Improving EFL students' performance in reading comprehension through explicit instruction in strategies

Olga Uribe-Enciso*

* Magíster en Enseñanza de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera y Magíster en Enseñanza de Español como Lengua Extranjera. Docente investigadora, Universidad Santo Tomás, Bucaramanga, Colombia. Correo electrónico: olgaluciauribeenciso@mail.ustabuca.edu.co

Abstract.

Introduction: Explicit instruction in reading strategies has been recommended to improve reading comprehension in both L1 and L2 formal educational settings for over 20 years. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a proposal for teaching reading strategies explicitly to EFL students, in terms of strategy recognition and performance in reading comprehension tasks. **Methodology:** The research is conducted to solve language learning problems and follows a mixed-method approach since both qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analyzed through questionnaires, reading tests and tasks. Besides, purposive sampling was used to select participants, and both qualitative and quantitative data was collected through questionnaires, reading tests and tasks. **Results:** After the sixteen-week training, the participants reported wider reading strategy repertoires and higher scores in the reading comprehension Exit Test. **Conclusions:** Explicit instruction in reading strategies is effective to improve reading comprehension. Further research is suggested to test the effectivity of the model with other students and to find out if learners in this study continue using the reported strategies consistently and autonomously.

Keywords: reading comprehension, reading strategies, explicit instruction, L2 reading, PIP (pre-, in/while, post-).

Mejorando el rendimiento de estudiantes EFL en comprensión de lectura a través de la instrucción explícita en estrategias de lectura

Resumen.

Introducción: durante más de 20 años, la instrucción explícita en estrategias de lectura ha sido recomendada para mejorar la comprensión lectora en la educación formal tanto en L1 como en L2. El propósito de este estudio fue determinar la efectividad de una propuesta para la enseñanza explícita de estrategias de lectura a estudiantes EFL en cuanto al reconocimiento de estrategias y el desempeño de tareas lectoras. **Metodología**: la investigación es aplicada puesto que apunta a resolver problemas de aprendizaje de lengua, y adopta un método mixto ya que se recogieron y analizaron datos cualitativos y cuantitativos por medio de cuestionarios, pruebas y tareas lectoras. Los participantes se seleccionaron por muestreo intencional y se recolectó información cualitativa y cuantitativa por medio de cuestionarios, pruebas y tareas lectoras. **Resultados:** después de 16 semanas de instrucción, los participantes reconocieron un rango más amplio de estrategias de lectura y mejoraron su puntaje en la Prueba de salida que evaluó comprensión de lectura. **Conclusión:** la enseñanza explícita de estrategias de lectura es efectiva para mejorar la comprensión lectora. Se sugieren futuras investigaciones para determinar la efectividad del modelo con otros estudiantes y para determinar la extensión en que los participantes de estudio continúan implementando las estrategias consistente y autónomamente.

Palabras clave: comprensión lectora, estrategias de lectura, instrucción explícita, lectura en segunda lengua, PIP.

Melhorando o rendimento de estudantes EFL EM compreensão de leitura através do ensino explicito de estratégias

Resumo.

Introdução: durante mais de 20 anos, a instrução explícita em estratégias de leitura tem sido recomendada para melhorar a compreensão leitora na educação formal tanto em L1 como em L2. O propósito de este estudo foi determinar a efetividade de uma proposta para o ensino explícito de estratégias de leitura a estudantes EFL no que tange o reconhecimento de estratégias e o desempenho de tarefas leitoras. **Metodologia**: a investigação é aplicada porque seu escopo é resolver problemas de aprendizado de língua, e adota um método misto já que foram coletados e analisados dados qualitativos e quantitativos através de questionários, testes e tarefas leitoras. Os participantes foram selecionados por amostragem intencional e foi coletada informação qualitativa e quantitativa mediante questionários, testes e tarefas leitoras. **Resultados:** depois de 16 semanas de instrução, os participantes reconheceram uma faixa mais amplia de estratégias de leitura e melhoraram sua pontuação no Teste de saída que avaliou compreensão leitora. **Conclusão:** o ensino explícito de estratégias de leitura é efetivo para melhorar a compreensão leitora. Sugere-se futuras pesquisas para determinar a efetividade do modelo com outros estudantes e para determinar a extensão em que os participantes de estudo seguem aplicando as estratégias de forma consistente e autônoma.

Palavras-chave: compreensão leitora, estratégias de leitura, instrução explícita, leitura em segunda língua, PIP.

Introduction

Background of the study

The 21ˢᵗ century requires individuals who are proficient readers in their mother tongue and, at least, in an L2[1] so that they can effectively access and use the vast amounts of information available in both print and digital format. Helping learners become effective readers is one of our main concerns as teachers since education involves preparing learners for life, which entails encouraging and enabling them to become individuals capable of taking, conveying, discussing, supporting, and revising their views on topics and situations affecting their lives as well as proposing alternatives to improve. Such skills can be promoted by being able to comprehend information. In this sense, reading comprehension seen as the capacity of constructing meaning through involvement and integration of both written language and the reader's knowledge (Snow 9; Koda 4) is a core element to evaluate the existing knowledge and explore new ideas and meanings from it. Therefore, reading is an essential skill to face the challenges that our rapidly changing world characterized by a knowledge-based economy presents: "Knowledge Age worker-citizens need to be able to locate, assess, and represent new information quickly." (NZCER).

In language learning reading promotes continuous expansion of vocabulary, full awareness of syntactic structures and forms of written discourse, development of cognitive skills and learner autonomy, and increasing comprehensive knowledge of any topic readers want to learn about. Therefore, teaching learners how to use reading strategies so that they can gradually become skilled readers and therefore improve their comprehension is a primary duty in our ELT classrooms (N. Anderson 2).

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a proposal for explicit instruction in reading strategies in the improvement of students' performance on reading tests and tasks and the expansion of their reading strategy repertoire. The instruction proposal was developed as a result of previous research on reading strategies carried out in the same institution and whose findings suggested that learners tended to use mainly bottom-up reading strategies in testing conditions and that helping learners expand their strategy range was needed.

Reading as a cognitive and strategic process

Gillet and Temple suggest that reading is important because it is functional in our daily lives (23). Thus, it is social since it is part of our day-to-day private and public life and provides opportunities for cognitive, educational, language, artistic, emotional, intellectual, professional, social, personal, and spiritual development. Besides, it is recreational since it gives us pleasure when reading for entertainment or reading about a topic we are keen on. Goodman (127) defines reading as a guessing game in which the reader reconstructs, as best as possible, a message that has been encoded by a writer. In addition, he suggests that the reader interacts dynamically with the text and uses primarily schematic knowledge to make sense of the data coming from the text. Also, Smith argues that the reader understands a text because they are able to use not only the information in the text but also their own knowledge (qtd. in Grabe, "Current Developments" 377).

Grabe affirms that reading is an interactive process among the reader, the text, and different processes that gradually and flexibly adjust to the reading situation ("Reading in a Second Language" 11). The processes that work simultaneously for effective reading to take place have to do with recognition of words, structures, and text types; comprehension, interpretation, inferring, assigning and redefining meaning, and evaluating critically. Such processes use both readers' schematic and systemic knowledge. Schematic knowledge includes readers' knowledge gained through individuals' life experiences as family and society members, students, professionals, researchers, among others (Anderson and Pearson 255). It is related to higher level processes which involve using top-down strategies to solve comprehension problems and therefore facilitate reading. For example, getting the main idea, summarizing, skipping unknown words, linking information, recognizing text structure, making inferences, identifying relevant information, monitoring comprehension, setting reading goals, and evaluating the text, among others.

On the other hand, systemic knowledge has to do with recognizing words (e.g. their orthography, inflections, derivations, denotations, and connotations), developing automaticity, recognizing syntactic

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1   The term L2 (second language) is used here to refer to the order of acquisition and not to the difference between second and foreign language regarding learning context.

parsing (e.g. basic word order and sentence structure), and understanding semantic-proposition formation, which are lower level processes which aid reading comprehension by means of accessing the incoming data or the message itself (Nuttall and Alderson 282). Such language processing skills can be developed through bottom-up reading strategies. Bottom-up theorists like Abraham, Carrell and Eisterhold claim that lack of automaticity in accessing linguistic data causes poor-skilled reading (qtd. in Alyousef 144, 150). They argue that "more words are recognized before higher-level […] context information can be used to influence lexical access" (Alyousef 144). Thus, in order to use schematic knowledge, readers must be able to access graphic display meaningfully. D. Anderson claims that only when reading automaticity has been developed, at least to a basic level, readers can focus on comprehension since their attention is free from word recognition and identification (2). To this respect, Grabe asserts that higher-level processes enable readers to direct attentional resources when encountering reading comprehension difficulties or not meeting reading purposes ("Reading in a Second Language" 49). Also, he affirms that reading is a strategic process in which different actions —such as anticipating and making intelligent guesses, getting the main idea, getting the meaning of unknown words from the context, and checking comprehension— are performed according to the reader's language proficiency level, the text type, the reading purpose, the reader's motivation, in other words, the reading situation. Thus, while reading, readers shift from lower to higher level processing and vice versa to achieve comprehension (Nuttall and Alderson 48).

By the same token, Widdowson argues that both types of knowledge compensate each other according to the reader's needs and the reading situation in general (158). Therefore, the vaster knowledge gives the reader more room for focusing on the limited one. In other words, the more fluency or automaticity to decode linguistic forms —which enables readers to grasp the meaning of words, phrases and sentences without requiring conscious attention or effort (systemic knowledge)— the more attention can be devoted to the meaning of the text. Conversely, the greater the schematic knowledge is, the bigger opportunity to focus on text-driven data. Thus, both systemic and schematic knowledge are essentially complementary since they support each other for effective reading comprehension.

Reading in L2

L2 reading has received attention since the 1970s, mainly in the works of Smith and Goodman who tried to explain reading from a psycholinguistic point of view (15, 127). Text meaning comes from the interaction between the reader and the text, which gives readers an active role in reading. They use their knowledge and the incoming data in the reading and process information to make meaning of the text. All these actions require readers to be able to select the most relevant knowledge and information as well as the most appropriate actions to better understand the text.

Grabe explains that as in L1, L2 reading requires both lower-level and higher-level processes, as well as systemic and schematic knowledge interaction ("Reading in a Second Language" 21; "Key Issues" 9). However, L2 reading is more complex since acquisition of systemic knowledge and development of reading skills occur simultaneously, whereas L1 readers have already acquired systemic knowledge through speaking and listening before starting to read. Consequently, native speakers' essential mental lexicon[2] enables them to focus their attention on interpreting and exploring the meaning of the text as a whole rather than on understanding individual units, which, in their case, they do automatically. By contrast, L2 readers have to be conscious of both language as a structural system and the meaning of the content, which is a more demanding cognitive process. L2 readers have to deal with factors like negative transfer and sociolinguistic variations which put a considerable strain on the readers. Thus, different word order, false cognates, compound words, collocations, homonyms, among others, might confuse L2 readers. Sociolinguistic variations —the way individuals (idiolect) or groups (sociolect) use the language in their communities and cultures— may also result in misinterpretations of the text. The L2 reader, who might not be sensitive enough to such subtle contextual distinctions in meaning, might resort to their L1 and their L2 systemic knowledge (e.g. denotative or referential meanings of words) to make sense of

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2   The mental lexicon is the knowledge an individual has of the lexical system of a language including its grammatical, phonological, and discursive realization. It has to do with words and multi-word units interconnected to facilitate clear natural communication (Aitchison [13]).

the text, which might lead them to poor or wrong interpretations.

Consequently, successful reading comprehension can be promoted by the readers' L1 reading experiences (Koda 4), which go beyond the mere recognition of forms and literal comprehension. Therefore, reading skills like interpreting, inferring, making inter-textual connections, evaluating the information, and monitoring reading comprehension, are likely to have been developed by, at least, L1 adult readers. Bernhardt argues than L1 reading skills have a positive effect on L2 reading comprehension and that readers use processing strategies to improve reading proficiency (802). Also, Grabe affirms there are some transfer effects that facilitate L2 reading ("Key Issues" 11). Other researchers also embrace the view on L1 reading skills as tools that promote L2 reading. For example, the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis as developed by Cummins claims that L1 academic reading skills transfer to L2 reading (Silver and Lwin 150). Later, Cummins suggests that L1 reading skills support L2 learning, which is a tenet of the Interdependence Hypothesis (qtd. in Grabe, "Reading in a Second Language" 142)[3]. It argues that reading skills are common to all languages and, therefore, when L1 reading strategies have become skills thanks to their automaticity[4], they will be transferred to L2 reading. Besides, the Threshold Hypothesis asserts that L1 reading skills transfer to L2 reading only when an L2 linguistic threshold is reached (Alderson 112); otherwise readers resort to less effective reading strategies when involved in complex L2 reading tasks (Bossers 48).

Another important feature of L2 reading is its metalinguistic nature. Successful L2 readers go through metalinguistic processes that enable them to be aware of how this new linguistic system works to convey meaning so that they can effectively solve comprehension problems (Nagy 54). L1 readers do not urgently need to resort to metalinguistic processes since they have already acquired the linguistic system in a natural way, whereas L2 readers have to be conscious of it. This is one of the reasons why L2 academically oriented readers become more conscious of the L2 linguistic system than L2 native speakers do (Grabe, "Reading in a Second Language" 151) or

at least have more explicit knowledge about how the language works (Ellis 1881).

Reading strategies and explicit reading instruction

Broadly, reading strategies are conscious actions readers take to solve difficulties in reading and therefore improve reading comprehension (Carrell, "Reading Strategies" 7; Abbott, "Introspective Study" 15). In the table below, there are some definitions of reading strategies proposed by different researchers or scholars.

The above definitions of reading strategies have the following characteristics in common: they are conscious processes, they are used for solving comprehension problems, and they facilitate reading comprehension. Reading strategies have been classified into different categories. For example, Z. Zhang and Shang, following the learning strategy taxonomy proposed by Oxford (17), divide them into cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensatory, social, and affective. Also, they include test-taking reading strategies. E. Block categorizes them into general and local strategies (472). N. Anderson groups strategies into supervising strategies, support strategies, paraphrasing strategies, strategies for establishing coherence in the text, and test-taking strategies ("Individual Differences" 461). Mokhtari and Reichard classify them into global, cognitive and support strategies (252).

Another taxonomy of reading strategies categorizes them into bottom-up and top-down strategies, which are associated to low-level and high-level processing respectively (Barnett, "Reading through Context" 150; Abbott, "ESL Reading" 635). Also, such classification is related to local and general reading strategies (E. Block 472; Barnett, "Reading through Context" 150). Bottom-up strategies use systemic knowledge and local text context to aid comprehension. As they deal with linguistic elements in the reading, they help make sense of the text by transforming separate items into "a hierarchical network of semantic relations, which in turn is linked to a conventional superstructure" (Van Peer 599). These strategies are more related to textual decoding and identification processes and, therefore, they are considered local, input-oriented, language-based, data-driven, detail-oriented, or text-oriented. Conversely, top-down strategies are seen as

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3   Also known as Common Underlying Proficiency Hypothesis.
4   According to O'Malley and Chamot, they are automatic when they are not conscious anymore and thus that they are represented as procedural knowledge (qtd. in Uribe, "Learning Strategies" 15).

global, conceptually-driven, big-picture oriented, or meaning-oriented (Carrell and Eisterhold qtd. in Alyousef 144; Abbott, "ESL Reading" 635; E. Block 472). Top-down strategies apply schematic knowledge and focus on the broad context of the text, its text structure and discourse organization, its general meaning, its purpose, and its central topic. They are also known as global strategies (Zhang and Wu 43) and help readers make inferences, intelligent guesses or hypothesis on the text, which are then confirmed or rejected. As they are hypothesis-driven (21) and concentrate on the relations between components as a whole, they are associated with high-level processing (Abbot, "ESL Reading" 638).

Table 1. Definitions of Reading Strategies

Author	Definition
Olshavsky	"…is a purposeful means of comprehending the author's message." (656)
Paris, Lipson, and Wixson	"…deliberate cognitive steps that learners can take to assist in acquiring, storing, and retrieving new information and that therefore can be accessed for a conscious use." (293)
Block	"…readers' resources for understanding." (465)
Cohen	"…mental processes that readers consciously choose to use in accomplishing reading tasks." (133)
Garner	"…generally deliberate, planful activities undertaken by active learners, many times to remedy perceived cognitive failure." (50)
Barnett, "Language Learner"	"…the mental operations involved when readers approach a text effectively and make sense of what they read." (66)
Paris, Wasik, and Turner	"…actions selected deliberately to achieve particular goals." (692)
Kletzien	"…as deliberate means of constructing meaning from a text when comprehension is interrupted." (69)
Carrell, "Reading Strategies"	"…actions that readers select and control to achieve desired goals or objectives." (7)
Urquhart and Weir qtd. in Talebi	"…ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading." (47)
Brantmeier	"…comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read." (1)
Mokhtari and Sheory	Intentional actions readers use for monitoring, managing, facilitating, and improving reading comprehension. (4)
Koda	Actions that are "deliberate, goal/problem-oriented, and reader-initiated/controlled." (205)
Abbott, "ESL Reading Strategies"	"…the mental operations or comprehension processes that readers select and apply in order to make sense of what they read." (637)
McNamara	Actions that with practice become rapid, efficient and effective ways to help readers "understand and remember much more from the txt in less time…" (XII)
Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris	"…deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text." (368)
Grabe	Conscious processes that can gradually become routines and are used for solving reading difficulties or achieving reading goals. (52)
Abbott, "Introspective Study"	"…the mental operations or comprehension processes that readers select and apply in order to make sense of what they read." (15)

Source: Compiled by the author

Another case in point is Ozek and Civelek who divide reading strategies into metacognitive and cognitive (1). They consider them in terms of how useful they are at the three stages of a reading task (pre, in, post) so that teaching them explicitly is more purposeful. Learners need to know what strategies are more effective at each stage rather than understand whether they are top-down, bottom-up, cognitive or metacognitive, for example.

As mentioned above, reading strategies, as opposed to skills, are deliberate conscious actions which can gradually become automatic through continuous use (N. Anderson, "Scrolling" 3). This intentional nature of reading strategies makes them highly teachable and possible to be accounted for (Ellis and Cohen qtd. in Uribe, "Learning Strategies" 16). Ashby and Rayner state that skilled readers are rarely conscious of the cognitive processes they go through while reading (52). Once such processes have become automatic, they apparently take place without considerable effort. Consequently, instruction on reading strategies could help learners turn such strategies into skills (Ozek and Civelek 24).

Also, as problem-solving processes and tools for facilitating comprehension, reading strategies enhance efficiency in reading tasks. If readers can overcome comprehension difficulties, they can better understand the text, learn from it and achieve reading purposes. Therefore, helping learners become proficient readers can be done by teaching them reading strategies explicitly. As already said, an important reason to teach learners to become proficient readers is the fact that reading is essential in understanding the world, learning a language, enhancing academic performance in all areas of study (Anderson, "Scrolling" 2), and surviving in a global knowledge-based society. Pearson and Gallagher argue that effective readers use a range of strategies, use schematic knowledge successfully, remember what they are reading, read in chunks, skip irrelevant words, make intelligent guesses about unknown lexis, and consider themselves fluent readers (318). Alfassi asserts that competent readers are able to fully understand a text, remember its most relevant ideas, adopt a stance towards its content, learn from it, and use such knowledge flexibly (172). Shang affirms that different studies on reading strategies employed by efl learners conclude that good readers implement a range of strategies appropriate to achieve reading tasks goals, whereas weaker readers do not use strategies frequently or use isolated or inappropriate strategies (18).

More recent studies support explicit instruction as an effective way to teach learners an extensive range of reading strategies and help poor readers improve reading comprehension (Ko 203; L. Zhang 1; Closs 1; Reutzel et al. 407; Grabe, "Key issues" 12). Reading strategies can help learners reduce the l2 reading heavy cognitive load caused by simultaneous language and content processing (Grabe, "Reading in a Second Language" 230) through teaching them how to use their knowledge and resources effectively and direct their attention to the relevant aspects of the reading task. Different reading instruction models have been proposed and implemented in l1 and l2 contexts. Some of them are well-known and have some empirical research that supports their effectiveness. Some examples are kwl (Know-Want to know-Learned) which promotes training in strategies like activating schemata, planning, goal setting, monitoring and evaluating text information (Ogle and Blachowicz qtd. in Block and Pressley 261); crs (Collaborative Strategic Reading) which is based on cooperative learning and mainly implemented in cbi (content-based instruction), and as kwl, it encourages learners to build on their previous knowledge, monitoring, predicting, clarifying, summarizing, generating questions, among other strategies (Hitchcock et al. 1). cori (Concept-Orientated Reading Instruction) is another proposal, and it is used for teaching reading and content; it includes strategies such as choosing a topic of personal interest, gathering information and working on a project (Guthrie and Ozgungor 276). Other two models are de (Direct Explanation) and tsi (Transactional Strategies Instruction) which explain, model, practice, discuss, and recycle strategies (Harris and Pressley 394).

Besides, some scholars and researchers have proposed some guidelines for effective training in reading strategies (Pearson and Dole 153; Beckman; Block and Pressley 3; Guthrie and Ozgungor 277; Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris 368; Grabe, "Reading in a Second Language" 237). They affirm that teaching reading strategies should include explicit presentation and explanation of the strategies, guided and freer continuous extensive practice, evaluation of their effectiveness, recycling and expansion of the strategy repertoire, and integration of the strategy training into the lesson shape pip (Pre, In, Post) since learner can better understand what strategies work better in each reading stage. In addition, Grabe

claims that instruction in reading strategies needs to be designed according to learners' needs, tasks purpose and requirements, and the instructional context since they determine the type of reading and reading strategies students will implement ("Reading in a Second Language" 228). He argues that learners sometimes do not carry out successful reading tasks because they are not aware of the reading purposes and, therefore, they do not know what strategies are more appropriate for them to succeed in the task. He adds that sometimes readers are not aware of the strategies so that they cannot use them to aid reading comprehension.

Leaning on the guidelines mentioned above, the DE and TSI reading instruction models, and what Ozek and Civelek (24) suggests about teaching reading strategies according to the stages in a reading task, the following approach was proposed to help EFL students at a private university improve their reading comprehension. It includes the following steps:

1. Presentation of the reading task: the objective of this step is to help learners understand the purpose of the reading task so they can both have a reason for reading and choose the most appropriate strategies to achieve it (Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris 368). The teacher guides students through questions like "Why are we reading the text?", "What are we doing with the information in the text?", or "Why do we need to read the text?"

2. Eliciting of the strategies learners already use in order to better understand a text: this is done at each stage of the reading task (pre, in, post) and one its objectives are to value learners' previous knowledge and help them be aware of it so that they can build on that, and to help the teacher have a clear idea of what strategies learners already know and use. The teacher asks questions such as "What do you usually do when you are going to read a text?", "What do you do to get a general idea of the text?", or "If you have to answer questions, do you read before or after reading the text?"

3. Presentation of the strategies: the objective is to present the strategies explicitly at each stage of the reading task. Acoording to Beckman, the teacher explains what the strategies are as well as when and how to use them. Also, the teacher demonstrates the use of the strategies and uses questions to guide learners. For example: "Do you think it is important to read the title? Why?", "What information can it give us?", "What is highlighting information?", "What information are we going to highlight?", "Do we have to read all the text to get a general idea about it?"

In this study, the strategies for the training were selected according to both the list of effective strategies for reading comprehension presented by Grabe[5], which are considered as fundamental to facilitate text understanding, and the results in the first questionnaire ("Reading in a Second Language" 208). Thus, strategies that were not mentioned or were referred to a few times, were chosen in order to extend the students' current range of reading strategies. Therefore, the strategies taught during the training were:

- Pre-stage: understanding the reading task purpose, understanding comprehension questions, making inferences from titles and headings, making inferences from visuals, skimming, and activating previous knowledge.
- In-stage: scanning, guessing the meaning of unknown words by using the context, recognizing related words, focusing on specific parts of the text, and monitoring comprehension.
- Post-stage: rereading, summarizing, using visual organizers, and evaluating the reading task.

4. Guided practice: the teacher guides learners in using strategies to carry out a reading task. The objective is to help them become familiar with the strategy so that they can use them appropriately. The teacher works in whole class simultaneously with learners and guide them through eliciting and clarification. Then, learners work individually. The teacher can use questions like: "What is the purpose of the task?", "Which strategies do you think will best help you achieve the task?", "What do you think the text is about?", "How can you make inferences about the content of the text?", "Do you have to answer any questions?", "What information are you highlighting?", or "How can you guess the meaning of words you don't know?", among others.

5. Independent practice: the objective is to encourage learners to use the strategies in a flexible, autonomous and effective way. If the task is done in class, the teachers can monitor them and guide

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5 Based on empirical research, Grabe presents the following list of effective reading comprehension strategies: summarizing, forming questions, answering questions and elaborative interrogation, activating prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, using text structure awareness, using visual graphics and graphic organizers, and inferencing ("Reading in a Second Language" 208).

them when they are somehow lost through questions like: "Are you sure this is the most effective strategy to get a general idea of the text?", "Why did you highlight all that information? Is it all relevant to the task?", "What strategies will help you best answer questions 3, 4 and 5?", or "Do you really need all that information in the graphic?"

6. Discussion on the effectiveness of the strategies: this step is connected to the reading strategy "evaluating the reading task" since its achievement has to do with the way learners use the strategies. The teacher prompts discussion on what strategies or combination of strategies are more appropriate or effective to each stage of the reading the task and to accomplish its purpose. Some useful questions are: "Which strategies do you find the most useful for doing the task?", "Why is strategy x more effective than strategy y to answer question 1 in the task?" or "Which strategies do you find useful to combine to summarize the text?" In a monolingual environment, especially if learners are beginners, this discussion should be held in learners' l1 so that they can express their views and feelings towards the strategies and the task.

   Also, the teacher assigns homework in order to encourage learners to practice and use the strategies continuously. The subsequent class, the teacher promotes discussion on the strategies used for doing the task.

7. Strategy recycling: the objective is to encourage learners to integrate the new strategies into their repertoire. This is done through both guided and independent practice.

Methodology

This research is of applied nature since it aims to solve a language learning problem by determining the effectiveness of an explicit teaching of reading strategies in order to help students improve their reading skills. As McDonough & McDonough affirm "The application of research results and the theory they support to the solution of English language problems" (43) is the main concern to this study. Besides, it follows a mixed-method approach as both quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analyzed (Dörnyei 42).

Participants

The participants for this research were chosen through purposive sampling (Patton 183). They were first semester students of International Business enrolled at elementary level of Business English (efl context) at a private university in Santander. Two classes of 20 students each participated in the study. The 40 participants shared their L1, Spanish, and their ages ranged from 17 to 21. They had, per week, two two-hour face-to-face classes and one hour assigned for virtual work in moodle platform. They received explicit instruction in reading strategies for 16 weeks as part of their regular English classes.

Materials and procedure

Materials for the study consisted of open questionnaires, diagnostic reading tests, reading tasks, progress tests and achievement tests in order to gather both qualitative and quantitative information.

- **Open questionnaires**: they were applied in order to get information about the reading strategies the participants already knew. The first questionnaire (q1) had ten questions about differences in their reading of l1 texts from English texts, the reading strategies they used when reading texts in either language as well as the strategies implemented according to the three reading phases (pre, in, post) of a reading task in English. They were designed in Spanish so that the participants' English level was not a limitation. The purpose of including questions about their l1 reading comprehension was to find out if there were common reading strategies to those of l2.

  There was a second questionnaire (q2) that asked three questions of the first questionnaire about the reading strategies recognized for each reading stage: "What strategies do you use before reading a text in English?", "What strategies do you use while reading a text in English?", and "What strategies do you use after reading a text in English?" The questions were used in order to compare the reading strategies mentioned by the participants before and after the instruction.

- **Diagnostic test**: it consisted of reading exercises taken from the Key Elementary Test (ket) which belongs to the Cambridge battery of proficiency exams used around the world. As all standardized tests, it is objective, valid, reliable, and practical to grade (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 423). It was

designed to assess English users' proficiency at a basic level and places them among A1 or lower, A2 or B1. For this study, the test had 27 questions that tested participants' understanding of short simple written information found in different texts like brochures, signs, newspapers, and magazines. Each right answer was granted a point.

There were four parts with questions that tested different reading skills and language systems:

- Part I had five multiple choice questions which tested reading for the main idea in signs, notices or other very short texts.
- Part II included five multiple choice questions testing grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Participants selected the option that best completed the missing item in different sentences in a story.
- Part III presented ten multiple choice questions about adjacent pairs; five questions with just one pair (question-response) where the appropriate answer had to be chosen. The other five questions were embedded in a single conversation whether the appropriate question or response had to be selected.
- Part IV had seven multiple choice questions aimed at testing reading for general and detailed information.

The test was used before the training to diagnose participants' reading comprehension level and set a point of reference. Then, after the explicit instruction in reading strategies, the test was applied again in order to compare participants' scores and determine whether there was a significant difference in the results or not. The first time it was set (week 1), it was called Entry Test (ET); the second time (week 16), it was called Exit Test (ExT).

- **Reading tasks**: three reading tasks (T1, T2, and T3) were implemented during the training to assess participants' improvement in their reading comprehension. All of them included seven questions of the same type of those in Part IV in the KET reading section. Reading contents were related to the topics being studied and the tasks were performed as regular class activities.
- **Progress and achievement tests**: two progress tests (PT1 and PT2) and an achievement test (AT) were taken as part of course assessment. Those exams included the fours skills, but only the results in the reading sections were taken into account for the study to monitor participants' improvement in reading comprehension tasks. Reading contents were related to the topics studied during the course.

The first week the participants were told about the project and given the consent form to accept being involved in the research. Also, they took Q1 and ET. The explicit instruction in reading strategies was embedded into the regular classes and done as explained before in the presentation of the model. As the course and the explicit instruction developed, the other instruments were used in the following order: T1 was done in week 4; PT1 was taken in week 7 and then, T2 in week 10; later, PT2 was sit in week 12 and T3 in week 27; next, T3 in week 14, AT in week 15, and finally, in week 16, ExT and Q2 were taken.

The information collected permitted determining whether or not the participants improved their scores in the reading tests and tasks and whether or not they recognized new strategies as a result of the explicit instruction. Responses in the Q1 and Q2 were digitalized without being edited and categorized inside each question. Strategies mentioned were named in English and classified based on the nature of the action described by the participants. For example, actions such as "yo busco las palabras que no conozco en internet" and "leo por encima para más o menos tener una idea de todo" were categorized as "using resources to understand unknown words" and "skimming", respectively. Strategies were counted according to the times they were mentioned by the participants since some of them reported more than one strategy in some responses. Next, a comparison was made between the strategies reported before and after the instruction.

Regarding the tests and tasks, the results were obtained by giving a point to each right answered. Then, they were registered individually and averaged. As tests and tasks had different number of questions, a percentage of correct answers was calculated for each of them so they could be equally compared. The results were ordered chronologically and, therefore, a tendency could be revealed.

Results and discussion

Concerning the Q1, 75 % of the participants (30) affirmed that they read in a different way when the text is in L2 and that they found it easier to read texts in their L1. Grabe explains that readers' L1 background knowledge and language knowledge facilitate their L1 reading comprehension ("Reading in

a Second Language" 138, "Key Issues" 11). Besides, the participants said that while reading in L2, they performed actions like "using dictionaries or online translators to understand unknown words or expressions", "using the context to guess the meaning of unknown information", "slowing down their reading rate to better understand parts of the text", "reading more than once a part of the text", and "translating". Even though the question neither asked explicitly for reading strategies and nor the participants referred to them as such, the 31 references categorized into seven different actions, were clearly strategic.

In a subsequent question, the students were explicitly asked about what reading strategies they already knew in general. 90 % of the participants (36) mentioned 56 actions which were grouped into nine different strategies. The most popular strategies were "highlighting/underlining relevant information" and "summarizing", named 25 and 14 times respectively. If compared with the answers reported before, these showed that when the participants were overtly asked about the strategies, the number of references increased since strategic behaviors were consciously prompted (Mobalegh and Saljooghian 1184).

Regarding the question related to strategies the participants recognized for the pre- stage in a reading task before the explicit instruction, 50 % of the individuals reported 26 actions which were classified into six reading strategies. The most common ones were "making inferences" and "using resources to understand unknown words", which were mentioned nine and six times respectively. After the training, 100 % of the participants listed 75 strategic behaviors which were grouped into six different reading strategies where the most frequent ones were "understanding questions" (27 references), "understanding the purpose of the task" (14 references) and "skimming" (13 references).

As for the in/while stage, 90 % of the students registered 44 actions which were divided into four reading strategies where "using resources to understand unknown words" and "scanning" were the most popular with 24 and 10 references respectively. After the instruction, 100 % of the participants expressed 84 behaviors which were categorized into eight different reading strategies where the most common ones were "scanning", "focus on specific parts of the text" and "using resources to understand unknown words" mentioned 22, 18 and 13 times respectively.

Concerning the post- stage, 50 % of the participants named 21 actions which were grouped into

four reading strategies; the most popular strategies were "rereading" (12 references) and "summarizing" (3 references). After the training, 97.5 % of the individuals reported 58 behaviors which were classified into five different reading strategies where "rereading", "using visual organizers" and "evaluating the reading task" were the most popular with 24, 15 and 15 references respectively (Uribe, "Incidencia" 11).

Consequently, the range of reading strategies recognized by the students after the explicit instruction was extended not only in the count of the references made to each strategy, but also in the different strategies mentioned. Thus, in the Q2, the number of times that the strategies were reported increased in 188 % in the pre- reading phase. Also, the six strategies included in the training were reported after it; therefore, the strategies "making inferences from visuals", "making inferences from titles", and "understanding comprehension questions", grew up in the number of references, and the other three strategies "activating previous knowledge", "skimming" and "understanding the purpose of the reading task" which were mentioned for the first time after the instruction, in the Q2 (Uribe, "Incidencia" 11).

In the in/while- phase, the number of references made to strategies increased by 90 % according to the responses to the same question in the Q2. Also, the five strategies taught during the instruction were all reported: "using text clues to understand unknown words", "recognizing similar words", "monitoring comprehension" and "focusing on specific parts of the text" were included, and "scanning" grew up in the number of times mentioned. Besides, in the post-stage, the number of references made to the strategies increased in 176 %, regarding the same question in the Q2, and the strategies included in the training were all named after it: "evaluating the reading task" and "using visual organizers" were added, and the strategies "summarizing" and "rereading" increased their number of references. On the contrary, some reading strategies mentioned before the instruction and that were not part of the group of strategies being taught, revealed a decrease in their number of references; for example, in the in/while- stage, the strategy "using resources to understand unknown words" was mentioned 24 times before the instruction and 13, after it. Also, the strategy "highlighting/underlining information" went down from nine, before the training, to six after it. Table 2 below shows the strategies reported before and after the explicit training.

Table 2. Strategies (pre-, in/while and post-) reported before and after explicit instruction. Strategies in *Italics* are the ones taught explicitly

What strategies do you use before reading a text in English?		What strategies do you use while reading a text in English?		What strategies do you use after reading a text in English?	
Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2
Understanding words…2	*Activating previous knowledge*…4	Rereading…1	Rereading…1	Using resources to understand unknown words…3	Using resources to understand unknown words…1
Understanding comprehension questions…2	*Making inferences (visuals)*…6	Highlighting/ underlining information…9	*Using text clues to understand the meaning of unknown words*…4	Scanning…3	*Summarizing*…5
Making inferences (images)…3	*Making inferences (title, headlines)*…11	Scanning…10	Highlighting/ underlining…6	Summarizing…3	*Evaluating the reading task*…13
Underlining information…4	*Skimming*…13	Using resources to understand unknown words…24	*Recognizing similar words*…8	Rereading…12	*Using visual organizers*…15
Making inferences (title, headlines)…6	*Understanding the purpose of the reading task*…14		*Monitoring comprehension*…12		*Rereading to confirm information*…24
Using resources to understand unknown words…9	*Understanding comprehension questions*…27		Using resources to understand unknown words…13		
			Concentrating on specific parts of the text…18		
			Scanning…22		

Source: Compiled by the author

In the Q1 after the participants were asked about the strategies they used in each reading stage (pre-, while/in and post-), they were immediately asked again about their L1 reading. The question was directly addressed to getting insights about whether those strategies mentioned in the three phases of their L2 reading were also recognized in their L1 reading comprehension. In response, 87.5 % (35) of the participants affirmed that while reading in their L1, they used the L2 reading strategies just reported. Also, 47.5 % (19) of those 35 students extended their answer and named specific strategies like "highlighting/underlining information" (12 references), "summarizing" (5), "rereading" (1), "making notes on the text" (1), "using visual organizers" (1) and "scanning" (1). These answers seemed to contradict the previous affirmation (mentioned at the beginning of this section) of the 75 % of the participants reporting that they read differently when approaching texts in L2. Nevertheless, there could be a plausible explanation for such an apparent contradiction. It was possible that those L1 actions were no longer strategies but skills due to automatization (Ellis qtd. in Uribe, "Learning Strategies" 16) so that they could not account for them consciously in the first question. However, after having been asked explicitly for reading strategies in the subsequent questions, they became aware of them and noticed they used reading strategies not only in L2 but also in their L1. It was not weird that they were more conscious about L2 reading strategies since their use required voluntary effort as the participants were learning the language as well, and as the strategies had not become automatic (Cohen qtd. in Uribe, "Learning Strategies" 16; Grabe, "Reading in a Second Language" 221).

As far as the tests are concerned, results in the ExT showed a considerable improvement. The average score increased from 13.5/27 (50 %) in the ET to 17.1/27 (63 %) in the ExT. On the contrary, the average score in the PT1, PT2 and AT indicated a gradual decrease from 6.1/10 (61%), to 5.4/10 (545 %) and finally to 5/10 (50 %) respectively.

Regarding the tasks, their average scores showed a steady progress of 3.4/7 (48.6 %) in the T1 and T2, and then a moderate increase to 4.2/7 (60 %) in the T3. When organized chronologically, results increased and decreased alternately as shown in figure 1. Such fluctuation between 50 % and 63 % of right answers in the reading tests and tasks evidences the non-linear nature of any learning processes through which better or worse performances are expected (Larsen-Freeman 166; Thornbury qtd. in Uribe, "Incidencia" 13).

Also, the fact that there is an upward trend between the ET and the ExT clearly shows that the explicit instruction was effective regarding the purpose of improving the students' performance in tests and tasks assessing reading comprehension (Raphael 76; Richards and Renandya 291; L. Zhang 15; Grabe, "Key issues" 13).
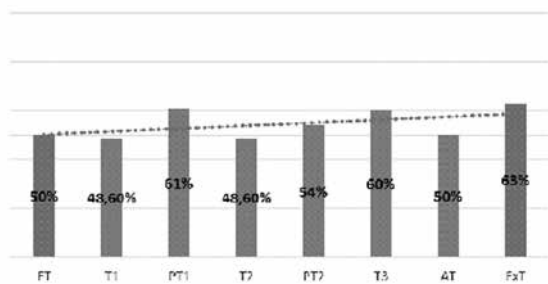

Figure 1. Test and Task Results Organized Chronologically. Compiled by the author.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this research was to determine the effectiveness of a proposal for teaching reading strategies explicitly in terms of extending the participants' range of reading strategies as well as obtaining higher scores in the reading tests and tasks. Findings clearly showed that the repertoire of reading strategies recognized by the students was extended after the explicit instruction. As Hedgcock and Ferris affirm, explicit instruction helps learners be more conscious of the strategies and expand their range so that they

can use them more effectively (41). Some of the strategies taught during the training were reported after it for the first time and the others increased their number of references. For instance, "understanding the reading purpose", "recognizing similar words" and "evaluating the reading tasks", were reported for the first time after the training, in the pre-, in/while and post- stages respectively. Conversely, reading strategies that were reported before the intervention and were not included in it, decreased their number of references, which warns about the importance of overtly recycling not only the strategies being taught during the training, but also the ones already used by the learners so that the new reading strategies are added to the existing ones instead of diminishing them. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the repertoire of reading strategies recognized by the participants was broadened as a direct consequence of explicit instruction.

In addition, results showed that when the participants were asked explicitly about reading strategies, a higher number of references to strategic actions was reported, which indicated that focusing attention directly on strategies helped the students be more aware of them even though they had already become skills as in the case of L1 reading (Cohen qtd. in Uribe, "Learning Strategies" 16). This finding supports explicit instruction as a pedagogical practice that promotes conscious learning and use of a wider repertoire of strategic actions by means of explaining, modelling, practicing, recycling, and discussing on how strategies are better exploited according to the reading purposes and readers' needs. Even though good readers can apply an initial set of reading strategies, they need to extend their range since more complex tasks require new and different strategies (Grabe, "Key Issues" 12). Also, struggling readers urgently need to be taught how they can improve their reading comprehension by becoming strategic readers. Therefore, both efficient and poor readers benefit from explicit instruction in reading strategies since teachers cannot take for granted that students will implement L2 reading strategies on their own (Lems, Miller, and Soro 173).

Concerning the performance of participants in the reading comprehension tests and tasks, even though results evidenced an alternate upward and downward trend when compared chronologically, the highest scores were reported in the ExT which was taken after the instruction. Such variation in the scores merely reflects that learning is a process that

involves progress, backsliding, and periods of stability (Larsen-Freeman 166; Thornburyqtd. in Uribe, "Incidencia" 13) and therefore needs continuous practice and use for new knowledge to be acquired and new skills to be developed. Nevertheless, such a better performance in the ExT strongly suggests that explicit instruction is an effective alternative to help readers improve their comprehension (McNamara xi; Aghasafari 156).

Grabe points out some findings about research on explicit teaching of strategies that affirm that reading strategies can be taught effectively, strategy instruction can improve reading comprehension, and both good and struggling readers use strategies but in different ways ("Reading in a Second Language" 50, 227). Thus, good readers can improve even more, and poor readers can understand how reading strategies are better used in order to facilitate reading comprehension. Besides, training students in how to use reading strategies help them become critical readers since they can devote attention to the meaning of texts (D. Anderson 3; Hedgcock and Ferris 41; Grabe "Key Issues" 15).

Finally, further research is suggested to test the model with other groups of learners in order to find out whether it is effective or not with different students. Also, further research is needed to determine the extent to which the students in this research will continue using the strategies reported in a consistent and autonomous way.

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