

Developing Reading Comprehension for Vietnamese Ethnic Minority Primary Students: A Foundational Knowledge Approach

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ABSTRACT: Reading is one of the four fundamental skills that reflect language competence and play an essential role in both learning and communication for every primary school student. Teaching reading comprehension to ethnic minority primary school students holds particular significance in their learning process and overall development. Reading competence not only enables students to acquire knowledge from textbooks and learning materials but also broadens their understanding of the surrounding world, enriches their vocabulary, and enhances their ability to express ideas coherently. For ethnic minority students, mastering reading skills in Vietnamese helps them overcome language barriers, build confidence in communication, and integrate with peers. This paper proposes an approach that emphasizes exploiting background knowledge to support reading comprehension instruction for grade 5 ethnic minority students. This approach aims to help develop their competencies in alignment with the new curriculum and textbooks.

KEYWORDS: reading comprehension, background knowledge, ethnic minorities, Vietnamese, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading plays an essential role in teaching Vietnamese at the primary school level. It aims to form and develop one of the four fundamental skills necessary for learning and communication in life in general, and for primary school students in particular. These skills are reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Reading is the activity of receiving and comprehending information through texts; it is a form of communication using written language. It involves using the eyes to recognize a given text, then transforming the written symbols into streams of linguistic sounds (either spoken aloud or internally). Following this, cognitive processes such as analysis, synthesis, and systematization occur, enabling the reader to understand the meaning conveyed in the text.

For students from ethnic minority backgrounds, the process of teaching reading comprehension often encounters numerous challenges due to limited vocabulary, restricted language proficiency, and difficulties in accessing and processing information. These barriers directly affect their ability to grasp, analyze, and interpret the content of texts. Therefore, fostering reading comprehension competence for ethnic minority primary school students is of particular importance in the context of the ongoing fundamental and comprehensive reform of general education in Vietnam.

In particular, the activation and utilization of background knowledge hold a pivotal role in teaching reading comprehension. When teachers skillfully elicit students' existing life experiences while simultaneously providing additional knowledge related to language, culture, and the natural and social world appropriate to the text, students are given a "foundation" to connect prior experiences with new knowledge. As a result, the reading process becomes easier and more effective. It also creates favorable conditions for students to develop linguistic thinking, enhance reasoning and expression skills, and foster long-term interest in learning.

2. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Reading comprehension competence

There are many ways to define the concept of reading comprehension, depending on the perspective from which the issue is approached. Some authors present reading comprehension in a general sense as follows:

- *Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive competence that requires the ability to integrate information in the text with the reader's prior knowledge* (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).
- *Reading comprehension is an interactive process that occurs between a reader and a text* (Rumelhart, 1994).
- *Reading comprehension is an intentional cognitive process in which meaning is constructed through the interaction between the text and the reader* (Durkin, 1993).

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- *In essence, reading comprehension is the process by which the reader constructs the meaning of a text through a system of activities, actions, and operations* (Pham Thi Thu Huong, 2012).

Some other authors define reading comprehension from the perspective of communication and social interaction theories, focusing on clarifying its function in developing the reader's competence to participate in social life.

- *Reading comprehension is a communicative activity in which the reader grasps spoken language that has been transformed into written text, with the aim of changing their own understanding, emotions, or behavior* (Thi Hanh Nguyen, 2002).

- *Reading comprehension is the ability to understand, use, respond to, and master written texts in order to achieve goals, develop knowledge and potential, as well as participate in the social life of each individual* (PISA, 2012).

From whichever perspective it is viewed, scholars agree on the core features of the concept of reading comprehension, namely:

- Reading comprehension is a cognitive activity. Its object is the meaning of the text, and it involves interaction between the reader and the text.

- The purpose of reading comprehension is to develop knowledge and connect the individual reader with their living environment so that each person can study, work professionally, and maintain their life.

Because reading comprehension functions to develop in the reader the ability to apply reading to solve learning tasks and real-life problems, it is not merely a skill but a competence—a reading comprehension competence. This competence is first formed in the subject of Literature/ Vietnamese language, making it a subject-specific competence. It is further developed and perfected to higher levels when used to address learning tasks in other subjects and to solve life's problems, at which point it becomes a general competence of every student and every individual.

2.2. Psychological and linguistic characteristics of ethnic minority primary school students Affecting reading comprehension

Ethnic minority primary school students, having grown up in distinctive natural, economic, and cultural environments, exhibit psychological and linguistic traits that differ from those of students in lowland and urban areas, directly influencing their reading comprehension activities. In terms of perception, they often have unstable orientation toward learning tasks, are easily attracted by bright colors or novel images, and tend to perceive primarily through direct sensory experience. Their ability to sustain observation is limited, leading to fragmented and incoherent perception. In terms of thinking, ethnic minority students face difficulties in grasping implicit meanings of texts, with limited abilities in generalization and synthesis. When confronted with cognitively demanding tasks, they tend to be passive and rarely engage in active discussion. Their memory tends toward rote learning, easily retaining specific details but lacking flexibility in application. Moreover, their concentration is often unstable, purposeful attention is weak, and their emotional expressions are restrained, making it difficult for teachers to recognize their level of text comprehension.

Linguistically, since Vietnamese is a second language, ethnic minority students encounter numerous obstacles in communication and learning. They mainly use their mother tongue outside the classroom, which causes their Vietnamese proficiency to develop slowly and inconsistently. Although by grades 4 and 5 they have acquired a certain amount of vocabulary, their pronunciation still shows tonal errors, improper pauses, and lack of intonation, leading to inaccurate comprehension. The interference between the mother tongue and Vietnamese often results in hybrid expressions, limiting their capacity for abstraction and the articulation of complex ideas. Additionally, they frequently make grammatical mistakes, use words incorrectly, and construct sentences inaccurately.

2.3. Background knowledge in teaching reading comprehension to ethnic minority students

Many researchers on reading comprehension have affirmed the crucial role of background knowledge in decoding and constructing the meaning of texts. According to Pardo (2004), "the concept of comprehension is commonly defined as a process in which the reader constructs meaning by engaging with a text through the integration of such factors as background knowledge, prior experiences, information in the text, and the reader's stance, position, and perspective in relation to the text" [4]. Similarly, Langer (1995) emphasizes that each reader, with their unique knowledge base, creates different ways of envisioning and imagining when encountering the same text. This indicates that the closer the reader's background knowledge is related to the text, the greater their ability to predict and deeply comprehend its content [5].

Background knowledge is important because it enables students to acquire new knowledge more quickly, deeply, and accurately. It includes life experiences, prior knowledge; cultural, family, and environmental influences; as well as information acquired from reading books, watching films, or traveling. In other words, background knowledge encompasses all the understandings, experiences, and emotions students already possess that relate to the content of a text. Reading a variety of texts, listening to diverse information sources, and engaging in discussions and exchanges help students broaden and enrich their background knowledge.

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Background knowledge is a decisive factor for effective reading comprehension. Activating it through connection strategies—linking to the self, to other texts, and to the world—allows students to build meaningful bridges between personal experiences and textual content. When students share their connections through discussion, writing, or illustration, it directly reflects their prior knowledge and experiences. Those with richer life experiences or prior exposure to related information generally demonstrate better comprehension, more easily analyzing, interpreting, expressing viewpoints, reasoning, and summarizing accurately. As a result, reading becomes not only more effective but also fosters interest, confidence, and autonomy in learning.

For ethnic minority primary school students in particular, background knowledge holds even greater importance. Due to limited living conditions, cultural exposure, and experiences, many students struggle to connect prior knowledge with texts. Therefore, teachers must not only elicit and activate existing experiences but also provide additional background knowledge through pictures, videos, experiential activities, or explanations of words and contexts. This foundation helps ethnic minority students expand their understanding, gradually develop reading comprehension skills, and thereby enhance linguistic thinking and overall learning capacity.

2.4. Developing reading comprehension competence for ethnic minority students through the provision of background knowledge

Human competence in general, and that of primary school students in particular, is always formed on the basis of several key elements: background knowledge, related skills, and attitudes or beliefs when participating in educational activities. If one of these elements is lacking, the formation and development of competence in students will be limited or even ineffective. On the other hand, background knowledge plays a particularly important role because it helps students acquire new knowledge more quickly, more deeply, and more accurately. Therefore, the first measure to develop reading comprehension competence for grade 4 ethnic minority students is to provide them with essential background knowledge so that they can read and understand texts effectively.

2.4.1. Guiding students to ask themselves questions during reading

To make effective use of background knowledge, teachers should guide students to ask themselves questions while reading new texts, thereby creating different types of connections.

Text-to-self connections are the easiest to establish: while reading, students draw associations with their own past personal experiences

While teaching the poem “Lên rẫy” (Going to the Field), the teacher helps students connect the text to their own experiences by guiding them to read and reflect through these questions:



✔ **Question 1:** Have you ever gone to the fields or the upland fields with your parents, or participated in any kind of labor? Describe how you felt during that experience.

👉 **Objective:** Connect real-life experiences with the character's experiences in the poem.

✔ **Question 2:** In the poem, the child is very happy to help his mother work in the fields. At home, what tasks do you usually do to help your parents? How do you feel when doing those tasks?

👉 **Objective:** Train students to relate their own experiences to the content of the text.

✔ **Question 3:** Have you ever observed the natural scenery early in the morning? In what ways is that scenery similar to or different from the one described in the poem “Going to the Fields”?

👉 **Objective:** Help students observe and compare real-life landscapes with the descriptions in the text.

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✔ **Question 4:** If you were to draw a picture of a morning in the upland fields as described in the poem, what would you include? Why?

👉 **Objective:** Develop visual thinking and imagination based on literary experience.

✔ **Question 5:** What lesson did you learn from the poem about family love and love for nature? What will you do in daily life to express those feelings?

👉 **Objective:** Help students draw practical lessons and orient their actions accordingly.

Example 2: Lesson “Twin brothers” [7, pp. 16-17]



✔ **Question 1:** Have you ever been mistaken for someone else (siblings, friends, etc.)? How did you feel when that happened?

👉 **Objective:** Connect students' own emotions with Long's emotions in the text.

✔ **Question 2:** If you were Long, what would you do when people keep calling you by your brother's name? Why?

👉 **Objective:** Help students put themselves in the character's situation to think about and express their own responses (explain gently, change hairstyle, etc.).

✔ **Question 3:** Do you have any siblings? What similarities and differences do you and your siblings share?

👉 **Objective:** Help students recognize their own identity, individuality, and uniqueness even when they may look like others.

✔ **Question 4:** After reading the story, how do you think Long has changed? Have you ever changed your way of thinking after an event? Tell about it.

👉 **Objective:** Develop the skill of identifying character changes and connecting them with personal experiences.

✔ **Question 5:** From the story of Long and Khanh, what lesson did you learn for yourself about living harmoniously with family members and friends?

👉 **Objective:** Foster the ability to respond and draw messages from the text (e.g., respecting differences, avoiding comparisons, always being yourself, and living happily with loved ones).

Providing such reading comprehension questions during the reading process helps students connect the text with their real-life experiences. These questions enable grade 4 students to relate the story's content to their own lives, feelings, and thoughts — thereby developing reading comprehension skills and reflective thinking.

2.4.2. Activating natural and social knowledge for ethnic minority students

By the time students reach grades 4 and 5, they already possess a certain foundation of natural and social knowledge formed through learning and real-life experiences. Teachers need to respect and make use of this knowledge base during instruction, especially when guiding students in reading comprehension.

The activation and utilization of students' understanding of nature and society not only helps them connect more effectively with the content of the text but also enhances the overall efficiency of reading comprehension. To achieve this, teachers should design warm-up activities that are flexible and creative, such as organizing games, posing open-ended questions, storytelling, using

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songs, videos, pictures, or real objects related to the lesson's theme. In addition, teachers should construct a system of questions and exercises that encourage students to recall and apply their existing knowledge in order to approach the text meaningfully.

For warm-up activities to be effective, teachers need to carefully study the text and identify connections between its content and the students' background knowledge. This ensures that students are guided from what they already know, enabling them to receive new information in a proactive and natural way.

Example 1: The poem "*Ngựa biên phòng*" (*The border guard's horse*) by Thi Thanh Nhan Phan [8, p. 67] not only evokes a vivid image of soldiers stationed at the border but also opens up a lively world rich in natural and social elements. When teaching this poem to primary school students, teachers can draw on many interdisciplinary aspects, particularly knowledge of Nature and Society, in order to enrich students' understanding while at the same time fostering essential qualities and competencies.

Through images such as "*The horse gallops as fast as flying*," "*The horse dashes with its four hooves*," "*Its legs as strong as steel*," the poem vividly depicts the characteristics of the horse—an animal closely associated with human life, especially in mountainous areas where transportation is difficult. Students may acquire foundational knowledge about the horse's appearance, speed, and strength, as well as its roles in daily life (transportation, labor, combat, etc.).

The poem's setting is a mountainous borderland with details such as "*The sun just rises*," "*The forest veiled in morning mist*," "*Cold winter nights*," "*Streams winding around*," and "*Forests as beautiful as paintings*." From this, teachers can help students identify features of the climate and terrain in mountainous areas, name characteristic plants such as orchids and banana flowers, and broaden their understanding of the natural landscape at the nation's borders.

The image of the border guard emerges as both resilient ("*Bending low on horseback*," "*Always chasing the enemy*") and simple, close, and humane ("*Patting the horse's back*," "*Walking leisurely beside it*"). Through this, teachers can help students understand the sacred mission of border guards: protecting the national borders and safeguarding peace for the people, while also cultivating in them gratitude and respect for those who stand on the frontlines. At the same time, teachers can nurture in students a sense of sharing, love, and care for those quietly dedicating themselves to the country.

"We, the children of small villages / Dry plenty of fragrant grass / To bring as winter gifts / For the beloved border guard's horse."

Example 2: The poem "*Tiếng ru*" (*The lullaby*) [8, p. 28] is a gentle and profound song. It conveys a deeply humanistic message by nurturing in children a love for others, a spirit of harmony and solidarity, and a sense of responsibility toward the community. In addition to its moral and ethical significance, the poem also contains many natural and social elements that can be effectively integrated and explored in Vietnamese language instruction at the primary level, particularly in grade 4—an age when students already possess a considerable foundation of knowledge through learning and real-life experience.

Right from the opening stanza, the poem introduces a simple and familiar natural space:

The bee makes honey, loving flowers /

The fish swims, loving water; the bird sings, loving the sky...

Through these symbolic natural images (bee, fish, bird), the poem evokes the harmony of life in the natural world. It also subtly conveys the message that all living beings are closely bound to their environment, thereby guiding children toward an awareness of protecting nature.

In the subsequent stanzas, natural imagery is used to convey a humanistic philosophy of life:

• *A single star cannot brighten the night /*

A single stalk of ripe rice cannot make a golden season.

• *Mountains are high because of soil built up... /*

If the sea despises small rivers, how could the sea keep its waters?

These verses help students better understand the interdependent relationships in the natural world: nothing exists in isolation, and all beings and entities need connection and cooperation. This understanding provides a foundation for expanding into the profound social philosophy that the poem seeks to convey.

The image of the bamboo tree—a national symbol—embodies the tradition of mutual support, gratitude, and intergenerational continuity in the lines:

Old bamboo loves the young shoots /

Cherishing them like a mother's daily love for her child.

Teachers can guide students to relate this imagery to real-life contexts: in families (grandparents and parents with children), in schools (teachers and students), and in communities (the older generation with the younger). This helps students realize that they are part of an interconnected, inherited, and responsible relationship.

Thus, teachers can utilize the natural and social elements embedded in the text to broaden students' real-world understanding and connect language learning with life. The integration of interdisciplinary elements creates lessons that are gentle yet profound, contributing to the formation of students' character and the development of their holistic competencies.

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2.4.3. Using teaching techniques to guide students in exploring reading texts

Several instructional techniques are often used effectively, including brainstorming, the KWL chart (recording what students already *Know* in column K), and the “We Know 3” activity. These techniques not only help students focus their attention, select and organize background knowledge systematically, but also create a lively and engaging learning atmosphere. Teachers can also integrate these techniques into games such as “*Passing the Current*” or “*Who Is Smarter?*” to increase interaction and receive more feedback from students.

The process of activating background knowledge not only enables students to connect with the content of the text but also broadens their understanding and allows them to share personal experiences with peers. This forms an important foundation for improving reading comprehension in a sustainable and comprehensive way.

- *Example 1:* Using active reading techniques to explore a text (*We Know 3, One-Minute Presentation*). Before reading the text “*Going to the Huong Pagoda Festival*” [18, p. 106], the teacher asks each student to state three things they already know about the Huong Pagoda.

- *Example 2:* Using the KWL technique. With this method, students begin by stimulating their thinking and recalling all the prior knowledge they have related to the lesson topic. This information is recorded in column K of the chart. Next, students generate questions about what they are still curious about or want to learn more about—this forms the content in column W. During the reading process, students gradually find answers to their questions and record the new information they acquire in column L. This approach helps establish a natural, active, and effective learning process.

K What I already know about this topic	W What I want to learn/know more about this topic	L What I have learned about this topic
☐ Melting ice: The phenomenon of ice melting due to the Earth getting warmer. ☐ Causes: The Earth warms up for many reasons, mainly due to human activities (greenhouse gas emissions). ☐ Consequences: - The habitats of many animals are altered, putting them at risk of extinction. - Sea levels rise. - Freshwater becomes scarce. - Islands and archipelagos may be submerged; people lose land and homes. ☐ Solutions: Humans need to work together to protect the environment in order to prevent ice from melting.	Question 1. Where does the phenomenon of melting ice occur? Question 2. What are the causes of melting ice? Question 3. What are the consequences of melting ice? Question 4. What does the text advise people to do in order to prevent melting ice? Question 5. Point out some actions that need to be taken to reduce the phenomenon of melting ice.	

Thus, when students answer warm-up questions and already possess some background knowledge related to the upcoming text, they can approach and understand the reading more easily. This technique not only helps teachers and students identify existing knowledge, but also enables students to actively monitor and regulate their own reading comprehension process. At the same time, it creates opportunities for students to develop ideas and extend their thinking beyond the text itself, thereby enhancing learning effectiveness.

3. CONCLUSION

Developing reading comprehension competence for ethnic minority primary school students is not only an essential requirement in teaching Vietnamese but also an important task in the current process of educational reform. By activating and enriching background knowledge, students are given opportunities to connect knowledge with personal experience, thereby improving their ability to receive, analyze, and interpret texts. Research has shown that the psychological and linguistic limitations of ethnic minority students may present significant obstacles to reading comprehension. However, if teachers know how to activate prior knowledge, provide additional background information, and apply appropriate teaching techniques, students can sustainably develop their reading comprehension skills.

Providing and exploiting background knowledge not only helps ethnic minority students gain a deeper understanding of texts but also fosters their ability to reason, respond, and create in learning. At the same time, it narrows the language gap, fosters students’

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confidence and communication competence in a multicultural educational environment. Therefore, developing reading comprehension through the activation of background knowledge fulfills subject-specific goals. It also carries long-term significance in nurturing the thinking, emotions, and character of ethnic minority students at the primary level.

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