

## INVESTIGATING READING STRATEGIES USED BY EFL STUDENTS AT DONG THAP UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

Reading skill is apparently integral to EFL majors at college. The present study thus made an attempt to examine reading strategies used in processing academic English texts by first-year and third-year English majors of Dong Thap University, South Vietnam. It was one of the first studies to be conducted about the concerned topic at this university. A questionnaire of 22 statements related to 22 reading strategies was delivered to both groups of students. Results showed that the two groups more or less used all the strategies in point. The first-year students frequently used those strategies of skimming, scanning, translating, highlighting, relevant-thinking, especially cooperating and assistance-seeking. Meanwhile, the third-year students no longer frequently used translating, resourcing and highlighting; instead they increased the varying frequencies of analyzing, elaborating, purpose-identifying and other strategies. In general terms, the two groups, though somehow different in EFL learning experiences, reflectively reported the use of those strategies at a medium level only (i.e. not yet close to that of proficient readers generally). Accordingly, reading strategy training should be taken into greater considerations by both EFL teachers and students so as to purposely activate and strengthen these strategic reading tools for students' present and future learning.

**Keywords:** Strategy, reading, level, use, student.

### INTRODUCTION

Few would deny that reading comprehension is so important because it is employed for numerous purposes, e.g. to learn, to find out, to get directions for doing something, to have fun and to appreciate the art of writing. It is obvious that by improving our reading comprehension, we will also improve our writing and speaking abilities. It is also a proven fact that people who read a lot write better, have more developed vocabulary and speak with greater fluency than people who do not read much. Especially for university students of EFL, reading English texts is the base that helps them to master the target language, enabling them to study at higher education and life-long learning, and also weaving into the English-speaking academic community as well as global job-market organizations of increasing competition demands. Much research work has been done on the awareness of reading processes and reading strategy use of readers with a variety of proficiency levels, cultural backgrounds, and school contexts (e.g. Sugirin, 1999; Mónos 2004; Lee, 2012; Kassem, 2013; Jafarigohar *et al.* 2013) around the world. However, research in this area appears to be still fragmentary or far from exhaustive, and thus it calls for more comprehensive investigation. At Dong Thap University, located in one of the rural areas of South Vietnam, the present study was one of the first to delve into the topic concerned.

### Study Aims

The present study was designed to (1) investigate reading strategies frequently used by Dong

Thap University EFL majors while they read academic texts in English; (2) compare-contrast the reading strategies used between the two groups of target EFL students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Language Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990) mentions 12 key features of language learning strategies: considering communicative competence as the main goal, allowing learners to become more self-directed, expanding the role of teachers, problem orientation, action basis, involvement beyond just cognition, (in)direct support of learning, (un)observability, consciousness, teachability, flexibility and being influenced by many factors. Ellis (1994) in reviewing the factors that have been found to affect strategy choice refers to learner beliefs about language learning, age, motivation strength, motivation types and goals, learner's personal background, language being learnt, setting and the task. Meanwhile, Wharton (2000) refers to proficiency levels, cultural background, first and other languages learnt, motivation, foreign language versus second language settings, gender and language learning styles as factors affecting the types, numbers and frequency use of language learning strategies.

### Reading Strategies

It is reported that when readers encounter comprehension problems, they use strategies to overcome their difficulties. Different learners seem to approach reading tasks in different ways, and some of these ways appear to lead to better comprehension than other ones. In other words, proficient readers are mostly aware of and actively make use of related reading strategies as much as possible, while the less proficient ones are still on their way to cognitively discover and put into actual use of these strategies. As a result, if the strategies of more proficient readers can be described and identified in details, it may be possible to train the less proficient to consciously internalize their can-improve strategies and employ them as far as possible when needed for better results. In other words, it is significantly pedagogical for teachers to wisely and promptly scaffold their learners to realize and strongly develop those beneficial strategies for success and autonomy in sustainable learning.

Scholars have classified language learning/reading strategies into dissimilar categories in view of different criteria, e.g. Brown (1994), Ellis (1994), Carrell (1998), Janzen *et al.* (1998), Anderson (2005), Chamot (2005), Phankiti (2006), and Kong (2006). The present study based its investigation on 4 major reading strategy categories: *cognitive, meta-cognitive, social* and *affective strategies* (Oxford, 1990). Each category encompassed specific strategies selectively applied in the present study as follows:

**Cognitive Strategies** rang from repeating to analyzing expressions to summarizing, unified by a common function: manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner. They include the following specific strategies: (1) *Skimming* helps reading a passage quickly to grasp main ideas; (2) *Using other clues* - using introductions, summaries, conclusions, transitions to get information concerned; (3) *Reasoning deductively* - predicting/infering, based on what is implied; (4) *Summarizing* - making a summary/abstract of a longer passage, helping structuralize new inputs; (5) *Scanning* - reading a passage quickly to get specific information or details; (6) *Analyzing expressions* - making sense of new expressions by segmental analysis; (7) *Elaborating* - associating new information with familiar concepts already in memory; (8) *Using imagery* - helping remember what has been read by relating new information to visual concepts in memory; (9) *Guessing the meaning of a new word from*

*context* - making guesses about the meaning of new words in context; (10) *Highlighting* – underlining, highlighting, etc. to focus on important information. (11) *Rereading* - reading more than once to comprehend better; (12) *Taking notes* - writing down main ideas, specific ideas/important points, key words, etc. (in symbols, for instance); (13) *Translating* – switching into first/native language for support; (14) *Resourcing* - using target language reference materials such as dictionaries, grammar books, encyclopaedias and glossaries.

**Meta-Cognitive Strategies** mean beyond/with the cognitive ones. They are established by (15) *Thinking about what has been known about the topic* - linking the present topic with previous relevant ones; (16) *Identifying a purpose for reading* - determining task purposes so as to apply appropriate reading acts; (17) *Paying attention* – making a decision promptly what to pay attention to, and what to ignore; (18) *Self-evaluating* – reflecting on what has been done and how it has been done (in the reading).

**Social Strategies** make use of assistance from other people (in hand). They are displayed by (19) *Cooperating with others* - working with one/more peers for better outcomes; (20) *Asking for clarification or verification* - asking a teacher or others to repeat, to paraphrase, explain or give examples when readers are not clear about what to do with a reading task, etc.

**Affective Strategies** are demonstrated in (21) *Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation* for comfort/relaxation if needed; (22) *Discussing feelings with someone else* - to discover and express feelings about language reading/reading tasks.

### Previous Studies Related

Barnett (1988) examined reading strategies used by university students of French, divided into two different groups: one group was taught reading strategies and the other was not. Results found that the former group showed a greater ability to read through and make use of context than the latter. Barnett concluded there was a correlation between strategy use and reading comprehension level. Schueller (1999) tested the effects of top-down and bottom-up reading strategies instruction on the comprehension of two different literary texts. Participants were 128 (78 females and 50 males) second year university-level students of German. The findings indicated that a higher degree of reading comprehension among females. In the light of the findings, Schueller contended that if L2 instructors did not have enough class time to teach both top-down and bottom-up strategies, they should focus on top-down strategy training because this would help both men and women. Meanwhile, Sugirin (1999) used a multi-method study to explore the comprehension strategies of 50 EFL readers. The results showed noticeable gaps among the studied readers in the degree of comprehension and strategies used. Accordingly, they were found to fall into either good or poor reader groups.

Mónos (2004) did a study to provide a picture of the meta-cognitive awareness of reading strategies used by 86 Hungarian university students majoring in English, with a view to offering suggestions for developing reading skills improvement programs. The results revealed students' fairly high awareness of all strategies in the survey, with a preference for problem-solving strategies, followed by global and support strategies. Zhang and Wu (2009) accessed meta-cognitive awareness and the frequency of reading strategies use of Chinese senior high school students. The results showed that high-proficiency group differed from the intermediate and low proficiency groups in terms of the frequency of employing these strategies.

Other studies of multidimensional approaches related to L2 reading strategies such as Kong (2006), Lee *et al.* (2008), Seng (2009), Shang (2010), Ebrahimi (2012), Lee (2012), Kassem (2013) and Jafarigohar *et al.* (2013) reported somehow inconsistent or dissimilar results on learners' reading comprehension although it tended to produce positive impacts on participants when they were instructed or made aware of strategies in point. Furthermore, Kazemi *et al.* (2013) reviewing empirical studies related to strategic reading instruction in EFL contexts concluded that more research in the field was needed.

Unlike the previous ones, the present study was conducted in a new setting with new participants from Vietnam, where EFL learning/teaching is still on its way to development and refinement. It hopefully added more evidence and insight to the relevant research literature as well as instructional orientations in the concerned area of inquiry.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

They were 107 first-year English majors, 88 female, 19 male, aged 18 – 21 (Group 1). The second group (Group 2) was 96 third-year English majors, 80 female, 16 male, aged 20 - 23. They were all from Dong Thap University, South Vietnam. That is Group 1 officially entered the school and started their EFL major program 2 years later than the other group. They all were invited and voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. At the time of data collection, Group 1 had finished their first EFL reading class and they were taking the second reading class in their second semester, while Group 2 had finished their fifth reading class and they were finishing their final reading class, scheduled by the school's training program. It means apart from other subject classes during their 4-year undergraduate program the EFL majors have to take 6 reading classes in all, each of 30 periods (50 minutes/period) normally lasting for one semester. As a result, Group 1's English proficiency was theoretically lower than that of the other group, i.e. they were less experienced or spending less time in EFL learning as full-time English majors at the university. As such, it is possible to measure certain gaps of awareness and use in language learning strategies (especially reading ones) between the two target groups.

### Instrument

A questionnaire was delivered to both groups to gather data about reading strategies used. It was designed by the present researchers basing on those in previous research models, especially on Strategies Useful for Reading by Oxford (1990, 321-324) (see Appendix). There were 22 chosen statements equivalent to 22 specific strategies under four categories of strategies: cognitive (14 items), meta-cognitive (4 items), social (2 items) and affective (2 items) as addressed above. Each statement was accompanied by a 5-point Likert-scale of frequency in use, i.e. "NEVER", "RARELY", "SOMETIMES", "USUALLY" and "ALWAYS".

### Procedure



Stage 1: First, the questionnaire was reviewed and approved by the Dean of Foreign Languages Department and another experienced EFL teacher, who was overall in charge of EFL section of Dong Thap University (where the present study was conducted). Then it was piloted among those characteristically similar to the study participants before officially used for the main study.

Stage 2: The questionnaire was administered by the researchers in class. Both groups were manipulated on the same day, Group 1 (first-year English majors) in the morning and Group 2 (third-year ones) in the afternoon. The students were informed about the purpose of the study and were asked to fill in the survey carefully and honestly (being reminded that there was no right or wrong answer). They were allowed to ask for any clarification, even translated into Vietnamese (their mother tongue) if needed. Also, they were assured that no one else other than the present researchers would assess their responses and their names would not be used in reporting the results. It took approximately 20 minutes for each group to complete the questionnaire.

Stage 3: All completed questionnaire copies (Group 1: 107, Group 2: 96) were statistically analyzed and interpreted in terms of strategy categories: cognitive, meta-cognitive, social and affective. The frequencies were scored by 1=NEVER, 2=RARELY, 3=SOMETIMES, 4=USUALLY and 5=ALWAYS. The gaps of strategy use frequencies between Group 1 and Group 2 were addressed as well.

For the present study, the calculated mean scores were often in decimals, so for convenience they had to be rounded towards the standard points of the scale. The standard points of the scale to assess the students' strategy use levels are as follows:

**Table 1: Levels of Reading Strategies Used**

<b>Active</b>   <b>Passive</b>	<b>High</b>	Always/Almost always used	4.5 to 5.0 (points)
		Usually used	3.5 to 4.4
	<b>Medium</b>	Sometimes	2.5 to 3.4
	<b>Low</b>	Generally not/Rarely used	1.5 to 2.4
		Never/Almost never used	1.0 to 1.4

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### First-Year Students (Group 1) Results

**Table 2: Group 1's Mean Scores of Strategies Used**

<i>Strategies</i>	<i>Statements</i>	<i>Mean</i>			<i>SD</i>
		<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>	
<i>Cognitive</i>	(1) Skimming	3.70			0.69
	(2) Clue-using		3.39		0.81
	(3) Deductive reasoning			2.36	1.03
	(4) Summarizing			2.40	0.72
	(5) Scanning	3.73			0.94
	(6) Analyzing		2.81		0.58
	(7) Elaborating			2.39	1.04
	(8) Imagery-using			2.42	0.86
	(9) Guessing			2.36	0.71
	(10) Highlighting	3.55			0.92
	(11) Rereading		3.28		0.65
	(12) Note-taking			2.40	0.85
	(13) Translating	3.63			0.92
	(14) Resourcing	3.95			0.90
	(15) Relevant-thinking	3.64			0.78



<b>Meta-cognitive</b>	(16) Purpose-identifying		3.42		0.69
	(17) Attention-paying			2.35	0.90
	(18) Self-evaluating			2.36	0.97
<b>Social</b>	(19) Cooperating	4.07			0.53
	(20) Assistance-seeking	4.03			0.55
<b>Affective</b>	(21) Anxiety-lowering			2.42	0.69
	(22) Feeling-sharing		3.26		0.73
<b>Overall</b>			<b>3.0873</b>		<b>0.6546</b>

It can be seen that the mean scores of 22 strategies used by Group 1 ranged from low (2.35) to high (4.07 out of 5 points) level. Only 8 out of 22 (less than 50%) strategies reached a high level. Both social strategies got more than 4 points, and neither got the upper high level, i.e. more than 4.5 points. Meanwhile, 9 strategies (nearly 50%) were at low level of passive operation although none went down to the bottom of the scale. The overall mean score was, therefore, only at a medium level (3.0873 out of 5).

It is therefore evident that Group 1 used a wide variety of strategies in point, but was more or less still on its way to improvement in training. As a result, the students should be instructionally made aware of and regularly practice reading strategies, especially those of (3), (4), (7), (8), (9), (12), (17), (18) and (21), which were still at a low level of use. On the upper scale, concerning those at the active level, especially (1), (5), (13), (19) and (20), this is because understandably these strategies had been explicitly guided and employed by students since their English classes of high school in Vietnamese system. What is more, the students appeared to make good use of social strategies (19), (20) which reveals that they frequently worked in pairs/teams/groups and got sufficient assistance from external resources. But this is not enough at tertiary education, which by all means requires them to access and treat quite a larger amount of academic readings, actively and independently one way or another.

Following is the mean scores of 22 strategies in 4 categories used by Group 1 in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Group 1's Mean Scores in 4 Categories of Strategies Used

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>Cognitive (1) – (14)</b>	3.09
<b>Meta-cognitive (15) – (18)</b>	2.94
<b>Social (19) – (20)</b>	4.05
<b>Affective (21) – (22)</b>	2.84

Only the social category obtained the high level, while both the meta-cognitive and affective were at low level. The cognitive was medium only. Generally speaking, the students of Group 1 used all the reading strategies in discussion as expected, but not yet close to high frequencies or active levels. This should be taken into consideration by both teachers and students, especially during their next reading classes, for better internalization and actual use of those strategies.

## Third-Year Students (Group 2) Results

Table 4: Group 2's Mean Scores of Strategies Used

Strategies	Statements	Mean			SD
		High	Medium	Low	
Cognitive	(1) Skimming	3.84			0.94
	(2) Clue-using		3.48		0.89
	(3) Deductive reasoning		2.7		1.35
	(4) Summarizing		3.43		1.12
	(5) Scanning	3.75			0.93
	(6) Analyzing	3.55			1.05
	(7) Elaborating	3.57			1.84
	(8) Imagery-using		3.44		0.93
	(9) Guessing		3.39		1.15
	(10) Highlighting			2.36	0.73
	(11) Rereading		3.36		0.94
	(12) Note-taking		3.38		1.42
	(13) Translating			2.38	1.07
	(14) Resourcing			2.42	0.93
Meta-cognitive	(15) Relevant-thinking	3.63			0.96
	(16) Purpose-identifying	3.59			0.82
	(17) Attention-paying		3.43		0.99
	(18) Self-evaluating		3.40		0.84
Social	(19) Cooperating	3.91			0.86
	(20) Assistance-seeking	3.80			0.92
Affective	(21) Anxiety-lowering		3.16		1.11
	(22) Feeling-sharing		3.46		1.24
Overall			3.3459		0.4655

As seen in Table 4, all the concerned strategies were to some extent in use. Although the number of strategies reaching the high level was only 8 out of 22, i.e. less than 50% and none of them got 4 out of 5 points, more than 50% were at the medium and only 3 strategies of (10), (13) and (14) were found at the low level. But the low-level strategies might indicate a negative correlation between these strategies and the reader's language proficiency, i.e. proficient L2 readers universally tend to rarely use strategies of translating, highlighting or resourcing during the process of reading texts because it would probably slow down their speed of reading. Thereby it also makes way for correspondingly compensating strategies of (2) *clue-using*, (3) *deductive reasoning* and (9) *guessing* to develop. However, this is not the case for Group 2 in the present study, i.e. compensating strategies (2), (3) and (9) were only at the medium level. In addition, none of the high-level strategies went up to the upper high level of 4.5 - 5. Thus, the overall mean score was medium only (3.3459). Regarding the 4 categories, as seen in Table 5, the meta-cognitive and social categories got the high level (more than 3.5), but not upper high. Therefore, in general terms there is room for Group 2 to improve their reading strategies although (as mentioned earlier) they were all third-year English majors and were finishing their final reading class of the training curriculum.

**Table 5:** Group 2's Mean Scores in 4 Categories of Strategies Used

Categories	Mean
Cognitive (1) – (14)	3.23
Meta-cognitive (15) – (18)	3.51
Social (19) – (20)	3.85
Affective (21) – (22)	3.31

### Both Groups in Comparison

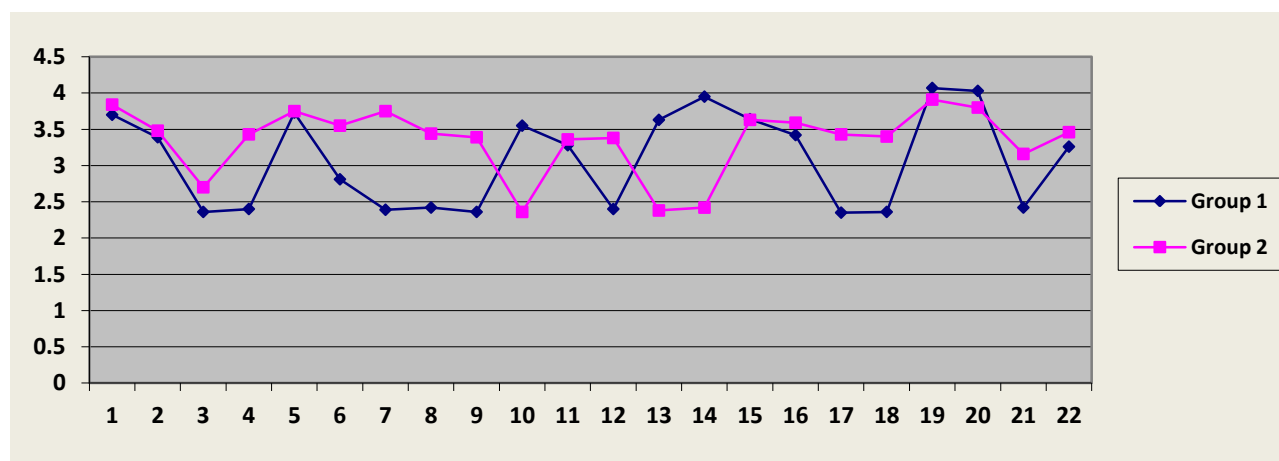
First, a paired-samples t-test (SPSS Version 20) was run to compare the mean scores in 22 strategies of the two groups. The result is presented in Table 6 below.

**Table 6:** Two Groups' Comparative Mean Scores in 22 Strategies

Group	Strategies	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Gr.1	22	3.0873	0.6546			
Gr.2	22	3.3459	0.4655			
Gr.1 vs. Gr.2				-1.519	21	p=.145>0.05

With  $p=0.145>0.05$ , it confirms that the mean scores are statistically equal and thus, both groups were indeed at a medium level of the 22 strategies in use only.

Although both groups on the whole reported that they used the strategies at a medium level and no statistically significant difference was found between the two groups' overall mean scores of 22 strategies, there are varying gaps of specific corresponding strategies (based on Table 2 & 4 above) found in the figure below.

**Figure 1:** Strategy Use Gaps between Group 1 & 2

Major gaps (1 point or more difference) between the two groups are seen at those strategies of (4), (7), (8), (9), (10), (12), (13), (14), (17) and (19), while minor gaps (around 0.5 point) go to (3), (6), and (21). The rest bear little or no gap between the groups, especially the social categories (19), (20) – both reached the high level.

With a closer observation it should be noted that Group 2 appeared to raise their frequent use of most strategies more or less *except* (10), (13) and (14) in comparison to those of Group 1. This obviously indicates a **positive** correlation between L2 learners' increasing experience length of L2 learning and a gradual increase in reading strategies used by the concerned



learners, but a **negative** one with reference particularly to *highlighting*, *translating* and *resourcing*. The fact that it may slow down reading speed accounts for the decreasing level use of these three strategies (which are highly activated among less proficient readers). This significant finding has not been explicitly stated in the previous relevant studies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study was carried out to explore the reading strategies used by first-year (Group 1) third-year (Group 2) students at Dong Thap University when they accessed and processed academic texts in English, which plays an indispensable role in their L2 learning. It also aimed to examine possible gaps between the two groups regarding the concerned strategies in use. Following are major findings.

First, as expected both groups reported to use a variety of reading comprehension strategies raised in the present study, but basically only at a medium frequency level (statistically). Secondly, in terms of individual strategies, Group 1 mostly made active use of those strategies of (1) skimming, (2) scanning, (10) highlighting, (15) translating, (16) resourcing, (19) assistance-seeking and (20) cooperating. Meanwhile, Group 2 increased the gradual frequency of most strategies, but significantly decreased the use of (10), (15) and (16) (from high level for Group 1 to low level for Group 2). This makes sense because proficient readers read faster with appropriately mental treatment and independently. Thirdly, in terms of 4 categories of strategies, both groups used social strategies at a high level. Appreciably, it implies the absence of harsh competition and the presence of group spirit in cooperative learning as widely seen in Vietnamese classroom context.

However, as addressed above, Group 2 were finishing their final reading class, it appears that they were not ready to actively maximize (at the upper high level) those necessary strategies of (2) clue-using, (3) deductive-reasoning, (3) summarizing, (9) guessing and so on, which are supposed to be highly activated by proficient readers. Thus, it calls for more attention to reading strategy training/instruction by EFL teachers and students themselves. In addition to regular reading strategies like skimming, scanning, cooperating and assistance-seeking, teachers should purposely make students aware of, describe, model/demonstrate in details one by one, repeatedly if needed and subsequently guide them to actually use other necessary reading strategies, both intensively and extensively, followed by reflective/evaluative activities for reinforcement and thorough internalization.

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## APPENDIX

## QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

Dear Students,

You are invited to participate in this survey. It is only for gathering information about reading strategies used by English majored students at Dong Thap University. There is no right answer for this survey. Please respond to each of the statements provided in the questionnaire truthfully, applicable to your case. The responses are used for research purpose only.

**Directions:** When you read English academic materials (textbooks and other learning materials), what would you typically prefer to do? There are 5 options and tick  $\surd$  for your case to each statement.

**5=ALWAYS, 4=USUALLY, 3=SOMETIMES, 2=RARELY, 1=NEVER.**

#	Statements	5	4	3	2	1
1	I first skim the text, then go back and read carefully.					
2	I use other clues, e.g. titles/headings, introduction, transitions, etc. for better understanding.					
3	I try to infer what is said, but not clearly stated in the text.					
4	I stop to periodically summarize what I've already read to make sure it makes sense.					
5	I read quickly to get specific piece of information that I want.					
7	I try to elaborate new information with known information in mind.					
8	I try to picture or visualize information to help me remember what I read.					
9	When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases in context.					
10	I underline/highlight information in the text to help me remember it better.					
11	When the text becomes difficult, I re-read it to increase my understanding.					
12	I take notes of what I have read.					
13	When reading, I translate from English into my native language.					
14	I use reference materials such as glossaries/dictionaries to understand the text better.					
15	Before I read, I think about what I have already known about the topic.					
16	I have a purpose in mind when I read.					
17	When reading, I try to stay focused on text and skip unimportant parts.					
18	After I read, I check if my guesses about text are right or wrong.					
19	I work with my classmates to solve reading problems.					
20	I ask my teacher to paraphrase/explain something that is not clear or does not make sense to me.					
21	I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about reading texts.					
22	I talk to my friends about my attitudes and feelings concerning academic reading materials in English.					