
# How to support students to cope with reading comprehension problems?

# Chapter 2
# How to support students to cope with reading comprehension problems?

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| **Teaching experience** | **Area of interest in teaching** |
|---|---|
| 24 Years | Writing, Speaking and Formative Assessment |

## Introduction

My reading class was a small class of only 12 students, all in Grade 11 (16–17 years old). They had attended other English reading classes when they were in Grade 10. Therefore, I assumed that they had already learned some reading strategies. However, after a few weeks of the semester, it turned out that the students struggled to comprehend English texts and always used dictionaries and translation applications when they read. Additionally, they lacked the confidence to complete reading comprehension tasks themselves or to summarise what they had read.

To give appropriate support, I needed to explore key factors that might affect the students' reading comprehension. Therefore, I formulated four questions:

1. What are students' perceptions about reading comprehension?
2. What kinds of reading texts do students prefer in the reading class?
3. What kinds of reading comprehension activities pose a challenge for the students in the reading class?
4. What kinds of reading comprehension tasks do I use with my students?

In the initial data collection, to find answers to the four questions, I designed three initial enquiry tools to help me analyse the situation from different perspectives.

## Initial enquiry tools

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| **Questionnaire** | **I designed a questionnaire to get information from my students' perspectives about reading comprehension and their preferences in the reading class. The questionnaire consisted of 5-scale Likert ratings and open-ended questions, and it was completed two months before the intervention.** |
| **Class observations by a colleague** | **To obtain information about what kinds of reading comprehension activities might pose a challenge for the students in the reading class, I asked one of my colleagues to observe while I was teaching three reading lessons, namely pre, while, and post. I also asked them to note down what happened in the class, using an English-language observation form, which I created.** |
| **Teacher's reflective journal** | **To be certain about what kinds of reading comprehension activities might pose a challenge for the students in the reading class and what kinds of reading comprehension tasks I actually used with my students, I kept a reflective journal and updated it after every reading class.** |

Table 2.1. Initial enquiry tools

## The three tools above led to some initial findings (Q1-Q4).

| | |
|---|---|
| **Q1.**<br>**What are students' perceptions about reading comprehension?** | About a third of my students felt English reading comprehension was difficult. Nevertheless, two-thirds thought that reading texts in English was an important skill to have because they need it for their further studies and work. A similar proportion of students used English–Thai dictionaries when they read English materials because dictionaries help them with word meanings. Most students read titles and looked at pictures to guess the meaning before reading English texts. However, two students could not summarise a reading text after finishing reading. |
| **Q2.**<br>**What kinds of reading texts do students prefer in the reading class?** | The majority of students preferred reading fiction texts, such as novels and short stories. Apart from reading English texts, the students love reading Thai novels and comics. They also like reading news, articles, and documentaries in Thai and English to get general ideas and specific information. However, the reflective journal showed that only half of the students appreciated more technical texts on innovations and health, with the vast majority of students greatly preferring texts on teenage life and life at university. |
| **Q3.**<br>**What kinds of reading comprehension activities pose a challenge for the students in the reading class?** | • Seventy percent of students found the vocabulary matching task difficult even though they worked in groups and only the strong students took the lead in completing the task.<br>• When the students had to read the whole text, 60% asked the teacher if they could use dictionaries/mobile phones.<br>• Matching tasks (matching words with meanings), true/false questions, and sentence completion (reading for details) posed a challenge. |
| **Q4.**<br>**What kinds of reading comprehension tasks do I use with my students?** | I used a variety of tasks for reading comprehension, including questions, photos, and a matching task at the pre-reading stage. I used individual activities such as the true/false and the sentence completion tasks at the while-reading stage. I also allowed students to work individually and in groups. I tended not to directly teach students to use reading strategies such as skimming/scanning to get general ideas or details. I asked students questions to activate their background knowledge and I made a point of pre-teaching new vocabulary. During the while-reading stage, I used true/false statements and sentence completion. At the post-reading stage, I transferred reading to writing by having the students write a summary of the text using their own words.<br><br>Overall, the students had a positive attitude towards English reading and reading outside class. They liked reading fiction texts, such as novels and short stories. Despite this, the students still encountered reading difficulties because they lacked sufficient vocabulary knowledge, thereby hindering their comprehension of texts. Furthermore, they faced real challenges when trying to summarise the texts using their own words. |

## Methods

After some reflection on the findings, I developed an action plan that included GRS (Guessing-Reading-Summarising) activities (shown in Figure 2.1) in each stage of my lesson plans.

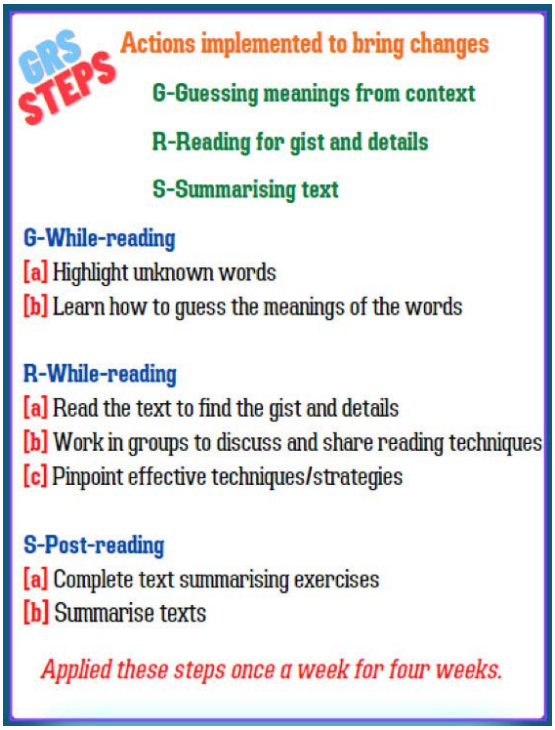


Figure 2.1. Actions Implemented to Bring Changes

The main teaching and learning activities during this time can be seen in Table 2.2.

| Pre-reading | While-reading | Post-reading |
|---|---|---|
| I activated students' background knowledge and pre-taught seven to ten new vocabulary items. | I asked students to highlight any unknown words. I let them decide whether they needed to know the meaning of each word or not (asking myself 'Did the vocabulary affect their comprehension?'). If yes, they would learn by guessing the meanings of the words by using other words in the sentences, other sentences in the paragraph, or by looking at the prefixes, suffixes, or roots.<br><br>I had the students individually read the text, encouraging them to get the gist and details of the text using questions/worksheets. I then let them work in groups to discuss their answers and share how they were able to find them. Some volunteers were asked to share their techniques with the class. After that, I helped the students to pinpoint the most effective techniques/strategies to get the gist and details of the text. | I asked the students to summarise the text in their own words. First, I let them practise how to do this by choosing words for them to complete the summary. I then had them summarise the text using their own words. |

Table 2.2. Pre-while-post Activities

Per the above, the majority of the activity occurred in the while-reading stage. As such, student support in reading comprehension was task-based and strategy focused.

At the end of the implementation phase, I used peer observations and student questionnaires to see the effects of my action plan. The peer observations happened twice, in the second and the fourth week of the intervention, and the questionnaires were administered by the end of the fourth week.

## Findings

The students appeared to learn to deal with unknown words by using; i) the context, ii) other sentences in the paragraph, and iii) prefixes, suffixes, and roots. They reduced their reliance on dictionaries and did not need to ask their peers for help as much because they could now better figure out the words themselves. However, some students continued to struggle with difficult words, leading to confusion when they reached the while-reading stage.

The students looked more confident as they read and completed reading comprehension questions individually. Only a few out of the 12 students seemed to lack the confidence to complete the tasks on their own, so they continued to ask their peers for help. The students were able to give correct

answers to most of the questions. In groups, they were also eager to share their answers to the comprehension questions and the techniques they used to find the answers. These answers showed that their reading comprehension skills had improved.

Most students could summarise the text after practising doing so with sample texts, whereas some students were not able to do it well. The reasons for finding this a challenge included issues such as copying the pattern and words from the original text ('patchwriting'), and the fact that some students even copied sentences verbatim from the original text.


Figure 2.2. Poster Presentation

## Discussion

I learned that although the students had attended many English reading classes, they were not able to use reading strategies such as guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context, or skimming or scanning texts to find main ideas and details. They needed to be taught directly, either by me as the teacher or by their peers. Working and sharing in groups helped raise students' confidence. The students needed time to compare and discuss the answers of the reading tasks before they could give the answers to their teacher or to the class. I also learned that the students had their own ways of communicating with each other and that these were more effective than learning from the teacher's explanations. The text summarising task was a combination of reading and writing skills. Some students might understand the texts but could not write the summary well. As a senior teacher, I used to judge any learning situations based on my own beliefs and experiences. I always solved my students' learning problems by what I believed to be good practices. I rarely looked closely at the underlying problems or explored the possible factors that might affect my lessons. Joining the EAR project has actually widened my points of view, and I have learned how to write research questions, design research tools, collect and analyse data, create and implement action plans, and present my work using posters.