Improving students' reading comprehension through predicting strategy instruction: an action research at Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary school

1. Rationale for the Study

Reading is an essential skill for English as a foreign language (EFL) students; and for many, reading is the most important skill to master. With strengthened reading skills, EFL readers will make greater progress and attain greater development not only in English but also in all academic areas. Therefore, “reading is the most heavily researched single area of the whole curriculum, and yet, paradoxically, it remains a field in which a good deal of fundamental work has yet to be approached, and one in which a great many teachers would claim to be almost wholly ignorant” and secondary teachers “who have generally had no training at all related to reading but nevertheless feel conscious that the ability to read fluently is the basis for most school learning, and one of the surest predictors of academic attainment” (Harrison and Gardner, 1977).

Traditionally, attempts to improve the comprehension of texts for EFL students have focused on familiarizing the students with vocabulary needed to comprehend the passage. However, within the last 15 years, much of the research conducted in the field of reading comprehension has concentrated on the knowledge and control of reading strategies, and more and more emphasis has been put on the importance of training EFL learners to be strategic readers. Studies have revealed that the use of appropriate reading strategies may improve reading comprehension (Olsen and Gee, 1991), and using reading strategies can be of great help to non-native readers because they may serve as effective ways of
overcoming language deficiency and obtaining better reading achievement on language proficiency tests (Wong, 2005; Zhang, 1992).

However, empirical research indicates that in most reading classrooms, students have received inadequate instruction on reading skills and strategies (Miller and Perkins, 1989). EFL teachers seldom teach a strategy explicitly in class. In other words, teachers normally stress on the production of reading comprehension rather than the reading process. Reading lessons are more of reading tests, in which teachers ask the students to read the text and complete several reading tasks. This problem can be found in many EFL reading classes in the world, and Vietnam is not an exception. Vietnamese learners of English, in general, and students at Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary School in particular, after several years of learning English, turn out to be word-by-word readers; they tend to read very slowly to understand the meaning of every single word. When they encounter unfamiliar words or unfamiliar concepts, they feel discouraged and resort to wild guessing to construct the text meaning. Some students do not understand the main idea of a text even when they have translated every word into their mother tongue. Very few students deliberately look at the title of a text to think about its topic before reading. Fewer students use their background knowledge to facilitate their comprehension. They are completely dependent on the decoded messages from the text, so once their decoding mechanisms fail due to their deficient language proficiency, comprehension breaks down.

With a view to gaining some insight into reading strategies and reading strategy instruction, I chose to study how to improve students’ reading comprehension through predicting strategy instruction. The rationale for my focus on predicting strategies is that they are of key importance in the comprehension process. It has been found out that efficient reading often includes the use of predicting strategies (Goodman, 1976; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Interacting with text, readers use their prior knowledge in concert with cues in the text to generate predictions. Although the importance of prediction in comprehending
texts has been demonstrated by recent research, much remains to be learned about predicting strategies.

2. Aims of the Study

My study aims at, firstly, examining the impact of the predicting strategy instruction on the reading comprehension of 10th grade students at Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary School, and secondly, determining effective techniques to teach predicting strategies in reading comprehension in their reading classes, from the teacher’ and students’ perspectives.

3. Research Questions of the Study

In order to achieve these aims, two research questions were answered:

(1) To what extent does the use of predicting strategy instruction improve Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary School’s grade 10 students’ reading comprehension?

(2) What techniques are effective to teach these students predicting strategies, as perceived by the teacher and the students?

4. Scope of the Study

This study only focuses on the teaching of predicting strategies to 10th grade students at Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary School, so the teaching of other reading strategies or to other subjects would be beyond the scope.

5. Organization of the Study

The thesis consists of three main parts: INTRODUCTION which provides an overview of the study, DEVELOPMENT which is the main part and consists of 3 chapters, and CONCLUSION which includes the summary, pedagogical implications, limitations of the study and suggestions for further study.

Three chapters in the main part are as follows:

Chapter 1: Literature Review is the review of the literature related to the research topic, which serves as a theoretical foundation of the study.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology provides information about the research
context, participants, research approach, data collection instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 3: Results and Discussion is the main part of the study, which reports and discusses the main findings according to the research questions.

6. Literature Review

Following is the literature review of key concepts in the thesis:

Reading is “a fluent process of readers combining information from a text and their own background knowledge to build meaning. The goal of reading is comprehension…The text, the reader, fluency, and strategies combined together define the act of reading” Anderson (2003, p. 68)

There are three Reading models: bottom-up, top-down and interactive.

Predicting is a family of strategies. Here is the list of the activities to develop predicting strategies.

- Pre-reading activities: activating prior knowledge, previewing and overviewing,
- While-reading activities: reading to confirm the prior predictions and predicting what to come next. (Duke and Pearson, 2002, p. 6).
### Activating background knowledge
- Open prediction
- True/False prediction
- Pre-question
- Network
- If You Don’t Know, Ask, OK?

### Previewing
- Look at the title and the headings for each section to predict what the reading text is about.
- Look at the pictures to predict what the reading text is about.

### Overviewing
- Read the first and the last paragraphs each paragraph to predict what it is about.

### WHILE READING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading and Confirming Prior Predictions</th>
<th>Read and confirm or reject the prior predictions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicting What to Come Next</td>
<td>Use the prior knowledge about the topic to predict what to come next in the passage</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use the prior knowledge about the textual structure of the text to predict what to come next.</td>
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### 7. Research Methodology

In terms of research approach, an *Action Research* was employed as this study was conducted to examine the impact of a small scale of intervention, predicting strategy instruction, on the reading comprehension of 10th from students at CBQ Upper Secondary School and determine effective techniques to teach these students predicting strategies so as to improve their reading comprehension.

The intervention, a predicting strategy instruction course includes three lessons on predicting the content of the text from the title, the picture, the first sentence of a paragraph, and the prior knowledge of the content and textual structure.
The data was collected via a number of instruments including a questionnaire for a preliminary investigation, a pre-test, two post-tests to measure the impact of predicting strategy instruction on the students' reading comprehension, teacher’s diaries and students’ journals to investigate effective techniques to teach predicting strategies from the teacher and the students’ perspectives.

The five testing items included in the pre and post-test were consistent with the objectives of the predicting strategy instruction course.

The study was implemented in the second semester of the school year 2010 - 2011 with the participation of 50 students from Group 10A10 at Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary School. The data was then analyzed by means of descriptive statistic devices and content analysis method.

8. Results and Discussion

After the implementation of the predicting strategies on the participants, it was found out that:

Firstly, for the first research question “to what extent does the use of predicting strategy instruction improve the students’ reading comprehension?”, the test results (as shown in the table and the chart below) reveal that the predicting strategy instruction has made a slight improvement in the students’ reading comprehension. The students were significantly better at finding the topic of the text, answering the detailed questions with the help from the picture, and anticipating the upcoming information from the textual structure. Although the predicting strategy instruction has raised the students’ awareness of these reading strategies considerably, and enabled them to make use of these strategies in their reading, the difference is not significant because reading comprehension is influenced by not only strategies but also other factors such as the text and the reader’s vocabulary as well as background knowledge. This can be demonstrated through the following figure. Furthermore, predicting strategies are only a fraction of language learning strategies.
Secondly, for the second question “what are effective techniques to teach the students predicting strategies, as perceived by the students and the teachers?”, the results from the teacher’s diaries and the students’ journals suggested the following techniques:

- The most effective one, as perceived by the teacher and the students, is that the predicting strategy course should include **Explicit strategy instruction**, consisting of an explicit description of the strategy including when and how to use it, teacher’s modeling, student’s modeling accompanied by the teacher’s explanation of each step, guided practice with gradual release of responsibility, and independent use.

- The second most effective technique, as perceived by the teacher and the students, is that in order to teach the students predicting strategies effectively, the teacher should conduct **exciting, real-life, practical and useful tasks that equip the students with sufficient vocabulary and knowledge related to the text, and help them practice the strategies effectively**. The learning principle underlying the task-based approach proposes students will learn best if they engage in tasks that require them to use language in ways that closely resemble how language is used naturally outside the classroom (Bachman, 1990). Besides that, exciting, practical and useful task ensure that students want to learn, have the desire to accomplish the task, have a positive attitude toward the task, and exhibit effort to accomplish the task, which build motivated readers.

- Next, the teacher and the students perceived **Interesting and comprehensible reading texts of familiar topics** would guarantee the effectiveness of the predicting strategy instruction. Interesting texts motivated the students by making them want to read, whereas familiar topics and comprehensible inputs motivated them by making them believe in their ability including the ability to make predictions about the text and comprehend it. Reading motivation facilitates the strategy use.
• Pair work and group work are also very useful to the strategy learning. In fact, cooperation in such small groups provide students with more opportunities to share their own thoughts among the members, which really facilitates the strategy use because in such groups students of various abilities and skills are supposed to provide scaffolding support for each other’s reading processes. Moreover, with predicting strategies, cooperative learning enables students to broaden their knowledge and vocabulary related to the topic, and students, therefore, also have more opportunities to verify their predictions, clarify their confusion in terms of the text meaning and the strategy use, and advance their reading ability.

• Furthermore, giving feedbacks was also reported to be of great use to the students in their practice of predicting strategies. Feedbacks on the reading process enabled the students to reflect on their thinking during reading, finding out what they had achieved and what needed improving.

• Finally, clear instructions and detailed modeling, especially of Planning and Report stages of Task cycle, ensure better performance of the tasks, which contributes to successful strategy learning.

9. Pedagogical Implications of the Study

This study has shed some light on the impact of predicting strategies on Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary School’s 10th grade students’ reading comprehension and effective techniques to teach predicting strategies to these subjects. From the findings of the study, I come up with some pedagogical implications for upper secondary school reading instruction in EFL contexts.

Firstly, it is advisable to teach the students predicting strategies as well as other reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, guessing word meaning in context.

Secondly, it is important for teachers to recognize that learners’ effective use of a reading strategy like predicting requires teachers’ thoughtful planning to help them identify the nature of reading process and raise their awareness of the
necessity for the shift in their reading behaviours. Therefore, teacher should: 1) assess students’ awareness of strategy use (for example, by using an instrument such as the SORS); 2) raise their awareness of the importance of strategic reading; 3) raise their awareness of the array of strategies available to aid reading comprehension; and then 4) provide explicit strategy instruction. Teachers should also understand that developing students’ strategic reading is not simply a matter of introducing them to a number of reading strategies, but promoting mastery of these strategies involves teachers’ constant modeling and instant feedback not only at the beginning but also through the whole implementation of the strategy instruction.

Finally, it is suggested that strategic reading should be entwined with enhanced content and formal schemata, especially content schemata. As seen in the study, students could not made good use of predicting strategies in their reading comprehension because of their deficiency in their prior knowledge of the text topic and the textual structure as well as their vocabulary. Nevertheless, in many cases, even though the students understood all the linguistic cues, they failed to make predictions due to their insufficient relevant prior knowledge of the topic. Therefore, it is vital that teachers help students broaden their knowledge and vocabulary, and this might be aided by extensive reading. Teachers should frequently assign students reading texts of different topics and structures, then ask them to summarize each text in the form of network, or semantic map and note useful words and phrases. By this means, students’ world, vocabulary and structural knowledge stores are also expanded, which enhances linguistic proficiency. In addition, during each strategy instruction lesson, the teacher should use a number of techniques for the activation of the students’ prior knowledge and review of textual structures and useful vocabulary so that they can make full use of their prior knowledge to facilitate their reading comprehension.

10. Limitations of the Research
Despite my effort to take all aspects of the research into consideration, the study still bore some limitations in terms of the data collection instruments.

Firstly, the participants’ awareness and use of predicting strategies were measured only by the self-reported questionnaire and journals. Thus, the reported strategy awareness and use was the one perceived by the participants rather than the participants’ actual awareness and use. The results would have been more reliable if think-aloud protocols had been used as this qualitative data collection instrument may provide more reliable data on the participants’ actual use of predicting strategies and the prediction process in reading comprehension. However, due to its rich data sources, think-aloud can only be applied to a small sample size.

Secondly, the adapted reading comprehension tests, the reliability and validity of which had been taken into consideration during the development and implementation processes, may bear some limitations. The familiarity ratings of the topics and the vocabulary ranges of the texts included in these tests may not be equal.

Thirdly, an action research should be on an on-going cycle process, in which feedbacks from the data collected can be used to improve the next cycle, whereas only one cycle was implemented in the study. This is because there must be a long-enough interval between two successive cycles, which can be done due to the time allowance for this study.

Finally, the participants for this study were the students of group 10A10, a specific class at Cao Ba Quat Upper Secondary School, so they might not exactly represent all 10th grade students at this school. Thus, generalization of the results of this study could be limited.

11. Suggestions for Further Research

The present study explored the improvement that predicting strategy instruction has made in the subjects’ reading comprehension and determined
effective techniques to teach these reading strategies, and this study offered some suggestions for further research as follows:

Firstly, it was suggested that further research be conducted on other reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, inferring or guessing unknown vocabulary in contexts.

Secondly, it would be of great value if further research on the same issue was carried out with the think-aloud protocols.

Finally, further research may be devoted to investigating the impact of extensive reading on the participants’ knowledge and vocabulary.