

# READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES USED BY FIRST YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** Like other language skills, reading is a crucial factor in foreign language acquisition. The ultimate goal of reading is comprehension and it allows students to make sense of what the text is about. This research is carried out to investigate reading comprehension strategies (RCS) used by first-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education (TUE). The purposes of this research study are: a) to investigate into RCSs used by the first-year English-major students at TUE, b) to find out significant differences in the use of RCSs between more successful and less successful readers. This research is, therefore, aimed at helping students identify effective RCSs which may facilitate their reading comprehension. The implication of this study shows that good strategies of more successful readers can be shared by and provided for less successful ones to encourage them to study a foreign language effectively.

**Keywords:** reading, reading comprehension, reading strategies

## 1. Introduction

Researchers pay much attention to the topic of language learning strategies, which play an important part in developing foreign language skills. A learning strategy is “an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language to incorporate these into one’s inter-language competence” (Tarone, 1983, p. 67). There have been a variety of studies on learning strategies. Yet, there has not been any direct research investigating into reading comprehension strategies (RCS) at Thai Nguyen University of Education (TUE). Therefore, the researchers would investigate RCS used by the first-year English majors at TUE to fill this gap. Like other language skills, reading is regarded as one of big problems for a great number of English majors at TUE, especially the first-year ones. In fact, many of the first-year students majoring in English were not very successful in their reading comprehension tests last semester. What are their problems in reading comprehension (RC)? From informal interviews with some students, we have found that one of the problems they have to face while doing RC tasks lies in the fact that they often use their ineffective ways of reading, for example, reading word by word without integration of meaning, viewing translation as a practicable means, even spending too much time reading the whole passage again and again. From these initial observations, we intend to carry out this research to conduct an investigation RCSs used by the first-year English majors. We also hope that their RC skills will be evolved and improved after applying more appropriate RCSs.

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## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Reading strategies**

There have been many investigations into the reading process proposed by researchers based on various theoretical perspectives. Goodman (1986, p. 11) states that the bottom-up model is “common sense notion” in which reading is regarded as a process of decoding letters, words, phrases, and then sentences with the aim of grasping the meaning. *A study on the use of Cognitive Reading Strategies by ELT students*, conducted by Ozek and Civelek (2006) uncovered that top-down model may not accept the notion that identification of letters to form words, and the derivation of meaning from these words is efficient reading. In contrast, top-down model proves that efficient reading requires the readers to guess about the text content by using their previous knowledge as well as a few language clues. Nevertheless, as indicated by Lally (1998), the major distinction between the approaches is the emphasis given to text-based variables such as vocabulary, syntax, and grammatical structures and reader-based development, strategy use, interest, and purpose. According to Carrell (1998, p. 4), to comprehend a text, readers may make use of both the text and their background knowledge. Consequently, by combining top-down approaches with bottom-up approaches, readers may use pre-reading information about the text. In short, the reading process is an interactive process between the reader and the text, or between the bottom-up processing and top-down processing. Such a view of reading process is chosen in this present study. Consequently, reading strategies can be grouped into two categories: top-down and bottom-up strategies.

### **2.2. Factors influencing learners’ strategy choice**

#### **2.2.1. Gender**

“Gender” is one of the factors that have a significant influence on the learners’ strategy choice. Results collected from studies of gender differences affecting learner’s strategy choice show two opposite trends. Most studies claim that females tend to utilize strategies with greater frequencies than male learners (Oxford, (1990), Goh and Foong (1997); Kato (2005)). In contrast, very few studies show the contrary trend favoring males (Tercanlioglu, 2004). In fact, female readers seem to use many more strategies than males do, which is a relatively popular tendency. From this viewpoint, the researcher see that “gender” may be a factor exerting influence on learners’ choice of strategies. Therefore, in this study the resercher’s investigation is focused on RCSs adopted by either male or female learners or employed by both genders.

#### **2.2.2. Proficiency**

In *A preliminary investigation of the reading strategies of successful and unsuccessful second language learners*, Hosenfeld (1977) defines “proficiency” as “knowledge, competence or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what condition it has been acquired.” Although a few studies have pointed out that the higher-proficiency learners used fewer strategies than their unsuccessful partners (e.g. Chen, 1990), most investigations have revealed that successful learners implemented language learning strategies more frequently and significantly than unsuccessful learners. In general, good language learners seem to be more skillful in monitoring and adopting different strategies, whereas poor learners cling to

ineffective strategies that hinder successful language learning (Gallo-Crailand Zerwekh, 2002). In this study, the researcher has recognized the strengths and effects of the factor “proficiency” on the use of reading strategies by the learners.

### **2.3. Previous studies on reading comprehension strategies**

Anderson (1991) carried out a study to investigate the individual differences in reading strategy use by twenty-eight Spanish-speaking students who enrolled at a university level intensive ESL program in the Southwestern United States. Think-aloud protocols were used as the major source of data collection. Findings indicated that both more and less proficient readers seemed to use the same kinds of strategies for answering reading comprehension questions; however, more proficient readers appeared to apply reading strategies more effectively and appropriately.

Ozek and Civelek (2006) reported a study on the use of cognitive reading strategies by 23 first-year and fourth-year students in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at Dicle University. They utilized think aloud procedures to obtain data on strategies. The results of think aloud protocols analysis indicated that there was an inherent contradiction in the use of some strategies of both groups, namely in using the dictionary parsimoniously, skipping some unknown words and thinking aloud during reading. Because the first-year students were less experienced juniors, they might be in need of getting more information on the topics whereas the fourth-year students were more experienced seniors and they could predict the meaning of new words from their contexts, using what they had learned from so much reading before. In other words, difference in proficiency levels may result in the discrepancy in strategy implementation.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Instruments for collecting data**

The instruments used to gather data in the current study were think-aloud protocols and questionnaires.

The think-aloud protocol (self-revelation) is a data collection method whereby informants are asked to say “what they are thinking and doing (i.e., everything that comes to mind) while performing a task” (Matsumoto, 1994). The current study identified the effectiveness and appropriateness of the think-aloud protocol and applied it to carry out an investigation into RCS.

A background questionnaire was set up to obtain more information about the participants including age, gender, previous experience in learning English, and contexts in which they were provided with RCSs. By processing the information gathered, the researcher would find out factors deciding on RCSs employed by the learners.

### **3.2. Participants**

There were 58 first-year English majors at TUE, who were 18-19 years of age at the time the study commenced. All of them had studied English formally for 7 years at junior and senior high schools, where their English learning was focused on only vocabulary and grammar, and for a term at TUE, during which they were exposed to the four major language skills. However,

they had only 2 class hours a week for reading comprehension. When this research was started, they had finished the first term of their first year. The students who participated in the study were selected based on certain criteria listed as follows: First, on the basis of the results they scored in the reading tests of the two previous terms, we grouped them under two levels labeled as “more successful” and “less successful”. The baselines for the “more successful” and the “less successful” were 7 marks or more and 5 marks or less, respectively. Second, the number of male participants had to be the same as female counterparts. Third, they should be willing to take part in the study. In our judgment by the above-mentioned criteria, of the 58 first-year students of English only 8 were chosen as the participants in this study.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The researcher analyzed the data collected from the think-aloud protocol using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 10.0. Descriptive statistics and a Mann Whitney U test were utilized in the procedure of data analysis. Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were employed to survey the RCSs used by the eight English majors selected.

## 4. Results of the study

### 4.1. Students' use of reading comprehension strategies

#### 4.1.1. Students' use of strategy categories

The descriptive statistics for the six strategy categories in terms of Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Meta-cognitive, Affective and Social utilized by the eight participants are shown in Table 4.1 below.

**Table 4.1.** Descriptive Statistics for Reading Comprehension Strategy Categories

Strategy category	N	M	SD
Memory	8	3.13	2.80
Cognitive	8	20.88	4.05
Compensation	8	6.13	4.49
Meta-cognitive	8	10.13	2.70
Affective	8	.50	.54
Social	8	7.75	5.45

\*N: numbers; M: mean; SD: standard deviation

As can be seen from Table 4.1, of the six strategy categories, the most frequently used was Cognitive (M=20.88), followed by Meta-cognitive (M= 10.13) and Social (M=7.75). The groups of strategies with moderate frequencies were Compensation (M=6.13) and Memory (M=3.13) whereas Affective had the lowest mean frequency (M= .50).

#### 4.1.2. Students' use of individual strategies within strategy categories

The analysis of the results from the eight students' use of individual strategies within six strategy categories can be summarized as follows. First, the results of the study showed that

Cognitive strategies (M=20.88) were the ones used by the students the most frequently. As can be seen in Table 4.2, in this strategy category, the students had the highest frequent use on the strategy of Taking notes (M=8.63), followed by Reasoning Deductively (M=4.00) while their least frequent use was found in Getting the idea quickly (M=1.13). Second, the findings show that the students utilized Meta-cognitive strategies (M=10.13) and Cognitive strategies much more often than the others. As indicated in Table 4.2, among the four strategies in Meta-cognitive category, the strategy of Self-evaluation (M=5.38) was the most frequently used by the students; however, the least commonly used strategy was Identifying the purpose of a language task (M=.13). Finally, as displayed in Table 4.2, Memory strategies (M=3.13) and Affective strategies (M=.50) were less frequently employed. With regard to Memory category, Associating/ Elaborate strategy (M=2.25) was used more often than Using Imagery (M=.87). With reference to Affective category, Using laughter (M=.50) was the least often used strategy.

**Table 4.2.** Descriptive statistics for individual strategies within the six categories

Category and strategy	N	M	SD
<b>Memory Strategies</b>			
Associating/ Elaborate	8	2.25	1.83
Using imagery	8	.87	1.13
<b>Cognitive Strategies</b>			
Repeating	8	1.50	1.85
Getting the idea quickly	8	1.13	1.36
Using resources for receiving and sending messages	8	2.13	2.23
Reasoning deductively	8	4.00	3.74
Translating	8	2.13	2.17
Taking notes	8	8.63	2.50
Summarizing	8	1.38	1.30
<b>Compensation strategies</b>			
Using linguistic clues	8	1.38	1.50
Using other clues	8	4.75	3.28
<b>Meta-cognitive strategies</b>			
Paying attention	8	3.75	1.28
Identifying the purpose of a language task	8	.13	.35
Self-monitoring	8	.88	1.13
Self-evaluation	8	5.38	3.11
<b>Affective strategies</b>			
Using laughter	8	.50	.54
<b>Social strategies</b>			
Asking for classification and verification	8	7.75	5.45

**4.2. Difference in strategy use between more successful and less successful readers**

After analyzing the results from the descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test results for six strategy categories utilized by more successful and less successful readers, some

generalizations can be revealed as follows. First, the results from the descriptive statistics indicated that the more successful readers surpassed their less successful peers. As depicted in the table, there were statistically significant differences in the frequency of the use of Social strategy (sus:  $M=3.00$ ; un:  $M=12.50$ ), Compensation strategy (sus:  $M=10.00$ ; un:  $M= 2.25$ ), Cognitive (sus:  $M=23.25$ ; un:  $M=18.50$ ), Memory strategy (sus:  $M=5.25$ ; un:  $M=1.00$ ), and Metacognitive (sus:  $M=12.25$ ; un:  $M=8.00$ ). However, no variation was in the use of Affective strategy. From these results, it can be concluded that the use of RCSs between the more successful and less successful readers is significantly different. Second, the Mann Whitney U test results also pointed out this significant variation in the use the six strategy categories between students identified as more successful and less successful ( $p<.05$ ).

**Table 4.3.** Strategy categories utilized by More successful and Less successful readers

Strategy Category	Successful (N= 4)		Unsuccessful( N=4)		P
	M	SD	M	SD	
Memory	5.25	2.36	1.00	.82	.03*
Cognitive	23.25	3.50	18.50	3.3	.10
Compensation	10.00	2.16	2.25	1.50	.02*
Metacognitive	12.25	1.26	8.00	1.83	.02*
Affective	.00	.00	1.00	.00	.01*
Social	3.00	.82	12.50	2.89	.02*

\*Significant level:  $p < .05$

### 4.3. Factors influencing students' strategy choice

#### 4.3.1. Proficiency

As analyzed in section 4.2, it is clear that there were significant differences in RCS use between more successful and less successful students. The results from the descriptive statistics showed that the more successful readers surpassed their less successful peers. Also, the Mann Whitney U test results showed this significant variation in the use of RCSs by students of the more successful and less successful groups. Thus, proficiency is the main reason affecting the students' strategy choice.

#### 4.3.2. Difference in the use of individual strategies by gender

The descriptive statistics and the Mann Whitney U test results indicated that some variation was found between two groups of gender: male and female readers in their individual strategy choice.

In the first part, the descriptive statistics uncovered that the male readers had significantly higher frequency of RCS use than the female readers did. With respect to memory category, the male readers surpassed their female readers in the use of two strategies. The male readers employed Associating/ Elaborate ( $M=2.75$ ) and Using Imagery ( $M=1.00$ ) more often than the female readers did ( $M= 1.75$ ;  $M=.75$ ). Regarding compensation category, the male readers were superior to their counterpart readers in the use of Using Linguistic clues (m:  $M= 2.00$ ; f:  $M=.75$ ) and Using other clues (m:  $M= 6.25$ ; f:  $M=3.25$ ). In terms of Affective category, the female readers appeared to use Using laughter ( $M= .75$ ) more often than the male readers ( $M= .25$ ).

In contrast, in the second part, the results from the Mann Whitney revealed that the variation in the frequent use of individual strategies was not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ). In other words, there was little difference in the frequent use of individual strategies for the two groups of gender.

**Table 4.4.** Individual strategies used by male and female readers

Category and strategy	Gender	N	M	S.D	P
<b>Memory strategies</b> Associating/ Elaborate	Male	4	2.75	1.50	.37
	Female	4	1.75	2.22	
Using imagery	Male	4	1.00	1.41	.88
	Female	4	.75	.96	
<b>Cognitive strategies</b> Repeating	Male	4	.50	1.00	.12
	Female	4	2.50	2.08	
Getting the idea quickly	Male	4	1.5	1.29	.35
	Female	4	.75	1.50	
Using resources for receiving and sending messages	Male	4	3.25	2.50	.18
	Female	4	1.00	1.41	
Reasoning deductively	Male	4	5.75	3.78	.08
	Female	4	2.25	3.20	
Translating	Male	4	.75	1.50	.05*
	Female	4	3.50	1.92	
Taking notes	Male	4	7.50	.58	.37
	Female	4	9.75	3.30	
Summarizing	Male	4	2.00	1.41	.18
	Female	4	.75	.96	
<b>Compensation strategies</b> Using linguistic clues	Male	4	2.00	1.83	.3
	Female	4	.75	.96	
Using other clues	Male	4	6.25	3.78	.24
	Female	4	3.25	2.22	
<b>Metacognitive strategies</b> Paying attention	Male	4	3.75	1.71	.88
	Female	4	3.75	.96	
Identifying the purpose of a language task	Male	4	.25	.50	.32
	Female	4	.00	.00	
Self-monitoring	Male	4	.25	.50	.12
	Female	4	1.5	1.29	
Self-evaluation	Male	4	6.50	3.00	.65
	Female	4	4.25	3.20	
<b>Affective strategies</b> Using laughter	Male	4	.25	.50	.19
	Female	4	.75	.50	
<b>Social strategies</b> Asking for classification and verification	Male	4	6.25	6.55	.47
	Female		9.25		

\*Significant level:  $p < .05$

#### 4.4. Summary

After analyzing the think-aloud protocols of eight students, some generalizations can be made as follows. First, the students employed all six-strategy categories by Oxford (1990): memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social. Second, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups of readers including more successful

and less successful, which helps to make an assertive answer to the research question “Are there any significant differences in the use of RCS between more successful and less successful readers?” The significant differences between these two groups in the frequent use of both strategy categories and individual strategies are explicit and convincing proofs to answer the research question above. Actually, there were statistically significant differences in overall frequently used measures of three strategy categories between two groups by levels of proficiency, e.g., Memory, Compensation and Social. Finally, it can be concluded that proficiency is the factor that had a great influence on the students’ use of RCS while there was no significant variation in gender in the use of RCSs found by the current study.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

In short, the study aims at conducting an investigation into the RCSs employed by the first-year English majors at TUE. By using the think-aloud method, the research has endeavored to give the answers to the research questions. The study indicates that the subjects utilized all the six strategy categories by Oxford (1990). Moreover, the findings uncover that there were significant differences in the use of RCSs by the more successful and less successful readers. The more successful readers dominated their less peers. The more successful preferred using Compensation, Cognitive, Meta-cognitive, Memory strategies while their less peers preferred employing Social strategy. The strategies that showed strongest variation between these two parties of readers are Associating/ Elaborate (Memory); Using Resources for Receiving and Sending Messages, Reasoning Deductively (Cognitive); Using other clues (Compensation) and Self-evaluation (Meta-cognitive). In addition, the study showed that proficiency is the major factor affecting the students’ reading comprehension strategy use whereas gender indicated little influence on their choice of RCSs.

This study has also pointed out that proficiency was the main factors creating the significant difference in the use of RCSs between the more successful and less successful readers. In other words, proficiency has a great influence on the students’ use of RCSs. This study implies that it is necessary to offer the less successful learners appropriate guidance in order to help them experiment with these new strategies and decide on the types of strategies that suit them. According to Carell et al. (1989, p. 648), less competent learners are able to improve their reading skills through training in strategies. Moreover, effective reading strategies may help them a great deal in improving their reading proficiency so that they can read more effectively for their academic studies regardless of the type of text they encounter (Grabe, 1991, p. 27). However, “strategy training should not be abstract and theoretical but should be highly practical and useful for students” (Oxford, 1990, p. 201). Thus, in this study, the researchers put forward that there must be explicit instructions which involves learning and practicing strategies with actual reading tasks so as to provide the readers, especially the less successful ones with more effective ways to acquire particular strategies, when and how to use them and how to monitor and evaluate their own performance. This type of training called *Long-Term Strategy Training* by Oxford (1990) will be the best choice for effective reading strategy instruction.

The following sub-section presents six steps in reading strategy training which are purposefully adopted from a *Model for Strategy Training* by Oxford (1990).



*Step 1: Determine readers' needs and timetable*

First, consider the readers' needs with related factors such as who the readers are, the reasons for their needs to learn English, their present levels of proficiency, and their age. Second, allocate suitable amount time for reading strategy training, e.g., how much time can be spent in this kind of training?, Will strategy training be related to the language tasks in some ways so that the strategies become immediately applied and learners can comprehend and practice them?

*Step 2: Select reading strategies well*

First, choose suitable reading strategies, which are in relation to the readers' needs and characteristics. Second, select more than one reading strategy to teach by deciding the kinds of mutually supporting strategies that are important for the readers. Third, make sure that the training concludes a combination of these approaches as follows: first, supplying readers with a large range of reading strategies and then stressing on those which readers have selected for themselves.

*Step 3: Consider integration of reading strategy training*

Integrate reading strategy training with the tasks, especially the communicative tasks in every kinds of text with the hope that the readers can clearly understand the importance and the usefulness of reading strategies.

*Step 4: Prepare materials and activities*

Develop some materials or handouts on when and how to use the strategies those are focused on purposefully. Choose the activities and materials that seem to attract readers or let them select their own language activities as materials they like.

*Step 5: Conduct "completely informed training"*

Ensure that the reading strategy training is explicit and easy to understand because it aims at helping readers to improve their independence and autonomy.

Inform the readers of the reading strategies that they are being taught, the reasons, the purposes of utilizing these strategies and the methods that they can use to transfer these reading strategies to the reading text.

*Step 6: Evaluate and revise the reading training*

Ask readers to make an evaluation and revision of the reading strategy so that they can feedback their own comments about their strategy use.

Observe during and after the training and following which are useful for evaluating the achievement of reading strategy training.

Give some criteria for evaluating training on the basis of task improvement, general skill improvement, and maintenance of the new strategy over time, transfer of reading strategy to other related reading tasks and improvement in readers' attitude.

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## CHIẾN LƯỢC ĐỌC HIỂU ĐƯỢC SỬ DỤNG BỞI SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ NĂM NHẤT TẠI ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM THÁI NGUYÊN

**Tóm tắt:** Giống như các kỹ năng khác, kỹ năng đọc có vai trò quan trọng trong tri nhận ngôn ngữ. Mục đích của đọc là hiểu và giúp người học nắm được nội dung văn bản. Nghiên cứu này điều tra chiến lược đọc hiểu được sử dụng bởi sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm nhất, Đại học Sư phạm Thái Nguyên. Nghiên cứu nhằm: (1) tìm hiểu chiến lược đọc được sử dụng bởi sinh viên chuyên năm nhất; (2) phát hiện những khác biệt quan trọng trong việc sử dụng chiến lược đọc giữa sinh viên tốt và kém. Nghiên cứu còn giúp định hướng, tìm ra chiến lược đọc phù hợp. Kết quả cho thấy chiến lược đọc tốt mà những sinh viên tốt đã dùng có thể được chia sẻ và áp dụng cho sinh viên yếu nhằm giúp họ học ngôn ngữ một cách hiệu quả hơn.

**Từ khóa:** chiến lược đọc, chiến lược đọc hiểu, đọc hiểu