Perspectives of EFL Students towards Reading Strategies

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Proyectos de Investigación

Certifico que Mercedes Nathaly Mendoza Calderón y Viviana Karina Vinces Salas han

cumplido satisfactoriamente su investigación descriptiva como pre-requisito de

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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

Reading has become a necessity for students in universities since they search for academic sources and most of them are found in English. There has been previous researches that investigated about the strategies used in reading and the skills in literacy. This descriptive study was intended to analyze the skills and perspectives towards reading in English and the strategies students use to understand what they read. The participants for this study were students from 18 to 30 years old with an A2-B1 level who are from different careers in a university of a coastal Ecuadorian city. The data was obtained from an online survey sent to students by different means. The findings in this study indicated a large number of students who find reading in L2 necessary because of the information they can get. Despite not applying common strategies for reading comprehension, the students' comments mentioned the existence of strategies they apply by themselves in order to ease the reading process. The result of the survey showed the students' confidence in aspects of reading such as, vocabulary knowledge and their feelings towards reading in L2. The present study brings descriptive information about experiences in reading in English, which contains statistical data for researchers or teachers who need a theoretical basis for future researches.

Keywords: reading, reading strategies, reading comprehension, vocabulary

Resumen

Leer se ha convertido en una necesidad para estudiantes universitarios ya que buscan

recursos académicos y la mayoría de ellos están en inglés. Ha habido trabajos previos

que han investigado acerca de las estrategias usadas en la lectura y las habilidades

literarias. Este estudio descriptivo tenía como objetivo analizar las habilidades y

perspectivas sobre leer en inglés y las estrategias que los estudiantes usan para entender

lo que leen. Los participantes para este estudio fueron estudiantes de entre 18 a 30 años

de edad con un nivel A2B1 cursando diferentes carreras in una universidad de una

ciudad costera de Ecuador. Los datos se obtuvieron con una encuesta en línea a los

estudiantes que fue enviada por diferentes medios. Los hallazgos en este estudio

indicaron un gran número de estudiantes que encontraron que la lectura en el segundo

idioma es necesaria por la información que pueden conseguir con ella. A pesar de no

aplicar estrategias comunes para la lectura comprensiva, los comentarios de los

estudiantes mencionaron la existencia de estrategias propias in los lectores para facilitar

el proceso lector. El resultado de la encuesta mostró la confianza de los estudiantes en

aspectos de lectura tales como el conocimiento del vocabulario y los sentimientos sobre

leer en inglés. El presente estudio trae información descriptiva sobre experiencias al leer

en inglés, el cual contiene datos estadísticos para investigadores y profesores quienes

necesiten una base teórica para investigaciones futuras.

Palabras clave: lectura, estrategias de lectura, comprensión lectora, vocabulario

Perspectives of EFL Students towards Reading Strategies

Reading has been part of our lives, and in terms of education, reading has a big impact in our society and it is considered as an essential skill (Merga & Mat Roni, 2018). Unfortunately, according to Wipf (1976), "Reading has been described as one of the least teachable of the four skills" (p.63). Reading is not the favorite skill to develop for some students. In Ecuador, the statistics from (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC], 2012) showed that 27% of Ecuadorian people do not have reading habits including students.

The Ecuadorian curriculum (Ministerio de Educación, 2012) for English Language establishes that students have to achieve a B1 level proficiency when they graduate from the University, in accordance with the proficiency bands established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, the reality is different; and, teachers face problems with the level of reading proficiency students in Ecuador have.

There are two descriptive studies done about reading: one of them investigated skills in literacy, such as vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, fluency and phonological reading in a Medium School in Kerala (Paige et al., 2013). The second one described and investigated comprehension when reading with the use of the strategies like "think out loud" and "summarizing" in EFL students from a University in Bangkok (Adisra, 1997). There are no similar studies in Ecuador about reading in English.

The limitations that L2 student's learners face during reading activities make them feel discomfort with this skill. One relevant limitation is that teachers do not use the correct strategy or technique to engage students with the reading activities and this can make the reading unreadable (Bekhta, 2018). Some other problems with reading are lack of motivation, difficulties to keep up with extensive readings, students' limited

vocabulary and poor material, student's behavior, among others. Locher et al. (2019) stated that students reading motivation is connected with students reading behavior. When students do not feel motivated to read they can easily lose interest in the reading and their behavior will be negative.

A survey was applied to 50 students with an A2-B1 level from a private university located in Manabí, province of Ecuador. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the results of applying a survey about the strategies of reading skill in EFL students. To this end, a Google Forms was sent to the participants by email.

Literature Review

Reading

Alderson (2000) argued that reading is an activity, which is enjoyable and pleasant, and the reader can be absorbed. In addition, this skill is important in a language to get information (Aritonang et al., 2018). According to Hill (2000), the readers get information and meanings from sources to interpret.

Reading Components

Vocabulary.

Proctor et al. (2011) mentioned that there are three domains in the knowledge of vocabulary: Morphology, semantics, and syntax. Morphology leads to the application of vocabulary based on the root words and derivations. Semantics offer knowledge of how the words are related with the context; and, syntax is to know its structure.

As Zhang and Zhang (2020) pointed out, "Vocabulary Knowledge (VK) plays a pivotal role in second-language (L2) reading comprehension" (p.2). Through a study, these authors showed that L2 learners need to reach a certain lexical cover rate in order to understand unassisted readings.

Grammar.

Nunan (2015) stated that grammar is more than just morphology and syntax. Rahuma (2016) supported that grammar is a helpful way to comprehend the language. The author added that grammar is more interesting for people in extensive literature. In addition, grammar is seen as key to help students to understand language in a better way since many times, language is a combination of patterns to generate meaning.

Reading Skills

White (1977) described the skills in reading by ages. Children from seven to twelve years old develop this skill first by recognizing sight words and phonics, then structural analysis such as, prefixes and suffixes. After that, they need to develop vocabulary and their multiple meanings, and identify the main idea or deduce conclusions.

On the contrary, Metz (2018) established that adults and teenagers develop reading skills in a different way compared to children. The author also suggested that , nowadays, there is a new age of reading where there has not been progress in reading ability and teenagers prefer to spend more time watching television or searching on the internet. Educators must motivate students to develop this skill.

Skimming and scanning.

Maxwell (1969) pointed out that skimming is inferring the main idea and anticipating the text to interpret it faster while reading. On the other hand, in scanning, the reader is seeking inside the text some specific information needed, such as names, places in order to find details in a quick way.

As stated by Alderson et al. (2016), skimming and scanning can be considered strategies for efficient, fast and selective reading. Skimming, for example, is seen by Wohl and Fine (2017) as a strategy many students utilize to read large chunks of texts

or information in a relatively short period of time while still trying to comprehend the main parts of the reading.

Summarizing.

Pečjaka and Pircb (2018) stated that summarizing in a strategy that permits students to understand deeply the texts and it can be a way to measure understanding. With this strategy, the student is capable of finding important and significant information.

Decoding and encoding.

Sangia (2014) referred to decoding and encoding as translation. Decoding is to say the word (sound and meaning) when reading it on a text. It is essential but it cannot work properly alone. A good reader knows how to decode. Decoding helps the reader understand unfamiliar words even if the reader is not thinking about it.

On the contrary, encoding which is called "spelling", use a set of directions to the decoder in order to make it have sense. Raley (2020) said that decoding permits to read words that are known and unknown. It gives them a meaning by letter patterns.

Reading out loud.

According to Ledger and Merga (2018), reading aloud is "…reading text orally and audibly for self and others." (p.126). In addition, they mentioned that reading aloud and the frequency of reading has a good effect on students' schooling outcomes. It increases the motivation and attitude in students.

The author Hasler-Brooks (2016) claimed that reading out loud can be an effective way of improving students' interpretative skills. They argued "reading out loud, when taught, practiced, and applied, can be an interpretive exercise that makes any student of literature a better reader." (p.10).

Prior Knowledge When Reading

Cervetti and Hiebert (2015) established that student's prior knowledge contributes to develop reading comprehension activities, which help students to analyze new information better, compare it with the prior information, and use them to improve reading skills through types of texts such as stories, and short readings.

Sanacore (1983) suggested some strategies to activate prior knowledge to current reading activities or assignments; the prereading plan PRep, which Sanacoere stated as "a three-step assessment/instructional procedure design for use before assigning textbook reading." (p. 715). This is an activity where students work in small groups and the teacher encourages them to work with prior knowledge and connect that information with the new knowledge. The main idea of this activity is that students activate and compare the information that they already know with the new information, so that students will connect both information to use them in the activity.

Purpose For Reading

According to Sweetman and Sabella (2018), "When students read with a narrow purpose in mind, they collect only pertinent information for the questions they are researching". (p.76). Students should have a clear purpose of the information that they want to get of the reading, this will help them to focus on the most relevant information when it is needed. Students and teachers must work together to achieve reading goals.

As reported by Soodla et al. (2017), readers should be able to use appropriate reading strategies depending on their reading purpose, for example: if the purpose is to summarize the reading, students should focus on the main ideas of the texts. The key of a successful reading activity is to allow students to choose how to read and what strategies to use according to the texts and the aims of the reading activities.

Organization Of Texts

Fisher and Frey (2015) stated educators must work with appropriate texts according to student's levels and necessities; it also involves students' access to proper texts. It is necessary that students feel confident with different types of readings, having the opportunity to choose a reading that permits them to acquire vocabulary and to improve their reading skill.

As claimed by Kganetso (2017), providing informal texts to reading activities will increase students interest to read, and this involves connecting reading through culture. This will allow students to connect experiences with culture by learning familiar and unfamiliar content and this can be used by teachers as a tool where students get access to different contents.

Methodology

Baum et al. (2006) claimed that research methodology has been used as a strategy to show results of a specific problem through surveys or assessments that will be applied in local communities or participants in general. For this descriptive study, the researchers will use a quantitative and qualitative survey to analyze the results about reading strategies of students from different areas (Social, Health and Business) in an Ecuadorian private university from Portoviejo city. Quantitative research needs to be addressed to research groups and it can work with general populations that are considered valid (Van der Gaast et al., 2019). The goal of this study is to report the results of the survey. The specific research questions are:

1.   Do participants read in English?

2.   Do they use reading strategies?

3.   What are their perspectives towards vocabulary?

4.   What are their perspectives towards reading in English?

Participants

Fifty students from a private university in Portoviejo, Manabí, between the ages of 18 to 30, participated in this survey. This University is private; it is located in the urban zone of Portoviejo – a canton from Manabí. The participants were 32 females and 18 males with ethnicity of "mestizo" and "montubio". Economically, most of the participants belong to middle-class and there are few of them belonging to working class. These students have access to technology by gadgets such as smartphones, laptops and desktop where 98% of them use their own internet access at home. They are in different level of careers from Social (Law, Initial Education and Scenic Arts), Business (Management, Finances and Auditor) and Health (Odontology) areas. In their English level, half of the sample have a basic level while the rest considered they have an intermediate level of English. They considered their level of English to be elementary to intermediate, which is A2- B1 according to CEFR. The students were asked to participate in this survey and the information is confidential, the participants were at home and their access to the internet was from home.

Instruments

The instrument was used to collect the necessary information to answer the research questions and get results about reading strategies in EFL students. This instrument was created in google form, which is an application that allows participants to answer questions and save their answers. The researcher can check and analyze the answers to collect data information. This is an eleven questions survey where different types of questions are included, such as demographic questions and reading skills questions. The questions in the survey were written in English and Spanish to make it more understandable. This survey was sent to the students through email and

WhatsApp. Students could complete the survey in any type of devices: cellphone, tablets and laptops.

Data Analysis

The data was tabulated in excel to get the mean of some questions. Duplicated answers were deleted. For qualitative answers, a selecting code was used. Google Forms showed the demographic percentages and a formula was applied to get the mean of the quantitative items. All the 50 participants answered the questions completely.

Ethical Consideration

The information presented in the current study will be kept confidential and use for academic purposes only. This study has been structured in a way that is guided by core ethical principles throughout the whole research cycle, as suggested by Beninger (2016). The participants of this study were all adults, so they did not need a consent letter from their parents, they were informed about the survey and they all knew that it was not mandatory to participate in the survey. A consent letter was sent to the director of the English Institution to carry out the survey. After the approval, participants were informed and the data was collected.

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Results

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This part of the present study shows the results of the survey. The data through the survey answered the research questions for this study. Research question one: *Do participants read in English?* In question 17, 39 students (78%) said they do read in English, 9 students (18%) said "no", and 2 students (4%) said "a little". This result is shown in Table 1.

Question 18 gave the details of their answers. Some students who answered with "no" stated answers like, "because it is hard to learn English to me", "I just did it when I had English classes", "Pronunciation is difficult" and "Lack of time".

Students, who answered with "yes", established they do it because they want to learn the language and they need it (32% of the sample). They gave answers such as, "I like reading articles in English to improve my pronunciation", "to learn vocabulary", "because it is useful", "I like to learn day by day", "because I am learning new words and new structures", "because I want to improve my understanding level and new grammar forms" and "Yes, because I am taking an English course, and I have a long way to go to continue improving". Some students (20% of the sample) said they like English with answers like "I like it", "I like to practice it", "because I love English" and "it is sensational". In addition, 13 students answered "yes" mentioning they read in English because they are asked for it in classes. These students gave answers such as, "because we have activities where we must read in English" and "I read when it is asked for or because of homework".

Table 1

I read in English

Option	Frequency	Percent
Yes	39	78%
No	9	18%
A little	2	4%
Total	50	100%

Second research questions was: *Do they use reading strategies?* For this research question, the question 19 in the survey had 14 options about reading habits that can answer it. Each option permitted the student to choose among five levels in a scale: to a great extent, most of it, some, a little bit and none. This scale was replaced from 5 to 1 respectively to make the process easier and to get a media. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Strategies

Option	Mean
I understand long and complex text.	3.48
I understand single phrases at a time.	4.12
I understand long text with 1st reading.	3.26
I understand long text by rereading it.	3.88
I can skim.	3.20
I can scan.	3.34
I know elements of a summary.	3.54
I read and translate all the words.	3.20
I identify the type of text.	3.30
I know the organization of a text.	3.38
I use my prior knowledge when I read.	3.44
I can classify.	3.48
I observe punctuation pauses.	3.78
Punctuation helps me understand the text.	3.62

The results from these options can evidence the level of understanding during reading practices and the strategies the students apply to ease their reading process. The lowest means (M=3.20) were for the items "I can skim" and "I read and translate all the words", followed by "I understand long text with 1st reading" (M=3.26). It means that skimming, which is the ability to understand the main idea is not a strategy they are applying and that is the reason why understanding in the first reading is a difficulty. It can be said that while reading and translating at the same time make the student confused about the main idea of what they read.

On the contrary, "I understand single phrases at a time" (M=4.12) has the highest mean, followed by "I understand long text by rereading it" (M=3.88). It means

that, if understanding in the first reading is a difficulty, they do read more times in order

to understand it. Although, what they can handle the best is reading phrases one by one,

in the end reading once again is the strategy they consider the most. In addition,

"observation of punctuation pauses" (M=3.78) and "punctuation helps me to

understand" (M=3.62) show that students respect the use of punctuation and it is helpful

for them to comprehend more what they read.

Finally, for this research question, question 21 in the survey asked about

Skimming and Scanning and if they know how to apply them. They were open

questions, so students could give their own thoughts. Results are expressed in Table 3.

Table 3

Skimming and Scanning

Option	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	12%
No	8	16%
Maybe or sometimes	21	42%
Explained their strategy	15	30%
Total	50	100%

On the survey, this question had an explanation of skimming and scanning, and

because of it, 6 students (12%) just affirmed with a "yes" that they know the strategies.

Although they did not explain it, as the question required it, they based their affirmative

answer on the question's explanation. Additionally, the ones who neither know them

nor apply them were 8 (16%) and 21 students (42%) mentioned that they can apply

them, but with difficulty. The 15 students left (30%) just explained a little bit which

strategies they use when reading, such as: read it three or more times (8%), reading

attentively (6%), look for key words and highlighting (6%), and identifying parts or ideas when reading (10%).

Third research question was: *What are students' perspectives toward vocabulary?* For this one, question 22. "I feel my knowledge of vocabulary in English is…" and question 23. "I think learning vocabulary is complex…" gave open answers from the participants; and the results are shown in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4

Knowledge of vocabulary

Level	Frequency	Percent
High	11	22%
Intermediate	27	54%
Basic	12	24%
Total	50	100%

Table 4 indicates three levels, which has been chosen to shorten the variety of options given by the students. High level replaced options such as: Much, acceptable, High and good. For the Intermediate level, students gave options like regular, normal, medium and intermediate. In addition, for Basic level, the answers were a few, low, bad and basic.

It showed that 11 students (22%) had a high level of vocabulary; while 12 students (24%) answered, they have a basic level of vocabulary in English. Mainly, 27 students (54%) expressed they have an intermediate level of vocabulary, which for A2-B1 level is adequate.

Question 23 asked students about what is complex for them when learning vocabulary, and results can be appreciated in Table 5. For 15 students (30%) learning

vocabulary is not that difficult. In addition, 13 students (26%) did not say it is difficult

for them but it is not enough practiced.

Table 5

Vocabulary Complexity

Difficulty in vocabulary	Frequency	Percent
It is not difficult	15	30%
Do not practice it	13	26%
Found a difficulty	22	44%
Total	50	100%

The item "found a difficulty" was taken from 22 students (44%) who said the

reason why it turns difficult for them. Here are reasons such as, pronunciation, amount

of words, spelling, rules, non-translatable into Spanish and disinterest.

The participants have a proper knowledge of vocabulary since they are A2-B1

level. Most of them know what the weaknesses with vocabulary are and few students

are not having enough practice with the vocabulary they have learnt.

The fourth research question was: *What are their perspectives towards reading*

in English? Moreover, this one was answered through question 20: "I see an English

passage and I feel..." which results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Feelings when reading in English

Feeling	Frequency	Percent
Anxious	14	28%
Frustration	3	6%
Bored	3	6%
Worried	1	2%

Bad	1	2%
All above	7	14%
Do not understand	3	6%
Curiosity	1	2%
Can handle it	16	32%
Does not read	1	2%
Total	50	100%

In table 6, it can be seen that 16 students (32%) can handle the content of what they read with the knowledge they have. Closely, 14 students expressed they feel anxious (28%). Additionally, feeling bored, feeling frustration and not understanding were the answers of 9 students (3 students per answer); and feeling worried, feeling bad and "do not read" were the answers that 3 students gave (1 student per answer). There were 7 students (14%) who mentioned that they have a mix of feeling such as anxious, frustrated, bored, worried and bad.

Discussion

Because of the general profile of the participants about their reading experiences, it can be said that Alderson (2000) was right when mentioning that reading is enjoyable and pleasant. After taking into account the first research question when asking if the participants read in English, the results show that most of the students read in English because it is a necessity for them. Aritonang et al. (2018), who said that reading is important in order to get information, supports this skill as a necessity for university students because any academic sources are found in English.

The second research question about the reading strategies proved that students have and recognize some actions as strategies when reading in English. Soodla et al. (2017) mentioned that readers might use a strategy according to the purpose with the

reading and that they must choose the way they read and what strategies to use. A little more than the quarter of the participants know the strategies they apply, such as reading as many times as they need, looking for key words and highlighting them and identifying specific parts or ideas. Based on the results for this research question, it shows that the most used strategy is reading single phrases at a time and rereading.

On the other hand, skimming and scanning were the strategies that most students can apply with difficulty since not all of them are sure of how they work. Wohl and Fine (2017), said that skimming is a strategy for reading much in less time and still understanding but it is not a well-worked strategy with this sample. Based on the results in this study, skimming and understanding with the first reading are not strategies the students use.

From the third research question about perspectives toward vocabulary, the results show that more than the half have an intermediate level of vocabulary. Zhang and Zhang (2020) explained that vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in reading comprehension and it is necessary for the student to get certain lexical to read without assistance. Then, the majority of students have enough knowledge of vocabulary as they are in A2 and B1 level according to CEFR. There was just 22% percent of these students who find difficulties in learning vocabulary because of the morphology (spelling) and syntax (rules), which are mentioned by Proctor et al. (2011) as domains of vocabulary knowledge.

In addition, for the last research question, these results showed the perspectives toward reading English. As Fisher and Frey (2015) said it is necessary that students get confident with different types of readings. It was found that there are more students that can handle what they read with the knowledge they already have, although are few students who feel anxious when reading in English. It can prove that there is a

considerable amount of students who feel their vocabulary is enough for the type of readings they read.

Conclusion

Students realize the importance of reading in English and that is a motivation to keep reading. They recognize its benefits for their academic improvement. Although, it is an obligation or it is demanded during the classes.

The most common strategies for reading comprehension are skimming and scanning but they are not the ones that students choose to apply. As strategies, they take their own time to read as many times as the need in order to understand, they look for key words and highlight what they consider important and reading a single phrase at a time is the way they can get to comprehend better.

Vocabulary is not an issue for most of the students. Moreover, learning new vocabulary is not that difficult for them. What is hard is to find how to practice what they already know and face some common aspects of vocabulary such as pronunciation, spelling, the rules and words that are not translatable into their L1. There is almost an equal percent of students who can handle a reading in English using what they know; and another part of them who feel anxious when reading.

To conclude, there is a quantity of students from a university in Portoviejo, city of Ecuador, which take English classes from A2 - B1 level and do find interest in reading in English. To comprehend better, most of them apply rereading as a strategy but not skimming and scanning, which are strategies that are more common. They consider they have enough vocabulary and that getting more vocabulary knowledge is not a difficulty but they are aware that what they know is not practiced enough which is a reason why students forget words or phrases. Moreover, there are two groups of

students; the ones who can handle reading with the knowledge they have and others who do not because they feel anxious.

Limitations

During pandemic season and the forced virtual education, encouraging students to fill in a survey was easier because it was online. However, most of the devices used for completing this survey were their smartphones, which were not comfortable for answering the open questions properly. It could have been better having a one-to-one interview or group interview in order to know deeply student's thoughts and feelings about reading. With written answers can be harder to perceive how the participant truly feels about the topic. The voice tone and gestures could help the researcher or interviewer have an empathetic idea of the participants' feelings.

In addition, the moment when the survey was sent, was after the final tests when it is harder to keep in touch with the students because they were practically out of the academic cycle and close to have a holiday in the country.

Recommendation

For a following study, if there is not any other pandemic situation or even more time to apply single interviews or focus groups, it is advisable to get the perspectives and feelings more empathetically through conversations and experience telling.

Online surveys can still work properly, as long as they are completed by using computers and laptops, which is advisable to have it as a requirement for answering these online surveys next time.

Finally, look for the perfect time to apply the survey, such as beginning or during the middle of the academic cycle. In these moments, students are not stressed or distracted enough not to answer a survey.

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Appendix 1

Perspectives about EFL Reading and Vocabulary

Available upon request.