

READING COMPREHENSION COMPETENCE OF EFL LEARNERS AND TECHNIQUES TO TEACH AND LEARN CULTURAL WORDS

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Abstract: Among four skills of English, reading is somehow hard to handle well for learners. One problem to hinder their positive achievements in reading comprehension is difficult vocabulary. Cultural words are of this vocabulary range. Within her brief research, the writer analyzes students' reading comprehension competence at Hanoi National University of Education and recommends possible techniques to teach and learn cultural words in the textbook *New English File* (pre-intermediate) for students' enhancement in reading tasks. Students' interviews and statistics of their reading results are used as methods for the study. After that, data are collected; findings are specifically discussed for final conclusion.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, H.N.U.E, New English File (pre-intermediate), Interviews, Result statistics

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has been considered as a hard-to-conquer skill among the four skills of acquiring foreign languages. A large number of learners are continuously on the way to struggle for higher reading band score. Various strategies have, as a result, been applied including expanding vocabulary range. Cultural words are included in the quantity of new vocabulary to memorize. Within this brief paper, the author attempts to consult and comment theories of reading comprehension, cultural words written by other researchers; then, she recommends potential techniques to utilize for language learners, in general and non-English majors at Hanoi National University of Education, in particular after thoroughly analyzing their reading test results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher initially quotes and gives her comments on selected theoretical arguments written by different authors in Vietnam and in other countries related to

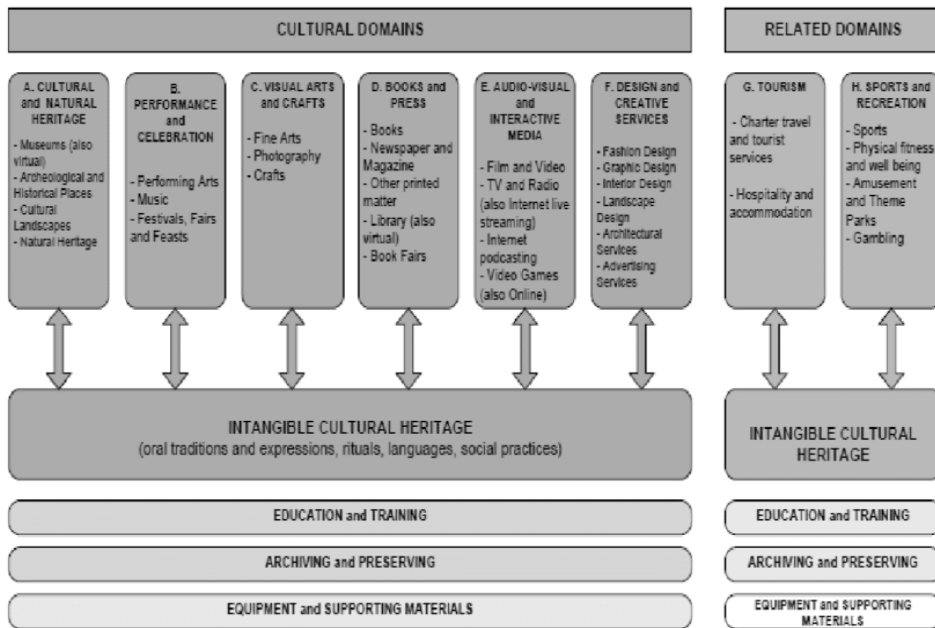
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culture, cultural words and reading comprehension of language learners.

Culture and Cultural Words

One author said that, “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a human as a member of society.” (Tylor, E. in Seymour-Smith, C., 1986) This is among the most popular definitions of culture, which is quite easy to understand. To make it clearer, another definition in UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity should be noted, namely that “culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”. (UNESCO, 2001) This latter one gives readers a more specific view of culture in order to know for sure about this term.

Mentioning cultural diversity, UNESCO explained, “culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.” (UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001, Article 1) This Declaration painted a picture of cultural diversity in words, clarifying the term to be fully understood. The Declaration also made a list of cultural domains so that readers are capable of distinguishing, as illustrated in the diagram below. As can be noted from the diagram, cultural domains consist of 6 categories (cultural and natural heritage, performance and celebration, visual arts and crafts, books and press, audio-visual and interactive media, design and creative services) and 2 other categories in related domains (tourism, sports and recreation).



UNESCO 2009 Framework for Cultural Statistics Domains

Mentioning cultural vocabulary, John Locke (1976: 226) stated that in a language there appears a “great store of words ... which have not any that answer them in another language”. He added, these language-specific words symbolize certain “complex ideas” created through “the customs and manner of life” of the people. Additionally, he confirmed that such complex ideas were “collections made and abstracted by the mind”, which did not change in different cultures. Another author, Edward Sapir (1949: 27) clarified, “distinctions which seem inevitable to us may be utterly ignored in languages which reflect an entirely different type of culture, while these in turn insist on distinctions which are all but unintelligible to us.” Anna Wierzbicka (1997) owned another idea related to cultural words, “in a sense, it may seem obvious that words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society but also ways of thinking.” She meant that culture-specific words showed people’s lives and thinking.

For the past few years, Andre Canga Alonso and Daniela Cifone Ponte (2015) deeply analyzed cultural vocabulary in English textbooks. The research detailed that the number of cultural vocabulary in English textbooks are not balanced, mostly words on such topics as geographical places and celebrities. Isabel Negro Alousque

(2009) held the view that, a great deal of vocabulary in a particular language is culturally referent, which is specific for a language community. Meaning of recorded vocabulary on culture is normally hard to acquire without cultural knowledge, causing a lot of problems of translation, especially in case the words are associated with cultural fields.

In Vietnam, recently, Nguyen Van Chien (2004) said that, cultural vocabulary is initially a fundamental unit among sources of cultural words of a language. Furthermore, he added that through meaning and semantic structure of vocabulary, cultural words are closely associated with definitions related to certain characteristics of people's culture; they are forms of languages reflecting definitions of recording basic tribal cultural features; content of symbols from culture always reflects uniquely culture of a language when contrasting them with equivalent symbols of words in another language...; he further analyzed, on the other side, cultural vocabulary, as fundamental symbols of languages, always shows distinctive things of the world outside the language. Writer Nguyen Thị Diem My (2012), who did research on "means of translating Vietnamese cultural words in French", mentioned means to figure out Vietnamese cultural vocabulary by French people. The author chose 3 fields that represent Vietnamese culture most obviously for her research, namely that customs, traditional costume and food.

Reading Competence of English Learners

Reading competence reflects language learners' comprehensive capability. So as to master this competence, it is necessary for learners to practice and train themselves with appropriate strategies.

Kintsch (1998) và Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) confirmed that, reading comprehension itself was a process of creating a passage; the objective was to comprehend the whole passage, not the meaning of separated words or sentences; the goal of reading comprehension was representing psychology of meaning included in the passage and readers' own background knowledge.

Defining the term "reading competence", Phạm ThịHòa (2009) stated that, reading a passage for comprehension was a process of not only decoding a language to search for concepts from syntax and semantics but also understanding concepts that the creator of the passage would like to express in typical context and how the context influences on things mentioned. The researcher added that, what language teachers need to do was to assist learners to read and comprehend thoroughly, build deep awareness of the language in the text, get them ready to read the passage and master effective techniques to read for comprehension. Undeniably, the writer had a right idea of reading competence which is still a hill to go over for many learners.

There appeared another researcher, Dinh Thi Bac Binh (2018) mentioning troubles in teaching and learning English reading in the field of finance and banking at Academy of Finance and Banking. The researcher made a list of several causes leading to unsuccessful lectures, and suggested a few methods to improve teaching and learning English reading in the field of finance and banking for non-English majors at Academy of Finance and Banking. To make the matter clearer, Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016) explained different types of reading and strategies to better reading comprehension.

Non-English majors at Hanoi National University of Education have frequently experienced hardships in making effort to get higher score for reading comprehension. A number of reasons can be found obviously for these learners. One problem is a lack of wide vocabulary range to comprehend reading passages totally. What they need is applying efficient strategies to memorize new words including cultural words of different topics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research design

In order to find out difficulties students encounter during their reading comprehension procedure and feasible strategies of reinforcing reading competence which were applied for non-English majors at Hanoi National University of Education, the author interviewed 10 19-year-old students of level A1 from different faculties who were studying the subject English 2 and analyzed 43 students' midterm test papers of the same level. Here are the findings for the above methods of research.

Data collection and analysis

First and foremost, the writer would like to analyze results of interviews from 10 students.

The questions to ask them are hereinafter:

1. Of the four skills of learning English, which skill do you like most?
2. Do you find it easy to master reading comprehension skill?
3. What troubles do you encounter when doing reading comprehension tasks?
4. Are there normally many new cultural words for you in a reading text in the textbook?
5. What strategies do you usually utilize to cope up with the new cultural words while finishing reading tasks?

6. Do you think your reading score will rise if the lecturer pre-teaches selected new cultural words before you start reading? Why?
7. Besides reading texts in the textbook, do you frequently read other sources of English texts?

These are their responses to the mentioned questions. For the very first question, all of them said that they were most interested in speaking skill. No one told the researcher that they were fond of reading. They added that reading skill is so hard to get good score for reading comprehension tasks. As can be seen, it seemed to be a must for these students to do reading tasks in English lessons and in exams. It is because reading skill requires them to practice gradually with full attention and obvious well-planned procedure.

For question 2, their answer is No. They confirmed that they found it difficult to comprehend the text totally; as a result, their answers in reading tasks were somehow incorrect. This means that they did have their own problems to deal with for better band scores in reading skill.

For question 3, their troubles included: so many difficult new words to understand the meaning of the whole reading passage, challenging question types, hard-to-analyze questions, confused multiple choice answers. All these problems prevented the students from reading quickly and getting high scores for reading tasks. They need to seek for possible solutions for all the above issues related to reading tasks and apply them as their reading strategies day by day in order to conquer easy-to-difficult reading questions.

The answer to question 4 is naturally Yes. They thought there were normally 10 new words including cultural ones in a reading text. In some way, they can be difficult cultural words of all fields in daily social life. Without understanding the vocabulary, readers are not able to accomplish the reading tasks well.

Responses to question 5 gives researcher some strategies that learners used to tackle new vocabulary in the reading text. They include: making guess the meaning of the words or ignoring them so that readers applied techniques of reading comprehension to finish the tasks. Understandably, knowing the meaning of new cultural words from the passage is comparatively essential to understand the whole text and have the most correct answers to the questions in a reading task.

To answer question 6, students said Yes. Such reasons are listed as: comprehending new cultural words enabled them to understand the questions and the text fully or it took shorter time to read and answer questions in reading tasks. Thus, it is advised that selected new cultural vocabulary taken from the text should

be pre-taught before the students start reading so that they are well-prepared for more effective reading tasks accomplishment.

Responses for question 7 does not satisfy the author. All the students said No. They did not normally read other English texts beside the texts in the textbook. This is one of the causes why their vocabulary range was not wide and varied. To make it worse, their reading comprehension skill did not improve gradually as they did not read English materials frequently.

Now, the writer would like to analyze results of 43 A1 level students' reading comprehension scores in their midterm test. These are their results after 3 weeks they learnt with the lecturer of English who pre-taught new vocabulary including cultural words before they started doing their reading tasks in their coursebook namely New English File (Pre-intermediate). Initially, they found it a burden to do reading tasks; some even did not feel interested in this skill of reading and did other things like surfing the Internet or chatting, instead. However, after 3 weeks, they were much more confident to do any reading comprehension tasks in the book.

The reading comprehension section of midterm test was designed with two smaller parts, matching notices and answers (6 questions), and choosing Right-Wrong-Doesn't Say for the information given (7 questions). In total, this section had 13 questions.

The findings showed that 2 students got correct answers to all the 13 questions. It is also noticeable that 10 students got correct answers to all 6 questions in part 1 (matching notices and answers). 5 other students only had 1 incorrect answer to each part of reading comprehension sections. The rest of students, 26 remaining students normally possessed 2 or 3 incorrect answers for each part of reading comprehension section.

The 2 questions that students did not have correct answers in part 1 were designed with certain difficult words as: for sale, great prices, hot meals, served until 10 p.m. That is the reason why the students could not comprehend the questions printed correctly so as to get right answers.

Such questions that students themselves had incorrect answers for part 2 consisted of complicated words that prevented them from totally understood the meaning, such as: lots of places, in his area, nearly as good at rowing as him, doing the driving, found a teacher to help him, learn to row, it is possible, row on his favourite rivers. In the passage, there appeared several hard-to-handle words for them like: take them to and from the rivers, continue with his sport, don't have enough water, started rowing on the sea, most of his free time, practising on the

many rivers near his home. For A1 level students, some of them find it troublesome to figure out complicated words and phrases or collocations; they normally know single simple vocabulary which do not require them to analyze or guess the meaning; only a small percentage of the A1 level students possess wide range of vocabulary of different topics.

As can be seen, the research showed amusing results and attitudes from students who were not completely keen on reading tasks before the research was carried out in the class. This means that pre-teaching new cultural vocabulary leads to optimistic changes in the procedure of teaching and learning reading skills for non-English majors at Hanoi National University of Education.

Suggested techniques to pre-teach cultural words

The author expresses her deep thirst for recommending several techniques she utilized for her students within 3 weeks to teach new cultural words taken out from reading texts in New English File (Pre-intermediate) textbook. Here they are:

- Matching words and definitions
- Matching words and pictures
- Explaining meaning of the words
- Analyzing structure of the words
- Practicing pronouncing words
- Creating a story with the new words
- Choosing a word to complete each blank

Above are selected techniques the researcher applied in class for students' better performance in reading tasks. They did work quite well only after 3 weeks.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

Any language learner would like to master reading comprehension skill for higher and higher score at universities or in exams for international English certificates. Non-English majors at Hanoi National University of Education have struggled with this skill since they started studying English.

The findings of the brief research from interviews and reading test results after 3-week experiencing reveals that students themselves have hoped and searched so long for better scores in reading comprehension tasks. They did had difficulties with this skill and they could improve after just 3 weeks the author experienced her techniques of pre-teaching cultural words from texts in the coursebook. Their

results were surprising as they did try hard to learn vocabulary and practice reading comprehension skill.

For limited time and scope of the study, the research was carried out for only 43 students. Hopefully, it will be further researched in the near future for more reliable and wider success.

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NĂNG LỰC ĐỌC HIỂU CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH VÀ CÁC THỦ THUẬT DẠY VÀ HỌC TỪ VỰNG VĂN HÓA

Tóm tắt: Trong bốn kỹ năng thực hành tiếng Anh, đọc là kỹ năng khó đối với người học. Một rào cản khiến người học khó đạt được thành tích tốt là vốn từ vựng khó. Từ vựng văn hóa nằm trong số đó. Trong phạm vi bài nghiên cứu vấn đề này, tác giả phân tích năng lực đọc hiểu của sinh viên trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội và đề đạt một số thủ thuật dạy và học từ vựng văn hóa trong giáo trình *New English File* (trình độ trung cấp) để cải thiện khả năng làm bài đọc của sinh viên. Tác giả sử dụng phương pháp phỏng vấn và liệt kê kết quả bài đọc. Sau đó, số liệu được thu thập và thảo luận cụ thể trước khi kết luận được đưa ra.

Từ khóa: *Đọc hiểu, Đại học Sư phạm HN, New English File (trình độ trung cấp), Phỏng vấn, Liệt kê kết quả.*