

DIAGNOSING ENGLISH READING ABILITY IN CAMBODIAN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Sem Kakada¹, Sornchai Mungthaisong² and Natthaphon Santhi³

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ABSTRACT

Cambodian lower secondary school students' deficits in English learning have raised concerns in the educational field. Despite the improvement in most of the study subjects by the Education Reform, most students are still struggling to learn English, particularly reading. This current study identifies their strengths and weaknesses in English reading and seeks some practical guidelines that can be applied to enrich their reading ability. This study answered these two research aims through quantitative and qualitative research designs. The study recruited both lower secondary school students and their teachers of English in a Cambodian high school to participate in a reading test, questionnaire, and interviews. The data analysis employed descriptive statistics and content analysis to offer the key results.

The results of the research found that:

1) Lower secondary school students had very strong demographic backgrounds, such as living with educated parents, being literate in their first language, or having a high interest in English reading, and they also had strong motivation for English reading. However, they were weak in grammar and word recognition and very weak in reading comprehension and vocabulary, respectively.

2) Six teaching guidelines: ensuring students' foundation of English, focusing on students' vocabulary, explaining grammar in reading texts, ensuring students' reading fluency, teaching reading sub-skills, and helping learners set goals were suggested.

Keywords: Reading ability; reading comprehension; reading diagnosis; reading difficulties and problems secondary schools

¹Master's degree, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University

Email: semkakada98@gmail.com * Frist Author

²Asst. Prof., Ph. D., President of Chiang Rai Rajabhat University

³Ph. D., Faculty of Humanities, Chaing Rai Rajabhat University

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language plays an extremely important role in Cambodian contexts, particularly in higher education and employment. However, Cambodian learners have been found to be miserably incompetent in the language. According to a report, Cambodian English proficiency was found to be very low. From 2017 to 2021, Cambodian people's English proficiency ranked 77 out of 80, 85 out of 88, 94 out of 100, 84 out of 99, and 97 out of 112 studied countries, respectively (EF Education First, 2021). Similarly, upper secondary school students' (USSSs) English learning achievement was found to be terribly unsatisfactory. In 2019, among 453 successful Bac II exam candidates in the Takeo Pedagogical School national exam center, only 10 (2.20%) of them passed English subject (MoEYS, 2019). Also, lower secondary school students (LSSSs) face a similar problem. In 2021, out of 165 LSSSs in Sok An Kdey Tontoem high school, 71 (42.77%) failed their English subject (Sok An Kdey Tontoem, 2021). As can be seen, Cambodian English learners' competence was reported as exceedingly insufficient. This low competence could result from shortfalls in various skills such as reading and listening; however, reading could be the main contributor. As Brown (2004) stated, reading is the main warrantee of learning disabilities. Apparently, learners' deficits in the language could be mainly due to their reading inabilities. One strategy that may shed light on effective methods to deal with the shortfalls is to diagnose students' reading ability. However, very little literature is available on English reading diagnosis, particularly in Cambodian public schools.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the current study were to:

1. identify the strengths and weaknesses in students' English reading ability at the lower secondary school level.
2. propose guidelines for teaching reading at the lower secondary school level.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the rich studies on first language (L1) reading, there have been few studies on second or foreign language (SFL) reading diagnosis (Alderson et al., 2015). People might argue that there have been several studies on SFL reading diagnosis. Various studies have been conducted on SFL reading difficulties (Chandran & Shah, 2019; McNeill et al., 2019; Taha & Alhameem, 2019; Hassan & Dweik, 2021; Septia et al., 2022). Some researchers have investigated SFL reading problems (Kasim & Raisha, 2017; Khataee, 2018; Dara, 2019; Khan et al., 2020). Also, numerous studies have explored factors contributing to SFL reading difficulties and problems (Alowalid et al., 2018; Ancheta, 2018; Araromi & Olatubosun, 2018; Agbo et al., 2019). Nonetheless, these studies might not be categorized as a reading diagnosis as they might not match the characteristics of the diagnostic assessment, or they might not be intended or claimed to be diagnostic. Particularly, those studies may not reflect the five principles for diagnostic assessment proposed by Alderson

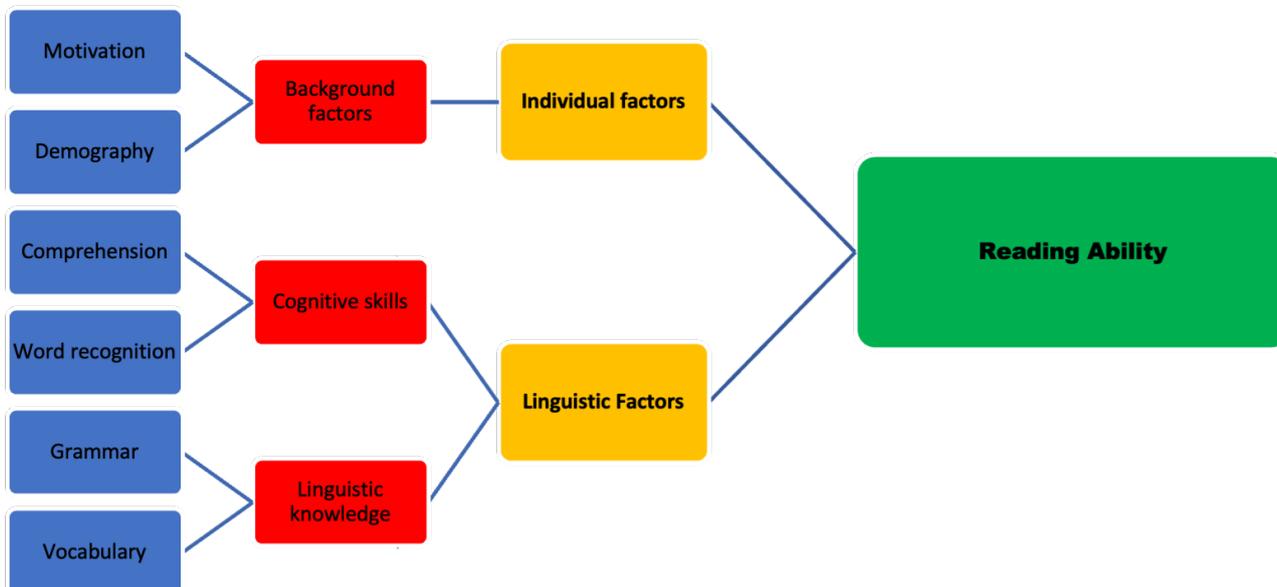
et al. (2014). In the diagnostic assessment, for example, one of the five principles suggests including these four stages: observation, initial assessment, tools or tests, and decision-making into a system. Nonetheless, a few studies have been carried out with the aim of SFL reading diagnosis. In the DIALUKI, Alderson et al. (2015) diagnosed SFL reading ability in three groups of participants, including primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary students in Finland. Vocabulary and grammar had a strong relation with SFL reading in all the studied groups. In addition, phonological awareness was the best predictor of SFL reading for all three groups, while the speed of lexical access significantly influenced all groups except the primary level. Comparing the influence of background factors, the two higher groups had a stronger relation with SFL reading than the primary group. Regarding motivational factors in SFL reading, however, the lowest group was moderately motivated, and the youngest group was even more motivated than the older groups. Hemmati et al. (2016) diagnosed English reading ability based on cognitive skills in 10,000 Iranian high school students. The results showed that 57 percent of the total examinees had not mastered the target sub-skills, including making inferences, deducing meaning from contexts, extracting explicit information, identifying pronominal references, and evaluating response options. Apparently, several studies have been conducted on SFL reading difficulties, reading problems, and the factors behind them, and a few studies were aimed at diagnosing SFL reading.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The current research primarily aimed to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the students' reading ability regarding the six variables. The primary data was generated from both the diagnostic test LSSERDT obtained from 248 9th grade students and the questionnaire obtained from 30 9th grade students. To meet the main objective, the instruments (test and questionnaire) were constructed basically under the SFL reading theoretical and diagnostic test frameworks contributed by Alderson et al. (2015). As described in the early section, their framework can be seen as focusing on the following variables: word recognition or decoding skills, working memory, vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and learners' backgrounds and motivation. Based on the framework, the following conceptual framework was drawn to illustrate the concepts of this study; however, working memory was excluded from the study due to the fact that it is not something a teacher can change. The framework is presented in the following figure.

Figure 1

The Conceptual Framework of the Study, modified from Alderson et al. (2015)



5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Sample and Population

The participants in this study included both lower secondary school students and their teachers at Sok An Kdey Tontoem High School. To select the sample, the researcher employed purposive sampling. Regarding the written test, the whole population of 9th grade students (248) in the school was selected. On the other hand, 30 students from the same population were purposefully selected to participate in the oral test and questionnaire. Therefore, the participants were 248 (123 females) 9th graders from the above public school. The students' ages are between 12 and 16. The participants were selected because they have received the most English education (more than 5 years) among the other grades at the same level. On the other hand, six lower secondary school teachers of English (all secondary school teachers of English in the school) were invited to take part in the interviews. Their ages are between 33 and 53, with 1 to 30 years of English teaching experience. They were invited since they are teaching English at this level, and the researcher aimed to elicit their perceptions from the whole population of lower secondary school teachers at the research site. The following table summarizes the sample and population.

Table 1

Sample and Population of the Study

NO	Groups	Population	Sample
1	Written test	Lower secondary school students	248 9 th grade students
2	Oral test	Lower secondary school students	30 9 th grade students
3	Questionnaire	Lower secondary school students	30 9 th grade students
4	Interviews	Lower secondary school teachers	6 teachers

2. Variables

The study included both independent and dependent variables. The independent variables include word recognition or decoding skills, working memory, vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and learners' backgrounds and motivation, while the dependent variable is students' reading ability.

3. Research Scope

With the increased demands of English and the unsatisfied English learning achievements of students as well as general users in Cambodia, research on English reading ability is needed in the country. In view of these situations, the present study provides a diagnosis of students' English reading ability in the context. The scope of the study was limited to lower secondary school students studying at a public school in Cambodia and their teachers of English. The focus was specifically on 9th grade students. Particularly, this research focused on the analysis of reading abilities and their sub-skills or components involved in English reading. These variables were limited to vocabulary, grammar, word recognition, reading comprehension, demographic backgrounds, and motivation. These participants, abilities, and components have been little studied, and they are worth studying in this context. According to Alderson's Threshold Hypothesis, reading in SFL seems to be more of a language problem than a reading problem (Alderson, 1984). Moreover, a meta-analysis's findings seem to support this hypothesis (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014). This reflects the fact that both language and reading-related abilities should be tested.

4. Research Tools

To reach the objectives, the researcher used various tools to gather data. A test (written and oral) and questionnaire were primarily employed to reach the first research objective, while interviews were fundamentally used to respond to the second objective. To gather the needed data that reflects the context of the current study, the researcher decided to develop all these instruments. Regarding the validity and reliability of the instruments, the researcher reviewed various sources before designing each instrument. For example, the test was developed based on the CEFR framework. They were then evaluated by three experts. Most importantly, the data triangulation was used to help maintain reliability.

1. Test

The researcher first developed a test called the Lower Secondary School English Reading Diagnostic Test (LSSERDT) based on the conceptual framework modified from Alderson et al. (2015), which suggests that vocabulary, grammar, word recognition, reading comprehension, demographic background, and motivation dominate reading ability, to identify students' strengths and weaknesses. The test consists of four sections: vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and word recognition.

2. Questionnaire

Another instrument used in this study was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to measure students' demographic and motivational variables. Regarding demographic factors, parents' first language (L1) and foreign language (FL) literacy, family income, environment, support, learners' L1 literacy, learners' FL literacy, use of FL, FL learning habits, and FL private classes are questioned. In addition, learners' motivation was also assessed. Adopted from Alderson et al. (2015), seven types of motivation were assessed: instrumentality, intrinsic motivation, motivational intensity, parental encouragement, anxiety, self-regulation, and FL self-concept. These factors were included to see to what extent they are related to students' reading ability.

3. Interviews

The last instrument used in this study was semi-structured interviews. To elicit guidelines for teaching reading, the interview guide was developed. It consists of 15 semi-structured interview questions. Teaching experience, methods, and difficulties, learning difficulties, reading literacy, teaching guidelines (vocabulary, grammar, word recognition, reading comprehension, demography, and motivation), general teaching guidelines, suggestions, and additional information were asked. The researcher employed this method because it allowed him to go deeper into the questions and facilitate any unexpected misunderstandings. This method seems to improve the reliability of the results.

5. Data Collection

The study was carried out in the first semester of the academic year 2023 with 248 9th grade students and their six teachers of English through several processes. Before the collection, a permission letter was offered by the researcher's institution. After that, informed consent was approved by the school director. Next, the researcher spent one week passing the written test to the participants from six different classes. To minimize interruption, he decided to give individual classes the test only during their English classes. Then, the researcher carried out the oral test, questionnaire, and interviews the following week.

6. RESULTS

To meet the general purpose of the study, a mixed method design was employed. A test (written and oral), questionnaire, and interviews were used to gather the needed data. 219 9th grade students (19 were absent) participated in the written test; 30 of them were also involved in the oral test and questionnaire; and 5

teachers (1 was not available) were interviewed. To be clear, the obtained results were presented according to each research objective.

Research objective 1

This objective was directly pointed to an examination of whether LSSSs are strong or weak in English reading regarding vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, word recognition, demography, and motivation variables. Each individual variable’s percentage was identified according to Evans’ (1996) distribution criteria. Out of the six variables, the demography variable gained the highest percentage (86.66%) of passing candidates, which means that LSSSs had very strong demographic backgrounds, such as living with educated parents, or having a high interest in English reading. The detailed results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Students’ Strengths and Weaknesses in English Reading

Variables	Total candidates	Cutoff scores	Mean scores	Passing candidates	Percentage	Results
Demography	30	35	44.46	26	86.66	Very strong
Motivation	30	17.5	21.33	23	76.66	Strong
Grammar	219	5	3.15	62	27.85	Weak
Word recognition (2 parts)	30	20; 103	9.13; 63.53	8	26.65	Weak
Reading comprehension	219	5	2.74	42	19.17	Very weak
Vocabulary (2 parts)	219	58/5	30.66; 2.55	16.5	7.53	Very weak

Note. The variables were measured by different instruments with different total numbers of participants. Demography and motivation were measured by a questionnaire answered by 30 students. Vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension were tested using a written test taken by 219 students. Word recognition was measured by an oral test taken by 30 students.

Table 3 shows students’ strengths and weaknesses in English reading by listing them from strengths to weaknesses, respectively, regarding demography, motivation, grammar, word recognition, reading comprehension, and vocabulary variables. To be clear, each variable is presented and explained separately.

Demography According to Table 3, the number of students who passed the average score on the demography variable accounts for 86.66% (26 candidates). This very high percentage of passing students on the variable indicates that LSSSs had very strong demographic backgrounds in English reading. In other words, they are living with educated parents, are literate in their first L1, or have a high interest in English reading.

Motivation Based on the above table, most LSSSs had strong motivation to read in English. As shown, 76.66% (23 candidates) of the candidates passed the motivation measure. This second high percentage of passing students on the motivation variable indicates that most of them had strong motivation for English reading. This result also confirms the teachers' responses in the interviews. Three of the five teachers replied negatively when asked if their students had poor motivation in English reading. Teacher A slowly answered, "Er...for me, I always motivate them every time I teach them. I tell them to learn because English is a vehicle that can help us reach communication around the world." When the researcher repeated the question again to see if his students had motivation, he added, "Have, have." Additionally, when asked the same question, Teacher C responded:

Yes. I think more than 50%. Before, it might be low but now it's improved. Now the surroundings motivate them. Their parents motivate them to learn. Before they didn't let their kids learn English when they were young. When I talked to them, they understood. I said if you waited till higher grades, they would not have time to study. (Transcripts 31/03/2023)

Grammar Based on Table 3, few students passed a grammar test. As can be seen, 27.85% (62 candidates) of the candidates passed the grammar test. This low percentage, which is far below average, of the passing candidates clearly indicates students' weaknesses in grammar knowledge. This result also supports the teachers' responses. Three of the five teachers who directly responded to the interview question agreed that their students were not good at grammar. When asked if their students were good at grammar, three of the five teachers disagreed, while the other two did not clearly respond. Teacher A and B shortly responded, "No." Teacher E answered, "Some, some of them understand or others not understand my grammar." This means that all of the teachers realized that their students' grammar competence was insufficient.

Word recognition As can be seen in Table 3, a few students passed the word recognition test. Out of 30 candidates from the oral test group, only 26.65% (8 candidates) passed the word recognition test overall. This low percentage of passing candidates indicates that LSSSs were weak in word recognition. Most of them could not decode both the words they had already learned and those they had not seen since the word recognition test measured both non-word and passage reading. In line with this result, most of the teachers also thought that their students could not recognize English words. When asked if their students could spell or recognize words in their English textbooks, 2 teachers stated that their students were not good at word recognition; another 2 did not state a clear answer; and 1 answered positively. Responding to the researcher, Teacher A stated, "About 15% can spell and read, and about 5 students can be fluent." Similarly, Teacher E responded, "No, not really." As a result, it can be seen that more teachers thought that their students were not good at word recognition.

Reading comprehension On the report in Table 3, very few candidates could pass the reading comprehension test. Only 19.17% (42 candidates) of them scored above average in the reading comprehension variable. This second-lowest percentage demonstrates that LSSSs were very weak in reading comprehension. This result might also reflect students' knowledge of skimming, scanning, and inferencing skills since the reading comprehension test was made up of these three skills. This test result can be supported by the teachers' responses in

the interviews. When asked if their students were good at reading comprehension, three teachers disagreed, one agreed, and the other did not make a clear response. Responding to the researcher's question, which asked if their students were good at reading comprehension, Teacher A said, "There are a few smart students, about ten moderate students, and the others are poor." Similarly, Teacher B answered, "I think that about 25%." Finally, teacher C said, "From what I met, if we did not translate, only 30 or 20% can understand."

Vocabulary According to the same table above, very few students scored above average on the vocabulary test. The number of students who passed the vocabulary test accounts for only 7.53% (16.5 candidates). As can be seen, only about 16 of the 219 students passed the vocabulary test. This very low percentage of students who passed indicates that most LSSSs were noticeably weak in vocabulary. In line with this finding, four of the four teachers who responded in the interviews, except one who did not clearly state his answer, answered negatively when asked if their students were good at vocabulary. Teachers B, C, D, and E solely answered, "No." This can be implied by the fact that almost all of the teachers strongly agreed that their students were not good at vocabulary.

Research objective 2

Research objective 2 was straightforward: generate teaching guidelines for teaching reading in English. Responding to this second objective, the interviews were primarily used to generate answers. However, the quantitative data was also used to help answer or support this research objective. At the beginning, the recordings obtained from the interviews were transcribed and coded. A content analysis method was used to analyze the data. Major themes related to teaching guidelines were categorized. Based on the qualitative analysis and the quantitative results, six major themes of teaching guidelines for teaching reading emerged from the data. These guidelines are presented and clarified in the following subsections.

Ensuring students' foundation of English

A number of themes that seemed to form teaching guidelines were determined from the interviews. For example, some teachers who participated in the interviews suggested strengthening students' basic English. When asked about how to help students with poor word recognition, Teacher A responded, "For those students who can't read or can't decode, there is a technique that is to have them learn phonetics, A, B, C, and vowels again." When asked about students' spelling ability, most of the teachers agreed that their students were not good at spelling, and recommendations were made. Teacher A said, "Some of them! We can say about 15% can spell, but only about five or six are fluent." Teacher C answered, "Maybe, for me, maybe 30%." He added:

For my strategies, for some students who don't know vowels or consonants, I have them write and repeat the words. In addition, I prepare the poor students to sit next to the smart, so that the smart can help them. (Transcripts 30/03/2023)

The test results also found that only 26.65% of the students passed the word recognition test, which tested both word and passage reading fluency. From both qualitative and quantitative data, LSSSs were poor at basic English skills, and most of their teachers stressed basic English skills such as the alphabet or decoding.

Focusing on students' vocabulary

A strong suggestion that emerged from the teachers' responses and the test results was that the teacher should give more focus to vocabulary teaching during reading lessons. When asked for strategies to deal with students' poor reading comprehension, Teacher A stated:

Pre-teach vocabulary that we think that students don't know. Those words they used to know, no need to pre-teach. We select only those which are hard for them that they haven't seen before, such as structures or phrasal verbs, which are hard. The most important thing is words. If they know words they can speak. (Transcripts, 30/03/2023)

On the other hand, when asked how to deal with students' weaknesses in vocabulary, Teacher E still answered, "Em... again, I still pre-teach. I still find other ways to pre-teach new vocabulary, like using real things to pre-teach, and some pictures in students' books, and real things, realia." In addition, the vocabulary test results in Table 3 indicate that only 7.5% of the students passed the vocabulary test. Apparently, LSSSs seemed very weak in vocabulary, and most teachers think that vocabulary teaching should be prioritized.

Explaining grammar in the reading texts

The next guideline that could be drawn from both the quantitative and qualitative data was to explain the grammar in the passages. Based on the qualitative interviews, when asked about how to help students if they were poor at grammar, some teachers suggested drawing grammatical forms from the text. Teacher A explained by saying:

If we want them to learn, bring in some outside sources to help them because our textbooks didn't clearly state grammatical forms, so we drew it out. If the lesson is connected to verb.ing, we bring the form of present continuous, and if we face with be, introduce be. (Transcripts 30/03/2023)

The teachers' responses also support the written test result, which found that only 27.85% of the students passed the grammar test. As indicated, LSSSs could be seen as weak in grammar knowledge, and some teachers suggested teaching both grammatical forms and meanings.

Ensuring students' reading fluency

One more important teaching guideline initiated by the mixed data was to ensure students' reading fluency. When asked how reading should be taught in their school context, Teacher C stated, "For me, it's related to competition. Just like in the Khmer subject, we named it a reading competition. Similarly, in English subject, English reading completion can be a kind of motivation." Teacher D responded, "Er... specifically, have them read aloud in class. Teach them how to read. If they don't know how to read, they can't read." Moreover, when asked if their students could read English texts fluently, some teachers replied negatively. For example, Teacher B said, "Actually, no. Not really." Teacher C replied, "Hesitantly... not fluent". Similarly, Teacher D responded, "Can't be fluent." Finally, Teacher E responded, "No!" This finding also supports the oral test result, which found that only 26.65% of the students passed the word recognition test, which tested both word and passage reading fluency. Therefore, LSSSs' reading fluency is strongly suggested to be maintained.

Teaching them reading sub-skills such as skimming, scanning, and inferencing

Teaching reading sub-skills such as skimming, scanning, and inferencing could be another important guideline that may help improve LSSSs' reading in English. When asked how to deal with students' poor reading comprehension, Teacher C explained:

Er... for me, I tested them because some of them know more than others. Sometimes I tell them that when reading in English, we cannot translate every word. We should use our strategies, such as looking at the first sentence and middle and try to quote the message, for example, the main idea, to know its meaning. And first, look at the topic. Then use our feelings to feel what the writers want to give a message. These are my strategies. (Transcripts 31/03/2023)

This finding also supports the reading test results, which found that 80.83% of the students failed the reading comprehension test, in which the three sub-skills were tested. As can be seen, the majority of the students were not familiar with the necessary reading sub-skills.

Helping students set goals for learning English

The other guideline that might help LSSSs with English reading was to help them set goals for learning English. When asked about how to improve students' motivation, some teachers made strong suggestions towards students' English learning goals. For instance, Teacher A stated:

Based on my experience, I tell them to try to learn English. When you try to learn, it can help you have a good future. Whatever you want to be, such as doctor, teacher or guide, you need English. It's good. Even though you work in a factory, you may also have a better position. This is to build motivation. Some students understand, and that's good, but some still don't understand. (Transcripts 30/03/2023)

Teacher C claimed, "You have to have a goal. Studying needs time, so don't be demotivated. Explain them to try to study. Don't blame them. Tell them to ask when they don't understand." Although it might not be the main barrier to English reading, as found in the questionnaire, some teachers recommended setting learning goals.

In sum, the results from the first research question found that LSSSs had strong demographic backgrounds and motivation. More than 80 and 70% of them scored higher than average on these variables. However, they were noticeably weak in grammar, word recognition, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Less than 30% of them passed the average scores on the four variables. Regarding the second research question generated from both the survey study and interviews, six teaching guidelines were suggested: ensuring students' foundation of English, focusing on vocabulary, explaining grammar in the reading texts, ensuring students' reading fluency, teaching them reading sub-skills, and helping them set English learning goals. Based on the data analysis from all of the instruments, it can be seen that the reliability of the results can be maintained since the interviewees' responses mainly support the obtained results in the research question and vice versa.

7. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this mixed methods research was to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in English reading using a test, questionnaire, and interviews. The researcher also looked for some guidelines that could be applied to the research site. Thus, the following discussion sections are mapped according to the objectives of the study.

Research objective 1

Demography The percentage of passing students yielded from the questionnaire showed that LSSSs had very strong demographic backgrounds related to English reading. According to the questionnaire, 86.66% of them scored above average regarding their demographic backgrounds. This very high percentage indicates that their family and personal backgrounds did not have a significant impact on their English reading since most of them reported having strong family and personal backgrounds and interests in English reading. This finding is in line with Taladngoan et al. (2020), who found that the least influential factors in EFL reading comprehension were teacher influence, family influence, and the environment. As pointed out, LSSSs seemed to have very strong demographic backgrounds regarding their English reading. When asked if their parents told them to study English, 17 of the 30 students circled the highest rank score (5), 6 students circled a rank score of 4, 5 students circled a rank score of 3, and only 2 of them circled a rank score of 2, while a rank score of 1 was not selected by any respondents.

Motivation The percentage of passing candidates on the motivation variable shows that LSSSs had strong motivation related to English reading. The high percentage of passing candidates demonstrates that the majority of the students were motivated to read in English. It is interesting to note that 76.66% of the respondents agreed that they were motivated to read in English. The finding also supports the teachers' responses, as well as Chandran and Shah (2019) and McNeill et al. (2019). From the interviews, among the 5 teachers, only 2 agreed that their students had low motivation for English reading, while the other 3 disagreed. Similarly, Chandran and Shah (2019) concluded that the USSSs had strong motivation for English reading. Also, 81.5% of the students responded that they enjoyed reading in English (McNeill et al., 2019). However, this study does not support Dara (2019), who found that motivation was the main problem in English reading comprehension in Cambodian 12th grade students. It might be reasonable that 12th grade students have lower motivation in English reading than 9th grade students because they are preparing for their up-coming 12th grade national exam (Bac II), which can be the most important exam in their 12-year academic life. Also, English is only an additional subject that is taken for granted and is not compulsory in the exam. As stated, it is possible that most LSSSs had strong motivation for English reading since students and teachers offered similar results.

Grammar The percentage of passing candidates on the grammar variable pointed out that LSSSs were weak in grammar. This low percentage of passing candidates expresses that the LSSSs had not mastered grammatical features at their level. It should be noted that only 27.85% of the test takers passed the grammar test. The finding also supports the interviews' data in this study, Alderson et al. (2015), and Torabi and Maleki (2022).

From this study's interviews, three of the five teachers who answered the question of whether their students were good at grammar all answered negatively. Alderson et al. (2015) concluded that both grammar and vocabulary are the main predictors of SFL reading ability. It could be assumed that those poor SFL readers may also be weak in grammar. According to Torabi and Maleki (2022), 65% of the intermediate students reported having grammar problems when reading in English. As demonstrated, the majority of LSSSs seemed to be weak in grammar, and most of their teachers seemed to have the same idea with the statement.

Word recognition The percentage of passing candidates on the word recognition variable illustrates LSSSs' weaknesses. Only 26.65% of the candidates passed the word recognition test. This low percentage clarifies that their word recognition was insufficient. The result is similar to those in Alderson et al. (2015), Alowalid et al. (2018), and the current study's interviews. In the DIALUKI, Alderson et al. (2015) found that all strong, medium, and weak L1 readers became weak FL readers, and FL weak readers are significantly different from strong FL readers regarding cognitive skills such as word recognition and others. Alowalid et al. (2018) found that spelling, which makes use of knowledge of the alphabets just like word recognition, was the main predictor that contributed to students' poor reading. From this study's interviews, Teacher A stated that only about 15% of his students could spell and read. In sum, it is possible to conclude that many of the LSSSs seemed to be weak in word recognition. Teacher A explained, "Most of the students can't read difficult words in the text even if I teach them carefully and again and again."

Reading comprehension Based on the written test, the percentage of passing candidates on reading comprehension shows that LSSSs' reading comprehension was at a very low level. According to Table 3 above, only 19.17% of the total candidates passed the reading comprehension test. This very low percentage demonstrates that LSSSs might also have little knowledge of reading sub-skills such as skimming, scanning, or inferencing since the test was totally made up of these skills. The result appears to support Araromi and Olatubosun (2018), Agbo et al. (2019), as well as this study itself. It was found that secondary school students' reading comprehension was generally low (Araromi & Olatubosun, 2018). It was also demonstrated that 90% of the junior secondary school students failed the reading comprehension test (Agbo et al., 2019). From this study's interviews, most of the teachers thought that their students were not good at reading comprehension. Apparently, it is probable that LSSSs were very weak in reading comprehension. Agbo et al. (2019) once summarized, "Summarily, out of 80 students who sat for the test, only 8 students passed; while 72 others failed. We can therefore say very strongly that students have problems with reading comprehension, as we have rightly hypothesized in the preamble."

Vocabulary The percentage of passing candidates on the vocabulary variable shows that LSSSs were very weak in vocabulary. The terribly low percentage of passing candidates indicates that LSSSs' vocabulary was very limited. It should be noted that only 7.53% of the test takers passed the vocabulary test. This finding also supports the teachers' responses in this study as well as Alderson et al. (2015). Among the four teachers who answered the question of whether their students were good at vocabulary, all answered negatively. Alderson et al. (2015) concluded that vocabulary and grammar were the main predictors of SFL reading ability. This might

imply that poor English readers are mainly due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge. As can be seen, LSSSs seemed to be seriously weak in vocabulary. That is why, when asked about how to help poor readers, Teacher A quickly suggested teaching vocabulary.

Research objective 2

Ensuring students' foundation of English Based on the teachers' responses, it was strongly suggested that the foundation of basic English must be ensured. This implies that most of the teachers realized that their students were mostly weak in basic English skills such as spelling, decoding, or word recognition. In addition to the teachers' perceptions, the students' test found that the majority of the candidates were weak in basic English skills. The first guideline proposed here also supports Weisi (2012), who concluded that improving spelling might result in reading comprehension development. As demonstrated, enriching LSSSs with basic English skills might help them overcome their English reading difficulties. Teacher A once suggested, "If students' reading is impossible for them, there is a technique that is to have them learn phonetics A, B, C, and vowels again. So that they know what letter it is and how to decode it."

Focusing on students' vocabulary Based on the analysis, a special focus should be given to vocabulary teaching. This second teaching guideline indicates that vocabulary plays a crucial role in English reading and that special attention should be given to it. Also, this guideline seems to reflect back on students' weaknesses found on the vocabulary test. This recommendation, to some extent, supports Alderson et al. (2015), who found that vocabulary was the main predictor of SFL reading ability. In other words, enriching learners with vocabulary would develop their reading ability. This guideline also supports Webb (2019), who found that pre-learning vocabulary could increase foreign language learners' proficiency in both reading and writing. As can be seen, vocabulary is likely to be prioritized when teaching reading in English.

Explaining grammar in the reading texts When teachers explain grammar during a reading lesson, people might argue that it is a reading lesson, not a grammar lesson; however, explaining grammar during a reading lesson might help readers comprehend texts, which is why it was suggested and supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. This suggestion presents the important role of grammar when reading English texts. This is because grammar might help learners digest the meaning of English texts. That is why some scholars, such as Halliday (1973) and Purpura (1998), do not separate grammar from vocabulary; instead, they call them lexicogrammar. This teaching suggestion lends support to Alowalid et al. (2018), who advised increasing grammar knowledge through strategies such as form and explicit instruction in order to gain better reading competence. Hence, grammar appears as if it requires proper explanation in English reading lessons.

Ensuring students' reading fluency From the teachers' perspective, reading fluency should be ensured if we want to increase students' reading ability. This suggestion exemplifies that reading fluency plays an important role when reading. This is because fluency in reading might help learners remember words and comprehend texts faster than those who have low fluency. In line with other scholars, this fourth guideline also

supports Gbadegesin (2019) and Grabe and Yamashita (2022), who recommended maintaining reading fluency. Apparently, reading fluency seems to suggest high attention when teaching reading.

Teaching them reading sub-skills Another guideline that emerged from the teachers' responses was that reading sub-skills such as skimming, scanning, and inferencing should be taught to improve students' reading ability. This recommendation displays the essential needs of these sub-skills required when reading English texts. In agreement with another study, this guideline seems to support Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), who recommended teachers use reading comprehension strategies. In line with the qualitative data, this guideline responds to the LSSSs' weaknesses yielded from the reading comprehension test. It may be perceived that the reading sub-skills could be critically taught at the school level.

Helping students set learning goals The final guideline elicited from the interviews was to help students set goals for learning English. This statement indicates the critical role of having clear goals for English learning, which later influences students' reading ability. Having clear goals in foreign language learning might give students reasons why they should learn the language, and when they figure it out, they could pay more attention when learning or reading English texts. This guideline is also in agreement with Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), who advised teachers to help learners find the goals and advantages of reading comprehension. As already indicated, LSSSs' reading ability seems to be positively influenced if students have specific reasons for learning English. Likewise, Teacher A always explained to his students that various jobs require English.

8. ORIGINALITY AND BODY OF THE KNOWLEDGE

Using a Cambodian public school as a case study, this study was designed to expand our understanding of SFL reading and provide direction for future research on SFL reading treatment by identifying the students' strengths and weaknesses in English reading. Specifically, this study might contribute to several educational stakeholders, such as English teachers, language planners, parents, and researchers, concerning the English learning process. Based on the findings, school teachers can use the obtained information to help them decide in what particular areas to help their students. Curriculum designers might review the findings obtained to consult on their new textbook and curriculum design to fit students' needs. Parents might use the information obtained to help their children focus on problematic areas. Finally, despite the fact that this current study was limited to a sample school, the information might be useful to other researchers in language education, particularly in SFL reading treatment. Thus, several educational stakeholders as well as reading researchers were expected to benefit from this study by both gaining a better understanding of SFL reading and indicating a new study on SFL reading remedies.

9. RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implications of the Study

1. Emergent actions should be taken after the findings of the study. Phonics or basic English courses, for example, should be offered to the students, as the results indicated that the majority of the students could not decode English words.

2. Teachers should help students set clear goals for learning English. Clear goals for learning can attract students' attention in classes or at home. This might be reasonable when they know why they should learn English. For example, they have a dream to study abroad. Thus, to achieve it, they must study hard.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

1. As the study was conducted to primarily identify students' strengths and weaknesses in English reading, future research should focus on reading treatment.

2. Training students on decoding skills, applying reading strategies, or practicing new teaching methods could have a big impact on their reading ability.

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