

Enhancing Ielts Reading Skills For Freshmen At A Vietnamese University

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Abstract-

With many advantages in enrollment and recruitment today, IELTS certification is becoming a learning priority for many students, especially high school students. Recognized by more than 11,000 organizations in more than 140 countries globally, IELTS is a popular English certificate in the world because of its security, reliability, and practicality, not only bringing opportunities shortly for learners but also helping equip long-term knowledge and skills. IELTS Reading is considered by many learners as the most challenging skill as lots of effort and time are required if learners wish to make much progress in Reading. In the current study, 86 freshmen took part in the semi-interview as the major participants. Specifically, this paper looks at some typical reading difficulties faced by freshmen and offers some suggestions to help learners achieve their targets.

Index Terms- IELTS, English certificate, Reading skills, performance, freshmen.

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I. Introduction

Currently, the IELTS exam (International English Language Testing System) is a prestigious measure of English proficiency globally. As a certificate widely recognized by many countries around the world, IELTS is a tool to support learners' abilities, helping the young generation easily progress further on their academic path. To be able to open the door to the dream horizon, more and more students are preparing for and taking this international standard exam. Since 2019, each year there have been about 3 million candidates taking the IELTS test, according to statistics from exam organizers.

Studying in an international educational environment and integrating with diverse and rich cultures has long been the dream and ambition of many young people. Currently, in the world, there are more than 11,000 universities and educational organizations in more than 135 countries (including many large universities in the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand...) that accept IELTS certificates. IELTS is considered one of the prerequisites for studying abroad applications.

Not only does it create a bridge to help students get closer to their dream of studying abroad, but the IELTS certificate is also a powerful weapon on the "battlefield" of recruiting students at all levels in Vietnam. In recent years, IELTS has helped students improve their chances of being admitted to university when many schools prioritize or combine admission with candidates with IELTS certificates. In particular, in 2023, IELTS will be used for direct admission and scoring in the high school entrance exam in many provinces and cities across the country.

As a certificate that comprehensively evaluates four language skills of learners, IELTS test results are considered a reliable criterion to help schools, academic institutions, and businesses have an overview of learners' English proficiency. In Vietnam, the IELTS certificate acts as a bridge to shorten the gap between Vietnamese students and the achievements of Vietnamese students. However, that does not mean that students only need to focus on studying and taking English exams, ignoring specialized subjects and other social skills. Combining foreign languages and a variety of new knowledge and skills is the right way to master knowledge and assert yourself with a personal identity.

In fact, IELTS, as well as other international English certificates such as TOEFL or Cambridge, have long become a must-have passport to enter an international standard educational environment. However, it was not until universities in Vietnam decided to spend a large proportion of the total annual enrollment target to directly enroll students with IELTS scores that parents and students saw the value and benefits of IELTS.

II. Literature Review

Reading definitions

The definition of reading is proposed by several experts. According to Leu and Kinzer (1987: 9) reading is a development, interactive, and global process involving learned skills. The process specifically incorporates and can be positively and negatively influenced by nonlinguistic internal and external variables or factors.

Moreover, according to David Nunan (1989:33), "Reading is not an invariant skill, that there are different types of reading skills that correspond to the many different purposes we have for reading". So, in the classroom, in students' reading activities, the writer is sure that they have many purposes, among others are to graduate from their school and to provide themselves with the knowledge to continue their studies whatever their purposes are. To achieve the goal, the comprehension ability in reading is needed.

According to Day and Bamford (1998:12), reading is the construction of meaning from a printed or written message. It means the construction of meaning involves the reader connecting information from the written message with previous knowledge to arrive at meaning and understanding.

According to Cline et.al (2006: 2), states that reading is decoding and understanding written texts. Decoding requires translating the symbols of the writing system (including Braille) into the spoken words that they represent. Understanding is determined by the purposes for reading, the context, the nature of the text, and the readers' strategies and knowledge.

From all definitions above, it means that a general understanding of reading can be derived as an active process of getting meaning. This process is done by knowledge and influenced by nonlinguistic internal and external variables. Besides that, reading can be taken as a life skill which is relevant to immediate as well as long term life success and reading generally serves as a source of information and enjoyment.

Types of reading

Some types of reading are proposed by one of the experts. According to Fideles (2009), there are five types of reading, they are:

- a) Scanning: This is looking over a text quickly to get a specific piece of information.
- b) Skimming: Looking over the text quickly to get general ideas of the content, your eyes move quite fast, taking in titles of chapters, their beginnings and ends, and the first sentences of paragraphs.
- c) Sub-vocalisation: This is reading very slowly and methodically, either saying the words out loud or at least with a 'voice' in your head. It is painstaking but very slow. We tend to use it when trying out a recipe for the first time, or carrying out instructions as to how to assemble something we've bought.
- d) Light Reading This is reading fairly quickly without concentrating too hard or worrying about every single word. We often use it when reading an enjoyable novel.
- e) Study Reading: Study reading involves thinking about what is being read so that it is understood and can be recalled. It needs to be worked at, with time for reflection, thought, analysis, criticism, comparison, notes made, points highlighted and emphasized, arguments followed and evaluated, and the whole summarized.

IELTS reading tests

Reading skills are often rarely mentioned in IELTS test preparation knowledge, however, this is an extremely important part of the test and requires serious training to achieve a high score.

Of all the skills in the IELTS test, Reading is an extremely important skill that helps the examiner evaluate the ability to grasp main ideas, read to remember details, skimming skills, and read and understand close arguments. closely, and recognize the point of view, attitude, and purpose of the information contained in the article.

Reading Section (60 minutes): Involves three long texts that range from descriptive and factual to discursive and analytical. These are taken from books, journals, magazines, and newspapers. The Academic version includes texts suitable for those entering university courses or seeking professional registration, while the General Training version involves extracts from books, magazines, newspapers, notices, advertisements, company handbooks, and guidelines.

The IELTS Reading test evaluates the candidate's ability to read and understand meaning, and language proficiency in English documents. In general, some reading skill points that the IELTS Reading test evaluates candidates include: Ability to read and understand the general idea of the passage; Ability to grasp the main idea of the problem/question; Ability to understand important details; Ability to make inferences from reading text; Ability to recognize the author's opinion, attitude, or purpose of a passage; and Ability to analyze arguments.

III. Major Findings

Followings are the results from the interview, which emerged 2 themes including some typical reading difficulties faced by freshmen and their mistakes when practicing IELTS reading.

Some typical reading difficulties faced by freshmen

First, difficulties in Vocabulary

Results from the interview showed that most students said that they had difficulty in vocabulary because there was a reading passage where up to 70% were new words. Also, they stated that every word they read was new, so they had to use a dictionary to look up the meaning of each word, which was both time-consuming and ineffective.

Second, difficulties in Grammar

The findings indicated that many students found English grammar challenging. This was a factor that became a barrier to the reading comprehension process. Therefore, when they learned vocabulary, they must grasp basic grammar, distinguish between active and passive sentences, simple sentences, and compound sentences, and identify word types, and word tenses... to read effectively.

Third, difficulties in word length

From the interview, many students stated that English reading comprehension passages are very long, not many new words, and the grammatical structure was not complicated but could easily make learners feel bored.

Fourth difficulties in learning methods

In fact, many students were still confused about their method of learning English. They did everything they heard or read somewhere, but could not define their method.

Fifth, document downloads are widespread

In today's era of widespread Internet coverage, finding IELTS study materials was extremely easy because most IELTS books are available online. However, for the freshmen who are in the foundation-building stage, choosing suitable IELTS test preparation materials was a challenge.

Mistakes when practicing IELTS Reading

First, most participants stated that they looked up all the words in the reading lesson.

Maybe this mistake was not made by many students, but it was an "eternal" mistake of candidates when first studying for IELTS. IELTS readings are excerpted from scientific articles on real-life topics and use a large number of specialized words. Looking up all or most of the words in the dictionary was impossible as well as very time-consuming and ineffective.

Second, most participants said that they tried to fully understand the content of the entire text.

A reading task is relatively long, and with 20 minutes of work for each task, understanding the entire content of the entire task is not necessary. Maybe the students would get the first few sentences correct, however, IELTS needs speed. If students read carefully to understand everything, they may have to leave a lot of questions blank (or circle them) because they did not have time.

Third, most participants stated that their ability to paraphrase was not good.

Paraphrase was an extremely important skill in both listening and reading. Many times, the questions were not difficult at all, but rather the test challenged candidates' ability to understand in many ways.

Fourth, most participants stated that they spent too much time on one question

This was a problem that many IELTS learners had. With each difficult question, spending a lot of time on that question was inevitable.

IV. Recommendations

How to do an IELTS Reading test

There is no general rule for doing an IELTS Reading test. Not only for each type of question but for each student, the method of taking the test is different. Some of you have the habit of reading the text first, answering the questions later, or vice versa. Therefore, students can refer to many different ways to do the test, thereby adjusting themselves to save time and be most effective.

Figure 4 below shows 4 steps to take the IELTS Reading test that many IELTS students can apply:

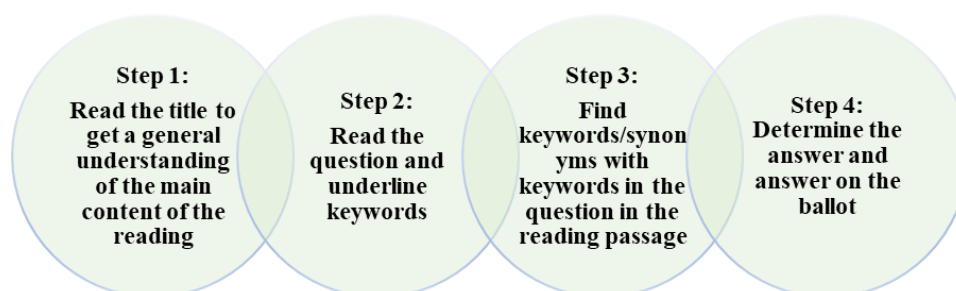


Figure 1: Four common steps to take the IELTS reading test

It is suggested that the SMART principle may help the learners improve their IELTS reading skills. Figure 2 below is the model of the SMART principle.

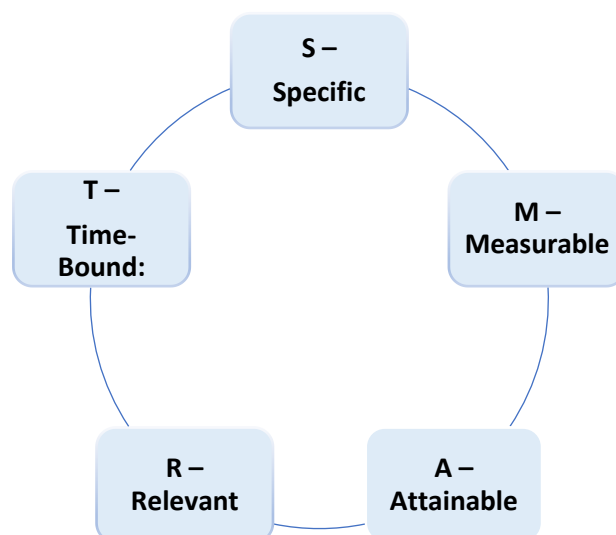


Figure 2: the SMART principle for enhancing IELTS reading skills

The SMART principle has 5 elements such as Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-Bound.

First, S - Specific means easy to understand. For example, instead of giving a vague goal like "Get a high score on the IELTS test", make it clear, specific, and easy to visualize like "Get 7.0 in IELTS with no skill below 5.5."

Second, M - Measurable. This means the goals must be specified in terms of time or quantity. For example: spend 1 hour solving the reading test, memorize 20 new words every day, or practice speaking for 30 minutes every night.

Third, A -Attainable. The goal a student set must be within his/her ability. If they are at the basic level and want to self-study to 7.0 IELTS within 5 months, it is completely overwhelming.

Fourth, R – Relevant. Each of the students' goals must be towards the common goal, which is to achieve an IELTS certificate with a positive score.

Fifth, T - Time-Bound. This way we will be motivated to complete the review process on time.

Besides setting goals according to SMART rules, learners should also break down goals into stages and continuously evaluate and review what they have accomplished or have not accomplished in that period.

V. Conclusion

Reading skill is often rarely mentioned in English learning tips, but it is one of the important skills and requires learners to have a serious training process to be able to deeply understand content of documents. Especially in IELTS, this skill is even more emphasized. Practicing reading every day is a very effective way to learn IELTS Reading for beginners. Start by reading everything you like: blogs, stories, magazines, newspapers,... in English. This will help you naturally create interest and inspiration in learning English. On the other hand, reading every day with diverse reading styles also helps the brain learn more easily and increase vocabulary effectively. Newcomers can start reading short passages or quotes, reading along with their favorite short videos, then gradually increase the difficulty with more complex articles and essays.

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