

**A STUDY OF READING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH
ENCOUNTERED BY FIRST YEAR STUDENTS OF FACULTY OF
VIETNAMESE STUDIES AT HNUE**

Ho Van Chung, M.A.

ESP Division

INTRODUCTION

Four language skills are used to attain the English language proficiency: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading is the most important for HUE students because it is the chosen instrument to widen their knowledge. Various English printed materials are available for Vietnamese students to read while opportunities to speak, listen, and write are not common in their daily life.

Besides, reading is very essential for students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because most textbooks and the sources of science knowledge and information on higher technology are published in English. As a result, reading is the foundation of advanced studies which require reading abilities to access both textbooks and other reading materials outside the classroom (Roe, Stoodt, & Burns, 1998).

Most of the first year students at HUE studied English for 6 years at school. However, while teaching English I found that they have problems in reading English texts. So, the study (carried out at the beginning of the academic year, 2012) was designed to yield data that would contribute to our understanding of the nature of problems our students encounter in comprehending English texts and the way they process such texts. Through investigating the reading process, we can learn a great deal about how our student approach reading and what kind of strategies they use.

Proposed Research Questions

This study aims to provide answers to 2 main research questions:

1. What are the main reading comprehension problems encountered by first year non-major English students at HUE?

2. What are the strategies students use in processing a text and solving their comprehension problems?

The result of this study could be helpful to English teachers at HUE, who are responsible for understanding the students' problems, and for facilitating their reading abilities. Also, some recommendations are made with the expectation that English teachers help their students not only "efficiently learn to read", but also "happily read to learn" by themselves after graduation. (Seliger, 1972, p.50)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading in L1 and L2

Having many available linguistic resources, Vorhaus (1984) observed the readers, when reading in L1, are interactors who could smoothly use their own native language for developing concepts in interaction with the author's ideas. They employ their language knowledge (e.g. Structure, grammar, or words) well even if they may not understand what they are reading. In addition, they are capable of using strategies like background knowledge to deal with what is to them at first incomprehensible.

L2 readers, however, are limited by their knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language, and must struggle to understand the content. In order to perceive the author's ideas explicitly, readers often regard the vocabulary as the most important component of the language, as well as the turning point of access to comprehension. Seliger found, therefore, readers often separate the whole content into isolated pieces, and focus their attention on the individual word-units.

The desire to know every word in terms of its dictionary meaning usually leads the students to view reading in the new language as a process of decoding word by word. Obviously, when reading in L1, the readers can more easily consider the content as a whole. Even if they encounter unfamiliar words, they skip to the next, and try to finish the reading. Conversely, reading in L2, readers automatically separate the whole article into fragment sentences or words, and they, thereby,

acquire an isolated, divided meaning, lack of a continuity, which is so-called “short-term memory” (Eskey, 1986, p.10). In this situation, comprehension is not clear because readers just acquire a series of discrete meanings, and they have to reread in order to connect all of the individual meanings into a whole. Short-term memory can cause a crisis in the reading comprehension process.

Comprehension and Reading Comprehension:

Comprehension depends on knowledge. Comprehension as defined by Bernhardt (1987), is the process of relating new, or incoming information to information already stored in the memory (background knowledge). Obviously, during the process of reading, readers must not only look at words on the pages (bottom-up processing), but also activate background knowledge (top-down processing), and then build all the elements into comprehension (Rumelhart, 1980). Furthermore, according to Bernhardt’s organization, reading comprehension can be defined as,

(1) is topic-dependent (2) involves making appropriate decisions from the beginning of a text (3) involves the selection of critical features for processing (4) involves the rapid processing of text (5) involves meta-cognitive awareness of the comprehension process.

The first two items above are so-called “schemata” (background knowledge). The third item involves scanning, which is looking for information in the text. The fourth item is also called skimming, which is reading quickly for general idea. As far as the third and the fourth parts (new information on the pages) are concerned, slow speeds in reading seem to imply limited use of them, and also limited comprehension. A study revealed that readers, who are unsuccessful, usually make more eye contact per line, rather spending more time at each fixation (Tullius, 1971). Similarly, Smith (1971) argued that the visual system is made up of three features:

- (1) The brain does not see everything that is in front of the eyes
- (2) The brain does not see anything that is in front of the eyes immediately.
- (3) The brain does not receive information from the eyes

So, reading must be “fast, selective and dependent on non-visual information”. To be more specific, reading related to both background knowledge and rate development could result in better comprehension. Hosenfeld (1977) dealt with what successful and unsuccessful students do to assign meaning to printed texts. Successful readers keep the meaning of the passage in mind, reading in broad phrases, and skipping nonessential words; the readers guess the meaning of new words from the context. In contrast, unsuccessful readers lose the meaning of sentences as soon as they decode them. They read word-by-word in short phrases, rarely skipping nonessential words, and turn to the glossary in order to find the meaning of new words.

Methods of data collection

One of the studies on the natural process of reading was conducted by Rumelhart (1980). He proposed an aspect of top-down and bottom-up is that both should be occurring concurrently in order to result in the best comprehension. Comprehending words, sentences, or even entire texts involves more than just relying on one’s linguistic knowledge. In terms of Rumelhart’s hypothesis on the nature of the reading process, I used a survey as an instrument. A questionnaire was randomly distributed to 13 students of Vietnamese Studies faculty at HUE, and at the age of 18 through 20. All of them have studied English for 6 years.

A five - point scale questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this study where students were presented with stated comprehension difficulties (e.g. unknown words) and asked to grade their difficulty according to the agreement scale (strongly agree - strongly disagree). The questionnaire was written in Vietnamese, the students’s L1. And then they were asked to circle the past experience in English reading when they were high school students. The purpose of the two questionnaire were to figure out what reading comprehension problems students encounter and how teachers teach English reading, as well as how students read in English.

Result

The results of the first questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively (to measure the extent to which students agree/disagree with the stated sources comprehension difficulties) and qualitatively (to reveal other sources of reading difficulties reported by the students)

The following table indicates the degrees of difficulty of all seven presented in the questionnaire as scored by students.

Areas of difficulties	VD	QD	D	NVD	Score
	4	3	2	1	
Unknown words	4	5	3	1	38
Keeping the meaning in mind	4	4	4	1	37
Background knowledge	2	3	3	5	31
Organizational structure	1	3	3	6	25
Tenses	2	3	5	3	30
Linking words	1	2	4	6	24
Pronouns	0	1	5	7	20

It is clear from the above figure that vocabulary is perceived as the greatest difficulty. This is consistent with findings of Gunning, 2002. Knowledge of vocabulary is very important for helping students to understand the complex materials such as textbooks which contain many concepts and technical vocabulary (Hayes, 1991; Kinzer, & Leu, 1995). Other comprehension difficulties were also reported such as style of writing, and then the style of writing, difficult in getting the main idea and making inference, and not given enough time for reading.

The results of the second questionnaires indicated that all the subjects agreed that reading, of the four language skills, played the most important role in their past experience at high school. Now, they think all of the four language skills are equally crucial. However, 9 out of 13 subjects still regarded reading as the most valuable skill in their future. No matter how the subjects liked or disliked English lessons, over *half of them* considered that the teacher's instruction and the

materials were the two significant factors, which influenced their motivation. As far as the teacher's instruction in class was concerned, only **5 mentioned** "understanding from the context". Surprisingly, 3 out of the 5 people thought that techniques of instruction improved their English reading abilities a lot. In contrast, the other 8 subject felt that their comprehension abilities improved only a little bit, or even not at all. As to the supplementary, 6 people disliked their materials, and the main reason was they were not interested in the content. There were 7 persons who liked handouts, and 6 out of the 7 considered the handout reading enriching their knowledge. The big problems students encountered in reading were "insufficient vocabulary" and "need to reread"

Questions 10 through 12 are a series of comparative questions about the differences that students reading techniques in their native language as opposed to those used when students read in English. These results obviously suggested that using the "guess from the context through background knowledge" skill resulted in better comprehension whether in Vietnamese or English. It was more successful than "reading each word carefully and slowly, and translated it" or "consult a dictionary immediately while meeting unfamiliar words".

DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

My findings proved and supported for Rumelhart's hypothesis. The results of the questionnaire were consistent with previous research by Hosenfeld (1977), dealing with what successful and unsuccessful students do to assign to printed texts. By means of the surveys, we can easily figure out that our class students do encounter several degrees of difficulty in reading comprehension.

Results of this survey showed that the two most serious problems preventing the students' comprehension from English reading were : (1) insufficient vocabulary and (2) the need to reread. Ironically, most English teachers spent a large amount of class time explaining vocabulary. Meanwhile, most of the students' time was spent reading each word carefully, consulting a dictionary The question "how do teachers help students read well?" needs to be addressed. First of all, it may be that

doing much reading helps students in building knowledge of vocabulary by exposing the students more efficiently, and directly to read vocabulary. However, beware not encouraging students use of a dictionary while reading but encouraging them to guess. Teachers should tell students that it is an unsuccessful reader who stops at each unfamiliar word, looking it up in the dictionary right away in order to understand the context. They should be told to try to finish an article by continuously reading with as little hesitation as possible in order to try to build up their conscious confidence without a dictionary. Furthermore, the teachers should encourage students to use “schemata”, guessing at unfamiliar vocabulary by using clues from the context. According to the results of the survey, students should be aware that this method “guess from the context through background knowledge” could efficiently improve their reading comprehension skills because this reading strategy facilitate reading for meaning. The careful reader will soon learn to understand the content, to decipher vocabulary meanings, and avoid rereading. This method will produce skilled readers, who comprehend more quickly, and avoid hours of rereading.

The importance of materials should be taken into account in order to design a syllabus. People who read, read for intellectual profit, or for pleasure believe that the content of whatever they have read will be useful to them, or will give them the special pleasure that comes from the experience of reading literature, or will help them understand the world.

Judging from the surveys, 7 out of 13 people liked *them* because they felt *the materials* used could enrich their knowledge. For this research, the supplementary materials teachers hand out and use had better relate to other academic, and non-academic fields. Also these materials must take into account the real needs and desires of learners. 6 people did not like the teacher’s handout, and 4 of them felt that all of the materials they had been assigned to use were not interesting at all. What will interest students enough to keep them reading is not always easy to know, but if interesting materials can be found, students will continue to read on

their own. Thus, the vital concern of English teachers should be to find a body of materials that students might find interesting to read, and then to do everything possible to relate those materials to the students' real concerns and needs. How about trying some authentic materials in class! If students encounter unfamiliar context, teachers could give learners some background knowledge to facilitate their recognition. Also, through using authentic materials, teachers can introduce some culture issues into learners' lives. Reading is not only for the language but for the real world.

REFERENCES

1. Vorhaus, Renee. Strategies for reading in a second language. *Journal of Reading* 27(5) : 412-416. 1984
2. Seliger, Herbert W. Improving reading speed and comprehension in English as a second language. *English Language Teaching* 27(1) : 48-55. 1972
3. Eskey, D. E., Dublin, F. and Grabe, W. Theoretical Foundation. Teaching second language reading for academic purpose : 3-21. Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. 1986.
4. Smith, Frank. *Understand Reading*. New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1971.
5. Bernhardt, E. B. and James, C. J. The teaching and testing of comprehension in foreign language learning. *Proficiency, Policy, and Professionalism in Foreign Language Education* : 65-81. 1987.
6. Cohen, A. C. *Language Learning*. Newbury House : Harper Collins. 1990
7. Yalden, Janice. *The Communicative Syllabus : Evaluation, Design, and Implementation*. U.K. : Prentice-Hall. 1987.
8. Yamashita, J. Mutual compensation between L1 reading ability and L2 language proficiency in L2 reading comprehension. *Journal in Reading* 25(1) : 81-95. 2002.

9. Laufer, B. and Yano, Y. Understanding unfamiliar words in a text : do L2 learners understand how much they don't understand? Reading in a Foreign Language 13(2) : 549-66. 2001.
10. Yu Shu. Acquiring vocabulary through a context-based approach. Forum 9(1) : 2001.