

An Investigation into applying Structure-Proposition-Evaluation (SPE) method to solve Matching Headings exercises in IELTS academic reading at second-year students in the English faculty, University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Da Nang

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Abstract- This study investigates the efficacy of applying the Structure-Proposition-Evaluation (SPE) method to solve Matching headings exercises within the IELTS Academic Reading test for second-year students at the English Faculty, the University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Da Nang. Recognizing the challenges students face in comprehending and navigating complex academic texts, the research aims to assess whether the SPE method can enhance their ability to identify relationships between information presented in the passage and list of headings provided in the questions. Through a mixed-methods approach involving instructional intervention and assessment, the study examines the impact of SPE method implementation on students' reading comprehension skills and performance in matching exercises. Previous findings suggest that the SPE method improves students' structural understanding of texts, facilitates the identification of key propositions, and enhances their critical evaluation of information. These results hold significant implications for language instruction and test preparation, suggesting that the SPE method could be a valuable tool in assisting students to effectively tackle matching exercises in the IELTS Academic Reading test. In practice, integrating the SPE method into teaching practices could empower students to approach reading tasks systematically, thereby enhancing their overall academic and professional success.

Keywords: SPE method, IELTS Reading, Matching headings, Reading comprehension strategies, EFL students.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ideal scenario involves second-year students in the English Faculty at The University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Da Nang, mastering the skills required to excel in the IELTS Academic Reading section. They should possess the ability to efficiently tackle matching exercises, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the texts and effectively applying the Structure-Proposition-Evaluation (SPE) method. Second-year students at UFLS should be able to handle IELTS Academic Reading Matching Headings tasks with confidence, demonstrating strong comprehension skills and applying systematic strategies such as the SPE method.

However, many students still struggle with this task, particularly in analyzing text structures, identifying key propositions, and evaluating information within complex passages. Many students struggle to grasp the structural elements of texts, identify key propositions, and evaluate the relevance of information when confronted with complex passages. Without adequate guidance and systematic strategies, students' performance in this section remains subpar, hindering their overall IELTS scores and impeding their academic and professional aspirations.

In response to these problems, aims to investigate the effectiveness of applying the Structure-Proposition-Evaluation (SPE) method in enhancing second-year EFL students' ability to solve Matching Headings exercises in the IELTS Academic Reading test at UFLS, UD. Firstly, students' confidence in their English language proficiency and their ability to succeed in standardized tests like the IELTS may badly affect their motivation and engagement with academic studies. Secondly, lower scores in the IELTS Academic Reading section may limit students' opportunities for further education or employment in English-speaking environments, hindering their academic and professional growth.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What specific difficulties do second-year EFL students at UFLS face when solving IELTS Matching Headings exercises?
2. What are the main reasons for these difficulties?
3. To what extent does the SPE method improve students' performance in solving Matching Headings exercises compared to traditional approaches?

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Definition of Reading

- **Reading**

Reading is a multifaceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation (Reading Rockets, n.d.) [1]

- **Reading Comprehension**

What does it mean to read and understand a text? Central to any conceptualization of reading comprehension is that it requires the construction of a mental representation of the information in a text (Kintsch, 1988) [2]. More formally, reading comprehension has been defined as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (Snow, 2002, p. 11) [3]. Reading involves three interrelated elements: the reader, the text, and the activity or reading task, all situated into a broader sociocultural context. To comprehend a text, a reader must be equipped with a host of abilities (e.g., attention, memory, inferencing), motivation (e.g. reading goals, interest) and knowledge (e.g., domain knowledge, linguistic knowledge), all of which are influenced by the specific texts used and the activity the reader is engaging in (Snow, 2002) [3]. Although each of these elements is important for reading comprehension, in this article, we emphasize reading processes, components, and individual differences.

3.2. Characteristics of Reading skills

Reading skills encompass various abilities that enable individuals to comprehend written text effectively. There are seven characteristics of reading skills:

- **Decoding:** The ability to convert written words into sounds and understand their meanings. This involves recognizing and pronouncing individual letters, syllables, and words.
- **Fluency:** Fluency refers to reading smoothly and with appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression. Fluent readers can decode words quickly and effortlessly, allowing them to focus on comprehension rather than word recognition.
- **Vocabulary:** A rich vocabulary is crucial for understanding written text. Strong readers possess a wide range of words and understand their meanings in different contexts.
- **Comprehension:** This is the ultimate goal of reading—to understand and interpret the meaning of a text. Comprehension involves making connections between the text and one's prior knowledge, inferring meaning from context, identifying main ideas, and summarizing key points.
- **Critical Thinking:** Skilled readers engage in critical thinking while reading, questioning the text, evaluating arguments, and analyzing information for validity, bias, and relevance.
- **Contextual Understanding:** Effective readers can grasp the nuances and subtleties of language, including idiomatic expressions, figurative language, and cultural references, to understand the deeper meaning of a text.
- **Active Engagement:** Good readers actively engage with the text by asking questions, making predictions, and monitoring their understanding as they read. They employ strategies such as visualization, summarization, and making connections to enhance comprehension.
- **Adaptability:** Effective readers can adjust their reading strategies based on the purpose of reading, the genre of the text, and their own background knowledge and interests.

3.3. Factors influencing learners's reading competence

Several factors can influence learners' reading competence. These factors can be both internal (related to the learner) and external (related to the environment):

- **Prior Knowledge and Experience:** Learners bring their prior knowledge and experiences to the reading process. A strong background in the topic or familiarity with the language and cultural context can enhance reading comprehension.
- **Vocabulary Knowledge:** The size and depth of a learner's vocabulary play a significant role in reading comprehension. Learners with a broader vocabulary are better equipped to understand and interpret unfamiliar words in context.
- **Reading Strategies:** Effective readers employ various strategies such as predicting, summarizing, questioning, and making connections to aid comprehension. Teaching learners these strategies can improve their reading competence.
- **Fluency:** Reading fluently, with appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression, is essential for comprehension. Fluent readers can focus more on understanding the text rather than decoding individual words.

3.4. Structure-Proposition-Evaluation (SPE) method

The SPE method, developed by M. Adler, provides a structured approach to reading comprehension, particularly suited for academic texts. This method involves breaking down passages into identifiable structures, identifying key propositions, and evaluating the relevance of information to answer specific questions (Adler, 1940) [4].

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research method

The paper uses the following research methods:

1. **Questionnaire:** Before the application of SPE method in IELTS Academic Reading ,the questionnaire is used to identify student's obstacles in IELTS Academic Reading and to look for the reasons why students find difficult in matching headings exercise. A questionnaire was designed using Google form based on questionnaire with the 5-point Likert scale.

Part 1. Personal information

Part 2: Before training

Part 3: After SPE training

Part 4: After taking the assessment test

2. Pre-test:

Objective: Assess the participants' baseline proficiency in solving matching headings in the IELTS Academic Reading section before any intervention.

Administration: Administer a Pre-test to all participants, including both the control and experimental groups.

Content: The Pre-test should consist of authentic IELTS Academic Reading matching headings similar to those they might encounter in the actual exam.

Data Collection: Collect quantitative data on participants' scores and qualitative data on their strategies and approaches.

3. Intervention:

Experimental Group: Provide instruction on solving matching headings using the SPE method.

Control Group: Continue with traditional IELTS preparation methods.

4. Implementation of SPE Method:

Conduct structured sessions introducing the SPE method to the experimental group.

Ensure that participants understand the principles of Structure, Proposition, and Evaluation in the context of solving matching headings.

5. Post-Test

Objective: Evaluate the impact of the SPE method on participants' performance in solving matching headings after the intervention.

Administration: Administer a Post-test to both the experimental and control groups.

Content: Similar to the Pre-test, the Post-test should include IELTS Academic Reading matching headings. Ensure that the difficulty level is comparable to the Pre-test.

Data Collection: Collect quantitative data on post-test scores and qualitative data on participants' experiences and perceptions of the SPE method.

Quasi-experiment design: 20 second-year students in FE-UFLS-UD were chosen to involve in experiment. The group of experimental participants was divided equally into two groups (control group and experimental group). The control group followed traditional IELTS preparation methods, while the experimental group received instruction using the SPE method. Comparing the outcomes of these two groups helped assess the impact and effectiveness of the SPE method on the specific task of solving Matching headings in the IELTS Academic Reading section.

Research process:

Step 1: Test selection (both Pre-test and post-test have 20 questions of matching headings which are extracted from Reading test in IELTS Cambridge 10-17). This test materials are chosen for the research as the level of reading test in IELTS Cambridge is similar to the authentic IELTS Reading test and they are the updated material to keep up with the content in real IELTS Reading test.

Step 2: 20 students at FE-UFLS-UD are allocated equally in control group and experimental group. Both groups have to take a Pre-test before using "Structure-Proposition-Evaluate" method.

Step 3: The experimental group is taught how to apply "Structure-Proposition-Evaluate" method to solve IELTS matching headings.

Step 4: The experimental group embarks on the training program of 30-day using SPE

Step 5: Until the end of training, both groups have to take Post-test after applying "Structure-Proposition-Evaluate" method. (Note: all students are not informed about the Post-test)

Step 6: The results from two tests are collected and then analysed to answer the third research question.

Step 7: All the information collected from the questionnaire answers the first and the second research questions.

Quantitative method: The results of the Pre-test and Post-test before and after applying "Structure-Proposition-Evaluate" method and the data collected from questionnaire, the research analysed to yield conclusions.

4.2. Population

All second-year students who have been preparing for IELTS and studying at FE-UFLS-UD

4.3. Sampling

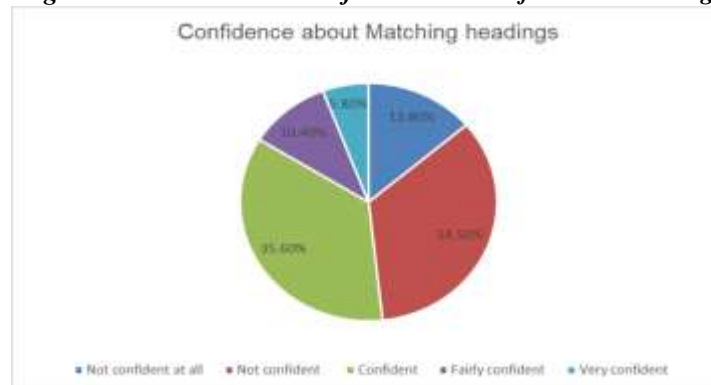
87 students at FE-UFLS-UD participated in the questionnaire, and 20 were selected for the quasi-experiment. In addition, the participants had similar educational backgrounds and have undergone at least 6 years of formal English training from secondary to high school and at least 1 year of preparation for IELTS.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Students' perception of Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading

5.1.1. Confidence about Matching headings

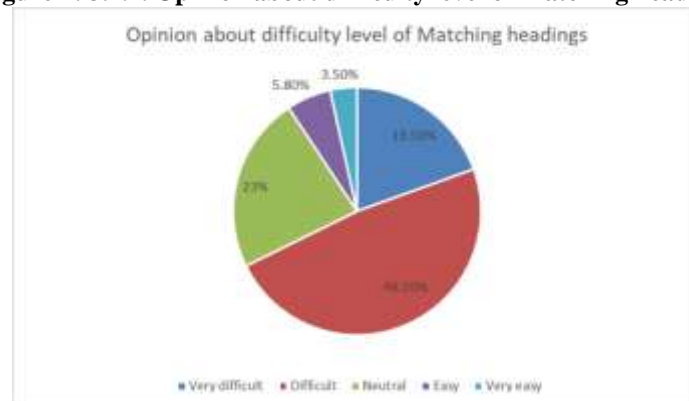
Figure 1: 3.1.1. Students' confidence levels before SPE training



Before participating in the training, a significant portion of students (70.1%) expressed either no confidence or low confidence in their ability to perform the Matching headings exercise in the IELTS Academic Reading section. Only a minority of students (16.2%) felt either fairly confident or very confident before the training, highlighting the need for intervention and support to address students' confidence levels and proficiency in this area. Therefore, Matching heading is considered a difficult type of exercise in IELTS Academic Reading by second-year students. Cultural untranslatable elements in the English translation of “Đề Mèn phiêu lưu ký” by example.

5.1.2. Opinion about difficulty level of Matching headings

Figure 2: 3.1.2. Opinion about difficulty level of Matching headings



Results indicate that the majority of respondents perceive Matching headings to be a challenging exercise, with 67.7% of students choosing either "Very difficult" or "Difficult" options. Only a small percentage of students (9.3%) considered Matching headings to be easy or very easy, highlighting the overall consensus among participants regarding the difficulty of this exercise. A significant majority of students perceive Matching headings to be challenging, indicating a widespread recognition of the difficulties associated with this type of exercise.

5.2. Difficulties faced by students in doing Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading

5.2.1. Different kinds of difficulties faced by students in doing Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading

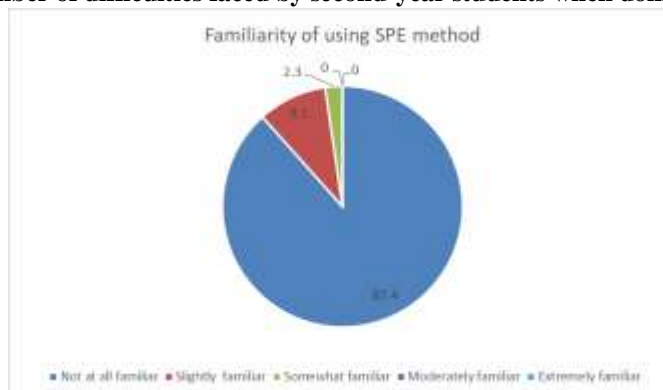
Figure 3: 3.2.1. Difficulties faced by students in doing Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading



According to a survey of 87 second-year students at FE- UFLS-UD joined in the questionnaires from Figure 1, the majority of sophomore students (79.3%) are struggling with question analysis when doing Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading. Additionally, nearly 60% of second-year students get time-management trouble in doing the same type of question, which is slightly higher than the percentage of obstacles relating to Similarity among headings and Lack of vocabulary, which make up 49.4% and 42.5% respectively. The remaining and lowest-percent difficult is Complex grammar structure, which constitute roughly 30%. Therefore, the chart shows that question analysis may pose a challenge for most of students, it is more prevalent than other difficulties mentioned.

5.2.2. Number of difficulties faced by second-year students when doing Matching headings

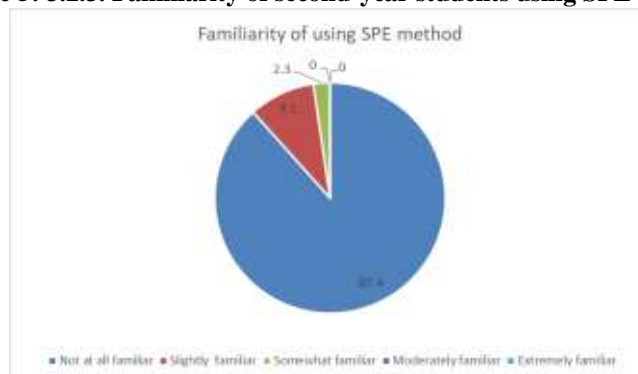
Figure 4: 3.2.2. Number of difficulties faced by second-year students when doing Matching headings



From Figure 4, the bar chart shows that there are 78 participants making up approximately 90% choose more than one difficulty. Among these, 36 survey takers go for 2 obstacles which constitute nearly 42%, compared to that of three-option and four-option participants which are only 23 and 19 people respectively. Therefore, the chart can demonstrate that most of participants faced with more than one difficulty, even nearly a quarter of them encountered four difficulties.

5.2.3. Students's perception of applying SPE in doing Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading

Figure 5: 3.2.3. Familiarity of second-year students using SPE method



According to Figure 5, there are 87 survey-takers involving in this question to answer referring how familiar they are with the use of SPE method. The highest percentage can be seen in these people who are totally unfamiliar with SPE, which is nearly 90%, in comparison with the proportion of who are slightly familiar and somewhat familiar with SPE, constituting only 9.2% and 2.3% respectively. The two remaining categories make up trivial percentage. Therefore, it can be concluded SPE are not common method for the mass of second-year students.

5.2.4. The effectiveness of SPE method in doing Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading

Table 1: Test results of Experimental group

Experimental group			
Participant no.	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Variance
1	60	75	15%
2	35	65	30%
3	80	70	-10%
4	55	85	30%
5	25	50	25%
6	70	80	10%

7	60	50	-10%
8	45	60	15%
9	55	75	20%
10	75	70	-5%

Table 2: Test results of Control group

Control group			
Participant no.	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Variance
1	45	60	15
2	55	50	5
3	35	45	10
4	70	60	-10
5	85	75	-10
6	65	70	5
7	40	40	0
8	70	75	5
9	45	50	5
10	60	70	10

As can be seen in Table 1, the results of the Post-tests for both groups were, on average, considerably better than the results of the first trial. Experimental group is significantly superior to Control group in terms of how effectively they solve the Matching headings in IELTS Academic Reading. In particular, Experimental group improved their correct percentage by 12% on average, while Control group improved their correct percentage by 3.5% in comparison to the initial result. This makes sense that all students practice their reading skills. Despite this, group 1 made significantly more progress than group 2, which was more than three times as much. When compared to group 2, all of the students in group 1 showed an increase in the correct proportion that was 8.5% higher on average. In contrast, the results of both group were unevenly distributed. In summary, this demonstrates that the application of SPE method is effective that can be used to improve second-year students' reading performance while they are participating in the experiment.

VI. CONCLUSION

4.1. Conclusion

The study has provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by students and the effectiveness of the SPE method as a potential solution.

Before the training, a considerable number of students expressed low confidence in their ability to perform the matching headings exercise, highlighting the necessity for intervention. The majority perceived the exercise as difficult, with various obstacles identified, including difficulties in analyzing questions, distinguishing between headings, comprehending complex grammar structures, and managing time constraints.

Moreover, the study revealed that most students were unfamiliar with the SPE method, with lack of exposure, understanding, and participation cited as reasons for their unfamiliarity. However, despite this lack of familiarity, students held expectations regarding the benefits of the SPE method, including saving time, improving comprehension, and enhancing question analysis skills.

The findings regarding satisfaction with the SPE method training indicated a generally positive response, with the majority of participants reporting satisfaction and recognizing the method's usefulness. While some participants found the method challenging to apply, most acknowledged its utility in solving matching exercises.

Furthermore, the study revealed variations in the frequency of SPE method usage among participants, with some incorporating it into their test-taking strategies more consistently than others.

In summary, the study underscores the importance of addressing students' challenges in the matching headings exercise and highlights the potential of the SPE method as a beneficial tool in enhancing performance in the IELTS Academic Reading section. Recommendations for further research may include longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of SPE method training and investigations into effective strategies for promoting its adoption among students. The study contributes valuable insights to the field of language education and test preparation.

4.2. Recommendation

4.2.1. For teachers

Teachers should integrate the Structure-Proposition-Evaluation (SPE) method into the curriculum for teaching IELTS Academic Reading exercises, particularly the matching exercise, to enhance students' comprehension and problem-solving skills. Besides, it is crucial to provide training and support for teachers to effectively implement the SPE method in their instruction, including guidance on structuring lessons and providing constructive feedback to student.

Monitor students' progress regularly and adjust instruction as needed to address individual learning needs and ensure maximum effectiveness of the SPE method. Moreover, they should foster a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable practicing the SPE method and seeking help when needed.

4.2.2. For students

Students should practice applying the SPE method to various reading passages and matching exercises to improve your comprehension and critical thinking skills. In addition, it is necessary for them to seek feedback from teachers and peers on your use of the SPE method and incorporate suggestions for improvement into your study routine. Moreover, they should take advantage of resources and support provided by teachers to enhance your understanding and mastery of the SPE method.

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