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READING COMPREHENSION PERFORMANCE OF ELF FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS: BASIS FOR READING ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

Bui Thi Kieu Giang

Abstract: *This study aimed to determine the cause of the difficulty of reading skill acquisition that affects the study habit of 221 EFL freshmen at 7 universities in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam. This study was expected to contribute to lessen if not eradicate the reading weaknesses of the EFL freshmen with a reading enhancement program. The study combined utilized descriptive method and correlational technique. The finding revealed that students' level of competence in reading comprehension is merely the state of being literal in dimension. From this finding, it is recognized that EFL freshmen are only easy to understand what they read at the low-level type of understanding. Reading comprehension with cognitive evaluation will be an obstacle for them to go over. Reading comprehension involves critical thinking and scientific reasoning. Therefore, it is advisable that the programs should be designed to encourage these two factors with a variety of genres of reading comprehension. Besides, it is better to expose students with selected materials that meet the demand of students in the area of English language communication. More diversified activities and strategies should be taken into account to draw the interest of EFL freshmen.*

Keywords: English reading exposure; Integration; Literal Comprehension; Evaluation; Interpretation.

Introduction

English has become increasingly important in ever-changing world of communication, which is used as an effective medium of international communication. In fact, English is used as the language of trade, science, technology, and many other fields in life. In practice, teaching and learning English in Vietnam has received special attention since the country implemented the “open-door” policy from 1986. This explains for why learning English is not only interesting but it is also a great and practical demand for many people, especially for those who want to advance in their careers and to achieve their long-term study goals. Thus, teaching English in Vietnam has focused on the learner-centered teaching considering teachers as facilitators who supply with creative contexts for English language learning. To satisfy the dream, Vietnamese Government issued the Vietnam's National Foreign Language 2020 Project to meet the demand of converting English from as a foreign language to as a second language in the coming years. To be proficient learners of English, students need to have access to a wide range of

materials and to be good at communicators in English. Actually, it is difficult to reach this goal as freshmen receive virtually almost no training in such skills.

Among the four skills, reading is considered one of the most important skills for learners.¹ It is clear that reading comprehension is the most challenging and difficult task for the learners in studying English, it is a complex process for many students and it is even more challenging to read in a foreign language. Many studies indicate that EFL students find it difficult to comprehend the texts and achieve their goals in reading comprehension.²

Reading is a lifelong skill to be used both at school and throughout life. According to,³ reading is a basic life skill. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfilment and job success inevitably will be lost. Despite its importance, reading is one of the most challenging areas in the education system. The ever-increasing demand for high levels of literacy in our technological society makes this problem even more pressing.⁴ According to, reading comprehension is considered the real core and the peak for the reading process, and a big process around which all other processes are centred.

In Vietnam, the problem in reading skill acquisition that prevails among the freshmen has to be identified and given attention. The researcher really wanted to come up with a concerted effort among English instructors of the different universities - to lessen, if not eradicate the reading weaknesses of the students. Such effort, however, is an expectation for better quality of today's college graduates. Likewise, the need for this study is really on call since it should always be the

¹ Duke, N. K., & Pearson, P. D. (2002). *Effective practices for developing reading comprehension*. In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (3rd ed., pp. 205–242). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

² Blanton, Kenneth (2001). *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*. New York, McGraw Hill Gill Book Co. Ellis, R. (2010), *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford University Press, UK. Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Reading*. London: Pearson Education. Bas, G. *Reading Attitudes of High School Students: An Analysis From Different Variables*, (2012), International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications April, May, June 2012 Volume: 3 Issue: 2 Article: 04 ISSN 1309-6249.

³ Arnold, N. (2009). *Online extensive reading for advanced foreign language learners: An evaluation study*. *Foreign Language Annals*, 42(2), 340-366.

⁴ Ablex. Goodman, K. (1970). *Reading: A psycholinguistic guessing game*. In Brown, H. D. (3rd ed.), *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (pp.357-389). Oxford, UK: Pearson Longman.

concern of the English teachers to know the abilities, interests, needs and characteristics of the students under his control and at the same time discuss the weaknesses of each student in reading as well as give the corresponding measure. As one goes up the ladder of education, this student has to learn to read extensively in order to improve his level of achievement. He has to develop the basic skills in reading. The researcher wanted to emphasize the need for reading skills because she believes that success in reading is success in school, thus, success in future life.

It is in this premise, that the researcher was motivated to determine the reading comprehension level of the college freshmen at 7 universities in Vietnam. Results of this study will eventually be the basis in designing a program which enhances learners' critical thinking skills.

Generally, this study aimed to determine the reading comprehension performance of the first year students as basis for a reading enhancement program for 7 universities in Thai Nguyen. This study also benefits the essence of the models developed by,⁵ and⁶ for 4 components; lowest level - literal comprehension, then interpretation level, evaluation (critical reading), Lastly, integration (application of self and life). Specifically, it sought answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What is the profile of EFL students in terms of
 - a. Sex
 - b. Place of residence
 - c. Course distribution
 - d. Monthly Family Income
 - e. Parents' highest educational attainment
 - f. Reading interests
 - g. Exposure to English mass media
- 2) What is the level of reading comprehension performance of the respondents along
 - a. Literal comprehension
 - b. Interpretation
 - c. Evaluation
 - d. Integration

⁵ Garner, R. (1987). *Metacognition and Reading Comprehension*. Norwood, NJ: Gorsuch, G., & Taguchi, E. (2008). *Repeated reading for developing reading fluency and reading comprehension: The case of EFL learners in Vietnam*. System, 36, 253-278.

⁶ Ikeda, M., & Takeuchi, O. (2006). *Clarifying the differences in learning EFL reading strategies: An analysis of portfolios*. System, 34, 384-398.

- 3) What is the level of reading comprehension performance of the respondents along
 - a. Poem
 - b. Essay
 - c. Short story
- 4) Is there significant difference in the level of reading comprehension performance of the respondents and their select profile variables?
- 5) Is there significant relationship between reading comprehension performance of the respondents and their select profile variables?
- 6) What reading program can be proposed to enhance the reading comprehension skills of the students?

Literature Review

Reading, according to,⁷ is the apprehension of meaning through observation of the form and relationship of printed or written characteristics. Thus, it is helpful to distinguish between two main components in reading: word decoding and language comprehension. Word reading (or decoding) refers to the ability to read single words out of context. Language comprehension refers to our ability to understand words, sentences, and text. These are the two key components in The Simple View of Reading (originally proposed by Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

Comprehension is a process during which a reader constructs understanding by following writer's text just as a construction of a building by following architect's blueprint or building plans (Abadilla, 1991). Of all human attributes and functions, comprehension is one of the most complicated because of its internal nature—it is more difficult to explain as a process although it is easy to observe. According to Rubin (1993), he stated that reading is a complex intellectual process involving a number of abilities. The two major abilities involved word in meaning and verbal reasoning. Without word meaning and verbal reasoning, there would be no reading comprehension. He further pointed out that reading is not a passive process, it demands active

⁷ Lee, M., & Liao, H. (2007). *Investigating the effect of English reading proficiency levels of EFL college freshmen on the selection of global strategies used when reading English expository texts*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on Education, Hawaii, 3406-3418.

participation. The readers have to decode, search his memory and think while processing a text.

From a Modern Teacher (2001), comprehension and learning are one and the same process in which new experiences are associated with what they already know or of their beliefs,⁸ posits that comprehension is the aim of reading, and word recognition skills are means to an end. The end being understanding levels differ in degree of difficulty, of sophistication in thinking and of thoroughness in reading. Another way to understand reading as mentioned by Isenberg, and as cited by⁹ is to look at it as a creative and personal engagement with text, and unique transaction that involves particular backgrounds and experiences. Thus, reading literature or literary reading can be taken to mean an information processing through five distinct phases: transformation, reduction, classification, storage and retrieval accordingly.

In the study of Gomez (1991), he pointed out that the students have difficulties at the literal level which may be due to deficient vocabulary skills. Other students may have troubles because they read too well so they proceed immediately to interpretation before they are sure of what information has been provided to serve as the basis for their interpretation. On the same view, Gagne (1990) pointed out that applied level of comprehension is the process of taking what has been known and applying to what has just been learned, then developed ideas that encompasses both but extend beyond them.

Some children have problems with the development of both word reading and language comprehension. They are termed generally poor readers. Children with early language impairments have a higher risk than other children of developing such general reading problems (Bishop, 2001), though the particular combination and extent of the language impairments may also lead to isolated problems with word decoding (Catts et al, 2012). Besides, in the study of Pilo (1990), she found out that in oral reading in classes, the most prevalent difficulties were: lack of comprehension, word by word reading, lack of expression, lack of phrasing, and difficulty in making inferences. These were due to physical deficiencies, lack of individualized needs and lack of reading materials. According to Lumbas (1990), in her study, the findings on the reading difficulties were most serious with: reading comprehension,

⁸ Lituanas, P. M. et. al. (2001), *An Investigation of Extensive Reading with Remedial Students in a Philippine Secondary School*, International Journal of Educational Research, 35, 217-225

⁹ Maarof, N., & Yaacob, M. (2011). *Meaning-making in the first and second language: Reading strategies of Malaysian students*. Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 12, 211– 223.

noting details, and use of prefixes including vocabulary skills. Based on her findings, these reading difficulties were caused by ineffective teaching strategies and inappropriate instruction in reading. In a similar study conducted by Kibad (2002) on common reading difficulties of pupils, it was found out that: reading comprehension skills should be taught from the beginning reading period. The reading difficulties of the students according to Carter (1992) is on physical and some psychological factors, while Dulay (1996), found the causes of difficulties in comprehension with the limited intelligence of pupils, the type of reading materials used, and the physical factors among pupils. The problem that brings about poor reading comprehension skills of student in Edurian's (1999) study is the following: a) inadequate instructional materials; b) inadequate English related school activities; c) very little training and development for teachers; d) limited time appropriated for lecture and discussion; e) little interest in the subject, and f) lack of support from administrators.

Individual's reading interest is influenced by sex, age and physical development. While they are highly affected by these factors, opportunity also plays an important part.¹⁰ his study found out that interest progresses through the different stages of life development. Javier further explains that reading interest serves as the springboard that spurs individual actions; whether oral or written, the influence of books, magazines and newspapers may be as far reaching as its ultimate goal ought to be.

In a study conducted by Colonia as cited by,¹¹ it discovered that highly educated parents generally provide an environment which is conducive to student's mental growth. They contribute to the students' intellectual development with a better study habit and better academics. Apostol (1992) stated in her study that students whose parents and other members of the family who have highly monthly income, and high educational attainment had better study orientation. These factors influence the reading ability of the student. Parents' attitudes and the kind of education the parents reflect much on pupils/ students' willingness to learn. Sosing (1999) stated that the role of parents and the family in the education of children is widely accepted.

¹⁰ Day, R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Karbalaci, A. (2010). *A comparison of the global reading strategies used by EFL and ESL readers*. The Reading Matrix, 10 (2), 165-180.

Looking more into related studies, Mercado, as cited by¹²studied the relationship of socio-economic status to the intelligence rating and scholastic achievements of first year high school students in Iloilo City School. Her study found out that children from lower socio-economic status score below average in intelligence ratings and scholastic achievement. Likewise, investigated the relationship of socio-economic status of the grade VI pupils and their reading abilities. Her finding comes out that a child from a poor family has a lower set of values than what is typically expected by the school and as a result, his performance is often considered below standard. Furthermore,¹³ stated that the role of the teacher is crucial in the development of basic reading skills. One major cause of slow reading is the teacher's inability to realize the pupils' potential, their needs and interests. On the same boat, Holmes (2002) study concerning students' perception of the effective teacher revealed four most outstanding qualities: a) approachable, kind, understanding of problems, b) intellectually honest, c) emotionally balanced and d) has leadership qualities. On the right track, in the study of¹⁴she stated that personal qualities are those that stem from the teacher's personality, his interests, attitudes and beliefs, his behavior in working relationships with the pupils and with other individuals.

Method

3.1. Research Design

The study employed the descriptive method of research, using specifically the survey and correlation techniques. The descriptive research is defined by Lardizabal as a method that presents the status of an organization, a place, an individual or anything. This research design was used to examine the current status of the reading comprehension performance of the EFL freshmen which exists in the study and to describe the profile of the respondents as to sex, reading interests, parents' highest educational attainment, monthly family income, place of residence and English reading exposure. Moreover, the study is

¹² Douglas, et.al. (2000). *Teaching Reading with Learning Problems*. London: Charkes, E. Merrill Publishing Company, Inc.

¹³ Kummin, S., & Rahman, S. (2010). *The relationship between the use of meta-problem solving strategies and achievement in English*. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 7(C), 145-150.

¹⁴ Block, E. (1986). *The comprehension strategies of second language readers*. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 463-494.

correlational as it aimed to determine how the dependent and independent variables are related to one another. The design involves finding the correlation of the profile variables and reading comprehension performance of the students.

3.2. Sampling and Respondents of the Study

The population of the study is the group of 1,190 first year college students of the seven universities in Thai Nguyen. It is represented in the study by a sample size obtained, through the Slovin's formula, wherein N is the population size, n is the sample size and e is the margin of error which is 5 percent, the respondents are 299. After the desired sample size was determined, stratified random sampling was used to proportionately allocate the number of respondents per university. This technique was used to avoid bias sample from the entire population which consists of 7 different universities. After the sample size per university was known, the students involved in the study were chosen through draw lots in small universities and by random number key of a scientific calculator for bigger universities.

3.3. Research Instrument

The researcher made use of a survey questionnaire. This is a questionnaire constructed by the researcher herself. The first part was used to gather relevant information and data from the students' profile. It includes information on the profile of students in terms of sex, reading interests, parents' highest educational attainment, monthly family income, and English reading exposure. The second part consists of 42 items. It was used to determine the level of students' reading performance in English. The 42 item-test is composed of three selections about poem, essay and short story. Each selection has 14 items about four sets of questions for the different levels, namely: literal - consisting of 3 items, given 1 mark for every correct item; interpretative of 5 items, given 2 marks for every correct item; evaluative of 4 items, given 3 marks for every correct item; and integrative of 2 items, given 4 marks for every correct item. This was used in evaluating students' responses along levels of reading comprehension.

In the development of teacher-made test, the first draft prepared was submitted to the adviser for comments and suggestions. The two parts of the instrument were reviewed and checked in line with their content and statement of the problem. To ensure the validity and reliability of the test, the researcher personally administered and treated the results

3.4. Data Analysis

The data was collected, tabulated, analyzed and interpreted using descriptive statistics. This consists methods for organizing, displaying, and describing data. Likewise, inferential statistics was used which involves methods that use sample results to help make predictions about a population.

Frequency count and percentage was used to treat the profile of the students in terms of sex, place of residence, monthly family income, and parents' highest educational attainment. Weighted mean was used to treat the extent of exposure to media and English library holdings, and reading interest using the scales below.

The analysis of variance was used to determine the differences in the level of reading comprehension performance of respondents when the students are grouped with select profile variables whose category levels are three or more. For profile variables with two categories, the t-test for independent groups was used.

The relationship between the profile variables of the students and reading comprehension performance was established with the use of Pearson product moment correlation. The hypotheses of the study were set at 0.05 level of significance.

Data Analysis

4.1. Profile of EFL students

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents according to **sex**. It is gleaned on data that 51.5% or 154 out of 299 student-respondents are male, while 48.5% or 145 out of 145 are female. This finding infers that majority of EFL first year students are male. Since the percentage distribution is a little above 50%, it would mean that there is most likely a balance of representation of first year students in class academic interaction.

Table 1. Profile of students according to sex

Sex	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 299)	Percent
Male	154	51.5%
Female	145	48.5%

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents according to residence. It is observed on data that 45.2% or

135 out of 299 student-respondents reside in the mountain areas; 27.4% or 82 reside in the countryside; 12.4 or 37 reside in the suburb; and only 15.1% reside in the city. These findings infer that most enrollees of the course program come from rural areas whose greater population specifically hails from the countryside and mountainous geographical locations.

Table 2. Profile of students according to residence

Residence	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 299)	Percent
In the city	45	15.1%
In the suburb	37	12.4%
In the countryside	82	27.4%
In the mountain Area	135	45.2%
Total	229	100%

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents according to course. As shown on table, 52.5% or 157 out of 299 first year EFL students come from Universities of Sciences. The rest of the students are almost equally spread to the six other categories such as only 5% is a representation of the University of economics and Business Administration; exactly 8% in each of the University of Agriculture and Forestry, University of Education, and University of Medicine and Pharmacy; 8.4% of the University of Information and Communication Technology; while 10% is represented by the University of Technology. These findings would simply imply that majority of the first year enrollees are participated by students whose professional field of interest is along University of Sciences. This infers further that the University of Sciences is prospectively the college that needs more of the finest English proficiency (as a medium or facility of communication) since most of the learning resource materials for their field of interest are written in English. Thus, the students of the college in general are more adept to undertake intelligibly scientific laboratory learning activities or to expand the horizon of their knowledge acquisition meritorious enough to making them equip with academic facts and information.

Table 3. Profile of students according to course

Course Distribution	Frequency	Percent
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	(n = 299)	
University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF)	24	8.0
University of Sciences (TUS)	157	52.5
University of Education (TUE)	24	8.0
University of Technology (TUT)	30	10.0
University of Medicine and Pharmacy (TUMP)	24	8.0
University of Economic and Business Administration (TUEBA)	15	5.0
University of Information and Communication Technology (TUICT)	25	8.4

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents according to income. It is obviously evident on the data that 49.5% or 148 out of 299 of the respondents' parents earn income within the range of 5,000,000 VND and below, while 42.8% or 128 earn within the range of 5,100,000-9,999,999VND. It is also noticed that only 7.7% or 23 earn the income ranging from 10,000,000 VND and above. These findings point out the fact that almost 50% of the families of the EFL student-respondents live a socio-economic status that is below poverty threshold. However, a little more than 40% of them earn income that is relatively probable and sustainable enough to satisfy their children's educational needs and priority basic needs and amenities.

Table 4. Profile of students' parents according to income

Income	Frequency (n = 299)	Percent
High 10,000,000 VND and above	23	7.7
Average 5,100,000 VND – 9,999,999VND	128	42.8
Low 5,000,000 VND below	148	49.5

Table 5 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents according to fathers' highest educational attainment. It is observed on data that 31.8% or 95 out of 299 students' parents reached high school level; 27.8% or 83 of them were able to reach college level; at least 12.4% or 37 of them reached elementary level; while 4.3% or 13

out of 299 students' fathers did not have formal schooling. These findings infer among others that a little above 70% of students' parents are under graduates of elementary, secondary and tertiary levels which mean that most of them lack the necessary skills and competencies that are regarded enabling factors that supposedly allow them better chances for greater job and/or income as well as productivity.

Moreover, it is also evident in the percentage distribution of their fathers' highest educational attainment that only a negligible percentage of 17.1 or 51 out of 299 of them graduated from the elementary; 4.0% or 12 graduated from secondary, and 2.2% or 8 graduated from college education programs. These findings corroboratively infer that less than 30% of them completed their education from the different levels. However, it is not captivating as it should ideally be since the data manifest very low percentage of students' fathers who completed secondary and tertiary education programs.

Table 5. Profile of students according to fathers' highest educational attainment

Fathers' highest educational attainment	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 299)	Percent
College Graduate	8	2.7
High school Graduate	12	4.0
Elementary Graduate	51	17.1
College Level	83	27.8
High School Level	95	31.8
Elementary level	37	12.4
No formal Schooling	13	4.3

Table 6 shows the profile of students according to mothers' highest educational attainment. It is gleaned on data that 34.4% or 103 out of 299 of the students' mothers reached the college level; 16.1% or 48 reached high school; 2.7% or 8 were able to reach elementary level, while 1% or 3 out of 299 of mothers were not able to have formal schooling. These findings infer that a little more than 50% of the respondents' mothers have completed education and training in elementary, secondary and tertiary levels. It is quite captivating to note that more than 30% of them reach college. However, non-completion of the academic requirements of the college program among students' mother would

normally mean highly probable failure for these mothers to avail better job opportunities with higher compensation.

It is also alluring to note that 25.8% or 77 out of 299 mothers completed elementary education program but only 8.7% or 26 of them graduated in high school, and only 11.4 or 34 finished college education. Though these findings are quite better compared with findings of fathers' educational attainment, it infers just the same a scenario where only a little more than 10% of mothers of the students finished the required tertiary competent skills and educational academic edge.

Table 6. Profile of students according to mothers' highest educational attainment

Mothers' highest educational attainment	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 299)	Percent
College Graduate	34	11.4
High school Graduate	26	8.7
Elementary Graduate	77	25.8
College Level	103	34.4
High School Level	48	16.1
Elementary level	8	2.7
No formal Schooling	3	1.0

4.2. Reading comprehension performance of the respondents

Table 7 shows the extent of students' reading interest in at least five reading materials. It is intriguing to note that EFL first year student-enrollees find music a primary interesting reading material as shown by a weighted mean of 4.01. Secondary to what they regard it interesting includes sports and games, food and health, and the last is literature, as shown by their weighted means of 3.82; 3.67; 3.42; and 3.33, respectively. Moreover, it is observed on data that science reading materials are less interesting learning resource among EFL first year students. With these sorts of findings, it infers that, first, the Vietnamese EFL student-enrollees are most likely inclined with the development of musical intelligence; second, that they are more inclined to be more allured in gaining more consciousness on physical development through sports and games along with health through right foods intake; third, the literature's reading materials are also interesting to them. However, they are less interested to read science reading materials with a weighted mean of 3.33. This shows that the EFL students need immense motivation and

better facilitative avenues from mentors purposely for these students to greatly pay equal or special attention in enhancing further their interest in literature and science learning areas. In this way, students are honed with straightforward reading skill and competence they indispensably need in exploring the broad dynamics of language comprehension through the cognitively developed conceptual and contextual mapping skills they shall have consequentially gained from habitual reading.

This is supported by the study of Bumidong (1997) that there is a need for teachers to give more reading exercises and informative reading materials to improve comprehension. Likewise Hernandez 1992 emphasized that reinforcement procedures can be effective in motivating students to read; and according to Goodman (1970) teachers should not only present the passage followed by comprehension but also construct reading tasks. For science reading materials which is less interesting to them, unlocking of difficulties be done so that the readers will not be bothered thinking of the meaning of these difficult scientific and highly technical terms that will deter them to understand the reading materials, as point out by Guffrey and Abdula (1999).

Table 7. Extent of students' reading interest

Reading Materials	Weighted Mean	Description
Music	4.01	Interesting
Sports and Games	3.82	Interesting
Food and Health	3.67	Interesting
Literature	3.42	Interesting
Science	3.33	Less interesting
Overall Weighted Mean	3.65	Interesting

Legend:

<i>4.20 - 5.00</i>	<i>Very Interesting</i>
<i>3.40 - 4.19</i>	<i>Interesting</i>
<i>2.60 - 3.39</i>	<i>Less Interesting</i>
<i>1.80 - 2.59</i>	<i>Less Interesting</i>
<i>1.00 - 1.79</i>	<i>Not interesting at all</i>

Table 8 shows the extent of students' exposure to media and English language library holdings. Specifically, it is gleaned on table that EFL first year students are sometimes exposed to media learning facilities like TV, radio and social media network particularly Facebook,

as shown by their individual weighted mean of 3.16, 3.08, and 2.42, respectively. As regards mode of exposure to library holdings, it is observed on data that the student-respondents are likewise *sometimes* exposed to books, newspapers, comics, and magazines, with weighted means of 3.15, 3.09, 3.04, 3.85, respectively. These findings clearly infer the fact that EFL first year students have practically mean exposure to media facilities and social networks. This circumstance is however a fact that explains the prime reason why they are not as assertive as it should be in the field of English language. Nevertheless, one that excuses them from this phenomenal assumption lies in the fact that Vietnamese are only second speakers of English as medium of communication.

Furthermore, it is obviously noticed that student-respondents rarely indulge themselves in spending substantive time in reading encyclopedia and reader's digest, as justified by their individual weighted means of 2.08 and 2.02, with adjectival description of *often* for their exposure to such reading materials. This finding implies that students lack the sufficient knowledge of general facts and very significant historical and contextual bits of information as well as trivia published by credible press.

Generally, taking into account the two scenarios presented above, the data reveal that the extent of exposure of EFL first year students falls on *sometimes* only which corroborate with the earlier findings mentioned above revealing among others that students are yet less equipped with remarkable interest on reading materials. One of the reasons of their lack of exposure to media and English language library holdings is in the fact that many Vietnamese believe that reading is basically an expensive skill and those who have reading difficulties are those who usually less ready and educationally disadvantaged because of their environmental conditions, Otero (2000).

Table 8. Extent of students' exposure to media and English language library holdings

Modes of Exposure	Weighted Mean	Description
TV	3.16	Sometimes
Radio	3.08	Sometimes
Books	3.15	Sometimes
Newspapers	3.09	Sometimes
Comics	3.04	Sometimes
Magazines	2.85	Sometimes

Facebook	2.43	Not Often
Encyclopedia	2.08	Not Often
Readers Digest	2.02	Not Often
Overall	2.77	Sometimes
Weighted Mean		

Legend:

4.20 - 5.00	<i>Always</i>
3.40 - 4.19	<i>Usually</i>
2.60 - 3.39	<i>Sometimes</i>
1.80 - 2.59	<i>Not Often</i>
1.00 - 1.79	<i>Never</i>

Table 9 shows the level of students’ performance in reading comprehension which are literal, interpretation, evaluation and integration.

As clearly shown in table, it is indicated that the EFL first year students’ level of competence in reading comprehension is merely to the state of being literal in dimension as shown by a mastery index of 81.78 with a mean of 7.36 out of 9 items administered from the select genres of literature which are poem, essay and short story. This means that the respondents can easily comprehend those that are at the low-level type of understanding by using only the information or data which are clearly stated in the text. It is reading that line that is evidently the strength of the respondents. The lowest level of reading comprehension of the students is at the evaluation level with mastery index of 24.33%, with a mean of 2.92 out of 12 items. This reveals that the respondents are poor in understanding the text when asked of questions at the critical thinking level. Their reading skill of “reading beyond the line” is yet to be mastered as it is the lowest and where the respondents even got the score of zero.

It is also observed that students’ level of reading comprehension is characterized as somewhat deficient along interpretation, and integration as shown by their individual mastery index/numerical indicators of 53.47; and 34.50, respectively. These findings corroborates to the fact that students are *poor* in understanding the literary pieces when challenged to answer questions at the Higher Order Thinking Skills. (HOTS).

Generally, the level of performance of the students in reading comprehension is below 50% index of mastery with a mean of 20.37 out of 42 items. This means that the respondents are poor in reading

between the line, reading beyond the line and even reading the line. This implies that ELF students are most likely capable only of comprehending literal meanings of facts and information constituted by simple written texts, sentences or paragraphs through lower thinking skills (LOTs).

Table 9. Level of students' performance in reading comprehension

Dimension	Number of Items	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean	SD	Index of Mastery
Literal	9	1	9	7.36	1.75	81.78
Interpretation	15	2	3	8.02	2.08	53.47
Evaluation	12	0	8	2.92	1.44	24.33
Integration	6	0	5	2.07	1.06	34.50

4.3. Difference in the level of reading comprehension performance of the respondents

Table 10 shows the level of students' reading performance by literary genre. With the level of reading comprehension along literary genre, the respondents have 53.03 index of mastery on poems with a mean of 7.42; 48.18 index of mastery on essay with a mean of 6.75 and 44.27 mastery index on short story with a mean of 6.20, respectively; with 14 items in each genre. This reveals that the respondents have better comprehension when literary pieces are in poetry rather than in prose.

Taking a composite view of the findings, it simply infers that EFL students least or lowly excel in their reading comprehension on poems, essays and short stories. This finding confirms the fact that students are hard up to understand literary pieces.

Table 10. Level of students' reading comprehension performance by literary genre.

Dimension	Number of Items	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean	SD	Index of Mastery	Rank
Poem	14	3.0	12.0	7.42	1.84	53.03	1
Essay	14	0.0	11.0	6.75	1.91	48.1	2
Short Story	14	2.00	10.00	6.20	1.71	44.27	3

Table 11 shows the comparison between the reading comprehension scores of students grouped by sex. The data on table reveals that with reference to the reading comprehension scores of students grouped according to sex, the female respondents have better reading comprehension skill than the male respondents as shown by the mean of 21.51 and with the probability value of 0.000 which is lower than 0.05 level of significance. Thus the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore there is significant difference in the level of reading comprehension performance of the students with regard to sex. This finding translates the fact that female excel better in reading comprehension compared to male EFL first year students.

Table 11. Comparison between the reading comprehension scores of students grouped by sex.

Group	Mean	SD	Std. Error of Difference	t-value	Prob.	Statistical Decision
Male	19.29	3.16				
Female	21.51	3.79	0.403	5.510	0.000	Significant at 0.05

4.4. Significant relationship between reading comprehension performance of the respondents and profile variables.

Table 12 shows the comparison among the reading comprehension scores of students grouped by place of residence. The data show that with the use of Analysis of Variance in comparing the reading comprehension score of students grouped by place of residence, the probability value of 0.672 shows that it is greater than 0.05 level of significance. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted. Hence, there is no significant difference in the level of reading comprehension performance of the respondents in whatever type of residence they belong.

Table 12. Comparison among the reading comprehension scores of students grouped by place of residence.

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	f	Mean Square	F	ig.	Statistical Decision
Between Groups	20.635	3	6.878	0.515	0.672	

Within Groups	3940.897	295	13.359	Not significant
Total	3961.532	298		

Table 13 shows the comparison among the reading comprehension scores of students grouped by course. It is observed that the correlation coefficient of $r= 0.000$ is significant at 0.05 level, this means that the course is a factor to the EFL first year students' variability on the level of competence in their reading comprehension. Thus, the hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is significant difference in the level of reading comprehension performance of the respondents in respect to course.

Table 13. Comparison among the reading comprehension scores of the students grouped by course.

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Statistical Decision
Between Groups	668.492	6	111.415	9.879	.000	
Within Groups	3293.039	292	11.278			Significant at 0.05
Total	3961.532	298				

Table 14 shows the comparison among the reading comprehension scores of students grouped by course. It is clearly revealed on table that University of Information and Communication Technology (TUICT) and University of Sciences (TUS) have correlation coefficient of $r= 2.47$ which is significant at 0.05 level.

Moreover, University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA) has correlation with three course programs such as University of Education (TUE) as shown by a correlation coefficient of $r= 3.91$, with TUS course as shown by a correlation coefficient of 3.80; and with University of Technology (TUI) course as revealed by correlation coefficient of 3.52, which are all significant at 0.05 level.

Lastly, University of Medicine and Pharmacy (TUMP) curricular program have correlation with four course programs such as TUE as shown by a correlation coefficient of $r= 4.58$, with TUS course as shown by a correlation coefficient of 4.48; with TUT course as revealed by correlation coefficient of 4.28, and with University of Agriculture and

Forestry (TUAF) course as justified by its correlation coefficient of 2.19 which are all significant at 0.05 level. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted.

Generally, these findings infer that EFL first year students who are enrolled in these grouped courses have similar level of competence in reading comprehension. Their competence in English reading comprehension is evident in relationship across social science and allied science-related courses.

Table 14. Comparison among reading comprehension mean scores by course.

Group	Mean Differences					
	ean	E	HV M	M	ERD	FT
Environment	1.38	-				
Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Medicine	1.27	0.11 ^{ns}	-			
Resource Management	1.00	0.37 ^{ns}	0.27 ^{ns}	-		
Agronomy	9.71	1.67 ^{ns}	1.56 ^{ns}	1.29 ^{ns}	-	
Economics and Rural Development	8.80	2.75 ^{ns}	2.47*	2.20 ^{ns}	0.91 ^{ns}	-
Biotechnology and Food Technology	7.47	3.91*	3.80*	3.53*	2.24 ^{ns}	1.33 ^{ns}
Forestry	6.79	4.58*	4.48*	4.28*	2.19*	2.00 ^{ns}
						0.66 ^{ns}

ns = not significant

* = significant at 0.01

Table 15 shows the relationship of variables among the reading comprehension scores of students grouped by profile variables. It is clearly revealed on table that family income has coefficient correlation of $r = -0.182$ which is significant at 0.05 level. Since it is negative, it means that EFL first year students whose parents' family income is lower have higher reading comprehension scores. This practically confirms a

scenario whereby parents who have lower income are most likely deficient in economic resources that with it becomes a challenge among learners not to experience the same. It is thus a strong feeling among students for their reason to excel in best manner they potentially can.

Corollary, fathers' highest educational attainment has correlation coefficient of $r= 0.241$ which is significant at 0.05 level. This finding signifies that the higher is the fathers' level of education, the greater is the influence to children-learner's reading comprehension.

Moreover, it is observed that the reading interest has a correlation coefficient of $r= 0.14$ which is significant at 0.05 level. This finding points out a fact that the higher is the reading interest, the more competent the learner is in reading comprehension.

Lastly, the exposure to the English language has a correlation coefficient of $r= 0.229$ which is significant at 0.05 level. This means that the greater is the exposure of the learner to the English language, the better is the learner's reading comprehension performance.

Table 15. Relationship between the reading comprehension score of students and their select variables.

Variables Reading Comprehension Score and	Correlati on Coefficie nt	Prob.	Statistical Decision
Family Income	0.182	0.002	Significant at 0.01
Father's Highest Educational Attainment	0.241	0.000	Significant at 0.01
Mother's Highest Educational Attainment	0.11	0.051	Not significant
Reading Interest	0.14	0.012	Significant at 0.05
Exposure to the English Language	0.229	0.000	Significant at 0.01

Findings

5.1. Profile of EFL students

Majority of the EFL first year students are male. It is also exciting to note that females excel better in reading comprehension compared to

males. Most enrollees of the course program come from rural areas whose greater population specifically hails from the lowlands of countryside and mountain ranges.

Majority of the students are enrolled in University of Sciences. Thus it is the only University of Sciences that has the greatest students' population enrolled in EFL program that is ideal enough to making themselves potentially adept to undertake intelligibly scientific laboratory learning activities as they are more exposed to academic facts and information written in English language.

It is about half of the student-respondents' families who live at the average social class, while another less than half of them live at the low social class whose income they earn is just enough to satisfy their children's educational needs and priority basic needs.

Two-thirds of the students' parents (father and mother) lack the necessary skills and competencies, which mean lesser chances for them to have better job and/or income since most of them are undergraduates of elementary, secondary and tertiary.

5.2. Reading comprehension performance.

The EFL student-enrollees find primary interest in music reading materials which means that Vietnamese students are most likely inclined with the development of musical intelligence. The sports and games as well as food and health are their secondary interest to read which means that they are allured in gaining consciousness on physical development. It is also intriguing to note that science is the least reading material they are interested with to read.

It is likewise intriguing to note that the students are moderately exposed to media learning facilities like TV radio; social media network particularly Facebook; and library holdings like books, newspapers, comics, and magazines. Furthermore, it is a finding that they rarely indulge themselves in spending substantive time in reading encyclopedia and reader's digest. This explains the students' deficiency of knowledge of general facts and significant historical and contextual bits of information as well as trivia published by credible press.

It is a finding that students' level of competence in reading comprehension is merely to the state of being *literal* in dimension. This means that they can only easily comprehend those that are at the low-level type of understanding. Reading comprehension with cognitive evaluation is even meaner which means "reading beyond the line" for them is yet to be mastered.

5.3. Difference in the level of reading performance vis-à-vis genres.

Though the level of students' reading mastery is relatively high along poetry, it remains an undiscounted fact that they are yet weak in reading mastery along essay and short story.

As initially mentioned above, there is significant difference in the level of reading comprehension performance of the students with regard to sex. This finding translates the fact that female excel better in reading comprehension compared to male EFL first year students.

5.4. Significant relationship between reading comprehension performance of the respondents and profile variables

It is a finding of this study that there is no significant difference in the level of reading comprehension performance on the basis of their residence. However, course is a factor to the variability on the level of competence in their reading comprehension which means that students' individual choice on fields of specialization requires different extent of needs for reading comprehension.

The similarities in the level of students' reading comprehension in respect to field of specialization are evident only to the two groups of curricular orientations such as social sciences and allied science-related courses.

It is also a finding that the students whose family income is lower have higher reading comprehension scores. This scenario would most likely mean that children of marginalized parents are more challenged to study; the higher is the fathers' level of education, the greater is the influence to children-learner's reading comprehension; the higher is the reading interest, the more competent the learner is in reading comprehension; and the greater is the exposure of the learner to the English language, the better is the learner's reading comprehension performance.

Conclusion

The first year students in EFL are dominantly male but the female students relatively excel better in reading comprehension.

The low parents' educational attainment is a factor to poor economic condition of the students' parents which is the similar reason for weaker material and technical influence of parents to their children's needs relative to enhancement of reading competence.

The least interest of students to literature and science reading materials, the moderate exposure to social media networks and the lesser interest in reading library holdings' general references and trivia learning

resources are contributory factors to the students' deficiency in reading performance. It is likewise the basic reason why most students are merely in the dimension of being literal in reading comprehension in the area of English language as medium of communication. As a consequence, they too are weak in reading mastery along essay and short story.

Recommendations

Reading comprehension involves critical thinking and scientific reasoning. Thus, it is suggested that English Language professors of 7 universities should design a strategy that is equipped with learning modules that intensively require students to academically delve themselves in developmental reading of literature, science, general references and trivia library holdings. The modules are suggested subsumed with mastery reading sessions and output requirements such as poem, essay and short story.

When the suggested modules shall have been utilized, a follow-up study on students' reading comprehension and writing performance of students should also be undertaken by the future researchers. In this way, a more exemplified teaching and learning materials can be provided to meet the challenging needs of students in the area of English language communication.

Lastly, for students to remarkably hone their technical skills and intellectual competence and comprehension in reading, immense motivation of mentors to their students should be more focused on exploring broad dynamics of language comprehension through contextual and conceptual mapping.