

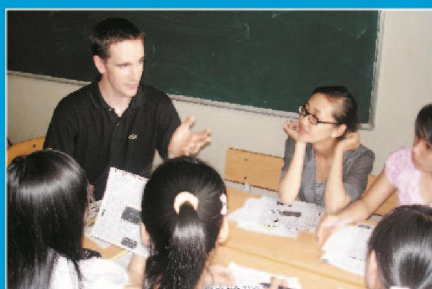
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**SỐ ĐẶC BIỆT CHÀO MỪNG KỶ NIỆM 10 NĂM THÀNH LẬP
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Mục lục	Trang
TS. Lê Hồng Thắng - Bàn về dạy-học ngoại ngữ qua đề án dưới góc độ của giáo học pháp	3
Nguyễn Thị Như Nguyệt, Chu Thành Thúy - Đánh giá năng lực đầu ra tiếng Nga của sinh viên trình độ A2-B1 theo khung tham chiếu chung châu Âu tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên	7
Nguyễn Thùy Linh - Kiểm tra đánh giá trong giảng dạy các môn đề án ngôn ngữ - một số chia sẻ từ thực tế	13
Vũ Thị Thanh Huệ - Nhận thức của sinh viên đối với khóa học mở rộng trực tuyến với sự trợ giúp của mạng xã hội Edmodo	19
Mai Thị Thu Hân, Nguyễn Thị Liên, Hoàng Thị Tuyết, Dương Thị Ngọc Anh - Tăng cường tính tự học bằng dự án học tập - nghiên cứu tình huống tại trường Đại học Hoa Lư	25
Dương Đức Minh, Dương Lan Hương - Nghiên cứu về sự tương tác giữa người thuyết trình và khán giả khi học kỹ năng thuyết trình của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên	31
Phạm Thị Kim Uyên - Sử dụng nhật ký trong dạy biên dịch cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ Đại học Nha Trang	37
Lê Thị Hồng Phúc - Phản hồi của sinh viên về dự án TV show lấy điểm cuối kỳ trong khóa ngữ âm	43
Hán Thị Bích Ngọc - Dạy học ngoại ngữ bên ngoài lớp học - ứng dụng mạng xã hội facebook trong dạy và học tiếng Anh	49
Nguyễn Ngọc Lưu Ly, Quách Thị Nga - Vài nét về việc sử dụng truyền thông đa phương tiện trong giảng dạy tiếng Trung Quốc trình độ sơ cấp tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên	55
Lê Thị Hòa, Đậu Thị Mai Phương - Nâng cao kỹ năng thế kỷ 21 trong học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành thông qua dự án	61
Nguyễn Thị Bích Ngọc, Trần Minh Thành - Phương pháp gia tăng hiệu quả của đề án tạp chí tiếng Anh trong việc học viết cho sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên	67
Hoàng Thị Huyền Trang, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Anh - Phát triển khả năng đọc hiểu tiếng Anh cho sinh viên ngoại ngữ thông qua các bài đọc có nội dung bao hàm yếu tố văn hóa phù hợp	73
Nguyễn Quốc Thủy, Nguyễn Thị Đoàn Trang - Dạy - học ngoại ngữ qua đề án tạp chí tại trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Thái Nguyên	79
Nguyễn Tuấn Anh - Thiết kế tổ chức dạy học môn báo chí trực tuyến theo hướng học ngôn ngữ qua dự án như một cách đảm bảo tính đa ngành của chương trình đào tạo	85
Đỗ Thị Sơn, Đỗ Thị Phượng - Nghiên cứu phân tích lỗi sai của sinh viên Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên khi dịch trực tiếp từ Hán Việt sang tiếng Trung Quốc và giải pháp khắc phục	91
Trần Đình Bình - Ứng dụng phương pháp dạy học qua dự án trong dạy học ngoại ngữ ở Việt Nam	97
Lê Thị Khánh Linh, Lê Thị Thu Trang - Phương tiện biểu đạt thái độ của người kể chuyện trong các chương trình talk show của Mỹ và Việt Nam	103
Đỗ Thanh Mai, Phùng Thị Thu Trang - Ứng dụng Moodle trong dạy và học trực tuyến học phần tin học đại cương tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên	109
Mai Thị Ngọc Anh, Vi Thị Hoa, Phạm Hùng Thuyên - Vận dụng phương pháp dạy học theo dự án trong giảng dạy môn tiếng Trung du lịch tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên	117
Trần Thị Hạnh - Nhận thức của sinh viên về việc ứng dụng Edmodo như một công cụ phụ trợ trong học tập	123
Bùi Thị Ngọc Oanh - Cải thiện kỹ năng nói của sinh viên không chuyên trình độ A2 với dạy học qua đề án	129

Nguyễn Hạnh Đào, Đinh Nữ Hà My - Nghiên cứu tình huống về những khó khăn với người học và điều cần lưu ý khi giảng dạy môn tiếng Anh chuyên ngành áp dụng phương pháp học qua dự án	135
Nguyễn Thị Kim Oanh - Sử dụng đường hướng học tập theo dự án cho môn học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành tại Viện Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Bách Khoa Hà Nội: lợi ích, thách thức và đề xuất	141
Vũ Thị Kim Liên - Phát triển năng lực ngữ dụng của sinh viên trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội	147
Đàm Minh Thủy - Tích hợp kỹ năng trong học ngoại ngữ thông qua dự án làm video “Tìm hiểu ảnh hưởng của văn hóa Pháp tại Việt Nam”	153
Nguyễn Thị Thu Hoài - Thực trạng thực tập giảng dạy tiếng Anh ở một số trường THPT tại thành phố Thái Nguyên và các đề xuất giải pháp	159
Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Anh, Hoàng Huyền Trang - Khảo sát lỗi sai của sinh viên Trung Quốc khi học tiếng Việt tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên và những đề xuất khắc phục	165
Quách Thị Nga, Đỗ Thị Thu Hiền - Những vấn đề tồn tại của giáo trình đối dịch Trung - Việt ở Việt Nam hiện nay và giải pháp khắc phục (khảo sát tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên)	171
Phan Thanh Hải - Hướng tới một chương trình đào tạo cử nhân sư phạm tiếng Anh dựa trên các đề án học tập trong đào tạo đại học định hướng thực hành ứng dụng nghề nghiệp	177
Lê Vũ Quỳnh Nga, Lý Thị Hoàng Mến, Nguyễn Thị Thu Oanh - Nâng cao chất lượng bài dịch của sinh viên Khoa Ngoại ngữ - ĐHTN thông qua việc áp dụng phương pháp học tập hợp tác	183
Đoàn Thị Thu Phương - Phong cách học ngoại ngữ của học sinh lớp 11, Nam Định	189
Đinh Thị Liên, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Anh - Hệ thống biểu tượng trong Then Tày	197

DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE READING COMPREHENSION AMONGST EFL/ESL LEARNERS THROUGH CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS

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SUMMARY

Reading comprehension is one of the most important information processing skills for building up learners' language competence and performance. Many researches have been conducted on reading comprehension in order to find ways in developing learners' language acquisitions. With the same purpose, this paper explores the role of culturally relevant texts on EFL/ESL learners' reading comprehension ability on the basis of previous researches in this field, also promotes using culturally relevant texts as materials for reading comprehension programs (intensively and extensively), suggesting that they have advantages over the more traditional approach. The paper clarifies some definitions of reading comprehension, explains the influence of background knowledge on learners' reading competence and provides the criteria which can be used to evaluate the cultural relevance of the texts towards learners.

Key words: *reading comprehension, background knowledge, culturally relevant texts, extensive reading, intensive reading.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading ability is recognized as critical for EFL/ESL learners, and reading comprehension is one of the most important information processing skills for building up learners' language competence and performance.

Many language researchers and experts hold the view which considers reading comprehension as a process in which the reader plays an active role when recognizing written symbols and understanding the intended messages and the whole discourse [7]. Such a process surmises that readers should have some background knowledge about the topic of the reading text. Accordingly, meaning of the texts does not clearly exist on the printed pages but is derived from them by various mental operations of the readers through an interactive reading process [6]. In other words, a text by itself does not carry meaning, but rather guides readers in retrieving meaning based on their own prior knowledge. Therefore, reader may differ in the meaning that each associates with a given word. In

addition, it is easier for readers to understand the meaning of a text which contains recognizable components because their background knowledge helps them make predictions and inferences about the story [9].

Fredricks (2012) [8], while teaching EFL in Tajikistan, realized that his students were likely to read more texts about other countries which historically and linguistically linked to their country and eager to make the comparison between the contexts of those texts with their own social and political contexts. The same situation also was recognized by Freeman (2004) [9] when she conducted a research with students in Arizona; that higher quality miscues were made and better retellings were produced when students worked with the culturally relevant stories which draw on readers' background and culture.

The aim of this paper is first to describe what reading comprehension primarily is and then to look at the role of culturally relevant texts in a reading comprehension program.

METHODS

Secondary research was chosen as an appropriate approach to do this paper due to

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the limitation of time (6 weeks). The author collected and studied a wide range of previous studies relating to the research topic thoroughly, most of which were retrieved from the Internet source by reason of restriction in term of published/printed materials which were available on the subject. Of 11 referred articles, 7 came from worldwide acclaimed journals specializing in language teaching or second/foreign language acquisition namely Cambridge University Press, The Reading Matrix, Reading Horizons, The Talking Point, Learning in a Foreign Language and TESL Reporter; with famous experts in such field such as Neil Alderson [1], Yvonne Freeman [9], David Freeman [9], Kevin Stuart [10], Ann Ebe [6], etc. In addition, these articles were conducted in diverse teaching and learning contexts of different countries from The United States of America, China to Egypt and Iran, etc. with participants at various age groups. This contributes to the diversity and reliability of the materials which are the main source of the research paper.

RESULTS

The findings of this paper are presented in the context of this research question: “Does ESL/ESL learners’ familiarity with the cultural content of reading texts help them develop their reading comprehension?”

Reading comprehension

According to a definition provided by Bamford and Day (1998, p.12) [2], reading is “the construction of meaning from a printed or written message. Construction of meaning involves the reader connecting information from the written message with previous knowledge to arrive at a meaning – at an understanding”. In this construction process, with the widely accepted role of active readers, they construct the meaning of the texts by directing their own cognitive resources and prior knowledge to relate to the reading passages.

Goodman (as cited in [7]) used the term “a psycholinguistic guessing game” to refer to the reading process through which the reader uncovers a reading text, makes prediction about later ideas or matters with the use of available minimal language cues, syntactic constraints and semantic constraints, while sampling the text so as to confirm or reject the prediction. In this process of reading, readers can interact with various sources, such as the content and the background of a text or the pragmatic context and then draw the meaning from the information in the reading [11]. More information is contributed by the readers than by the print on the page. That is, readers comprehend the information in the reading text because they are able to take the motivation further than the written symbols and allocate them to an appropriate group of notions that have been already stored in their minds [7]. Erten and Razi (2009) [7] also found that when readers bring their relevant background knowledge to their reading process, they can assign more attention for analyzing and interpreting textual meaning.

Background knowledge and Reading comprehension

In recent years, there have been an increasing amount of literature on the term “schema theory” [3] [6] [11] reporting that our knowledge and experiences of the world around us also influence how a text is read or processed. Competence readers have an idea of what is normal (linguistically and conceptually) and of how the world works, therefore when reading they make use of existing background knowledge and then adjust them with any new information [3]. The existing background knowledge, combined with the ability to make linguistic anticipations, determines the prospects the reader will expand when reading.

Davoudi and Ramezani (2014) [5] draws on an extensive range of sources to find that the

competent interaction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world have big influence on reading skills. According to Alderson (2000) [1], the knowledge of the world refers to every particular person's world which differs from others for the reason that every individual has unique personal history, feelings, ideas, interests and experiences which are not necessarily experienced or processed by others. However, people can share their knowledge of the world with other people in a community or nation.

Kramsch (as cited in Davoudi & Ramezani, 2014) [5] believes that understanding a language includes understanding a culture within which it is used; in other words, since culture affects all aspects of life, it certainly has a major impact on all elements of reading [7]; therefore, learners can grasp a new language only when they have a probable understanding of the cultural context of that language. As a result, a reader is most likely to fail to understand a text if his/her cultural knowledge is different from the one proposed by the text [5].

Another research developed by Chang (2007) [4] also states that there is a high degree of connection between readers' prior background knowledge and the reading texts. According to Chang's research, ESL/EFL learners' reading comprehension not only depends on the difficulty level of the texts but is more due to the level of learners' recollection from their culturally relevant background knowledge and from the proper evidences about the cultural foundations.

Culturally relevant texts

Culturally relevant texts are then literary texts that depict aspects of learner's culture such as ways of life, way of dressing, food, artifacts and others, which are unique to the learners' culture and are familiar to them [5]. In their research, Davoudi and Ramezani (2014) [5] cited Brock's explanation that culturally

relevant texts are texts that includes subject matters, contexts, cultural assumptions, circumstances, characters, language, and historical references that are recognizable to the second language readers. In simple words, culturally relevant texts are those that readers can connect to [9] and can draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make meaning [7].

Many researchers while studying this field find the problem in text selection [6] that texts that are used to assess the reading proficiency of EFL/ESL learners are not culturally relevant for the students who read them. Often a writer will assume that the target reader has the relevant background knowledge to read and make meaning out of the text; therefore, the writer will leave certain facts out or unstated. However, this creates problems when the writer and reader do not share the same relevant background knowledge [3]. This problem is found in many nations where ESL/EFL holds an important place in education. One example takes place in Taiwan, where most English texts that Taiwanese students read are narrative or expository passages; thus, many students cannot interact with the context and they cannot learn the whole picture of the reading passages [11].

The same situation happens in China where reading courses are intended to develop general reading skills, the ability to read quickly and an ability to grasp main meaning. As a result, many students cope with distasteful job assignments in which little knowledge of English is actually required, and quickly lose their interest in English [10]. Another example, Ebe (2010) [6] in her research told her story when working in New York that her students, who came from the flat deserts of Northern Mexico, had to struggle to read texts about children climbing mountains and finding caves with waterfalls. She also gave the familiar situation of her

college in Hong Kong that the students had difficulties to read the texts not only because they are not proficient in English, but also because they lack the background knowledge to connect to the reading texts.

Roles of culturally relevant texts on reading comprehension

A strong influence of the culturally relevant texts on learners' reading comprehension has been reported in literature. Many researchers implemented culturally relevant texts on his reading classroom with different methodology and found that culturally relevant texts have good impacts on developing reading comprehension ability of students at different levels and ages.

Fredricks (2012) [8] initiated critical literature circles, a program which drew from critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy, on his adult students in Tajikistan. In this program, students worked together in small, peer-led discussion groups whose members had chosen to read the same reading texts about their own historical, cultural and social issues and then shared opinions about what they had read in an educational setting. The program came up with excellent outcome in which readers developed personal responses to literature, could express their views on texts in relation to their own life experiences, beliefs and values, and had an opportunity for enjoyable L2 reading experiences. "Many members reported enjoying reading texts they have chosen rather than those that they were forced to read for course" [8].

The interaction between culturally relevant texts and language proficiency level in EFL learner's reading comprehension was investigated through a quantitative method conducted by Weng (2012) [11]. Four reading tests, in which four reading texts of different backgrounds were chosen, were designed to examine the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension. The participants,

who came from six classes of university freshmen in Taiwan, had to read four different texts and then answered 20 follow-up questions. The results indicated that participants got higher grades in their topic familiar readings than topic unfamiliar readings and topic familiarity was more important in participants at lower language proficiency levels.

Another method in this field was conducted with participants coming from an urban elementary school in the United States of America by Ebe (2010) [6]. Each participant was asked to read and retell two third grade stories. After analyzing the results, the researcher found that students were more proficient in their reading of the story they identified as being more culturally relevant.

The connections seen in these studies between the culturally relevant texts and reading proficiency indicate that teachers can help support the reading development of their EFL/ESL learners by considering cultural relevance when selecting texts as reading materials [6].

Criteria to select culturally relevant reading texts

While there are many researches support the influence of culturally relevant texts on learners' reading comprehension ability, the question many teachers may ask is: "what makes a text culturally relevant?" [6]. Although a wide range of books is available, determining cultural relevance should go beyond the nationality or ethnicity of the main character and include a number of other factors [9]. There was a set of factors to evaluate a book, which was first developed by Goodman (as cited in Ebe, 2010 [6] and Freeman, 2004 [9]) and refined into a rubric [6] [9] which contains a list of questions focusing on ways the characters and events in the book match up with the lives of the students in the class. Teachers and students

can rate each questions in the rubric using a four point Likert scale, from “1” meaning “no connection” to “4” – very close connection. The questions in the lists are as follows:

Are the characters in the story like you and your family?

Have you ever lived in or visited places like those in the story?

Could this story take place this year?

How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?

Does the story have main characters who are boys (for boy readers) or girls (for girl readers)?

Do the characters talk like you and your family?

How often do you read stories like this one?

Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?

DISCUSSION

The paper is an attempt to shed a light on whether culturally relevant texts have any significant influence on EFL/ESL learners' reading comprehension ability. In conclusion, the results from the previous researches expose the natural impact of background knowledge in culturally relevant texts on second language reading comprehension. Background knowledge has been exactly instrumental in connecting the contextual meanings with EFL/ESL readers' comprehension. It is important to note that different books are culturally relevant for different readers and identifying texts that are relevant for a reader for all eight factors is a difficult work. However, finding texts with some cultural relevance for the reader is supportive. In other words, not every text is necessarily relevant to readers' cultural background knowledge but at least some of the texts EFL/ESL learners are provided should be culturally relevant.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATION

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, this study was based on a small number of previous researches due to the limitation of time. Although the chosen researches varied in diverse contexts, most of them were conducted with small groups of participants. The paper would have been more reliable with the findings from a wider range of previous studies which were conducted on more expanded groups in order to include the effects of culturally relevant texts on components of reading comprehension such as the speed of reading, reader perspective, critical thinking, main ideas construction process as well as other reading processes. Further, this study was not designed to measure the effectiveness of individual reading activities using culturally relevant texts. Instead, the use of reading activities was applied in previous researches' methodology as an instrument in examining the influence of cultural background on reading comprehension. Future research may wish to consider these limitations in an attempt to promote better reading comprehension ability amongst EFL/ESL learners through culturally relevant texts.

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TÓM TẮT

PHÁT TRIỂN KHẢ NĂNG ĐỌC HIỂU TIẾNG ANH CHO SINH VIÊN NGOẠI NGỮ THÔNG QUA CÁC BÀI ĐỌC CÓ NỘI DUNG BAO HÀM YẾU TỐ VĂN HÓA PHÙ HỢP

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Khoa Ngoại ngữ - ĐH Thái Nguyên

Khả năng đọc hiểu là một trong những kỹ năng quan trọng nhất trong việc trau dồi và phát triển khả năng ngôn ngữ của sinh viên. Rất nhiều nghiên cứu về khả năng đọc hiểu đã được thực hiện nhằm phát triển năng lực ngôn ngữ cho sinh viên. Cùng với mục đích này, bài báo sau đây nghiên cứu về vai trò của những bài đọc có nội dung bao hàm yếu tố văn hóa phù hợp trong việc nâng cao khả năng đọc hiểu của sinh viên, dựa trên những nghiên cứu trước đây trong cùng lĩnh vực. Đồng thời, bài báo khuyến khích việc sử dụng các bài đọc này vào các chương trình đọc hiểu (đọc mở rộng và đọc tăng cường) và cho rằng chúng có nhiều lợi ích hơn các bài đọc thông thường. Bài báo này giải thích các định nghĩa về khả năng đọc hiểu, giải thích sự ảnh hưởng của hệ thống kiến thức nền vào quá trình đọc hiểu và đưa ra những tiêu chí đánh giá mức độ phù hợp về nội dung bao hàm yếu tố văn hóa của các bài đọc đối với sinh viên.

Từ khóa: *khả năng đọc hiểu, kiến thức nền, bài đọc có nội dung bao hàm yếu tố văn hóa, chương trình đọc mở rộng, đọc tăng cường.*

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**THE SPECIAL ISSUE FOR THE 10th FOUNDATION ANNIVERSARY
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Content	Page
Le Hong Thang – Discussion on Project-Based Learning Approach	3
Nguyen Thi Nhu Nguyet, Chu Thanh Thuy - Students' Output Competency Assessment in Using Russian Language at Level A2-B1 on the Basis of Common European Framework of Reference at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University	7
Nguyen Thuy Linh - Evaluation and Assessment in Project-Based Learning - Some Practical Suggestions	13
Vu Thi Thanh Hue - Students' Perception about an Online Extensive Reading Course with the Help of Edmodo	19
Mai Thi Thu Han, Nguyen Thi Lien, Hoang Thi Tuyet, Duong Thi Ngoc Anh - Fostering Learners' Autonomy through Project Work in an ESP Class at Hoa Lu University: A Case Study	25
Duong Duc Minh, Duong Lan Huong - A Study on the Interaction between the Presenter and Audience in the Presentation Skill for English Major Students at School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University	31
Pham Thi Kim Uyen - Use of Journals in Teaching Translation for English Major Students of Nha Trang University	37
Le Thi Hong Phuc - Students' Responses to the TV Show Project as the End-of-Term Assessment in the Pronunciation Course	43
Han Thi Bich Ngoc - Teaching Outside the Classroom - Integrating Social Media into Innovative Language Teaching: The Case of Facebook	49
Nguyen Ngoc Luu Ly, Quach Thi Nga - Some Features in Applying Multimedia Tools into Teaching Elementary Chinese in School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University	55
Le Thi Hoa, Dau Thi Mai Phuong - Fostering the 21st Century Skills in Project-Based ESP Learning	61
Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc, Tran Minh Thanh - Methods to Increase the English Magazine Project Power in the Study of the English Written Language for English Major Students at School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University	67
Hoang Thi Huyen Trang, Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh - Developing English Language Reading Comprehension amongst EFL/ESL Learners through Culturally Relevant Texts	73
Nguyen Quoc Thuy, Nguyen Thi Doan Trang - Teaching Foreign Languages through Magazine Project at Thai Nguyen University of Education	79
Nguyen Tuan Anh - PBLL Course Development as a Way of Ensuring a Multidisciplinary Program	85
Do Thi Son, Do Thi Phuong - An Analysis of Students' Errors at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University in Directly Translating from Sino-Vietnamese Words to Chinese and Solutions	91
Tran Dinh Binh - Application of Project-Based Learning in Language Teaching in Vietnam	97
Le Thi Khanh Linh, Le Thi Thu Trang - Evaluative Devices in Personal Narratives from American and Vietnamese Talk Shows	103
Do Thanh Mai, Phung Thi Thu Trang - The Application of Moodle in E-Learning and Teaching Informatics at School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University	109
Mai Thi Ngoc Anh, Vi Thi Hoa, Pham Hung Thuyen - Application of Project-Based Learning to the Teaching of Chinese Excursion at School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University	117
Tran Thi Hanh - Students' Perceptions on the Use of Edmodo as a Supplementary Tool in Learning	123
Bui Thi Ngoc Oanh - Using Project-Based Learning to Improve English Speaking Skills of Non-English Major Students of Level A2	129

Nguyen Hanh Dao, Dinh Nu Ha My - A Participatory Case Study into Learners' Difficulties and Pedagogical Implications of Doing Project-Based Learning ESP Course	135
Nguyen Thi Kim Oanh - Project-Based Language Learning Adopted for an ESP Module in School of Foreign Languages, Hanoi University of Science and Technology: Benefits, Challenges and Recommendations	141
Vu Thi Kim Lien - Enhancing Pragmatic Competence of Students at University of Languages and International Studies, VNU	147
Dam Minh Thuy - Integrated Skills in Foreign Language Learning via Video Project "Study of the Cultural Influences of France in Vietnam"	153
Nguyen Thi Thu Hoai - Situation of Intern Teaching Program of English Subject at Some Selected High Schools in Thai Nguyen City and Suggested Solutions	159
Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh, Hoang Huyen Trang - Language Errors of Chinese Students Studying Vietnamese Language at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University and Proposals for Correction	165
Quach Thi Nga, Do Thi Thu Hien - Problems and Suggestions for Chinese - Vietnamese Translation Textbooks in Vietnam (Investigate in School of Foreign Languages - TNU)	171
Phan Thanh Hai - Toward a Project Based Learning Curriculum for TEFL B.A Program within Profession Oriented Higher Education	177
Le Vu Quynh Nga, Ly Thi Hoang Men, Nguyen Thi Thu Oanh - Enhancing Students' Translation Performance in School of Foreign Languages: An Application of Cooperative Learning	183
Doan Thi Thu Phuong - Language Learning Style Preferences of Grade 11 Students at a High School, Nam Dinh	189
Dinh Thi Lien, Nguyen Thi Ngoc Anh - The System of Symbols in Then Songs of Tay People	197