

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

อ่านภาษาอังกฤษอย่างไรให้เก่งขึ้น: พิเคราะห์มุมมอง จากการศึกษาประกอบของการอ่าน

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Abstract

This academic article aims to present what essential components are involved in order to make them read much better. The detailed concepts of vocabulary knowledge, fluency in reading, and reading strategy, as well as recommendations for tackling the reading problems were

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investigated and addressed. Today's digital world, reading in English is one of the most crucial skills in our everyday lives. Due to the tremendous sources of information provided by the internet, we need to read not only in our own language but also in English for effective communication. However, many people like Thai learners are still struggling in English reading comprehension in spite of the fact that they have been doing it for many years

Keywords: Reading Strategies, Fluent Reading, Reading Comprehension, Reading Components, Becoming a Better Reader in English

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการฉบับนี้มุ่งนำเสนอองค์ประกอบของการอ่านที่เป็นสาระสำคัญ อันจะช่วยพัฒนาให้สามารถอ่านภาษาอังกฤษให้ดียิ่งขึ้น ประกอบด้วยความรู้ด้านคำศัพท์ ความคล่องแคล่วในการอ่าน กลวิธีในการอ่าน และข้อเสนอแนะแนวทางการแก้ปัญหาการ อ่านภาษาอังกฤษบางประการ ซึ่งโดยส่วนใหญ่ที่ได้กล่าวไว้ในปัจจุบันการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษถือเป็น ทักษะสำคัญอย่างหนึ่งที่ต้องใช้ในชีวิตประจำวัน สืบเนื่องจากมีแหล่งข้อมูลต่าง ๆ จำนวนมาก บนอินเทอร์เน็ต นอกจากความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาไทยได้ดีแล้ว เราจำเป็นต้อง สามารถอ่านภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพอีกด้วย อย่างไรก็ตาม ผู้เรียนชาวยิ่งจะต้องมีความเข้าใจในภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อความเข้าใจผ่าน การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษมากยิ่งขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: กลยุทธ์การอ่าน การอ่านอย่างคล่องแคล่ว การอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจ องค์ประกอบของการอ่าน อ่านภาษาอังกฤษอย่างไรให้เก่ง

Introduction

In today's digital world, it is not difficult to see people everywhere reading on their smartphones or other portable devices. Reading seems to

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

be one of the most important skills and it is more and more crucial for anyone to communicate. In fact, we need to read fluently for many other purposes. Students, for example, need to read efficiently in order to succeed in their academic settings. With high potential in reading ability, they can also do well in examinations and find better jobs. For other people they need to read and understand the instructions on medical labels. People travelling abroad must read and fill out immigration forms as well as road and warning signs and provided recommendations. Specifically, the Internet is a great learning tool and this makes reading an inevitable skill. So reading is no doubt a necessary skill to master as we are to encounter overwhelming information. No matter how hard a text is, reading in one's own language is not a problematic issue. In the globalized world connected by the Internet, however, reading in English is very common in everyone's daily life since the majority of web pages (59.5%) are in English (W3Techs, 2020). Most of those who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) like Thai learners still find themselves struggling to read effectively. Much research in the past decade clearly showed this reading problem throughout the country (Ammaralikit & Chattiwat, 2020; Lekwilai, 2014; Yimwilai, 2008; Bell, 2011). Then, to be a better or efficient reader, this means that one should be able to "read without help unfamiliar authentic texts at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding". (Nuttall, 1982: 21) What enables EFL learners to become fluent readers in English? In this article, some pedagogical issues for better reading ability are examined and addressed. Recommendations for improving each reading aspect are also clarified and discussed.

Reading is a complex process and learners need constant reading practice so that they can read proficiently. There are a variety of factors influencing comprehending a text. Grabe (2009) offers the following six components of reading proficiency:

1. Word recognition and knowledge of vocabulary
2. Grammatical knowledge
3. Discourse structure knowledge
4. Metacognitive knowledge
5. Content/world knowledge
6. Cognitive ability (inference, synthesis and evaluation)

Anderson (2003) states that effective reading is the interaction of four factors: the reader, the text, reading fluency and reading strategies. As cited by Alderson (2000), reading comprehension can be considered by the ways of looking at how this skill ability is assessed by the standard reading test. The components mainly measured are the following four aspects: a) a general verbal factor-in effect, word knowledge b) comprehension of explicitly stated material c) comprehension of implicit meaning and d) reading appreciation (pp. 94-95). In the next section some of these components are explored in detail along with suggestions on what EFL learners can do when such aspects become obstacles to reading effectively.

Vocabulary Knowledge

As vocabulary is an essential part of reading, all scholars agree that it plays an important role in reading performance. Compared to grammar, for example, Wilkins (1972) states that “without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p. 97) while Grabe (1991: 392) stresses the important role of vocabulary as “predictor of overall reading ability”.

What vocabulary and how to learn it

To foster reading comprehension, it is necessary to first describe what vocabulary EFL learners actually need to know and what they need to

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

do to acquire the words needed. Because there is such a large number of words in the English language, it begs the question where to begin. Fortunately, however, only a relatively small number of words are repeatedly used. The corpus-based study of these high frequency words, or sight words as they are referred to in reading instruction, has drawn considerable attention among many language scholars. Numerous studies on frequency have been made to give insights for communication and academic uses specifically for EFL learners as well as their impact on text comprehension (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Coxhead, 2000; Meara, 1995; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; & West, 1953). All these experts strongly advocate the idea that high-frequency words are very important and useful as they “cover a very large proportion of the running words in spoken and written texts and occur in all kinds of uses of the language.” (Nation, 2001: 13)

In order to search into detailed vocabulary learning principle, research by Laufer (1989) and Lui and Nation (1985) show that readers need to know 95% of the words in a text to gain adequate comprehension and to be able to guess unknown words from context. Then how many words are needed to be learned? Schmitt (2000: 142) advocates that “a vocabulary of about 2000 words would be a realistic goal” for second language learners. Similarly, Nation (1990: 1-2) concurs that learners should first focus on a common core of 2000 words or the first 2000 high frequency words found in the English language. This is because these words account for almost 80% of the words found in an average text. Since these words occur frequently, it makes sense to master them first. The remainder of the less frequently used words include those found in the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 1998) and some others. The table below gives the coverage figure from an academic corpus.

Table 1: The coverage by different kinds of vocabulary in an academic corpus

Type of vocabulary	% Coverage
1st 1000 words	71.40 %
2nd 1000 words	4.70 %
Academic Word List (570 words)	10.00 %
Others	13.90 %
Total	100.00 %

Source: Nation (2001)

There are numerous lists of high frequency words available and they can be easily accessed from websites. Each is slightly different as they are all based on different criteria and serve different purposes. Probably the earliest and most well-known list, The General Service List (GSL) published by West (1953), is a good example to see what common words are commonly encountered while other lists such as Vocabulary Lists (Nation, 1984), University Word List (UWL) (Nation, 1990) and the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 1998) are frequently referred to and cited. Some lists are divided into sublists with related information and practice exercises for direct systematic vocabulary learning.

Explicit learning of high frequency words gives a valuable return for EFL learners as these words occur most frequently in written material and spoken language. The list of 100 words of English, for instance, is very useful for EFL children in the early stage as they enable them to read and understand about 50% of any text (Nation, 2001: 15). Even though 50% understanding of a text would not make much sense on its own, but this is a reasonable way to start.

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

The importance of learning high frequency words should not be misconstrued to suggest that other, less frequently used words are not important as well. Hard as these words are, they sometimes have great impact on text comprehension. Normally, whenever we read authentic text, it is inevitable to encounter some difficult words. However, learning to deal with such words requires developing learning strategies such as guessing meaning from the context, recognizing words parts, etc. to deal with them. This is because it is impossible for learners to handle the sheer number of these low-frequency words and learning these kind of words does not provide a good return on investment given the amount of time and effort required to learn them. Additionally, as mentioned before, they occur infrequently and cover only a small proportion of most texts.

What should EFL learners do to master these important words? Nation (2014) stresses that an essential condition for vocabulary learning is repetition. That is, vocabulary learning “depends on the number of meetings with each word and the quality of attention at each meeting. The more meetings, the more likely learning is to occur” (Nation, 2015: 136). He points out that learners not only need to encounter the words, but they have to encounter them often enough to recognize them. He proposes two approaches to vocabulary learning, direct and indirect vocabulary learning (Nation, 1990: 2 - 4). Direct vocabulary learning, on the one hand, includes any activity that focuses the learner’s attention on the target words to be learned. Such ‘focusing’ activities could include word-building exercises, guessing words from the context activities, learning words in semantic or topical categories, and vocabulary games. Indirect vocabulary learning, on the other hand, involves reading practice whereby an entire text is comprehensible, using only words that the learner already knows. Commercially prepared graded readers are a familiar example of this. To make learning

more successful, opportunities for indirect vocabulary learning should be more focused than direct vocabulary activities. Similarly, Schmitt (2000: 120) suggests two main processes of vocabulary acquisition, explicit and incidental learning, which embody similar and complementary principles to those advocated by Nation. Both approaches are necessary conditions for vocabulary acquisition in second language learning and should be viewed as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Schmitt further stresses that the explicit learning of certain important words is essential as it helps learners reach a critical vocabulary size “threshold” which permits incidental learning from reading to occur. In other words, if there is too high a percentage of unknown words on a page, learners will become frustrated trying to guess the meanings of so many new words.

In terms of direct or explicit learning, which is usually done in a classroom setting, the following approaches can be used. First, vocabulary learning comes from simplified materials with carefully sequenced vocabulary grading. Second, words are best dealt with by the teacher when learners find that they are too difficult to grasp in a given reading passage. Third, vocabulary can be embedded within other language activities such as pre-reading instruction before learners actually read a passage. Finally, the study of vocabulary can be done separately as in exercises like semantic mapping (using a mind map to show the relationships between sets of words), contextual analysis, dictionary use, the use of word parts and glossary lists (e.g., student vocabulary journals). Some of these approaches can be done in class while others are suitable to be carried out either in or outside of the classroom.

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

Extensive reading

Compared to the vocabulary work done in the classroom, where learning time is limited, self-directed learning outside the classroom through extensive reading is the key route by which rapid vocabulary growth can be achieved, Nuttal (1982: 56) insists “an extensive reading program is the single most effective way of improving both vocabulary and reading skills in general.” In this setting, the idea is premised on four principles: learners read as much as possible, they choose what they want to read, they are provided with a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics, and this reading material is easy to understand (Boutorwick, & et al., 2019: 150-151). Together these four principles help to create an atmosphere where the private world of reading, exploring topics of personal interest, becomes a rewarding experience. When learners read more and get hooked on books, they end up reading faster and understanding more. It is within this environment that incidental vocabulary learning can take place unfettered by institutional constraints and class schedules.

For the benefit of vocabulary development, and English language learning in general, schools or institutions should provide a place for learners to read independently. A self-access language center (SAC), a section within a school library or a reading corner within a single classroom can greatly improve learners’ vocabulary and language abilities. An extensive reading program is an integral part of it. There a variety of reading materials are provided such SRA reading kits, graded readers, newspapers, magazines and so on. Computers with some software designed for reading practice can also encourage learners to study at their own pace, and according to their own preferences and learning styles. When a suitable place has been designed and created and suitable learning materials have been made available, it then requires systematic administration to motivate learners to

come and study there. One problem many teachers face here in Thailand is that many learners are reluctant to practice reading outside the classroom (Ammaralikit & Chattiwat, 2020; Lekwilai, 2014). In order to ensure a SAC or reading corner is used productively to its full potential, Hawes (2014) recommended that such places be staffed with trained specialists who can direct and encourage learners to use level appropriate self-study resources effectively, especially important during the learner's early stages of development so that they can form good reading habits and become autonomous learners.

Vocabulary knowledge is strongly linked to reading ability and reading ability results in academic success. Unfortunately, it is easy to find that many English classrooms in Thailand, even reading courses, where vocabulary is often a neglected aspect of instruction. In other words, where is vocabulary being taught in the course? This is because vocabulary may be strongly assumed that it can be left to take care of itself during language learning. So, without a well-planned vocabulary program within a language course, the learners' inadequate vocabulary knowledge can make them face an English lexical dilemma.

Fluency in Reading

For many people reading in their native language is usually effortless. With the exception of lexically dense technical articles and legal documents, most people can read a newspaper article or magazine in their own language without much conscious thought extended to the perceptual and semantic processes being used. After all, the focus is on the message, not the media. Word recognition, saccadic eye movements, phrasal chunking, momentary fixations and variably adjusted reading speeds are all brought to bear unconsciously as a reader decodes text from the printed page, and comprehends what has been written there. When all of this

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

occurs without incident or trouble, we can broadly refer to this as reading fluency in the first language. For some EFL learners, in contrast, reading in English is frustrating. They come across numerous unfamiliar words written in complicated sentence structures and this makes their reading very slow and arduous while text comprehension is unpredictable. In order to help learners overcome such a formidable challenge as learning to read in a second language, it is first necessary to address what reading fluency is and what makes some learners become fluent readers and others not.

Reading fluency definition and studies

Reading fluency is a key component of reading comprehension abilities. Reading fluency is “the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy, and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing. It involves a long incremental process and text comprehension is the expected outcome”. (Grabe, 2010: 71-72) From this definition of reading fluency, such abilities include rapid word recognition, fast reading rate, large amount of extensive reading, incremental learning and comprehension outcome. These skills have gradually been developed and turned to be automaticity, but it may take learners years to practice. Nation (2001: 337) suggests four criteria to determine whether the activity is likely to develop reading fluency. First, the activity should be meaning-focused, eagerly intending to convey a message, and the learners should be interested in the text they are reading. Second, the reading material must be easy to comprehend. It should include only known vocabulary and grammatical features. Third, there should be time constraints that force the learner to do the activity faster than normal. Learners can be encouraged to do the activity in the form of timed tests, competitions, or repeated attempts. Finally, there should be a large quantity of reading processing, moving gradually from short passages to

longer texts. Also worth noting, all of this practice to be successful has to be measured not in weeks or months but in years. Fluency has to arise from a foundation that makes the best use of what is already known (Kennedy, 2020).

Several studies in second language reading fluency involving word recognition, oral reading and sustained reading practice all correlated significantly with reading comprehension. (Grabe, 2010) Another study involving a training program of repeated silent reading practice was found to significantly improve both reading rates and reading comprehension (Taguchi & et al., 2004). Additionally, a number of other research studies have demonstrated that extensive reading and timed reading training positively impact reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary development and reading speed (Nation, 2005; Chung & Nation, 2006; Grabe, 2009; Nuttal, 1996). Opportunities for extended periods of practice, using activities that support and develop reading fluency both within and outside the class should, therefore, be included as an essential part of any well-developed reading curriculum.

Speed reading

Given the earlier mentioned research results on comprehension and reading fluency, speed reading or timed reading could be one of the most efficient ways to develop reading fluency and should be part of any reading course. According to Nation (Kennedy, 2020), there are some justifications of the inclusion of speed reading in a reading program. First, if EFL learners' reading speed can be brought up to the speed of native speakers, somewhere between 200 and 300 words per minute, they will get much more input, especially when doing extensive reading. Second, really slow

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

reading does not facilitate global comprehension. That is, reading too slowly at speeds of much less than 100 words per minute can have negative effects on comprehension. Third, speed reading is an activity which allows learners to make use of the recognition of vocabulary they already know, a good practice for substantial fluency development.

Some essential principles should be taken into account when doing speed reading. To begin with, a number of different reading passages with the same length and written with controlled vocabulary and language structure are required. This is because learners “will more easily improve their speed on material that is readily comprehensible...” (Nuttall, 1996: 54). The books Asian and Pacific speed readings for ESL learners (Quinn & Nation, 1974) and Speed readings for ESL learners, 3000 BNC (Millett, 2017), for instance, are excellent sources for speed reading activities using passages at the first 1000 and 3000 word levels respectively. These books and detailed speed reading procedures are also available on various websites (see Paul Nation’s website and Sonia Millett’s for different levels of speed readings). The main aim of such activities is to increase reading speed without adversely affecting comprehension, so each passage has an imposed time limit followed by a set of ten comprehension questions, which must be answered without looking back at the passage. The deep reading processing with time pressure is more likely to make learning to occur. Learners are trained to read very quickly in some reading manners. While reading, learners are instructed not to subvocalize or use their fingers or pens to trace the words. Their eyes are trained to derive meaning in chunks, not word-by-word. Finally, this activity should be done regularly, if possible, twice a week or more throughout a semester. It is also a good idea for students to graph their progress over time, including both reading times and comprehension scores.

Reading Strategies

Reading strategies have been received much attention for the past four decades when numerous research have centered on second language learning strategies. As reading is an essential component of the four language skills, many topics of studies have focused on reading strategies of successful and unsuccessful learners, strategy use and individual differences, and strategy assessment and trainings (Anderson, 1999; Alderson, 2000; Geva & Ramirez, 2015). And in particular is the main focus on how the use of reading strategies contributes to effective reading comprehension.

Reading strategies are “ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading” (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 95). Anderson (1991: 460) defines reading strategies as “deliberate, cognitive steps that readers can take to assist in acquiring, storing and retrieving new information”. So, reading strategies are the planned and explicit actions that help reads comprehend the text. To be much clearer, for example, we can imagine the process we are reading a paragraph for the reading important skill-the main idea. There are some reading strategies we can use here. We use titles or headings to provide some clues; we use topic sentence which usually appears at the beginning of a paragraph; we use concluding sentences; and we can look for repeated ideas in the text. These are ways to help us get the main idea.

Empirical studies indicate that success in reading is related to the quality and quantity of reading strategies used (Anderson, 1999; Brown, 1989; Oxford, 1989). Effective readers use reading strategies to understand a text before, during and after they read. That is, before they read, they use prior knowledge or knowledge about the world to think about the topic. They also make prediction about the data they will find in the text. Then they preview the text by skimming and scanning to get the overall idea. During reading the text, they monitor their understanding by asking

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

questions and thinking about the presented idea and information. After reading, they clarify their understanding, and reflect on the information in the text using their own critical ideas.

Oxford (1990) provided a useful and comprehensive classification of reading strategies into six categories: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, memory strategies, compensatory strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. O’Malley & Chamot (1990) summarize differentiated strategies into three categories: cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective strategies. The strategy group, strategy set and strategy table below gives a clearer idea about how they are interrelated.

Table 2: Examples of selected strategies useful for reading

Strategy Group	Strategy Set	Strategy
Memory	Applying images and sounds	Semantic mapping Using keywords
Cognitive	Predicting Creating structure for input and output	Repeating Taking notes Summarizing
Compensation	Guessing intelligently	Using linguistic clues Using other clues
Metacognitive	Arranging and planning your learning	Organizing Setting goals and objectives Identify a purpose of a language task Planning for a language task Self-monitoring Self-evaluating

Strategy Group	Strategy Set	Strategy
Affective	Taking your emotional Temperature	Writing a language learning diary
Social	Asking questions	Asking for clarification and Verification
	Cooperating with others	Cooperating with peers Cooperating with proficient user of the new language

Source: Adapted from Oxford (1990)

Several studies revealed that reading strategies instruction helps learners improve their reading comprehension and promote strategy use (Oxford, 1990). Learners can get benefits from direct or explicit teaching. Oxford (1989) and Wenden (2002) suggested that integrative method (teaching a strategy throughout the class activity instead of teaching a strategy separately) would be more effective for learners to use them more naturally. Thinking aloud protocol, modelling and strategies discussion are some of the examples the teacher can use to make learners become strategic readers.

Conclusion

In summary, this article reviews the three factors influencing EFL learners' reading comprehension. The language knowledge, especially word recognition is probably the most essential component among these. Explicit and incidental vocabulary learning are both necessary; however, incidental vocabulary learning through extensive reading should be more focused. Reading fluency as well as reading strategies can be initially dealt by the teaching process as the teacher needs to monitors the learners'

Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

reading speed and performance. Some learners who are not capable of reading fluently, in our point of view, do not often possess the right ground of reading practice; they do not know what and how to read due to the lack of research-based reading concepts. Many start reading in an inappropriate way and find it laborious and frustrating task. As a result, this makes them not want to read and without constant reading, it goes against a belief of best practice in reading: the more one reads, the better reader one becomes. In short, “we learn to read by reading” (Nuttall, 1982: 168). It is such a problem which is easily found among reluctant and inexpert readers. The key concepts for becoming better English readers presented in this article can be a helpful guideline to enhance anyone to be fluent and successful readers.

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Becoming a Better Reader in English: A Closer Look at Some Foundational Reading Components

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