

Improve reading skills for first-year english major students at Thang Long University: difficulties and solutions

*Trần Thị Phương**

**Thang Long University*

Received: 16/9/2024; Accepted: 25/9/2024; Published: 01/10/2024

Abstract: *This paper explores the challenges that first-year English major students at Thang Long University face in developing their reading skills. It examines the key difficulties such as limited vocabulary, insufficient reading strategies, low motivation, and difficulties in processing academic texts. The article also proposes solutions for improving reading skills, including vocabulary enhancement, teaching effective reading strategies, promoting motivational reading, and integrating technology into the learning process. By providing a multi-faceted approach combining traditional methods and modern strategies, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing these issues comprehensively to facilitate student success.*

Keywords: *Reading skills, vocabulary acquisition, reading strategies, motivation,*

1. Introduction

Reading is an essential skill for academic achievement, especially for English majors, as it lays the foundation for understanding literature, mastering linguistic concepts, and engaging with scholarly texts. However, many first-year English major students at Thang Long University encounter significant challenges when developing their reading skills. These difficulties can impede their academic progress and overall success in their studies.

The purpose of this article is to identify the specific challenges faced by first-year English majors at Thang Long University and propose practical solutions to enhance their reading skills. By exploring these challenges and offering strategies for improvement, the study aims to support educators in helping students achieve better outcomes in reading and comprehension.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reading Skills in Language Learning

Reading is often described as a complex cognitive skill that involves not only recognizing words but also interpreting meaning, making inferences, and synthesizing information from texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). It plays a critical role in second language acquisition, as it allows learners to access a wide range of linguistic input, from vocabulary and grammar to discourse structure and cultural context.

For English majors, reading is particularly important as it provides exposure to the literary canon, academic papers, and professional texts that

are essential to their field of study. Reading also fosters critical thinking and analytical skills, which are crucial for academic success (Alderson, 2000). However, research indicates that students often struggle with reading when the language of the text exceeds their current level of proficiency, or when they lack effective reading strategies (Zhang, 2012).

2.2. Common Challenges in Reading Development

Several studies highlight the challenges that second language learners face in developing reading proficiency. These challenges include linguistic factors such as limited vocabulary and poor grammatical knowledge, as well as cognitive factors like weak comprehension skills and low motivation (Nation, 2009). First-year students are particularly vulnerable to these challenges as they transition from high school to university-level academic work, which typically involves more complex and dense reading materials.

In a study by Carrell (1989), it was found that learners often struggle with academic texts because they focus too much on decoding individual words rather than understanding the overall meaning of a passage. This problem is exacerbated by inadequate training in reading strategies, which makes it difficult for students to process and retain information effectively.

2.3. Effective Approaches to Teaching Reading

Pedagogical research offers a range of approaches to teaching reading skills, from explicit vocabulary instruction to task-based reading activities that

engage students in meaningful interaction with texts. Brown (2001) advocates for using a communicative approach in teaching reading, where students are encouraged to discuss, question, and interpret texts collaboratively. Task-based reading activities, such as group discussions and text analysis, have been shown to enhance comprehension and retention of information.

Another key aspect of teaching reading is fostering motivation, as students who are intrinsically motivated to read are more likely to engage with texts and develop better reading habits (Day & Bamford, 1998). Strategies that promote self-directed learning, such as offering students choices in reading materials or integrating technology into reading instruction, have proven effective in motivating learners to improve their reading skills.

3. Discussion of findings

3.1. Identified Difficulties

3.1.1. Limited Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in reading comprehension, and many first-year students at Thang Long University struggle with understanding academic texts because of their limited vocabulary. English academic texts, particularly those in fields such as literature and linguistics, often contain a wide range of specialized and technical terms that students have not yet encountered. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, students are unable to fully grasp the meaning of the texts, leading to frustration and disengagement.

The vocabulary challenge is further compounded by the fact that many English learners in Vietnam tend to rely heavily on translation tools. This over-reliance on translation often results in surface-level understanding, as students focus on translating individual words rather than comprehending the overall meaning of the passage.

3.1.2. Insufficient Reading Strategies

First-year students often lack effective reading strategies, which prevents them from reading efficiently and effectively. Many students approach reading by focusing on each word rather than on the larger structure of the text. This word-by-word approach can be time-consuming and ineffective, particularly when reading lengthy or complex academic texts.

Effective reading strategies, such as skimming for the main idea, scanning for specific information, and making inferences, are essential for successful

reading. However, many students at Thang Long University are not familiar with these strategies, which makes it difficult for them to process and analyze academic texts.

3.1.3. Lack of Motivation and Interest

A significant challenge for many first-year students is a lack of motivation to engage with reading materials. Several factors contribute to this issue, including the difficulty of the texts, the pressure of academic workloads, and the growing influence of digital media, which often favors shorter, more visually engaging content over traditional reading.

For some students, reading in English is seen as a laborious task, particularly when they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary or complex sentence structures. This negative perception of reading can lead to avoidance, where students choose to skip reading assignments or engage with the material only superficially.

3.1.4. Difficulty with Academic Texts

Academic texts, particularly those required in English courses, present a unique challenge for first-year students. These texts are often characterized by formal language, complex sentence structures, and abstract ideas, which can be overwhelming for students who are still developing their language proficiency.

Moreover, the lack of background knowledge on certain topics can make academic texts seem inaccessible. For instance, students who are unfamiliar with Western literary traditions may struggle to understand references and allusions in English literature texts. This disconnect between students' existing knowledge and the content of academic readings further complicates their ability to comprehend and engage with these texts.

3.2. Proposed Solutions

3.2.1. Vocabulary Enhancement through Targeted Instruction

To address the issue of limited vocabulary, educators should implement targeted vocabulary instruction that focuses on both general academic words and subject-specific terms. One effective method is to introduce vocabulary-building exercises that are integrated into regular reading activities. For example, teachers can create vocabulary lists from assigned readings and ask students to complete exercises that involve using these words in different contexts.

In addition to explicit vocabulary instruction,

it is important to encourage students to develop independent vocabulary learning habits. Teaching students how to use context clues, such as prefixes, suffixes, and root words, can help them infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. This not only improves their comprehension of specific texts but also enhances their overall ability to learn new vocabulary independently.

3.2.2. *Developing Reading Strategies through Structured Practice*

To help students improve their reading comprehension, educators should focus on teaching specific reading strategies. Techniques such as skimming, scanning, and identifying topic sentences should be introduced early in the semester and practiced regularly in class. Structured reading activities, such as reading comprehension exercises and group discussions, can provide students with the opportunity to apply these strategies in a supportive environment.

One particularly effective strategy is to use reciprocal teaching, where students work in groups to summarize, question, clarify, and predict the content of a text. This interactive method encourages active engagement with the material and helps students develop critical thinking skills. Moreover, reciprocal teaching fosters collaboration and peer learning, which can motivate students to improve their reading skills collectively.

3.2.3. *Promoting Motivational Reading through Choice and Relevance*

To address the issue of low motivation, teachers should select reading materials that are both engaging and relevant to students' interests. Offering students a choice in the texts they read can increase their motivation by allowing them to explore topics that they find personally meaningful. For example, students could be given the option to choose from a list of articles, short stories, or book excerpts related to the course themes.

Additionally, incorporating culturally relevant texts or contemporary media, such as blogs, news articles, and social media posts, can make reading more relatable and enjoyable for students. Teachers can also use project-based assignments that require students to engage with real-world issues through reading, such as researching current events or analyzing popular media.

3.2.4. *Incorporating Technology into Reading Instruction*

Integrating technology into reading instruction can also support students in overcoming the challenges they face. Digital tools such as online dictionaries, grammar checkers, and language learning apps can provide immediate feedback and assistance, helping students navigate difficult texts more easily.

Teachers can also use platforms like Google Classroom or other learning management systems to create discussion forums where students can share their thoughts on readings and engage in collaborative analysis. This not only promotes critical thinking but also encourages students to actively participate in the reading process. By leveraging technology, educators can create a more dynamic and supportive learning environment that fosters reading development.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, improving the reading skills of first-year English major students at Thang Long University requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses both linguistic and motivational challenges. By focusing on vocabulary enhancement, reading strategy instruction, motivational reading practices, and the integration of technology, educators can help students develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in their academic studies. As these students advance in their education, these foundational reading skills will be critical for their ability to engage with complex texts, think critically, and contribute meaningfully to academic discourse.

References

- [1]. Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2]. Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- [3]. Carrell, P. L. (1989). "Metacognitive Awareness and Second Language Reading." *TESOL Quarterly*, 23(4), 647-678.
- [4]. Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5]. Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2013). *Teaching and Researching Reading* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing*. Routledge.
- [6]. Zhang, L. J. (2012). "A Dynamic Metacognitive Systems Perspective on L2 Reading Comprehension Ability." *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(2), 320-352.