



Perspectives of EFL Students towards Reading Comprehension

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Proyectos de Investigación

Certifico que Kevin Larry Rivas Mendoza ha 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 COMPREHENSION cuyo objetivo general es determinar las dificultades que tienen los estudiantes al leer en inglés como lengua extranjera.

En este proyecto, cada participante reporta los resultados de una encuesta tomada en un contexto educativo diferente. Las secciones de introducción, literatura y metodología (instrumentos y análisis de datos) son las mismas.

Particular que comunico para los fines consiguientes.

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Abstract

This descriptive study aimed at finding out the regular difficulties that English as a Foreign Language learners face when it comes to reading comprehension. Additionally, it was analyzed whether learners use reading strategies or not, making emphasis on skimming and scanning techniques. The data were collected through an online survey which contained several questions about reading habits. The surveyed population was 100 students from a public university in Quevedo, Ecuador. The results showed that most of the participants made an effort to read in English, facing obstacles such as poor knowledge of vocabulary and lack of practice. The use of reading strategies was medium and the techniques skimming and scanning were explained by a minority of the population. The information in this study can be taken by the academic community as a reference point to know about the students' perspectives towards reading.

Key words: reading, reading strategies, difficulties, skimming, scanning.

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Resumen

Este estudio descriptivo tuvo como objetivo descubrir las dificultades más comunes suscitadas cuando un aprendiz de inglés como lengua extranjera practica lectura comprensiva. Adicionalmente, se analizó si los estudiantes usan estrategias de lectura, enfatizando las técnicas de *skimming* y *scanning*. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de una encuesta electrónica conteniendo diversas preguntas sobre hábitos de lectura. La población encuestada equivalió a 100 estudiantes de una institución pública universitaria en Quevedo, Ecuador. Los resultados demostraron que la mayoría de alumnos leen en frecuencias mayores y menores afrontándose a dificultades como escaso conocimiento de vocabulario y su propio desinterés por aprender a leer en un segundo idioma. El empleo de estrategias de lectura fue medio y las técnicas *skimming* y *scanning* fueron reconocidas por una minoría de los encuestados. La información desplegada en este estudio puede ser tomada como punto de referencia para maestros e investigadores de la enseñanza del inglés. Este estudio amplía la percepción actual entendida con respecto a los estudiantes de lengua extranjera cuando se trata de leer.

Palabras clave: lectura, estrategias de lectura, dificultades, *skimming*, *scanning*.

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English is the predominant learned language due to its multiuse at several aspects of life. Rao (2019) considered English as a tool to connect different kind of people and that the language is present at nearly all the fields. There is no doubt that being bilingual with English as L2 is useful in a globalized world. These facts are causing that every day more and more people become aware of the importance of mastering an advantageous second language as English is.

English is also the most taught foreign language in Ecuador and it is demanded for higher academic programs. Universities in Ecuador follow a program of B2 completion as the ultimate goal based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as it has been determined by the Ministry of Education (2019). The Ministry of Education (2019) remarked the multilingual singularity of our country, mentioning that not every Ecuadorian student speaks Spanish as their mother tongue. Bearing this in mind, English prevails as the second most common language used at academic settings.

In 2018, the Ministry of Education of Ecuador started executing a national plan in order to foment L1 reading among primary and secondary students. The project called “José de la Cuadra” consisted of including segments of reading in the textbooks distributed to public schools; the passages were meant to reinforce the 30 minutes previously scheduled to practice reading in class. Along with the aforementioned plan, the educational institutions in the country have annually carried out a reading festival named “Yo Leo” (I read) to also promote interest for literature in general. These are all plausible efforts to help the Ecuadorian young learners. However, based on international standards, there is more that needs to be done to meet expected results in L2.

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The four main skills of language learning are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. This descriptive study focuses mainly on the reading skill. It attempts to diagnose the difficulties that learners tend to have, the reading strategies they habitually use, and their knowledge about the techniques skimming and scanning applied on reading comprehension. Local university students completed a survey concerning these issues. The report of the results is displayed throughout this document.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages dictates that a B2 level person should be able to comprehend the gist of concrete and abstract laborious texts. In order to meet those standards, several reading strategies such as skimming and scanning have been suggested as helpful techniques to improve language proficiency. An action research conducted in Colombia, a neighbouring country of Ecuador, found positive results on skimming and scanning addressing especially reading comprehension enhancement (Díaz & Laguado, 2013).

Subayil (2017) described the effects of scanning on reading comprehension on an eighth graders group. The researcher in this descriptive study used comprehensive tests as the main tool of data collection which were tallied and interpreted afterwards. The results showed a general positive response in terms of reading comprehension using scanning, with most of the students obtaining “good” and “very good” scores. The study pointed out some elements that could have influenced the learners’ positive performance such as understanding the scanning technique, students’ experience and prior knowledge.

Rusmiati and Kamalina (2017) also did a descriptive study on reading comprehension strategies. They gathered information from elementary and high school students through interviews and questionnaires. The findings revealed, among other things, that the majority of the learners made their way to specific parts to get a text idea when reading. The study

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conclusions despite not emphasizing skimming and scanning directly, demonstrated that students who apply direct strategies can do better at reading.

At a university level, Cornejo et al. (2012) diagnosed the reading habits of students majoring in science and technology. The researchers, who used written surveys to collect the data, described the study as exploratory and interpretative. The conclusions of the study suggested that learners should be encouraged to read more, especially scientific contents. Although the academic document did not cover reading comprehension or reading strategies, part of the research surveys and the processing of information served as a reference to be taken into consideration in this study.

Owing to the indisputable fact that knowing English is essential to access information and opportunities in the world, it is fundamental to explore theories related to reading, reading comprehension, and reading habits. This descriptive study intends to report diagnostic surveys on students' reading habits. The surveyed population was university level students in the city of Quevedo, Ecuador. An issue that might have to be dealt with is not counting with the students at the university facilities due to the restrictions caused by 2020's pandemic.

There are vast depositories of information related to reading comprehension and reading strategies, yet no similar studies to the one intended on this document have been carried out in Quevedo. Hopefully, the resulting data of this descriptive study will help the academic community to enhance the knowledge on the subjects of reading comprehension and reading strategies. Thus, contribute to scholars who constantly analyze methods of English learning improvement.

Literature Review

The present descriptive study plans to determine the extent of use of reading strategies such as skimming and scanning by university students. It also aims at describing the emerging

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knowledge, questions and doubts resulted from the information obtained in the surveys. By exploring concepts related to the study, the following literature review prepares the ground for better understanding of its content and results.

Reading is an important pillar of language development, one imperative skill in order to learn a second language. According to Rumelhart (as cited in Chandran and Shah, 2019) the reading skill involves a text, a reader and its relationship with each other. Furthermore, Yusuf et al. (2017) described reading comprehension as an elaborate communication process between a writer and a reader, who predicts, infers, argues, and recognizes viewpoints in a text. Consequently, reading should be seen as an active skill, capable of cooperating with the other aspects of language.

Within the years, the more important English became, the more time and effort were put into finding and applying the right techniques for learning. That is how scholars turned from trying traditional methods to using more appropriate approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching. Richards and Schmidt (2010) defined CLT as an approach that focuses on communicative capability as its main goal, using L2 to have meaningful interaction. Even when somebody is reading in silence, this person is participating in communication (Thompson, 1996). A study about the effect of CLT on reading comprehension was conducted on university students in Ethiopia with positive results on the experimental group that applied the communicative approach, thus being highly recommended by the researcher (Tegenge, 2018).

Works of research regarding reading habits in Ecuador have exposed different findings on the matter. For instance, Párraga et al. (2016) reported satisfying results after interviewing students about their views on reading in a university in Manta. The researchers found that 70 percent of the examined students were fond of reading and an 85 percent applied analytic

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reading e.g. extracting main and secondary ideas. On the other hand, Pérez et al. (2018) found that university students in Quevedo were not devoted to reading and did not access reading material or sites on a regular basis. The researchers revealed that a 65 percent of the interviewed population had an ordinary level of interest for reading, the rest of the answers fluctuated among a lot and no interest.

It is also of common interest to know the difficulties that students might face when they are practicing a second language. Several researchers have looked into the common obstacles that appear in the way to succeed at reading comprehension. Qrquez and Rashid (2017) found that learners lacked vocabulary and cognitive abilities to understand a text since secondary school in a study about reading comprehension among university students in Jordan, Middle East. Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) did a similar research with Arab scholars adding to the list of difficulties: lack of students' attention, unfamiliarity with grammar, anxiety-related errors, noisy surroundings, and adverse weather. Muijselaar et al. (2017) mentioned that when there are problems in text comprehension, reading strategies are of special help.

According to Paris et al. (as cited in Griffit & Ruan, 2006) a strategy is an action chosen from different options in order to achieve a goal. There are several reading strategies such as use of prior knowledge, re-reading, summarizing, along with others. Raqqad et al. (2019) remarked that reading strategies provide assistance to students who want to overcome language barriers like vocabulary and grammar. Thus, it is in the best interest of teachers to know and make students apply reading strategies. Suiting the content of this descriptive study, Samad et al. (2017) suggested skimming and scanning strategies as an alternative to overcome reading comprehension difficulties.

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Fry (1978) pointed skimming as a helpful skill to excel at reading and defined it as reading quickly in order to understand principal ideas in a text. Moreover, Lück (2013) deemed skimming important to master reading in a second language by comprehending main concepts of a text. Throughout different studies, skimming has been widely regarded as a valuable reading technique. However, authors have also listed some disadvantages attached to skimming. For example, Santoso (2017) mentioned that teachers having learners apply skimming required a precise control of time and preparation for uprising questions from pupils.

Scanning on the other hand, according to Maxwell (1972), is the fast search of particular information or where that information is placed. Additionally, Wahyuningsih (2018) commented that scanning solely considers certain information leaving out the rest of the text. Researchers concur that by scanning it is not necessary to go over the whole of a passage. Additionally, Khoirunnisa (2019) warned us that students might not consider important information due to the fast process involved in scanning. Therefore, it is in our best interest to look over the incidence of skimming and scanning in reading comprehension.

Methodology

This work is presented in form of descriptive study. Koh and Owen (2000) referred to this type of research as an investigation of status that is broadly applied in education and other areas. Papanyan (2004) expressed that descriptive surveys helped to point out problems, opening a chance to address them and treat such problems for possible solutions. This research followed the common lines of a descriptive study in order to contribute to education by identifying reading issues so they can be better approached by the EFL community.

Koh and Owen (2000) acknowledged the survey as the main resource used in a descriptive research. In this study the participants answered a demographic survey, and a

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reading habits survey. The questions behind the study are: What are students' difficulties when reading? Do students apply reading strategies? Do students know how to skim and scan?

The demographic survey served as a descriptor of basic information about the participants such as gender, age, and nationality, among others. The participants were young adults (age range from 18 to 28 years old) from a public university. They belonged to distinct majors and were coursing different semesters. The female population was bigger with 57% whereas the male corresponded to 42%. All of them were Ecuadorians with Spanish as a mother tongue. Most of them registered themselves as mestizos, others afroecuadorians and montubios. The dominant religion was Catholicism and the majority of them positioned themselves in the middle range of social economical status.

The survey about reading covered several aspects of this skill and how the students felt towards them. Most of the participants thought that their English level was basic, whereas a minority thought they were at a beginner and intermediate level. Regarding technology, most of the students accessed to it through their laptops, a big part used their mobile phones and a minority used a desktop. According to the students, their knowledge of technology was basic and intermediate, and then a small part said to have a beginner's knowledge. All of them had access to the internet at home.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the survey was narrowed down to 100 replies and organized into a spreadsheet. The process took one week and it was developed digitally through Google Drive which also provided statistics, allowing the study results to be double checked. Qualitative and quantitative data was analyzed. Answers to open questions were classified

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into categories according to the participants' replies. Answers for Likert scale questions were coded thus the mean for each question was accurately obtained.

Ethical Considerations

The participants in the study were notified in advance as well as the authorities of the educational institution. Permission to conduct the research was granted and every one was free to accept or decline their involvement in the process of the study. The participants' identities and trusted information was not revealed but substituted by codes. The obtained data was strictly used for academic purposes.

Results

The following description reports the results of the different questions regarding reading examined across the survey. Through the components of the reading survey, it was possible to answer the main questions of the present work.

Table 1 reflects the answers of: *I read in English*. 53% of the participants affirmed they did, 14% read occasionally and 33% did not have the habit. The reasons for their affirmative answers were that English was an interesting and necessary language, they wanted to get familiar with it through reading and that it helped them to acquire more vocabulary. The reasons for negative answers permitted to know what the common difficulties that students faced when reading were. The students expressed that they found English difficult to understand and pronounce. Other obstacles included lack of vocabulary and practice. Some of them admitted to study the language only in class.

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Table 1.

I read in English

Answer	Frecuency	Percent
Yes	53	53%
Some	14	14%
No	33	33%
Total	100	100%

The subsequent question covered reading strategies. In this section, students indicated to what extent they applied different reading strategies, if they did so at all. Through a Likert scale, the participants rated with none, a little bit, some, most of it, and to a great extent, statements about knowing and using reading techniques. In order to get the media, the scale was numbered from 1 to 5. The lowest mean obtained ($M=2.47$) revealed a difficulty of understanding a text when this was only read once. On the other hand, the highest mean ($M=3.73$) suggested that for the participants it resulted less difficult to read singles phrases at a time. Table 2 shows the results of this section of the survey.

Table 2.

Reading strategies

Option	Mean
I can understand a long, complex text	2.85
I understand singles phrases at a time	3.73
I understand a long text with the first reading	2.47
I understand a long text by rereading it	3.28
I can skim	2.75
I can scan	2.84
I know the elements of a summary	2.89
When I read, I translate all the words	3.05
I identify the type of texts I read	2.98
I know the organization of a text	2.77
I use my prior knowledge when I read	2.96

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I can classify readings	3.09
When I read, I observe punctuation pauses	3.41
When I read, punctuation helps me understand	3.19

In order to uncover what students typically experience when reading a text, the next question asked them about the feelings they had when encountered a passage in English. Among them, positive and negative emotions such as curiosity and anxiety could be distinguished. Nevertheless, most of the answers denoted feelings of incapacity to understand a text. The results are shown in table 3.

Table 3.

I see an English passage and I feel...

Answer	Frequency	Percent
Anxious/stressed out	54	54%
Bored	1	1%
Reluctance to read	2	2%
Curious/interested	15	15%
The need for understanding	28	28%
Total	100	100%

The following question focused on the specific strategies of skimming and scanning and whether the participants used them or not. The students' answers are represented in table 4. Most of the students manifested they did not know how to use the strategies. Others said they did, but did not provide a definition for the terminologies. A small amount of participants said they used skimming and scanning and gave a short definition.

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Table 4.

I can skim and scan

Answer	Frecuency	Percent
Yes	13	13%
Yes but no explanation	11	11%
No	76	76%
Total	100	100%

The next part of the survey focused on the perception the participants had about heir own mastery of vocabulary. Most of the students categorized it as “average” followed by “basic”. The rest of them said their knowledge about vocabulary was “little” or “low”. Table 5 portraits the results to this question.

Table 5.

I feel my vocabulary in English is ...

Answer	Frecuency	Percent
Little/low	21	21%
Basic	36	36%
Average/good	42	42%
Broad	1	1%
Total	100	100%

The last aspect that the survey explored was the reasons for students to think that learning vocabulary was complex. Answers to this section varied from language aspects like pronunciation to personal issues such as lack of interest. Results to this part are shown in table 6.

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Table 6.

I think learning vocabulary is complex because of...

Answer	Frecuency	Percent
Spelling	30	30%
Pronunciation	29	29%
Lack of practice	17	17%
Lack of interest	13	13%
It is not complex	6	6%
Grammar	2	2%
Concentration issues	2	2%
Secondary deficiency	1	1%
Total	100	100%

Discussion

The participants acknowledged that reading is essential to learn English. Those who read regularly deemed it interesting and necessary. Those who did not have the habit of reading explained why they found it difficult to do. The survey permitted to know if and which reading strategies were commonly used and to what extent students applied them. The strategies skimming and scanning had their own section for better interpretation. Here is what can be discussed about the results:

The results of this study shine a light on the difficulties that students have when reading, which was one of the issues to be examined through the survey. According to those who did not have the habit of reading, did not do so mainly because of vocabulary and pronunciation deficiencies. Scarce knowledge of vocabulary is an obstacle that researchers have already pointed out when analyzing students' struggles. This is an important topic since lack of vocabulary is caused precisely by not cultivating the habit of reading according to Yunuz et al. (as cited in Qrquez and Rashid, 2017). Therefore it could be said that not reading and lacking vocabulary belong to the same vicious circle of reason and result. Matching Al-

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Jarrah and Ismail (2018) findings, students also listed indifference and grammar incomprehension as difficulties when reading.

The following research question asked whether students applied reading strategies or not. Based on what students responded to the use of certain reading techniques, it can be said that some students had a notion about this topic. The media extracted from the participants' answers determined that understanding single frases at a time was the most used technique among those who read. Understanding a text after reading it once was something many students did not know or apply. Yang (2016), suggested that a successful learner would use reading strategies more often (as cited in Raqqad et al., 2019). It was palpable that the participants did not fully apply reading strategies which might also be the cause of discouragement when students encounter a text.

The third research question wanted to find out if students knew and applied skimming and scanning. Referring to these strategies, Wahyuningsih (2018) said that they make reading easier to understand and get information from. That point of view coincided with the small amount of participants who expressed that applied skimming and scanning and felt that reading was not such an impossible task. However, regarding the rest of the participants, 73% of them did not know or use skimming and scanning. These students did not have a major understanding about reading techniques, especially skimming and scanning.

Conclusion

This descriptive study, through the use of a reading survey, revealed the difficulties that EFL learners encounter developing the reading skill. It could also determine the extent of use of reading strategies including skimming and scanning. The participants' answers revealed a notorious interest for reading and learning the language above all. On the other

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hand, a more effective approach from students towards reading was evident as well. This should serve as a reason for reading strategies to be included when studying English.

As a habit or occasionally, 67% of the participants manifested that they read in English. When asked why they read, the students recognized the importance of knowing a second language and practicing it. Many participants considered English appealing and wanted to be good at using it, but due to circumstances like poor vocabulary and lack of time, this goal was sensed difficult to reach by them. Furthermore, some of the surveyed population declared to have little interest in learning how to read.

On that account, not so many knew or applied skimming and scanning as a strategy to comprehend a text. A small percentage of students (13%) said to apply the techniques and managed to explain what they were about. The interpretation of the mean in the Likert scale section for most of the reading strategies is that the students use *some* of the strategies. These data shows that EFL learners have room for improvement and they need to get familiar with the existing tools to excel at reading in L2.

Reading is reception of language. Logic dictates that in order to produce language, one has to receipt the language. It is imperative that English learners get interested in the advantages of reading strategies so their journey to bilingualism becomes easier and pleasurable.

Limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic changed various aspects of regular education; the way surveys were applied was one. The survey for this study was executed via online which had limitations of valid answers. Some students could have responded carelessly due to the anonymous state of the survey. Additionally, not all of the students collaborated completing the survey due to Internet or electronic device deficiency.

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Recommendations

In a further work of research using the online modality, it would be of valuable help to inform students about the importance of answering the questions properly. Perhaps the researcher could find a way to stimulate the surveyed population to participate more effectively.

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Appendix 1

Survey

Available upon request.