



Original Article

A Cross-Sectional Study on Teaching Informational Text for Third Graders in Vietnamese School Context

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Received 09th June 2024

Revised 20th October 2024; Accepted 12th November 2024

Abstract: Reciprocal teaching method has been proven to be effective for reading comprehension. However, in Vietnam, primary school teachers are still unacquainted with this method. Thus, this study investigated the current situation of teaching and learning informational texts among third grade students in Vietnam in order to highlight the need for reciprocal teaching in the reading comprehension of informational texts. Based on a sample of 272 primary school teachers and their responses on a self-designed survey questionnaire, the teachers still struggle with identifying informational texts and have yet to focus on guiding students to extract the lessons/meanings from the texts and apply them in their daily lives. In this regard, the lack of informational text reading strategies and the limited exposure to the new curriculum may be contributing factors. Meanwhile, the contents of the informational texts were deemed appropriate for the children's understanding and they helped maintain their interest in finding the main idea of each paragraph. Considering the benefits of reciprocal teaching, future research in Vietnam should explore the application of this method in subjects beyond reading comprehension such as mathematics, science, physics, etc.

Keywords: Reciprocal teaching, informational text, primary school, questionnaire, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

According to Andreas Schleicher, the Director for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the modern world demands schools/institutions to prepare students for jobs

that have yet to be conceived, technology that has yet to be developed and issues that have yet to arise, due to the rapid changes in the economy and society. Similarly, Li et al., [1] argued that a literate citizen in the 21st century must be capable of synthesizing and using information to solve problems, especially in the contemporary digital era, in which a significant amount of information is transmitted through informational texts [2]. In this regard,

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<https://doi.org/10.25073/2588-1159/vnuer.4923>

informational texts refer to the texts that we encounter every day and are widely accessible to students [3]. Additionally, proficiency in comprehending written information is essential for a student's academic achievement and lifelong education [4, 5]. This is why the role of informational texts is gaining increasing attention in the school environment [6].

Currently, Vietnam is undergoing the transition of using textbooks from the old curriculum to those from the new one, in which informational texts play an important role [7]. Meanwhile, the 2018 Literature Program at the primary school level encourages teachers to explore innovative teaching methods that emphasize the development of self-reading comprehension and communication skills [8]. However, research on the teaching and learning of informational texts has only been conducted at the high school with no studies at the primary school level [2].

The reciprocal teaching method is effective for enhancing reading comprehension. It has been used successfully to teach reading skills to students from primary [9, 10], secondary [10, 11] to the university level [12, 13]. Although the reciprocal teaching method has been in existence since 1984, it is still quite new and therefore, under-researched in Vietnam [14, 15]. Thus, the present study investigates the current situation of teaching and learning informational texts among third grade students in Vietnam in order to highlight the need for reciprocal teaching in reading comprehension. The following research questions were formulated for this study:

i) What is the current status of teaching informational texts among third grade students in Vietnam?

ii) What is the current status of learning informational texts among third grade students in Vietnam?

iii) What are the future directions of the reciprocal teaching programme and its impact on the reading comprehension of informational texts among third grade students in Vietnam?

2. Overview

2.1. Informational Texts and Related Genres in the Third Grade Vietnamese Curriculum

In general, informational texts are regarded as a comprehensive genre of written discourse designed to convey information and ideas [3, 7]. Massey (2014) noted that informational texts not only delineate and elucidate attributes and characteristic events associated with a given subject, but they also introduce pertinent terminology and incorporate authentic illustrations/photographs, along with a diverse array of textual elements and navigational aids [16]. Informational texts also diverge from narrative texts in terms of their content, language and visual attributes, which are factors that potentially influence children's reading experiences [17]. In related research, Anh (2021) distinguished between literary and informational texts, and defined the latter as non-fiction texts that use description and analysis, and predominantly utilize events, data, charts and statistical tables to convey information or fulfil communicative functions [18]. At this point, there appears to be a consensus among the authors in their definitions of informational texts. Specifically, they do not incorporate fictional/imaginative elements, and their primary purpose is to provide information. This aligns with the definition of informational texts presented in the 2018 Literature Project in Vietnam, which states, "Informational texts are a type of text aimed at providing truthful, objective information through description, explanation and introduction,..." [8]. This definition will be consistently used in the present study.

In regard to the characteristics of informational texts, researchers around the world and in Vietnam have focused on the vocabulary and structure of this genre. In terms of vocabulary, they often include monosyllabic words, timeless verb tenses, generic noun constructions and technical or content-specific vocabulary. Regarding their structure, they are complex and they take various forms such as description, sequence, comparison/contrast and

problem [1, 5, 6, 16]. However, in primary schools in Vietnam, students do not need to learn about vocabulary or text structure. Instead, they focus on understanding various types of informational texts. The 2018 Literature Program developed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam, categorized informational documents based on their expressive methods. First, there are documents that offer clear and easily understandable instructions such as those introducing traffic signs. Next, there are documents that present specific facts and phenomena such as descriptions of the wind, clouds, rain and sky. This project also included simple and common informational documents (e.g. tables of contents and class schedules), with short documents outlining 2–3 tasks such as detailing animal characteristics or offering instructions for certain activities. Descriptive documents, such as the invention of the light bulb, and explanatory documents about various subjects, such as people, plants and buildings, were also delineated. Finally, the project included short announcements and pre-printed forms, indicating the diverse range of informational materials aimed at enhancing the learning experiences of students in Vietnam [8].

Such classifications were also appropriate for the current teaching practices of primary schools in Vietnam. It also helped teachers design lesson plans and instructional methods tailored to their students' needs. In other words, it considered the simplicity and clarity required for effective teaching of informational texts at the primary school level in the Vietnamese context.

2.2. Reciprocal Teaching Method

The reciprocal teaching method, developed by Annemarie Palincsar and Ann Brown in 1984, is a framework for instruction in which students and teachers switch roles to debate different passages of texts for the purpose of creating meaning together. According to Oo et al., (2021), it consists of four strategies: i) The student's questions based on the texts; ii) The student's summarization of the texts; iii) The student's explanation of the textual

contents that he/she does not comprehend; and iv) the student's prediction of the direction of the texts [19].

In related research, Okkinga et al., (2021) introduced three steps of reciprocal teaching: i) Teaching comprehension-boosting reading techniques to students such as question formulation, prediction, summarization and clarification; ii) Showcasing mastery by providing guidance and modelling, while progressively withdrawing support; and iii) Encouraging students to practice and share comprehension-boosting reading techniques with their peers, under the teacher's guidance [20].

According to previous studies [5, 13, 19-21], the reciprocal teaching approach significantly enhances students' outcomes. For example, Kula and Budak (2020) found a significant difference between the fourth grade students in the experimental group (who used the reciprocal teaching method) and the control group (who used the traditional Turkish teaching methodology) [21]. Similarly, Mafarja et al., (2022) provided proof that using the reciprocal teaching method to teach physics is more effective than using a conventional strategy, and that it benefits both male and female students [22].

Although this method has been in existence since 1984, it is still quite new and under-researched in Vietnam [14, 15].

2.3. Reading Comprehension of Informational Texts and Its Requirements in Vietnam

Reading Comprehension of Informational Texts.

Reading comprehension is a cornerstone of academic success and a vital skill for effectively participating in daily activities [6, 21, 23]. Reading comprehension, regardless of whether it is for informational texts or any other type of texts, comprises two essential skills: reading at the surface level (read aloud) and reading at the deep level (comprehension), which involves various processes such as retrieval, connections, analysis, evaluation, reflection, application, etc [18]. According to Hien et al., (2020), the reading comprehension

of informational texts is a major cognitive activity that requires readers/listeners to apply various skills in order to make sense of and incorporate new materials into their prior knowledge [2].

Requirements for the Reading Comprehension of Informational Texts in the Third Grade Curriculum in Vietnam.

In each grade of primary school, the MOET outlines specific requirements concerning the reading comprehension of informational texts. For third grade students, these requirements are designed to cultivate their ability to grasp both the content and form of informational materials. As for understanding the content, students are tasked with answering fundamental questions about the texts such as the main topic and noteworthy information. They are also expected to discern the main idea of each paragraph, thus honing their ability to extract key information.

In terms of understanding the form of the informational texts, students are encouraged to recognize common types of documents based on their characteristics, including narratives of phenomena, introductions to objects, short notices and simple declarations. They are also instructed to identify how information is chronologically organized within a text and to interpret the data and images presented alongside the textual content. Additionally, students are prompted to compare and connect the ideas presented in the texts, demonstrating their comprehension by articulating what they have learned from the materials [8]. Overall, the purpose of these guidelines is to equip third grade students in Vietnam with the necessary reading comprehension skills to effectively navigate informational texts.

In sum, these theoretical frameworks served as a good foundation for creating a survey questionnaire about the current situation of teaching and learning informational texts among third grade students in Vietnam. It should be noted that this survey questionnaire was based on the Vietnamese context. Thus, the concept, genre and requirements for the reading comprehension of informational texts under the MOET's guidelines must be emphasized.

The inclusion of the reciprocal teaching method in our survey questionnaire aimed to verify whether this method is known among teachers in Vietnam and to what extent. Their responses to these questions will assist researchers in developing future experimental plans in Vietnam.

3. Methodology

In this study, a survey questionnaire was used to carry out the investigation. The Doctoral School of Education's Institutional Review Board granted ethical approval for this study prior to its execution. The authors attest that each teacher who answered the survey gave his/her informed consent.

3.1. Participants

The questionnaire was administered online to a sample of teachers at 50 primary schools in Vietnam. Overall, there were 272 participants (21.3% male, 78.7% female; average age: 40.1 years; 15.8% with <10 years of teaching experience, 48.5% with 10-20 years of experience and 35.7% with >20 years of experience) who volunteered for the research and are currently teaching third grade students through the book series *Connecting Knowledge With Life*.

3.2. Instrument and Procedure

The survey questionnaire focused on the theoretical concept of informational texts, their characteristics, the requirements for the reading comprehension of informational texts in the Vietnamese curriculum and the concept of reciprocal teaching. It consisted of 38 items (multiple-choice questions, essay questions and frequency scale questions) that were classified into four factors: knowledge about informational texts; practical experiences; knowledge of reciprocal teaching; and evaluation of students' attitudes and skills.

After the survey questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese, the similarities and differences between the two versions were examined. A pilot study comprising 10 participants made multiple

modifications/improvements to the translated questionnaire in order to guarantee that all of the questions were understandable and straightforward for the teachers. A thorough evaluation of the conceptual, semantic, experiential and operational equivalencies of the translated questionnaire items was also conducted. In order to ensure that all of the instructions and items on the two English-language versions of the questionnaire were consistent with one another, an English version of the questionnaire (back-translated from the Vietnamese version) was compared with the original. The final Vietnamese version was then converted into an online Google Form. To assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, the reliability coefficient was determined by using Cronbach's alpha (α). In this case, the calculated value, indicative of high reliability, was 0.896 for the 38 items.

3.3. Data Collection

The teachers were given the survey questionnaire outside of the classroom. The objectives and ethical implications were communicated to the teachers, along with the fact that their answers would only be utilized for this study and would not be shared with outside parties. Then, the teachers were requested to use the Google Form to answer all of the questions. After completing the survey questionnaire and emailing the answers to the data collector, all of the data was coded in an Excel file and analyzed for completeness and accuracy.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Question 1: What is the Current Status of Teaching Informational Texts Among Third Grade Students in Vietnam?

In this study, 51.5% of the teachers believed that teaching informational texts to students is "very necessary", while 46.7% stated that it is "necessary". In other words, 98.2% of the teachers agreed that teaching informational texts to students plays an important role in the school environment, with no responses denying

the value of such teaching. Regarding the level of interest in teaching informational texts, 95.3% of the teachers answered "interested" and "very interested", with the remaining 4.7% answering "not very interested". Similarly, 97.1% of the respondents found it "very necessary" and "necessary" to have reference materials/books for teaching students to comprehend informational texts. However, when asked about the basic goal of such teaching in schools, only 36.8% of the teachers answered correctly. Finally, 172 out of the 272 teachers (63.2%) believed that teaching informational texts to students only involves understanding the content and form of the texts. This indicates that more than half of the teachers have not focused on enabling students to express the lessons learned from the texts.

As shown in Figure 1, when teaching the reading comprehension of informational texts, group discussions and problem-solving are the two most commonly used methods, followed by the question-answer method. Meanwhile, the advantages of informational texts are diverse content channels (which engage the students' interest) and age-appropriate texts. In addition, the teachers have access to various teaching methods and flexible applications during class time. However, the difficulties that the teachers faced are as follows. First, since the teachers only had access to the new curriculum for approximately a year, there was still some uncertainty with this approach. Second, there are currently no specific materials on teaching informational texts. Third, there is a lack of material facilities such as computers and projectors. Fourth, training is mainly conducted online, making it difficult for many teachers to interact on a practical basis. Finally, the contents of the informational texts are lengthy, with some vocabulary that is unfamiliar to the students.

In sum, primary school teachers in Vietnam are currently interested in teaching informational texts in the new curriculum. They also recognize the importance of teaching the reading comprehension of this genre and are making efforts to apply active teaching methods in their respective classes. However, many

teachers have not enabled students to draw lessons from the texts and apply them in their daily lives. This may be due to

subjective/objective difficulties such as the new curriculum, limited instructional materials, lengthy texts, etc.

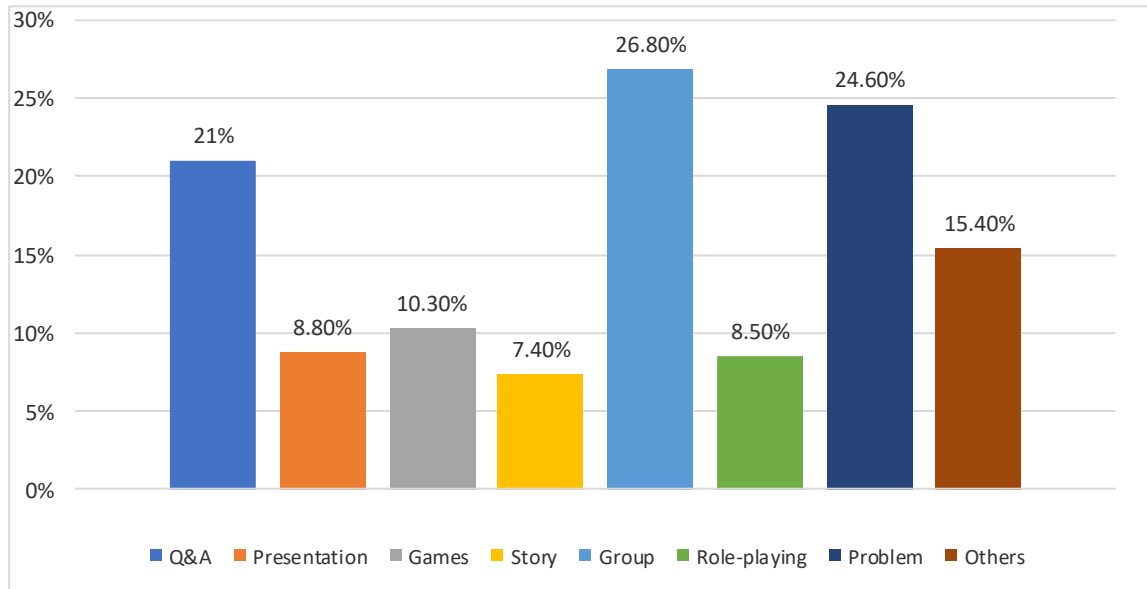


Figure 1. Teaching Methods Used by the Vietnamese Teachers.

4.2. Research Question 2: What is the Current Status of Learning Informational Texts Among Third Grade Students in Vietnam?

Regarding students' attitudes, 66.5% of the teachers believed that their students enjoy informational texts in the current textbooks. Since the students receive support from their families and have access to the Internet, many of them also find it easy to absorb knowledge from informational texts while studying. However, 42.6% of the teachers stated that their students still lack real-life experiences and are somewhat timid in regard to communicating in class.

In order to understand the students' skills, we divided their skills into two groups: those required by the new curriculum in Vietnam and those associated with the reciprocal teaching method. As shown in Figure 2, among the skills in the first group, "identifying main ideas", "understanding the content of the texts" and "recognizing information through images" are

the most proficient skills among the students, with "expressing lessons learned from the texts" ranked last. This can be explained by the fact that the teachers did not focus on this skill, but only concentrated on having the students understand the contents and recognize the text type of the informational texts.

In the second group, only one-fifth of the participants (54 people) responded because they were the only ones who had applied the reciprocal teaching method in their classes. As shown in Table 1, among the four skills associated with this method, the students were relatively proficient in prediction ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.790$) and clarification ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.799$), but struggled more in summarization ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.904$) and questioning ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.860$). According to the students' responses, these skills were performed "often", rather than "always".

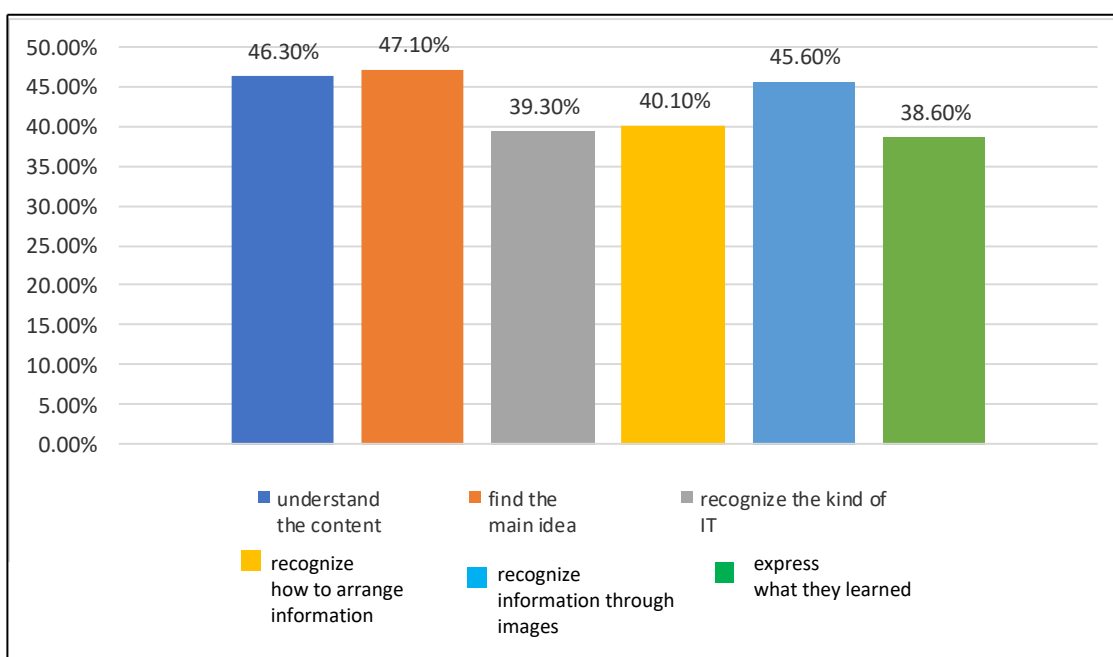


Figure 2. Students' Skills According to the Requirements of the New Curriculum.

Table 1. Students' Skills According to the Reciprocal Teaching Method

Skills	Mean (M)	SD
Predicting	3.58	0.790
Questioning	3.45	0.860
Clarifying	3.58	0.799
Summarizing	3.29	0.904

Based on the findings, current third grade students in Vietnam are interested in learning informational texts. However, besides favourable factors, such as family support and the contents of the texts, the teachers' limitations in providing real-life experiences pose challenges for the students when comprehending this genre. Conversely, as per the requirements of the new curriculum, many students have yet to learn to extract the lessons from the informational texts and apply them in their daily lives. In sum, for the students introduced to the reciprocal teaching method,

the skill of summarizing texts is still a challenge.

4.3. Research Question 3: What are the Future Directions of the Reciprocal Teaching Method on the Reading Comprehension of Informational Texts Among Third Grade Students in Vietnam?

In order to answer this question, this study analyzed the results from Part 2 (i.e. a general understanding of teachers about informational texts) and Part 3 (i.e. a general understanding of teachers about reciprocal teaching). In terms of the former, 172 out of the 272 teachers (62.5%) provided correct answers regarding the concept of informational texts. Interestingly, some teachers believed that informational texts are meant to provide entertainment along with the information, while others thought they were only used for analyzing data and charts. In this case, both interpretations are incorrect and incomplete. On the other hand, 50.7% of the surveyed teachers correctly identified which reading exercises belonged to the genre of informational texts and the form of such texts in

the exercises. Even for the teachers who clearly understood the concept of informational texts, they hesitated in identifying and classifying the types of informational texts in the curriculum. Regarding the recognition of the linguistic features of the informational texts, 66.5% of the teachers adequately identified all five characteristics of the language of the informational texts (scientific, specialized, using general nouns, unambiguous and concise), while 22.5% correctly recognized them, but incompletely. The remaining 11% answered incorrectly, thinking that the vocabulary of informational texts are polysemy and imagery.

Regarding the general understanding of teachers about reciprocal teaching, 72 out of the 272 teachers (26.5%) responded, "Heard of it, but haven't explored it", while 54 out of the 272 teachers (19.8%) chose the answer, "Explored this method to some extent". Those who have heard about this method mainly learned about it through the Internet. Among the 54 teachers, although some applied reciprocal teaching in several teaching periods, no teachers currently use this method on a daily basis. However, when guiding students to practice certain tasks through this method, 57% of the teachers simply explained the strategies, after which they had the students practice immediately, while the remaining 43% demonstrated and explained the strategies to the students, but did not pay attention to the feedback from the students. Thus, it can be concluded that the application of the reciprocal teaching method by teachers in Vietnam is not yet comprehensive, since the role of the teacher is to support the learning process, present challenges and offer assistance (as necessary) to students within their so-called zone of proximal development [24].

Based on the analyses conducted, this study delineated the primary directions for the forthcoming experimental programme. First, it emphasized more training of teachers to actively engage in experiments regarding informational texts. Such training encompasses familiarizing teachers with various concepts

and characteristics as well as recognizing genres and the specific requirements for teaching comprehension within this domain. Additionally, the teachers should undergo training in the reciprocal teaching method in order to understand the concepts and principles inherent in this approach. As for the development of lesson plans for the experiment, the researchers underscore the importance of ensuring that the objectives extend beyond mere comprehension of text contents and forms. It is also essential that students grasp the deeper meaning of the texts and its application in real-life contexts.

Drawing from the insights of Schünemann et al., (2013), who highlighted the efficacy of questioning and summarizing strategies in primary school classrooms, the present study acknowledges that these skills pose challenges for third grade students in Vietnam. Consequently, the researchers will devise a systematic series of exercises aimed at enhancing these skills among such students. Moreover, the experimental teachers will play a pivotal role in guiding the students through practical exercises to reinforce their questioning and summarizing abilities, thereby enriching their overall comprehension capabilities within the context of informational texts [25].

5. Conclusion

In this study, the survey questionnaire was based on the theoretical framework of reciprocal teaching, informational texts and the requirements of the reading comprehension of informational texts in the context of Vietnam. In order to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, the reliability coefficient was determined by using Cronbach's alpha (α). The calculated value, indicating high reliability, was 0.896 for the 38 items. Overall, the results from the questionnaire provided valuable practical grounds for implementing the reciprocal teaching method when teaching the reading comprehension of informational texts for third grade students in Vietnam. The results also demonstrated the significance and novelty of

the study in the context of Vietnam. Specifically, the reciprocal teaching method is still not widely known among teachers, indicating that research on teaching the reading comprehension of informational texts according to the new curriculum should be conducted. Moreover, by using four strategies (i.e. predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarizing), students can develop their cognitive, metacognitive and self-regulatory skills. It will also help them become independent learners, capable of problem-solving in the future. Most importantly, the essence of this method is cooperative learning in which the process of group work and mutual learning can help students enhance their communication skills, one of the most important skills of the 21st century. Considering the benefits of reciprocal teaching, future research efforts in Vietnam should explore the application of this method in subjects beyond reading comprehension such as mathematics, science, physics, etc.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our special thanks to primary school teachers in Hanoi, Hai Phong, Nghe An, and Ha Giang of Vietnam for participating in our survey questionnaire. We are also grateful to Associate Professor/ Doctor Nguyen Tri for sharing his expertise and giving valuable guidance the content of the questionnaire.

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