Peer Assessment of Think-Aloud Strategies to Improve Reading Comprehension

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Teachers and students usually strive when teaching and learning English. The use of English as a foreign language in Ecuador is considered an issue as well as in other countries of America Latina. Latin countries struggle to manage the English language, which is considered poor, basic, or intermediate. In 2016, Ecuador started to evaluate students' English level in public schools that focus on reading and listening skills (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). The present document aims to help better reading comprehension skills in English by using a Think-aloud strategy that might provide a glimpse of the mental processes towards the comprehension and interpretation of text while working with another person (Rankin, 1988).

To Shih and Reynolds (2018), strong readers tended to combine strategies. This may sharpen the focus of teachers' efforts to teach a second language successfully as a contribution to better reading strategies. Strong readers used more global strategies than weak readers and have a more diverse reading strategy repertoire, while weak readers tended to lean towards using a single strategy.

There is a wide range of methods, approaches, and tools that aim to better reading strategies and the interpretation of texts. The communicative language teaching approach (CLT) relies on Cooperative Learning rather than an individualistic learning approach (Richards, 2006). An essential aspect of the CLT is using different communication strategies indistinctively if they are reading, writing, speaking, or listening skills. A significant influence of this study is the constructivist approach that mentions the huge impact that social interaction has on cognition and the construction of knowledge (Bruner, 1984). Based on the approaches above, both peer assessment and a think-aloud strategy will be explored, involving a pair of work experiences to enhance reading comprehension.

There might be uncountable benefits of working with peers. One benefit to mention is that students can construct their knowledge, in which the teachers' role turns into a facilitator that monitors the learning progress. Also, the peers reduce the students' affective filter that may block their performance when learning the L2 (Krashen, 2013). Peer assessment through a think-aloud strategy combined with the CLT and the Constructivist approach aims to better reading strategies giving stimuli for the use of higher-order thinking skills while interaction takes place.

Peer assessment is a learning tool in which learners evaluate and give ideas to each other's work while enhancing social interaction. To promote learning, community engagement in self-assessment and peer assessment is crucial that students remain focus and engaged in the learning process. Students who were engaged with peers were likely to express satisfaction with their experience, reported higher levels of achievement than their less-engaged peers, and indicated clear plans to persist with their university study (Krause, 2005).

A similar study has not been conducted in Ecuador. The current proposal will explore peer assessment through a think-aloud strategy to determine its effect on Reading Comprehension Skills. According to the research study of Rankin (1988), it gives the most direct access as the process of reading happens, in which learners read a text to afterward give their reflection, interpretation, or point of view to their partners. It is a framework for thinking aloud projects to understand how best students perform the strategy and problem solving towards reading. Throughout the process of the application of the study, the teacher will assist students in overcoming difficulties. First, students who are not used to reading in the L1 may struggle to read in the L2. Along with it and to be aware of the reading learning process while conducting the study, it is vital to be conscious that not all the students might have the A2.1 level. It might limit the use of the target language in class while working with

their peers. It is the level required for 9th graders according to the Common European

Framework (2001). One of the significant problems occurs due to the excessive use of L1 in

monolingual groups (Ellis, 2008). The difficulties with Reading in occasions were mainly

that the students worried more about speaking aloud their thoughts and concentrated less on

the reading itself as well as the comprehension of the text and the focus of the study.   This

study will be developed in the period 2020 - 2021 in a public school located in la Sequita-

Crucita Cantón Portoviejo in Manabí Province.

Literature Review

Think-aloud strategy

To study problem-solving strategies Jahandar et al. (2012) stated that Think-aloud was

initially developed by Newell and Simon (1972). Engaging students towards the use of think-

aloud strategy enable teachers to be aware of the reading strategies learners apply in order to

top up the required English skills and use them effectively.

A crucial component of learning is being able to stimulate one´s thought to assess the

comprehension level and adjust strategies towards students 'success.

The think-aloud system relies on pair work. Students read text thinking aloud to later

on change roles. While the first participant is thinking aloud, the second one listens and

records what the partners says. Every student has the opportunity to participate and observe

the process of think-aloud. Finally, the students share and discuss the process together,

pointing out and reflecting on what worked well for them and what did not.

Eccles and Arsal (2017) mentioned that the think-aloud strategy allows participants to

complete a task and recall ideas or thoughts, stimulating thought and discussion. According

to Jahandar et al. (2012), reflecting on the use of think-aloud and the reading process

promotes the comprehension of text instead of the only fact of the reading of words.

The think-aloud is a current method used in the scientific community and psychology. It also has its place in the educational field. There is not guarantee that this or any other method will succeed or fully work. However, being aware of the students' needs, choosing the appropriate text material, identifying their weaknesses and strengths, will improve students abilities. In order to succeed in the process of teaching and learning, reasoning on how and why the strategies work is vital. Trial-and-error and introducing the strategy in a way that is comprehensible for learners will benefit their learning.

Findings of a particular study determined that using the think-aloud strategy improves evaluative science comprehension skills in students. It allows monitoring their thinking process that contributes to questioning, interpretation, making inferences, and making connections (Jackson, 2016). A recent study pointed out differences between good and poor readers through think-aloud tasks. Both readers tend to use the same strategies as inferences and paraphrasing in the reading process through the think-aloud strategy (Wang, 2016). A study done with ten freshman high school students relying on think-aloud strategy and participating with pairs in four reading tasks to answer comprehension questions, demonstrated under the analysis of reading scores that the most successful pair performed think-aloud reading better than the least successful one (Wang, 2016). Seipel et al. (2016) stated that poor readers make fewer connections related to the text because they rely more on their own background experience instead of strategy use. Considerations of a moment-by-moment strategy intervention are suggested in which the teacher makes think-aloud more effective, looking forward similar comprehension levels among learners that might facilitate the reading process (Seipel et al., 2016).

Reading

Concerning the reading skill and according to Fisher and Frey (2010), reading is not innate or automatic; every brain has to be taught to read. Reading is a complex integration of the brain's systems that recognize sounds, written symbols, meanings, and sequences and then connect with what the reader already knows (Wolf et al., 2009). To help students conceptualize reading skills and strategies, teachers use modeling as a direct teaching strategy to demonstrate and guide practice as a cognitive strategy through an authentic task and under the think-aloud method (Blair & Rupley, 1988).

According to William et al. (2009), skills and cognitive strategies in teaching reading are addressed when obtaining learning outcomes. Both types of learning are vital towards reading; Skills have a low level of cognitive processing where the teacher is in complete control and a high use of structure. Examples of reading skills include the various decoding methods used in phonics, context analysis; specific comprehension skills such as recognizing sequential development, fact versus opinion, a stated main idea, and more. On the other hand, cognitive strategies involve a higher level of cognitive processing, being less specific than skills and under the reader's command. The cognitive strategy learning is

In cognitive strategy learning, teacher directness and control are more relaxed than in skill learning. However, the teacher still explains and models to their students what they need to learn without being a controlled and strict procedure as it is for skill instruction (Blair et al., 2007). Cognitive strategies applied to reading consist of making predictions, summarizing a story, reacting critically to what is read, and inferring main ideas. According to Janzen (2002), in a study done to test reading comprehension, the results showed that the student who scored lower relied on one technique instead of the one who excelled on the result. The way how the text was successfully approached suggested that the use of different strategies, including frequent self-questioning, led to the student's success.

Peer assessment

Peer assessment is a tool in which learners focuses on collaborative learning to search, explore, provide feedback, increase social interactions, and encourage students to master the topic of learning (Alzaid, 2017). Ruiz (1998 cited in Fernández, 2018) highlighted that assessment includes four basic components: Measuring improvement over time, motivating students to study, evaluating the teaching methods, ranking the students' capabilities in relation to the whole group evaluation.

Findings in a different study address that learners prefer assessment from their teachers rather than their partners (Tsui & Ng, 2000). Peer comments do not show to have the same value for all learners. Relying on teacher feedback is seen in cases as a more reliable source of improvement by learners (Golparian et al., 2015). Scherer (2016) stated that the term feedback is often used to describe all kinds of comments made after the fact, including advice, praise, and evaluation. However, none of these are feedback, strictly speaking. Feedback is information about how someone is doing efforts to reach a goal. Whether feedback is just there to be grasped or is provided by another person, helpful feedback is goal-referenced; tangible and transparent; actionable; user-friendly (specific and personalized); timely; ongoing, and consistent.

Goal-referenced means that effective feedback requires that a person has a goal, takes action to achieve the goal, and receives goal-related information about their actions. Tangible and transparent means any useful feedback system involves a clear goal and tangible results related to the goal. Even little children, we learn from such tangible feedback. That is how people learn to walk; to hold a spoon, or change clothes. The best feedback is tangible that anyone who has a goal can learn from it.

Actionable feedback refers to *actionable* information. Thus, "Good job!" and "You did that wrong" and *B+* are not feedback at all. The performer must also accept actionable feedback. Many so-called feedback situations lead to arguments because the givers are not

sufficiently descriptive; they jump to an inference from the data instead of simply presenting the data. Such care in offering neutral, goal-related facts is the whole point of the clinical supervision of teaching and good coaching more generally. Effective supervisors and coaches work hard to carefully observe and comment on what they observed, based on a clear goal statement.

User-friendly (specific and personalized) refers to help the performer concentrate on only one or two key elements of performance than to create a buzz of information coming in from all sides. Even if feedback is specific and accurate in experts' or bystanders' eyes, it is not of much value if the user cannot understand it or is overwhelmed by it.

Timely refers to the vital feedback on key performances that often comes days, weeks, or even months after the performance. Educators should work overtime to figure out ways to ensure that students get more timely feedback and opportunities to use it while the attempt and effects are still fresh in their minds.

Ongoing refers that the key to substantial improvement is that the feedback is both timely and ongoing. In the game of Angry Birds, Halo, Guitar Hero, or Tetris, it is visible to know when the player is failing, so immediately it is possible to start over—sometimes even right where the game was left off—to get another opportunity and learn from the feedback that is how all highly successful computer games work. The more feedback the player can receive in real-time, the better the ultimate performance will be.

Consistent refers that performers can only adjust their performance successfully if the information fed back to them is stable, accurate, and trustworthy. To be useful, feedback must be consistent. In education, that means teachers have to be on the same page about what high-quality work is. Teachers need to look at student work together, becoming more consistent over time and formalizing their judgments in highly descriptive rubrics supported by anchor products and performances. By extension, if teachers want student-to-student feedback to be

more helpful, students must be trained to be consistent the same way they were trained, using the same exemplars and rubrics.

According to Schwartz and Sparks (2019), children do not naturally develop reading skills through text exposure. Like English or French, alphabetic languages use letters to stand for sounds that make up spoken words. To read an alphabetic language, children must learn how written letters represent spoken sounds, recognize patterns of letter sounds like words, and match those to spoken words whose meanings they know. Written language is a code.

For the last few decades, the research has been detailed: Teaching young kids how to crack the code—teaching systematic phonics—is the most reliable way to make sure that they learn how to read words. Of course, there is more to reading than seeing a word on a page and pronouncing it aloud. As such, there is more to teaching phonics. Reading requires children to make meaning out of print. They need to know the different sounds in spoken language and connect those sounds to written letters to decipher words. They need deep background and vocabulary knowledge so that they understand the words they read. Eventually, they need to automatically recognize most words and read connected text fluently, attending to grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. Knowing how to decode is an essential step in becoming a reader. If children cannot decipher the precise words on the page, they will never become fluent readers or understand the passages they are reading.

The **research questions** that arise from this study are:

1.   To what extent does peer assessment of think aloud improve reading comprehension?

2.   How learners after Peer assessment feel about reading comprehension skills?

3.   What are students´ perspectives towards the think aloud strategy use?

Innovation

The innovation is designed to improve reading comprehension through the think-aloud strategy while working with peers. The study will use a backward design that aids to better the students' performance (See appendix A). The current study allows teachers to set the desired learning goals to transfer and apply acquired knowledge in authentic contexts and situations (Yurtseven & Altun, 2015). The study will last 22 teaching hours (4 weeks) were all skills such as writing, reading, listening, and speaking are embedded in the study being reading comprehension the main focus.

During the first stage of the implementation, the students receive an explanation of what the thinking-aloud strategy is and its process to work with their peers in class for assessment. First, they will read silently and individually. Then, they will work in pairs to share their thoughts about the text (See appendix B). Finally, they will reflect on their own and about each other's thoughts, promoting comprehension performance while the process of reading comprehension occurs.

After receiving the explanation about the think-aloud strategy use, the students will learn how to handle peer assessment by using a rubric to evaluate and assess improving reading comprehension (See Appendix C). Through the passing days and weeks of the innovation, the students will complete tasks in a collaborative environment while enhancing their reading skills. At the end of the study, the students will perform a final task.

Methodology

Regarding the collection of data, it will be collected under qualitative and quantitative instruments during an Action Research method. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches is of considerable interest to researchers (Brannen, 2017). Action Research attempts to address an issue, track the progress, and evidence results of the study promoting significant learning and supporting professional development (Ryan, 2013; Terrance, 2000).

Participants

The study's convenience sample is 24 students (9 males and 15 females) of 9th grade for A2.1. The ages of the participants range between 13 to 14 years old among both genders. The students work according to their reading comprehension level, their written performance, and their spoken fluency. Most of the students come from low or middle socioeconomic status. The teacher will assign the participants to develop the study. This study aims to find conclusive results related to the questions stated at the beginning of the this paper.

Data Collection and Analysis.

The independent variable is peer assessment that uses think-aloud as a strategy to sustain reading comprehension as the dependent variable.

Instruments.

Pre and posttest.

RQ# 1. To what extent does peer assessment of think aloud improve reading comprehension?

To answer the first question pre and post-tests will be held at the beginning and the end of the study. They consist in the reading of three different passages. Each one includes multiple choice exercises. The pre-test will diagnose and evaluate the initial stage towards reading comprehension. The post-test will evaluate and measure the reading comprehension knowledge improvement acquired through the application of the think aloud strategy at the end of the study.

A rubric will be used to evaluate the task performance in class. The rubric's objective is to evaluate the process of the think-aloud strategy when working in pairs to determine the impact towards reading comprehension skills.

The rubric will be used to give feedback on the students' progress in each session.

Field Notes.

RQ# 2. How learners after Peer assessment feel about reading comprehension skills?

To answer the second question field notes is used to list situations observed through verbal and nonverbal students' expressions (See Appendix D). Bogdan et al. (2015) mentioned that Field notes are related to the constructivist model that allows building comprehension and interpretation of a text in context through the participants. Observation also enables the researcher to understand the surroundings better, pay attention to the class activities, and, most importantly, observe behaviors on how participants respond to ensure aids towards the challenges learners might face (See Appendix D). . Direct observation will be done to determine how students feel and respond to different reading strategies while working in pairs to finally triangulate data and verify findings from other data collection sources.

Interviews.

RQ# 3. What are students´ perspectives towards the think aloud strategy use?

Finally, to answer the third question the interviews intend to get participants' in-depth thinking process towards the use of the think-aloud strategy to comprehend the meaning of texts and overcome reading difficulties. Interviews help to validate or dismiss aspects that learners will possibly encounter through the strategy use. With think-aloud, students verbalize, in an interview context their perspectives, how they are processing the strategy and text they read through peer assessment. The interview will be carried out virtually in times of Covid-19 with the interactions (participant-researcher) through verbal reports as a narrative of the experience (See Appendix E). There will be 8 questions related towards the experience of the think-aloud strategy and how it aims to help better reading comprehension skills in English.

Regarding the interviewees, a group of students will be selected according to their grades. A group of students with higher and lower grades will participate in the interviews. The interview will take from 8 to 10 minutes.

Ethical considerations are crucial when conducting the study. The previous consent of parents and school authorities is a part of ethics to inform about the implementation objective, the anonymity, and the benefits of the study. There should be a good fit between the ethical and legal concerns and the made sampling choices as informed consent, privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and professional codes of ethics. As part of preparing sample choices, one should make sure one is aware of the relevant ethical considerations (Daniel, 2011).

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Appendix A

Design from Your Goals

Available upon request.

Appendix B

Pre-test/Pos-test

Available upon request.

Appendix C

Rubric to Assess Reading through Peer Feedback

Available upon request.

Appendix D

FIELD NOTES

Available upon request.

Appendix E

Virtual Interview

Available upon request.