stop reading	6%
Translate into mother tongue	12.5%
Continue reading	31.3%
Others	6.4%

Nearly half of the respondents (43.8%) affirmed that they resort to using a dictionary to comprehend English texts when encountering unfamiliar words. On the other hand, 31.3% of the participants chose to continue reading despite the lack of understanding. Moreover, 12.5% of the participants preferred to translate the text to their native language, while a mere 6.3% decided to abandon the reading entirely upon facing comprehension difficulties.

"When reading the narrative texts, there are some words that I do not know the meaning of the text, so it forces me to open a dictionary to check up the new words." (N12)

"Using my dictionary or Google translate to make me comprehend the text easily." (N8)

The data indicates that the majority of the students prefer to employ dictionary or translation tools to overcome their reading difficulties, rather than utilizing more diverse reading strategies. When asked about the use of reading strategies, many students expressed a lack of interest and reported struggling with various issues while reading English texts. These included attempting to translate word by word, paying attention to details while missing the main ideas, taking a prolonged time to grasp the content, and feeling overwhelmed by lengthy texts and a vast number of new words.

Consequently, this can lead to boredom, passive-aggressive psychology, and a failure to absorb information from the reading materials.

3.1.5. Identifying challenges in reading English texts: students' reported difficulties

When conducting a survey on the difficulties encountered by students, the study obtained the results as seen in Table 5.

Table 5. The difficulties encountered by students

Types of materials	Rate
Difficulties related to vocabulary	38%
Difficulties related to background knowledge	27%
Difficulties related to reading strategies	23%
Others	12%

The table 5 depicts the reading difficulties encountered by students in the English Faculty of Foreign Languages in their reading comprehension. 38% of students reported difficulties related to vocabulary, hindering their understanding of the text. Students noted that unfamiliar vocabulary, specialized terminologies, and complex grammar interfered with their comprehension. A student shared "I did not understand the reading text because it had complex grammar, difficult vocabulary, and many technical words." (N1). They said "I think I do not have enough vocabularies to translate a text; I cannot guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases" (N13&N9).

27% of students experienced difficulties with background knowledge, limiting their understanding of the content and leading to boredom.

"I cannot explain the meaning of the text because I do not connect the topic with my personal experiences." (N16)

"I do not understand much about the content of the reading texts because of my limited background knowledge of the topics of the reading texts." (N17)

23% of students reported difficulties related to reading strategies, including a lack of time for reading and a lack of knowledge of effective strategies.

"I do not know how to decide what to read closely and what to ignore." (N12&N15)

"When reading English texts, I translate every word into my native language." (N3&N5)

Finally, the remaining 12% of students reported difficulties related to attention or text structure. Overall, vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading strategies were found to be the primary obstacles hindering students' reading comprehension.

3.1.6. *Unveiling the factors behind reading difficulties in English texts: a closer examination of students' perspectives*

When conducting a survey on reasons for reading comprehension difficulties, the study obtained results in Table 6.

Table 6. *Reasons for reading comprehension difficulties*

Reasons	Rate
A lack of reading habits	36%
Unfamiliar types of texts	27%
A lack of motivation	22%
Others	15%

Upon inquiry about the main causes of reading difficulties, it was found that 36% of students lacked a reading habit, 27% were unfamiliar with the types of texts they were reading, and 22% lacked motivation for reading. The remaining 15% cited other reasons.

Those who did not have a habit of reading encountered difficulties due to encountering numerous unfamiliar words, leading to a limited vocabulary and less improvement in language skills. This, in turn, affected their reading motivation. For instance, when a text became too challenging, students lost interest in rereading it. Additionally, complex and lengthy passages could demotivate them. A few students also struggled with understanding unfamiliar text structures (N2, N8, N15, N17).

3.1.7. *Assessing the adequacy of reading session time: students' perspectives on time management and reading habits*

The survey results reveal that a significant majority (87%) of the surveyed students expressed dissatisfaction with the allocated time for reading sessions, indicating challenges with time management and reading habits. Only a small proportion (13%) of students reported being satisfied with the duration, suggesting that improvements are needed in this area. Students cited various reasons for this issue, such as insufficient time to read the entire text, slower reading speed compared to their peers, and excessive time spent on looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary, which hampers their ability to read attentively. One participant stated, "I feel that the allotted time for reading a text is insufficient for reading it in its entirety" (N14), highlighting the struggle to complete readings within the given timeframe. Another student mentioned, "My reading speed is slower compared to my peers" (N8), indicating a personal challenge in maintaining a desired pace. Additionally, a participant mentioned, "I end up spending a lot of time searching for the meanings of new words in the dictionary, which distracts me from reading the text thoroughly" (N14), emphasizing the

impact of excessive word lookup on comprehensive reading. These insights underscore the importance of addressing time management and reading efficiency in order to enhance students' reading experience and overall language proficiency.

3.1.8. Exploring weekly reading time: a study on students' reading habits and time allocation

When conducting a survey on students' time for learning reading skills per week, the study obtained results in Table 7.

Table 7. Students' time for learning reading skills per week

Time for learning reading skills per week	Rate
Less than 1 hour	12.5%
1 hour to 2 hours	56.3%
2 hours to 4 hours	31.2%
More than 6 hours	0%

In general, as can be seen from Table 7, the number of students spending time reading for a week is not the same. The majority of the students, approximately 56.3%, spend only 1 to 2 hours per week practicing reading. On the other hand, a small fraction of students, about 12.5%, do not consider reading a priority. Reasons for this include prioritizing other subjects and not valuing the importance of reading.

"I feel like I don't have enough time to cover up all the syllabus and I work part-time. Also, I can't balance study with a part-time job." (N4)

"I think it is very easy to find the document about self-learning English on the Internet, but I am so confused about whether it is good for me to read or not." (N16)

Approximately 31.3% of students allocate 2 to 4 hours per week to reading English, as they are FFL students and recognize the significance of practicing reading in their language acquisition. However, none of the students devote more than six hours a week to reading.

3.2. Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore the various challenges encountered by EFL freshmen at HaUI when reading English texts, and identify the underlying causes of these difficulties. Based on the survey results, it is evident that many students face significant obstacles when it comes to reading comprehension.

As previously noted, the most common difficulties experienced by students are related to vocabulary limitations, insufficient background knowledge, and poor reading strategies. This finding confirms that despite being English majors, students struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary (38%), inadequate background knowledge (27%), and a lack of reading strategies (23%).

There are three key challenges that impede students' reading comprehension. Firstly, unfamiliar vocabulary is the most obvious problem that affects comprehension. Participants reported struggling with the meanings of new words and ambiguous terms. The root cause of this issue is a lack of reading practice, with 87% of students reporting inadequate time devoted to reading skills development. Secondly, insufficient application of appropriate strategies impedes learners' reading comprehension. Only 31% of students feel confident addressing comprehension issues as they arise, while others rely heavily on dictionaries. Finally, a lack of background knowledge pertaining to reading materials further exacerbates comprehension difficulties.

In summary, the statistical analysis reveals that the three main factors underlying learners' vocabulary, background, and strategy difficulties are a lack of reading habits, unfamiliar text types, and poor motivation. The results of this study provide valuable insights that can inform the development of effective interventions to support EFL students in enhancing their reading skills and achieving academic success.

4. Conclusion

The study has fulfilled its objective of identifying the factors that hinder the English reading comprehension of English-majored freshmen at HaUI. The findings are based on the responses of 170 participants, which were collected through survey questionnaires and interviews. The results showed that the students face challenges related to vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading strategies. The study also revealed that a lack of reading habits, unfamiliar text types, and lack of reading motivation are the three main factors behind the learners' difficulties.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that educators and students work together to develop strategies to improve reading skills. Suggestions include building students' vocabulary through regular reading, providing background knowledge on the subject matter before reading, and teaching students effective reading strategies. It is also important to create a positive and motivating reading environment to encourage students to read more frequently.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the challenges that students face when reading English texts, and offers practical solutions to overcome these difficulties. By implementing these strategies, students can improve their reading comprehension skills, which in turn will enhance their overall language proficiency.

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