

Effects of Whole Language Approach on Tenth Grade Students' Reading Achievement

Nguyen Thi Anh Hong

MA student, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University of Education

Abstract: English is a global language used for communication, science, business, aviation, entertainment, radio, and diplomacy. English is currently incorporated in every school in Vietnam, exceptionally high schools, focusing on developing the four abilities of reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Reading is one of the critical abilities, and it is regarded to be the most efficient approach to learning about the culture of the language. It is helpful in everyday life and in teaching and learning English. However, several issues have arisen throughout the teaching and learning of English in general and reading skills in particular.

The aims of this research are firstly to identify typical problems that are encountered by the students of Cao Bang high school in process of teaching and developing reading English abilities of the students. Secondly, after finding out the root causes of students' reading difficulties, the second objective of the research was whether the Whole Language approach can be applicable for improving the tenth-grade students' reading skills at Cao Bang high school. Finally, this research also aimed to evaluate how effective the Whole Language approach was on the improvement of the tenth-grade students' reading skills at Cao Bang high school.

Keywords: Action Research, Effects, Reading Achievement, Ten grade students, Whole Language Approach.

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I. Rationale

Nowadays, as learning English is no longer new and unfamiliar to students, this subject has received the attention of parents and students. English is also a subject for students to love, explore, compare the differences between languages, learn about the culture, people, socio-economics of the country they are studying. English is currently incorporated in every school in Vietnam, exceptionally high schools, focusing on developing the four abilities of reading, listening, writing, and speaking.

Reading is one of the critical abilities, and it is regarded to be the most efficient approach to learning about the culture of the language. It is helpful in everyday life and in teaching and learning English. However, several issues have arisen throughout the teaching and learning of English in general and reading skills in particular. According to reading professionals, many pupils cannot become effective readers because they have bad reading habits and no reading ability. They are usually people who have a jumbled mess of irrelevant, unorganized, and unfinished words floating in their memories. As a result, they cannot concentrate on the reading materials and frequently fail to read even accessible texts in class. Furthermore, most students who study English, even those who major in it, struggle to communicate in English. They cannot read English literature for enjoyment since they only decode at the sentence level.

People can never perform something well until they completely comprehend its conditions and settings. Suppose teachers want to be successful in developing teaching methods and strategies. In that case, teachers must first understand both the advantages and limits of teaching and learning and the existing competency of pupils at school.

One of the main approaches to teaching English reading skills is Whole Language Reading, widely used in teaching and learning a foreign language. According to Goodman (1980s-1990s), the method grew in popularity substantially and became a fundamental educational paradigm in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite its popularity at the time, educators who thought skill training was essential for students' development and sure educational researchers were suspicious of whole language claims.

The entire language is seen as an educational viewpoint, philosophy, and belief system. It is a research-based and practice-based educational theory. The entire language might be described as a student-centered "constructivist" vision of learning, focusing on literacy development in particular. Students are more inspired and motivated to learn since the entire language is relevant and necessary to them.

Whole language learning is undeniably productive and successful, allowing learners to grasp and acquire the language more naturally. Furthermore, it provides them with the possibility to function and perform better.

The findings show that the entire language is meaningful for the learners since the instructor and the print-rich environment stimulate and push them to study and take risks. However, it is essential to realize that making errors is acceptable and is part of the learning process.

II. Method of the Research

The aims of this study are firstly to identify typical problems that are encountered by the students of Cao Bang high school in process of teaching and developing reading English abilities of the students. Secondly, after finding out the root causes of students' reading difficulties, the second objective of the research was whether the Whole Language approach can be applicable for improving the tenth-grade students' reading skills at Cao Bang high school. Finally, this research also aimed to evaluate how effective the Whole Language approach was on the improvement of the tenth-grade students' reading skills at Cao Bang high school.

In order to achieve these objectives, a participatory action research (McTaggart, 1994) was implemented with the main focus on providing change and improvement, individuals' practices were investigated, data were collected systematically, reflective inquiries were made, and new action plans based on them were prepared and implemented with cyclical or spiral steps (Peter et al., 2001). The participatory action research was designed to closely follow the four steps in each cycle: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

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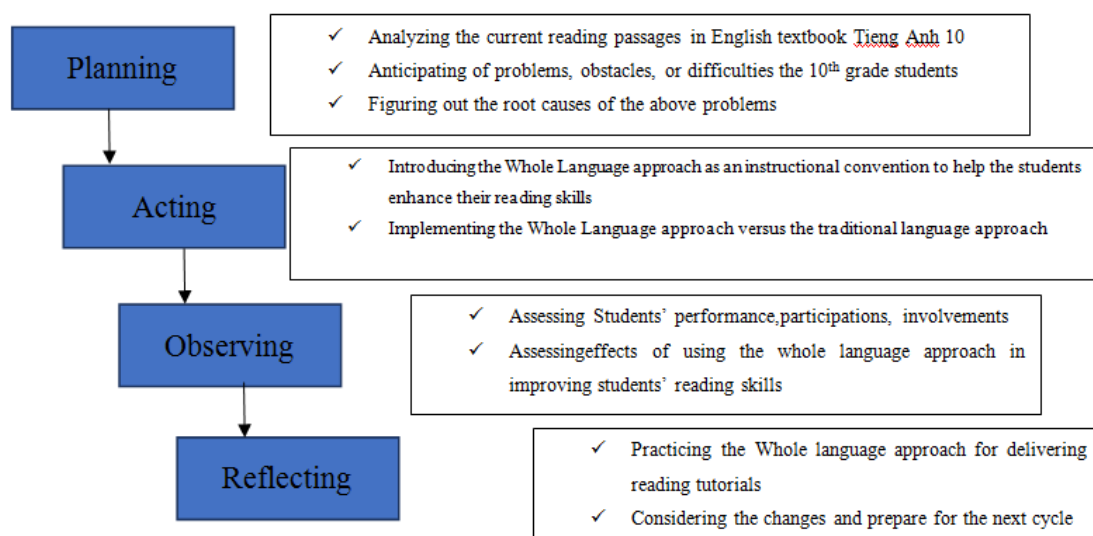


Figure 2.1: Action research design in one cycle

III. Findings

3.1. Results from interviews

Totally eight interviews with teachers and 10 interviews with the tenth – grade students were conducted at Cao Bang High School. The aim of the interviews was to identify typical problems and the root causes for the problems encountered by the students in process of teaching and developing reading English abilities of the students. The participants were asked to give their opinions about the following points:

1. *Could you name the three most common problems that the tenth-grade students had difficulty with when they did the reading tasks in the text book? Why?*
2. *Do you think the number of uncommon words, phrases and/or collocations is the biggest barriers for tenth-grade students to complete the reading tasks in the text book? How?*
3. *Do you think new structures and grammatical issues are the biggest barriers for tenth-grade students to complete the reading tasks in the text book? How?*
4. *Do you think Dialects or idioms are the biggest barriers for tenth-grade students to complete the reading tasks in the text book? How?*
5. *Do you think Types of Exercises are the biggest barriers for tenth-grade students to complete the reading tasks in the text book? How?*
6. *Do you think topic is the biggest barriers for tenth-grade students to complete the reading tasks in the text book? How?*

7. Among 4 basic skills, is reading your most favorite skill? Why?

Interview results showed that the three most common problems that the tenth-grade students had difficulty with when they did the reading tasks in the text book were firstly collocations. They explained that although students already knew every individual word in the phrases or collocation, they could not understand the combinations as the phrase or collocation exactly. Besides, some student participants shared that new structures and grammatical issues were considered as the second biggest barriers to their reading comprehension since their knowledge background is basic sentences and simple tenses while the reading texts appeared several completely new things they had never seen before. In addition, a majority of participants agreed that Dialects or idioms were something out of their reach to remember and use in a specific context. However, they ranked this obstacle as the third one because dialects or idioms was not popular in the reading texts.

Surprisingly, results from interviews showed that the root cause for those mentioned problems was not lack of lexical resources or the core language knowledge, but the lack of motivation to learn to read and practice reading skills. Students explained their learning process of reading like this “*I started to learn how to pronounce a new word first, then made sentences with the new words and finally read the text and completed the reading tasks*”, said a participant. Some student participants found this way of learning boring and ineffective because they would easily forget the reading lessons after completing the reading exercises. Some other thought it was waste of time reading and never practice reading outside classes since their vocabulary and grammar could not enhance significantly after reading skills as their teachers and they themselves expected although they had completed all the reading tasks.

3.2. Results from a Focus Group discussion

The focus group was conducted with the participation of three English teachers who taught English for grade 10 at the school and four 10th grade students in a face-to-face meeting at the meeting room at school before the second semester started. The highlighted idea resulted from the interviews of “low motivation to learn to read and practice reading was the root causes of the three most popular problems” was further discussed in group.

1. *Do you really think low motivation to learn to read and practice reading was the root causes of the three most popular problems (collocations, new structures and grammatical issues, dialects or idioms) in process of teaching and developing reading English abilities of the students? Why?*

The focus group results showed that all of the six participants highly agreed with the root cause of the reading problems the 10th grade students at Cao Bang high school were facing. The teacher participants gave a deeper explanation that the traditional language approach taught students in the process from phonemes → letters → words → sentences → stories might be the key factors contributing to the low level of interest in reading. Accordingly, “*students have to wait for so long to get their target of understanding the reading text because phonemes make no sense, letters make no sense, words make sense but not enough to understand the whole text at the real time*”, added a senior teacher in the group. Moreover, “*the stories in the text are normally something far from us, not in our real life, so it’s really hard to make it catch our sights or our interests, so reading is still an academic task for students to have to do, not a hobby or habit that student enjoy to do*” further explained from a student in the group.

The focus group results also indicated that Whole Language approach versus the traditional language approach should be introduced as an instructional intervention to increase the level of motivation to learn to read and practice reading for the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school. After the Whole Language approach was carefully explained by the researcher, all members of the focus groups together discussed the following question:

2. *Do you think the Whole Language approach versus the traditional language approach should be introduced to teach reading text at Cao Bang high school? Why?*

“*Whole Language approach could create motivation for students to read because students could form their own knowledge by following the process of stories → sentences → words → letters → phonemes*”, explained by one teacher in the focus group. “*The higher the level of engagement of learners into the new lessons are, that mean the more the learner are interested in*” a male teacher added. “*When I am free and natural to learn the story I like, I will definitely find a way to understand more deeply about it including words, letters, and phonics. They become my demand to learn about it. They are my tastes not my tasks anymore.*” Explained by one of the students in the focus group.

3.3. The results of a pre-test and a post-test

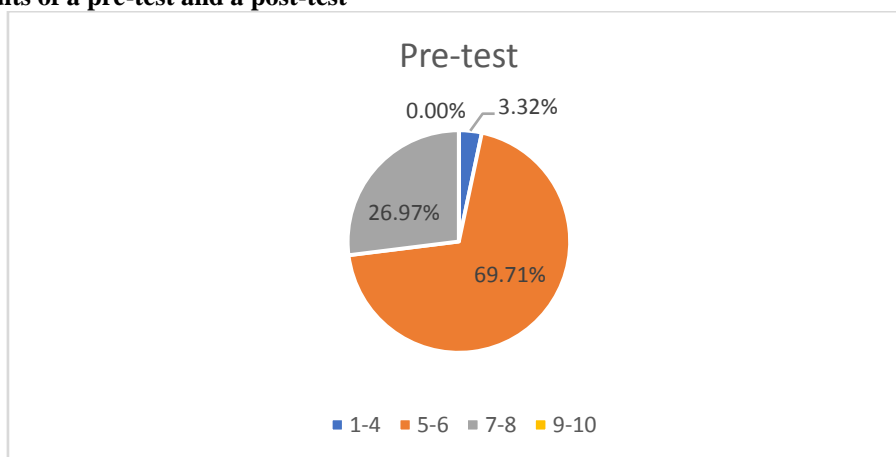


Figure 3.1: The results of the pre-test

Legend: 1-4 (poor); 5-6 (Fair); 7-8 (Good); 9-10 (Excellent)

The results of the pre-test shown in Figure 4.1 that the percentage of the tenth-grade students getting score 5-6 accounted for roughly 70% in the first week of the second semester of the school year 2021-2022 before the whole language approach was introduced. Remarkably, no students achieved excellent marks (9-10) in reading test before the whole language approach was introduced. There were still 3.32% of the tenth-grade students showing their poor performance of reading skills, who was scored 1-4.

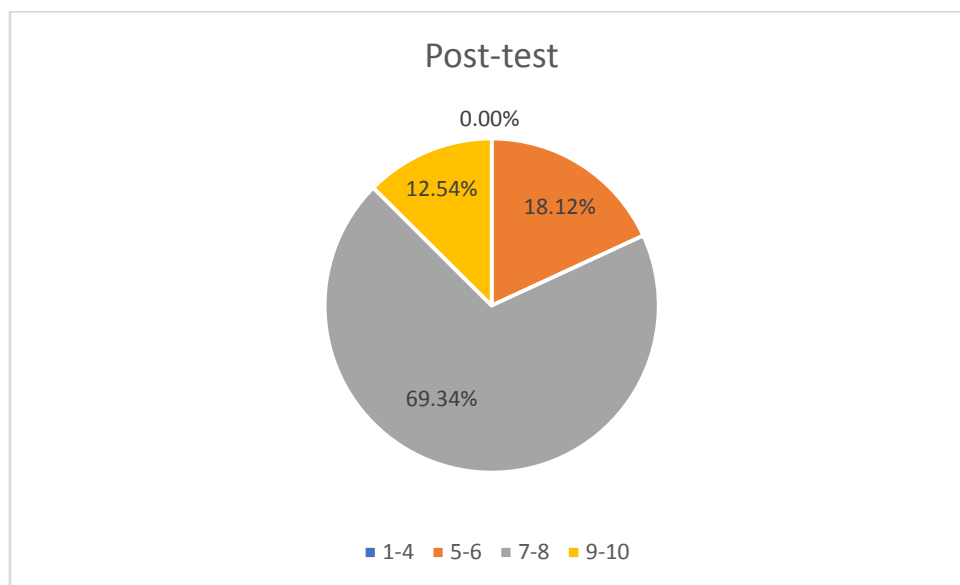


Figure 3.2: The results of the post-test

Legend: 1-4 (poor); 5-6 (Fair); 7-8 (Good); 9-10 (Excellent)

Figure 4.2 showed the results of the post test of reading in the twelfth week of the second semester of the school year 2021-2022 after the whole language approach was implemented. As it could be obviously seen from the pie chart, the percentage of the tenth-grade students obtaining the score 7-8 dominated the whole, with approximately 70%, replacing the space of score ranged 5-6 in the pre-test. Significantly, there was a breakthrough increase in the number of students achieving excellent marks (9-10) in reading test after the whole language approach was conducted, which was 12.54% from none. Surprisingly, the percentage of the tenth-grade students with poor performance of reading skills had been eradicated after the whole language approach was intervened.

Table 3.1. Mean pre-test score and post-test score of the group.

No.	Pre-test score	Post-test score
1	6	8
2	6	5
3	6	7
4	7	9
5	4	6
6	5	6
7	7	8
8	6	8
9	6	7
10	6	7
11	6	8
12	6	6
13	5	7
14	6	7
15	7	7
16	5	7
17	8	9
18	5	6
19	5	7
20	6	7
21	6	8
22	6	7
23	8	9
24	6	8
25	5	6
26	6	8
27	7	7
28	6	7
29	6	7
30	6	8
31	6	7
32	7	8
33	6	7
34	7	8
35	6	6

36	4	5
37	6	7
38	6	7
39	6	6
40	7	9
Mean	6.025	7.175

Legend: 1-4 (poor); 5-6 (Fair); 7-8 (Good); 9-10 (Excellent)

Table 4.2. illustrated the means of pre-test score and post-test score of the group of 40 tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school, who participated in the research. The column to the left-hand side showed the scores of 40 group participants before the whole language approach was introduced. The final column to the right-hand side presented the scores of 40 group participants after the whole language approach was implemented. The final row of the table tells us the mean of pre-test scores and post-test scores which were 6.025 and 7.175 respectively. The differences in the score means between the pre-test and post-test results confirmed that the whole language approach as an instructional intervention had a positive influence on the enhancement of the tenth-grade students' performance of reading skills. Noticeably, after three months of applying the whole language approach into reading teaching practice, the reading proficiency of the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school improved significantly from Fair level to Good one.

IV. Conclusion

5.1. Characteristics of reading passages in English textbook Tieng Anh 10 gave favorable conditions for teachers to implement the whole language approach

The design of the eight reading passages in English textbook Tieng Anh 10 chose reading as the first skills placed in the beginning of each unit to equip students with input language. The design of pre-reading and post-reading with speaking activities individually, in pairs and in group gave favorable conditions for teachers to implement the whole language approach when delivering the reading lesson to the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school because reading was not only taught separately but integrated in others such as speaking activities.

5.2. Three typical reading problems of the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school

Interview results revealed that the three most common problems that the tenth-grade students had difficulty with when they did the reading tasks in the text book were firstly collocations, secondly new structures and grammatical issues and thirdly Dialects or idioms.

Further, focus group discussion reconfirmed the top three popular obstacles of the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school.

5.3. The root causes for reading problems of the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school

Results from interviews showed that the root cause for those mentioned problems was not the lack of lexical resources or the core language knowledge, but the lack of motivation to learn to read and practice reading skills. Further, focus group discussion reconfirmed the major reason causing the students' reading difficulties was the low level of interest in reading due to the current traditional language approach.

5.4. Applicability of the Whole language approach for improving the tenth-grade students' reading skills at Cao Bang high school

Focus group discussion also showed that the Whole Language approach versus the traditional language approach could be introduced as an instructional intervention to increase the level of motivation to learn to read and practice reading for the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school.

5.5. Effectiveness of the Whole Language approach on the improvement of the tenth-grade students' reading skills at Cao Bang high school

The differences between the mean scores of pretest and posttest of the reading skills of the tenth-grade students at Cao Bang high school showed that there was an positive effect of the Whole language Approach on teaching reading skill of students.

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