



An Investigation of English Reading Comprehension Difficulties and Improvement Methods of Undergraduate Chinese Students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages

Xingfeng Li^{1*}, Kris Lietz², Kitpinit Usho³, Phikun Ekwarangkoon⁴

^{1,2,3}North Bangkok University, Bangkok, Thailand

⁴Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand

✉: * xingfeng.li@northbkk.ac.th

(*Author Corresponding Email)

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were to investigate the difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages and to construct improvement methods of English reading comprehension for undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. This research was considered a mixed-methods research study conducted at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. The respondents were divided into two groups: 335 undergraduate Chinese students and 95 teachers at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages in the academic year 2025. Two research instruments were employed: 1) a questionnaire for investigating difficulties of reading comprehension and 2) focus group discussions for evaluating the improvement methods. The data collected were analyzed through statistical and content analysis methods and presented in terms of frequency count, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The results indicated that: 1) The difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students were found at the highest level with mean scores ranging from 4.21 to 4.40, including difficulty understanding unfamiliar vocabulary, struggling to identify main ideas, difficulty with long and complex sentences, and anxiety when reading English texts. 2) The improvement methods of English reading comprehension were categorized into four chapters: methods for learners focusing on metacognitive strategy development and vocabulary enhancement, methods for instructors emphasizing diagnostic assessment and culturally responsive teaching, classroom management strategies creating supportive environments, and teaching-learning materials incorporating authentic resources and digital integration. Keywords: Reading Comprehension; Difficulties; Improvement Methods; Chinese Students; English as Foreign Language

Keywords: English Reading Comprehension Difficulties, Improvement Methods, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages

1. Introduction

Most ESL/EFL students have problems with text reading in English. The primary issue is thought to be an inability of vocabulary and sentence structure expertise (Gunning, 2002). Vocabulary knowledge is crucial for supporting students in comprehending complicated texts,

such as textbooks that include a wealth of concepts and technical vocabulary (Hayes, 1991; Kinzer, & Leu, 1995). When it comes to terminology, the issues are related to words that have several meanings, superordinates, synonyms, antonyms, and technical language (Grave & Ryder, 1998; Nuttall, 2000). The student's capacity to comprehend what they are reading may be affected by these word clusters. Furthermore, reading comprehension issues may arise from words having several meanings. Complex and very long sentences also cause problems in reading comprehension for students learning English as a second or foreign language. Complex sentences are sentences that contain many clauses or reduced clauses. Sentences with cohesive words such as however, because, thus, although, and furthermore are also complex (Aebersold & Field, 1997). In addition, complex noun groups, nominalizations, coordinating conjunctions, participial phrases, and prepositional phrases are the main causes of problems in reading comprehension of the students because they render texts complex and difficult to understand (Nuttall, 2000). Additionally, Ponmanee and Sinsuwan (2001) studied the demands and issues with English usage of 60 graduate students teaching social science and Thai in comparison to those teaching English. The research equipment included a reading test and questionnaires. All four English language abilities were determined to be necessary for students in all three fields of study, with poor reading being the primary issue for these students. According to Songsiri (1999), students in the 12th grade had very poor English reading comprehension. Students struggled with vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, and they were unable to deduce meaning from context. These deficiencies were caused by their inability to skim for main ideas, scan for details, draw conclusions, locate references, clarify, order facts from opinions, and evaluate the author's tone and mood. Additionally, Adunyarittigun's (2002) study revealed that participants' inability to infer meaning in context was mostly caused by their inability of vocabulary and understanding of language structure. Furthermore, Chuenta (2002) discovered that the participants' reading difficulties included a lack of appropriate reading strategies, an inability to summarise the text, a difficulty to understand the primary concept, and a slow reading speed according to a limited vocabulary. Tanghirunwat (2003) discovered that Thai engineers challenged with technical jargon related to other areas, as well as new vocabulary caused by new technology and the telecommunications industry. In conclusion, reading comprehension is a critical skill for EFL/ESL learners, particularly for those in higher education and various professional fields. Despite its importance, Thai students consistently demonstrate low proficiency in English reading comprehension. This deficiency stems from various factors, including vocabulary limitations, difficulty with complex sentence structures, and inadequate reading strategies. The challenges are further compounded by the perception of English as a difficult language and low student motivation. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and improved teaching methodologies to enhance the English reading skills of Thai students. By addressing these challenges, educators can better prepare students for academic success and professional advancement in an increasingly globalized world where English proficiency is paramount.

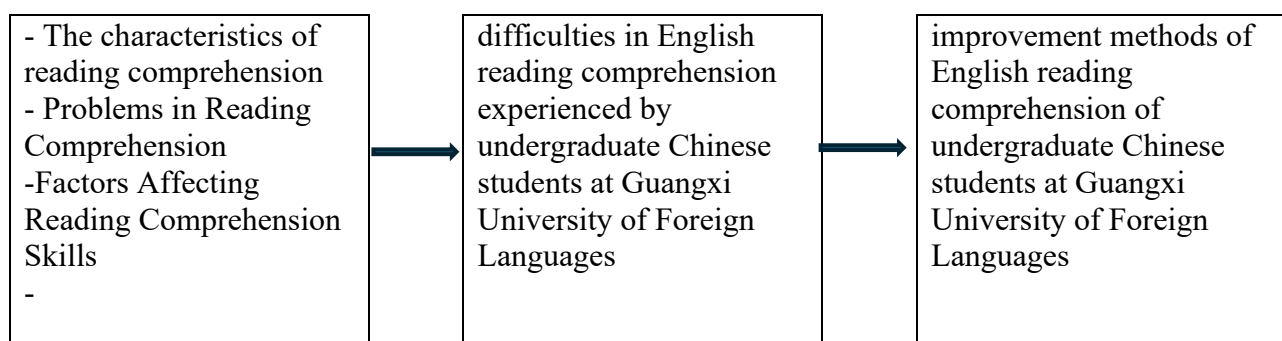


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2. Literature Review

Brown (2004, p.189) stated that reading is the process to understand texts. Accordingly, reading involves actively searching out and deriving meaning from written content. The ability to identify and comprehend written symbols in connection to spoken language is known as word recognition. The research by Chandran and Shah (2019) focuses on identifying difficulties in ESL reading comprehension among secondary school students. They suggest that collaborative efforts are necessary between different stakeholders to address these difficulties and improve students' reading comprehension. The research technique employs a survey method with a questionnaire, and the authors advise expanding the study to additional secondary schools and higher education institutions to gain a more thorough grasp of reading comprehension challenges. Furthermore, Siahaan (2022) emphasizes the importance of English language fluency in Indonesia, where English is taught from a young age till university. Reading is regarded as one of the most essential abilities to master since it allows students to absorb information, improve their critical thinking and analysis skills, and broaden their vocabulary. The author emphasizes that reading requires not just speaking words or phrases, but also comprehending the information delivered by the author. This implies that in addition to being able to pronounce words or phrases from the book, you must also be able to grasp what information the author is attempting to express. Overall, they emphasize the importance of reading in language acquisition, comprehension, and academic accomplishment. They emphasize the need for effective tactics, collaboration, and more research in addressing challenges and improving students' reading comprehension skills. The reader has to apply a variety of reasoning and information-processing techniques in a comprehension exercise to derive meaning from what they have read. The categories of comprehension according to (Voughan & Boss 2009) are the kinds of reasoning based on how readers must use their prior knowledge to generate the meaning. This paradigm categorizes comprehension into the following types:

1. Textually clear understanding: in this kind of comprehension, the reader's prior knowledge is minimally added and information is taken straight from the text.

2. Textually implicit: in this case, the text provides the information, but readers must apply their prior knowledge to connect the concepts the text provides.

3. Scripturally implicit: in this category, the text doesn't include information. To understand the article in the book, readers have to participate with and create from their prior knowledge.

According to the studies above, reading comprehension is the capacity to grasp the material. It entails not just decoding the words on the page but also making sense of the

information, linking concepts, and extracting meaning from the text. When readers participate in reading comprehension, they actively interact with the text, relying on prior knowledge, vocabulary, and cognitive abilities to comprehend and make sense of what they read. This process employs a variety of skills, including prediction, questioning, summarising, clarifying, and forming conclusions. Effective reading comprehension enables readers to move beyond surface-level knowledge and study the text's deeper meaning and implications. It allows readers to learn, extract information, examine arguments, analyze viewpoints, and engage critically with written material. Reading difficulties is a condition in which the person faces difficulty in reading, usually caused by an unknown factor or factors. The problem affecting the brain's information-processing and reception capacity is the unknown factor. Learning as rapidly or in the same way as someone who is not impacted by a reading difficulty may be difficult for someone with this illness. When taught in traditional methods or left to solve problems on their own, children with reading disabilities struggle to accomplish certain kinds of skills or complete assignments. This syndrome persists despite traditional education, enough IQ, and sociocultural opportunity. It is caused by cognitive problems, many of which are constitutional. Children with reading problems have difficulty understanding the meaning of words and paragraphs. These youngsters may struggle with other elements of reading, such as decoding, but comprehension is their primary challenge. (Mahapatra, Iyoti & Sabat 2016).

3. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages.
2. To construct the improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Population

In this research project at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages was employed as a case study. The population in this research project will be divided into 2 groups; namely, 2,600 Chinese students and 95 teachers at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages in the academic year 2025.

4.2. Sample group

The sample groups in this research project was divided into 2 groups; namely, 335 Chinese students and 95 teachers at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages in the academic year 2025. The sample size (n) was obtained through the Krejcie & Morgan. (Krejcie & Morgan,1970). The respondents in this research were obtained through the Simple Random Sampling Technic.

4.3 Research Instrument

The two main research instruments were: 1) a questionnaire was employed for the investigation of difficulties of reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students studying at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. All items/questions were evaluated for their correctness and suitability by the three specialists in terms of IOC. They were found in the IOC ranging from 0.66 to 1.00, and 2) a set of questions for 2 focus group discussion meetings was used for the evaluation and approval of the improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. The three specialists evaluated and approved the constructed improvement methods of English reading comprehension through the content analysis.

4.4 Data Collection

For this research project, the researcher himself collected the data and information from the sample groups. The sample groups were informed of the purposes of the data collection, then make an appointment with the researcher. The researcher must mail or submit a letter of permission signed by the researcher's advisor to the university in advance to ask for permission to collect the data.

4.5 Data Analysis

4.5.1 For the data and information from the questionnaire concerning difficulties of reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students studying at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. The data and information collected were analyzed and then interpreted and presented in terms of frequency count, percentage, mean, standard deviation (S.D.). In addition, the information and data from the 2 focus group discussion meetings were analyzed through the content analysis then used for the evaluation and approval of the improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages.

4.5.2 For the approval of the improvement methods of English reading comprehension : The data information concerning the strategies were collected, interpreted and presented through the content analysis technique.

5. Findings

Part 1 Difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages

Table 1: Difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages(Students)

Items	n=335		Level of problems
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	
1) I have difficulty understanding unfamiliar vocabulary when reading English texts.	4.31	0.21	Highest
2) I struggle to identify the main idea of a passage.	4.31	0.13	Highest
3) I find it difficult to understand long and complex sentences.	4.40	0.15	Highest
4) I cannot read quickly enough to finish reading tasks on time.	4.26	0.12	Highest
5) I have problems recognizing implied meaning in texts.	4.32	0.13	Highest
6) I feel confused when reading academic or technical materials.	4.25	0.21	Highest
7) I forget what I have read after finishing a passage.	4.21	0.14	Highest
8) I face difficulty connecting sentences and paragraphs to understand the whole passage.	4.22	0.12	Highest
9) I lack strategies to guess the meaning of words from context.	4.26	0.20	Highest
10) I feel anxious and lose motivation	4.45	0.19	Highest

when reading English texts.

According to table 1, it is indicated that the students rated the problems of English reading comprehension at the highest level at the range of $\bar{X}$ 4.21 (SD=0.18) – $\bar{X}$ 4.40 (0.15)

Table 2: Difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (Teachers)

Items	n=95		Level of problems
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	
1) I have difficulty understanding unfamiliar vocabulary when reading English texts.	4.30	0.21	Highest
2) I struggle to identify the main idea of a passage.	4.31	0.13	Highest
3) I find it difficult to understand long and complex sentences.	4.40	0.15	Highest
4) I cannot read quickly enough to finish reading tasks on time.	4.25	0.12	Highest
5) I have problems recognizing implied meaning in texts.	4.32	0.13	Highest
6) I feel confused when reading academic or technical materials.	4.25	0.21	Highest
7) I forget what I have read after finishing a passage.	4.21	0.14	Highest
8) I face difficulty connecting sentences and paragraphs to understand the whole passage.	4.22	0.12	Highest
9) I lack strategies to guess the meaning of words from context.	4.25	0.21	Highest
10) I feel anxious and lose motivation when reading English texts.	4.40	0.15	Highest
Total	4.32	0.18	Highest

According to table 2, it is indicated that the students rated the problems of English reading comprehension at the highest level at the range of $\bar{X}$ 4.21(SD=0.14) – $\bar{X}$ 4.40 (0.15).

Part 2: The improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages

The improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students are composed of 4 chapters ; namely, chapter 1: About Learners , chapter 2: About Instructors, chapter 3: About classroom management , and chapter 4: About teaching-learning materials and assessment : All the 4 chapters were evaluated and approved by the three specialists (One Thai professors and two English native speakers) in terms of correctness and suitability through the content analysis meaning the constructed the improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students could be used as guidelines for the improvement of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students in China.

6. Conclusion

The title of the research is “An Investigation of English Reading Comprehension Difficulties and Improvement Methods of Undergraduate Chinese Students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages”. The objectives of this research were: 1) to investigate the difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, and 2) to construct the improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. In this research project, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages was selected as a case study. The population in this research project was divided into 2 groups, namely, 2,600 undergraduate Chinese students and 95 teachers in the academic year 2025, The sample groups in this research project were divided into 2 groups; namely, 335 undergraduate Chinese students and 95 teachers Guangxi University of Foreign Languages in the academic year 2025. The main research instruments were a questionnaire and a set of questions for a focus group discussion meeting for the approval of the constructed the improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. In this research project, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages was employed as a case study. The researcher selected the Guangxi University of Foreign Languages as a case study since the researcher has a connection with people there. This helped facilitate the data collection. For this research project, the researcher myself collected the data and information from the sample groups. The data and information collected were analyzed and then interpreted and presented in terms of frequency count, percentage, mean ($\bar{X}$), and standard deviation (S.D.). The findings from the investigation of the difficulties in English reading comprehension experienced by undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University indicated the students rated the problems of English reading skill at the highest level at the range of $\bar{X} = 4.21$ (SD=0.18) – $\bar{X} = 4.45$ (0.19). Moreover, it was also indicated that the teachers rated the problems of English reading comprehension at the highest level with the range of $\bar{X} = 4.21$ (SD=0.14) – $\bar{X} = 4.40$ (0.15). It can be said that the students and teachers at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages rated the problems of English reading skill of undergraduate Chinese students at the highest level. The constructed improvement methods of English reading comprehension for undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages” are composed of four chapters; namely, chapter 1: For Learners of English Writing, chapter 2: For Instructors of English Writing, Chapter 3: For Classroom Management, chapter 4: For Teaching – Learning Material and Assessment. The constructed improvement methods of English reading skill for Undergraduate Chinese students were evaluated and approved by the three specialists through the content analysis and can be used as guidelines for the improvement of English reading skill of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages

7. Discussion

It can be concluded that both students and teachers at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages rated the difficulties in English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at the highest level. The difficulties in English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students can be delineated through the facts that the contents of the English courses do not focus directly on reading comprehension practice and the lesson contents and activities for reading comprehension practice are not emphasized on specific situations. It can be accepted that Chinese students have little or no chance to participate in extensive reading activities in daily life and they also have little chance to encounter authentic English texts outside the classroom. They therefore get confused or frustrated at first due to

unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures. They might not have confidence in reading comprehension or lead to hesitation when encountering academic texts. Furthermore, one of the most pressing difficulties identified was vocabulary limitations and complex sentence structure comprehension, especially in real academic contexts. Many students feared encountering unfamiliar words or technical terms, leading to limited engagement in reading tasks. This reflects the findings of previous research, which observed that Chinese students often avoided challenging texts due to fear of incomprehension and low self-efficacy. Moreover, the findings from this research were found corresponding to related studies, which indicated that insufficient exposure to authentic English reading environments limited students' ability to develop reading fluency and comprehension strategies. Limited vocabulary knowledge and poor understanding of English syntactic patterns were significant obstacles. Students reported difficulty in understanding implied meanings and connecting ideas across paragraphs, especially in academic scenarios such as research articles or technical documentation. The lack of extensive reading practice outside the classroom contributed to this issue, as students rarely engaged in English reading for pleasure or academic purposes beyond assigned coursework. Additionally, students demonstrated significant challenges with reading speed and time management, indicating inadequate development of reading fluency and over-reliance on word-by-word translation strategies rather than meaning-focused approaches. The research revealed that students struggled with metacognitive reading strategies, showing limited ability to monitor their comprehension, make predictions, or use context clues effectively. These problems are partly due to the lack of systematic reading strategy instruction and over-reliance on traditional grammar-translation methods in English language teaching. The findings also highlighted psychological barriers, with students experiencing high levels of reading anxiety and motivation loss when faced with challenging English texts, creating additional obstacles to reading skill development and academic success. The constructed improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages" were composed of four chapters; namely, chapter 1: For Learners of English Reading, chapter 2: For Instructors of English Reading, Chapter 3: For Classroom Management, chapter 4: For Teaching – Learning Material and Assessment. They were accepted and approved by the three specialists, then it could be used as a guideline for the improvement methods of English reading comprehension of undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research instruments used for data collection included: A questionnaire with both closed- and open-ended items designed to measure reading challenges, confidence levels, and language use frequency, and a set of semi-structured interview questions that allowed for deeper exploration of personal reading difficulties and learning preferences.

8. Recommendations

1. For the implementation of the research findings into practice, the improvement methods should be reported and applied to the teaching and learning setting for undergraduate Chinese students at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages
2. For further research: The study on the construction of improvement methods for the other three skills (listening, speaking and writing) need to be constructed.

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