FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION COMPETENCES OF FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS AT NAM CAN THO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

English reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for English major students, especially first-year students in the transition period to the university academic environment. This study aims to investigate the factors affecting the reading comprehension ability of first-year English major students at Nam Can Tho University and suggest possible solutions to solve their difficulties. The study focuses on four main factors, including vocabulary, background knowledge, grammatical competence and reading strategies based on the constructivist reading comprehension theory. A mixed-method research design was used, including a survey of 130 students and semi-structured interviews with 10 students to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The results indicated that limited academic vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, poor grammar comprehension and ineffective application of reading strategies were the main barriers affecting students' reading comprehension competences. In addition, limited reading habits and access to appropriate reading materials were also important factors. From these results, the study proposed some pedagogical orientations to improve reading comprehension skills and enhance students' self-learning ability.

Keywords: English reading comprehension, first-year English major students, reading strategies

1. Introduction

English proficiency, especially reading comprehension skills, is considered the foundation for accessing knowledge and developing critical thinking (Hulme & Snowling, 2011). For English as a foreign language (EFL) students, reading

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comprehension is not only a means of acquiring academic information but also a tool for developing higher-order thinking skills. Over the past decades, many studies have shown that factors such as vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, learning motivation, and exposure to authentic reading materials all influence reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000; Anderson, 2003; Day & Bamford, 1998). In Asian countries such as Japan, China, or Saudi Arabia, students often have difficulty with reading comprehension skills due to little exposure to English outside the classroom and the influence of traditional grammar-translation teaching methods (Taguchi *et al.*, 2006). In Vietnam, the growing emphasis on English language education can be observed through the increasing time dedicated to the subject in 2008, when English language teaching and learning in Vietnam in response to the growing demands of global purposes. The Vietnamese Prime Minister issued Decision N0 1400/QĐ-TTg on September 30, 2008, approving the National Foreign Languages Project (shortened as Project 2020 or NFL), titled "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System for the Period 2008-2020." During this period, one of the crucial issues of learning writing in Vietnam is that teachers emphasize on helping students pass their exams and passively accept the knowledge presented by their teachers (Nguyen, 2018). As a result, Dr. Duong (2015) mentioned in the interview that the traditional one-dimensional writing teaching mode can demotivate them because it is irrelevant to their experiences in real-life contexts. Previous studies have shown that Vietnamese students are mainly taught using traditional methods, focusing on memorization and translation, rather than developing effective reading strategies (Nguyen & Hudson, 2010).

Therefore, EFL teachers need to change and address the gap between traditional teaching approaches and new, instructional, active ways (Nguyen, 2020; Ho *et al.*, 2023). In particular, at Nam Can Tho University, there has been no specific research investigating the factors affecting the reading comprehension of first-year students majoring in English. This creates a significant research gap that needs to be filled. This study aims to investigate the factors affecting the English reading comprehension ability of first-year students majoring in English at Nam Can Tho University. Specifically, the study will (1) examine students' perceptions of factors affecting reading comprehension ability, (2) identify the main difficulties that students encounter in the process of reading English texts, and (3) propose practical solutions to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning reading comprehension skills at the university.

2. Literature review

2.1 Definition of reading comprehension
Reading comprehension plays a key role in English language acquisition, both for academic and communicative purposes. Students with regular reading habits help develop language effectively, especially in expanding vocabulary, improving spelling and writing skills. However, reading comprehension is a complex process that requires the coordination of word recognition and content comprehension (Kozak, 2017).

According to Koda (2005) and Grabe (2008), reading comprehension is an interactive process of extracting information from a text and applying the learner's background knowledge, language proficiency, and reading strategies.

Similarly, Hudson (2007) emphasizes the role of grammar, syntax, contextual knowledge, and metacognition in constructing meaning. Snow's (2002) model describes the reading process as consisting of three main components: the reader, the text, and the reading activity, which occurs in three stages, including pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading. Reading comprehension is not a passive act of reception but an active thinking process where readers connect the content of the text to their knowledge and reading purpose (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Moreover, students effectively using skills such as word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and background knowledge can lead to their misunderstanding or missing important information. Therefore, strong reading comprehension skills are essential for learners to access and process information effectively in their studies and lives.

At Nam Can Tho University in Vietnam, Hong (2025) found that students' reading skills are crucial to their success in school, as they will allow them to access a wide range of curricula and improve their communication and language skills. In addition, reading can be a fun and imaginative pastime for students, opening doors to all new worlds for them, especially for first-year English Language majors at Nam Can Tho University , as English at the university is learned and taught in a non-native environment.

2.2 Factors affecting students' reading comprehension skills

Reading comprehension is broadly defined as the process by which readers extract and construct meaning through interaction with written language (Snow, 2002). This interaction is influenced by the reader's linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, reading strategies, and cognitive engagement. According to Kintsch (1998), reading comprehension consists of two main levels of representation, including the text base, which refers to the literal understanding of the text, and the situation model, which refers to the integration of new information with prior knowledge. In the context of learning English as a foreign language in Vietnam, students encounter major difficulties that affect their reading comprehension.

2.2.1 Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a key role in developing English reading comprehension. Studies such as those by Hsueh-Chao & Nation (2000) and Nation (2001) have confirmed the close and two-way relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Vocabulary not only helps decode text but also directly affects the ability to understand and interpret the content. According to Perfetti (2007), the quality of word representation (i.e. the ability to recognize, retrieve, and connect words to meaning) is a factor that improves reading efficiency. Studies by Laufer (1992), Qian (1999, 2002), and Schmitt *et al.* (2011) also show a linear relationship between vocabulary breadth and depth and reading comprehension performance. Learners need to understand both the meaning,

usage, and semantic relationships of words to understand a text deeply. Nation (2006) emphasized that learners need to master at least 98% of the words in a text to understand without support; however, first-year English major students in Vietnam often do not reach this threshold, leading to difficulties in reading academic documents independently and effectively.

2.2.2 Background knowledge

Background knowledge plays an essential role in reading comprehension, especially for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Many international studies have shown that background knowledge can significantly influence students' reading comprehension, especially in academic contexts (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980). Background knowledge includes knowledge of the topic, language, text structure, and reading strategies. For example, familiarity with the topic helps readers make inferences, predict, and remember information (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983), while linguistic knowledge, including vocabulary and grammar, is the foundation for effective text decoding (Nation, 2001). In addition, the ability to recognize text structure helps learners follow the flow of content and identify main ideas more easily (Carrell, 1984), while strategic knowledge, such as skimming, inferring or summarizing skills, is a tool to support better information processing and understanding (Paris *et al.*, 1991).

In the context of first-year English major students at Nam Can Tho University, many learners still lack one or more of the above types of background knowledge, affecting the reading learning process. Studies in Vietnam also reflect this situation when students are not clearly instructed on the structure of academic texts and lack strategic skills in reading comprehension (Nguyen & Trinh, 2020). Therefore, identifying and supporting background knowledge gaps is necessary to improve academic reading skills for EFL students.

2.2.3 Grammar

Many studies have shown that a lack of grammar knowledge negatively affects the ability to understand the content of the text (Alderson, 2000; Akbari, 2014). The main grammatical factors that affect reading comprehension include knowledge of clauses, passive sentences, logical relationships and tenses in English.

First, knowledge of clauses, including main, subordinate, and relative clauses, influences how learners determine grammatical roles in sentences, thereby maintaining text coherence (Koda, 2005). Second, passive voice, which is common in academic texts, often confuses agent-action identification. Third, lack of knowledge of conjunctions, connectors, and referents such as pronouns and conjunctions can lead to misunderstandings of the logical relationships between sentences, which reduces the overall coherence of the reading (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Finally, the use of tenses in English is also challenging, especially when readers cannot clearly distinguish between the present perfect, simple past, or future tense in the past.

The present study aims to investigate the level of difficulty that first-year English major students at Nam Can Tho University encounter with the above four grammatical elements and how these elements affect their reading comprehension performance.

2.2.4 Reading strategies

Reading skills in English language teaching are often divided into intensive reading, extensive reading, scanning reading, and skimming reading. Each type of reading has its own purpose and requirements, contributing significantly to the development of students' reading comprehension. However, first-year English major students in Vietnam still face many difficulties in effectively applying these reading skills.

Intensive reading requires learners to analyze the grammar, vocabulary, and detailed meaning of the text, but students often lack vocabulary, have difficulty with complex sentence structures, and rely on translation (Nation, 2001; Koda, 2005). Extensive reading has been known as an independent reading outside of class, which helps increase vocabulary and fluency (Nguyen, 2016). Scanning, a technique for quickly finding specific information, is hampered by word-for-word translation habits and limited vocabulary (Pham, 2017). Skimming aims to find main ideas quickly, but students often lack knowledge of text structure and have difficulty identifying keywords (Nation, 2001; Nguyen, 2016). This study aims to examine the common difficulties of first-year students at Nam Can Tho University in using the four main reading skills, thereby proposing solutions to improve reading comprehension in the context of Vietnamese higher education.

2.3 Theoretical framework of the study

Constructivist reading comprehension theory argues that reading is not simply about receiving information but about actively constructing meaning based on the learner's background knowledge, experiences, and interactions with the text. Drawing on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, this theory emphasizes the role of individual cognition and social context in the formation of understanding. Piaget focuses on cognitive adaptability, while Vygotsky emphasizes the role of instruction in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Rumelhart and Anderson add that readers create meaning by connecting new information to prior knowledge. In the context of first-year English major students at Nam Can Tho University, this theory is particularly suitable to explain the development of reading comprehension skills, because it emphasizes the subjectivity, knowledge base, and reading strategies of learners. Figure 1.1 describes four main factors affecting students' reading comprehension skills in the study.
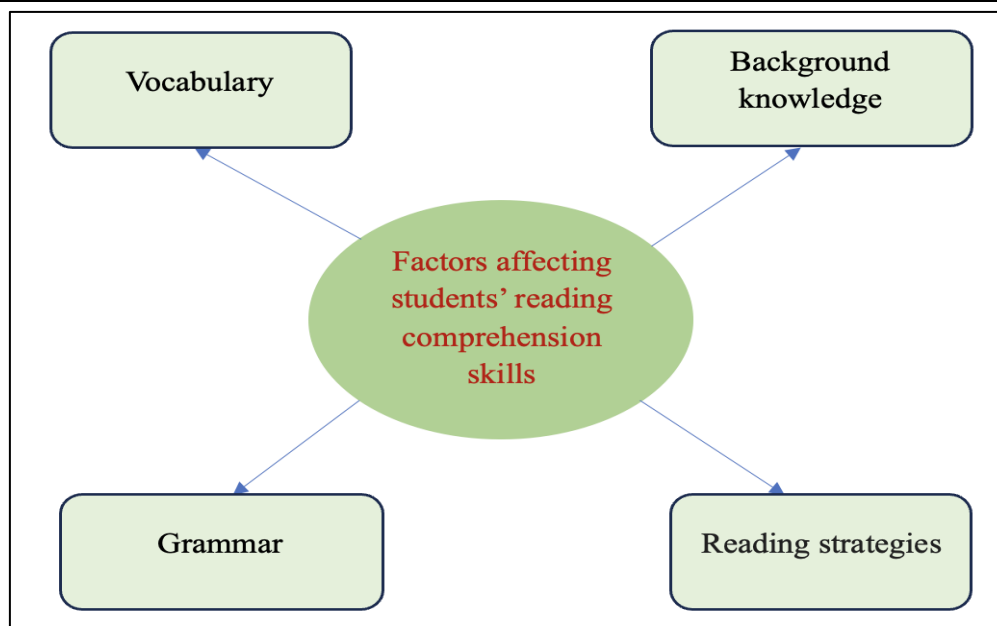
Figure 1.1: Theoretical framework of reading
comprehension skills (Piaget, 1970 and Vygotsky, 1978)

From the main characteristics of reading comprehension skills and the difficulties that students may encounter in the reading comprehension process, combined with the constructivist reading comprehension theory (Piaget, 1970 and Vygotsky, 1978), the current study relies on the main characteristics of reading comprehension skills and the constructivist reading comprehension theory to examine the factors affecting the reading comprehension ability of English major students at Nam Can Tho University.

2.4 Related studies

Many theoretical and empirical studies have shown the common challenges that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face in reading comprehension. Chawwang (2008) surveyed Thai students and found that the majority had difficulty understanding English texts. Nezami (2012) identified Saudi students as lacking in reading skills, vocabulary, scanning ability, and being easily distracted. Similarly, Pang *et al.* (2003) emphasized the role of background knowledge, vocabulary, and reading strategies in text comprehension.

Qrqez and Ab-Rashid (2017) found that Jordanian students struggled with ambiguous words and slow text processing speed. Wutthisingchai (2011) highlighted three main barriers: lack of motivation, limited background knowledge, and lack of reading strategies. These challenges can be divided into four groups, including vocabulary, background knowledge, grammatical structures, and reading strategies.

In Vietnam, Tran and Nguyen (2023) surveyed 186 second-year students at Hanoi University and identified similar problems. Meanwhile, Nguyen (2020) surveyed first-year students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and highlighted three main difficulties, including vocabulary, grammar, and background knowledge. However,

current studies have not addressed first-year students majoring in English at Nam Can Tho University.

Therefore, the current study aims to identify the specific difficulties that first-year students at this university encounter in the process of reading comprehension in English, thereby proposing appropriate measures to improve reading effectiveness in the following years of study.

3. Material and Methods

This study was implemented with a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to comprehensively explore the factors influencing first-year English-majored students' reading comprehension at Nam Can Tho University. This approach is grounded in the view of Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998), who argued that integrating both methods allows researchers to leverage the strengths and offset the limitations of each, thereby enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

In the quantitative phase, a survey questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire was designed in Vietnamese based on theoretical frameworks and previous studies, such as those by Nation (2001), Koda (2005), Grabe & Stoller (2011), especially Tran & Duong (2018), to ensure relevance and content validity. The questionnaire comprised two parts: Part A gathered participants' demographic information, such as gender, years of English learning, and self-assessed reading proficiency; Part B consisted of 20 items categorized into four key factors: vocabulary (items 1-5), background knowledge (6-10), grammar (11-15), and reading strategies (16-20). All items used a five-point Likert scale to measure participants' level of agreement. The questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of 15 students before being officially distributed to 130 first-year English majors at Nam Can Tho University via Google Forms, of which 130 valid responses were included in the analysis. Researchers then grouped questions into the appropriate category and analyzed them thoroughly.

The second instrument used in the study was the semi-structured interview. The main reason behind selecting this instrument was to have a profound understanding of participants' responses and to collect detailed data regarding the participants' reading comprehension difficulties. Hence, 10 out of 130 students were haphazardly selected to partake in the interview, which was conducted in Vietnamese to encourage comfort and honest sharing. The interview questions focused on three main themes: (1) specific challenges encountered during reading comprehension, (2) personal and environmental factors affecting reading skills, and (3) students' suggestions for improving reading comprehension. Interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis, which helped clarify aspects not fully captured by the questionnaire.

In terms of the participant, the study's target population comprised 130 first-year English majors aged 18 to 19. Selecting first-year students was deemed appropriate, as they are transitioning from high school to the academic environment of university, where reading materials are more demanding and follow stricter academic standards (Alderson, 200). To ensure objectivity, participants for the survey were randomly selected. For the interviews, purposeful sampling was used to represent a wide range of language proficiency levels and perspectives.

Regarding data analysis, quantitative data were processed using SPSS version 22.0. Initially, the reliability of the scales was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Then, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to identify the prevalence of various reading comprehension difficulties. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed thematically and triangulated with the quantitative findings to identify convergences and discrepancies, thereby providing deeper insights into students' reading comprehension processes.

4. Results and Discussion

After collecting 130 survey responses from first-year English-majored students at Nam Can Tho University, the data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 to determine the extent to which the four factors, i.e. vocabulary, background knowledge, grammar, and reading strategies, affected English reading comprehension. The results are presented in detail in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: The influence of vocabulary, background knowledge,
grammar and reading strategies for English reading comprehension
competences among first-year English-majors at Nam Can Tho University

Factor	Mean	SD
Vocabulary	4.09	0.34
Background knowledge	3.98	0.33
Grammar	3.76	0.39
Reading strategies	3.06	0.37

Quantitative analysis reveals that vocabulary exerts the strongest influence on students' reading comprehension (Mean = 4.09, SD = 0.34), surpassing even background knowledge (Mean = 3.98, SD = 0.33). These findings suggest that a solid grasp of vocabulary, particularly academic vocabulary, is fundamental to effective comprehension of academic reading materials. Grammar ranks third (Mean = 3.76, SD = 0.39), indicating a moderate impact, mainly related to understanding complex sentence structures. The factor with the least impact is reading strategies (Mean = 3.06, SD = 0.37), suggesting that most students have yet to effectively apply techniques such as prediction, summarizing, and note-taking.

More specifically, vocabulary emerged as the most influential factor affecting reading comprehension. The survey showed that 85% of students agreed or strongly

agreed that they struggled when they did not understand the vocabulary in a text (Mean = 4.28, SD = 0.54), underscoring the essential role of vocabulary knowledge in contextual understanding. In addition, the lack of academic vocabulary was perceived as a major obstacle for first-year students (Mean = 4.22; SD = 0.64), highlighting its significant impact on their ability to process academic texts.

Furthermore, difficulties with fixed expressions and idioms (Mean = 4.13, SD = 0.72) suggest that challenges in reading comprehension extend beyond individual word meanings to more complex lexical units. The issue of misinterpreting content due to unfamiliarity with synonyms and antonyms (Mean = 3.95, SD = 0.62) also emerged as a noteworthy factor contributing to comprehension difficulties. Although the item "I easily get confused when encountering words with multiple meanings" received the lowest mean score (Mean = 3.85; SD = 0.65), it still reflects a moderate level of difficulty. Overall, the results highlight the critical role of vocabulary knowledge—particularly the ability to infer meaning from context—in facilitating students' academic reading comprehension. Table 4.2 below presents students' responses concerning vocabulary-related challenges in reading comprehension.

Table 4.2: Vocabulary

Items	Mean	SD
I often struggle when I do not understand the meaning of vocabulary in a reading text.	4.28	0.54
A lack of academic vocabulary hinders my reading comprehension ability.	4.22	0.64
I have difficulty with fixed expressions and idioms in texts.	4.13	0.72
I easily get confused when encountering words with multiple meanings.	3.85	0.65
Not understanding synonyms/antonyms leads me to misinterpret the reading.	3.95	0.62

Background knowledge emerged as the second influential factor affecting reading comprehension. 84.8% of students indicated difficulties when reading texts that required subject-specific or culturally embedded knowledge (Mean = 4.24, SD = 0.61). The lack of social knowledge (Mean = 4.15, SD = 0.57) and the inability to connect the text with prior understanding (Mean = 3.87, SD = 0.69) were also seen as major obstacles to constructing meaning. Furthermore, students expressed that when topics extended beyond their personal experience (Mean = 3.85, SD = 0.70), they found it challenging to grasp the core message of the text. Some admitted that in the absence of sufficient background knowledge, they had to spend more time researching related information (Mean = 3.83, SD = 0.68), which hindered reading fluency. Table 4.3. outlines how the lack of background knowledge of social, academic, or cultural affects students' ability to comprehend reading texts effectively.

Table 4.3: Background knowledge

Items	Mean	SD
I have difficulty understanding reading passages that involve specialized or cross-cultural knowledge.	4.24	0.61
A lack of social knowledge prevents me from understanding the content of the text.	4.15	0.57
I cannot connect the information in the reading to what I already know.	3.87	0.69
I find it difficult to comprehend topics that go beyond my personal experience.	3.82	0.70
I need more time to understand the text if I lack background knowledge because I have to look up related information.	3.83	0.68

Although grammar had a comparatively lower mean score, it still posed a significant barrier for certain student groups. A number of 77.6% students reported misunderstanding texts due to the confusion about verb tenses (Mean = 3.88, SD = 0.69), while 76.8% struggled with complex sentences containing multiple clauses (Mean = 3.84, SD = 0.76). Many students noted that they had to reread sentences several times to grasp relationships between parts, particularly when encountering passive voice, inversion or embedded clauses, which are common features of academic texts. Students' perceptions of grammar-related difficulties, such as complex sentence structures, verb tenses, and passive or reported constructions, are detailed in the Table 4.4. below.

Table 4.4: Grammar

Items	Mean	SD
I find it difficult to understand complex sentences that contain multiple clauses.	3.84	0.76
I often misinterpret the meaning of a text if I do not fully understand verb tenses.	3.88	0.69
Advanced grammatical structures such as inversion or reduced clauses create obstacles for me.	3.66	0.77
I have difficulty identifying the subject and predicate in long sentences.	3.70	0.76
I cannot recognize passive or reported speech structures in reading passages.	3.70	0.74

Reading strategies, often seen as supporting tools, appeared to be underutilized among students. The survey found that 66.2% of students rarely applied strategies such as summarizing, questioning, or predicting (Mean = 3.31, SD = 0.72). A lack of note-taking habits (Mean = 3.18, SD = 0.78), difficulty inferring word meanings (Mean = 2.98, SD = 0.70), and the inability to identify paragraph main ideas (Mean = 2.93, SD = 0.65) all pointed to a broader deficiency in strategic reading. Interview responses confirmed that many students had never been explicitly taught these strategies or had not yet recognized their value in enhancing academic reading performance. Table 4.5 below provides an overview of students' use of reading strategies, shedding light on how often they employ techniques such as inferring meaning, note-taking, and identifying main ideas.

Table 4.5: Reading strategies

Items	Mean	SD
I have difficulty inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words from context.	2.98	0.70
I cannot identify the main idea of a paragraph when reading.	2.93	0.65
I do not know how to use keywords to understand the content of a text.	2.90	0.64
I do not have the habit of taking notes on important information while reading.	3.18	0.78
I rarely apply strategies such as predicting, questioning, or summarizing when reading.	3.31	0.72

In summary, the results indicate that vocabulary, background knowledge, and grammar play decisive roles in first-year students' reading comprehension, while reading strategies, though not the main barrier, remain essential tools for processing and retaining information, which are tools that are not yet being effectively used. These results provide a solid practical foundation for recommending pedagogical interventions, especially in teaching academic vocabulary, building interdisciplinary background knowledge, and fostering strategies and critical thinking skills.

Based on the results and discussion, related theories, and previous studies, the authors recommend theoretical and practical implications, limitations of the study, and future research.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for enhancing the English reading comprehension competences of first-year English-majored students in Nam Can Tho University. These implications include both teaching practices and student learning strategies.

A. Enhancing academic vocabulary knowledge

To enhance academic vocabulary knowledge of first-year English-majored students, Nam Can Tho University and the Faculty of Foreign Language should implement some strategies as follows:

First of all, it is crucial to develop intensive vocabulary learning programs. Teachers should focus on academic vocabulary and fixed expressions by integrating resources into English courses, such as *the Academic Word List* by Coxhead (2000). They require students to learn and apply weekly about 10 to 15 commonly used academic vocabularies in reading texts which are related to cultural, social, or economic topics. Meanwhile, to help students to familiarize themselves with vocabulary usage in real-life contexts, teachers should use authentic materials, such as academic articles or resources from the internet, like *BBC Learning English*. For instance, teachers use a reading text about climate change to introduce some words, including *GHG* (*greenhouse gas)*, *sustainability*, *mitigation*, or *emission*. Additionally, the faculty should organize weekly or monthly vocabulary workshops, or incorporated into English Club activities in which students could drill analyzing words through roots, prefixes, and suffixes (e.g., un-, re-, -tion). Thereby, students could enhance their ability to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Secondly, exposing to authentic texts could expand students' vocabulary (Day & Bamford, 1998). Thus, teachers should promote extensive reading activities. On the one hand, an extensive reading program at the university library or the faculty could provide materials suitable for first-year English-majored students, such as graded readers or short articles from *National Geograpghic*. Students should be required to accomplish at least 2 or 3 short reading tasks per month and write summaries to reinforce vocabulary retention. On the other hand, teachers should integrate English vocabulary learning applications to facilitate self-study and review through flashcards, like *Quizlet* or *Wordwall*.

Finally, students' autonomous vocabulary acquisition could be enhanced by incorporating exercises for inferring meaning from contexts (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, teachers should integrate assignments for inferring meaning from contexts into reading comprehension classes. Teachers should instruct students in analyzing sentence structure, identifying synonyms, or considering related words in the text. For instance, when encountering the word *profound* in the sentence "The discovery had a profound impact on science," students should be encouraged to examine the word *impact* and the surrounding context to infer its meaning. Another example, teachers could provide a passage consisting of 5 to 7 underlined new words and require students to infer their meanings before consulting a dictionary.

B. Building background knowledge

To build first-year English-majored students' background knowledge, teachers should integrate diverse content related to cultural topics, social topics, and specialized terminology into the curriculum (e.g., Western culture, the history of globalization, or foundational concepts in linguistics). In addition, teachers also use multimedia resources, such as TED-Ed or YouTube, to introduce unfamiliar topics before reading. These activities could activate background knowledge regarding the schema theory by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983). Furthermore, pre-reading activities such as group discussions or introductory videos could activate students' background knowledge as well (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Specifically, teachers utilize activating questions to engage students to connect new information with their existing knowledge, or they could provide a list of reliable resources for students' self-study and expanding their knowledge outside of classrooms, such as *BBC Learning English* or *The Conversation*.

C. Improving grammatical knowledge

Teachers should enhance complex grammatical assignments, including verb tenses, relative clauses, and passive voice, in academic contexts. According to Biber and Gray's (2016) research, these assignments should be progressively increased in complexity to familiarize students with academic language. To help students apply grammatical knowledge practically, teachers should incorporate grammatical exercises into reading tasks or design sentence correction activities, instead of teaching grammar in isolation. Importantly, teachers should provide constructive feedback on common grammatical

errors in students' work (e.g., verb tense misuse or complex sentence structure issues) to help students obtain deeper understanding and further practice.

D. Enhancing practice of reading comprehension strategies

Based on findings of Anderson's (2003) and Paris *et al.*'s (1991) studies, to improve students' information organization competence, teachers should intensify practice with reading comprehension strategies, which conclude predicting, summarizing, questioning, and note-taking. Besides that, teachers also guide students to create mind maps to summarize the main ideas of passages. For instance, teachers can hand out reading passages and require students to apply comprehension strategies, such as writing a summary within 50 to 100 words or formulating 3 to 5 questions about the content. Teachers could instruct students to do exercises step by step as follows: (1) Before reading (*pre-reading*), students should predict the content based on titles and visuals, then check their predictions after reading. (2) During reading (*while-reading*), main idea identification tasks should be employed to help students clarify the central theme of each paragraph and connect it to the overall passage. (3) After reading (*post-reading*), students should create mind maps for summarizing the main ideas of passages. Necessarily, teachers should explain clearly the benefits of each reading comprehension strategy, such as questioning for improving focus or summarizing for time-saving. Real-life examples can be shared to motivate students, for instance, a student utilized note-taking to excel in exams. Furthermore, organizing group discussions on using reading comprehension strategies is crucial to sharing students' experiences and learn from each other. Importantly, teachers should monitor students' activities and give constructive feedback frequently to facilitate students to recognize the benefits of reading comprehension strategies and utilize them effectively.

5.2 Limitations of the study

Although the findings provide valuable insights into the factors affecting the English reading comprehension competences of first-year English-majored students at Nam Can Tho University, it has several limitations that should be considered to ensure objectivity and to guide future research. Firstly, this study did not fully explore these external factors, which may affect reading comprehension abilities, such as the learning environment, examination pressures, or the specific impact of the curriculum at the university (Minh, 2020). Additionally, the use of Likert-scale questionnaires may be subject to response bias because students tend to select neutral or positive responses rather than reflecting their actual perceptions (Brown, 2001). Finally, it had a lack of longitudinal data. This limitation might constrain the ability to draw conclusions about the long-term sustainability of the identified influencing factors (Tran & Nguyen, 2003).

5.3 Future research

Based on the identified limitations, the following suggestions for future research are proposed to expand and deepen the understanding of English reading comprehension

competences among students. Future studies should investigate external factors, as Minh (2000) noted that evaluating the impact of National reading comprehension examinations or specific university curricula could clarify systemic barriers. Additionally, English reading comprehension performance might be significantly influenced by individual factors, such as learning motivation, learning styles, or attitudes toward English reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Thus, future research should consider these factors. Furthermore, longitudinal studies should be conducted to track students' progress in reading comprehension across academic years (Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005).

6. Conclusion

This study identified the factors affecting English reading comprehension competences of first-year English-majored students at Nam Can Tho University. The findings not only reinforced the theoretical frameworks related to reading comprehension but also highlighted the specific challenges faced by first-year students in the Vietnamese context, where traditional teaching methods and academic pressure significantly influence learning outcomes. The specific conclusions are as follows:

6.1 Vocabulary knowledge
Vocabulary knowledge was identified as the most significant barrier, with 84.8% of students experiencing difficulties due to unfamiliar word meanings and 83% indicating that a lack of academic vocabulary hindered their reading comprehension competences. This emphasized a foundational role of vocabulary in the reading process (Nation, 2001; Perfetti, 2007).

6.2 Background knowledge
The results showed that 85% of students faced challenges when reading unfamiliar texts. This proved that a lack of vocabulary knowledge was the second major barrier to students' English reading comprehension, particularly regarding cultural and specialized topics. This result aligned with the schema theory by Anderson and Pearson (1984), which indicated that background knowledge supports the connection between information in texts and personal experiences.

6.3 Grammatical knowledge
Grammatical knowledge was revealed as a factor that had a moderate influence on students' English reading comprehension. It included challenges in terms of verb tense, complex sentences, and passive voice. This finding reinforced Akbari's (2014) view on the role of grammar in analyzing the syntax of academic texts. Therefore, teachers should place greater emphasis on teaching grammar relevant to English reading materials.

6.4 Reading comprehension strategies

The finding indicated that 66. 2% of students rarely applied reading comprehension strategies, including predicting, summarizing, or note-taking. According to Anderson (2003), this finding reflected a lack of training in critical reading strategies. Consequently, teachers should guide students in employing critical reading strategies more extensively to enhance their reading comprehension.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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