Reading Strategies in EFL Students: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract

This descriptive study shows the perception of EFL students toward the use of reading strategies. This investigation collected quantitative and qualitative data. The sample were 68 students, 20 males, and 48 females; whose ages ranged from 18-30. The instruments used were surveys to collect data of participants. The students' English background showed a mode of 3 that means most of the participants learned English from the school and have problems in reading. Moreover, a reading survey was applied to know if they read in English, comprehend texts, and other issues when they read. This survey indicated that 72% of participants do not read in English. The results indicated that participants can understand some of the long texts, reading simple words with a mean of 4.05 that means most of it. Furthermore, students have to reread a text to understand with a mean of 3.61 which means some and they translate word by word with a mean of 3.34 which means that some words of a text are translated. These findings determine that students need to improve their reading strategies to increase reading comprehension skill. It is recommended that teachers apply more readings, and apply strategies during the English courses. This study provides a snapshot view for teachers of what is happening with EFL students toward reading strategies to support the need for effective reading interventions.

Keywords: reading, reading strategies, reading comprehension, EFL.

Resumen

Este estudio descriptivo muestra la percepción de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera hacia el uso de las estrategias de lectura. Esta investigación integró datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. La muestra fue de 68 estudiantes, 20 hombres y 48 mujeres; cuyas edades fluctuaban entre los 18 y 30 años. Los instrumentos utilizados fueron encuestas para recopilar datos de los participantes sobre sus antecedentes con respecto al aprendizaje del idioma inglés con una moda de 3 que significa que la mayoría de los estudiantes aprendieron inglés en la escuela y tienen problemas en lectura. Además, se aplicó una encuesta de lectura para saber si leen en inglés, comprenden textos y si tienen problemas al momento de leer. Esta encuesta indicó que el 72% de los participantes si leen en inglés. En comprensión de textos, los resultados mostraron que los participantes pueden entender algo de los textos largos, leyendo palabras simples con una media de 4,05 qué significa la mayor parte. Además, los alumnos tienen que volver a leer un texto para entenderlo con una media de 3,61 que significa algo y traducen palabra por palabra con una media de 3,34 que significa que algunas palabras son traducidas. Se concluye que los estudiantes necesitan mejorar sus estrategias de lectura para aumentar la habilidad de comprensión lectora. Se recomienda que los docentes apliquen más lecturas utilizando estrategias de lectura durante los cursos de inglés.

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

Reading Strategies in EFL Students: A Descriptive Study

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) involves different processes and methods aimed to acquire an effective proficiency in the target language. Sultan et al. (2018) mentioned that foreign language teachers are expected to master the four language skills, which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing, to facilitate students reaching excellent oral communication in L2. Lessard-Clouston (2018) pointed out that input is an essential condition for second language acquisition (SLA). Learners should be exposed to the language by listening and reading it.

Ghasemi (2011) stated that literature helps to express cultural and universal human values. Carlino (2006) and Bazerman (2010) confirmed that through reading, students make contact with the academic production to contribute with their own ideas since real intellectual exchange begins when learners react to what they read. According to Dehqan and Samar (2014) reading is considered a receptive skill which activates prior knowledge and enables the reader to predict the contents of texts. With this in mind, learners can combine the information, write, and critique texts to form a general meaning (Sultan et al., 2018).

UNESCO (2017) indicated that children and teenagers lack basic reading competence. There are 19 millions of teenagers that do not reach the required level of reading in their first language (L1) at the end of high school. In Ecuador, the local National Statistics Institute showed that only 27% of people in urban areas have reading habits, and 73% do not practice it because of lack of interest (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC], 2012).

Huges (2013) mentioned some issues related with reading in a foreign language like whether the English resource materials support the learning and development of reading, the home culture views reading as significant or not and whether the teachers are trained in how to teach reading in a foreign language.

According to the last report carried out by Education First (2020), Ecuador is in the ninety-three place in the world's largest ranking according to the English proficiency among one hundred countries. In Latin America, Ecuador is in the 19/19 position that means a very low English domain. Ortega et al. (2017) reported that 142 students from high school in eight public institutions have poor mastery in L2. This means that students are not achieving the English proficiency (B1) established by Common European Framework of Reference CEFR that sets students as independent users which implies the ability to communicate effectively and describe unpredictable situations, explain the main points in an idea or problem with reasonable precision.

In the National Curriculum, the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, 2014) set in its objectives to build up in learners the communicative language competence in L2, through the four main skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Regarding reading, at the end of high school, students must understand texts that consist mainly of high-frequency everyday language, recognize the line of argument, identify main conclusions, and skim to understand a text.

Studies related to reading comprehension show some issues of teachers and students with regard to reading. Briones and Ramírez (2011) mentioned that teachers make students read aloud paragraph by paragraph, asking comprehension questions to the whole class with poor participation which becomes in a superficially learning that does not allow to improve English proficiency in the students. Ortega et al. (2017) stated that what students learn in the scholar system is not replicable in social contact. In others words, students read and practice English only in classes.

Moore (2014) mentioned that cognitive strategies are prerequisites for reading comprehension as well as metacognition. In reading, metacognition refers to the control of

cognitive strategies that help learners to process new information from texts. Background knowledge is a significant contributor to comprehension. Learners who lack prior knowledge about the content they are reading will struggle to make sense of a text (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007 as cited in Moore, 2014).

Sagirli and Ates (2015) developed a descriptive research in Istanbul with a sample of 50 students randomly selected from among 1,000 students in an elementary school. The research showed that from 10 multiple choice questions 24.41% answered correctly, 72.68% got wrong answers, and 0.9% left blank the test. In five open-ended questions, 43.6% answered correctly, 28.8% got wrong answers, and 27.6% left blank. This study concluded that students do not comprehend multiple choice questions and have difficulties expressing themselves. One of the possible reasons may be that teachers do not develop vocabulary and expressions skills through reading.

Septiana (2019) developed a descriptive study with 58 participants of the second semester of the English department in Agama Institute. The researcher asked 50 reading comprehension questions where only two students could answer 36 questions correctly, and the other 56 participants answered between 14 to 20 questions correctly. In other words, the comprehension skill of the students is low. Among the difficulties in reading comprehension, the study showed that 78% of students have difficulties in determining the main idea in a text, 81% of the sample has problems to make inferences, and 62% have difficulties in detailing information in a text and the 67.2% cannot correctly answer vocabulary questions. The results of this study were obtained counting the average of mistakes in answering the questions. Mahardinata (2012) mentioned that the problem in the implementation of teaching reading is vocabulary because students get bored

when they see unfamiliar words in a text that is not according to their language knowledge, as a result, the comprehension activities are difficult and cannot be completed.

This descriptive study was applied in a public technological institute in Santo Domingo de los Tsachilas. The Higher Education Council (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2019) implemented the learning of a second language as a requirement for the graduation process in the third level of higher education. Thus, the institute works to develop in students a B1.2 English level through courses outside their regular schedule so students can graduate. The learners who participate in the study are in B1.1 level with pre intermediate knowledge in English language.

Literature Review

This section considered relevant topics about reading, reading comprehension, reading components, parts of speech, reading skills, prior knowledge when reading, purpose for reading, and organization of texts to facilitate a better understanding of this study.

Reading

Reading involves a complex set of brain processes because the reader has to decode visual codes, make connections between symbols and sounds to understand and interpret the writer's message (Maley & Prowse, 2013). The ideal acquisition of reading is through the integration of several systems like phonological, semantic, syntactic, morphological, pragmatic, conceptual, social, affective, articulatory, and motor (Wolf, 2008, as cited in Maley & Prowse, 2013). Furthermore, reading is an essential tool to achieve an integral transformation that contributes to the formation of better citizens who fundamentally support their beliefs scientifically in relation to relevant issues and human need by critical and rational thinking (Cornejo et al., 2012).

Reading comprehension.

To comprehend texts, a reader needs to combine automatic and strategic cognitive processes that allows the student to produce a mental representation of a text (Broek & Espin, 2012 as cited in Moore, 2014). Effective reading comprehension requires a coherent understanding of the organizing principles which lead to better reasoning and enable control of learning processes by learners themselves (Bransford et al., 1999). In order to develop reading comprehension skills, Moore (2014) mentioned some prerequisites like fluency which refers to the recognition of words. The vocabulary and semantic processing are significant prerequisites because they involve the extracting of meaning as well as the visualization that consists in the construction of mental images of the text which help to keep and update the information on the memory. Finally, reasoning and inferencing that involve the ability to use information in the text to express additional information.

Reading Components

Vocabulary.

Vocabulary is the range of words a student is able to understand and use in context. According to this, vocabulary is divided into two types: active and passive. The first type is the amount of words that students are taught and they are expected to be able to use and the second one is the amount of words which students would recognize when they met them, but are not able to pronounce. (Susanto, 2017). Alqahtani (2015) stated that teaching vocabulary is an essential part in foreign language learning since the lexical knowledge is central to communication competence and to the acquisition of a foreign language. A lack of vocabulary knowledge is an obstacle to learning.

Grammar.

Debata (2013) stated that grammar is the study of words and the way words work together. Ji and Liu (2018) mentioned that grammar in foreign language teaching and learning is undoubtedly necessary for mastering the language, for achieving accuracy and fluency. The word grammar has different meanings. Knowledge of grammar helps in the correction of mistakes and improvement in learning languages. Students cannot learn a foreign language accurately only through a process of unconscious assimilation. Grammar is a sure ground of reference when linguistic habits fail (Debata, 2013).

Parts of speech.

Parts of speech can be defined as a group in which a word is allocated to, based on its syntactic functions in a sentence regarding its meaning and grammar (A research guide, 2019). Rehbein (2019) mentioned that students need to be able to construct quality sentences that communicate information accurately and clearly. Understanding the basic part of speech is the first step for effective communication. These parts are distributed in diverse categories but, the eight parts of speech that every student should know are noun, pronoun, adjective, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. The prescribed way of introducing syntactic elements is through categorization of words into distinct word classes to put a highly emphasis on elaborating how the word is used, not what the word is (Khosravizadeh & Pashmforoosh, 2011). Taking this into account, original and authentic tools for teaching parts of speech enhance language proficiency because they aid students to become highly proficient English users.

Reading Skills

Decoding and encoding.

Decoding is a key skill for learning to read, it involves using letter sound relationships to pronounce written words. Decoding happens when people use prior knowledge to pronounce correctly letter-sound, it is the ability to match letters and their sound (Kelly, 2020). Understanding this relationship between letters and sounds, students can get the ability to recognize familiar words quickly and to figure out words they have not seen before. Encoding is the process of using letters or sounds knowledge to write. Using encoding enhances phonological processing and phonemic awareness and it supports learners, reading, writing, and spelling abilities (Linde & Clayton 2016).

Sangia (2014) said that decoding is not enough in itself to enable comprehension, but to be a good reader it is necessary to be a good decoder. The skills used in encoding are usually developed alongside decoding skills and reflect similar learning. To easily read, learners must be able to decode unfamiliar words without having to think about it. Gamboa (2017) mentioned that students do not have enough knowledge to decode unknown words and encode them to build messages.

Prior knowledge when reading.

Prior knowledge is defined as what one knows about a subject. It comes from experience or from reading. When a reader activates prior knowledge, he or she is linking what they already know to what he or she is currently reading. Activating prior knowledge before reading helps students to get ready to read and be open to new information (Alfaki & Siddiek, 2013). When students link their experiences or existing knowledge, they are more likely to build lifelong reading habits.

Priebe et al. (2010) stated that learners who have prior knowledge often tend to be better readers with a higher comprehension of words, better fluency, and few reading errors. For this

reason, it is important that teachers at the beginning of a class activate students' prior knowledge by identifying common terms, concepts or brainstorming to connect their ideas to a new topic.

Purpose for reading.

Most of the students read textbooks with a primary purpose: to memorize and understand enough information to receive a particular grade on a course or exams. This kind of reading is different from reading for fun. Empirical studies have shown that the particular purpose for reading influences readers' cognitive processing of texts (Linderholm, 2006). Anderson (2014, as cited in Cheon & Ma, 2014) stated that there are three purposes for reading: reading for pleasure, reading for information, and reading to learn something new. In teaching reading, one of the challenges is how to make students more active when processing texts since having a reading purpose in mind has positive effects on reading comprehension.

Methodology

Design

The goal of descriptive studies is to share a phenomenon and its characteristics concerned with what, where, when and how something has happened. A descriptive study looks for naturalistic data without any intervention or manipulation of variables (Nassaji, 2015). McCombes (2020) mentioned that a descriptive design can use a wide variety of research methods to investigate one or more variables. It is appropriate to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends and categories. Among the descriptive research methods are surveys, observations and case studies.

Lahore University of Management Sciences (2016) pointed out that qualitative research focuses on the quality of things to provide clear issues of the micro view in the investigation. On

the other hand, quantitative research analyzes large sets of data with statistical techniques to offer a macro view of the investigation.

Research questions:

Do participants read in English?

Do they use reading strategies?

What are their perspectives towards reading in English?

What are the perspectives towards vocabulary?

Participants

The participants of this study are 68 students (22 males and 46 females) of different careers and semesters from a Higher Technological Institute in Santo Domingo de los Tsachilas. The range of age is between 18 to 30 years. According to a proficiency test, students are in B1.1 level that means a pre-intermediate knowledge in English language. All participants are non-native English speakers. Their ethnicity is mix-raced and 73.44% is catholic. All participants have internet access, 44.62% have a laptop, 33.85% have a smartphone. The 47.69% have an intermediate knowledge of technology use. The 53.85% indicate that their perspective on English knowledge is intermediate.

The description of participants' English learning background indicates that all participants learned English from the school with problems in the four language skills: Listening 15.38%, speaking 20%, writing 7.69%, and reading 26.15% the rest of the participant mentioned that they do not have difficulties in learning English (10.77%) and the 20% did not specify the skill but said that they have many complications in learning English.

Instruments

After reading the research questions, the investigator used a draft with possible queries to write the survey. The tutor helped with the selection of the questions that allowed obtaining the necessary information for the elaboration of the data analysis.

Reading survey.

To answer the research questions, participants were asked to answer a reading survey through Google classroom in a Google form due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was in English and Spanish to facilitate the questions understanding and answers. The first part of the survey measured the students reading knowledge and strategies, there were 15 questions in a Likert scale and the second part was about students' attitudes and perspectives towards reading skills.

Data Analysis

The results of the study are shown in a table with the means. Excel datasheet was used to analyze the data collected.

Ethical Considerations

A consent letter was present to the principal of the institute to get authorization to carry out the study. After consent, participants were informed about the study and mentioned that their scores and names will not be revealed in the investigation, additionally they were informed that the participation was voluntary and the scores will not affect their grades in their English course.

Results

This section comprises the results obtained in the application of the surveys about reading comprehension. The results are organized according to the research questions: Do participants read in English? And do they use reading strategies? Collected data showed that students don't

read in English very well but they want to learn this skill because it is interesting and they want to learn the language accurately.

According to the results, most of the students cannot understand long texts. They try to comprehend the texts by reading simple words with a mean of 4,05 that means most of it. They translate word by word with a mean of 3,34 which means some of the text words are translated. Regarding the recognition of the elements of a summary, the mean obtained was 3,28 that means some of them can do it because they use their prior knowledge. Finally, in word classification of a reading according to their function, the mean obtained was, 3,60 that means some students can classify words. To get a clear vision of these results, all results are shown in the next table:

Table 1

Survey results about reading comprehension and strategies.

Descriptive Statistics	
Questions	**Mean**
- I read in English.	1.28
- I can understand a long, complex text.	3.14
- I understand single phrases at a time.	4.05
- I understand a long text with the first reading.	2.77
- I understand a long text by rereading it.	3.61
- I can Skim.	2.97
- I can Scan.	2.89
- I know the elements of a summary.	3.28
- When I read I translate all the words.	3.34
- I identify the type of texts I read.	3.26

- I know the organization of the text.	3.04
- I use my prior knowledge when I read.	3.60
- I can classify words of a reading.	3.60
- When I read, I observe punctuation pauses.	3.96
- Punctuation helps me understand the text.	3.70

With the questions related to student's perspectives toward reading the next table shows the results about how they feel when they read a passage in English

Table 2

Results about students' perspectives when they see a passage in English.

Options to answer	Frequency	Valid percent
I feel anxious not to understand	37	54%
I get bored because I have to translate the words	3	5%
I do not read	1	1%
I do not feel anxious	27	40%

To answer this question, 54% of participants feel anxious for not understanding a passage in English *"I feel anxious and frustrated for not understanding the words of a text"*. The 40% of participants do not feel anxious when see a passage in English one the answer was *"I do not feel anxious because when I see a reading in English I can learn more to improve my English"*

And what are student's perspectives towards learning vocabulary, the results are displayed in table 3

Table 3

Results about whether participants think learning vocabulary is complex.

Answers	Frequency	Valid percent
Positive	12	18%
Negative	56	82%

Participants' answers show that 82% think that learning vocabulary is complex and, 18% consider that it is easy. To analyze the students' responses, the researcher divided the responses into positive and negative. The most frequent positive answers were: *"Learning vocabulary is a matter of practice and interest"* and *"On the contrary, I think it is easier because there are many videos on the internet that can help us to learn"* and among negatives were: *"Learning vocabulary is difficult due to the pronunciation and spelling"* and *"It is difficult to memorize the meaning of the words"*

Discussion

The results obtained in this descriptive study shows the students' experiences regarding reading in EFL.

The first question to know whether students read in English demonstrated that they don't read in English. Instead, students apply their prior knowledge, word recognition, and vocabulary knowledge to get an idea of a text. Maley and Prowse (2013) mentioned that reading involves a set of brain processes to decode visual codes, make connections between symbols and sounds to interpret the writer's message. Some of the prerequisites in the ability of reading comprehension are fluency, which consist of cognition of words, and vocabulary and semantic processing which involves extracting meaning. Reading is considered a receptive skill which activates prior knowledge and enables the reader to predict the content of texts (Dehqan & Samar, 2014).

The second question about the practice of reading strategies reported that students do not apply reading strategies like scan, skim, elements of summaries, organization of texts, part of

speech. Students have difficulties answering questions because they do not know how to express their ideas. In Sagirly and Ates (2015), it was identified that most students could not get higher scores because of their lack of reading comprehension. This is attributed to the fact that perhaps teachers are not developing the vocabulary and expressions correctly through reading. Septiana (2019) found that 78% of students have difficulties in determining the main idea in a text. Students need to be able to construct quality sentences that communicate information accurately and clearly. The parts of speech are the first step for effective communication. (Rehbein, 2019)

The third question concerning the students' perspectives toward reading in English was negative. The results revealed that participants feel anxious about reading in English because they do not understand complex words; they have to translate the words to get simple ideas. On the other hand, few students do not feel anxiety; they are interested and motivated about the text contents and learn the language through literature. There was a high difference between positive and negative results. Alqahtani (2015) indicated that vocabulary is an essential part of learning a foreign language. Word knowledge is central in the communication competence and acquisition of a language. The activation of prior knowledge helps students getting a high comprehension of words, better fluency and avoids reading errors (Priebe et al., 2012).

The fourth question regarding the students' perspective towards vocabulary demonstrated that most of the participants think that learning vocabulary is complex and the rest of the students think that learning vocabulary is easy whether it is practiced and there is interest in learning. The reading purpose is reading for pleasure, reading for information, and reading to learn something new. When students have a reading purpose in mind it has a positive effect on reading comprehension (Anderson as cited in Cheon & Ma, 2014). Students can learn vocabulary if they have the purpose to learn and practice it.

Conclusion

This descriptive study gathered the reading perspectives and issues from students of a higher institute from Santo Domingo de los Tsachilas during the English courses. Reading is one of the four essential skills in teaching-learning English that implies a set of brain processes where the readers decode and encode letters to link them with their prior knowledge to understand and interpret a writing message. This descriptive study showed that students do not read in English because they feel anxious when they see an English passage with unknown vocabulary. For this reason, students think that learning vocabulary in English is complex, and indicated that they use translation as a strategy to understand a text. Some researchers related with this investigation, mentioned in their studies that teachers are not developing vocabulary and expressions skills through reading and they need to be trained in how to teach reading to EFL students.

Finally, teachers in the Tsachila institute should elaborate a syllabus with more reading strategies in each unit to promote reading culture. Reading strategies have a positive effect on comprehension and enable learning more vocabulary.

Limitations

The limitations that this descriptive study faced were the students' ideas toward the surveys, because they thought that all of these results will affect their course grades. Additionally, all the study was carried out online due to the current situation of COVID-19 pandemic, in some sessions the communication by google meet was not successful due to internet issues like bad connection because of the weather and power energy.

Recommendations

For future studies, it is important to mention that descriptive studies need to apply in face to face contexts instead of virtual, since real context allows researchers to observe students during the study to gather data on behaviors and phenomena to understand students' perspectives and systematically describe them. For open questions the researcher must be sure that all participants have a clear idea of what information it is required in their answers.

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Appendix 1

Perspectives about EFL Reading and Vocabulary

Available upon request.