

The Problems of English Reading Comprehension of Students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery in Mandalay of Myanmar

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Abstract

This research investigates English reading comprehension problems among students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery in Mandalay, Myanmar. The study was driven by two primary objectives: to examine the specific obstacles students face in comprehending English texts and to identify effective solutions to enhance their reading abilities. A mixed-methods research design was employed, collecting data from 56 students via questionnaires and conducting in-depth interviews with five English teachers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, while qualitative data provided deeper insight into pedagogical and environmental challenges. The findings reveal significant impediments to reading comprehension, including a limited vocabulary base reported by 46.4% of students, a lack of regular reading practice outside the classroom for 35.7%, and an inability to process complex sentence structures for 30%. Furthermore, the study identified a critical lack of explicit instruction in reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and predicting. External factors, including a shortage of school resources and traditional teaching methods, further compound these difficulties. To address these challenges, the study suggests implementing structured questioning techniques, strategy-driven instruction, and increasing exposure to diverse reading materials.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension; English Learning; Vocabulary; Monastic Education; Myanmar

Introduction

Reading comprehension is an indispensable skill that underlies academic success and personal development. This is particularly true in non-native English-speaking contexts, such as Myanmar, where English serves as a vital medium for accessing global knowledge and facilitating international communication. Proficiency in reading allows learners to engage with a wider range of texts, expand their vocabulary, improve their writing skills, and gain in-depth knowledge across various academic subjects. However, many students in Myanmar struggle to meet these standards, often facing significant challenges when interpreting or being tested on English materials. Students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery in Mandalay represent a unique demographic within this educational landscape. Many of these monastic learners originate from remote villages or impoverished areas and often lack access to formal English education during their formative

years. Despite these disadvantaged backgrounds, they are expected to comprehend difficult English texts, ranging from devotional scriptures to academic treatises and general reading matter. Consequently, many of these students experience failure and heightened anxiety due to a poor foundational vocabulary, the incorrect use of terminology, and a lack of established reading habits.

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process that extends far beyond the mere decoding of words and sentences. It requires deeper processing to extract meaning, make inferences, identify a writer's intentions, and critically evaluate content. For monastic students, these difficulties are compounded by a lack of explicit instruction in essential reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and summarizing. Without pedagogical support or effective feedback on how to engage with texts, students often face emotional and cognitive blocks, including frustration, anxiety, and a lack of motivation to read in English.

The educational environment further complicates these struggles. Monastic students often lack sufficient reading materials, access to qualified English teachers, and a conducive learning environment, all of which are necessary to develop reading fluency and confidence. This absence of resources prevents many learners from navigating the essential skills required for their academic and spiritual development. In the context of second-language reading, Westwood (2001) asserts that comprehension difficulties frequently arise when readers lack sufficient vocabulary and fail to apply strategies like skimming or predicting. Furthermore, Grabe (2009) and Harmer (2011) emphasize that vocabulary acquisition is essential for effective reading, a factor that is significantly lacking among the students at the monastery.

Cultural differences in text comprehension also play a role. Students often struggle to understand idioms, metaphors, and cultural references embedded in English texts, confirming Barnett's (2004) observation that background knowledge, or schema, significantly affects reading comprehension. Additionally, the prevalence of the Grammar-Translation Method in these settings, as noted by Brown (1988), may build grammatical knowledge but does not develop higher-order comprehension skills. Psychological barriers, such as low self-confidence and the fear of making mistakes, further hinder progress, as discussed by Peter (2001).

Given the insurmountable challenges faced by students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery, there is an urgent need for an in-depth study of their reading comprehension problems. This research aims to uncover the pivotal roadblocks hindering English reading development and suggest evidence-informed, feasible practices for the monastic education system. By identifying these impediments, the study seeks to facilitate quantifiable progress, ensuring that reading becomes not only an improved skill for students but also a more accessible tool for decoding educational and spiritual treasures. This theoretical framework underscores the necessity for strategic intervention to enhance reading comprehension skills in this unique monastic setting.



Research Objective

1. To study the problems of English reading comprehension of students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery in Mandalay of Myanmar.
2. To identify possible solutions to improve students' reading comprehension abilities.

Methodology

The methodology for this study utilizes a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of English reading comprehension challenges.

Population, Sample, and Key Informants

The study was conducted with a specific focus on the monastic education context in Mandalay.

- Population: The target population consisted of 56 students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery in Mandalay, Myanmar.
- Sample: The participants included students of varying ages and grade levels who were provided with personal time to express their ideas freely.
- Key Informants: For the qualitative component, 5 English teachers currently working under the Tant Kyi Taung Monastery served as key informants to provide pedagogical insights.

Research Tools

The researcher employed three primary instruments to gather data:

- Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire divided into four parts was utilized. Part 1 covered general background information; Part 2 focused on reading and wording comprehension; Part 3 solicited opinions on textbooks and teaching aids; and Part 4 evaluated specific reading comprehension results.
- Rating Scale: The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale for scoring: 5 (The most), 4 (More), 3 (Middle), 2 (Low), and 1 (Least).
- In-Depth Interview: A qualitative interview guide was developed to explore the experiences and observations of the 5 English teachers.

Data Collection

Data was collected during the 2024 academic year through a systematic process:

- Distribution: Questionnaires were delivered to 55 students and 5 teachers with the assistance of staff at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery.
- Interview Process: Interviews with the 5 teachers were initially conducted in the Myanmar language and recorded using a smartphone to ensure accuracy.
- Transcription: The recorded interviews were subsequently translated into English and transcribed into text format for analysis.

Data Analysis

The analysis was divided into five distinct parts to address both problems and solutions:

- Quantitative Analysis: Student questionnaire data was analyzed using the Statistical application.
- Statistical Methods: Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation (S.D.), were calculated to summarize the quantitative data.
- Qualitative Analysis: Data obtained from the in-depth interviews with teachers were analyzed to identify recurring themes and specific obstacles to reading comprehension.
- Integration: The results from both methods were synthesized to determine effective ways to improve reading comprehension performance for monastic students.

Research Results

Objective 1: To study the problems of English reading comprehension of students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery in Mandalay of Myanmar

The investigation into the obstacles faced by students revealed a combination of linguistic deficiencies, lack of strategy awareness, and environmental constraints.

Vocabulary and Phonetic Barriers: A significant 46.4% of students reported struggling with vocabulary and pronunciation. Teachers observed that students often translate texts word-for-word rather than grasping the full meaning of a passage.

Syntactic and Textual Complexity: 30% of the participants indicated they could not understand long or complex sentences. This limited vocabulary base makes it difficult for students to decipher underlying meanings in various contexts.

Absence of Reading Strategies: Students demonstrated a limited understanding of essential strategies such as skimming, predicting, and summarizing. Instead of employing these cognitive tools to identify main ideas, students relied heavily on direct translation and rote memorization.

Lack of Practice and Resources: 35.7% of students identified a lack of reading practice outside of class as a major challenge. Furthermore, only 25% of students reported having access to English-language books or digital reading tools.

Psychological and Pedagogical Hurdles: Teachers highlighted that students frequently lacked motivation and self-confidence during reading tasks. Many were not taught effective reading strategies in their earlier years of education.

Objective 2: To identify possible solutions to improve students' reading comprehension abilities.

Based on the identified impediments, the study proposed several evidence-informed strategies to enhance the monastic education system.

Strategy-Driven Instruction: Implementing explicit teaching of reading strategies—including skimming, scanning, predicting, and summarizing—is essential for addressing current performance gaps.

Structured Questioning Techniques: The findings suggest using pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading questions to encourage active engagement and critical thinking.

Expansion of Reading Materials: There is an urgent need to supply diverse English texts, storybooks, and digital resources to provide students with immersive exposure to the language.

Teacher Professional Development: Providing teachers with up-to-date methods and teaching materials is necessary to help them impart instruction more effectively.

Cultivating a Reading Environment: Creating reading corners and organizing group activities within the monastery can foster an interactive reading culture.

Contextualized Content: Developing custom reading materials based on Buddhist content in English can support comprehension by maintaining relevance to the students' daily lives and spiritual studies.

Discussion

Objective 1: To study the problems of English reading comprehension of students at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery in Mandalay of Myanmar

The first objective of this research was to investigate the specific obstacles students face when engaging with English texts. The findings revealed a multifaceted array of linguistic and cognitive hurdles that impede literacy development.

A primary barrier identified was a limited vocabulary base, with 46.4% of students reporting significant struggles in this area. This deficiency forces students into a "word-for-word" translation trap, preventing them from grasping the cohesive meaning of a text. This observation aligns with the theories of Westwood (2001), who asserts that comprehension failures are fundamentally rooted in an insufficient lexical threshold. Furthermore, Grabe (2009) and Harmer (2011) emphasize that vocabulary acquisition is the essential precursor to effective reading, a factor clearly lacking in this monastic context.

The results also highlighted a critical void in reading strategy awareness. Most students were unfamiliar with tools such as skimming, scanning, or predicting, which often leads to slow, detail-oriented reading that fails to capture overall meanings—a phenomenon described by Great (1981). Additionally, the study found that cultural gaps and a lack of "schema" (background knowledge) hindered the understanding of idioms and metaphors, supporting Barnett's (2004) view that comprehension is deeply tied to cultural context. Finally, the reliance on the Grammar-Translation Method (used by 30.4% of teachers) explains why students may understand rules but lack the fluency required for higher-order comprehension, as noted by Brown (1988).

Objective 2: To identify possible solutions to improve students' reading comprehension abilities.

The second objective aimed to identify evidence-informed strategies to revitalize the monastic learning experience and address the identified impediments.

The discussion emphasizes that substantial improvement can be achieved through strategy-driven intervention. Explicitly teaching students how to utilize skimming, scanning, and predicting can empower them to move beyond frustrating direct translation. This pedagogical

shift is supported by Richards et al. (1992), who advocate for the integration of cognitive reading strategies to bridge comprehension gaps.

Furthermore, the research identified structured questioning techniques—incorporating pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading phases—as a vital tool to foster active engagement. To sustain this growth, the study highlights the need for resource expansion. Aligning with Freeman and Long (1990), the findings suggest that the school environment and access to materials are significant predictors of reading achievement. Huang (2010) also suggests that increasing opportunities for reading aloud can improve oral fluency and phonetic confidence, addressing the "psychological fear" of making mistakes discussed by Peter (2001). Finally, the study recommends fostering a reading culture and providing specialized teacher training to ensure that instruction is student-centered and contextually relevant.

New Body of Knowledge

The research at Tant Kyi Taung Monastery establishes a significant new body of knowledge by identifying the "lexical and strategic void" unique to monastic English learners in Myanmar. It reveals that 46.4% of students function below the necessary vocabulary threshold, forcing a reliance on inefficient word-for-word translation rather than holistic meaning construction.

Furthermore, the study illuminates profound affective barriers, such as a pervasive "fear of making mistakes" and low self-confidence, which serve as powerful inhibitors to engagement. These internal struggles are compounded by severe resource scarcities, including a lack of modern materials and digital tools. Ultimately, this work advocates for a contextualized pedagogical roadmap, proposing the innovative use of Buddhist-themed English content to increase relevance and motivation. By bridging spiritual studies with language acquisition, the study offers a scalable model for improving literacy in non-formal religious institutions.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Utilizing Research Findings

To translate the study's insights into measurable academic progress, educational stakeholders should implement the following:

1) Adopt Strategy-Based Instruction: Teachers should explicitly teach cognitive reading strategies, such as skimming for main ideas and scanning for specific details, to move students beyond inefficient word-for-word translation.

2) Implement Structured Questioning: Engagement should be fostered through a combination of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading questions to encourage critical thinking.

3) Contextualize Learning Materials: Developing custom English reading materials that incorporate Buddhist content can increase student motivation by making the subject matter relevant to their daily monastic life.

4) Enhance Resource Access: Monasteries should prioritize the creation of "reading corners" and provide access to diverse English texts and digital storybooks to increase students' exposure to the language.

5) Provide Specialized Teacher Training: Professional development should equip monastic educators with modern pedagogical methods and student-centered techniques to better support learners.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

To further expand the body of knowledge in this field, the following areas for future inquiry are recommended:

1) Comparative Methodological Studies: Research should be conducted to compare the effectiveness of intensive versus extensive reading methods specifically within monastic environments.

2) Cross-Linguistic Analysis: Future studies could explore how Burmese reading habits and strategies influence English reading performance among monastic students.

3) Vocabulary Acquisition Techniques: Further research is needed to develop vocabulary-building techniques tailored specifically to the unique learning styles of student monks.

4) Longitudinal Motivation Studies: Investigators should examine the long-term impact of self-study habits and motivation on the development of reading proficiency in non-formal religious settings.

5) Impact of Educational Technology: Studies should investigate the role of digital tools and mobile learning in overcoming resource scarcities in remote monastic schools.

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