Strategies to Support High School Students' Reading Comprehension in the English Language

Estrategias de apoyo para la comprensión de lectura del idioma inglés en estudiantes de educación secundaria y media

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Teachers are often concerned about the low reading level of their students in both English and Spanish. One way to solve this problem is by using reading strategies. Promoting the development of reading competences in English will offer the students tools that allow them to comprehend texts and will contribute to a closer relation with the second language culture. This article reports on a study carried out when doing my teaching practice in a public high school in Bogotá, Colombia, in 2002. The main objective of my research project was to support the development of eleventh graders' reading comprehension competence in English. Hence, I refer to the group's views on English reading comprehension, their handling of strategies to develop reading competence in English and their progress after having applied those strategies.

Key words: Foreign Language-Teaching, Reading Strategies

El bajo nivel de lectura en los estudiantes de inglés y español es una de las preocupaciones comunes de los docentes. Una forma de solucionar este problema es a través del uso de estrategias de lectura. De tal manera, promover el desarrollo de competencias lectoras en los estudiantes de inglés les ofrecerá herramientas que les permitirán comprender los textos y contribuirá a crear una relación más cercana entre ellos y la cultura de la segunda lengua. Este artículo reporta un estudio llevado a cabo durante mi práctica docente en una escuela pública de Bogotá, Colombia, en el año 2002. El objetivo principal de mi proyecto de investigación fue apoyar el desarrollo de la competencia en comprensión de lectura en el idioma inglés en estudiantes de undécimo grado. Por lo tanto, menciono los puntos de vista de los estudiantes sobre la comprensión de lectura, la forma como utilizan las estrategias para desarrollar esta competencia en inglés y su proceso después de su acercamiento a la comprensión lectora a través del uso de las mismas.

Palabras claves: Lengua Extranjera-Enseñanza, Estrategias de Lectura

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INTRODUCTION

While doing my teaching practice, I explored the area of reading comprehension in English. Through a survey I found information about the way teachers incorporated learning strategies, their reasons to incorporate them, the frequency of working with reading strategies, and the contribution of the reading strategies in supporting the development of students' reading competence (see annex 1).

In relation to students' perceptions of the methodology introduced by the teachers, they stated that lessons were taught mainly through reading workshops and definitions on the blackboard. Students said that contents were introduced according to their own difficulties, the topic of the class and their preferences. Regarding the frequency of working with reading strategies, most of the students mentioned that the teacher rarely incorporated new reading strategies. Additionally, students acknowledged the contribution of reading strategies in the development of reading competences. They highlighted the use of the following strategies when reading texts in the foreign language: passage completion, scrambled stories, cloze tests, hypothesis identification, propositions extraction, argumentative nets construction, and semantic relations.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Based on the results mentioned above, my interest in examining the group's views regarding reading comprehension experiences in the English class, the way they handled strategies to develop reading competences and their progress after approaching reading comprehension using those strategies, led me toward a main question: How to support the development of the reading comprehension competences in the English area for eleventh graders? In order to answer that query, I posed two related questions, namely:

* How could I incorporate the use of reading strategies to support the development of reading competences in the students?
* What kind of competences do students develop through the use of reading strategies?

Likewise, the main objective of the study was to support the development of reading comprehension competences in English for eleventh graders. This, in turn, guided me to achieve two specific objectives: To foment the use of reading strategies' application by the students and, second, to promote the development of reading competences through situations related to the social context of the students.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This research has followed the qualitative case study principles. This kind of research allowed me to study an aspect in depth for a period of time. "In particular, qualitative case studies are ideal designs to understand and to interpret the observations made on an educational phenomenon in a second language acquisition" (Merriam, 1998, p. 40).

The data techniques used were: questionnaires, recordings, diaries and interviews. The participants were eleventh

graders at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia, and who had only studied English for six years in a non-intensive program (three hours per week). The institution belongs to a social zone of the 2, 3 and 4 strata. The course was made up of 31 students: 24 males and 7 females. The average age was seventeen years old.

In connection with the foreign language school project, I took into consideration the following achievement indicators that were part of the English area for the eleventh course and which had to do with reading comprehension processes, namely:

02 Analyze information provided by different types of texts in English.
05 Deal with reading comprehension strategies in English.
06 Go in depth in the argumentative, propositional and interpretative aspects in the foreign language.
09 Identify the main topic of the different English readings and apply new vocabulary to daily life.

I did this study during my teaching practice. I made an agreement with the teaching practice director, the class teacher and students to apply a plan that allowed them to develop their reading skills. I developed 13 workshops in which we used texts with topics such as Holy Week and international conflicts.

To approach these texts I designed materials applying different reading strategies discussed by Tanner and Green (1998). They were: skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, outlining, paraphrasing,

scrambled stories, extensive reading and cloze. (Relevant guidelines on extensive reading are also provided by Bamford and Day, 1998). I also included three of the six *levels of reading decodification* proposed by Miguel de Zubiría (1995): the primary, secondary and third decodification. Moreover, I considered the auxiliary mechanisms that operate in each of the previously mentioned levels. The auxiliary mechanisms were the synonymy, the antonymy, which constitutes part of the primary decodification; the pronominalization, the propositional inference and the chromatism from the secondary decodification; and the proposition extraction, and the semantic structure discovery, levels that make part of the third decodification.

These mechanisms were complemented following the ideas proposed by Julia Baquero (1994, 2002) in the courses on text comprehension and production. From those courses, I adapted two types of reading: *first level reading* and *functional reading.* The former is approached through different types of questions like referent questions and contextual questions –both used in this research. In the latter, the student should be able to extract the hypothesis and the argumentative propositions that support the reading.

The students were guided at theoretical and practical levels. At the theoretical level, I explained a determined number of strategies by session. Practical guidance was given in workshops composed of a reading followed by exercises related to it in which the students had to put in practice each one of the explained strategies in order to decode the reading passages. (See a sample workshop, in Annex 2).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I took into account the following aspects that made up part of this research: the notion of the concept of competence and communicative competence as well as the analysis of competence in the school and a revision of the aspects of reading, reading comprehension and reading strategies. Also, I found practical recommendations for handling reading lessons in the studies carried out in Colombian public schools by Correales, Mendivelso and Santacruz (2000) as well as by Santoyo and Morales (2000).

Regarding the concept of competence, Chomsky relates it to grammatical rules and to the generation of knowledge. This author, as pointed out by Maldonado (2001), founded two dimensions which are competence as an inherent capacity to know grammatical rules and to demonstrate it in concrete speech events. On the other hand, Maldonado (Ibid.) states two definitions of competence: The first relates competence with terms such as achievement, indicator and capacity, whereas from the labor point of view, competence is defined as production, honesty and efficiency. According to Torrado (2000), competence can be understood as the knowledge someone has and the use s/he makes of that knowledge to solve a task in a specific situation and in relation to context, needs and concrete demands.

Miguel de Zubiría (1995) points out the different mechanisms that occur in the reading process and proposes that the teacher should introduce them instead of teaching them. Due to the fact that *decodification mechanisms* play an important role in the reading process, my main interest was to reinforce these in the belief that students could find in them the strategies that allowed them to comprehend an English text.

In my opinion the strategies proposed by Tanner and Green (1998) support the development of reading competences, particularly when dealing with the form of the text (aspects of textual cohesion) while the strategies stated by De Zubiría (1995) look for a semantic approximation. Likewise, I consider the strategies stated by these authors to be similar in their functioning as can be observed in the following chart. Contextual guessing keeps up a relation with propositional inference. On the other hand, outlining and unscrambling stories correspond in a certain way to the macro-propositions extraction mechanism and semantic structure discovering, respectively, because they all support the reader's comprehension at a structural level of the text.

Strategies proposed by Tanner and Green	Strategies proposed by De Zubiría
Contextual guessing: To make conjectures about the meaning of the words' meaning looking at the words that surround the unknown word or situations that are being dealt with.	**Propositional inference:** Its goal is to discover the meaning found in phrases and sentences.
Outlining: It is a note taking strategy that helps us to see the organization of the overall text.	**Macro-proposition extraction:** It consists of extracting the macro-propositions and eliminating the remaining information. The macro-propositions' structure must explain the relationships among phrases/sentences.
Unscrambling stories: The reader must re- organize the mixed pieces of a text to show that s/he understands how the components fit together.	**Semantic structure discovering**: It is the system of the linked macro-propositions respecting the linkage among them.

Chart 1. Comparison of some reading strategies proposed by Tanner and Green (1998) and De Zubiría (1995)

FINDINGS

To collect data, I used questionnaires to diagnose the students' reading comprehension domain in English, their knowledge of reading strategies in a second language and the reading strategies' effectiveness. Field-notes were also used to register aspects such as students' progress and difficulties, evidenced skills and attitudes, and their success when working with reading strategies. Through videorecordings I looked for identifying students' problems, participation, differences among students' performance, their progress in reading, their reasoning, and the use of meta-language in the English class.

An analysis of the data gathered through the procedures mentioned above led me to the subcategories shown in the following diagram under a core category: Incorporation of strategies for the pedagogic process.
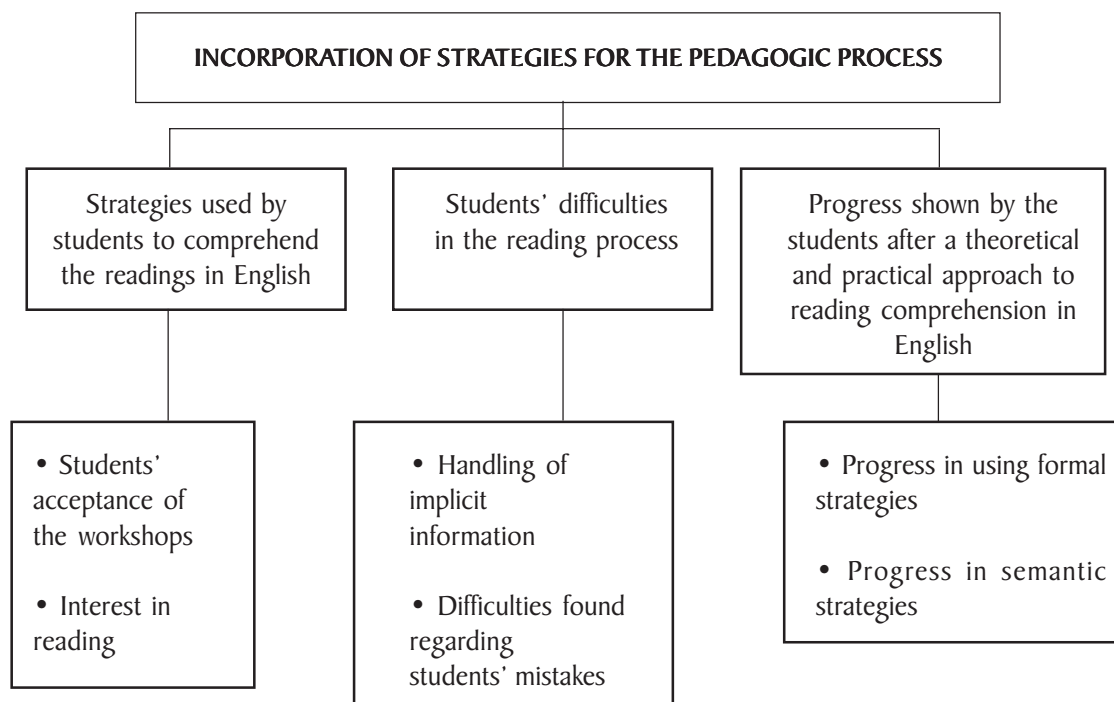
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│        INCORPORATION OF STRATEGIES FOR THE PEDAGOGIC PROCESS      │
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Strategies used by students to comprehend the readings in English	Students' difficulties in the reading process	Progress shown by the students after a theoretical and practical approach to reading comprehension in English
• Students' acceptance of the workshops • Interest in reading	• Handling of implicit information • Difficulties found regarding students' mistakes	• Progress in using formal strategies • Progress in semantic strategies

Diagram 1. Categories found when analyzing data on reading comprehension

Within the core category incorporation of strategies for the pedagogic process, I found three important subcategories. The first one is related to the **strategies used by students to comprehend the readings**. Results showed that the strategies most used were studying vocabulary and analyzing the main idea. This can be seen in one of the students testimonies, to wit: *Well, first at all the words I more or less know…to have an idea, if it has dates, by the dates one can have a guide, translation also and to translate to comprehend the text and by the words that one more or less knows how to guide oneself and by the title (Anibal Andrés).*

The use of the dictionary and imagination was also evidenced: *My strategy is to imagine every action of the text in English (Isauro).* In addition, students turned to prediction, translation, and attempted to use inference to make sense of what they read.

I could also observe the students' acceptance of the workshops when I adapted the argumentative model proposed by Baquero (2002). This acceptance could be evidenced through the familiarization of strategies such as semantic structure discovering and their interest in reading processes. As I wrote in my journal, students were motivated when they found functionality in the different topics as evidenced by the following: *As every point of the exercise was explained, students found this exercise practical for the reading comprehension in English.*

I could note that students' motivation for the functionality of the topics was due to the application of topics from different fields such as biology, history and anthropology. This shows us that, as stated by Maldonado (2001: 22), we have to promote the development of cross-curricular competences which implies decoding technical language that characterizes areas like physics, chemistry and linguistics.

In addition, the students were motivated when a new strategy was introduced as shown by the following: *When I taught some types of questions such as referential and contextual ones, the students were "amazed" because these types of questions had not been commonly used in the English class (Field-note, April 1).* They also got engaged in reading activities when these were not too long or when exercises were not too numerous.

A second important subcategory has to do with students' **difficulties** in the reading process. I could observe that the students had difficulty with the handling of implicit information as shown by this statement: *Even they have not comprehended that there is implicit information that is also relevant.* The students also showed difficulties with the intensive reading, outlining and unscrambling stories strategies. In relation to this point, I think that the students are guided unconsciously and easily toward prediction than toward the fulfillment of strategies whose objective is the comprehension of the structure of the text (including intensive reading). This might be due to the nature of language itself because, as Torrado (2000) states, language is more than a system of signs that allows us to communicate and to decompose the sentences in their grammatical elements. Language is used to live reality in other ways, from multiple and magical possibilities of approaching, removal and construction of the world.

Difficulty in making outlines was another pattern found as revealed by the following: *Outlining was another strategy used to comprehend this text; however, most of the students did not make an outline. For the comprehension of a text, the students were asked to make an outline of the text; however, a great number of the students left this point out of the workshop (Field-note, April 1).* They had also difficulties with the domain of the grammatical tenses. On several occasions I found that students had not understood clearly the concept of proposition. Lastly, they also demonstrated problems identifying the hypothesis and main idea, as shown in the following excerpt from a video recording:

T: …Underline the main idea of the text…
The students start to speculate… (Later on)
T: Which is the main idea?…
Other students look at their texts to find the main idea and to express themselves in English…
Steve: That a couple goes to a party, and then the girl, and then the girl looks quite beautiful to them…
T: And assign titles… And the title?. You can give an option for the title…
A student raises her hand…
T: O.K. Can you write it please? ...
The student writes a title for the outline…
T: All agree?
Some students do not agree…
T: Why not?…
They do not answer.

The students also evidenced difficulties concerning their own mistakes. For instance, they answered meaninglessly with parts of the text as can be seen in this extract from a video-recording: *Well, actually what is this paragraph talking about?… Yeah, that a lot of salmon is found…In Spanish we will say that the main idea of the text is?… A girl. Some students answer.*

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that sometimes low achievers copied answers from high achievers. This could be seen as a strategy to fulfill the tasks and not necessarily as an application of the reading strategies being promoted in class. In other cases, they copied bits from the text itself and no real extracts of propositions.

Observing their own difficulties, I identified some students' attitudes towards reading comprehension. Some students simply did not continue working in class when they faced difficulties, to wit: *Juan Camilo continues working and checking with the text. Andrés quits (From video recording).* Another reaction to difficulties was evidenced by fear, to wit: *Let us listen to Paola's conclusion. Do you have any idea? Who has another idea? Who wants to come to the board to write a logical conclusion? A volunteer. German, can you pass? All of us are going to help him (Video recording).*

In brief, I could notice that prediction was the main mechanism used by students to solve their difficulties. They analyzed the text superficially and from this analysis predicted its possible meaning. This showed they had not worked effectively in the use of those reading strategies that could guide them to a deeper analysis of the text.

As a third category, I can talk about students' progress. The students showed progress as a result of using strategies like prediction and scanning. This was seen in their ability to complete outlines and to correct wrong sentences by using the cloze strategy.

With respect to the process evidenced by the students in the fulfillment of certain strategies, I could say that there was progress in their argumentation skills and in establishing connection among propositions, illustrated as follows: *Here we have the bears can not survive without a forest but could not prosper without it. That is because the bears eat salmon and provide nitrogen for the forest when they defecate or take parts of bits…When this passes defecations or parts of meat three times faster than others… (Juan Camilo).*

Students also showed progress in the comprehension of the concept of proposition and recognition of argumentative texts characteristics, to wit: *It has a hypothesis…some propositions…that argue…(Steve).* Through the data analysis, I could conclude that imagination, prediction and translation were the most important mechanisms used by the students to comprehend the reading texts. Dealing with the incorporation of strategies into the classroom, I could notice three elements such as a preference for the novelty of new strategies; their functionality, and the students' preference for short tasks. It was in the incorporation of unknown strategies

in which students presented bigger difficulties and evidenced fear.

CONCLUSIONS

The results showed that reading comprehension competences in eleventh grade can be supported through the incorporation of strategies which strengthen those mechanisms they already use to comprehend a text; which raise their awareness regarding the utility of the reading strategies; which follow a systematic methodology that promotes the application of reading strategies, and which motivate them to read texts. It is also important to take into account the role of the teacher as a guide and the students as protagonists of reading processes. Moreover, we should bear in mind that the importance given to the students' previous knowledge and to the English reading skills is an essential part in the learning process of a foreign language as it constitutes an important support for the development of reading competences in English.

As pointed out previously, by incorporating the reading strategies, we can witness development of competences like the improvement of oral and writing skills, the increase of the capacity to organize texts as well as to establish relations between propositions and terms, a better performance in workshops and presentations, and the enrichment of vocabulary.

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ANNEX 1: DIAGNOSTIC SURVEY

Objective: To identify options according to the methodology carried out during the incorporation and development of reading strategies in the classroom.

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the following questions and choose the option(s) that apply to you.

1. In which way has your teacher introduced reading strategies in the classroom?
    a-   Defining them on the board
    b-   Through reading workshops
    c-   As investigation carried out by the students
    d-   Other(s). Specify _____

2. How often does your teacher incorporate new reading strategies in English?
    a-   Every class
    b-   Once a week
    c-   Rarely
    d-   Seldom

3. The teacher introduces the use of reading strategies depending on:
    a-   The topic of the class
    b-   Students' difficulties in comprehending a text
    c-   Students' request
    d-   Other(s). Specify _____

4. What do you understand by competence in reading comprehension?
    a-   To know a lot of vocabulary
    b-   To handle grammatical structures
    c-   A set of skills that allows you to comprehend a text
    d-   Other(s). Specify _____

5. What reading competences do you believe you can develop when you read a text? Grade them from 1 to 4. Note: 1= The least important and 4= The most important
    __ To determine relations that are present among the different terms of the text
    __ To be aware of established relations among the text's propositions
    __ To know the overall organization of the text
    __ To make outlines of the text
    __ Other(s). Specify _____

6. Which reading strategies have contributed to the development of reading competences?
    Note: 1 = The least important and 4 = The most important
    __ Fill in the gaps
    __ Unscrambling stories (paragraph organization)
    __ Hypothesis extraction and argumentative nets creation
    __ Semantic relations (e.g. synonyms, antonyms)
    __ Other(s). Specify _____

ANNEX 2: READING WORKSHOP

Useful little bears

Notes:

1. The strategies proposed by Tanner and Green (1998) and the mechanisms proposed by Baquero (2002) were used through interdisciplinary topics: ecology, biology and chemistry.
2. Text adapted from the "Text comprehension and production course" taught by Prof. Gloria Mora, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002.

1. Organize with numbers the paragraphs of the text.

___ Barry Gilbert, ecologist of the State University of Utah, and ____ colleague Arthur Morris penetrated the forest that borders the Koeye river, in British Columbia, and discovered that the feces of the bears and the terrain around ____ contained high concentrations of a heavy isotope of nitrogen, found usually in the meat of salmon.

___ Jim Helfield, of the University of Washington, found that the trees nearest to the rivers with plenty of salmon in Alaska grew three times faster than the ones nearest to the rivers without great quantities of that ____.

___ Gilbert and Morris believe that the bears ____ salmon and provide the forest with nitrogen when they defecate or leave parts of uneaten fish. _____ is a powerful fertilizer.

___ The brown bears of the Pacific northwest in the United States cannot survive without a forest as home. But a forest could not prosper without them _____.

2. Fill in the gaps in the text above with the following words:

his   either   fish   them   eat   nitrogen

3. Extract the hypothesis and the argumentative propositions from the text.

4. Construct the argumentative net.

5. Complete.
    a. The brown bears and the forest...
    b. Gilbert and Morris analyzed...
    c. The trees nearest to the rivers grow faster because...

6. Predict a logical conclusion related to the future of the brown bears and the forest.