



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 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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Coordinadora de Titulación

Abstract

The present descriptive study looks at the importance of reading skills for English Language Learners (ELL) and the challenges that university students in Ecuador face when practicing this skill. Hence, a survey was applied to 50 students, with an A2-B1 level from a private university located in Manabí, province of Ecuador. The results obtained from the survey show that many students read in English mostly for academic purposes and not necessarily for pleasure. It also shows that students try to look for strategies to make reading more enjoyable but tend to rely heavily on inappropriate strategies such as translation of texts. Additionally, results show a psychological aspect which is that many students feel very anxious when they read in English. Based on this evidence, it is possible to argue that teachers should pay more attention to the strategies that students employ when they read and to how students feel towards a particular reading activity. This study involves recommendations for teachers to work closely together with students to set, right from the start, clear strategies and goals so that the whole reading process is more productive and enjoyable.

Keywords: reading, reading strategies, reading skills, vocabulary.

Resumen

El presente estudio descriptivo analiza la importancia de las habilidades lectoras para los aprendices del idioma inglés (ELL) y los desafíos que enfrentan los estudiantes universitarios en Ecuador al practicar esta habilidad. Por lo tanto, se aplicó una encuesta a 50 estudiantes con un nivel A2-B1 de una Universidad privada ubicada en Manabí, provincial de Ecuador. Los resultados obtenidos de la encuesta muestran que muchos estudiantes leen en inglés, principalmente con fines académicos y no necesariamente por placer. También muestra que los estudiantes intentan buscar estrategias para hacer que la lectura sea más agradable, pero tienden a depender en gran medida de estrategias inapropiadas, como la traducción de textos. Además, los resultados muestran un aspecto psicológico que es que muchos estudiantes se sienten muy ansiosos cuando leen en inglés. Basado en esta evidencia, es posible argumentar que los maestros deberían prestar más atención a las estrategias que emplean los estudiantes cuando leen y a como se sienten los estudiantes hacia una actividad de lectura en particular. Por lo tanto, el estudio implica recomendaciones para que los maestros trabajen en estrecha colaboración con los estudiantes para establecer desde el principio, estrategias y metas claras para que todo el proceso de lectura sea más productivo y agradable.

Palabras clave: lectura, estrategias de lectura, habilidades de lectura, 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 a local Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC], 2012) showed that 27% of Ecuadorian people do not have reading habits, this includes 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 this type of investigation.

The limitations that L2 students face during the 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, and 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. 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 helping 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 a 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 an 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 is 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”, finds 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.

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

Prior Knowledge When Reading

Cervetti and Hiebert (2015) established that students' 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 shorts readings.

Sanacore (1983) suggested some strategies to activate prior knowledge to current reading activities or assignments; the prereading plan PRep, which Sanacore 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 readings 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 student's access to proper texts. It is necessary that students get confident with different types of readings, having the opportunity to choose a reading that encourages 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. (2016) 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, Business, Technical and Health) 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 34, participated in this survey. This university is private and it is located in the urban zone of Portoviejo - a canton from Manabí. The students were all from Ecuador but from different cities around the country. Two students considered that they belong to a high social status, 40 to a middle social status and eight students to a low income status. Out of the 50 participants, 32 were females and 18 males. Most of them considered themselves from the ethnicity "Mestizos" and a few of them "Montubios". About religion, some of them considered their religion as "Catholic", some "Christians" and a few do not have any religion. They were in different types of students' field such as: Social (Law), and Technical (Architecture and Graphic Design) areas. Their mother tongue is Spanish, however, students considered their level of English to be elementary to intermediate, which is A2- B1, according to the CEFR. Despite having some students establishing themselves within a low income social status, they all had access to internet and technological devices such as computers, laptops, and smartphones. The participants completed the survey at their houses and they were told that their information will be confidential.

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 was an eleven questions survey where

different types of questions are included, such as demographic questions, 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 used 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 is not mandatory to participate in the survey. A consent letter was sent to the director of the English Institution to send survey to the students. After the approval, participants were informed and the data was collected.

Results

The data from the survey were used to answer the first research question, there were two items that support this question: 1. *Do participants read in English?* and 2. *Why?* To this first item, 38 students (76% of the sample) answered “yes”, 7 (14%) answered “no”, 3 answered “sometimes”, 1 “so so”, and 1 “not much”.

For the second item, students were asked “why”, of the 38 students who answered yes, 17 mentioned that they read English for learning purposes, such as improving vocabulary, acquiring knowledge about diverse topics, among other things. Meanwhile, 10 students said that they read English because they like it, 8 because they see it as an obligation, and the remaining 3 for mixed reasons.

On the other hand, for the group of 7 students (14% of the whole sample) who answered “no”, the answers obtained show that 4 students do not read due to a lack of interest, 2 students only because they feel it is mandatory (they established they only read when the university requires them to read), and 1 student pointed out that she found it very difficult because of a lack of vocabulary.

For the remaining 5 students of the sample, who either answered “not much”, “so so” or “sometimes”, the answers recorded show very mixed reasons, which means there is not a clear tendency in this group. The answers of these 5 students were: “due to a lack of practice, from my part”; “because I still lack the knowledge of some words”; “I do it when I watch series or movies in English to learn more”; “because I find more information in English”; and “Sometimes books because I feel that I need a little more to learn, and sometimes comments because they are not so long and I think they are not so difficult to understand”.

To answer research question number two: *Do participants use reading strategies?* this study established 14 items as part of the survey. To get the answer for these 14 items, this study used a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being “to a great extent”, 4 “most of it”, 3 “some”, 2 “a little bit”, and 1 “none”. The results obtained from these items were intended to measure and determine the type of strategies that students use to read and understand texts in English. The following table describes the results obtained from the 14 items considered to answer research question number 2:

Table 1

Results of the Survey - Do participants use reading strategies?

| ITEM | MEAN |
|--|-------------|
| I can understand a long, complex text. | 3.5 |
| I understand single phrases at a time. | 4.14 |
| I understand a long text with the first reading | 3.24 |
| I understand a long text by rereading it | 3.94 |
| I can skim | 3.12 |
| I can scan | 3.4 |
| I know the elements of a summary | 3.5 |
| When I read I translate all the words | 3.16 |
| I identify the type of texts I read | 3.34 |
| I know the organization of the text | 3.26 |
| I use my prior knowledge when I read | 3.58 |
| I can classify words of a reading according to their function in context of the reading: noun, verb, adverb, adjective, among others | 3.56 |
| When I read, I observe punctuation pauses | 3.88 |
| When I read, the punctuation helps me understand the text | 3.84 |

Two highest scores were found in items: “I understand single phrases at a time” (M= 4.14) and “I understand a long text by rereading it” (M= 3.94), while the two lowest scores were in items: “I can skim” (M=3.12) and “When I read I translate all the words” (M=3.16). This serves as an indication that most of the participants from the survey are able to understand chunks and not precisely the whole reading. A second

aspect that stands out is that participants need to “reread” texts in order to understand them.

As for the items with the lowest scores, the results show that participants find it difficult to get the main idea of the reading. Likewise, the other lowest score demonstrated that participants tend to translate when they read.

Moreover, another item was considered to answer question number two: *Do participants use reading strategies?* This item was “I can skim and scan. Explain the process of each”. The results show that 9 students (18% of the sample) answered “yes”, they can skim and scan in a reading; 8 students (16%) answered “sometimes”, the participants established that they occasionally can skim and scan; 6 students (12%) answered “no”, they are not able to skim and scan. Meanwhile, 27 students (54%) pointed out the strategies that they use to skim and scan in the reading, such as: some participants read first the title and then the introduction, check punctuation, find the main idea of the reading, translate words that participants do not understand. One participant mentioned: “analyze the words I already know and associate them with those that I do not now”, among others.

The third research question *What are the participants’ perspectives towards vocabulary?* Was answered with two items from the survey: 1. “I feel my knowledge of vocabulary in English is...” and 2. “I think learning vocabulary is complex ...”. The following chart shows the results obtained for item 1:

Figure 1.

Perspectives about Vocabulary

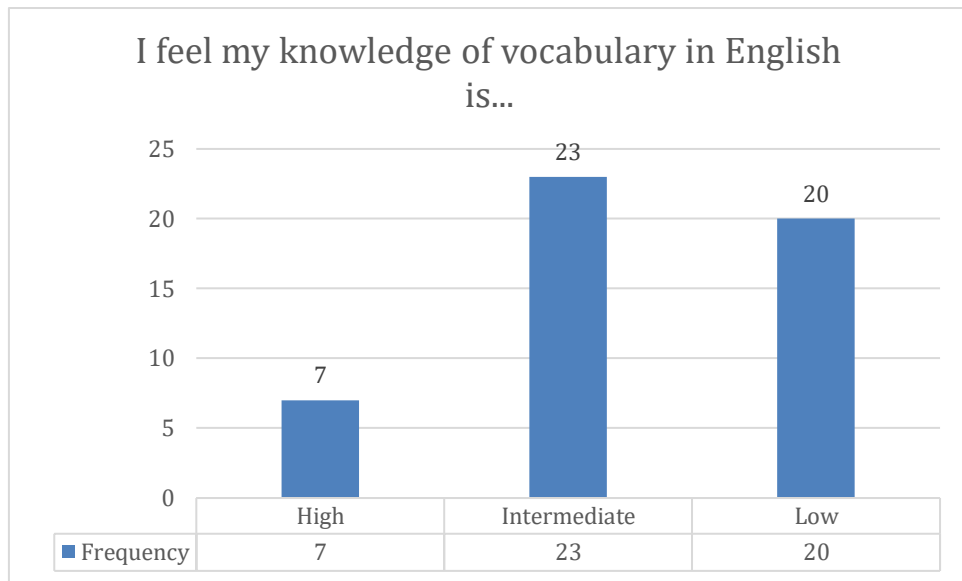


Figure 2 displays that 23 participants (46% of the sample) consider themselves to be at somewhere around an intermediate level, 20 participants (40%) at a low level, and only 7 (14%) at a high level. It is important to mention that not all participants wrote exactly “low”, “intermediate”, or “high” as their answers (some wrote for example: “basic”, “not low nor high”, “pretty good”), but based on the classification and analysis used, these categories are a close match to the answers obtained in this item.

According to item 2, participants mentioned different reasons why learning vocabulary is complex. One group of 8 participants (16% of the sample) said that the lack of practice. Another group of 8 participants (16%) mentioned that the lack of interest makes them feel unmotivated to learn vocabulary. Meanwhile, 7 participants (14%) think that learning vocabulary is not difficult, 7 (14%) that vocabulary is difficult because some words have many different meanings and because pronunciation varies a lot depending on the word’s structure, and 2 (4%) that it depends on the teaching strategy as there are some methods that facilitate the learning process. Finally, 18 participants (46%) wrote very mixed answers which did not seem to fit in any of the other five categories and therefore were categorized as “among others”.

The last research question was answered with the item: *I see an English passage and I feel...*, where participants expressed the way they feel when they read in English.

The results of the 50 participants are labeled in the following table:

Table 2

I see an English passage and I feel...

| Answers | Frequency | Percentage of the sample |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| Anxious | 24 | 48% |
| Do not feel anxious/ I like to learn | 18 | 36% |
| Interested in reading | 4 | 8% |
| Do not read in English | 2 | 4% |
| Bored | 1 | 2% |
| Challenged | 1 | 2% |
| TOTAL | 50 | 100% |

According to the table above, the most notable answer - “Anxious” - demonstrates that 24 participants (48% of the sample) feel anxious when they read in English, some of their answers were: “I feel very anxious”, “I feel anxious to discover new words and find out its meaning”, “I feel anxious because I do not understand the meaning”, among others. A group of 18 participants (36%) do not feel anxious at all, most of the participants of this group said that they feel happy to learn and read in English, and 4 participants (8%) mentioned that: “I feel interested to learn new words”, “I feel interested to learn in English”, “I feel curious and interested to learn new words” and “I feel interested to read in English”. Another 2 participants (4%) do not read in English at all. And the other 2 participants (4%), feel “bored” and “challenged” when they see a passage in English.

Discussion

In this study, the results of the survey reflect student’s interest for reading in English. Some of the students demonstrate that they enjoy and learn through reading activities, which reflects what Alderson (2000) claimed.

In regard to the first research question: Do participants read in English? most of the participants said that they do read in English with one of the main reasons being “learning purposes” – such as improving vocabulary and other skills. This is supported by Hill (2000), stated that the readers get information and meaning from sources to interpret. On the other hand, for some learners, reading may not be one of the favorite skills to practice (Wipf, 1976), which is also reflected in this study as there were participants who said they do not read in English for reasons such as: lack of interest, lack of vocabulary and because they feel it is mandatory. For these reasons, it is important to go back to what Kganetso (2017) argued, and that is that educators should offer reading activities that promote students’ interest to read.

For the second research question: Do participants use reading strategies? 14 items were established to analyze this question based on the student’s answers. The answers for this question show that students use different strategies that make them feel comfortable with the reading activities and this is supported by Soodla et al. (2017), who suggested that students should choose how to read and what strategies to use. The two highest scores demonstrate that students understand single phrases at a time and they also understand a long text by rereading it, while the two lowest scores indicate that participants found it difficult to get the main idea of the passages and they tend to translate every single word when they read. The situation seen with the two lowest scores differs from what Metz (2018) implied, which is that students should use strategies that make them enjoy the reading learning process.

Additionally, there was another item to answer research question number two and this item was: “I can skim and scan. Explain the process of each”, and a great majority of participants (54% of the sample) pointed out different skimming strategies that they use when they skim and scan. This item also showed that a few students are

not able to skim and scan when they read. Meanwhile, the strategy of “skimming and scanning” is considered to be very helpful with extensive readings or large information passages in a relatively short period of time (Alderson, et al. 2016).

To answer the third research question: What are their perspectives towards vocabulary? two items were considered: 1. “I feel my knowledge of vocabulary in English is...” and 2. “I think learning vocabulary is complex ...”. For the first item, answers were divided into three categories: high, intermediate, and low. A great majority of the participants were placed at an intermediate level, some others at a low level and a very few at a high level. The second item exposed the reasons why vocabulary is complex, and there were different reasons such as: lack of interest, word’s different meanings, and it depends on the teaching strategies, among others. The evidence obtained in this third research question is particularly important because, as Zhang and Zhang (2020) pointed out, students should reach a certain level of vocabulary to understand passages and avoid disagreement when they read. This study shows that most of the participants have a low to intermediate level of vocabulary knowledge, which may explain why they struggle with reading and understanding passages.

Finally, the last research question demonstrates student’s feelings when they read in English. Most of the students said they feel anxious when they read in English. Thus, participants do not feel comfortable if they do not have an extensive lexical knowledge. On the other hand, some participants exposed they feel happy and motivated to learn and read in English (Alderson 2000).

To conclude, it is important to reflect on what Sweetman and Sabella (2018) suggested, which is that students and teachers should work together to help students reach reading goals and to make this process enjoyable. This teacher-student interaction

is what needs to be at core of educators' strategies to make the student's acquisition of reading skills a highly productive learning process.

Conclusion

Reading has been considered an important skill during the process of learning a second language but, it is also believed that students may only read because it is mandatory in their English classes. Some students can understand readings easily and some others have more difficulty when they do reading activities. The objective of this study was to analyze participants' reading strategies in a private university in Manabí, Ecuador.

In this study, it has been seen that many participants read in English not just as a requirement but as a hobby too, and this is important to analyze because they feel more comfortable when they read what they feel interested in. Some other participants demonstrated their frustration and discomfort when they do not understand passages because of the lack of vocabulary or because readings are boring or extensive.

Based on this context, teachers should apply passages according to the student's interests and necessities. It is very important, for example, that educators provide topics that are in line with student's personal and professional goals, and having good strategies to do that will be a key to get students engaged with reading activities in the classroom. As a result, it is concluded that some participants do not apply strategies at the moment they read, and it is seen that most of the time participants only read when they are in the classroom. Thus, teachers should find ways to have students do more reading activities as part of their daily lives making sure that the learning process is as natural as possible so that it does not have to be seen as an obligation by them.

Limitation

During the survey, some difficulties arose and these resulted in that the survey had to be applied in a different way - namely through Google forms, different from a face-to-face survey. Because of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, participants took the test from home. Some of them did not have appropriate technological devices to fill the test, for this reason these participants took the test through their cellphone and the application did not work properly. This caused that some participants answer the questionnaire twice and therefore it was necessary to delete some repeated responses.

Another difficulty was that some participants did not understand some questions and therefore did not answer them properly. Many of them answered the open questions with a yes/no answer and this made it more difficult for the researcher to analyze the answers. Another group of students were not clear with the information they gave, they answered some questions in Spanish and others in English.

Recommendation

Based on the results and the limitations of the study, there are some recommendations that future research should follow: first, making sure that students have the same level of English and they are in the same area of study. For example, some of the participants that took the test were in Architecture and some others were in the Graphic design area, and this made a difference on the results. Moreover, the participants should be divided into two groups: students with the highest level and students with the lowest level. This will help the researcher divide the results and analyze them in a more organized and better way.

Another important recommendation is to guide students during the survey. Because of the pandemic, the survey was taken through the internet and with the use of technological devices and this made the guidance more difficult and confusing. Additionally, it is recommendable that the researcher provides an illustration on how to

take the survey before participants do it as there were students who took it twice, and some others do not answer the yes/no questions properly.

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Appendix 1

Perspectives about EFL Reading and Vocabulary

Available upon request.