

A SURVEY ON TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH READING SKILL IN A HIGH-QUALITY CLASS

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ABSTRACT

In the current context of global integration, mastering a common language for international communication has been of great importance to non-English speakers. In Vietnam, reading is perhaps the most used skill, which Vietnamese learners of English will be working with after leaving their colleges or universities. This is also true to the students from the high-quality class at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA). It is necessary for them to read effectively and efficiently in English because they will be offered a lot of interesting information as well as a variety of language expressions and structures, which are very useful for developing their other skills. However, there are some limitations in the effectiveness of the teaching and learning reading skill. This problem perhaps is due to a certain number of internal and external factors. For this reason, the researchers intended to investigate the attitude of students towards teaching and learning reading skill, their difficulties in learning reading comprehension and types of strategies applied by teachers to teach students. Consequently, some implications to improve learning and teaching English reading skill to the students can be proposed. The data collection instruments are two sets of questionnaires for 39 first-year non-English majored students and lecturers of the high-quality class at TUEBA. The research findings indicate that non-English majored students faced both internal and external difficulties. Based on the study results, the researchers proposed some possible measures to handle such challenges for non-English majored students in the high-quality class at TUEBA.

Keyword: reading skills, non-English majored students, difficulties, high-quality class

1. INTRODUCTION

With the recently rapid globalization, English reading proficiency is considered as not only the achievement but also the requirement for non-English learners to integrate in international communication. As a result, most Vietnamese universities and educational institutions have given priority to the improvement of learner's second language competence, which is proven in the adaptation of teaching curriculum and activities in classroom. However, numerous non-English majored students, especially those who are currently in their first year high-quality class at TUEBA, are still facing challenges to achieve their desired reading skills due to a range of both internal and external factors.

Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA) is a member of Thai Nguyen University, a regional educational institution in the North of Vietnam. TUEBA was set up in 2004 with various training majors, such as accounting, tourism, business administration and banking. Most of non-English majored students at TUEBA come from rural areas in the North of Vietnam. By the time they enter the university, they have experienced from 3 to 7 years learning English in primary schools. However, some of them have learnt other foreign languages such as Chinese or French so their English proficiency and learning styles were varied. In recent years, with the determination of the university's leaders, the teaching and learning English have been put great emphasis on. The introduction of high-quality training program is one example. Students of this class are required to study English throughout their first year and achieve level B1 (the third level of English in the Common European Framework of Reference) as an English learning outcome to graduate from university.

With this situation, the researchers wish to investigate students' learning English reading skill in the high-quality at TUEBA and give some implications to improve learning and teaching English reading skill for the students and teachers. Therefore, three following questions are going to be addressed in this study:

1. What is the attitude of students towards reading skill currently?
2. What are students' difficulties in learning reading skill?
3. What teaching strategies should be used by the teachers in the reading lessons?

Hopefully, this study can be useful for both teachers and students at TUEBA as well as the researchers with interest in this field. If this study is completed successfully, it will provide a picture of teaching and learning reading skill to the students in the high-quality class. Through the findings of the study, the researchers will point out some implications to enhance the effectiveness of these activities. Besides, this study can offer various and useful references for further studies. It can also be an idea that attracts other researchers to go further.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The nature of reading comprehension

It is undeniable that reading comprehension takes an important part in teaching and learning a foreign language. As a result, it is very essential to have a deep understanding about the nature of reading because the knowledge teachers gain about it will have a great influence on what they teach in the class. According to Grellet (1981, p3): "reading comprehension or understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible". From the point of view of authors, reading comprehension is an activity to aim at decoding the meaning of word combination in the text in the most efficient way.

Reading comprehension is best described as an understanding between the author and the reader. The emphasis is on the reader's understanding of the printed page based on his individual unique background of experience. Reading is much more than just pronouncing words correctly or simply what the author intends. It is the process whereby the printed pages stimulate ideas, experiences and responses that are unique to an individual.

2.2 Features of an effective reading lesson

To have a successful reading lesson, it is advisable to know the characteristics of an effective reading comprehension lesson. According to Ur (1996, p.148), an effective reading lesson should contain the following points:

- The language of the text is comprehensible to the learners. It is not too difficult or too easy.
- The content of the text is accessible to the learners; they know enough about it in order to apply their own background knowledge.
- The reading process is fairly fast: mainly because the reader has automatized recognition of common combinations, and does not waste time working out each word or groups of words.
- The reader concentrates on the significance and skims the rest. He does not have to pay the same amount of attention to all parts of text.
- The reader takes incomprehensible vocabulary in his or her stride: guess its meaning from the surrounding text, or ignore it.
- The reader can think ahead, hypothesize, and predict what will be next.
- The reader can use his background information for understanding the text.
- The reader is motivated to read by an interesting context or a challenging task.
- The reader has a clear purpose in reading.
- The reader uses different strategies for all texts.

In general, all the features of an efficient reading lesson are equally important. In teaching reading comprehension, teachers should be aware of his or her teaching roles and take these characteristics into consideration and apply them flexibly.

2.3 Reading problems and solutions

According to Nuttall (1982), when dealing with texts, students often have difficulties in establishing the plain sense of the text, dealing with vocabulary and syntax and have difficulties with the conceptual content of texts, particularly

if the topic is unfamiliar or if writers and readers are from different cultures. The solutions below are suggested by Marianne (2001).

Language problems

- Pre-teach vocabulary: Students can be provided with meaning and usage of new or difficult vocabulary that appears in the text.
- Extensive reading: Students read at length, often for pleasure and in a leisure way. That is the best way for students to develop automaticity.

Topic problems

- Choose the right topic: It is wise to choose topics which are appropriate with all students because if they are not interested in a topic or if the topic is unfamiliar with them, the students may be reluctant to engage fully in the followed activities.
- Create interest: Unfamiliar topics can cause problems in reading but they can be improved if teachers succeed in creating interest in reading lessons. They can get students engaged by talking about the topic, showing a picture for prediction, having them to look at the headlines before reading, etc.
- Activate schemata: The reading process becomes easier if students can relate the topic to what they already know in their real life.

Comprehension task problems

- Differentiate testing and teaching: The best kind of tasks are those which raise students' expectation, help them tease out the meaning of text whereas tests are used to explore students and their weakness, therefore, teachers should base on these purposes to choose suitable activities in reading lessons.
- Appropriate challenge: When asking students to read, it is better if texts and tasks are either far too easy or far too difficult. Getting the level right depends on the right match between text and tasks.

Negative expectation

- When students have a low expectation of reading, it will be the teacher's job to persuade them to change these negative expectations into realistic optimism.
- Manufacturing success: By getting the level of challenge right (in terms of language, text and tasks) or giving students a clear and achievable purpose.
- Agree on a purpose: It is important for teachers and students to agree on both general and specific purposes for reading. If the students know what they are reading for, they can choose how to deal with the text.

2.4 Stages of a reading lesson

A reading lesson can be divided into three stages which are pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stage. Each of these stages carries its own features and purposes and requires different techniques and strategies (William, 1984, p.37).

Pre-reading stage

In a reading lesson, the pre-reading stage creates motivation and positive attitude towards the reading text for students. According to Williams (1984, p.37), this stage happens to introduce and arouse interest in the topic; motivate learners by giving a reason for reading and provide some language preparation for the text.

General speaking, this stage is necessary to set a good preparation for students, provide them the sense of what they are going to do in their reading lesson.

While-reading stage

Williams (1984, p.38) pointed out that the aims of the while reading is to help to understand the writer's purpose; to help to understand the text structure and to clarify the text.

There are various activities that teachers can choose for his students in this stage, such as skimming for the gist, scanning for specific information, recognizing the organization of a text or understanding the relation between sentences and clauses, etc. (Mathews, Spratt & Dangerfield, 1999, p.67).

Post-reading stage

In William's opinions (1984, p.39), the post-reading stage aims at consolidating or reflecting upon what has been read and relating the text to the learners' own knowledge interest or views. After completing the tasks in the previous stage, students may be asked to discuss the text's main points, retell or rewrite the stories.

In summary, each of the reading stages carries its own aims and activities. It is very effective if these three stages are combined flexibly and appropriately for an efficient reading lesson.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Subject of the study

This survey was conducted with the participation of 39 students of whom 13 were male and 26 were female and 2 teachers.

- These 39 first-year students were from the high-quality class of K15 at TUEBA. By the time they enter the university, they have experienced from 3 to 7 years learning English in primary schools. However, the proficiency of reading skills among this group is relatively low.
- The second group of participants are two teachers who are currently in charge of teaching reading skill in the first and the second semester. They are both the teachers of the Division of English, TUEBA. They have a good knowledge of English and have been teaching English, especially reading skill for a long time.

3.2 Data collection instruments

To obtain the information for the study, the researchers used two sets of instruments.

A questionnaire completed by the students

The first part of the questionnaire was about the students' demographic information which included the students' gender, age, the number of years they had been learning English. The second part was designed to elicit the students' opinions about the reading subject, their attitudes towards reading English, current reading materials in class and difficulties they often face in learning reading skill.

A questionnaire completed by the teachers

The survey questionnaire completed by the teachers included questions about what they had done to teach their students to read, specifically concerning their opinions about reading comprehension skill, textbook, activities and techniques they have been using to teach students in their reading lessons.

3.3 Data collection procedure

First, all the questions for the teachers and students were designed concerning some of the important issues in the English reading class.

Secondly, the author piloted the questionnaires by having some teachers and students answer them to examine whether they help to elicit the kind of intended data. Basing on the feedbacks from these students and teachers, these inappropriate or ambiguous questions were revised to omit or change to the respondents and therefore improve the quality of the data obtained.

Finally, the collected data was analyzed quantitatively. The results were presented in the forms of tables for clear analysis and comparison.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Attitudes: The data analysis revealed that all of the teachers and a majority of the students have positive attitudes to teaching and developing reading skill. None of them denies the necessity of teaching and learning this skill in the first year at university because they all have clear purposes for this.

Table 1: The importance of developing reading skill to the first year students

The importance of developing reading skill to the first-year students	Students' choice (%)	Teachers' choice (%)
a) very important	14	100
b) important	86	0
c) not very important	0	0
d) not important at all	0	0

It is clear that none of the participants thought reading comprehension in general and learning reading in the first year at university was not very important and not important at all. This was due to the fact that a majority of the students who are chosen to join into the high quality classes have already understood the importance of learning English. This is very convenient for teachers to teach in this class.

Difficulties in reading lessons: Many students face to difficulties related to reading texts, ranging from the limited capacity of vocabulary, grammatical structure to the topics and the comprehension tasks. Some reading topics and given reading exercises challenge their students.

Table 2: Frequency of difficulties

Frequency of difficulties	Often		Sometimes		Never	
	Students' choice (%)	Teachers' choice (%)	Students' choice (%)	Teachers' choice (%)	Students' choice (%)	Teachers' choice (%)
A. There are many new words in the text.	89.7	100	10.3	0	0	0
B. Grammatical structures are difficult.	64.1	50.0	30.8	50.0	5.1	0
C. The texts often have strange topics.	20.5	50.0	48.7	50.0	30.8	0
D. The reading exercises are difficult to complete.	69.2	0	28.3	100	2.5	0

As can be seen from the table, students had the most difficulties with new words. This is agreed by 100% of the teachers. In addition, more than half of the participants reported that they often found the grammatical structures and reading exercises difficult to complete. Significantly, 69.2% of the students in comparison with no teachers complained that the comprehension reading exercises are often difficult. Moreover, whereas 30.8 % of the students said that they did not have difficulty with the topic of the text, 50 % of the teachers thought their students did. This fact is unbeneficial to the students' reading success because the teachers cannot help them to overcome the difficulties about which they do not know.

Teaching strategies: In fact, three stages of a reading lesson (pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading) are carried out in reading classes. Some of the teachers applied effective strategies such as pre-teaching vocabulary, skimming or scanning with different activities and different kinds of comprehension exercises which help their students exploit the text successfully.

Besides, to make the reading lessons more effective, pair work/group work has been used more frequently by most of the teachers. Most of the students also have strong awareness of these benefits.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of giving possible solutions to improve the situation of teaching reading skill to the first-year students in the high-quality class at TUEBA. All the suggestions were based on both theoretical and practical bases.

The theoretical basis or the literature review of the study mentioned a number of issues relating to English reading comprehension, difficulties of students when learning reading skill and teaching English reading comprehension.

The practical basis was the data collected from the survey on the teaching of reading skills to the first-year students in the high-quality class at TUEBA. By using survey questionnaires for both students and teachers, the researchers wished to find out the difficulties of students when learning reading skill and strategies applied by teachers to teach reading skill.

From the findings of the survey, some solutions were suggested to improve teaching and learning reading skill. The researchers hope that with these solutions the teaching and learning reading skill for the first year students in the high-quality class in TUEBA will be improved.

5.2 Recommendation

The findings of the result convey the special need to improve the teaching and learning reading skill to the first year students from the high-quality class. In this context, the challenge for the teachers is to find solutions to attract students to the classroom activities and verify their teaching techniques to help their students understand the text easier and to develop the student's reading skill. Through the survey, the researchers propose some suggestions for the remaining problems.

5.2.1 Improving student's participation in classroom activities

Obviously, student's participation makes a great contribution to the success of any lesson so if the teachers encourage their students to join in the classroom activities, they can solve the problems of some student's negative attitude towards reading skills. There are some suggestions for that.

Clarifying learning goals to the students

Teachers should clarify learning goals to their students right from the beginning because they will affect their ways of learning. It is necessary for the teachers to fully understand their purposes in teaching and let the students know about these purposes right from the beginning of the term and refer to them frequently. In each reading lesson, the students should be known clearly what they are going to learn in the lesson, why they need to learn and how they learn all these things.

Making use of pair/group work

It is clear that, using pair/group work is an excellent way to increase participation of the shy students into the discussion. The students will have chance to have some independent thinking and express their ideas in their group. Through the group activities, the relationship between students and students, students and teachers will be improved.

Making use of modern technology in teaching

These days, electric lectures in the form of PowerPoint are commonly used in many universities because it can help to save time and hold student attention through the use of video, graphics and music, etc. Power point is also useful in giving information or clear instructions to the entire class in the while or post reading stage.

5.2.2 Improving teaching techniques

From the survey, we can see the importance of improving the teacher's techniques in teaching reading to develop the student's reading skill. For this purpose, ways of adjusting teaching time and efforts in addition to various activities in the three reading stages (before, while and post reading) will be suggested.

Adjusting teaching time and efforts

Findings from the survey shows that the teachers have carried out three stages of a reading lesson but most of the time seems to be spent to the while reading stage whereas activities before and after reading are also useful for reading success. Therefore, in a reading lesson time should be balanced for the activities of all the three reading stages for a more successful lesson.

Varying strategies in three stages of reading lessons

In fact, all the reading texts in the course book are included with various activities for three stages of reading. Therefore, teachers should make use of these activities, and sometimes apart from available things in the textbook, they should apply other activities to understand the text more.

The researchers have suggested a number of activities in the reading stages presented in this chapter with the hope to facilitate the students to read better. The implementation of these suggestions will come to success easier if there is support from the university. To be more specific, the teachers should be given chance to take part in teaching training courses more frequently or enroll to international workshops to develop their profession and update changes in foreign language teaching.

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