

A STUDY ON TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' READING COMPETENCE

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Received: 01/08/2023

Revised: 19/02/2024

Accepted: 27/02/2024

DOI:

Abstract: *Previous studies have investigated the significance of reading proficiency in acquiring the English language and brought attention to the reading difficulties learners have in their learning process. This study examines the use of speed-reading strategies as a method to enhance learners' reading ability. Seventy senior English-major students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Dong Nai Technology University were participating in the study during their final semester. The study employed a mixed methodology, which included collecting quantitative data from a pretest-posttest paradigm without a control group, questionnaires before and after the use of speed reading strategies, and qualitative data through observations. The students' reading competence was assessed using a standardized IELTS reading test at the start of the study, followed by a pre questionnaire and 10 hours of speed reading training with observations. After the training, the students took a posttest to determine the discrepancy between the pre-test and post-test, and post questionnaire was sent to the participants to understand their opinion about the use of strategies in doing tests. Speed reading techniques were found to enhance students' performance on reading tests and cultivate a positive attitude towards reading comprehension. The students gained valuable reading skills and strategies that contribute to academic success.*

Keywords: *reading comprehension; reading difficulties; speed-reading strategies.*

I. Introduction

Acquiring proficiency in reading comprehension is crucial for English learners as a foreign language (EFL). Reading can enhance students' vocabulary, fluency, speaking, and writing skills, leading to mastery of the target language. Learners can also expand their knowledge through the information obtained from reading texts (Habók & Magyar, 2019).

In the context of Dong Nai Technology University, English Reading Comprehension is a mandatory program for English majors. Moreover, the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University administers international English proficiency examinations for final assessments,

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primarily the IELTS. The IELTS is a 60-minute reading test consisting of 40 questions distributed among three articles. Many senior English-major students at the faculty commonly express concerns about insufficient time to complete reading tests. The lengthy and challenging reading passages make it appear unfeasible to answer all questions within an hour, and reading at a slow pace can hinder comprehension. Thus, discovering the most effective approach to achieve the maximum score within the given time frame is crucial for reading test-takers and English educators.

Speed reading is a commonly used approach to enhance English reading skills worldwide and has shown numerous benefits. Speed-reading can assist EFL teachers and learners in enhancing their reading speed, thereby saving time without compromising comprehension. However, there is a lack of data on its effectiveness when used for test-taking. This study aimed to investigate the reading difficulties experienced by senior English major students and the influence of speed reading techniques on their test results. This study will examine the following questions.

1. What are the primary challenges faced by senior English major students when taking reading proficiency tests?
2. Can utilizing speed reading techniques enhance their reading results?
3. What do the students think about training in speed reading techniques?

II. Literature review

2.1. Common reading comprehension difficulties

Common problems faced by students in EFL reading classes include insufficient vocabulary, linguistic complexity, and a lack of prior knowledge (Satriani, 2018). Vocabulary is a significant challenge for learners in achieving success in reading comprehension, as demonstrated in various research (Satriani, 2018, Tran & Duong, 2018). Unfamiliar vocabulary causes learners to pause to comprehend their meaning, leading to a decrease in reading speed and comprehension efficiency, Soemantri (2011). Background knowledge refers to the prior knowledge that a reader possesses when approaching a certain issue. Students with extensive previous knowledge perform better since they can readily interpret material and enhance their critical thinking skills by having a comprehensive understanding of numerous reading elements, Newman, Kaefer, & Pinkham (2014). Prior knowledge is vital in enhancing students' ability to comprehend what they read. In addition to the elements influencing students' reading comprehension outlined previously, further research suggests that time constraints and grammar also impact reading comprehension. Time pressure is a significant element that can impact task performance (Chatterjee, 2016). Students lacking familiarity with time constraints would process information at a slower rate. Decision-makers frequently experience stress when dealing with this limitation, which might subsequently impact their effectiveness, Conte, Scarsini, & Surucu, (2015). The research implied that time constraints hinder learners from comprehending texts well, even though reading comprehension is not explicitly mentioned. Several research studies emphasize the importance of grammar in reading comprehension (Zhang, 2012). Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) suggest that varying levels of grammatical knowledge will impact readers'

understanding differently, particularly individuals with insufficient grammar knowledge may struggle with reading comprehension. To understand the passages' meaning, learners need to have a good grasp of grammar.

2.2. Speed reading techniques

Choirinintgyas (2018) defines speed reading as the act of reading quickly while focusing on essential elements including comprehension, and critical thinking. She said that quick reading involves utilising eye movement, brain function, and silent reading. This strategy aids readers in assimilating specific information, identifying the primary idea, and understanding the text more efficiently within a shorter timeframe.

Abdelrahman & Bsharah (2014) conducted a study to investigate the impact of speed reading techniques on enhancing English reading comprehension among secondary school students. The study had 42 students who were randomly divided into two groups: a controlling group and an experimental group. Both groups received training in speed reading strategies. Pre and post reading comprehension tests were conducted. The results indicated that the students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group. The disparity in means resulted from the implementation of speed reading techniques. The study validates that possessing a proficient speed reading approach enables students to easily absorb the material and enhance their academic performance. The students involved in the study demonstrated motivation and engagement during the training sessions. Teachers should intensively instruct children in speed reading skills like skimming and scanning.

Wardani (2014) conducted a study showing that speed reading helps students by teaching them techniques to comprehend information rapidly, enhance reading fluency, and foster a good attitude towards reading.

Within the field of reading strategy study, numerous scholars have employed various techniques such as anticipating, skimming, scanning, inferring, deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words, self-monitoring, and summarising. This study focuses on skimming and scanning techniques as their necessity in doing reading tests.

Beale (2013) states that speed-reading involves mastering the techniques of skimming and scanning, which are considered the most beneficial reading tactics for readers. Abdelrahman & Bsharah (2014) suggest that utilising skimming and scanning techniques can improve students' reading speed. Students read with a specific goal in mind to efficiently obtain the necessary information. They do not mind anything that is not essential. They excel at discerning which precise information to read and which method to use for reading. Regarding this case, the tactics of skimming and scanning are widely recognised for helping students enhance their speed.

2.3. Scanning and Skimming

Maxwell as referenced by Diaz & Laguado (2013) described the scanning method as the ability of students to swiftly discover specific information inside a book, such as dates, names, and places. It is considered a valuable reading ability and is included in the curriculum of most reading courses. Also, skimming was described as rapidly grasping the primary concept of a written document, enabling students to enhance their inferential skills through systematic

practice and anticipate the content of the text. Skimming aids students in identifying essential words that allow them to deduce the overall meaning of a document, helping them read faster and progress through the reading process. Hong (2013) found that skimming is typically done at a rate that is three to four times faster than regular reading. Individuals frequently skim through content when they are faced with a large volume of material to read within a restricted timeframe. Skimming and scanning are basic reading practices, but both methods contribute significantly to helping readers understand texts better and enhance their reading speed.

III. Research methods

3.1. Design

The study was conducted utilising the Mixed Method which utilised both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis. Questionnaires were distributed to 70 senior English majors both before and after the experiment. The preliminary questionnaire gathered data on the challenges faced by the learners during their reading process. The post questionnaire gathered data on the students' views regarding the test and the utilisation of speed reading strategies. An experimental study was conducted using pre-test and post-test measures to examine the effects of speed reading strategies on the reading comprehension of English majors. The qualitative data obtained from classroom observation offered valuable insights into the organisation of an English language classroom focused on enhancing students' reading abilities and the teaching strategies preferred by language instructors. The researcher as the teacher conducted 5 classroom observation sessions to collect data. The qualitative data collected from classroom observations was analysed using content analysis. The data was coded and categorised for comparison.

3.2. Participants

Seventy senior English majors who were students in the researcher's classes were participating in the research. The researcher grouped all of them without using a control or experimental group.

3.3. Research procedure

3.3.1. Pre-test

To assess the data, the initial step involved sending out online questionnaires and holding interview sessions whose data was systematically arranged into charts and figures based on the related questions. The pre-test is designed to assess students' performance in an IELTS reading test before implementing speed reading strategies. The researcher created the reading pre-test using the IELTS format. The researcher gathered and labelled the students' pre-test as appropriate.

3.3.2. Pre - questionnaire

The researcher administered the first close-ended questionnaire to the students following the pre-test. Questions were designed to identify the problems students had during the test.

3.3.3 Lesson outlines

Five sessions were held to teach reading using skimming and scanning tactics. The experiments spanned over five weeks, each focusing on a different facet of reading comprehension. Treatment-1 involves identifying the purposes and organizational patterns of

texts. Treatment-2 focuses on understanding unknown vocabulary through structural clues and word parts. Treatment-3 is about inferring information from the passage. Treatment-4 deals with understanding facts and details from the text. Treatment-5 revolves around defining the author's attitudes, tones, and purposes in the passage.

3.3.4. Observational checklist

The researcher created a checklist for the experimental class consisting of three primary components: knowledge observation, skill observation, and attitude observation. The researcher conducted classroom observation as the teacher during reading lessons to gather data on the students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

3.3.5. Post-test

The researcher administered an additional IELTS test to students after the reading courses, with a time limit of 60 minutes. Subsequently, the researcher gathered and analyzed the students' findings to determine the disparities between the reading pre-test and post-test scores. The post-test for reading has 40 questions following the IELTS pattern. Both the pre- and post-tests were of equal difficulty, but the questions were distinct.

3.3.6. Follow-up questionnaire

A post-questionnaire was created and administered to the students after collecting the post-test results. The questionnaire aimed to determine students' attitudes towards speed reading techniques.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results of the pre-test

The participants' reading scores are determined based on the number of accurate responses they provide out of 40 questions in the test. The total number of right answers will establish the students' raw score, which will then be used to determine their band score. Table 1 shows the distribution of students' scores across various reading levels as determined by the pre-test. Only 2 out of 70 students achieved band 8, indicating a very high user level. 40% of the students were classified as good users, while 28.5% were in band 6. The percentages of the participants seen as modest and limited users were 17.1% and 11.5%, respectively.

Levels/bands scores	No. of correct answers	No. of students	Percentage
Very good user-band 8	33-36	2	2.9%
Good user- band 7	27-32	28	40%
Competent user- band 6	19-26	20	28.5%
Modest user- band 5	13-18	12	17.1%
Limited user- band 4	8-12	8	11.5%
Total		70	100%

Table 1. Results of the pre-test

4.2 Students' reading competence levels changes from the pre-test to the post-test

A study was done to assess the effect of speed reading strategies on students' reading competence by administering a pre-test and a post-test. Figure 1 contrasted the students' scores in the pre- and post-tests. Figure 1 shows a notable improvement in students' test scores following the reading classes, as seen by the substantial discrepancies between the pre-test and

post-test outcomes. Only 2 students achieved a band 8 score in the pre-test, however, 5 students attained the same band in the post-test. The finding also revealed a rise in the number of students achieving a band score of 7, from 28 to 33 students. The number of competent students was consistent in both assessments. Finally, there were reductions in the number of students considered modest and limited. The study shows that speed reading approaches positively impacted the participants' reading performance.

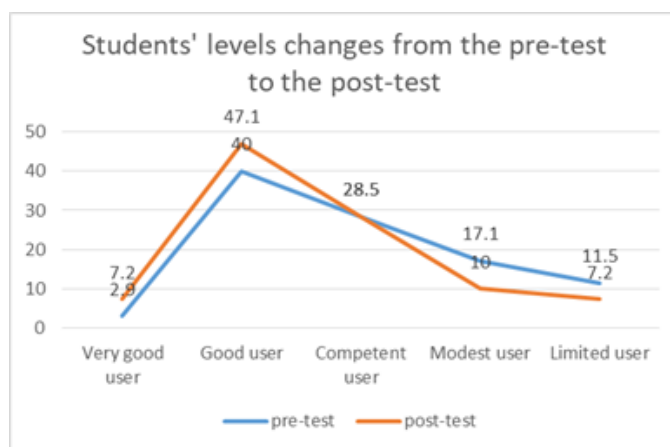


Figure 1: A comparison between pre-test scores and post-test scores

4.3. Results of the first questionnaire

The researcher collected the students' feedback on the test and any difficulties they encountered during the examination. According to Table 2, the majority of students regarded the pre-test in IELTS to be quite difficult. 21.5% of participants found the reading passages very challenging, while 71.4% chose the option "difficult." Only a small fraction of the participants found the texts to be of ordinary difficulty (7.1%), with no one perceiving the test as easy or extremely easy.

Difficulty levels	Students' perceptions
Very difficult	21.5%
Difficult	71.4%
Normal	7.1%
Easy	0%
Very easy	0 %

Table 2: students' opinions towards the difficulty levels of the reading test

The primary issues that impeded students from finishing the reading test, as indicated in Table 3, were inadequate vocabulary and time constraints. Both components were evenly matched at 82.8%. Despite other criteria identified in the research and literature review, students faced barriers in reading, including lack of background knowledge (52.8%) and ineffective reading strategies (54.2%). Only 17.1% of students recognised that complex grammatical structures had a substantial impact on their reading comprehension, making grammar the least prevalent issue hindering their reading skills.

Students' problems	Students' choice	Percentage
Lack of Vocabulary	58/70	82.8%
Poor Grammar	12/70	17.1%
Lack of background knowledge	37/70	52.8%
Lack of time	58/70	82.8%
Lack of suitable reading strategies	38/70	54.2%

Table 3: students' problems in the test

4.4. Results of the classroom observations

The analysis of the observation checklists indicates that students' interaction, attitudes, and the atmosphere in the reading classes were generally favorable. The students demonstrated a high level of collaboration with the researcher while working on reading texts by comprehending and adhering to the researcher's instructions. These students consistently monitored their reading time throughout practice, ensuring they finished a reading passage in no more than 20 minutes.

4.5. Students' feedback on using speed reading techniques

A post-questionnaire was created and distributed to students to collect feedback on the reading classes that utilized the fast reading technique. Figure 2 displays the students' responses. All perks indicated in the questionnaire received at least 50% of the votes from the students. Often, students' lack of focus can impede their academic achievement. Concentration is crucial for students getting ready to tackle a challenging English proficiency exam such as IELTS. In the classroom setting, the instructional method should encourage students to maintain concentration for extended durations. Most students (85.7%) found that the strategies used in speed reading provide them with an intensive engagement in which they always had to stay focused. Students can harness the potential of their subconscious mind and grasp intricate concepts without compromising comprehension by mastering the skill of speed reading. 78.5% of the students concurred that speed reading strategies allow them to handle more information in less time. This essential skill is a potent asset that enables students to optimize the quantity of knowledge they get in academic environments and in their lifelong learning. Proficient readers may have increased self-assurance due to their speedy and efficient reading skills. This can impact their academic achievement and overall self-esteem. It is calming to observe that 64.2% of the students agreed that they experienced more confidence and improved results. However, only 50% of the students felt that speed reading can help them remember and recall material more quickly. The cause may be attributed to the levels of expertise achieved via practice. Students' brains improve memory performance with consistent training, similar to how a muscle grows with exercise. Hence, students should engage in regular practice of these strategies.

Speed reading assists students in recognizing crucial information and developing skills in text analysis, making connections between concepts, and forming opinions based on their reading. Speed reading enables students to efficiently analyze current knowledge and its connection to previously read material. However, only half of the students acknowledged that their capacity for critical thinking had improved following the program.

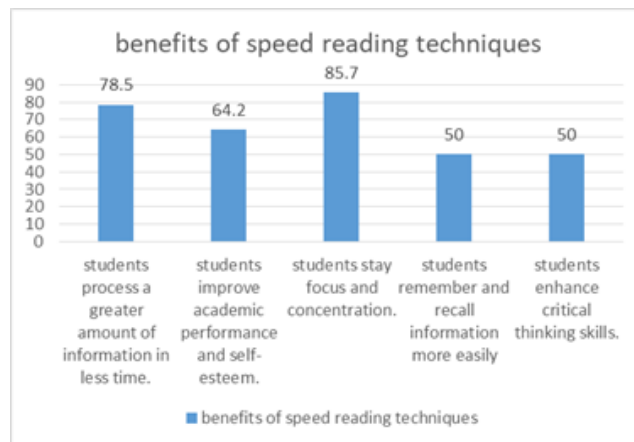


Figure 2: students' perceptions of speed reading techniques

V. Conclusion

The primary results of the study can be summarized as follows: The senior English majors in the study had numerous challenges with reading competence examinations. Some of the largest challenges were lack of vocabulary, prior knowledge, reading tactics, and time management abilities. Furthermore, significant disparities were observed in the pre-test and post-test outcomes of the subjects. The students' reading performance considerably improved after the speed reading classes. After analyzing students' responses collected through observations and post-questionnaires, the researcher discovered that students had a positive attitude when working with reading strategies. Speed reading is an efficient approach for teaching and mastering English reading. The study's findings indicate that requiring English majors to take an English proficiency test can enhance their learning process and encourage them to study more strategically. The study asserts that students must possess various skills when working with a reading text. They must be able to scan texts for specific information and skim texts to quickly grasp the overall content.

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NGHIÊN CỨU CHIẾN LƯỢC LÀM BÀI KIỂM TRA NHẢM NÂNG CAO NĂNG LỰC ĐỌC HIỂU TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ

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Tóm Tắt: Các nghiên cứu trước đây đã tìm hiểu về tầm quan trọng của khả năng đọc hiểu trong việc học tiếng Anh và chú ý đến những khó khăn mà người học gặp phải trong quá trình học tập. Nghiên cứu này xem xét việc sử dụng các chiến lược đọc nhanh như một phương pháp để nâng cao khả năng đọc hiểu của người học. 70 sinh viên năm cuối chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh của Khoa Ngoại ngữ trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai đã tham gia nghiên cứu trong

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học kỳ cuối cùng của họ. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định tính và định lượng, bao gồm thu thập dữ liệu định lượng từ mô hình kiểm tra năng lực trước và sau thực nghiệm, bảng câu hỏi khảo sát trước và sau khi sử dụng chiến lược đọc nhanh và dữ liệu định tính thông qua quan sát lớp học. Năng lực đọc hiểu của sinh viên được đánh giá bằng bài kiểm tra đọc chuẩn IELTS khi bắt đầu nghiên cứu, sau đó là bảng câu hỏi đầu tiên và 10 giờ luyện đọc tốc độ được quan sát. Sau khóa đào tạo, sinh viên làm thêm một bài kiểm tra để xác định sự khác biệt giữa bài kiểm tra trước và sau và gửi bảng câu hỏi sau cho học viên để hiểu ý kiến của họ về chiến lược sử dụng khi làm bài kiểm tra. Kỹ thuật đọc nhanh được cho là giúp nâng cao hiệu suất của sinh viên trong các bài kiểm tra đọc và nuôi dưỡng thái độ tích cực đối với việc đọc hiểu. Học sinh đã đạt được các kỹ năng và chiến lược đọc có giá trị góp phần vào thành công trong học tập.

Từ Khóa: Đọc hiểu; khó khăn khi đọc hiểu; kỹ thuật đọc nhanh.