# IMPROVING READING SKILLS FOR SECOND-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT DONG THAP UNIVERSITY

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Researchers have found that teaching reading strategies is the key element in developing student's comprehension. Learning reading skill plays a vital role to English major students at Dong Thap University since it has been one of the compulsory requirements for them to get graduation certificate. The study is an action research applied to a number of 20 students in an intermediate level intergrated skills course (including 5 ethnic minority students). The main questions of the study are what difficulties students have in learning reading skills? And what strategies should be applied to improve this skill? The results of the study indicate that student encoutered many problems in studying reading skills like lack of knowledge and practice in reading strategies and some solutions have been proposed such as COR Framework and Reading Comprehension Framework.

***Keywords:*** *Framework; Dong Thap University; Reading skills; Strategies; Students.*

## 1. Introduction

Learning reading skills has played a vital role to English major students at Dong Thap University because this is an important requirement for students to get certificate of graduation. Being good at reading comprehension also helps students improve other English's skills and support other comprehension, such as reading articles, newspapers, or consulting research to get information and background knowledge.

Students have been encouraged and instructed studying reading skills since they were freshman at Dong Thap University because reading is one of the important and essential skills in studying English, which needs a long process of investment and pratice from the students and is one of the key factors to achieve succesful outcomes in university. Nevertheless, many students haven't had good awareness on the importance of learning reading. On the other hand, most of them meet difficulties in reading for gists and for detail information because they do not know how to read effectively and appropriately. Besides, students lack vocabulary and grammatical structures to deal with a reading passage in particular and to reading tests in general. Especially, they lack effective strategies to improve their reading comprehension.

The research project aims to investigate the difficulties students have in the process of learning reading skills and to suggest some effective strategies for improving reading comprehension for second year English major students at Dong Thap University. Also, interviewing 10 students (including 5 ethnic minority students) will be conducted to find their perceptions about skimming and scanning, two typical and major techniques in reading. Two research questions are arisen: 1) What difficulties students have in learning reading skills? and 2) What strategies should be applied to improve students' reading skills?

## 2. Literature review

According to the research of Alvermann & Earle (2003), reading comprehension is the basis and foundation for learning at all educational level. Lipka & Siegel (2011) indicates that reading skills is a complex progress that relating to readers, the reading context and reader's background knowledge. They also states that reading comprehension is the primary goal of reading and students can be failed at learning courses if they fail in the comprehension ability. Moreover, basing on the research of National Reading Panel (2000) and Snow (2011), reading comprehension is one of the critical skills in daily lives, but many people are unsuccessful in obtaining and getting good competence on it. They states that comprehensing text is quite difficult and challenging because it relates many aspects, such as inference, word background resources, lexical access…Many readers may encounter many difficulties in reading texts if they lack knowledge and vocabulary resources related to certain topics.

Perfetti & Hart (2001) states that students meet many difficulties in lexical skills with low level like vocabulary resources and words for reading proficiency, lexical skills with sentence level like grammatical structure competence and lexical skills with high level like comprehension and inference. Besides, Duke and Pearson (2001) illustrates that there are seven main factors that affect people's competence in reading comprehension: the purposes or motivation, knowledge on vocabulary, understanding and strategies's use employed by effective readers, text's nature, genre's types and the time readers spent for reading.

Martha (1972) demonstrates that skimming and scanning are indispensable skills for students to deal with long and complex reading texts, and they recommends teachers should pay much time to guide students on how to use these techniques to improve reading comprehension. She conducted a study on students' use of skimming and scanning in reading comprehension and found that most students denied or paid little attention to using skimming and scanning when they deal with reading passages. As a results, most of them faced many problems in reading and got low grades in doing reading exercises. It is clearly seen that students do not have good background knowledge and perception on using these techniques and this impacts negatively to their learning results.

Therefore, it is important to find efficient reading strategies to help students improve reading comprehension and get better achievements in learning at university. Basing on the research of National Reading Panel (2000), the main objective of research on reading comprehension is finding effective reading strategies to enhance student's comprehension competence. They illustrate significant enhancement in reading comprehension for language groups in low and pre-intermediate level, these improvements are resulted from applying Reciprocal Teaching method, one of the most effective strategies to increase reading competence. They emphasizes that finding strategies for reading skills is necessary for students at all educational level.

Gina (2010) conducted a reading comprehension program that facilitate minority adults from disadvantage background of education. During the course, students were recommmended and instructed variety of effective reading strategies, and they were asked to use these strategies in reading passages and longer texts. The results were fantastic because most students have increased vocabulary knowledge, critical thinking as well as improve reading comprehension. In this research, the researcher will suggest some strategies for reading skills for university students which taken from this program. These will develop both students' background knowledege and raise their awareness in learning reading skills.

Oxford (1990) lists out 12 key features of language learning strategies which can be helpful for teachers in teaching's progress, these features can be considered as main factors affecting to the reading strategies' investigation. Ellis (1994) in reviewing the factors that have been found to affect strategy choice indicates to beliefs of learners about language learning, motivation types and goals, age, motivation strength, learner's personal background.

Barnett (1988) investigated and taught reading strategies used by French's university students, students are divided into two different groups: one group was instructed reading strategies and other group was asked to do reading tests without being instructed reading strategies. Research shown that the group was taught reading strategies have better competence in reading comprehension and spend less time in dealing with reading texts or longer text. Barnett concluded there was a correlation between students' competence and use of strategies. Schueller (1999) evaluated the impacts of reading strategies instruction on the comprehension of two different literary texts. There were 128 second-year English major students in Germany (78 females and 50 males). The findings indicated that female students have better reading comprehension than male students. Schueller states that teachers should spend more time teaching reading strategies in order to improve reading's competence for both male and female stduents.

With ethnic minority students, Cynthia (1992) indicates that limited educational opportunities, often coupled with ineffective learning strategies,

have restricted the educational attainment of many ethnic minority students, especially African-American and Hispanic female in the United States, this lead to the fact that these students seem to have negative attitude towards reading skills although they give positive feedback such as reading is relevant to our life, is a subsistence skill, facilitate self-improvement.

## 3. Research questions and methodology

### 3.1. Research method

#### 3.1.1. Research objective

The study analyses students' perceptions on skimming and scanning, two basic and significant techniques to have better understanding on how students deal with reading skills and the difficulties they usually meet in learning reading skills as well. Hence, the researcher analyses reading materials and answers from interviews to investigate reading's strategies to help students improve their reading comprehension

#### 3.1.2. Research questions

1. What difficulties students have in learning reading skills?

2. What strategies should be applied to improve student's reading skills?

### 3.2. Methodology

The researcher decided to carry out in-depth interview with students to have better understanding about their viewpoints on skimming and scanning, the two important techniques in reading skills. In addition, students' difficulties in the process of learning reading skills are also addressed so that the researcher can find out effective strategies to help them overcome the problems and have better methods in learning reading comprehension. Levi (2010) carried out the research about students' problems in reading comprehension and he also conducted a survey to investigate the difficulties students may deal with in learning reading skills. The researcher also conducts interview with lecturers to get information on difficulties they have had in the process of teaching this skill. Besides, their viewpoints on how students use skimming and scanning are pointed out. The lecturers are also asked to suggest some strategies to improve students' reading competence.

The data will be divided into three main parts: students' interview, lecturers' interview and students' survey. These data will be analyzed to answer two main research questions: 1) What difficulties students have in learning reading skills? 2) What strategies should be applied to improve student's reading skill?

### 3.3. Data collection

#### 3.3.1. Data collection instruments

a. The interview

The interview in this study includes seven questions with three questions for students and four questions for lecturers. The researcher will execute in-depth interviews with students who are in different learning background. These interviews will be recorded to analyze. These are the questions researcher used to ask students:

1: What do you know about skimming and scanning? Do you usually use these techniques in reading?

2: Have you ever met difficulties in reading texts? If Yes, what do you do to solve this problem?

3: What difficulties do you have in learning reading skills?

The researcher also conducts the interview with two lecturers in order to have broader view about the reality of learning reading among students, students' perception in using skimming and scanning, the problems they usually encounter in learning reading skills. In addition, lecturers are suggested to give some strategies or solutions to help students improve their reading comprehension.

The interview questions for teachers are listed below

1: What problems do you have in teaching reading skills?

2: Do you think all students have good background knowledge about skimming and scanning? Why/ Why not?

3: What difficulties do students usually have in reading skills from your teaching experience?

4: Can you suggest some strategies/ solutions to improve their reading skills?

b. Survey

The researcher designs 15 question-survey to investigate techniques students use in dealing with reading texts. Therefore, suggesting some useful and effective techniques to improve students' reading competence. They will choose from 1 to 5 in accordance with the frequency of using these techniques. The researcher will take pre-reading pratice before giving students survey, that means to help students understand clearly the contents of the sentences in the survey.

**Table 1.** A 15 question-survey
5=ALWAYS, 4=USUALLY, 3=SOMETIMES, 2=RARELY, 1=NEVER.

| # | Statements | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I skim reading texts, then read again and try to read carefully. | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | I read carefully to get specific and detail information. | | | | | |
| 3 | I try to investigate new ideas based on the knowledge I have | | | | | |
| 4 | I try to guess the meaning of difficult words or phrases used in context | | | | | |
| 5 | I highlight important information in the text to get better understanding on the texts | | | | | |
| 6 | When I deal with difficult text, I try to read many times to have good answer | | | | | |
| 7 | After reading a text, I try to take notes the main ideas | | | | | |
| 8 | I use reference materials such as glossaries/ dictionaries to understand the text better. | | | | | |
| 9 | When reading, I try to stay focused on text and skip unimportant parts. | | | | | |
| 10 | After I read, I check all the information to guarantee my answer are corrects | | | | | |
| 11 | I work with my classmates to solve reading problems. | | | | | |
| 12 | I ask my teacher to paraphrase/explain something that is not clear or does not make sense to me. | | | | | |
| 13 | I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about reading texts. | | | | | |
| 14 | I try to consult English newspaper and books to read effectively | | | | | |
| 15 | I spend much time a day to read information on Internet in variety aspects to have more knowledge and improve my reading competence | | | | | |

c. Material analysis

The researcher uses materials from books and Internet to get background knowledge on reading comprehension as well as investigate effective strategies to support the research questions. Besides, analyzing many documents relate to reading skills will also be a good method to enhance teaching's background knowledge.

*3.3.2. The participants of the study*

The particpants of the study are 20 second-year English major students of Foreign Languages Faculty at Dong Thap University, Vietnam. The subject consists of ten students in class Bachelor of Arts in English Education 19 (DHSANH19), five students in class Bachelor of Arts in English Language 19 (ĐHANH19A) and five students in class Bachelor of Arts in English Business (DHTAKD19). Among them, there are five students who come from Khme and Cham areas in Ninh Thuan and Tra Vinh provinces. The reason why I choose these ethnic minority students for my research is because I want to find out if they have the same difficulties in learning reading skills with other students, so that I can provide them some appropriate strategies. All of them are twenty years old. They have two reading classes per week (each class takes 50 minutes); and their reading class lasts 8 weeks in total.

Also, the participants of the study are two lecturers who are teaching reading skills at Dong Thap University. The female lecturer has more than twenty-year experience in teaching English and the male lecturer has taught English for ten years. The researcher hopes that the young lecturer will support many effective strategies relates to applying information and technology in teaching reading because he is so professional in using information and technology for teaching process.

In order to guarantee the comparable data, the researcher decides to select 20 students with different learning level. The researcher decides to conduct in-depth interview to get their perception on using skimming and scanning, the difficulties students have in learning reading skills. The researcher also asks lecturers who are teaching reading skills at Dong Thap University on problems they have in the process of teaching, their perceptions on student's background knowledge on skimming and scanning, the difficulties students may face in learning reading skills according to their teaching progress and experience. Therefore, they suggest some effective strategies that help students improve reading proficiency.

Before conducting the interview, the researcher will take some reading activities for students. For example, facilitating students to understand the

questions given. The purpose of this was to ensure that the students answer the questions completely without feeling shy or fear. Moreover, because of doing secondary research, the researcher send consent forms to students.

### 3.3. The framework for analyzing data

Daniella et al (2006) conducted a research on reading comprehension strategies basing on a framework called 4-pronged comprehension strategy framework which including Monitoring Comprehension and Reading Strategies and four significant factors which building the framework: Preparing to Read, Interpreting Words Sentences and Ideas in branches, Going Beyond the text, and Organizing, Restructuring, and Synthesizing Information in the Text (see figure 1). The framework is very necessary and vital for the researcher in the process of consulting documents and investigating strategies for reading comprehension. Danielle et al (2006) recommend that the framework should be applied in classroom in order to improve students's reading competence as well as facilitate teacher in teaching reading skills.



**Figure 1.** 4 Pronged comprehension strategy framework

Woolley (2009) suggested COR framework which allow students to be active and enhance cognitive thinking while reading and comprehending texts. This framework is based on Bloom's Taxonomy which building students' comprehension competence gradually in three main stages: Before, During and After. In Before stage, Consider, Conceptualise, Contrive are applied step by step, whereas in During stage, Overview, Organize and Observe are main activities for students. In After stage, students are asked to Review, Relate and Revise the texts or passages that they have done in the previous stages to develop metacognitive thinking and memorising ability (see table 1).

**Table 2.** COR Framework

| BEFORE | DURING | AFTER |
|---|---|---|
| Consider (factual)<br>• Skim, scan, visualise | Overview<br>• Gist, compare and contrast | Review (factual)<br>• Summarise, visualise, graphic organiser |
| Conceptualise (conceptual)<br>• Discuss: vocabulary and genre | Organise<br>• Clarify, question, elaborate | Relate (conceptual)<br>• Extend, relate, create |
| Contrive (metacognitive)<br>• Negotiate, predict, set goals | Observe<br>• Monitor goals: process and product | Revise (metacognitive) |

In 2001, Wren from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) designed the framework for reading comprehension. The framework provides a basic foundation that allows educators and teachers access valuable resources relating to reading's background competence. Wren also consulted opinions and perspectives from many sciencs and educators who had many years experience in teaching and conducting scientific research to design the framework which is the solid foundation for teaching and learning reading skills. The main features of the framework are language comprehension and decoding skills and they have mutual relation which develop students' cognitive thinking and improve competence in reading skills. (see figure 2)

The researcher will mainly base on the framework of Woolley, Danielle et al and Wren to give appropriate questions for teachers and students to find their perceptions on reading's difficulties and strategies for teaching and learning' process. Besides, The researcher will design a survey to investigate the factors affect to students' learning reading skills base on the framework of Wren. These frameworks are also main foundation for analyzing the data which collected from teachers and students
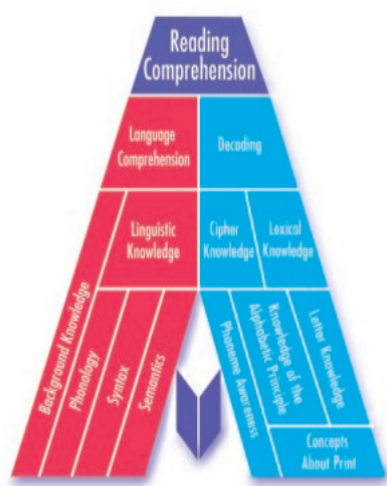


**Figure 2.** Reading Comprehension Framework

### 4. Result and discussion

**Table 3.** Results of the survey

| # | Statements | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I skim reading texts, then read again and try to read carefully. | 12 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 2 | I read carefully to get specific and detail information. | 7 | 6 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 | I try to investigate new ideas based on the knowledge I have | 0 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 5 |
| 4 | I try to guess the meaning of difficult words or phrases used in context | 5 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 0 |
| 5 | I highlight important information in the text to get better understanding on the texts | 16 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6 | When I deal with difficult text, I try to read many times to have good answer | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 0 |
| 7 | After reading a text, I try to take notes the main ideas | 0 | 0 | 11 | 5 | 4 |
| 8 | I use reference materials such as glossaries/dictionaries to understand the text better. | 5 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 0 |
| 9 | When reading, I try to stay focused on text and skip unimportant parts. | 1 | 6 | 7 | 3 | 3 |
| 10 | After I read, I check all the information to guarantee my answer are corrects | 0 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 2 |
| 11 | I work with my classmates to solve reading problems. | 14 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 12 | I ask my teacher to paraphrase/explain something that is not clear or does not make sense to me. | 4 | 4 | 8 | 4 | 0 |
| 13 | I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about reading texts. | 15 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 14 | I try to consult English newspaper and books to read effectively | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 0 |
| 15 | I spend much time a day to read information on Internet in variety aspects to have more knowledge and improve my reading competence | 5 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 0 |

The survey illustrates that students have applied some techniques in reading passages, most of them try to skim reading the text to find out the specific and general information. Besides, most students also highlight important information to get better understanding about the contents and organization of the reading passages. Also, students use reference materials such as glossaries/ dictionary to understand the text better. These are essential

techniques that students should use in reading because they can help students locate and find out information effectively and scientifically.

However, it is clear that most students sometimes or rarely spend much time a day to read information on Internet in variety aspects in order to have more background knowledge and improves reading competences. Lack of specific vocabulary is also one of the most significant difficulties students have when dealing with the reading texts according to the interview. More than half of students spend little time or rarely consult English newspaper and books to read effectively. In fact, when being asked, the lecturers agreed that students lack vocabulary and specialized knowledge in variety of fields, this lead to the fact that students get low results when dealing with the academic topics such as: technology, environment, science, ocean life or planets, etc.

Another obstacle that hinders students from getting better reading capacity is the lack of effective reading techniques. We can see clearly from the survey that most students occasionally or even never try to guess the meanings of words or phrases used in context, and they don't take notes the main ideas after reading the text. These explains for the fact that students mainly dependant on dictionary and technological devices to look up words meaning, and rarely apply guessing meaning words/ phrases in context when they encounter a hard reading text. On the other hand, more than half of students haven't asked teachers to paraphrase or explain something that is not clear or does not make sense to them, this shows students shyness and inactive in learning.

Especially, when being asked about the difficulties ethnic minority students meet in study and deal with reading skills. All lecturers demonstrate that these students lack necessary techniques and useful materials for learning because they mostly come from rural areas and lack of learning conditions. These students even had a lot of problems studying reading when they were freshman due to the lack of effective learning methods and appropriate reading techniques for different types of reading texts.

In order to improve reading skills for second year English major students, I have conducted some synthesis materials to investigate appropriate strategies for learning reading. According to Kucukoglu (2013), there are 6 strategies that learners can use to improve reading comprehension, namely: predicting, visualizing, making connections, summarizing, questioning and inferring. She also suggested that teachers should give instructions of these strategies to help students have general knowledge and be more confident when using these techniques. McNamara

(2009) suggested some strategies with specific examples, including comprehension monitoring, paraphrasing, elaboration, using logic, prediction, and bridging inference. *Comprehension monitoring* is the process of being aware of understanding. In effect, the process of comprehension monitoring falls out of using effective reading strategies because to use a strategy the readers must be at least somewhat aware of their level of understanding. *Paraphrasing* is the process of restating the text in different words, or in the reader's own words. It doesn't go beyond the information in the text, so it's not an explanation of the text. In the reading strategy literature, paraphrasing is often not recognized as an effective strategy. Paraphrases are important because they help the reader, particularly less skilled readers, to better understand the explicit information contained in the words and sentences of a text.

*Elaboration* is the process of making inferences that link what is in the text or sentence to related knowledge. For example, when reading the following sentence about corona virus, "coronavirus is spread through droplets and virus particles released into the air when an infected person breathes, talks, laughs, sings, coughs or sneezes" the reader might make the link to prior knowledge that corona virus has widely spread in different situations. Thus, the two strategies, elaboration and *logic* are quite similar, but when learning to use the strategy, logic or common sense, the reader is encouraged to use whatever knowledge is available, because readers often don't have enough domain knowledge or directly related knowledge. The *prediction* strategy involves thinking about what might be coming next in the text. For the most part, predictions are relatively uncommon and may be more useful and more common when reading narrative texts than when reading science texts. Predictions are also more common and useful when the predicted outcomes are highly constrained or highly probable. On the other hand, making *bridging inferences* is the process of linking ideas and understanding the relations between separate sentences in the text. Deep comprehension requires more than merely interpreting individual sentences; the reader must also be able to integrate individual sentence meanings into a coherent text level representation.

From the in-depth interview with lecturers, they suggest some strategies to improve student reading comprehension. Firstly, students should read articles and model essays to get the ideas, vocabulary and learn how to express ideas in English as a second language. Secondly, reading English newspaper and glossaries every day is also a good solution to improve reading skills

because students can enhance their competence in organizing ideas, increasing vocabulary and getting more knowledge. Thirdly, teachers should let students brainstorm prior to reading a text because brainstorming is a good way that helps students develops ideas and outline of passages as well. Especially, they suggest some website that help students practice reading and acquire vocabulary knowledge such as: Engbreaking.com, Go4English. com, VocabSushi, BBC Learning English and some English funny game sites for both relaxation and review knowledge, namely: ESL Game Plus, vocabulary.co.il, Britishcouncil.vn.

## 5. Conclusion

Nowadays, English is becoming more and more popular and has been one of the compulsory requirements for students, including those who get higher education and go to work. Research has revealed common difficulties that students often face, leading to unsatisfactory reading results. Therefore, we see the need to focus on improving and enhancing reading skills for students. Thereby, forming the habit of reading English and contributing to improving the quality of English teaching and learning in general and reading comprehension skills in particular at Dong Thap University will be critical to improve student learning results.

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# CẢI THIỆN KỸ NĂNG ĐỌC HIỂU
# CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM 2 CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH
# TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐỒNG THÁP

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Các nhà nghiên cứu đã phát hiện ra rằng việc dạy các chiến lược đọc là yếu tố quan trọng trong việc phát triển khả năng đọc hiểu của sinh viên. Việc học kỹ năng đọc đóng một vai trò quan trọng đối với sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp vì đây là một trong những yêu cầu bắt buộc để họ được cấp chứng chỉ tốt nghiệp. Nghiên cứu này được áp dụng cho 20 sinh viên trong một khóa học kỹ năng tích hợp trình độ trung cấp (trong đó có 5 sinh viên là người dân tộc thiểu số). Các câu hỏi chính của nghiên cứu là sinh viên gặp những khó khăn gì trong việc học kỹ năng đọc? Và những chiến lược nào nên được áp dụng để cải thiện kỹ năng này? Kết quả của nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng sinh viên đã gặp phải nhiều vấn đề trong việc học kỹ năng đọc như thiếu kiến thức và thực hành các chiến lược. Do đó, tác giả đã đề xuất một số giải pháp như sử dụng Khung COR và Khung kỹ năng đọc hiểu.

*Từ khóa:* *Chiến lược; Đại học Đồng Tháp; Khung; Kỹ năng đọc hiểu; Sinh viên.*