A Study On Reading Strategies Used By Vietnamese High School English Language Learners

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Abstract- Reading strategies have been considered one of the most valuable tools for language learners to overcome difficult reading task. This mixed method study investigated reading difficulties experienced by 75 high school English language learners at three schools in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam. The instruments used in the study consist of two questionnaires. The results reveal that most of the learners experience vocabulary understanding (87%). The second ranking challenge belongs to problems handling lengthy reading (81%). The time pressure ranks third with 78%. The findings also indicated that most of the strategies are reported using at moderate and high level, except for GRS1, GRS2, GRS3 and PSRS3 (M<2.5). The most preferred strategies include PSRS7, PSRS8, SRS1, SRS2, SRS6, SRS7, SRS9 (M>3.5).

Index Terms- Reading difficulty, reading strategies, Vietnamese high school learners

I. INTRODUCTION

A statement of the research problem

Reading in a second or foreign language (SL/FL) has been a significant component of language learning over the past few years (Zoghi, Mustapha, Rizan & Maasum, 2010). This significance has made reading education an important issue in educational policy and practice for English language learners (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). However, reading is a complex, interactive cognitive process of extracting meaning from text. In the reading process, the reader is an active participant, constructing meaning from clues in the reading text. Reading is also an individual process, which explains the different interpretations of different readers (Maarof & Yaacob, 2011). Cogmen and Saracaloglu (2009) reported that simple methods such as underlining, taking notes, or highlighting the text can help readers understand and remember the content. Their findings indicated that in reading text, good readers often use effective reading strategies to enhance their comprehension. According to the above discussions, learning to read is an absolutely necessary skill for understanding SL/FL texts. Readers may use useful strategies to help them read SL/FL texts as they construct meaning. Using such strategies will help learners not only to understand general information in the reading text at very fast rates but also to remember new lexical items from the text.

As a full-time teacher of English in a high school, the researcher has observed that most learners at high schools experience reading difficulties. In some schools the learners have to attend extra classes on weekends to compensate for their deficit in their reading skills. Locally, the problem is often raised in principals' meetings, teacher forums, union meetings, in-service trainings/workshops and in the media. There have been many research carried out to investigate the causes of reading difficulties experienced by language learners all over the world. However, looking at the issues from cultural and psychological perspectives is none of previous studies. This motivated the researcher to conduct this study "A study on reading strategies used by Vietnamese high school English language learners"

1.1. Aims and significance of the study

The general aim of this study is to investigate reading difficulties of senior secondary schools students who are learning English as a foreign language. More specifically, the research aims to find out factors that correlate with reported difficulties from cultural and psychological perspectives. These variables will be examined both quantitatively and qualitatively, so that the research data can be triangulated when drawing conclusions. The findings from the study can be used as a guideline for teachers to select appropriate reading strategies to improve reading ability for their students.

1.2. Research question(s)

With the aims stated above, the study focuses on answering these research questions:

1.3.1. What reading difficulties are experienced by students at high school?

1.3.2. Which reading strategies are used by more/less successful readers?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.3. Definitions of reading

Reading is definitely an important skill for academic contexts but what is the appropriate definition of the word "reading"? foreign language reading research has gained specific attention since the late seventies (Eskey, 1973; Clarke and Silberstein, 1977; Widdowson, 1978). Before that time, foreign language reading was usually linked with oral skills and viewed as a rather passive, bottom-up process which largely depended on the decoding proficiency of readers. The decoding skills that readers used were usually described in hierarchical terms starting from the recognition of letters, to the comprehension of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs. In other words, it is a gradual linear building up of meaning from the smaller units to the larger chunks of text. The common assumption that reading theorists had

about foreign language reading was that the higher the foreign language proficiency of readers the better their reading skills. Knowledge of the foreign culture was also an important factor that enabled foreign readers to arrive at the intended meaning of texts (Fries, 1972; Lado, 1964; Rivers, 1968). Reading thus involves two main processes as suggested by Lunzer and Dolan.

Grable (1991) defines reading as an "interactive" process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or (reading fluency). In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he/she tries to elicit the meaning and where various kinds of knowledge are being used: linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing).

According to Pang, Elizabeth, Muaka, Angaluki, Bernhardt, Elizabeth B, Kamil, Michael L. (2003), reading is about understanding written texts. It is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Reading consists of two related processes: word recognition and comprehension. Word recognition refers to the process of perceiving how written symbols correspond to one's spoken language. Comprehension is the process of making sense of words, sentences and connected text. Readers typically make use of background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with text and other strategies to help them understand written text.

Nuttal (1982) defines reading as the ability to understand written texts by extracting the required information from them efficiently. While looking at a notice board, looking up a word in a dictionary and looking for special information from a text, normally we use different reading strategies to get what it means. Smith (1971) defines it as the act of giving attention to the written word, not only in reading symbols but also in comprehending the intended meaning. The writer and reader interaction through the text for the comprehension purpose is also viewed as reading by Widdowson (1979:105). What is significant in all these definitions is that there is no effective reading without understanding. So reading is more than just being able to recognize letters, words and sentences and read them aloud as known traditionally (although letter identification, and word recognition are of course essential). It involves getting meaning, understanding and interpreting what is read. What we need is reading that goes hand in hand with understanding and

1.4. The comprehension process

Reading comprehension is a psychological process which occurs in the mind. The mental process is invisible. This invisibility makes it difficult for the researcher to provide a concrete and clear definition. Kintsch (1998) describes comprehension as occurring "when and if the elements that enter into the process achieve a stable state in which the majority of elements are meaningfully related to one another and other elements that do not fit the pattern of the majority are suppressed" (p.4). In common sense terms, the mental elements can be readers' prior knowledge, concepts, images or emotions. With the schematic processing perspective held by Johnston (1983), reading comprehension can be defined as follows:

Reading comprehension is considered to be a complex behavior which involves conscious and unconscious use of various strategies, including problem-solving strategies, to build a model of the meaning which the writer is assumed to have intended. The model is constructed using schematic knowledge structures and

the various cue systems which the writer has given (e.g., words, syntax macrostructures, social information) to generate hypotheses which are tested using various logical and pragmatic strategies. Most of this model must be inferred, since text can never be fully explicit and, in general, very little of it is explicit because even the appropriate intentional and extensional meanings of words must be inferred from their context (p. 17).

For Johnston (1983), reading comprehension can mean the reader's comprehension of the text results from using different strategies consciously and unconsciously and is evoked by various knowledge sources. Johnston (1983) discusses using strategies to comprehend the text and he emphasizes examining the process of comprehension. Another view of reading comprehension focusing on the result rather than the process can also be added for this current study. The result of reading comprehension may show what the reader understands from a text, what he/she fails to understand from a text, and how he/she transacts with the text.

Gunderson (1995) differentiates three levels of comprehension including "literal or detail, inferential, and critical and evaluative, sometimes called applicative" (p.27). Gunderson (1995) provides explanations for the three levels of comprehension: literal-level comprehension requires little more than memory work and the remembering of details from the text; inferential-level comprehension involves "readers in thinking about what they've read and coming to conclusions that go beyond the information given in the text" (p.31); at critical and evaluative-level comprehension, readers are able to "evaluate whether a text is valid and expresses opinion rather than fact, as well as apply the knowledge gained from the text in other situations" (p.28). This study, following Gunderson's (1995) suggestion, avoids focusing on literal-level comprehension as the end goal of the study but rather intends to set up an EFL reading program which may "excite students and nurture their ability to use language in creative and meaningful ways" (Gunderson, 1995,p.43)

1.5. Factors affecting reading comprehension

A study by Palincsar and Brown (1984) showed that "reading comprehension is the product of three main factors" (p.118). The three factors include first, reader-friendly or reader-considerate texts; second, the interaction of the reader's prior knowledge and text content; and third, reading strategies which reveal the way readers manage their interaction with written texts and how these strategies are related to text comprehension (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

Comprehension can be enhanced to the extent that the texts are well written, that is, they follow a structure which is familiar to the reader and their syntax, style, clarity of presentation, and coherence reach an acceptable level in terms of the reader's mother language. Such texts have been called reader-friendly or reader-considerate (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984).Comprehension can also be influenced by the extent of overlap between the reader's prior knowledge and the content of the text. Research demonstrates the impact of schematic constructive processes on text comprehension. A number of studies suggest that text comprehension is dependent upon prior knowledge (Anderson & Pitchert, 1978;Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, & Goetz, 1977, Bransford & Johnson, 1973;Dooling & Lacharnn, 1971;Fass & Schumacher, 1981).Voss and his colleges (Chiesi, Spilich, & Voss, 1979) provide a clear example of this in their research that

describes how previously acquired knowledge influences college students' acquisition of new domain-related information. In their research, the performance of individuals with high baseball (HK) or low baseball (LK) knowledge is compared. Chiesi, Spilich and Voss (1979) indicate HK recognition performance is superior to LK, and that HK individuals need less information to make recognition judgments than LK individuals. Moreover, to enhance comprehension and overcome comprehension failures, some reading researchers focus on reading strategies. In Casanave's (1988) study of comprehension monitoring strategies, Cananave describes how successful readers employ effective strategies while reading; they usually propose a question, and elaborate their own knowledge and the content of the text. Casanave (1988) also makes a distinction between routine and repair (non-routine) monitoring strategies- the task of routine monitoring strategies may include "predicting, checking understanding for consistency, and checking for overall understanding" (p.290) whereas repair (non-routine)strategies may include "evaluating what the problem is, deciding how to resolve it, implementing the strategy as a result of the decision made, and checking the results" (p.290). Other recognized strategies may include these identified in Zvetina's study (1 987) for building and activating appropriate background knowledge, and those described by Block (1986) for recognizing text structure. The well-practiced decoding and comprehension skills of expert readers permit those readers to proceed relatively automatically, until a triggering event alerts them to a comprehension failure but when a comprehension failure is detected, readers must slow down and allot extra processing to the problem area (Spilich,Vesonder, Chiesi, & Voss, 1979).To fully understand how a student learns from texts, the reading instructor cannot ignore any of these three main factors which Palincsar and Brown (1 984) propose. However, in this paper, the researcher has chosen to concentrate most extensively on how the reader's prior knowledge may influence EFL students' reading comprehension.

1.6.   Strategies to enhance reading comprehension

According to Lerner (2006) the National Reading Panel of 2000 recognized several strategies that had a solid scientific basis of instruction for improving reading comprehension including:

Comprehension monitoring: Students learn how to be aware of their understanding of the material.

Cooperative thinking: Students learn reading strategies together.

Use of graphic and semantic organizers, including story maps: Students make graphic representations of the materials to assist their comprehension.

Question answering: Students answer questions posed by the teacher and receive immediate feedback.

Question generation: Students ask themselves questions about various aspects of the story.

Story structure: Students are taught how to use the structure of the story as a means of helping them recall story content in order to answer questions about what they have read.

Summarization: Students are taught to integrate ideas and to generate ideas and to generalize from the text information.

Williams 1998 in learner (2006) However suggests that students with learning disabilities require a different type of comprehension instruction than typical learners and that just as students with learning disabilities need explicit structure

instruction to learn word-recognition skills, they need explicit, highly structured instruction to learn reading comprehension skills. Williams (1998) emphasizes a "Themes Instruction Program", which consists of a series of twelve 40 minutes lessons and each lesson is organized around a single story and is composed of five parts namely: pre-reading discussion on the purpose of the lesson and the topic of the story that will be read, reading the story, discussion of important story information using organized (schema) questions as a guide, identification of a theme for the story, stating it in general terms so that it is relevant to a variety of stories and situations and finally practice in applying the generalized theme to real-life experiences.

III.   METHODOLOGY

1.7.   Research design

This study adopted both the quantitative and qualitative research approaches. According to Christenson and Johnson (2008), the qualitative research approach relies on the collection of non-numerical data, while for Gay et al. (2009) it is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insight into a particular phenomenon of interest. Best and Khan (2006) describe the quantitative approach as the collection and analysis of numerical data describe, explain, predict, or control phenomena of interest.

1.8.   Participants and sampling

For this study, students of grade 12 were selected. Those students are chosen from three schools in Thai Nguyen Province namely; Luong Ngoc Quyen Secondary school (LNQS), Ngo Quyen Secondary school (NQS) and Duong Tu Minh Secondary school (DTMS). All of these students are about to take the graduation examination in which English is one of the compulsory subject. The number of students involved in the present study is seventy five (75). Twenty (26.6%) students from LNQS, another thirty (40%) students come from NQS and twenty-five (33.3%) students are from DTMS
.

1.9.   Data collection instruments

The first instrument was a questionnaire which is delivered to the students to investigate types of difficulties they encounter during the reading comprehension (see appendix A).

The second instruments used in this study was the Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARSI) version 1.0, which was originally developed by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) as a tool to measure native English language learners' awareness of reading strategy usage. Some of the items have been altered or reworded to be closed to the reading texts in school textbook. The MARSI consists of 30 items that measure awareness reading strategies (see appendix B). In this questionnaire each item is accompanied with a 5-point, Likert-type scale, 1 (never or almost never do this), 2 (only occasionally do this), 3 (sometimes do this), 4 (usually do this), 5 (always or almost always do this) in which scores of 2.4 or below demonstrate low strategy use, 2.5 to 3.4 show moderate strategy use, and 3.5 or above signifies high strategy use.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1.10.   Results for research question 1

A hundred copies of questionnaire have been delivered to students in three high schools. The researcher received 75 valid papers back. There are some students who cannot even specify their problems so they left the column blank. The results of the first questionnaire are as shown in the table 1 below.

No	STATEMENTS	REPORTED RESULT
1.	I have problems understanding words in the readings	87%
2.	I have problems understanding grammatical points	65%
3.	I have problems inferring information in the readings	70%
4.	I have problems getting the main points of the readings	75%
5.	I have problems deducing meaning from context	65%
6.	I have problems selecting specific relevant information	50%
7.	I have problems predicting information from readings	72%
8.	I have problems handling lengthy readings	81%
9.	I have problems recognizing writing styles	30%
10.	I have problems with different subject matters	45%
11.	I am not interested in reading texts in English	35%
12.	I do not have enough external supports such as peers, parents and teachers	46%
13.	I lack of exposure to authentic reading materials	72%
14.	I do not have motivation with readings	48%
15.	I am always under time pressure during readings.	78%

Table 1: Results of the difficulty experienced by EFL students

1.11.   Results for research question 2

The descriptive statistics (table 2) shows that most of the strategies are reported using at moderate and high level, except for GRS1, GRS2, GRS3 and PSRS3 (M<2.5). The most preferred strategies include PSRS7, PSRS8, SRS1, SRS2, SRS6, SRS7, SRS9 (M>3.5).

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	S.D	Variance
GRS1	75	1	5	3.12	1.542	2.377
GRS2	75	1	5	2.19	.940	.884
GRS3	75	1	5	2.12	.958	.918
GRS4	75	1	5	2.97	1.385	1.918
GRS5	75	1	5	2.85	1.430	2.046
GRS6	75	1	5	3.28	.938	.880
GRS7	75	1	5	3.15	1.402	1.965
GRS8	75	2	5	3.47	.920	.847
GRS9	75	1	5	3.49	.876	.767
GRS10	75	2	5	3.71	.731	.534
GRS11	75	1	5	3.40	.870	.757
GRS12	75	1	5	3.37	.897	.805
GRS13	75	1	5	3.40	.885	.784
PSRS1	75	1	5	2.69	1.013	1.026
PSRS2	75	1	5	3.24	.956	.915
PSRS3	75	1	5	2.47	1.031	1.063
PSRS4	75	1	5	2.75	1.116	1.246
PSRS5	75	1	5	2.71	1.075	1.156
PSRS6	75	1	5	2.87	1.166	1.360
PSRS7	75	1	5	3.67	.935	.874
PSRS8	75	1	5	3.64	.939	.882
SRS1	75	1	5	3.77	.924	.853
SRS2	75	1	5	3.71	.882	.778
SRS3	75	1	5	2.92	1.440	2.075
SRS4	75	1	5	3.07	1.536	2.360
SRS5	75	1	5	3.05	1.506	2.267

SRS6	75	1	5	3.84	.855	.731
SRS7	75	1	5	3.88	.900	.810
SRS8	75	1	5	3.23	1.503	2.259
SRS9	75	1	5	3.79	.890	.792
Valid N (listwise)	75					

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the mean scores of the use of reading strategies

In this research, the factor analysis process is repeated in 2 rounds due to the cross-factor loading of the variables. In all 2 rounds of the factor analysis process, KMO is about 0.8 (>0.5) with statistical significance (sig = .000) and each Total Varian Explained is over 70% (>50%) which prove the appropriateness of factor analysis.

In the first round, 4 initial components are converted into 4 components. 10 items are deleted because of cross-loading factor and 20 remaining items are kept for the next step. Finally, these 20 items are tested again in the final round.

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.839
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1293.541
	df	190
	Sig.	.000

Table 3: KMO and Bartlett's test

1.12.   Hypothesis testing

The next step includes all the other dependent variables in the model together with the above control variables to assess the overall impact of these control variables on the reading achievement of students dependent variable. Table 5 shows that independent variables that account for 35.3% of the variation of the dependent variable.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.616[a]	.379	.353	.6849	.379	14.464	3	71	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), SRS, GRS, PSRS

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.663	.543		3.063	.003
	GRS	.269	.111	.228	2.432	.018
	PSRS	.520	.094	.542	5.532	.000
	SRS	.033	.105	.030	.310	.757

a. Dependent Variable: MAR2

Table 4: Variable summary

The linear regression model expresses the correlation between the factors as follows:

Mark = 1.663+0.269*GRS+0.52*PSRS

The research results of the author are basically consistent with previous quantitative studies. The test results show that the reading achievement of students is influenced by 2 factors: (1) GRS; (2) PSRS.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire for reading difficulties

DIRECTIONS: Listed below are statements about difficulties when doing reading comprehension tasks. Four numbers follow each statement (1, 2, 3, 4)
and each number means the following:

• 1 means "never true for me."
• 2 means "sometimes true for me."
• 3 means "often true for me."

• 4 means "always true for me."

After reading each statement, circle the number (1, 2, 3, or 4) that applies to you using the scale provided. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to the statements in this inventory.

No	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
1.	I have problems understanding words in the readings	4	3	2	1
2.	I have problems understanding grammatical points	4	3	2	1
3.	I have problems inferring information in the readings	4	3	2	1
4.	I have problems getting the main points of the readings	4	3	2	1
5.	I have problems deducing meaning from context	4	3	2	1
6.	I have problems selecting specific relevant information	4	3	2	1
7.	I have problems predicting information from readings	4	3	2	1
8.	I have problems handling lengthy readings	4	3	2	1
9.	I have problems recognizing writing styles	4	3	2	1
10.	I have problems with different subject matters	4	3	2	1
11.	I am not interested in reading texts in English	4	3	2	1
12.	I do not have enough external supports such as peers, parents and teachers	4	3	2	1
13.	I lack of exposure to authentic reading materials	4	3	2	1
14.	I do not have motivation with readings	4	3	2	1
15.	I am always under time pressure during readings.	4	3	2	1

Appendix B: Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARSI) Version 1.0 Kouider Mokhtari and Carla Reichard © 2002

DIRECTIONS: Listed below are statements about what people do when they read academic or school related materials such as textbooks, library books, etc. Five numbers follow each statement (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)
and each number means the following:

• 1 means "I never or almost never do this."
• 2 means "I do this only occasionally."
• 3 means "I sometimes do this." (About 50% of the time.)
• 4 means "I usually do this."
• 5 means "I always or almost always do this."

After reading each statement, circle the number (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) that applies to you using the scale provided. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to the statements in this inventory.

PART A: GLOBAL READING STRATEGIES

#	STRATEGIES	SCALE				
1	I have a purpose in mind when I read.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I think about what I know to help me understand what I read.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I preview the text to see what it's about before reading it.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose	1	2	3	4	5
5	I skim the text first by noting characteristics like length and organization.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I decide what to read closely and what to ignore.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding	1	2	3	4	5
8	I use context clues to help me better understand what I'm reading.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I use typographical aids like bold face and italics to identify key information.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I critically analyze and evaluate the information presented in the text.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I check my understanding when I come across conflicting information	1	2	3	4	5
12	I try to guess what the material is about when I read	1	2	3	4	5
13	I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong	1	2	3	4	5

PART B: PROBLEM SOLVING READING STRATEGIES

#	STRATEGIES	SCALE				
1	I read slowly but carefully to be sure I understand what I'm reading	1	2	3	4	5
2	I try to get back on track when I lose concentration	1	2	3	4	5
3	I adjust my reading speed according to what I'm reading	1	2	3	4	5
4	When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I'm reading.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I stop from time to time and think about what I'm reading.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read.	1	2	3	4	5
7	When text becomes difficult, I re-read to increase my understanding.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I try to guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases	1	2	3	4	5

PART C: SUPPORT READING STRATEGIES

#	STRATEGIES	SCALE				
1	I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read	1	2	3	4	5

2	When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read	1	2	3	4	5
3	I summarize what I read to reflect on important information in the text.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I discuss what I read with others to check my understanding.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I use reference materials such as dictionaries to help me understand what I read	1	2	3	4	5
7	I paraphrase (restate ideas in my own words) to better understand what I read.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I go back and forth in the text to find relationships among ideas in it.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text	1	2	3	4	5