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Factors Affecting the Development of Reading Comprehension in EFL Learners

Nitchalak Laksanavilas

Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand

Surattana Adipat

Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2433-1547>

Rattanawadee Chotikapanich

Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the internal and external factors influencing the English reading comprehension ability of EFL primary students in Grades 1 to 6 at a Thai government primary school. The research employed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire developed by [Taladngoan et al. \(2020\)](#), consisting of 15 items designed to assess factors related to reading comprehension ability. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first collected general demographic information, while the second addressed internal and external factors influencing reading comprehension. It was distributed online via Google Forms and administered to 45 students enrolled in Grades 1 to 6 during the 2024 academic year. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations, using SPSS. The results indicated that internal factors ($M=3.84$, $SD=0.97$) had a slightly greater influence on students' reading comprehension ability than external factors ($M=3.49$, $SD=0.95$), although both were rated at a high level of influence. Among all variables, teachers' teaching techniques ($M=4.67$, $SD=0.60$) were identified as the most influential external factor, followed by students' linguistic knowledge ($M=3.89$, $SD=0.79$) as the most significant internal factor. The findings offer practical implications for enhancing students' English reading comprehension by increasing their awareness of individual learning challenges and informing teachers' instructional practices. Future studies should examine how both internal and external factors contribute to the development of other English language skills, including speaking, writing, and pronunciation as well as identify effective instructional methods for improving reading comprehension in various educational settings.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, EFL Learners, Factors, Thailand

Introduction

Nowadays, English plays an important role in every social world, especially among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. It is an international language used to access educational information and resources to engage in career opportunities, cultural insight, and global conversations. Reading is essential for everyone to search for information and knowledge or receive news from all over the world. Likewise, as students who want to acquire new knowledge and skills, it is necessary to know how to read for comprehension in order to interpret content correctly. Therefore, reading skills help students develop their language learning and communication skills for use in everyday life.

Reading is a significant skill in enhancing students' learning literacy as the students can apply this skill in their education and in real life, students who read proficiently are likely to perform well across various academic subjects, whereas those who read infrequently often struggle with reading comprehension as [Dawkins \(2017\)](#) concluded that reading performance and academic achievement are related. A core component of proficient reading is reading comprehension, which refers to the ability to acquire and comprehend any information through the content by relating to their background knowledge and recent knowledge. It is a complicated process in which students must derive information and construct meaning from the text by utilizing their existing skills, according to [Block \(2004\)](#) and [Graves et al. \(1998\)](#). Similarly, [Gilakjani & Sabouri \(2016\)](#) concluded that reading comprehension involves various components, processes, and factors.

Therefore reasons, reading comprehension is the foundation for acquiring knowledge, promoting critical thinking, and effective communication among students ([Khalilova, 2023](#)). [Nanda & Azmy \(2020\)](#) also emphasized that lack of reading comprehension skills could have adverse effects, including undermined performance, impaired problem-solving efficiency, lack of access to further learning and work-related opportunities. Moreover, prior knowledge, fluency, lexical knowledge, and word recognition of the students may influence their reading comprehension as indicated by [Pressley \(2002\)](#) and [Birsch \(2011\)](#). These skills should be applied efficiently for the students to gain insight from the text.

Although Thai EFL learners are increasingly exposed to various English written materials such as textbooks, academic papers, news articles, and magazines their reading proficiency remains relatively low, which limits their ability to fully engage with and benefit from these resources ([Chavangklang & Suppasetseree, 2018](#)). Therefore, greater access to reading material does not necessarily ensure effective reading or comprehension. Reading success depends on multiple factors, including learners' reading habits and strategies. In fact, even texts written in one's native language can pose comprehension challenges if the reader lacks regular

reading experience or practice ([Taladngoen et al., 2020](#)). Moreover in reading English, Thai students often struggle with the complexity of English grammar and tense structures, which are considered challenging and beyond their abilities. These difficulties can lead to decreased motivation and contribute to the development of negative attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language.

Students' comprehension levels in reading English content depend on several influencing factors including differences in intelligence, attitude, and states of mind such as motivation, boredom, or anxiety all of which can significantly impact their ability to process and understand text. [Gan et al. \(2004\)](#) also referred to the fact that students' basic linguistic knowledge has an effect on reading comprehension of learners especially in vocabulary and grammar. [Nation \(2022\)](#), and [Magnussen & Sukying, \(2021\)](#) also emphasized that vocabulary development plays a vital role in fostering reading comprehension and is widely acknowledged in the academic literature. Supporting this, [Xie et al. \(2022\)](#) found that vocabulary knowledge and morphological awareness among primary school students form a critical foundation for the development of decoding skills, which, in turn, enhance both listening and reading comprehension. Additionally, home environment or family influence can also obstruct the reading accomplishment of students, especially students in rural areas who may not be proficient in English due to financial constraints and lack of family educational opportunities as [Tebekana & Cishe \(2015\)](#) mentioned. Another important factor affecting students' reading comprehension ability is teachers including teaching methods or techniques, teaching materials, and choosing content and applications identified by [Habibian et al. \(2015\)](#). [Sanbutda et al. \(2024\)](#) also pointed out that the implementation of well-structured learning activities and effective teaching techniques significantly improved students' reading comprehension and led to high levels of learner satisfaction.

While various studies have investigated the factors influencing reading comprehension among EFL learners, much of the existing research has focused on students at secondary or tertiary levels. The study that has been conducted on the topic of

both internal and external influences on the aspect of English reading comprehension remains a significant gap in primary school students especially in the realm of the Thai education system in the country side areas. Various internal and external variables also affect the EFL acquisition of students' reading comprehension as mentioned above. Therefore, this study fills the gap in the body of knowledge by exploring these variables among students Grades 1 to 6 of a small public school in Thailand. Consequently, this study aimed to investigate the internal and external factors of reading comprehension as EFL students among grade one to six students in a small government school by developing a questionnaire about students' reading comprehension.

Research Question

What factors influence EFL primary students' reading comprehension?

Methodology

To explore the influence of internal and external factors on the reading comprehension ability of the EFL primary learners, a survey study was conducted. The researcher used quantitative methods to quantify and statistically evaluate the information obtained through questionnaires.

Participants

The population of this survey study consisted of 68 students from the academic year 2024 at a public school in Prachinburi Province, Thailand. A sample of 45 students in grades 1 to 6, who matched the study's inclusion criteria, was selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure the relevance of the data because of the small and specific population of interest.

Research Instrument

This study utilized a questionnaire adapted from [Taladngoen et al. \(2020\)](#) to assess the factors affecting EFL learners' acquisition of reading comprehension ability. The questionnaire contained close-ended questions, with a 5-Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). The questionnaire was also composed with two sections where the first section was to collect

the data of the participants regarding their years of education and gender, and the second section was to determine the factors that affect the ability of reading comprehension in English across 15 questions in 2 domains: internal and external factors affecting the reading comprehension ability of the learners. The internal factors focused on learners' linguistic knowledge (3 items) and their perceptions (2 items). In contrast, the external factors included the influence of teachers (4 items), family (3 items), and the environment (3 items). The study employed the following intervals to measure the results: least affecting (1.00–1.80), little affecting (1.81–2.60), moderately affecting (2.61–3.40), highly affecting (3.41–4.20), and mostly affecting (4.21–5.00) ([Kampongsan, 2007](#)).

Three experts who specialize in English language teaching examined the validity of the questionnaire through determining the value of index of item objective congruence (IOC) which states that the IOC has a high degree of congruence (+1) to a low degree of congruence or uncertainty (0), or not congruent at all (-1). Based on experts' feedback, 15 items obtained IOC scores ranging from 0.67 to 1.00, suggesting that they aligned with the research objectives. Subsequently, the researcher conducted a pilot study with six students in grade 1-6, one student from each grade, representing 10 percent of primary school students at a public school in Prachinburi Province, Thailand. This study aimed to determine the discrimination index and evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (α). The results of this study indicated that the questionnaire demonstrated good reliability. The item discrimination indices ranged from 0.22 to 0.83, and the overall reliability, as measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was 0.88, indicating that the questionnaire was appropriate and acceptable.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was sent through Google forms and given to 45 first to sixth-grade students, who were attending English course at a public school in Prachinburi Province, Thailand, in their second semester of academic year of 2024. The statistical analysis was based on the descriptive statistics such as percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Results

Table 1 Mean Scores, Standard Deviations and Interpretation of a Comparison of the Internal Factors and External Factors that Affected the Students' Reading Comprehension Ability. (n=45)

Items		Mean	SD	Interpretation
Internal factors		3.84	0.97	Highly Affecting
1.	Linguistic Knowledge	3.89	0.79	highly affecting
2.	Perceptions of reading comprehension problems	3.79	1.14	highly affecting
External Factors		3.49	0.95	highly affecting
1.	Teacher Influence	4.11	0.73	highly affecting
2.	Family Influence	2.67	1.01	moderately affecting
3.	Environment	3.70	1.10	highly affecting

The results of the study show a comparison of internal & external factors that affect students' reading comprehension ability, illustrated in

Table 1 and Figure 1.

The data presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate that both internal and external factors exerted a considerable influence on students' reading comprehension abilities, with mean scores of 3.84 and 3.49, respectively. A comparative analysis of the two types of factors revealed that internal factors demonstrated a slightly higher impact than external factors, with a mean difference of 0.35.

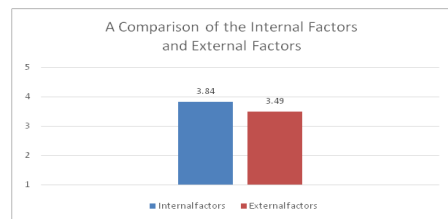


Figure 1 Level of a Comparison of the Internal Factors and External Factors that Affected the Students' Reading Comprehension Ability. (n=45)

Tables 2 and 3, along with Figures 2 and 3, present the mean scores, standard deviations, and interpretations of the internal and external factors affecting students' reading comprehension ability, respectively.

Table 2 Mean Scores, Standard Deviations and Interpretation of the Internal Factors that Affected the Students' Reading Comprehension Ability. (n=45)

Items		Mean	SD	Interpretation
Linguistic Knowledge		3.89	0.79	highly affecting
1.	You cannot comprehend the contents of the reading when you do not understand the meaning of the vocabulary or expressions.	4.44	0.76	mostly affecting
2.	You cannot comprehend the content of the reading when you do not understand the grammatical structures of sentences in the reading.	3.24	0.65	moderately affecting
3.	You cannot comprehend the main ideas of the reading when you have little or no knowledge of reading content.	4.00	0.95	highly affecting
Perceptions of Reading Comprehension Problems		3.79	1.14	highly affecting
1.	Illness can cause distraction in reading.	3.73	1.25	highly affecting
2.	Stress or anxiety can cause distractions during reading.	3.84	1.02	highly affecting

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the two internal factors examined in the study: linguistic knowledge and perceptions of reading comprehension problems. The findings indicate that both factors significantly influenced students' reading comprehension abilities. Specifically, linguistic knowledge (M = 3.89) had a slightly greater impact than perceptions of reading

comprehension problems (M = 3.79). A detailed analysis of the sub-components of linguistic knowledge revealed that vocabulary knowledge had the highest influence on reading comprehension (M = 4.44), whereas grammar knowledge demonstrated the lowest (M = 3.24).

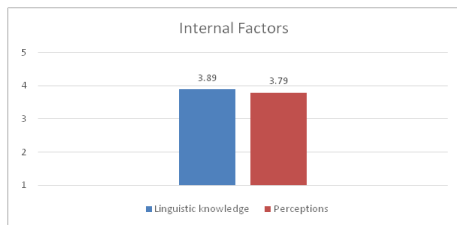


Figure 2 Level of the Internal Factors that Affected the Students' Reading Comprehension Ability. (n=45)

Regarding the sub-components of perceptions of reading comprehension problems, students' stress and anxiety were found to have a more pronounced

influence on reading comprehension ($M = 3.84$) compared to the perception of physical illness ($M = 3.73$).

Table 3 and Figure 3 illustrate the three external factors examined in this study, namely teacher influence, family influence, and environmental conditions. The findings revealed that both teacher influence and environmental factors had a high impact on students' reading comprehension abilities. By contrast, family influence demonstrated a moderate level of impact. Specifically, teacher influence exerted the greatest effect on reading comprehension ($M = 4.11$), whereas family influence had the least impact ($M = 2.67$).

Table 3 Mean Scores, Standard Deviations and Interpretation of the External Factors that Affected the Students' Reading Comprehension Ability. (n=45)

Items		Mean	SD	Interpretation
Teacher Influence		4.11	0.73	highly affecting
1.	When the teacher presents reading materials that you believe that you will be able to use some of the knowledge you have acquired in the future, then you are willing to read and be more attentive.	4.29	0.69	mostly affecting
2.	Obsolete reading exercises leave you disinterested and distract you from read.	3.22	0.70	moderately affecting
3.	The teacher's interesting teaching techniques attract your interest in reading.	4.67	0.60	mostly affecting
4.	While being assigned to read with friends, the reading material will be easier to comprehend.	4.24	0.93	mostly affecting
Family Influence		2.67	1.01	moderately affecting
1.	Your parents are very strict, and they always ask you to read in English on a regular basis.	2.56	0.84	little affecting
2.	Family members are aware of the importance of English reading, therefore, they always provide English writing books at home.	2.60	1.05	little affecting
3.	Family members have encouraged you to read in English since the childhood.	2.84	1.13	moderately affecting
Environment		3.70	1.10	highly affecting
1.	You cannot concentrate when you are reading either in a place that is too hot or too cold.	3.60	1.05	highly affecting
2.	You lose focus while reading when you are surrounded by distracting or loud noises.	3.73	0.99	highly affecting
3.	Poor lighting in the reading environment can cause you to loss of focus owingto reduced text visibility.	3.76	1.25	highly affecting

An item-level analysis of the teacher influence dimension indicated that the use of interesting and engaging teaching techniques had the most substantial impact on students' reading comprehension ($M = 4.67$). In contrast, the use of outdated classroom activities had the least effect ($M = 3.22$). Regarding the family influence factor, the results revealed that

encouragement from family members to read English from an early age had the highest influence ($M = 2.84$), whereas strict enforcement of routine reading practices had the lowest impact ($M = 2.56$). Among the environmental factors, insufficient lighting in reading areas was identified as the most influential sub-factor ($M = 3.76$), while extreme temperature

conditions had the least effect on students' reading comprehension ($M = 3.60$).

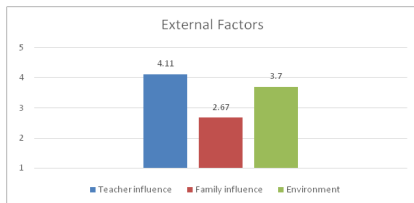


Figure 3 Level of the External Factors that Affected the Students' Reading Comprehension Ability. (n=45)

Discussion and Conclusions

This study investigated the factors affecting the reading comprehension abilities of primary EFL students. The results revealed that internal factors ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.97$) had a slightly greater impact on students' reading comprehension ability than external factors ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.95$), with the mean scores of both the internal and external factors being high. Teachers' teaching techniques were found to be the most influential external factor ($M = 4.67$) under all the variables, and thus the role of interesting and effective teaching strategies cannot be overlooked when it comes to students' reading motivation and the comprehension of what is taught to them.

Regarding the internal factor, linguistic knowledge, especially the vocabulary ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.79$) was the most determining factor in explanation of reading comprehension. Knowledge of vocabulary was regarded as the key to text comprehension, which is why its role is the basis of the entire reading process. In contrast, family influence, another external factor, was reported to have the least impact on reading comprehension ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.01$).

These findings are consistent with previous studies. Vocabulary was identified as a key internal factor influencing reading comprehension, in line with the finding of [Vazalwar \(2011\)](#), who reported that limited vocabulary hinders students' ability to understand text. The importance of teaching strategies also serves to confirm of the ideas of [Wonglao \(2022\)](#), who emphasized the importance of effective pedagogical strategies in supporting EFL students in the enhancement of reading comprehension. However, the findings are contrary to [Taladngoen](#)

[et al. \(2020\)](#) who revealed that internal and external factors do not correlate significantly even though it is likely that the interactions between factors depend on the contextual factors such as the age of students and school factors.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Further research should explore the internal and external factors influencing EFL students' other language skills, such as pronunciation, writing, and speaking. This would be valuable for informing effective lesson planning and classroom management strategies for both teachers and students. A mixed-method design incorporating classroom observation, teacher interviews, and performance assessment might allow learning more about such influences and developing more specific teaching strategies. In addition, longitudinal research could be able to determine the lasting effect of such measures.
2. Based on the fact that reading comprehension forms an important component of English learning, future studies should investigate effective instructional strategies such as reciprocal teaching, metacognitive strategy training, task-based learning, or teaching proficiency through reading and storytelling (TPRS), that enhance students' reading comprehension skills.

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Author Details

Nitchalak Laksanavilas, Master's Degree Student, Faculty of Education, Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand,
Email ID: 6614590003@ru.ac.th

Surattana Adipat, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand,
Email ID: ajsurattana@gmail.com

Rattanawadee Chotikapanich, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand,
Email ID: rattanawadeeru2@gmail.com