

# An investigation into the difficulties in reading comprehension skills experienced by first-year English-majored students at school of foreign languages

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the difficulties in English reading comprehension skills experienced by first-year English-majored students at School of Foreign Languages (SFL) in Thai Nguyen. This is done by answering two questions: “What difficulties do the first-year English-majored students meet when dealing with reading lessons and What are feasible solutions to overcome these difficulties?” One hundred and fifty first-year English-majored students were involved in answering the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to the students with a Google form link due to COVID-19. The data was collected within one day and analyzed through the descriptive statistical percentage Microsoft Office Excel 2013. The results of the study show that most of the students dealt with three main types of problems such as the area of linguistics, reading strategies, and psychology. Reading strategies are considered to be the most difficult among the three factors above and students often find it hard to guess meaning from the context, skim and scan. To solve these problems, teachers should provide students with more chances to practise reading strategies so they can use them in the right way to improve their reading comprehension and do well in their study.

**Keywords:** Background knowledge, English reading comprehension, Grammar, Reading difficulties, Reading strategies, Scanning, Skimming, Vocabulary.

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### Highlights of this paper

- Students meet difficulties in English reading comprehension skills.
- Three main types of problems are the area of linguistics, reading strategies, and psychology.
- Teachers should provide students with more chances to practise reading strategies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Knowing a language gives you more opportunities to develop yourself in the world of globalisation. As English has been an international language, more and more people feel a need to master this language to be able to compete in studies and careers. According to Butler-Pascoe (2009), "Today with the emergence of English as the prominent language in our increasingly technological and global society, especially in countries that are attempting to restructure the manner in which students learn and perform English."

Reading skills are essential to language acquisition. If students understand more or less what they read, the more they read, the more they can perceive. Reading also positively affects a student's vocabulary development, spelling and writing ability. The reading comprehension documents are also very suitable and useful sample documents for students in the process of practicing writing skills. At different stages, teachers can encourage students to focus on vocabulary, grammar, or punctuation. Reading materials can also be used to illustrate how a sentence, paragraph, or whole text is formed. From there, students can write their own best essays based on these sample texts. In addition, the selected reading materials also provide interesting topics, creating interest for students to explore, discuss and develop their listening-speaking skills. This is stated by Erten and Razi (2009) "Reading is often referred to as the most important of the four language skills for EFL learners, as it enables students to gain exposure to the target language and receive valuable linguistic input to build up language proficiency". For the first-year English-majored students, although they have been learning English for at least ten years, it is still often difficult for them to understand texts or passages in English since they lack vocabulary, grammar, reading skills, and background knowledge. As a matter of fact, students are not confident in reading, they usually get common problems in linguistic causes, psychological causes, and in lacking strategies. Besides, the teachers sometimes have to face difficulties in dealing with the students' learning demands and newly introduced sources of materials. Identifying the areas of students' difficulty at SFL and the causes of their unsuccessful reading comprehension is necessary. For those problems, the study "*An investigation into the difficulties in English reading comprehension skill experienced by first-year English-majored students at School of Foreign Languages*" is conducted to chart out these issues more deeply. The authors hope that this research will help all first-year English-majored to master their reading skills and have a way to learn reading skills more effectively.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Definition of Reading

According to Harmer (1989) reading is a mechanical process that "eyes receive the message and the brain then has to work out the significance of the message". In his definition, Harmer focuses on both two actions dominated by the eyes and the brain. Similarly, Kenneth (2017) Goodman has demonstrated that: "A receptive psycholinguistic process when the actor uses strategies to create meaning from text. Reading is a precise process. It involves exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns and larger language units."

### 2.2. Definition of Reading Comprehension

Comprehension is the ability to understand completely with a situation, facts, etc, and discover and grasp the relationship of things, phenomena, certain objects, and the meaning of that relationship. "Reading comprehension is

a complex interaction among automatic and strategic cognitive processes that enables the reader to create a mental representation of the text” as considered by [Van den Broek and Espin \(2012\)](#).

According to [Yovanoff, Duesbery, Alonzo, and Tindal \(2005\)](#) “Comprehension also requires effective use of strategic processes such as metacognition and comprehension monitoring. As readers mature in their comprehension skills, they are able to progress efficiently from the stage of learning to read to the ultimate goal of reading to learn”. Reading comprehension means reading combined with the formation of the capacity to explain, analyze, generalize, the reason right and wrong about logic, that is, combined with capacity, thinking, and expression. Study the nature of reading comprehension, [Francois \(1981\)](#) indicated that “Reading comprehension or understanding written text means extracting the required information from it as effectively as possible”. This means that the student can show his understanding by re-expressing the content of the text in many ways such as summarizing the text, answering questions, etc.

### *2.3. Reading Process*

In examining three basic views of the reading process, namely: bottom-up, top-down, and interactive, they can be summarized in this manner:

Firstly, in the bottom-up models, the reader begins with the written text (the bottom) and constructs meaning from letters, words, phrases, and sentences found within and then processes the text in a linear fashion. In the process of meaning interpretation, the language is translated from one form of symbolic representation to another ([Nunan, 1991](#)). Secondly, the top-down models in which the reading process moves from the top, the higher level of mental stages down to the text itself. It relates to an extension of the language acquisition process and views the process of reading as predictions confirmed by inspecting the text, and comprehension is obtained by reorganizing the meaning given to the reading.

Finally, the interactive model views reading as involving both the bottom-up and top-down models, and the process of reading comprehension as the interaction of the reader and the text, depending on the particular situation.

### *2.4. Types of Reading*

According to [Williams \(1996\)](#), reading is classified into four main types, namely skimming, scanning, extensive reading, and intensive reading.

- Skimming: Reading rapidly for the main points.
- Scanning: Reading rapidly to find a specific piece of information.
- Intensive reading: Reading a short text for detailed information.
- Extensive reading: Reading a longer text, often for pleasure with an emphasis on the overall meaning

### *2.5. Linguistic Difficulties*

#### *2.5.1. Background Knowledge*

Reading comprehension is complex and there are many factors behind it. Students may find certain topics difficult to understand if they don't have the necessary background knowledge. [Alderson \(2000\)](#) notes that “the reader's knowledge affects what they understand”.

The importance of background knowledge is especially essential for students. Background knowledge acts as scaffolding, so when a student builds on existing information they already know, they're better able to understand

and remember the material. The imperative to foster student's background knowledge as a means for providing a firm foundation for learning, therefore, is greater than ever.

### *2.5.2. Vocabulary*

Having a strong vocabulary is a key component of reading comprehension. Students can learn vocabulary through instruction but they typically learn the meaning of words through everyday experience and also by reading.

Thus, it is necessary for students to know vocabulary and structures in order to get meaning from the texts. It proves that teachers need to provide students with appropriate vocabulary learning methods.

### *2.5.3. Grammatical Structure*

It is not only vocabulary but also grammar that is a significant barrier for students to read materials. Grammatical knowledge as a more contributive factor in L2 reading comprehension. The problem of not mastering the grammatical characteristics of noun phrases or verb phrases causes many obstacles for students to learn to read.

## *2.6. Reading Strategies Difficulties*

### *2.6.1. Guessing Meaning from Context*

Guessing is one of the important strategies in reading skills. When students read, they do not need to look up the meaning of all new words in a dictionary. They can often get the meanings of many new words from the context - in other words - in the sentences of the paragraph. Guessing from context refers to the ability to infer the meaning of an expression using contextual clues. [Thornbury \(2002\)](#) also argues that “guessing from context is probably one of the most useful skills students can acquire and apply both inside and outside the classroom. It seems to be one that can be taught and implemented relatively easily. It is also one that they all already use-perhaps unconsciously-when reading and listening in our mother tongue”.

### *2.6.2. Skimming*

According to [Christine \(1982\)](#) skimming means “glancing rapidly through a text to determine whether a research paper is relevant to our own work or in order to keep ourselves superficially informed about matters that are not of great importance to us”. When students want to find only important ideas and not all details, they often skim a text. Skimming means passing or gliding lightly or superficially. Many students may think that their main problem when reading is not having enough vocabulary. Skimming is a more thorough activity which requires an overall view of the text and implies a definite reading competence. Skimming is used to quickly identify the main ideas of a text.

### *2.6.3. Scanning*

Scanning is a speed-reading technique and a useful reading activity in which learners need specific information without dealing with the whole text. Scanning involves quick eye movements, not necessarily linear in fashion, in which the eyes wander until the reader finds the piece of information needed. Scanning is very useful for finding a specific name, date, statistic, or fact without reading the entire article. According to [Brown \(2001\)](#) “Scanning is a quickly searching for some particular piece of information in a text, scanning exercises may ask students to look for name or dates, to find a definition of key concept, or to list a certain number of supporting details. The purpose of scanning is to extract specific information without reading through the whole text”.

## *2.7. Psychological Difficulties*

### *2.7.1. Attitude*

Students' attitude plays a significant role in the second language reading classroom. They have a close relationship with motivation. Krashen (1982) proposes that attitudes can act as barriers or bridges to reading a new language and are the essential environmental ingredient for language reading. Day and Bamford (1998) argue that "a learner's experience of reading in the first language influences the learner's attitude to read". Furthermore, it seems that cultural beliefs are another cradle for the incubation of negative or positive attitudes towards reading. Sharing the same opinion, McKenna (2001) "A culture where reading is viewed in a negative light by people whose approval a learner seeks, may not encourage positive reading attitudes."

### *2.7.2. Motivation*

Motivation plays an important role in learning a language. Language teachers cannot effectively teach a language if they do not understand the relationship between the motivation and its impact on language learning. The Gardner's theory of second language learning motivation is based on the definition of motivation as —the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity (Gardner, 1985). According to Brown's point of view "motivation is some kinds of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something". And "motivation explains why people decide to do something, how hard they are going to pursue it and how long they are willing to sustain the activities (Dornyei, 2001). Motivation is crucial for second language learning, and it is essential to understand what the students' motivation is. As a general rule, teachers are advised to use as many of the intrinsic suggestions as possible while recognizing that not all students will be appropriately motivated by them. However, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be paid attention to teaching and learning second language learning.

## **3. THE STUDY**

### *3.1. The Subjects*

The participants in the study were 150 first-year English-majored students at School of Foreign Languages. They have learnt English at school for ten years.

### *3.2. The Research Questions*

- What difficulties do the the first-year English-majored students meet when dealing with reading lesson?
- What are feasible solutions to overcome these difficulties?

### *3.3. The Instruments*

The study was conducted with the main data collection instrument of a questionnaire.

#### *3.3.1. Questionnaire*

The questionnaire consisted of thirty-two questions, twenty-seven of which were close-ended based on five-point Likert scale. The last question was open-ended.

#### *3.3.2. Data Collection and Analysis*

To collect data for the study, the questionnaire was distributed to 150 students via google form and it was returned within one day. The data was analyzed through the descriptive statistical percentage.

## 4. RESULTS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE

The findings collected from the questionnaire are presented and discussed in three categories: linguistics, reading strategies and psychology in reading comprehension.

### 4.1. In the Area of Linguistics

#### 4.1.1. Background Knowledge

Table 1 reveals that students get more difficulties with Item 1 (strange topics) than Item 2 (lack of background knowledge).

Table 1. Difficulties in background knowledge.

No	Item	Percent responses (%)				
		SA*	A*	N*	D*	SD*
1	Strange topics	10	70.25	7.85	11.90	0
2	Lack of background knowledge	15.9	50.8	33.33	0	0

Note: \* SA: Strongly agree, A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly disagree.

#### 4.1.2. Vocabulary

Table 2 presents that Item 5 has the highest percentage of students' agreement (80.9%). The lowest falls into Item 4 (58.33%).

Table 2. Difficulties in vocabulary.

No.	Item	Percent responses (%)				
		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Sometimes, it is very hard for you to learn new words.	8	65.33	20.80	5.87	0
2	When you meet so many words in a reading text, you cannot understand them.	6.50	70.40	10.67	12.43	0
3	You usually read word by word so you cannot understand exactly what the writer wants to say in the text.	20	60.30	15.92	3.78	0
4	You often have difficulty in the form of exercises relating to vocabulary.	0	58.33	33.07	8.60	0
5	You feel confused because one word can have different meanings.	15	65.90	10.45	8.65	0
6	You cannot choose the right word form.	20	56.33	13.40	10.27	0

#### 4.1.3. Grammar Structures

Table 3 shows that students meet less difficulties in grammar than in vocabulary. Item 3 has the highest percentage with 35.9 % of agreement. The lowest is item 2 with 5% of agreement.

Table 3. Difficulties in grammatical structures.

No.	Item	Percent responses (%)				
		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	You often get difficulties in complex sentences to find the main idea.	0	10	30.72	59.28	0
2	You get difficulties in prepositions order when you do reading exercises.	0	5	22.36	72.64	0
3	You get difficulties how to classify the type of each word that is also your problem when doing exercises.	10	25.9	24.83	39.27	0

4.2. In the Area of Reading Strategies

4.2.1. Guessing Meaning from Context

Table 4 reveals that students have difficulties in guessing the meaning of words from the context (Item 1 with 70.6%).

Table 4. Difficulties in guessing meaning from the context.

No.	Item	Percent responses (%)				
		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	It is very hard for you to guess the meaning of words from context.	10	60.6	25.9	3.50	0
2	You meet difficulty when you want to find out the main points and important details.	8.6	50.5	27.9	13	0
3	You usually check the meanings of words from the dictionary, you do not know that you can find them from the context.	0	70.4	20.1	9.50	0
4	You cannot guess the meaning of topic without the clues.	0	50	35.6	14.4	0

4.2.2. In the Area of Skimming

Table 5 exhibits that most students agree with the importance of skimming strategy in reading comprehension.

Table 5. Difficulties in skimming.

No	Item	Percent responses (%)				
		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Skimming is an important strategy to do reading comprehension.	14.80	70	15.20	0	0
2	Skimming helps you read faster.	4.20	80.40	15.40	0	0
3	By skimming, you can quickly locate the information you have not mastered yet.	1.50	67.90	30.60	0	0
4	Skimming helps you get the topic and the main idea of a paragraph.	0	80.50	12.33	7.17	0

4.2.3. In the Area of Scanning

Table 6 shows that Item 2 (90.33%), which is useful for students, is the most important.

Table 6. Difficulties in scanning.

No	Item	Percent responses (%)				
		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Scanning is another useful tool for speeding up your reading.	0	60.3	25.70	14	0
2	Scanning before reading can help to understand the main points of the article.	10	80.33	9.67	0	0
3	Scanning allows you to find details and other information in a hurry.	0	75.34	14.66	10	0
4	You do not know how to apply scanning for exercises.	0	82.50	6.98	10.52	0
5	You do not practice scanning, so learning more details about scanning will be difficult.	0	75.90	20.40	3.70	0

4.3. In the Area of Psychology

Students are often affected by psychological factors. They are depressed when the reading text is too long.

While attitudes and motivation can be seen as a reason which leads an individual to act in a certain way, they play a significant role in reading development. 2 items of attitudes and motivation are reflected in the following Table 7:

Table 7. Student's attitudes and motivation.

No.	Item	Percent responses (%)				
		SA	A	N	D	SD
1	You feel interested when doing reading exercises.	0	60.22	19.78	20	0
2	Motivation plays a major role in learning a language.	15.33	50.33	24.37	10	0

#### 4.4. Rank Order of Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

Table 8 presents the average results of all 3 aforementioned factors. Among these factors, reading strategies have the highest percentage of agreement.

Table 8. Rank order of difficulties in reading comprehension.

Item	Percent responses (%)				
	SA	A	N	D	SD
Linguistics	11	47	21	20	0
Reading strategies	3.51	69.67	20.1	6.60	0
Psychology	8	55	22	15	0

#### 4.5. Recommendations from Students

Almost all of the participants would like their teachers to help them with the vocabulary. There should be a wordlist at the end of each lesson. They suggested the length of reading texts and the level of difficulty be suitable to student's competence.

### 5. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTED IMPLICATIONS

#### 5.1. In the Area of Linguistics

In the field of linguistics, it includes three elements: background knowledge, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. The results showed that vocabulary is considered to be the most difficult for students. As in the questionnaire, most students have difficulty in the area of vocabulary with 70.40% of selections in the item "When you meet so many words in a reading text, you cannot understand them". In fact, students' limited vocabulary makes them unable to understand the content of English reading texts. If the content is too hard to understand, the students will become lazy or show rebellious behavior. These factors make reading periods become ineffective and bring about a lot of troubles for students in learning reading skills.

#### 5.2. Reading Strategies

Secondly, the respondents also found a problem in the area of reading strategies which includes three factors such as in the area of guessing meaning from context, skimming, scanning. It was shown that most respondents get difficulties in skimming and scanning skills. In the questionnaire, most of the students still confuse skimming and scanning when doing exercises, which makes it difficult for students to apply the right skill for the appropriate time. In the area of reading strategies, the difficulty in skimming and scanning is considered the highest when students do not know how to apply reading strategies to deal with reading texts. This leads to a situation of feeling bored during the process of reading comprehension causing passive-aggressive psychology as well as difficulty in absorbing information in the reading text.



### 5.3. In the Area of Psychology

Psychological area consists of two factors such as attitude and motivation. The results of the questionnaires show that most of the students are not willing to improve their knowledge of language. While they realise the importance of reading, they do not know that reading skills help them to improve their professional knowledge. Only 15% of students think that attitude and motivation causes difficulties in learning reading. They are still passive learners and dependent of the teacher's instructions and requirements.

### 5.4. Rank Order of Factors

In sum, out of the three major factors investigated, lack of reading strategies is the issue that has the most influence on students' reading comprehension. Psychological causes rank the second. Finally, 47% of participants often meet difficulties in linguistic causes. Teachers should provide students with appropriate teaching methods, and choose suitable reading materials. In addition, students should pay more attention to reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, paraphrasing, etc, and apply them frequently in reading comprehension.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In the study, a number of factors that influence the students' reading comprehension have been explored. The results show that students have the most problems with reading strategies. Students usually apply them in the wrong way. They often read the whole text, and when meeting new words, they stop to look up the dictionary which leads when they answer the question, they don't remember the content and need to read again. This also takes time and is not effective. In order to improve the quality of reading practice activities, teachers should provide students with a variety of reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, paraphrasing, etc, and explain clearly how each of them works. Therefore, students can apply reading strategies flexibly to different types of reading tasks in their field of expertise.

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