

# Using Online Newspapers to Enhance Students' Reading Skills: A Case Study at Thai Nguyen University

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## ABSTRACT

The action research was conducted to test the ideas that using online newspapers written in English to improve students reading skills and cultivates their positive attitude towards extensive reading (ER). The participants were 42 second-year students at School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University (SFL-TNU). The results showed a significant improvement in students' reading skills, and students' positive attitudes towards ER. Besides, in order to create a habit of reading extensively with an online newspaper written in English for students, there seems to be a need of consideration of time and a variety of local online newspapers written in English for students to choose.

**KEY WORDS:** reading skills, extensive reading, online newspaper

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Today with the advent of the internet, learners have chances to read and get information from all fields by reading newspapers online. They develop learners' knowledge and enhance their language skills. Online newspapers play a predominant role in English language learning, and develop the natural outgrowth of critical thinking. Besides, learners have a variety of choices for online English newspapers.

With up-to-date information in every field, online English newspapers are a rich source for English language teachers to teach reading (Grundy, 1993; Sanderson, 1999). In comparison to printed English newspapers, online English newspapers are more accessible.

Since online English newspapers promote the learners' language skills enormously, the researcher believe that online English newspapers can help improve second-year students' reading skills and help to cultivate their positive attitude towards extensive reading (ER) which is the basis to create a reading habit outside the class.

The action research was conducted with 42 second-year students at SFL-TNU. The study focused on the use of online English newspapers to improve their reading skills. Twenty-eight articles were used to design twenty-six reading tasks. Due to the socio-cultural background knowledge, a local online English newspaper in Vietnam was exploited.

With the above aims, the study tried to answer for the following questions:

- *To what extent can online English newspapers help to improve students' reading skills?*
- *What are students' attitudes towards the ER program with online newspapers written in English?*

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Reading

Reading is an important skill in the language learning process and many researchers have defined it in different ways.

Harmer (1989:190) defines that "reading is an exercise dominated by the eyes and the brain. The eyes receive message and the brain then has to work out the significance of the message". Reading thereby is considered as a "receptive skill" whose aim is to extract a message from the written text (Harmer, 1989; Ur, 1996; Richard and Platt, 1992).

Other researchers tend to have a deeper look into reading. They realize that reading is a complex process with the involvement of various elements. Smith (2004:73) points out that:

Access to visual information is a necessary part of reading, but not sufficient ... Knowledge of the relevant language is essential for reading, but you can't expect to find it on the printed page. Rather it is information that you must have already, behind the eyeball. It can be distinguished ... by being called non-visual information of prior knowledge.

Anderson (1999:1) shares the same view and he considers 'non-visual information' as the reader's background knowledge and experience. In other words, reading is not a passive process. Reading is an 'interactive' process between a reader and a text, which leads to automaticity. In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he or she tries to elicit the meaning and various kinds of knowledge being used: linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing). These factors have been summarized and synthesized by MacLachlan and Reid (1994: 3-4) as the interpretive framing which consists of four following types of framing:

- Extratextual framing – using information outside the text, your background knowledge and experience to understand the text.
- Intratextual framing – making use of cues from the text, such as headings and subheadings and referential words such as “this” and “that” to understand the text.
- Intertextual framing – making connections with other texts you are reading to help understand the text.
- Circumtextual framing – using information from the cover of the book, title, abstract, references, etc. to understand the text.

### **Reading skills**

Woodley (2011:33-34) considers reading skills as the means to “gain meaning from text by constructing a text-based model while at the same time they draw upon and use their own background knowledge to construct a situation model of the understandings related to the text passage”.

Different researchers have proposed different types of reading skills. Davis (1994 cited in Afflerbach, Person and Paris, 2008: 367) suggests nine skills of reading comprehension namely: word meanings, word meaning in context, follow passage organization, main thought, answer specific text-based questions, text-based questions with paraphrase, draw inferences about the content, literary devices, and author purpose.

Similarly, Harmer (1989) mentions a number of reading skills, such as: predicting, guessing word meaning, reading for specific information, reading for general comprehension, scanning, skimming, inferring from texts, interpreting texts, surveying text organization, and critically evaluating texts.

### **Attitude**

According to Kerlinger (1984), attitude is a 'multidimensional' factor which predisposes a person's selection of behaviors towards something. Similarly, Ajzen (1987) and Mager (1986) state that attitudes determine a person's emotion and response to a person, a thing or an activity. Moreover, they divide attitudes into two types: positive (favorable) and negative (unfavorable). In language education, attitudes play an important role. Fakeye (2010) states that learner's attitude is one of the most important factors affect on leaning a language. Dornyei (1996) confirms that students with more favorable attitudes toward the second language and its speakers are likely to be more successful in the language learning than others.

### **Online English newspapers**

Online English newspapers as well as printed ones are authentic materials because they are ‘...real-life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes’ (Wallace, 1992: 45). According to Reah (2002: 13), newspapers are “ephemeral texts, that is, they are intended only for the day they are delivering the news”. Compared to printed versions and other materials, online English newspapers are more updated, more visually stimulating and more creative. Grundy (1993), Sanderson (1999) and Reah (2002) have summarized some prominent features of online English newspapers as follows:

Firstly, they include a system of interrelated lexical, phraseological and grammatical means serving the purpose of informing, instructing and entertaining the reader. Because of these diverse purposes, online newspapers involve a wide range of styles.

Secondly, online newspapers have both general educational and cultural values. They keep us informed about what is happening in the world, thereby, extending our knowledge and deepening our understanding.

Thirdly, online newspapers use language naturally and cover many things which are not included in textbooks but popular in the real life. By reading online newspapers, students will know how to use language naturally and widen their vocabulary about all fields.

Therefore, in a foreign language classroom, online English newspapers as well as printed ones are a rich source of reading materials with many positive effects.

### **Extensive reading (ER)**

Harfiz and Tudor (1989: 4) consider ER as “the reading of large amounts of material in the second language over time for personal pleasure or interest, and without the addition of productive tasks or follow up language work”. Besides, Davis (1995: 329) provides a detailed description or ER in the context of ELT

classroom. According to Davis (1995), an ER program in an ELT course is compared to an additional class-library idea where students are provided with a large number of books as well as a time and encouragement to read them.

Hedge (2002) states that ER “enables students to achieve independency by reading the material they want in consideration to content, level of difficulty, and length and they are promoted to learn how to increase their reading speed through which, by sure, they learn how to locate certain information to help them reach the main and basic ideas”.

Nuttall (2004: 35) also emphasizes that because ER offers a large amount of reading materials, it occurs mainly out-of-class.

• **Benefits of ER**

Ellis (2005: 217) states that “successful instructed that language learning requires extensive second language input” and the effectiveness of ER to develop students’ language competence has been demonstrated by many studies. In terms of the knowledge and skills, students can get comprehensible input, improve their vocabulary and grammar. In regard to the qualities of a learner, ER increases students’ motivation and confidence in reading, develop their autonomy by instilling them the love for reading. Therefore, Nuttall (1982) proposed that ER should be considered as ‘standard practice’ in second language learning.

Firstly, ER provides comprehensive input for students. According to Krashen (1985), input hypothesis, comprehensibility is one of the most importance factors in deciding students’ interest.

Secondly, vocabulary and grammar are developed by reading extensively. Reading different topics will supply students with different banks of lexical and syntactic form. Moreover, ER builds automaticity of words recognition from the words meanings in the context and its phonological representation, which enhances students’ vocabulary knowledge.

Thirdly, ER constructs the fluency of reading which plays an importance role in the efficiency of reading. With the aim to get the meaning, students will ignore difficult words and try to guess the meaning of key words from the context with the support of their knowledge about the language and topic.

Fourth, ER helps students to develop their general language efficiency. Waring (2006) states that students get the comfort from the ‘experience with the language. The more it has to enter their comfort zone and the greater chance there is for it to become available for production’.

Moreover, ER promotes learners’ positive attitude towards reading. It fosters their confidence and motivation to read. Bell (2001) agrees that “ER is the only way in which learners can get access to language at their own comfort zone, read something they want to read at the pace they feel comfortable with...”

**III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**Results of students’ questionnaires and teachers’ observation sheets**

*Results of questionnaires*

*Table 1. Results of questionnaire for students*

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
1. The ER program with online English newspapers has many interesting topics.	70%	8%	2%	1%	1%
2. The ER program with online English newspapers improved my reading skills.	75%	15%	5%	3%	2%
3. The reading tasks were comprehensible.	73%	15%	7%	5%	0%
4. The ER program broadened my sociocultural knowledge.	70%	15%	8%	5%	2%
5. My background knowledge facilitated me in completing reading tasks.	68%	12%	10%	5%	5%
6. After the ER program, I will continue to read these online English newspapers.	48%	25%	7%	10%	10%
7. If I had been given a choice, I would not have participated in this ER program.	2%	2%	8%	15%	73%

Table 1 illustrates students’ attitudes towards the reading program with online newspapers written in English in terms of affective, cognitive and behavioral components. As can be seen, most of the students had positive attitudes towards the ER program. 70% of the students agreed that reading topics were interesting. This implied their interest in doing reading tasks. Besides, students made their evaluation of the ER program in

relation to the comprehensibility of the input, the role of socio-cultural knowledge and the efficiency of the program. Relating to the input, the majority of the students (87.5%) thought that the reading materials were comprehensible with 87.5% agree and strongly agree. Considering background knowledge, 67.5% students realized that their reading process was facilitated by their socio-cultural knowledge. Furthermore, 70% of the students admitted that their background knowledge was, in turn, widened by reading extensively. In terms of the efficiency of the reading program, up to 75% students remarked that they had made a significant improvement. This means that most of the students were highly aware of the benefit of ER. The last two questions showed students' willingness and future action. 72.5% students confirmed that they were willing to participate in the ER program. Although students were willing to take part in the program and realized its benefits, only 47.5% strongly determined to continue to read this online English newspaper. This seemed to be understandable when first year students did not have much time for a new ER program.

**Results of teachers' observation sheets**

Teachers' observation sheets were adapted from Peacock's (1992). Each sheet has two complete statements, two incomplete ones and one question. The observers choose the response and answer which are designed according to Likert scale from 1 (not really or low) to 5 (very much so or high). These statements and questions focus on other teachers' comments on the appropriateness of the ER program and their observation of students' reaction to reading tasks given to them. Besides, observers were asked to give more details about students' behaviors.

*Table 2. Results of teachers' observation sheets*

Statements	Not really/ Low (1)	Low (2)	Not really /High (3)	High (4)	Very much so/high (5)
1. The reading materials are interesting for students.	0%	0%	16%	6%	78%
2. The reading materials are appropriate for students.	0%	0%	0%	6%	94%
3. The level of students' concentration on reading materials is ...	0%	3%	3%	6%	88%
4. The level of students' interest in reading ...	0%	3%	6%	28%	63%
5. How well do students complete the reading tasks?	0%	3%	6.5%	6.5%	84%

As can be seen from table 2, teachers observed that students had positive attitudes. With regard to topics, 78.1% topics were considered as very interesting. Encouragingly, 93.7% observation sheets confirmed the appropriateness of the reading materials. In other words, the criterion of the comprehensible input was assured. Relating the level of students' concentration of reading materials, there were 65.6% students with high concentration. And the percentage of students expressing high interest in reading tasks is 62.5%, There was a significant difference between what the teachers thought about reading topics and students' ideas. Observers elaborated that what might be considered interesting by both the task designer and observers (Question 1) could be considered "not interesting" (Question 4) by students. For other questions, 84.3% lessons were took part in effectively by the students. These lessons belonged to the final phase of the reading program. This reflected the improvement of students' reading skills. Observers added that when students were used to practicing reading skills, they could finish given reading tasks more quickly. This means that their reading speech was improved.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

Reading skills play an important role in helping readers to understand reading materials and boost their reading speech. The study found out the answers to the two research questions that using online English newspapers improves students' reading skills, and it cultivates their positive attitudes towards ER. There was a significant improvement in students' reading skills and most of them had a positive attitude towards the applied ER program. Their attitudes were confirmed by teachers' observations. Significantly, the study has contributed to the exploitation of a new source of teaching and learning reading skills. In order to create a habit of reading extensively, students need to have 'optimal conditions'. This explains the findings that although most of students were aware of the comprehensibility of the reading material, the support of the background knowledge together with the expansion of their socio-cultural knowledge, the percentage of students deciding to continue to

read the online newspaper after the application of the ER program was not high, therefore, students may need more time and choice to read extensively.

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