

# GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS – EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR TEACHING READING SKILLS

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## Abstract

*Graphical organizers are visual displays that illustrate concepts and relationships between facts, figures, or ideas in a reading text. Graphic organizers are known by different names, such as maps, graphs, charts, diagrams, or clusters. They are sometimes referred to cognitive organizers providing students with tools to enhance and facilitate their understanding. Many researchers claim that readers create an image in their mind of what they truly understand it. Therefore, when a student can visualize the text, the teacher knows that he or she has a fascinating insight into its content. If not, he or she should be helped by graphical reading guidelines from the teacher.*

*This workshop will give descriptions of six basic graphic organizers (namely Venn diagram, cause & effect map, problems & solution map, compare & contrast matrix, network tree, and KWL chart) and their application. It is very useful for teachers who teach English at upper secondary schools in Vietnam because the presenter will give samples based on the new English textbook for grade 10 in which such common organizers are appropriately applied. Participants will come away with the value of graphic organizers and become confident to apply these tools in any stages of their reading lesson.*

## Key words:

Graphic organizers, Venn diagram, cause & effect map, problems & solution map, compare & contrast matrix, network tree, and KWL chart

## **I. Introduction**

Teachers of English in Vietnam have a tremendous obstacle to get students enthusiastic about reading texts. Through classroom observations and informal interviews with teachers who conduct reading lessons at upper secondary schools, it reveals that students often feel scared when doing a long and difficult reading task, the reading lessons are not exciting enough to get students involve in their learning, reading comprehension activities designed in the textbook are relatively monotonous. The teachers also worry about how to encourage students to learn and improve their reading skills. Some common questions that they often ask themselves are: (1) Did students really read the text? (2) Do students comprehend with what they read? (3) What will students do if they want to answer comprehension questions according to their favorite learning styles? (4) How do students perform their understanding by using images or visual illustrations instead of responding the questions given in the textbook? (4) How can the teacher motivate and enhance student thinking skills through the reading text?

One of the possible solutions for such problems is using graphic organizers because these organizers can help students depict key concepts and construct the meaning of the reading text. An application of graphic organizers that match the structure of the message, teachers will be able to assess student comprehension of what they are reading, observe their thinking process on what they read as a class, as a group, or individually. Furthermore, graphic organizers are considered as wonderful techniques to make students actively engaged in their learning. Because organizers include words, visual images, illustrative shapes, meaningful labels and logical displays, they are effective for a variety of students with different language levels and different multiple intelligences, especially for those with a visual modality preference.

From various studies on graphic organizers and their effects on student reading comprehension, Robinson (1998) suggests that teachers should use a variety of types of organizers chosen for their appropriateness for the content. They are effective tools in planning, instruction, and assessment.

In this article, six basic graphic organizers namely Venn diagram, cause & effect map, problem & solution map, compare & contrast matrix, network tree, and KWL chart will be described. The value of these organizers will be discussed and followed by their application in English reading lessons at upper secondary schools in Vietnam. There are some samples based on the new English textbook for grade 10 in which such common organizers are appropriately applied. It is hoped that English teachers will have a better insight into graphic organizers and become confident to integrate these effective tools into their reading classroom practice.

## **II. What graphic organizers?**

A graphic organizer is a visual frame used to represent knowledge and understanding of a subject matter by arranging important aspects of a concept or topic into a logical pattern using labels. There are numerous kinds of graphic organizers called maps, graphs, charts, diagrams, or clusters. Each of these patterns can be expressed in different lay outs but they have a similar purpose that depicts the relationships between facts and figures or key concepts and ideas within a learning task. In terms of reading comprehension, graphic organizers can be effectively used in

all lessons for students of all ages to check not only students' understanding but also to motivate and enhance their thinking skills. Krasnic (2011, p.24) claims that students are able to clear their thoughts and sharpen their thinking by organizing and connecting key concepts related to what they are reading from the text. This process can help the students to improve their critical thinking, a kind of cognitive activity that appears in many categories of the cognitive process dimension.

Graphic organizers are wonderful tools to get students actively engaged in their learning. Because these visual representations include words, images and symbolic patterns such as conceptual, hierarchical, cyclical and sequential, they seem to be effective with students with verbal, visual and logical learning styles. Students who are good at their merits feel easier to demonstrate their reading understanding by using graphic organizers instead of answering comprehension questions in verbal languages. Reading researchers point out that in an English reading lesson, if the teacher uses graphic organizers that appropriately go with the organization of the passage being read, he or she will enhance and facilitate student understanding and develop their full potentials. For example, if the text is presented in a sequential manner, a list or a timeline will be best, or if written in a compare/contrast mode, a 2-column chart or Venn diagram might be better. If the reading passage is related to a central theme and followed by paragraphs that have a relationship to the controlling point, a mind map or a network tree should be used to brainstorm the topic and become a great strategy for students.

### **III. Why graphic organizers?**

Graphic organizers come in many forms and provide students with visual information that complements the class discussion or text. After carrying out extensive research on the effect of graphic organizers on student reading comprehension, Fisher (2002) says that students who belonged to the experiment group consistently reported that the graphic organizer is the most helpful strategy that they employed. Many teachers believe that it is not hard for good readers to symbolize key concepts and the core value from the text or to depict the given information in different ways regardless which genres or formats the comprehension task is presented in. However, they are not totally sure that what kinds of formats can stimulate student learning modalities, and which techniques can promote student critical thinking skills. Quist (1995) points out that metacognitive strategies used in instructional activities will be able to improve student reading comprehension. He also claims that good readers seem to read for a certain purpose and actively monitor their own understanding of what they read.

On the other hand, a question raised in various discussions is that what techniques are suitable for poor readers. This is also a serious problem that many teachers concern. Fortunately, many studies show that explicit instructions in such strategies as questioning, summarizing, comprehension monitoring, and especially using graphic organizers can help not only good readers but also poor ones learn to retain, organize, and evaluate the information that they read (Quist, 1995., Langford, Rizzo & Roth, 2003., Irwin-DeVitis & Pease, 1995). Graphic organizers help students focus on what is important because they highlight key concepts and vocabulary, and the relationships among them, thus providing the tools for critical and creative thinking (Bromley, Irwin-DeVitis, and Modlo, 1995).

Another study asserted the effectiveness of using organizers, particularly mind map, story map, or network tree in promoting comprehension skills of secondary students identified as being at risk for reading, including six students with learning disabilities. Instructions with organizers appropriate for the organization of reading text were found to be more effective in improving students' reading comprehension than the traditional instruction in which reading tasks merely consist of question and answer form (Dimino et al., 1990).

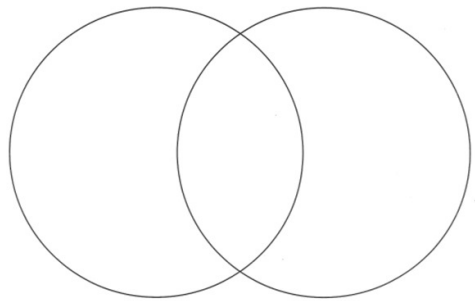
With the mentioned benefits, teachers should use graphic organizers to help students prepare themselves for reading, to explore the text with a deeper understanding, to externalize their thinking, and to promote effective learning.

Appropriately use, graphical organizer instructions can significantly reduce the amount of time required to achieve the objective of a reading lesson for both the teacher and learners. However, the appropriate choice of organizers for the reading lesson depends on the teacher's knowledge of the topic presented in the passage, knowledge of pedagogical content that requires the teacher to plan and conduct an effective lesson with a supportive learning environment, and knowledge of language learners in order to develop students' creativity and critical thinking – the essential 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills.

#### IV. How graphic organizers?

Graphical organizers are visual displays that illustrate concepts and relationships between facts, figures, or ideas in a reading text. Graphic organizers are known by different names, such as maps, graphs, charts, diagrams, or clusters. The following are brief descriptions of six basic graphic organizers, namely Venn diagram, cause & effect map, problems & solution map, compare & contrast matrix, network tree, and KWL chart. These visual representations are followed by specific samples taken from the new English textbook for grade 10 in Vietnam but adapted for a better use in English reading classrooms.

##### IV. 1. Venn diagram

<p><b>Description</b></p> <p>A Venn diagram consists of two (or sometimes as many as five) overlapping circle. It is used to help students compare and contrast two characters, settings, events, or other literary elements. The Venn diagram is one of conceptual organizers that highlights similarities and differences. It is also an effective tool for students to easily think about how the information is organized. In groups, students can share and compare the information on their Venn diagrams.</p>	
<p><b>Procedures:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Copy the Venn diagram template for students.</li> <li>2. Identify and label above each circle the two people, places or things to compare and contrast.</li> <li>3. Discuss the similarities and differences with students.</li> <li>4. Record shared traits or characters in the overlapping section of the circle</li> <li>5. Record unique traits and list them in the appropriate circle</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Venn diagram</b></p> 
<p>(Adapted from Robb, A (2003). <i>40 graphic organizers that Build Comprehension during Independent Reading</i>, p. 30. New York: Scholastic Professional Books.)</p>	

## Application

### *Success for the Americans*

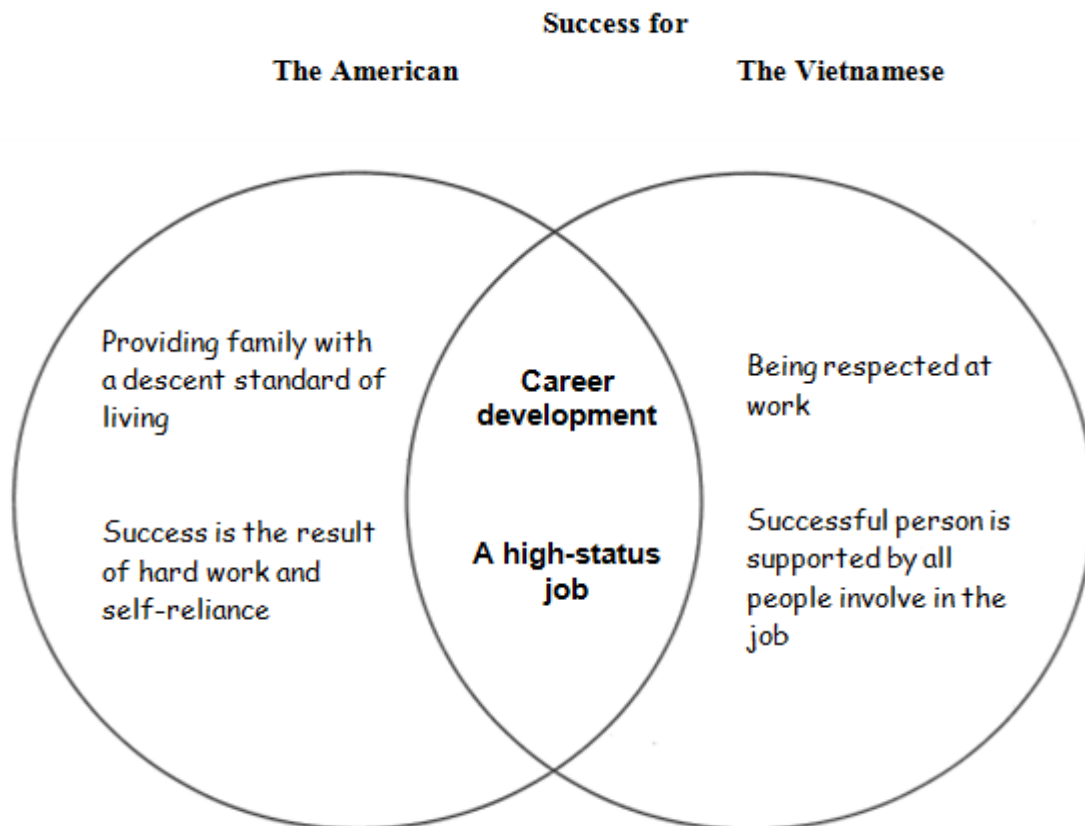
The American idea of success has not changed much over the several centuries of its existence. First, success has always meant providing their family with a decent standard of living. Second, as for career development, success means ending their career in a higher and more prosperous position when they began it. To an American, it is clear that success is the result of hard work and self-reliance.

### *Success for the Vietnamese*

For many people, the idea of success varies greatly. However, the Vietnamese share some common views about personal success. First, success always goes along with a high-status job with good income. Second, being respected at work also means success. To a Vietnamese, a successful person is someone with high status and is supported by all people involved in his job.

(Vietnam MOET. (2014) *Tiếng Anh 10: Student book 2*, p.24. Hanoi: Education Publishing House and Pearson.)

## VENN DIAGRAM



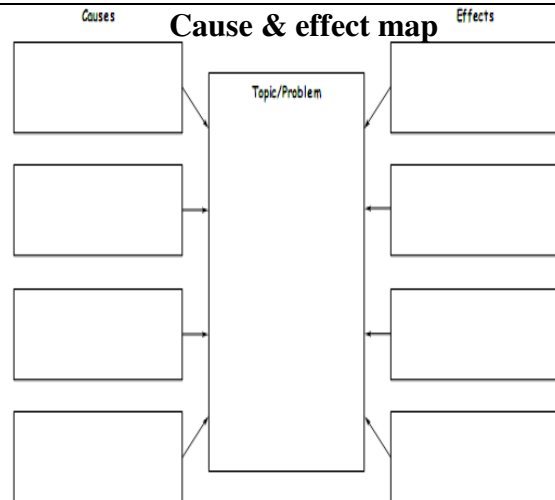
## IV. 2. Cause & effect map

### Description

A cause and effect map is one of the effective organizers used to show relationships of all factors (causes) that lead to the given situation (effect). It is usually preceded by cause and effect analysis. The teacher uses this organizer to help students realize that there are many causes that contribute an effect. It also graphically displays the connections of the causes to the effect to each other. This activity seems to be suitable for students at a high level. Students can do this task individually, in pairs or in groups and then share what the information in the diagram with the others.

### Procedures:

1. Copy the cause & effect map template for students.
2. List the topic or problem explored in the center of the organizer.
3. Discuss the causes and effects with students.
4. Record what makes the problem happen in the Causes section.
5. Record what happens because of these causes and list them in the Effects section



(Adapted from IRA/NCTE. 2006. *Read-Write-Think: Cause and Effect Graphic Organizer*. Retrieved June. 2, 2015, from [http://tryscience.org/sites/default/files/uploads/lessonplan/sharedresources/graphic\\_organizer\\_highlevel.pdf](http://tryscience.org/sites/default/files/uploads/lessonplan/sharedresources/graphic_organizer_highlevel.pdf))

### Application

#### *Environmental Pollution*

Environmental pollution is one of the impacts of human activities on the earth. It is also one of the biggest problems of the world today. The environmental pollution is the cause of some disease that most people do not know about. There are four types of pollution, namely, air pollution, soil pollution, water pollution and noise pollution.

Most of the air pollution results from the burning of fossil fuels, motor vehicles, factories, aircraft and rockets. This can cause acid rain which damages water, soil, vegetation. Air pollution also contributes to the greenhouse effect which can lead to series of environmental problems such as global warming, polar ice melting, rise of sea levels and loss of land.

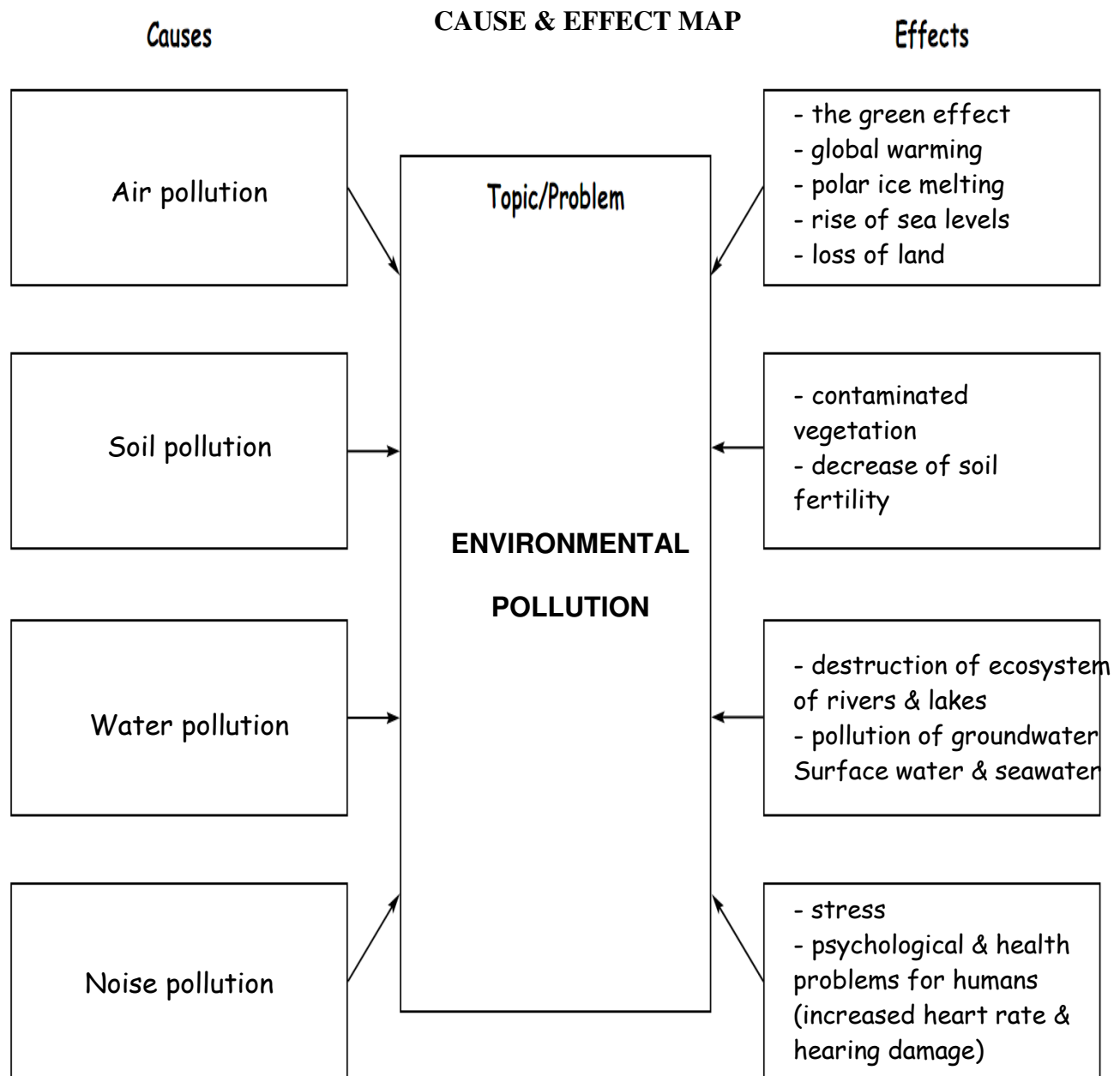
Soil pollution is a result of dumping plastic or other inorganic waste in the ground and the over use of chemical fertilizers in agriculture. The long-term effects of soil pollution are contaminated vegetation and the decrease of soil fertility.

Water pollution is a result of dumping pollutants such as detergents, pesticides, oil and other chemicals in rivers, which makes the water unclean or contaminated. Rubbish blockages in rivers can also cause pollution. The effects of water pollution include the destructions of ecosystem of rivers, lakes and the pollution of groundwater, surface water and seawater.

Noise pollution is caused by loud and annoying sounds of motor vehicles, railway, aircraft and jet engines, factory machinery and musical instruments. It can cause stress psychological and health problems for humans such as increased heart rate and hearing damage.

Environmental pollution is becoming an increasingly serious problem or threat that needs to be taken care of as soon as possible, not only for the sake of the environment, but also for the people that live in it.

(Vietnam MOET. (2014) *.Tiếng Anh 10: Student book 2*, p.41. Hanoi: Education Publishing House and Pearson.)



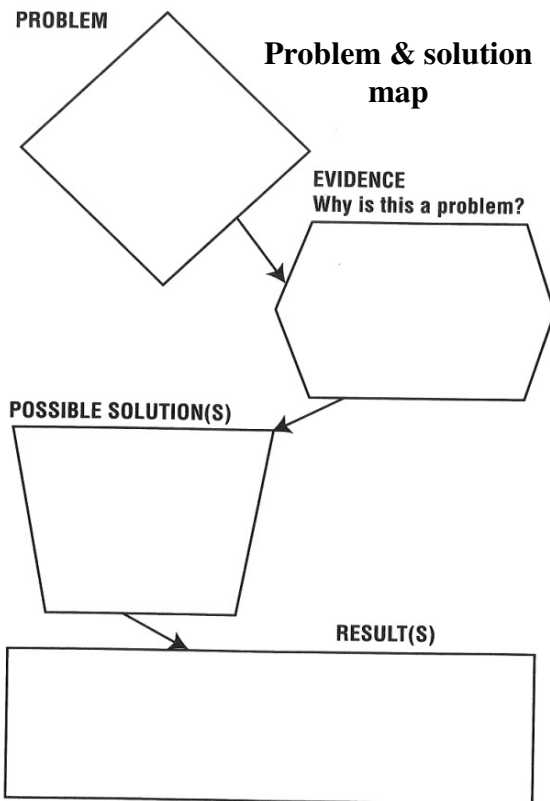
### IV. 3. Problem & solution map

#### Description

The critical thinking necessary to problem-solve by posting and evaluating solutions is an important skill students need throughout their lives. Being able to write clearly and persuasively about proposed solutions is as important as being able to think clearly and logically in formulating solutions. This reading guide helps students organize and write about problems and proposed solutions. This activity is also applied into a writing class where students are aware of the relevant problem and discuss reliable methods. Students can do this task individually and then share what the information in the diagram with their partner or their group members.

#### Procedures:

1. Have students identify the problem in the text and write it in the diamond at the top of the template labeled PROBLEM.
2. Ask student(s) to find out what specifically makes this a problem. Have the students write the given evidence for defining this as a problem in the box labeled EVIDENCE.
3. Let students list each of the solutions presented in the text in the box labeled SOLUTIONS.
4. Have students predict and write the results expected from the chosen solutions in the box labeled RESULTS. (optional)
5. Students then have presentation about the discussed topic, using the template as a guide. Remind students to use the key organizing words to help connect ideas



(Adapted from Bromley, K., Irwin-Devitis, L. & Modlo, M. (1999). *50 graphic organizers for reading, writing & more: Reproducible templates, student samples, and easy strategies to support every learner*, pp. 106-107. New York: Scholastic Professional Books.)

#### Application

##### *Is It Really Ecotourism*

Vietnam's natural and cultural potential for ecotourism is well known. However, eco tours in Vietnam involve mainly travel to natural places and the activities are not based on the ecotourism principles.

In Halong Bay, for example, tourists just visit the bay and some caves, without learning about



the environment or taking part in any local cultural activities.

In addition, in some national parks, tourists are not fully aware of environment protection. If they throw rubbish or break tree branches, they are not fined. As a result, some tourist areas have suffered from some environmental damage.

What's more, most tour guides have poor knowledge of the ethnic culture. Therefore, ecotourists have little or no understanding of Vietnam's cultural diversity.

### ***Ecotourism: Development or Damage?***

Many African countries, with their numerous national parks and safaris, have benefited from ecotourism. However, ecotourism activities have had some negative impacts on the environment and people there.

One of the worst impacts is the mass loss of land. Parks and game reserves require vast land, and the local people's best pasture lands have been taken away.

In Kenya, the tourism industry has employed better educated people from other countries. As a result, ecotourism has not provided more jobs for the local people.

In Tanzania, hunting in some game reserves is allowed. Camping requires firewood for cooking and heating. These activities have caused danger and harm to the environment.

(Vietnam MOET. (2014). *Tiếng Anh 10: Student book 2*, p.55. Hanoi: Education Publishing House and Pearson.)

### **How to become ecotourists?**

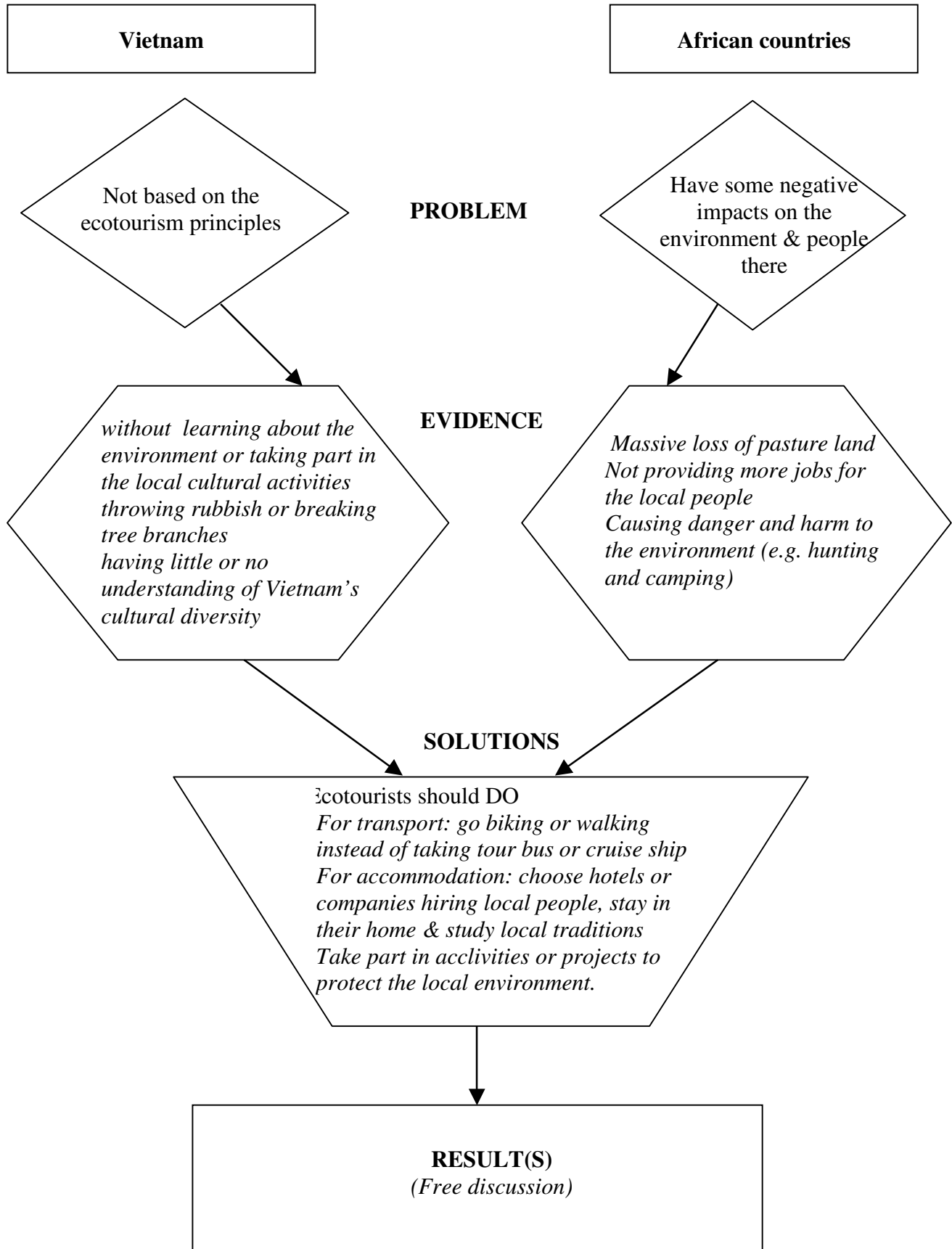
As for transport, ecotourists might prefer a biking or walking tour to a bus tour which may contribute to air pollution. They often avoid travelling on cruise ship, as a cruise ship is a great source of air and water pollution, with harmful emissions sent into the air and passengers' waste dumped into the sea. A cruise ship might also cause damage to coral reef and the ecosystem that it travels near.

What about accommodation? Ecotourists choose hotels and tourist companies that hire mainly local staff, as a way to contribute to the local economy. They can also directly benefit the local people by staying in their homes and studying local traditions.

What else make tourists become ecotourists? Ecotourists take part in activities or projects to protect the local environment, such as recycling used products or cleaning up the beach. In general, if they make their trip environmentally and socially responsible, they are ecotourists.

(Vietnam MOET. (2014). *Tiếng Anh 10: Workbook 2*, p.38. Hanoi: Education Publishing House and Pearson.)

**PROBLEM & SOLUTION MAP**





her parents or grandparents. Vietnamese parents often spend their free time helping their children with their homework or giving them advice on behaviour.

(Vietnam MOET. (2014). *Tiếng Anh 10: Student book 1*, p.13. Hanoi: Education Publishing House and Pearson.)

### COMPARE AND CONTRAST MATRIX

Questions		Answer	
		In Singapore	In Vietnam
1	What type of family is popular in the country?	<i>nuclear</i>	<i>extended</i>
2	Who take care of young children when their parents at work?	<i>Nursery school or child-minder</i>	<i>Grandparents or great grandparents</i>
3	Who looks after elderly parents?	<i>Nursing homes</i>	<i>Children or grandchildren</i>
4	How do the parents contribute to educating their children?	<i>Taking part in the activities of Parent Support Group or Parent Teacher Association</i>	<i>Helping their children with their homework or giving them advice on behavior</i>

## IV.5. Network tree

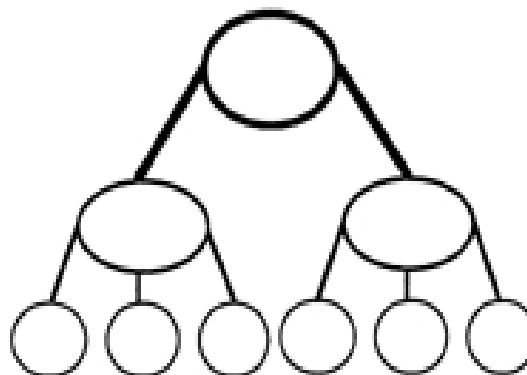
### Description

Graphic organizers can help students organize facts and information related to the reading text. A network tree is a type of graphic organizer that shows connections. A network tree is made of a series of oval of two or three different sizes connected by many branches to show how facts and information branch off of a main idea or topic. Also, this organizer is often used to indicate a work cooperation (the company structure), a hierarchy (types of insects), or branching procedures (the circulatory system). Key frame questions for this organizer are: What is the superordinate category? What are the subordinate categories? How are they related? How many levels are there? Students can do this task by themselves, in pairs or in groups and then share what they have done with the others.

### Procedures:

1. Copy the network tree template for students.
2. Help the students create headings for top large oval and sub-headings for the other large ovals.
3. Walk around to observe while the students are reading the text individually or together and record the information in each branch.
4. Discuss the connection of the idea in each oval if necessary.
5. Make sure the students are recording details from the text in appropriate places on the network tree organizer

Network tree



Hall, T., & Strangma, N. (2013) Strangman Graphic Organizers. Retrieved June 12, 2015, from [http://aim.cast.org/learn/historyarchive/backgroundpapers/graphic\\_organizers#.VbnbaLPtmko](http://aim.cast.org/learn/historyarchive/backgroundpapers/graphic_organizers#.VbnbaLPtmko)

### Application

#### “Many hands make light work.”

I live in a family of four: my parents, my young sister and I. We are all very busy people: my parents work, my sister and I spend most of our time at school, so we split the household chores equally.

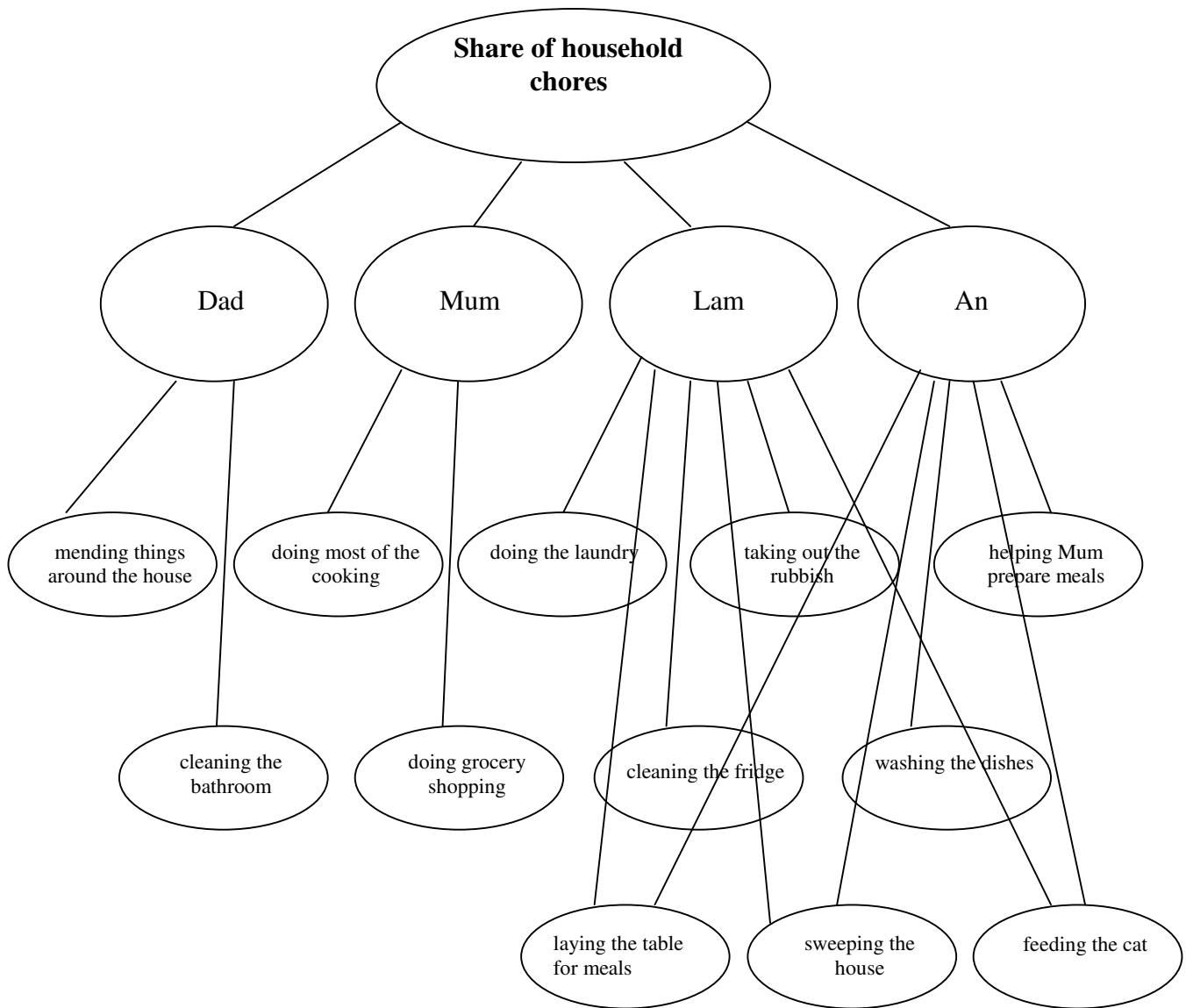
My dad is responsible for mending things around the house. He also cleans the bathroom twice a week. My mum does most of the cooking and grocery shopping.

Being the elder child in the family, I take up a large share of housework. I do the laundry, take out the rubbish, and clean the fridge once a week. My younger sister An’s responsibilities include helping Mum to prepare meals and washing the dishes. My sister and I take turns laying the table for meals, sweeping the house, and feeding the cat.

We do our share of housework willingly as we know that if everyone contributes, the burden is less and everyone can have some time to relax.

(Vietnam MOET. (2014). *Tiếng Anh 10: Student book 1*, p.12. Hanoi: Education Publishing House and Pearson.)

# NETWORK TREE



## IV. 6. KWL chart

### Description

A K-W-L (Ogle, 1986) chart helps students understand what they know (**K**), what they want to know (**W**), and what they learned (**L**) when reading or researching a topic. This an effective visual tool to improve students by tapping their prior knowledge and letting them set their own purposes for learning. By analyzing the **L** column, both the teacher and students can evaluate students' grasp of knowledge or content. Then the teacher can make plans to enrich concepts or to remedy misconceptions.

### Procedures:

1. Construct the organizer and preteach or review the terms on the template.
2. Write the information the students brainstorm about the topic in the **K** (know) column.
3. Record the questions the students have about the topic in the **W** (want to know) column. This establishes a purpose for reading or researching.
4. After the students have read, researched, and discussed the topic, place the new information in the **L** (learned) column.
5. Discus with students whether they can now confirm or deny any statements listed in the **K** column.

### K-W-L Chart

<b>L</b> What (I) we learned	
<b>W</b> What (I) we want to find out	
<b>K</b> What (I) we know	

(Taken from Bromley, K., Irwin-DeVites, L. & Modlo, M. (1999). *50 graphic organizers for reading, writing & more: Reproducible templates, student samples, and easy strategies to support every learner*, pp. 48-49. New York: Scholastic Professional Books.)

### Application

#### **Idol: A Global Smash Hit**

*Idol* is one of the most successful entertainment formats ever launched. *The first Idol, Pop Idol*, began in 2001, and quickly became a world-wide phenomenon with local versions in many countries and territories. Hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide have watched *The Idol* programme since its first launched in the UK. The show has been on the top ten rating lists of the most countries. Year after year, *Idol* remains a global smash hit.

#### **Some Facts**

*American Idol* began in 2002 and quickly became the most popular entertainment series in America with viewers in the hundreds of millions.

*Vietnam Idol* is part of Idol franchise created in the UK by Simon Fuller. The first season of *Vietnam Idol* aired on May 23, 2007. *The Vietnam Idol* process includes: auditions, semi-finals, and finals. The final contestants perform live on stage to a television audience. The contestants receiving the fewest viewers' votes are eliminated from the competition.

(Vietnam MOET. (2014). *Tiếng Anh 10: Student book 1*, p.29. Hanoi: Education Publishing House and Pearson.)

K-W-L Chart		
K What (I) we know	W What (I) we want to find out	L What (I) we learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The <i>Idol</i> format came from the UK.</li> <li>- <i>Pop Idol</i> was first launched in 2001.</li> <li>- Contestants are voted by the audience and TV viewers.</li> <li>- The first season of <i>Vietnam Idol</i> aired in 2012.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who created the <i>Idol</i> format?</li> <li>- Is <i>Vietnam Idol</i> a franchised programme?</li> <li>- When did <i>American Idol</i> begin?</li> <li>- When will <i>American Idol</i> end?</li> <li>- What are the rules of the <i>Idol</i>?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Pop Idol</i>, created by the British entertainment executive Simon Fuller, is a music competition which began on British ITV on October 6, 2001 to select the best new young pop singer in the UK based on viewer voting and participation.</li> <li>- <i>Vietnam Idol</i> is part of the <i>Idol</i> franchised of the original reality program <i>Pop Idol</i> by Simon Fuller. The first season of <i>Vietnam Idol</i> aired on May 23, 2007 on HTV9, and the fourth season aired on August 17, 2012.</li> <li>- <i>American Idol</i> began in 2002 and will end its 15-year run after the upcoming season, finishing in 2016.</li> </ul>

### Guided questions

1. Look at the logos. Are you familiar with them?



2. What do you know about these kinds of entertainment?
3. What information about these shows you want to know?
  - a. Where did the *Idol* format come from?
  - b. How long has the *Idol* format lasted?
  - c. Who created the first *Idol* format?
  - d. Is *Vietnam Idol* an original programme or a franchised one?
  - e. What are the rules of the *Idol*?



## **V. Conclusion**

Graphic organizers, without a doubt, can be used as practical tools for students to organize information, to connect keys concepts or ideas presented in the reading text. They also allow students to acknowledge and share their collective understanding or views on the lesson goals. Teachers need to provide such wonderful means for students to organize information before, while, and after reading. They should guide students in articulating their prior knowledge and develop linkages between prior knowledge and new information. They should establish various means for students to respond to text by encouraging and teaching various organizational structures for recording information (Ruddell, 2001). It can be seen that graphic organizers are teacher-directed activities that get students engaged in learning on their own initiative.

With the mentioned discussions about the value of graphic organizers and basic samples for their applications, teachers of English, especially Vietnamese teachers of English who are using the new English textbook of grade 10 become confident when integrating such effective organizers into their reading classroom practice. It is strongly believed that graphic organizers can help teachers to activate students' multiple modalities or their favourite learning styles while immersing themselves in reading books regardless of the age groups or content area.

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