Perspectives of EFL Students towards Reading Strategies

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Proyectos de Investigación

Certifico que Oswaldo Jonathan Sánchez Macías y Carla Isabel Lozano Alvarado han cumplido

satisfactoriamente su investigación descriptiva como pre-requisito de graduación de Magíster en

Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros con Mención en la Enseñanza de Inglés. Su

investigación es parte del proyecto PERSPECTIVES OF EFL STUDENTS TOWARDS

READING STRATEGIES cuyo objetivo general es determinar las dificultades que tienen los

estudiantes al leer en inglés como lengua extranjera.

En este proyecto, cada participante reporta los resultados de una encuesta tomada en un contexto

educativo diferente. Las secciones de introducción, literatura y metodología (instrumentos y

análisis de datos) son las mismas.

Particular que comunico para los fines consiguientes.

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Abstract

This descriptive study describes the perspective a group of students had about reading and vocabulary strategies in EFL. This research included the collection of quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the participants 'responses. The participants were 50 students, 27 males and 23 females; eighth, ninth, tenth graders, and one university student whose ages ranged from 11 to 18 years old. The instrument applied in this study was a survey which was designed to collect information on how the students feel when reading short and long texts in EFL. According to their responses, most of the participants read in English, however, they present several problems when reading long texts, especially when they do not understand the meaning of words which causes them anxiety and boredom. At last, they also identified reading as one of the most important skills since it helps them to improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills. These results should be considered by other EFL teachers to plan their lesson plans and take into consideration the importance of reading in their classes.

Keywords: reading strategies, vocabulary, EFL, descriptive study

Resumen

Este estudio descriptivo describe la perspectiva que tenían un grupo de estudiantes sobre las estrategias de lectura y vocabulario. Esta investigación incluyó la recopilación de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos obtenidos de las respuestas de los participantes. Los participantes fueron 50 estudiantes, 27 hombres y 23 mujeres; estudiantes de octavo, noveno, décimo grado y un estudiante universitario cuyas edades oscilaban entre los 11 y los 18 años. El instrumento que se aplicó en este estudio fue una encuesta la cual fue diseñada para recolectar información sobre cómo se sienten los estudiantes al leer textos cortos y largos en EFL, según sus respuestas, la mayoría de los participantes leen en inglés, sin embargo, presentan varios problemas al leer textos largos, especialmente cuando no comprenden el significado de las palabras, lo que les provoca ansiedad y aburrimiento. Por último, también identificaron la lectura como una de las habilidades más importantes ya que les ayuda a mejorar su vocabulario y habilidades de comprensión. Estos resultados deben ser considerados por otros maestros de inglés como lengua extranjera para planificar sus planes de lecciones y tener en cuenta la importancia de la lectura en sus clases.

Palabras clave: estrategias de lectura, vocabulario, inglés como lengua extranjera, estudio descriptivo

Perspective of Reading Strategies in EFL

According to Karavas (2015), English is a language for communication around the world. One of the ways to acquire more information is by reading. Readers interpret texts and passages according to their specific purpose. However, teachers can face difficulties or obstacles directing their students into the correct material. Chacha and Housan (2019) stated that learners find it difficult to comprehend texts due to their lack of motivation and interest.

Teaching English as a second language in Ecuador has gone through different changes since a new curriculum came out in 2016 in order to enhance the students' English level in public and private high schools (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016). Unquestionably, the application of this curriculum facilitates the teaching process for educators in the classrooms around the country.

Shehu (2015) indicated that teachers are able to use different methods to build up all the English skills especially, reading and vocabulary which students struggle the most when trying to comprehend a given text. It is also stated that some of the factors which influence reading comprehension are the different level of materials, the readers' responses, background knowledge, experience in selecting reading books, and readers' environments (Noicharoen, 2012, as cited in Dara, 2019). These are common aspects that EFL learners face when reading a text at home or school.

According to Jun and Bin (2008), educators and learners refer to vocabulary as the biggest barrier in reading comprehension. Moreover, vocabulary is often one of the most critical aspects of language acquisition. This is because of the complexity of vocabulary for ESL learners present problems in learning English properly (Mohamad Ali & Jabar, 2016).

According to Hindman, Wasik and Bradley (2019), students do not gain enough knowledge in everyday conversations and reading helps them to enhance their vocabulary skills. This author agreed that vocabulary and reading play an important role in the communication and proficiency of learners even more when they are not accustomed to using the appropriate material in or out of class.

This descriptive study is an exploratory research that is characterized by how EFL students deal with reading comprehension and vocabulary skills. Thus, learners reported their perspectives about EFL reading and suggestions on how they could enhance their reading and vocabulary skills. Moreover, this research clarified some of the difficulties and challenges frequently encountered when reading.

The participants also described the time they spend reading and what resources are commonly used to enhance their vocabulary and reading skills in the English language Jerrim (2012) stated in his paper about the performance of reading skills of teenagers in England that the teachers have the task of addressing the difficulties that students face, especially the ones labeled as underachieving or circumspect readers. Additionally, the author mentioned that the way in which the teacher motivates the pupils can directly affect the levels of gratification the students can have at the moment of performing a reading task, and even affect the perception they have about reading for pleasure in their personal lives.

Literature review

In this study, some of the most relevant reading components are indicated in order to clarify the importance of reading comprehension in the English language. They are: reading skills (skimming, scanning, summarizing, decoding, encoding, reading out loud), prior knowledge when reading, the purpose for reading, and organization of texts.

All these characteristics are considered appropriate in order to execute this descriptive study and clarify the importance of reading comprehension.

Vocabulary and Grammar in Reading Comprehension

In agreement with Al-Damiree et al. (2016), the main objective of vocabulary and reading comprehension is to provide students the denotation of as many words as possible in order to make them communicate in an effective way. The use of grammar in reading takes a crucial role as much as learners spend valuable time reading not only in English but also in their native language (Al-Damiree et al., 2016). The more time students spend reading, the more likely they get familiarized with new words and expressions.

Additionally, grammar and vocabulary knowledge is built up when reading involves continual extraction of information. According to Jun and Bin (2008), favorable reading comprehension mostly depends on the connection students make between their previous knowledge and what they read in the passage. Although students do not recognize all the words in a text, they may interpret the meaning of them by identifying the grammar structure. Most studies addressing the role of grammar in L2 reading explored this issue by measuring the correlation between learners' grammatical knowledge and their L2 reading comprehension ability (Akbari, 2014).

Another component of reading comprehension is vocabulary which plays a valuable part in understanding and grammar sentence structure. Nagy (1988) stated that learners are not able to understand most of the words in a passage if they are not familiarized with them. English as a foreign language as any other has a very large number of words, however, the lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge in students is a great impediment to raise their relationship between vocabulary and comprehension.

Reading Skills

Reading comprehension skills are defined as a group of mental tools necessary to fulfill a task, and that facilitates learners to reinforce comprehension approaches (Cartwright, 2002). It has been noticed that readers can use their executive skills in a proficient way and have better results in the reading comprehension process in all its stages (Sesma et al., 2009). Reading comprehension helps learners to reinforce their abilities to comprehend written English efficiently and associate the context with the meaning of words or phrases. According to Jun and Bin (2008), reading comprehension increases a wide range of skills including critical and cognitive capacities to active readers by comparing and contrasting situations.

Skimming.

One of the most common reading skills used in the process of reading comprehension is skimming. It is said that in this technique the gist is the reader's purpose. When this skill is put into practice the reader goes through the text very quickly to identify in a general way what it is about and develops a general understanding of it. In addition, the reader does not need to know the meaning of all the words in the text (Ngoc, 2015).

Scanning.

Another widely used technique implemented by readers is scanning, which can be defined as reading a text searching for specific information. Yusuf et al. (2016) mentioned that this process is formed by three steps; first, it is necessary to identify keywords that readers will be looking for in the reading. Secondly, the reader needs to look quickly through the text for those specific words; and finally, read the text around the words to discover if that information is useful. This strategy is also useful after reading the complete text to remember specific details about it.

Decoding and encoding.

Decode information means to translate the words into information in the learner's mind while encoding is to translate the information into the learner's mind as well to build a link between the meaning internalized and the word itself that is written in the text (Sesma et al., 2009). As described by Tauber (1993), encoding increases the reading and spelling skills of those students at risk for literacy failure, the use of didactic material such as plastic letters and letter tiles might be of great help to teach phonemes and graphemes. Likewise, Weiser and Mathes (2011) conducted a study that students were able to enhance their reading skills with decoding and encoding through the spelling of words and writing.

Reading out loud.

One of the advantages of reading out loud is to improve the interpretation of words and scenarios, especially to children since they associate words with situation and context with meaning (Kieras & Just, 1984). Reading out loud not only enhances reading comprehension but also listening skills in large or small classes (Djiwandono, 2018). Through reading out loud students build connections between spoken and written words.

Prior Knowledge when Reading

In reading comprehension, previous knowledge makes predictions about the information that the subject brings. Additionally, it can be influenced by a way of intellectual capacity, emotions, linguistic and communication skills. According to Lipson (1982), new information can be acquired through textual materials taking into account three prior knowledge conditions such as correct, wrong, or unknown. She argued that prior knowledge refers to all of the experience's readers have had throughout their lives, including information they have learned elsewhere.

This knowledge is used to bring the written word to life and make it more relevant in the reader's mind. Brantmeier (2006) indicated that a quality shaping the contribution of prior knowledge to L2 reading comprehension is the degree of the reader's familiarity with culturally related information within a text. Furthermore, the prior knowledge activation before beginning a new reading can help the readers practice their inference-making skills and metacognition. When introducing and reviewing new vocabulary, pupils are able to become more familiar and continue building up their skills. Tarchi (2015) noted that prior knowledge and inferences are considered the most important predictors of reading comprehension.

Readers relate the written word to their previous experiences to make reading more personal, helping them to both understand and remember what they have read. Some experts believe that activating prior knowledge is an important aspect of the reading experience. Joh and Plakans (2017) proposed that the contribution of working memory to L2 reading comprehension can be moderated by readers' prior knowledge. Al-Momani, Hussin and Hamat (2015) stated that the more time students spend reading, the more knowledge they construct, especially when they present great interest in what they read.

Organization of Texts

Organization of texts refers to how a text is developed. Therefore, readers follow and understand the information presented. Richard (2001, as cited in Andriani, 2019) pointed out that textbooks are a key component of language teaching serving as the basis for much of the language input trainees receive when learning a language. Reading texts provides detailed information through ideas, opinions that do not just determine the structural, lexical forms of new vocabulary, but also the semantic and syntactic elements. Moreover, texts that contain unknown grammatical constructions are more difficult to understand than well-organized text.

Andriani (2019) said that readers who can recognize the rhetorical organization of a text have better comprehension than those who do not. Readers who prosecute new rhetorical information can acquire better retention furthermore they know the meaning and the usage of a specific part of the speech to comprehend what the text is about. Mahdavy (2011) noted that attention to orthography, pronunciation, grammatical category, the meaning of words as well as the relationships between them improves retention. Moreover, readers can expand their prior knowledge of the correct use of the meaning of words.

Methodology

This is a descriptive study with an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. The instrument used in this article was a survey designed to determine the viewpoint of this group of students towards reading and the acquisition of new vocabulary. According to Nassaji (2015), the goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics, therefore observation and surveys are commonly used tools in this type of research. On the other hand, quantitative data is defined as the value of collected information to know numbers where each data-set has a numerical value. Watson (2015) claimed that quantitative research involves measurement and assumes that the phenomenon under study can be measured.

In this survey, students reported their attitude about the attainment of reading and vocabulary skills in EFL.When they finished answering all the questions, the responses were saved to interpret the results.

Research questions

1. Do participants read in English?

2. Do they use reading strategies?

3. What are their perspectives towards vocabulary?

4. What are their perspectives toward reading in English?

Participants Description

      Fifty students participated in this descriptive study. The sample consisted of 27 male and 23 female teenagers. Their English proficiency level varied from A1 to B1 according to their responses and opinions in the survey. The participants did not belong to the same class. There were 10 students from eighth, 31 from ninth, 8 from tenth grades and 1 university student. The ages ranged from 11 to 18 years old. All the students lived in Piñas- El Oro, Ecuador. However, not all of them shared the same educational background. There are some students from different countries. According to the survey, there were 43 Ecuadorian, 4 Cuban, and 3 Venezuelan students.

Instruments

      Reading survey.

      The survey used in this study presented 23 different questions divided into five parts. The first section asks students their gender, age, nationality, English level, language, ethnicity, course, and type of institution. In the second part of the survey, the students indicated what their English background was, their knowledge about technology, and if they had internet access at home. The third section of the survey indicated five different points on a Liker scale; to a great extent, most of it, some, a little bit, and none. These five points proposed the participants specify if they could understand a long text, single phrases at a time, a long text with the first reading, or a long text by rereading it. The students also pointed out if they could skin, scan, or if they knew the elements of a summary. Also, if they translated all words when reading, if they knew how to identify the type of texts or how to organize a text, if they used their prior knowledge when they read, if they could classify words of reading according to their function in the context of the

reading: noun, verb, adverb, adjective, among others, and when they read, they observe

punctuation pauses, or when they read, the punctuation helps them understand the text.

Finally, the last two parts of the survey required students to answer three open questions

describing how they feel towards their reading comprehension and vocabulary skills.

Data Analysis

The data of this study was collected in a survey and analyzed on a Microsoft Excel

document. The obtained results were displayed in charts in order to find out how tedious reading

and vocabulary was for this group of students. All the information allowed the researcher to

collect the mean and comments from all the participants.

Ethical Considerations

The first step to develop this descriptive study was to request the permission of the

principal at the school where the survey was applied. The director agreed to sign the only

document that approves her permission to use the information of this survey academically.

Secondly, the permission of the students' parents was also requested since all the students are

under-aged to fill out the survey. The university student did not need any requirement since her

participation was voluntary.

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Results

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The data in this descriptive study was considered to analyze the perspective EFL students

had in reading and vocabulary. In the first part of the survey, the participants described their

English learning background. The majority of the students mentioned that English was one of the

most important languages worldwide. Besides giving their opinion about the language, they also

pointed out that reading helped them to improve their English skills since new words and phrases

are found when reading. In their opinion, reading English texts was a tool to comprehend the

language effortlessly. However, another group of students, stated that reading is one of the most

difficult English skills because they got anxious when they did not understand new words,

especially in long texts.

Although a considerable part of students indicated that previous knowledge was an

essential part when reading, others assumed that the translation of words was an effective way to

interpret and extend their vocabulary skills.

Table 1

Do you read in English?

	Why or why not?	
	Entertainment	12
	Improves grammar, vocabulary and spelling skills	10
Yes (N= 31)	Take private English lessons	4
	Reading English is easier than speaking it	3
	Similarities in their native language	2
	Lack of knowledge	10
No (N= 19)	No interest	5
	Unavailability of textbooks	3

Table 1 shows how most of the participants indicated that reading not only can be practiced in class, but also during their spare time, for example on social networking sites, online games and free online chat rooms where they find small passages to read. Finally, other students do not read in English because their background proficiency is not good enough to understand short or long texts. They also indicated that the reading material applied in class was not engaging to call their attention.

Perspective about EFL Reading and Vocabulary

Table 2 analyzed the Likert scale table; it shows the means of the survey. According to the results, most of the participants could understand single phrases at a time and long texts by rereading them. It also demonstrated that a great number of the students considered punctuation marks a big help to understand texts. However, other reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, identification of texts, elements of a summary proved the lowest scales in the table.

Table 2

Perspective about reading

Descriptive Statistics		
	Item	Mean
1	I can understand a long, complex text.	3.18
2	I understand single phrases at a time.	4.14
3	I understand a long text with the first reading.	2.98
4	I understand a long text by rereading it.	3.80
5	I can skim.	3.00
6	I can scan.	3.06
7	I know the elements of a summary.	3.28
8	When I read, I translate all the words	3.12

9	I identify the type of texts I read.	3.18
10	I know the organization of the text.	2.84
11	I use my prior knowledge when I read.	3.55
12	I can classify words of a reading according to their function in context of the reading: noun, verb, and adverb, adjective, among others.	3.4
13	When I read, I observe punctuation pauses.	3.66
14	When I read, the punctuation helps me understand the text.	3.72

In the following questions in the survey; how I feel when I see an English passage, how I feel about my English vocabulary, and what I think about learning vocabulary. "The majority of the participants implied that they feel anxious when reading long English texts and they resign the activity. On the other hand, there were 5 students who considered that reading in English is beneficial since they take private English classes and they had to read all the time".

From the students' perspective learning vocabulary is not a simple skill to enhance because words and phrases sometimes are used in different contexts and have more than one meaning, as a result most of the participants agreed that remembering and using words in different contexts caused them confusion. In addition, they mentioned "In English the way how words are written and spelled is different from how they are pronounced".

Discussion

This descriptive study shows the principal difficulty that these participants had while learning reading in English is their limited vocabulary knowledge. According to Nagy (1988), learners are not able to understand most of the words in a passage if they are not familiarized with them. Most of the students mentioned that their low English level is caused due to their lack of vocabulary, therefore the translation of words is necessary when needed.

Jun & Bin (2008) stated that favorable reading comprehension mostly depends on the connection students make between their previous knowledge and what they read in passages. In this study, some students indicated that their background knowledge helped them to connect ideas and make good sense to comprehend a story or a text. In their opinion, reading is confusing without knowing any word from a text. Tarchi (2015) noted that prior knowledge and inferences are considered the most important predictors of reading comprehension. The participants also claimed that the more they knew about the topic, the more they could relate context with situations in a story.

According to Jun & Bin (2008), reading comprehension increases a wide range of skills including critical and cognitive capacities by comparing and contrasting situations. The participants who take private English classes mentioned that reading is an effective skill to construct vocabulary and language skills since it improves their comprehension and interpretation of contexts every time they read in English. Momani, Hussin and Hamat (2014) stated that the more time students spend reading, the more knowledge they construct, especially when they present great interest in what they read. Another group of the participants claimed that because of the Covid-19 pandemic, they spent more time on the internet and social networking sites which made them interact with other users by sharing written information through memes or online games.

Al-Damiree et al., R. R. (2016) emphasized that the main objective of vocabulary and reading comprehension is to provide students the denotation of as many words as possible in order to make them communicate in an effective way. Some students mentioned that reading English passages and texts helped them learn and understand more words. Thanks to it, they improved their communicative skills and could use this acquired knowledge more effectively.

Learners in this study also pointed out that the correct punctuation played an important role in reading comprehension because it helped them understand texts easily. Mahdavy (2011) noted that attention to orthography, pronunciation, grammatical category, the meaning of words as well as the relationships between them improves retention. In conclusion, as students identified their main failures in reading and vocabulary in this study, their responses and opinions agreed with some of the authors' citations listed in the literature review in this descriptive research.

Conclusion

This descriptive study aimed to show what perspective students had about reading and vocabulary skills, through all their responses and opinions, it was determined that most of the students agreed that reading is not a simple skill to build up since their lack of vocabulary and the proper material set back their learning and reading comprehension proficiency in English.

There were some important points to be taken into consideration to enhance students' reading comprehension skills. First of all, the material that teachers use should be proper for their students' level and ages. Besides, these resources should be easily accessible to all of them. Secondly, teachers should also include dynamic and noticeable supplies in their classes. For instance, the use of realia to make their reading comprehension lessons more meaningful and authentic for students.

Thirdly, students demonstrated to have prior knowledge on English since they have been studying it since they started primary school, however according to their responses their current knowledge is not good enough to understand long passages which make them feel anxious and confused when reading. When comparing the students' perspectives about reading texts and what some authors pointed out in their studies, it was evident that teachers ought to apply new

teaching methods in their classes. For example, the use of electronic devices or the use of social networking sites which can be quite useful to share information and students have immediate access to them. In addition, the participants also stated that the translation from Spanish to English is a great help since they could determine the meaning of words when they required some help.

Limitations

Some limitations should be important and necessary to take into account with the application of the survey applied in this research.

First, some students hesitated to fill out the survey because they thought it was going to be evaluated as an online lesson, therefore, it was clearly explained that their responses would be used in a descriptive study in order to know about their perspectives about reading and vocabulary in English. Some of their parents also asked questions about this study, for example, one asked if they could take the survey instead of the students which caused confusion and misunderstanding at first. However, it was all described step by step to avoid misinterpretation of this research.

Another limitation was the parents' permission that was not documented, it was attached and described at the end of the survey as a proof that they and the students were informed about the purpose of this study. Eventually, all the students demonstrated to have the requested authorization before taking the survey. One final characteristic about this study taken into consideration was the misunderstanding of some students while completing the survey.

They pointed out that speaking is the only way to learn the language and the other skills are not important and did not answer all the questions completely and left their ideas unfinished.

Recommendations

After all the students completed the survey and all their questions and doubts were answered, some observations were made in order to improve the survey applied in this study. First, there is an extra option listed in the survey: the item says" other" and responds to the question "If they read in English" there should have been only two choices to make the question clear to the participants.

Second, the question about socioeconomic class has nothing to do with the survey and the study about perspectives about reading and vocabulary. Instead of asking about socioeconomic status, it is suggested to ask "how often they read in their free time? Finally, it is also recommended to include the permission of the parents at the end of the survey because the one included in this survey was developed by the researcher.

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Appendix

Survey

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

School Principal Permission

Available upon request.