

USING SUPPLEMENTARY READING MATERIALS FOR IMPROVING STUDENTS' READING SKILLS AT COLLEGE OF MECHANICS AND METALLURGY

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ABSTRACT

The action research aimed at investigating the efficiency of supplementary reading materials in improving students' reading skills. The participants of the study were 58 second-year students of Information Technology Faculty at College of Mechanics and Metallurgy in Thai Nguyen. The study which lasted for ten weeks used the two tests (pre-test and post-test) and students' questionnaire as the instrumentation to collect necessary data. Results of the two tests were computed and analyzed using t-test for correlated means, the students' questionnaire was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to give the findings. The results of the tests analysis showed that supplementary reading materials in an extensive reading program actually helped students improve their reading skills. The questionnaire analysis also gave students' attitudes towards reading skills and reading texts in their textbook *New Headway Elementary*. Further, it evaluated the effectiveness of students' reading strategies applied before the extensive reading program. Additionally, the results showed that students expressed positive opinions about supplementary reading materials in the extensive reading program. Based on the findings of the study, some implications for teaching reading skills were suggested and recommendations were made for the betterment of the students reading skills and further research was also recommened.

Keywords: *reading skills, supplementary reading materials (SRM), intensive reading (IR), extensive reading (ER), college of Mechanics and Metallurgy (CMM)*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an important mental process that belongs only to human beings. It helps to open the door into mankind's treasures of knowledge. Good reading skills can help readers make great progress in academic purposes. They also bring people enjoyment and enrich their life. Undeniably, a person has to master these essential skills.

In English teaching and learning, reading is one of the four important major skills. However, the effectiveness of teaching and learning reading is still limited in many schools and colleges.

Regarding English teaching and learning methodology, there have been a lot of books and researches done on reading. Some names to be considered are Nunan, D. (1991, 1999) in the series about language teaching and learning, Brown, H.D. (1994), and Anderson, N.J. (1999), to name but a few. The given authors

share an opinion that once appropriate strategies are applied, intensive and extensive reading will help improve students' reading skills.

Methodologically, many teachers are influenced by the Grammar-translation method. Accordingly, teaching of reading means introducing vocabulary, grammatical structures and translating the text into their mother tongue. Furthermore, the reading materials are not sufficient, relevant and interesting enough for students, which leads to students' demotivation in learning reading.

In order to explore the efficiency of using supplementary reading materials in improving students' reading skills, the authors conducted an action research at College of Mechanics and Metallurgy (CMM). With this study, they wanted not only to enhance the teaching and learning efficiency of reading skills, but also to stimulate students' interest in language learning as well.

SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

CMM is a technical college, which trains skilled workers and practical engineers of

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engineering and metallurgy for the whole country. It is located in Thai Nguyen - a northern mountainous province. Accordingly, the teaching and learning conditions are not very good. The college does not have language laboratories for students to learn foreign languages. Teaching aids are merely cassettes, textbooks, board, and chalk. Reference books are very poor in the college library. In addition, the class size is large of about 60-70 students. Consequently, English teaching and learning is limited.

Entering the college, students are at different levels of English language proficiency. Most of them studied English; some of them learnt French, Chinese or Russian at high school. However, students are not divided into different groups depending on their levels of language proficiency, because there has never been an official examination to classify them.

The action research is conducted with the voluntary participation of 58 of 65 second-year students. They are all in the same class CD-CNTT 46 of the Information Technology Faculty. The numbers of males and females are relatively equivalent. 30 males and 28 females. All the students are at the ages from 19 to 24, and come from different provinces in the North and Central of Vietnam

The study was conducted as a descriptive one that employed quantitative approach by means of tests and survey questionnaire delivered to CMM second-year non-major English students to assess their English reading proficiency before and after the Extensive Reading Program and their attitudes towards supplementary reading materials.

In this study, the two tests (pre-test and post-test) are the main means to gather the data. First, the pre-test is given to the students in order to classify their English reading proficiency before carrying out the ERP. After eight weeks of ERP, the post-test is delivered to assess students' improvement in reading skills.

Questionnaire enables the researchers not only to gain the necessary quantitative data, but also to provide students with a chance to express their attitudes towards their problems.

FINDINGS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Test results

As shown in table 1, there is overall improvement in the post-test scores in comparison with those of the pre-test. In the pre-test 53.4% is BR (bad readers), in the post-test the number of BR decreases to 36.2%. Meanwhile, 37.9% of the MR (medium readers) in the pre-test increases up to 48.3% in the post-test. Especially, number of GR (good readers) in the post-test (15.5%) is much more in comparison with the one of the pre-test (8.6%).

Table 1. Tests results of the three groups BR, MR and GR

N = 58	BR	MR	GR
	31	22	5
Pre-test	53.4%	37.9%	8.6%
	21	28	9
Post-test	36.2%	48.3%	15.5%

Results of the questionnaires

Students' attitudes towards reading skills and reading texts in the textbooks

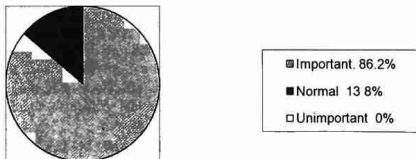


Figure 1. Students' attitudes towards importance of reading skills in English learning

As can be seen in figure 1, the majority (86.2%) of the students agree that reading is important in English learning. 13.8% of the students consider it normal in terms of importance and none find it unimportant.

Students' reading strategies before ERP

Table 2. Students' orientation before reading

N ^o	Questions	Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Usually (%)
7	Before reading, do you often look at the title and pictures of the text to predict the content of the reading text?	31	37.9	31
8	Before reading, do you read the questions followed to focus on important information in the text?	43.1	36.2	20.7
9	When reading, do you skim for general ideas then read carefully?	36.2	39.7	24.1

As shown in the table 2, in question 7, 31% students *never* look at the title and pictures of the text to predict the content of the reading text, and 37.9% *sometimes* do that. In question 8 about the reading orientation stage through the text questions, the majority of students (43.1%) *never* read the text questions to focus on important information in the text before reading, 36.2% students *sometimes* do that while only 20.7% *usually* read questions beforehand. Answering question 9 about the reading strategies applied, 36.2% students *never* skim for general ideas, and 39.7% *sometimes* do that, there are only 24.1% students skim for general ideas then read carefully. It means that from the beginning of the reading process they are not well-oriented about the reading topic as well as the content of the text.

In one word, part 2 of the students' questionnaire analysis gives the researchers some important information about their strategies applied in reading comprehension before ERP. Most students do not use appropriate strategies from the reading orientation procedure as well as when working with new vocabulary or the whole text. Next, the analysis and discussion of part 3 showed students' perspectives towards ERP in order to see whether students benefit from the ERP.

Students' attitudes towards Extensive Reading Program

Table 3 shows the results of the third part of the questionnaire on the students' attitudes towards the ERP.

Table 3. Students' attitudes towards Extensive Reading Program

N ^o	Questions	Yes (%)	No (%)
15	In your opinion, should we use supplementary reading materials to improve the reading skill?	93.1	6.9
16	Extensive reading makes you more interested in learning English	93.1	6.9
17	Your reading skill is improved after extensive reading	98.3	1.7
18	Your background knowledge is widened owing to extensive reading	94.8	5.2
19	Extensive reading provides you with more new vocabulary and structures	96.6	3.4
20	Extensive reading outside the class provides you with enjoyment and friendly environment. You do not get work pressure with extensive reading.	94.8	5.2
21	After this program finishes, you will keep on reading extensively	87.9	12.1

As shown on the table, most students have positive impression on the ERP. Accordingly, 93.1% students agree that SRM should be used to improve students' reading skills. Also, 93.1% students think that ER makes them more interested in learning English and 98.3% say their reading skills are improved after ERP; besides, 94.8% students believe that their background knowledge is

widened and 96.6% confirm that ER provides them with more new vocabulary and structures; in addition, 94.8% students express their enjoyment of having taken part in ERP and 87.9% decide to keep on reading extensively after ERP.

Table 4. Students' suggestions for good supplementary reading materials

Ranking	Items
1	Each reading text should have its glossary
2	Reading texts should be of various types, such as articles, short stories, letters, emails, advertisements, diaries ...
3	Reading texts should be relevant and within the reader's background knowledge.
4	Exercises should be of various types.
5	Vocabulary should be familiar with students.
6	Reading texts should have suitable length for elementary students.
7	Time should be set for each reading text

From the numbers above, it can be concluded that students like ER because they benefit from it in different dimensions: enjoyment, friendly reading environment, widening background knowledge, enriching vocabulary, and improving reading skills as well.

When being asked about preferred topics for reading, they have different viewpoints, but the most preferable topics are *student life, famous people, love and science & technology*. It may be inferred that those topics are interesting, related and realistic to them. The next ones are ranked as followed: *holidays & festivals, sports, exploration & adventures, environment*. The less enjoyed topics are *health, inventions, education, business & trading and politics*.

For good supplementary materials to improve the reading skill, students give some suggestions which are ranked as in table 4 followed:

In their opinions, each reading text should have its glossary, since students can easily find the meaning of the new words in the text; and reading texts should be of various types, such as articles, short stories, letters, emails, advertisements, diaries, etc so as to get familiar with different types of texts in the real life. Moreover, reading texts should be relevant and within students' background knowledge for them to comprehend. Besides, exercises should be of various types for students to practice. In addition, reading texts should have suitable length and difficulty for

elementary students and time should be set for each reading text.

In short, students do hope to have better supplementary materials for improving their reading skills. Apart from topics, text types, length and level of difficulty of the reading texts, good supplementary reading materials should be relevant and within students' background knowledge with familiar vocabulary in order to motivate and improve their reading skills.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study was carried out at CMM with an attempt to investigate the efficiency of SRM in improving of reading skills in particular and English learning in general. The study was conducted as an action research within a class of 58 second-year students involved in an ERP and provided the following findings:

Firstly, it gave students' perspectives about reading skills and the reading sections in their textbook *New Headway Elementary Students* thought that reading was indispensable, but they were not satisfied with their textbook very much in terms of content and reading workload.

Secondly, students' reading strategies employed before ERP were identified as inefficient bottom-up reading model

Thirdly, the data collected in the study confirmed the fact that supplementary reading materials did improve students' reading skills.

Last but not least, students provided positive impressions on ERP. They also suggested some useful ideas for better supplementary reading materials.

Recommendations

Selecting and adapting SRM

Selecting and adapting SRM are very important since they should be selected with great care to fit the suggested criteria by Nuttall (1996, pp.170-179), such as *content suitability, exploitability, and readability, etc*

In the first place, having professional experience and language knowledge, the teacher should help students choose suitable SRM to them in terms of ages, language proficiency, likes and others, since students do not know how fluent they are and what the books are really about.

Furthermore, the teacher should choose the materials which are accessible to the students. They should know something about the topics beforehand to activate background knowledge in order to comprehend the content. Students surely cannot understand and be prevented from progress in reading if they have no idea about topics.

Teachers in mountainous institutions may have difficulties in suggesting reading materials to students, for there are not many books available. In this case, adapting or compiling in-house materials is a preferred option. They can compile the reading texts with length, language proficiency, likes, ages and genres appropriate for her students, then compose various exercises depending on the taught in class language items. SRM adapted should include a variety of text types and tasks to motivate students. Young people often prefer game-like or imaginative tasks such as reordering headings, rearranging pictures, completing tables/diagrams, gap-filling, role-play, problem-solving, etc

Designing an ERP

It is so important to consider how the program should be introduced. It is strongly believed

that students should be provided with necessary reading strategies before they participate in the ERP. Before carrying out the ERP, the teacher should explain clearly to students the aims, objectives of the program and give instructions on how to select SRM. During the program, students should read their texts at home and do some tasks (if required) and write the summaries. The teacher should check to make sure whether students really do the reading, but she/he should not make any correction. A review should be taken after first few weeks and at the end of the ERP for evaluation of its effectiveness and suggestions for the adjustment.

In providing students with necessary reading strategies, it can be briefly said that the teacher should guide the students to read interactively. The teacher should be a reader-model for students and instruct them carefully, clearly in different processes: orientation (by title, pictures, skimming in top-down approach), working with text (guessing new words from contexts, ignoring redundant words, etc in bottom-up approach, activating background knowledge and using grammar to understand the meanings in interactive reading, etc). When teaching reading in classes, some activities can be set for students to be more accessible to the text: brief discussion about the topics relevant to the text, providing text-based guided questions etc.

Especially, teaching reading may be combined with other skills (speaking, writing, listening). Seminars or bulletin reports can be the place for students to show what they gain from their reading. These activities make students more active and motivated in reading.

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TÓM TẮT

SỬ DỤNG TÀI LIỆU ĐỌC BỔ TRỢ ĐỂ CẢI THIỆN KỸ NĂNG ĐỌC CỦA SINH VIÊN TRƯỜNG CAO ĐẲNG CƠ KHÍ – LUYỆN KIM, THÁI NGUYÊN

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Nghiên cứu hành động này nhằm mục đích điều tra tính hiệu quả của tài liệu đọc bổ trợ trong việc nâng cao kỹ năng đọc của sinh viên. Tham gia vào nghiên cứu là 58 sinh viên năm thứ hai Khoa CNTT của trường Cao đẳng Cơ khí - Luyện kim, Thái Nguyên. Nghiên cứu kéo dài trong mười tuần, sử dụng bài kiểm tra trước, bài kiểm tra sau khi áp dụng chương trình đọc bổ trợ và bảng câu hỏi điều tra để thu thập các dữ liệu cần thiết. Kết quả phân tích các bài kiểm tra cho thấy tài liệu đọc bổ trợ ngoài chương trình đã giúp sinh viên cải thiện kỹ năng đọc của mình. Việc phân tích các câu trả lời trong bảng hỏi đáp cũng cho biết thái độ của sinh viên đối với kỹ năng đọc và quan điểm của sinh viên về các bài đọc trong giáo trình. Nghiên cứu cũng đánh giá tính hiệu quả của các chiến lược đọc mà sinh viên áp dụng trước khi tham gia vào chương trình đọc bổ trợ. Sinh viên đã bày tỏ ý kiến tích cực và đưa ra các gợi ý về tài liệu cho chương trình đọc thêm. Từ kết quả nghiên cứu, các tác giả đưa ra một số đề xuất cho việc dạy kỹ năng đọc và gợi ý cho các nghiên cứu sau này.

Từ khóa: kỹ năng đọc, tài liệu đọc bổ trợ (SRM), đọc trong chương trình (IR), đọc ngoài chương trình (ER), trường Cao đẳng Cơ khí - Luyện kim (CMM)

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