International Journal of Education and Practice
2020 Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 557-567.
ISSN(e): 2310-3868
ISSN(p): 2311-6897
DOI: 10.18488/journal.61.2020.83.557.567

INVESTIGATING INFORMATIONAL TEXTS TEACHING AND LEARNING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF VIETNAMESE HIGH SCHOOLS

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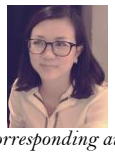
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Article History
Received: 28 May 2020
Revised: 13 July 2020
Accepted: 17 August 2020
Published: 25 August 2020

Keywords
Reading comprehension
Informational texts
High schools
Developing countries
Teaching and learning.

ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension of informational texts has been largely debated and introduced at all levels of education across western countries. However, it has not received enough attention in developing countries including Vietnam. This paper aims to investigate the procedure of reading and comprehension of informational texts in high schools in Vietnam. The study surveyed 588 teachers and 2744 high school students across all regions of Vietnam. The survey questionnaires asked teachers and students' opinions on the teaching and learning of informational texts. Through statistical analysis with Excel sheets, the results show that the part of informational texts in the curriculum was small when compared with literary texts. This shows that there is very little requirement of teaching and learning informational text in high schools which results in students' limited ability in reading informational text. The findings also suggest that understanding and reading informational texts have been contended as essential to the educational performance of students. The research also revealed that both teachers and students need to be more prepared in the classrooms to teach and learn informational texts. It is recommended that Vietnamese general education curricula should include a greater amount of informational texts in textbooks and instruction on informational texts should be given more attention to improve students' understanding.

Contribution/Originality: This study revealed that informational text reading comprehension was a fairly new concept at high school level in Vietnam. In fact, the proportion of informational texts in the curriculum was small when compared with literary texts. High school students were not instructed techniques and strategies to read informational texts. In this context, this study will provide useful new insights.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern society, a great deal of information is conveyed through informational texts, such as a congressional report, a presentation of a new technology, a handbook for running a home appliance, or a health problem booklet (Li, Beecher, & Cho, 2018). In general, an informational text "engages the reader with aspects of the real world by conveying and communicating factual information" (Ness, 2011). The ability to generate details and produce fully comprehend informational texts is an exceptionally important ability for adults and students of school age to have knowledge in a world around them (Reutzel, Jones, Clark, & Kumar, 2016). Recently, the role of informational text in the school environment has attracted much attention. Owing to their frequent use for common purposes, it is important to improve the level of competence of students to understand these informational texts (Li

et al., 2018). In other words, to be prepared for college and to have fruitful futures, students must learn to understand informational texts vividly and clearly(Reutzel et al., 2016). However, numerous students have problems reading informational texts particularly the secondary-level students who are used to reading mainly primary-level narrative texts and lack the awareness and experience of the informational text style (Duke & Martin, 2019).

High school students have reported similar concerns with informational texts in the Vietnamese context. Vietnam had 2842 high schools with over 2.5 million students in the 2018-2019 school year (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 2019). Like the high school students around the world who accomplish university and professional growth, Vietnamese students also need to be skilled in learning the informational texts. That being said, although Vietnamese teachers and high school students are comfortable with narrative and fictional texts, informational texts look like an interesting domain that rarely appears in modern Vietnamese high school curricula. It is found that Vietnam's high school teachers and students find these texts very unusual (Vu, 2019). This study examines the perspectives of Vietnamese high school teachers and students on understanding informational texts and their comprehension.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions of Informational Texts

According to Mason, Meadan-Kaplansky, Hedin, and Taft (2013) informational texts are frequently published with complicated text types, abstract ideas, and complex grammar. They lack a conceptual explanation, elaboration, or illustration. Chlapana (2016) notes that unlike narrative texts, which are designed by narrative grammatical components (such as place, time, theme, plot, and resolution), informational texts use expository writings and various structures, such as cause-effect, comparison-contrast, pattern, description, and problem-solution. In addition, the Common Core State Standards (2010) classifies informational texts as biographies and autobiographies, historical, scientific, and technical writings, textbooks, news or feature articles, book reviews, and informational trade books (Common Core Standards Initative, 2010).

Furthermore, Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, and Sacks (2007) highlight that informational texts usually comprise complicated, domain-specific sentence structure and put increased expectations on the understanding of the content by students. According to Nevo and Vaknin-Nusbaum (2018) informational texts support children in their logical growth, incorporate appropriate vocabulary, inspire them to participate in higher-order reasoning, promote interest and create logical awareness as children discover reliable and authoritative information, and adapt themselves to cognitively challenging conversations. Similarly, Fox (2009) states that informational texts are those oral or written texts that characterize a true phenomenon, event, scenario, or method. Another point of view is that informational texts are nonfictional texts with the main aim of transmitting information about natural and social environment (Chlapana, 2016; Duke., 2000; Nevo & Vaknin-Nusbaum, 2018). In addition, Pyle et al. (2017) claim that informational texts are capable of organizing thoughts in a number of ways, or sentence structure, that appear to change repeatedly inside and across paragraphs. Lennox (2013) adds that informational texts can also be used as a springboard to learn more about subjects that capture a child's curiosity. Informational texts, after all, are usually known to be hard for students to understand than any other type of narrative texts popular in their earlier grades (Ramsay & Sperling, 2015).

2.2. Characteristics of Informational Texts

Informational texts vary from narrative texts both in the content and text structure. Narrative texts contain plots that reflect the daily life of children, with recognizable textual structures and social-emotional content allowing children to link it with their own life experiences and previous knowledge. In comparison, informational texts are intended to educate children about modern, unknown subjects, and provide then frequently a wide variety

of fairly complex material (e.g., cause and effect, positive and negative, biographies) and/or theoretical and technical material (Belfatti, 2015; Pappas, 2006; Tortorelli, 2019). According to Li et al. (2018) lexical items such as technical terminology, description, and interpretation content, graphs, or labels and charts are also included in the informational text features.

Furthermore, informational texts are defined by their blocks; that is, by concepts, ideas, and shapes that permeate the thinking and writing of each discipline (Ramsay & Sperling, 2015). A few other texts are generally written to express process steps, while others express statements. For instance, mathematics documents are usually procedural in nature and are composed of signs and equations reflecting mathematical facts requiring students to properly examine texts and be alerted to words of various significance levels and symbols representing essential variables (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The Common Core Standards Initative (2010) also discuss informational texts in the following categories: literary nonfiction (using factual details in a narrative-like genre), interpretation texts (factual, textbook-like reading), argument/persuasion texts(e.g. texts that use arguments to convey a viewpoint and persuade readers), and procedural texts (containing step by step guidelines, how-to-do something, etc.).

To summarize, informational texts comprise these features: (1) exchange of information about the natural or social world, (2) factual and long-lasting content, (3) timeless verb tenses and standard noun construction, (4) technical or content-specific vocabulary, (5) classification and definition of the subject concerned, (6) text forms, such as comparison/contrast, problem/solution, cause/effect, and enumeration/description, and (7) integrated graphic elements such as diagrams, indices, charts, and maps (Duke., 2000; Ness, 2011; Pappas, 2006).

2.3. Reading Comprehension of Informational Texts

Reading comprehension is important to improve academic performance. According to Grabe and Stoller (2011) reading is the ability to extract sense from a text and properly understand its meaning. Research on understanding among English speakers demonstrate reading strategies, such as asking questions while reading, making predictions, outlining, and tracking understanding to enhance reading comprehension (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). In addition, Grabe and Stoller (2014) reading comprehension is defined as the ability to quickly and easily recognize words, evolve and use a substantial number of vocabulary, process sentences to build understanding, and engage a variety of important procedures and cognitive competencies, such as establishing objectives, altering aims flexibly, and monitoring understanding. Such methods may include defining significance in relation to background knowledge, interpreting, and analyzing texts in accordance with the aims and intentions of readers.

Van Den Broek (2005) points out that reading comprehension is a means of collecting information from the text. Reader attributes like background knowledge, use of strategy, inferential capacity, word reading/fluency level, language and vocabulary knowledge, and the intent and motivation of the reader can affect comprehension. Reading comprehension is the process of absorbing and creating meaning concurrently through contact and engagement with the written language (Mariage, Englert, & Mariage, 2020). Reading comprehension is frequently seen as a recursive communication between readers, texts, and learning contexts (Ramsay & Sperling, 2015). Additionally, Liebfreund and Conradi (2016) claim that effective comprehension of informational texts may require students to have greater levels of previous knowledge compared to understanding narrative texts.

The reading comprehension of informational texts is, however, a significant cognitive process that involves a reader or listener to implement several abilities to clarify and integrate the new information into their existing knowledge base. A skilled reader or listener makes assumptions and stimulates previous knowledge to integrate the content of the text (Chlapana, 2016). Likewise, Grabe and Stoller (2011) express that reading comprehension of informational texts is not a simple ability for processing information. It necessitates a capacity to recognize key ideas in the text, a sense of the dialogue framework, and tactical processing. Due to the lack of experience of the technical vocabulary and rhetorical meanings and mechanisms commonly used in informational texts, and also

because of deficits in reliable, appropriate context knowledge, the reading comprehension of informational texts can be more difficult for adolescent readers than reading the narrative texts (Denton et al., 2015).

2.4. Importance of Informational Texts for Students' Achievements

Previous studies showed that the skills in reading informational texts mostly lead to academic success (Li et al., 2018). The ability to use and understand informational texts is "central to success, and even survival, in advanced schooling, the workplace, and the community" (Duke, 2000). It is a reasonable explanation. Students in primary-grade classrooms need to familiarize themselves with the features and conventions of informational texts. Students also need to realize that there are tools which they can learn from. Informational texts also represent the physical, biological, and social environment around them, helping to build awareness of content that can help in sense-making of texts and also develop their awareness of the universe (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Children who are not exposed to informational texts during nursery school appear to encounter major trouble in elementary school text comprehension and achieve little accomplishment in education (Chlapana, 2016). The fourth and fifth-grade students are also required to read and understand a variety of texts for college and career planning, including informational texts individually and skilfully through content areas (Ritchey, Palombo, Silverman, & Speece, 2017).

Moreover, according to Moss and Newton (2002) informational texts accounted for just 16% of content across grades in basal readers. The negligence of informational texts in early grades possibly tends to leave several children unprepared when they reach upper elementary school, where there is an increased need for informational texts' readings. Researchers have historically assumed that the lack of early-grade informational texts is a significant contributor to the "fourth-grade drop", the trend that there is a general decrease in reading scores when children reach fourth grade (Duke, 2000; Li et al., 2018). A powerful and important statement is that the ability to analyze and understand informational texts contributes to one's education, employment, and societal success. Being educated in the 21st century is more than just the opportunity to appreciate literary works (Li et al., 2018).

In brief, the understanding of informational texts is crucial to the academic success of students in a wide scope of study areas, such as science and social studies (O'Connor et al., 2017; Zimmermann & Reed, 2020). Findings of the reading test of the 2011 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) demonstrate that fourth-grade students who read more magazine articles and informational books have better scores in reading achievement than those with no knowledge of such writings (Li., 2018). There is much recognition of the necessity for reading informational texts in early grades, and educators are motivated to increase the number of such readings (Li et al., 2018).

2.5. Informational Texts Teaching and Learning at the High School Level

While the ability to read and understand informational texts is important to the success of students and for continuous improvement, the use of informational texts is not often a standard requirement in primary and secondary schools. The teachers are likely to restrict their options to narrative storybooks (Duke & Martin, 2019). According to Wright (2014) teachers only spend 17% of their reading-aloud sessions on informational texts in class. It shows that students lack significant opportunities to observe and learn about informational texts that they may sometimes, eventually, experience in higher education. The teachers need to increase their awareness about the use of informational texts and make them accessible to students. The awareness about o these texts need to be increased because it will expand the intellectual knowledge of students and help them to improve their future independent reading, as they are expected to choose books outside their curriculum and books that their teachers have read (Nevo & Vaknin-Nusbaum, 2018).

The application of the Common Core State Standards in the U.S. in 2010 suggested several amendments in instruction and curriculum. One of the suggestions was that students across the K-12 spectrum should increase the use of informational texts particularly from 11th and 12th grade by 70% of the time of their school day. Under such

a new series of regulations implemented in most of the schools in the United States, at least 50% of the texts were changed into informational during the elementary stages. This was a spectacular teaching change in early grades where learning-to-read was being taught mainly through literary works for over a century. Such an incorporation of informational texts did not solely require teachers to shift their focus on informational texts or pick a new format or tactic but it also required them to reconsider or review their entire experience of acquiring literacy (Young & Goering, 2018).

As a result, students start to navigate adequately informational texts by the time they start secondary schools. In the new system, 75% of the texts in sixth grade and later are non-narrative (Ness, 2011). Nevertheless, making students read informational texts without clear guidance about how to read them may not contribute to their success of reading. Empirical recommendations on the total time spent and evidence-based methods are required to investigate how to enable learners with the good abilities to read informational texts (Li et al., 2018). For instance, trained teachers will empower students to become intellectually interested researchers, developers, and information consumers to help them become highly educated (Ness, 2011).

3. METHODS

The empirical data used in this research were gathered through a questionnaire about the opinions of high school teachers and students on the teaching and learning of informational texts. The questionnaire was responded in total by 588 teachers and 2744 students from 15 provinces (out of 63 provinces in Vietnam). The majority of teachers taught Literature while others taught Mathematics, Biology, English, History, Chemistry, Physics, Geography, Civic Education, Information Technology, and Military Education. Figure 1 shows the distribution of participating teachers in a subject category. Approximately 30% of respondents came from Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city.

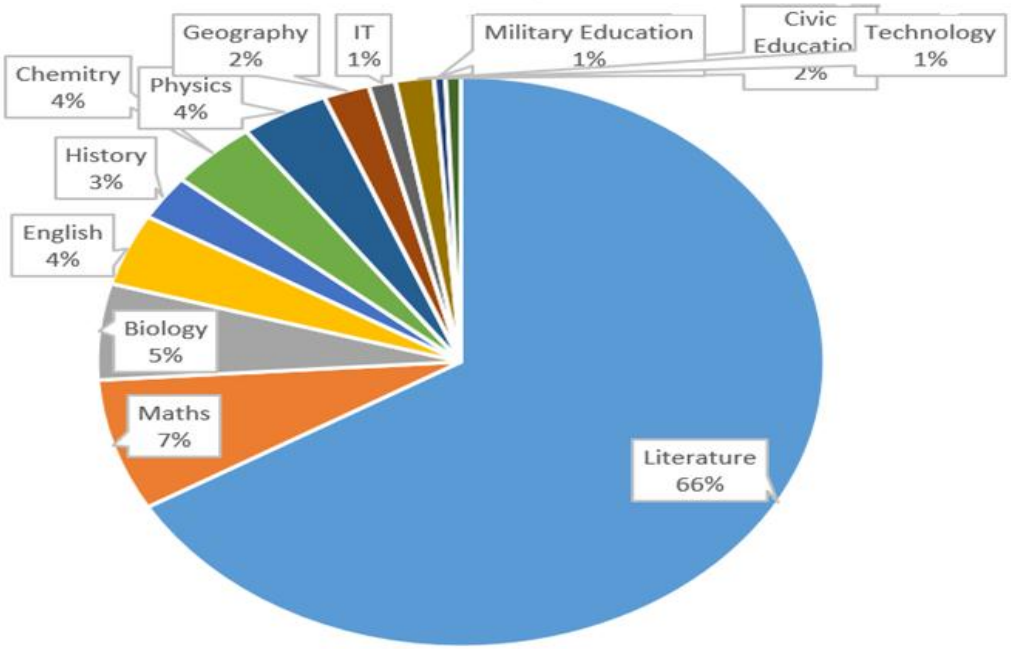

Figure-1. Distribution of teachers in subjects.

The teachers' questionnaire contained 11 questions requiring teachers to provide the percentage of informational texts in the curriculum; how they taught these texts; students' learning experiences; how they evaluated these texts; the capacity of students to learn them; and their value felt in high school teaching and learning. The students' questionnaire was composed of 8 questions. Students were asked about their interpretation

of informational texts, their use in the curriculum, how they were taught to understand them, assessments of these texts, and their value in schools. Participating teachers and students who responded were provided printed questionnaires and they were asked to submit them back to the researchers after completion. For analysis, the data were then inserted into Excel sheets.

Furthermore, the documentation analysis method was employed. The informational text data gathered from the textbooks of Literature, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Geography, and Civic Education, were statistically analyzed. Table 1 presents the total number of informational texts and related data.

Table-1. Number and types of informational texts in the textbooks.

Documents	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Total number of informational texts	394	339	361
Number of single model texts (documents with only texts)	107	90	77
Number of multi-model texts (documents with texts and pictures, graphs)	287	249	284
Number of pictures	745	698	517
Number of figures (graphs, charts, maps, tables)	483	557	486

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Teachers' Viewpoints on Informational Text Teaching and Learning

First, when questioned whether or not reading texts in schoolbooks were informational, 37.2% said yes, while 62.8% said no. The number of "No" responses was even higher with the question "Are there any secondary-level criteria for informational text in the curricula?". It was 80.8% and 19.1% for 'Yes' and 'No' respectively.

The next two questions were also about informational texts in the textbooks presented in Table 2:

Table-2. Teachers' responses of informational texts in the textbooks.

Questions	Answer (%)		
	None	Some	A lot
Do the textbooks you are teaching require students to read informational texts?	3.9%	54.1%	42%
Do the textbooks you are teaching contain instructions to help teachers how to teach students to read informational texts?	18.5%	61.5%	20%

The next three questions were based on teaching, learning, and testing informational text reading comprehension. Table 3 presents the responses on these questions:

Table-3. Teachers' responses of informational text teaching, learning and testing.

Questions	Answer (%)		
	Never	Sometimes	Quite often
How often do you receive requests from students to read informational texts and do exercises?	26.3%	41.2%	32.5%
How often do you receive requests from students to read informational texts from books, newspapers and the Internet?	2.7%	52.1%	45.2%
How often do you use informational texts in your examination?	6.7%	55.2%	38.1%

In addition, documentation analysis showed that many school books often included informational texts as texts, pictures, and tables. This shows that the writers of informational texts developed only a few tasks and activities based on these informational texts. The following two questions were about the school and the students' need for informational texts. Below are the findings in Table 4:

Table-4. Teachers' response of students' need for informational texts.

Questions	Answer (%)		
	Not necessary	Necessary	Very necessary
In your opinion, is the necessary to have the ability of informational texts reading comprehension for high school students?	1.0%	76.1%	22.9%
In your opinion, is it necessary to have informational texts in high school textbooks?	3.6%	54.1%	42.3%

The next question was about the attitude of the students towards reading comprehension of informational texts. The answers for "Don't like," "Normal," "Like a bit" and "Like a lot" were 38%, 32%, 26.3%, and 3.7% respectively, based on teachers' opinion. Finally, Question 11 addressed the teachers' examination of the understanding capacity to read informational texts for students. The responses were 2.9%, 44.9%, 43%, and 9.2% respectively for "Poor", "Average", "Good" and "Very good."

4.2. Students' Opinions on Informational Texts' Teaching and Learning

Like the teachers' questionnaire, the first three questions for students were about informational texts in the textbooks (Table 5).

Table-5. Students' responses of informational texts in the textbooks.

Questions	Answer (%)	
	Yes	No
Do you think your textbooks contain informational texts?	38.4%	61.6%
Do you think there should be more informational texts in textbooks?	53%	47%

For the question "Are there any activities in the curriculum involving reading informational texts," the responses of the students were 2.2% for "None," 59.9% for "Some" and 37.9% for "A lot." The next three questions were about teaching, learning, and evaluating informational texts. In this respect the results are as follows: (Table 6):

Table-6. Students' responses of informational text teaching, learning and assessment.

Questions	Answer (%)		
	Never	Sometimes	Quite often
How often do teachers require students to read informational texts in textbooks and do exercises?	1.5%	82.2%	16.3%
How often do teachers require students to read informational texts from books, newspapers and the Internet?	2.6%	59.5%	37.9%
How often do teachers use informational texts in the tests?	7.8%	53.1%	39.1%

The next question asked students to self-assess their ability to read informational texts. The responses were 2.3%, 58.9%, 27.9%, and 10.9% respectively for "Poor," "Average," "Good," and "Very Good." The final question asked students to offer their opinions on the value of reading comprehension of informational texts at the high school level. The responses were 1.1%, 5.8%, 56.3%, and 36.8% respectively for "Not important", "A little bit important", "Important" and "Very important."

5. DISCUSSION

It was evident from this research that textbooks provide a great source of informational texts (Li et al., 2018; Li., 2018). In the U.S. context, the Common Core State Standards request for providing literary texts and informational texts in fourth grade onwards received a split 50/50 response. The number of informational texts in

textbooks emerged 55% in the eighth grade and 70% in the twelfth grade (Common Core Standards Initative, 2010). These findings differ from previous studies when only a tiny proportion of teachers and students discussed the presence of informational texts in textbooks. Besides that, the majority of teachers (80.8%) noticed no informational text specifications in the secondary education curriculum. This is not consistent with the related literature which proves that informational texts should be included in the curriculum since it helps in building knowledge, assists with later reading achievement, and encourages readers (Liebfreund & Conradi, 2016).

The current research has shown that Vietnamese high school teachers generally do not encourage students to read informational texts in textbooks, or do exercises or even read such texts in books, newspapers, and the Internet. This finding is also not consistent with the research of Li (2018) which reported that teachers in fourth grade made their students read more informational texts than literary texts. Actuality, teachers need to teach students how to read informational texts and process the data contained within it. Students should then learn how essential are informational texts in their lives, and how they can be used to convey knowledge (Clark, 2013). Moreover, as the knowledge of informational texts grows, teachers also need to define challenges that students might face in understanding these informational texts and find ways to address these issues (Li et al., 2018). As was evident in the findings, 50% of the evaluation passages were informational texts in the 4th grade and 70% in 12th grade (Common Core Standards Initative, 2010). This research also examined the use of informational texts in evaluation and assessment and both teachers and students agreed that informational texts were not always used for such purposes.

The findings reveal that both teachers and students agreed on the need for more informational texts in the textbooks in order to teach reading comprehension of these texts in the classroom. This result confirms the views of Li. (2018) who found that in recent years the Common Core State Standards encouraged students to learn to read and write complicated literary and informational texts, as well as allowed teachers to teach informational texts than more before. Concentrating on informational texts teaching Li et al., (2018) recommended that teacher preparation programs and professional development programs should focus more on teachers' knowledge of informational texts and more on good teaching of the methods needed to understand them. Regarding expansion of knowledge from informational texts, teachers also need to define challenges that students face in understanding informational texts and find ways to address these issues. The students were also motivated to select this type of texts for independent reading (Clark, 2013).

Through the evaluation of teachers and self-evaluation of students, it was reported that the ability of Vietnamese high school students to read informational texts was not good. This finding is consistent with that of Li. (2018) who in the last decades of the 20th century, has been studying informational texts for reading comprehension in the USA. This researcher claims that one reasonable explanation for this issue was that reading informational texts was ignored in early grades. A number of students neglected reading because they did not realize how essential it was to them (Vongkrachang & Chinwonno, 2015). One aspect that influenced the quality of reading methods is the awareness of teachers about the informational texts. Inadequate knowledge of informational texts by teachers also hampered the reading performance of students (Li et al., 2018; Reutzel et al., 2016). Therefore, it was believed that students must use the best methods during the reading of knowledge books and improve their understanding skills (Chlapana, 2016).

In the current research, teachers and students stressed the importance of informational text reading comprehension at the secondary education level. This finding matches with that of Li et al. (2018) who also discovered that there was a significant recognition of the significance of reading informational texts in general education, and urged teachers to increase their quantity. The negligence of informational texts in primary and secondary education may leave several students inexperienced when they reach higher education, where there is an increased demand for informational texts (Li., 2018). Informational texts certainly affect our lives every day. To

gain benefit from the skills provided by these documents, we must know how to interpret and evaluate the details found therein (Clark, 2013).

6. CONCLUSION

Informational texts are a vital part of the learning of students in school and are closely linked to the academic achievement of students (Li et al., 2018). The present study showed that informational text reading comprehension at Vietnamese high schools was still a fairly new concept. In particular, there is still a very low number of informational texts in the textbooks. Students are not required to do activities by reading informational texts nor are they instructed with strategies and techniques to read informational text. As a result, the competence of students to read and comprehend informational texts is limited.

This study also confirms the significance of teaching and learning informational texts from the perspectives of both teachers and students. It is recommended that instruction on informational texts should be given attention to improve students' understanding. The general education curricula in Vietnam should reach a greater amount of informational texts in textbooks. Furthermore, the teacher preparation services and professional development programs will help teachers enhance their professional knowledge and skills (Nguyen, 2019) as well as creating informational texts' awareness. In general, teachers and students need to be more prepared to use informational texts successfully in classrooms.

Funding: This research was funded by VNU University of Education under Research Project number QS.20.02.
Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Acknowledgement: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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