

# Enhancing Vocabulary Retention Through Deep Reading Activities: A Case Study Of An EFL Classroom

Dao Phuong Linh

(Faculty Of English, Thuongmai University, Vietnam)

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## Abstract:

*This study examined the role of deep reading strategies to improve vocabulary retention for first-year English majors. A total of fifty students took part – one group of students continually practiced reading deep reading strategies (e.g. annotating, discussing, and reflecting on the text) and the second group regularly practiced traditional reading practices (e.g. summarising, basic comprehension). Students' vocabulary retention was measured using pre-test and post-test assessments, and their reflections collected in reflective journals provided context for results. Results demonstrated that students in the deep reading group improved vocabulary retention by 22%, whereas the control group improved by 6%. These results indicate that students in the deep reading group used deep reading strategies to remain engaged with both the text and the vocabulary with language that can support subsequent retention and a more meaningful understanding of the new words. This study focused on utilising a deep reading strategy as a powerful way to help students develop meaningful, lifelong vocabulary.*

**Key Word:** *deep reading, vocabulary retention, reading motivation.*

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## I. Introduction

With the strong development of technology, today's society is heavily media-driven, leading a large number of students to face increasing challenges in engaging deeply with text-based contents. Indeed, with the rise of digital platforms, students can have quick access to all kinds of information, which is often made digestible, thus develop habits of skimming texts rather than deeply engaging with them. This shallow reading approach can result in dire consequences for their memory, attention span, and comprehension. For English learning in particular, shallow understanding of a text is also synonymous with inferior vocabulary memorising ability, which can negatively affect their academic performance and can be a setback to the whole learning process. In the context of English teaching in Vietnam, where traditional, textbook-based approaches still dominate, there is a growing need to incorporate more engaging and cognitively demanding practices. Deep reading, therefore, has emerged as an effective way to encourage prolonged and thoughtful interaction with a text. This research aims to explore how the practice of deep reading can enhance vocabulary retention in 50 students of Thuongmai University, and suggest several effective ways that English teachers can adopt in order to effectively execute deep reading activities in classrooms.

## II. Literature Review

### Understanding deep reading

Deep reading is a practice that focuses on the deep engagement with a text on a cognitive, emotional and reflective level. In contrast to shallow reading, deep reading involves deliberate and sustained effort to comprehend, interpret and internalise the reading material (Baron, 2015). In line with this definition, according to Birkerts (1994), deep reading also promotes a deeper connection between the reader and text since it requires the readers to shift their attention to both the details and the broader themes, thus enabling them to engage more critically with the material.

The process of deep reading can be explained in several cognitive processes. First, readers read a passage, then they re-read it, make connections between different parts of the text and derive meaning from the information they read (Wolf, 2018). Along this process, techniques, such as annotation, note-taking, reflection or discussion, are also employed to further enhance the effectiveness. This reflects a stark contrast between deep reading and shallow reading, where analysis and reflection are often lacking while skimming and scanning tend to be more dominant.

### Deep reading in an English reading classroom

In an English reading classroom, deep reading skill is a vital skill, which not only fosters students' intrinsic motivation for reading but also reinforce their memory and ability to retain new vocabulary. This is

because vocabulary is learnt most effectively through meaningful contexts that are either emotionally relevant and stimulating, or appropriately contextualised for the readers. Furthermore, for deep reading sessions, follow-up discussions and reflections are archetypal, thus students can potentially benefit with enhanced short-term and long-term retention. Teachers also play a crucial role in facilitating the deep reading process by guiding students through strategies, such as questioning the text, encouraging reflection and personalisation, or prompting discussion for further exploration on the vocabulary and reading themes (Wolf, 2018).

### **Vocabulary retention**

Vocabulary retention refers to the ability to remember and recall words over time, which is a key factor in language acquisition and reading comprehension. It has been suggested that students' ability to retain new vocabulary depend on several factors, namely cognitive engagement, frequency of exposure, and the depth of text analysis.

**Cognitive factors:** Vocabulary deep processing (understanding a word's meaning in context) is superior for retention. The Levels of Processing theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972) states that words processed deeper cognitively; for example, through analysis or connection to previous knowledge, will be retained better than words processed in a surface way (Baron, 2015). Deep reading fosters deep processing of vocabulary because it requires students to interact with the text actively, re-read it, and reflect on vocabulary in the process. All of these factors will enhance retention.

**Repetition and Exposure:** Vocabulary learning for retention is also influenced by how many times words have been seen in relation to each other. The more words students encounter in myriad contexts, the more likely they are to retain vocabulary (Nation, 2001). Deep reading can allow for increased exposure to vocabulary in meaningful contexts which reinforces long-term retention.

**Emotional and Social factors:** Emotionality contributes to retention of words. In fact, words associated with personal or emotional experiences are typically better remembered. According to Bradley and Lang (2000), emotionally stimulating materials encourage students to connect to the text on a deeper level and emotionally attach to the vocabulary used in the text. Social aspects of engagement through discussions with classmates or peers can be used as a way to provide opportunities of retention of new vocabulary through the reflection and rehearsal of the words in meaningful contexts that emerge during these sessions (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

**Motivational Factors:** Intrinsic motivation plays a key role in vocabulary retention. When students have a motivation to engage in a text, there is going to be a higher retention of vocabulary. Deep reading connects to motivation because students are allowed to select a text that brings interest to them personally, which can make the reading experience personally meaningful (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This intrinsic motivation does not only improve engagement in the text, but it also improves vocabulary retention.

## **III. Methodologies**

### **Participants**

This study's participants consisted of 50 first-year English major students completing a compulsory reading course in Thuongmai university setting. These students were in their first year of university study at an upper B1 to B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). These students were all attending a compulsory reading class. The students were a homogenous group in terms of language proficiency, as most of them completed high school English education.

### **Reading Material:**

For the deep reading task, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger was chosen as the reading material. The novel was selected based on students' language level, range of vocabulary, and relevance in theme using content that students are familiar with. *The Catcher in the Rye* is available to students in B1-B2 levels in the CEFR, while offering complex language and deep themes dealing with identity, alienation, and society, and challenges the reader to engage deeply. While the overall narrative of the novel is accessible to students, the complexity allows students to engage with the language and the content while reflecting.

### **Research design**

This research utilised a quasi-experimental approach with a pre-test – post-test format in order to evaluate the processes involving deep reading strategies' effect on vocabulary retention. The research modeled the vocabulary retention of learners engaged in deep reading activities in contrast to learners participating in traditional reading practices.

### **Group Design**

Experimental Group: 25 students experiencing deep reading activities. The experimental group read selected reading materials by using deep reading strategies, such as annotation, critical thinking tasks, and engaging in class discussion.

Control Group: 25 students using traditional reading strategies, such as skimming and summarising, with a focus on comprehension instead of in-depth reading analysis.

Data collection

### **Pre- and Post-test:**

A vocabulary test was provided to all students before and after the reading experience. The pre-test was meant to measure students' knowledge of vocabulary in a baseline manner, while the post-test measured how much vocabulary the students had gained from the recreation activity. The test consisted of vocabulary items derived from the readings. It required students to demonstrate their knowledge of the meanings of words in recognition tasks (i.e. multiple choice) and productive tasks (i.e. fill in the blank).

### **Reflective Journals:**

Both groups were provided with a weekly reflective journal throughout the reading experiences. The reflective journals can provide insights about students' interactions with the reading material, their thoughts about the vocabulary they were exposed to, and their emotional and cognitive engagement with the text.

### **Class discussions**

During the 12-week course, in-class discussions were frequently held to evaluate the depth of student engagement with the reading texts. Students in the experimental group participated in guided discussions that focused on the meaning and usage of new vocabulary, while the control group focused on the general comprehension and summary task.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

The pre-test and post-test scores on the vocabulary tests were analyzed through the application of two paired t-tests to find any significant differences in vocabulary retention, with deep reading from the experimental group and traditional reading practices from the control group. The analyzing of pre-test and posttest mean scores for each group, as well as between the experimental and control groups followed a determined statistical method of comparison. The change in vocabulary knowledge from pre-test in relation to post-test was calculated to find any increases from the experimental group related to deep reading as effective vocabulary retention.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The reflective journals were analyzed through thematic analysis. The aim of the analysis was to find patterns regarding how students described their vocabulary learning experiences, the struggles they faced in using vocabulary, and their beliefs about the influence of the deep reading strategies on their engagement with vocabulary. The reflective journals were systematically coded through thematic coding and themes were generated that related to vocabulary retention, engagement, and motivation.

### **Triangulation**

To support the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, data triangulation was used. The results of the vocabulary test were compared with the qualitative journals and observation of class discussions to construct a more complete picture of how the strategies of deep reading impacted vocabulary retention. The addition of quantitative to qualitative data provided a richer understanding of the practical problem of research.

## **IV. Result**

When looking at the quantitative data collected through the pre-test and the post-test, there was a clear discrepancy in the retention of vocabulary items between the experimental and control groups. The experimental group had a mean 22% gain in posttest results while the control group had a mean gain of 6%. The difference in these groups shows that the strategies used in the experimental group, including the deep reading strategies, reflection, annotation, and whole-class discussions that allowed for thematic conversations, created a context that assisted in vocabulary retention through interactions. In the vocabulary word retention tests administered on the post-test, the experimental group were more successful in retaining words associated with the major themes in *The Catcher in the Rye* – "identity," "alienation," and "disillusionment." For example, in the post-test, 80% of deep reading students used "disillusionment" correctly in a sentence while only 45% of the control students used it correctly. This result made sense when looking at some cognitive theories that suggest that words that are

learned meaningfully and in context have a better chance of being retained as students are able to form better connections to the words (Baron, 2015). The deep reading group were able to recognize the vocabulary but more importantly they had a clearer understanding of how these words were engaged with bigger themes in the text beyond their original meaning.

The reflective journals offered significant qualitative data that illuminated how deep reading impacted retention of vocabulary. In the experimental group, students mentioned that activities like annotating, re-reading, and discussing, allowed them to engage more deeply with the text and vocabulary. One student illustrated the case for deep reading:

*"Before, I did not really understand 'alienation,' but after annotating the text, and discussing it as a class, I could really feel how it applied to Holden's experience. Now, I use the word when I talk about being left out."*

There were many similar recounts from students, who stated that reflecting on vocabulary through class discussions provided a stronger, and, ultimately, more personal connection to the word. Students stated the more they re-read the passages, traced the unfamiliar terms, and reflected on their meanings through the story, the more the vocabulary engaged their memory. That deeper cognitive processing (i.e., thinking about the word's meaning and use) contributed to the vocabulary retention. In comparison, students in the control group were generally less reflective of their vocabulary learning. The journals of the students in the control group mainly included a summary of the story or an overall understanding on a general scale of the text without providing any reflection on the vocabulary. This shows that the passive reading strategies the control group applied did not also see the same depth of vocabulary retention because that group was centered on general comprehension and summarisation, as opposed to the experimental groups' active engagement with the vocabulary.

The classroom discussions showed a drastic distinction in how the experimental and control groups discussed their vocabulary. The students within the experimental group referred to the newly learned words often in their discussions of the text. For example, when the deep reading group was discussing Holden's experiences, they spontaneously employed words like "awkward," "disillusioned," and "alienated" during their interpretations. One student's comment was:

*"Holden is always so awkward in social situations I think that's why he feels alienated from everybody around him."*

The students' vocabulary use in these matters shows that they were not merely practicing memorisation of vocabulary, they internalised the words and were able to personally draw parallels to their previous experience and world views. Their use of said vocabulary in that general context illustrates their depth of "understanding" vocabulary in this manner and ultimately works towards the retention of vocabulary. In contrast, the discussion sessions in the control group were not really discussion-based and were not heavily focused on vocabulary. The students in the control group were summarising the plot and sharing their general understandings of the story without much discussion of vocabulary. The use of vocabulary was not substantial and when they used words from the text, it was often in a more mechanical and less meaningful way. For example, one of the control group students said the following:

*"I know Holden felt kind of weird and uncomfortable about people, but I didn't really think about the word 'awkward' until I had the test."*

## **V. Conclusion**

The research demonstrates the benefits of deep reading strategies on vocabulary retention. Students in the deep reading condition showed significantly greater vocabulary retention by using one of more of these activities: a) annotation, b) reflective journaling, c) in-depth discussions, than students in the traditional reading condition. Students in the experimental group engaged in deep reading skillfully connected new words that they were learning in the text to the text, and their lived experiences. The students from the experimental group not only remembered the vocabulary better but were able to use the vocabulary. Overall, the findings of this research provide evidence that deep reading is a viable strategy for enhancing vocabulary acquisition and language learning, and should be recommended for educators who want to teach vocabulary in meaningful ways.

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