



Cognitive strategies in the reading comprehension improvement

Estrategias cognitivas en el mejoramiento de la comprensión lectora

Estratégias cognitivas para melhorar a compreensão da leitura

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to determine the effectiveness of the use of cognitive strategies to improve the reading comprehension of university students. Due to the low level of the students, the researcher proposed to carry out a research with quantitative methodology with a quasi-experimental design. This process involved steps such as taking a standardized exam such as the FCE level B2. After this, she planned a series of lesson plans that focused on applying four cognitive strategies such as skimming, scanning, summarizing, and questioning. The population object of this research was made up of 24 students who made up the comparison group and the experimental group. The two groups took the initial test; However, only the experimental group attended the intervention classes. After the intervention period, the students took the final test and these results were statistically analyzed. At the beginning there were no differences between the means of the study groups; but in the end, the result of the experimental group was higher than that of the comparison group. Therefore, it is concluded that the use of cognitive strategies is effective in improving students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: Reading comprehension; Cognitive strategies; Reading; Reading levels; Improvement.

Resumen

La presente investigación tuvo como objetivo determinar la efectividad del uso de estrategias cognitivas para mejorar la comprensión lectora de los estudiantes universitarios. Debido al bajo nivel de los estudiantes, la investigadora se propuso realizar una investigación con metodología cuantitativa con diseño cuasiexperimental. Este proceso involucró pasos como la toma de un examen estandarizado como es el FCE nivel B2. Luego de este, se planificó una serie de planes de clase que se enfocaron en aplicar cuatro estrategias cognitivas tales como hojear, escanear, resumir y cuestionar. La población objeto de esta investigación estuvo conformada por 24 estudiantes quienes conformaron el grupo de comparación y el grupo experimental. Los dos grupos tomaron la prueba inicial; no obstante, solo el grupo experimental asistió a las clases de intervención. Luego del período de intervención los estudiantes tomaron la prueba final y estos resultados fueron estadísticamente analizados. Al inicio no hubo diferencias entre las medias de los grupos de estudio; pero al final, el resultado del grupo experimental fue más alto que el del grupo de comparación. Por lo tanto, se concluye que el uso de estrategias cognitivas es efectivo para la mejora de la comprensión lectora de los estudiantes.

Palabras Clave: Comprensión lectora; Estrategias cognitivas; Lectura; Niveles de lectura; Mejoramiento.

Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa foi determinar a eficácia do uso de estratégias cognitivas para melhorar a compreensão de leitura de estudantes universitários. Devido ao baixo nível dos alunos, a pesquisadora se propôs a realizar uma pesquisa com metodologia quantitativa com desenho quase experimental. Este processo envolveu etapas como a realização de um exame padronizado, como o nível B2 do FCE. Depois disso, foi planejada uma série de planos de aula com foco na aplicação de quatro estratégias cognitivas, como leitura superficial, digitalização, resumo e questionamento. A população objeto desta pesquisa foi composta por 24 estudantes que compuseram o grupo de comparação e o grupo experimental. Os dois grupos fizeram o teste inicial; Contudo, apenas o grupo experimental assistiu às aulas de intervenção. Após o período de intervenção, os alunos realizaram a prova final e esses resultados foram analisados estatisticamente. No início não houve diferenças entre as médias dos grupos de estudo; mas no final o resultado do grupo experimental foi superior ao do grupo de comparação. Portanto, conclui-se que o uso de estratégias cognitivas é eficaz para melhorar a compreensão de leitura dos alunos.

Palavras-chave: Compreensão de leitura; Estratégias cognitivas; Leitura; Níveis de leitura; Melhoria.

Introducción

The native language of England was originally English. Nevertheless, it is now the primary or secondary language in many former British colonies, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and India, as a result of the historic efforts of the British Empire. Nowadays, English is widely used in many sectors of business and culture dominated by nations that were actively influenced by British imperialism. In addition to being the language of Hollywood, it is also the language of banking and global trade. Therefore, it is a useful and even necessary language (Northrup, 2013).

The main means of communication is language. Therefore, ideas and thoughts are communicated to others in this way and language development is what distinguishes humans from other animals (Yule, 2010). There are countless languages spoken around the world (Crystal, 2003). Each nation

has a national language, as well as a number of regional languages spoken and understood by citizens of various regions. However, English has constituted the *Lingua franca* (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001) and is spoken and used worldwide. In this context, English is currently required for communication due to a number of factors. This indicates that English is frequently used as a common language for communication between two people from different nations (such as an Ecuadorian and a Japanese) (Guilherme, 2007). Therefore, learning a language is a necessity for anyone who wants to connect globally.

However, in Latin America learning English constitutes a big deal. An international study shows that people in many countries have problems with English language proficiency. Education First (2022), an organization dedicated to language teaching, has created the English Proficiency Index. This study was carried out in 44 countries, which compared English proficiency between countries. The Latin American country with the best command of the universal language was Argentina, followed by Mexico. Meanwhile, Ecuador, Chile, Venezuela and Colombia were at the bottom of the list with the lowest scores.

According to Sempértegui (2022), the amount of time dedicated to teaching and the methods used, particularly in public institutions, are some of the problems with teaching English in Ecuador. Because of this, there is an educational gap between public and private school students, which generates social inequality (Azüero, 2023). Therefore, they do not have the same opportunities to develop as the latter. Likewise, in some cases, outdated methods are still used in language teaching (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017).

From the observations carried out in the classroom, prior to this research, it was discovered that one of the weaknesses in the English language subject is reading. This situation arises mainly because students do not develop reading comprehension strategies as they do not have the habit or interest in reading in English. Because of this, they only fully understand the read text and think that reading is the most boring part of a study topic. This issue undoubtedly has an impact on the way English is taught. Therefore, a poor attitude towards reading skills results in weak spoken and written English skills. Therefore, the objective of the research presented here is geared to determine the effectiveness of using cognitive reading strategies in the reading comprehension improvement of university students.

Theoretical foundation

Reading skills

Reading constitutes one of the language skills which involves the visual interpretation and decoding of the phonetic value of a series of written symbols, both mentally (silent) and aloud (speaking) (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001); (Elder, 2008). This activity includes translating symbols or letters into meaningful words and sentences that are played after the symbol is decoded (Logsdon, 2019). This will help the language user to interpret, understand, evaluate and use written materials according to their needs (Elder, 2008). It is the decoding of the message using conventional language, graphic symbols or some other non-verbal symbol system that is necessary for understanding the content of a text or other medium. The Latin word *lectura*, meaning "the act of reading or choosing," is where the etymology of the word comes from (Charlton, 2018).

According to Pisanie (2020), it is a crucial component of learning because it is necessary for the efficient acquisition of knowledge. It is essential to develop strong habits of concentration, which can be achieved by learning to read well. This can be achieved by reading private texts, such as letters, personal diaries and blogs, or reading public texts, such as newspapers, books and magazines for reflection or information (Bakar & Nizza, 2019). Depending on the level of the reading resources, they display a variety of materials that have images to complement the text. Images give information and make the text easier to understand (Clay, 1985).

There are many ways to read. They differ, among other things, in terms of the skills used in each case and the objectives pursued and the language user level (Elder, 2008).

- Oral and silence reading. Oral reading is a reading aloud method, which means that the reading speed is somewhat limited, as pronunciation and intonation are required to follow pauses and silences. On the other hand, silence reading is a process of understanding and decoding that occurs internally, without vocalization and without making any sound (Wright & Dunsmuir, 2019).
- Reflective and selective reading. Reflective is a slow reading process to truly and completely understand each part of the text. Meanwhile, in selective reading, readers choose to skip segments after receiving the complete text and choose for themselves what to read (Renandya et al., 2019).
- Deep reading and fast reading. The former is the act of reading at a higher or university level and involves detailed reading to understand the technical concepts of a particular

topic. However, the latter involves general reading at the fastest possible speed, exploring general aspects, and then intensive reading (Bakar & Nizza, 2019).

- Extensive reading and intensive reading. Extensive reading involves reading a text in its entirety from beginning to end, without skipping or skipping passages (Young Park, 2020). Intensive reading is one of the characteristics of the academic field and involves a careful and in-depth reading of a text to fully understand its meaning. It requires reading the entire text or more difficult passages several times (Williams & Vaughn, 2019).

Reading comprehension

Understanding the meaning of a text is the objective of the cognitive process of reading comprehension (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001). According to the reader's level, it takes a lot of time and practice to learn to read, so it is not an easy task. Learning a variety of reading strategies and perfecting them over time will help read with fluency and comprehension. In other words, it is essential to develop reading skills that are accurate, fast, and with appropriate intonation (Bakar & Nizza, 2019). In general, it can be said that the language user will be able to understand a written text if he or she can read fluently and understand spoken language (Elder, 2008).

According to Carabajo et al. (2020), the written text contains certain characteristics that make it difficult to understand and that significantly affect its comprehension:

- Written texts have varied vocabulary that includes abstract and low-frequency words.
- Sentences are complicated.
- While passive or relative clauses are rarely used in spoken language, they are frequently used in written language.
- Written texts have different syntax according to their level and purpose.

Levels of reading comprehension

Different learning models and levels must be defined to be able to visualize and develop an appropriate action plan adapted to each student, their needs and their particular objectives. This involves metacognitive processes that are the actions and results of one's own learned reasoning (Al-Rimawi & Al Masri, 2021). In this way, Bloom's Taxonomy is a useful and simple framework

that allows to recognize the hierarchy that humans internally give to a text in their comprehension and learning process (Bloom, 1986).

In fact, improving memory capacity is one of the main principles of the taxonomy because it will help understand and analyze the different concepts of written texts. As a result, the basis of this hierarchy is the prior knowledge necessary for an accurate and deep understanding of any topic under study. As a result, reading involves a variety of comprehension skills, from the most basic to the most complex such as literal, inferential, critical, and creative (Srisang & Everatt, 2021).

- Literal level. It refers to the reader's ability to recognize and retain information, that is, locate specific facts, figures or ideas in expository texts, and report that information clearly and accurately. It is a superficial reading comprehension level in which the reader does not examine the message of the text (Renelle & Quimbo, 2022). It means that it is a fundamental skill that educators must cultivate in their students because it will allow them to apply their knowledge at higher levels and serve as a cornerstone of their better understanding.
- Inferential level. The objective of this level is to give meaning to the text based on the reader's own experiences and prior knowledge, allowing him or her to draw conclusions and hypotheses from the content of the text. Therefore, academic texts or scientific research frequently use this reading level. In this type of reading, the reader tries to discover the hidden meanings in the text, which must be inferred from the tone of voice, vocabulary and other resources used in the literal level (Miñoza & Montero, 2019).
- Critical level. It is a special type of inferential reading in which readers make a subjective analysis of the text while reading and perform an evaluative analysis based on the way the text is written (Miñoza & Montero, 2019).
- Creative level. Last but not least, the creative level goes beyond reading comprehension and aims to awaken the language user's imagination and produce new concepts, settings or characters (Renelle & Quimbo, 2022).

Cognitive reading strategies

Adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship, and ICT management skills constitute educational challenges today. Understanding and accepting responsibility for their own learning strategies is a skill that students can develop through reading (Rahmat & Muhamad, 2020). While it is crucial to understand specific conceptual content when reading, it is equally important to process information and use comprehension strategies, as well as control cognitive processes. It is

also important to highlight the variety of factors and aspects that influence the learning process (Takal et al., 2021). Therefore, learning languages is closely related to strategies (Harmer, 2007). The use of cognitive strategies is undoubtedly a crucial component of understanding reading material that will support academic excellence in any field of education. Students who correctly understand all types of information in their native language or any other foreign language will be able to use that information correctly and solve real-world situations.

To achieve effective reading comprehension, cognitive strategies must control, regulate, or evaluate specific actions in order to be carried out. Cognitive strategies are conscious, deliberate and purposeful processes. Cognitive strategies for reading comprehension can allow students to make sufficient progress, become very important critical factors, and influence the development of personal learning skills that students use in reading (Wahyono, 2019).

There are cognitive strategies which are helpful to improve reading comprehension such as skimming, skimming, guessing meaning in context, summarizing, predicting, questioning, visualizing while reading. Skimming means speed reading. It is a reading strategy used to understand a text and find the main ideas. To do this, students read the first and last paragraphs in addition to the title and subtitle (Elder, 2008). Scanning, on the other hand, is called as searching for specific information; for example, dates and names (Harmer, 2007). Furthermore, students can guess the meaning of words in context. Additionally, students can take notes (Aziza & Abu, 2019) and use graphic organizers, chains of events, or any kind of drawing to summarize or paraphrase the text (Rodriguez, 2021). Students can also predict texts; then, they corroborate or reject their assumptions. Moreover, students make questions to develop reading comprehension. Finally, students visualize scenes while reading and improve their text understanding (Aziza & Abu, 2019).

Methodology

The current research was quantitative methodology with quasi-experimental design. The quantitative section aimed to compare results from two groups of study before and after an intervention to determine the effectiveness of cognitive reading strategies in the reading comprehension. Quasi-experimental design identified a comparison group that is as similar as possible to the experimental group in terms of baseline (pre-intervention) characteristics (Creswell, 2015). The researcher applied cognitive reading strategies with the experimental group to improve its reading comprehension during a whole semester five classes per week out of the normal

schedule. As subjects or participants in the research, for convenience samples consist of twenty-four sixth-semester Career of Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages students. Students' reading comprehension scores were determined using FCE B2 Reading test as the pre-test and post-test. Using T student test, means were compared and analyzed to reach conclusions.

Results and discusión

The results of this study are derived from the students' pre-test and post-test. The former before and the latter after the classroom intervention. In other words, research inquiries encompassing an analysis of the students' results before and after applying cognitive reading strategies.

Results

Reading comprehension pre-test scores from both the comparison and the experimental group before the classroom intervention are presented.

Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	%	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	Comparison group	12	17.08	33%	3.777	1.09
	Experimental group	12	16.83	32%	5.491	1.585
	Expected average		52			

Chart 1. Pre-test results

Chart one displays information about students' results in the pre-test. The expected average was 52; however, the experimental group obtained 16.83 and the comparison group had 17.08.

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means
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	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Pre-test Equal variances assumed	0.746	0.397	0.13	22	0.898	0.25	1.924	-3.74	4.24

Chart 2. T-test. Pre-test

Chart 2 shows the mean comparison between the scores of the comparison and experimental groups. With 95% of confidence, the two-tailed significance was 0.898. It means that there is no significant difference between means; therefore, the comparison and experimental groups have the same reading comprehension levels. It must be explained that the expected average was 52; however, the students only obtained 33% of it. It signified students had a low level of reading comprehension.

Once students took the pre-test, the experimental group participated in the classroom intervention focused on the cognitive strategies to improve their reading comprehension performance, while the comparison group did not. After this time, the experimental and the comparison groups took the post-test.

Group Statistics

Group	N	Mean	%	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test Comparison group	12	20.83	40.06	3.857	1.114
Post-test Experimental group	12	30.83	59.29	9.084	2.622
Expected average	52				

Chart 3. Post-test results

Chart three contains information about the students' scores obtained in the post-test. The comparison group obtained 20.83 which represents 40.06 of the expected average and the experimental group had 30.83 which is 59.29% of it.

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post-test scores assumed equal variances	Equal variances assumed	3.043	.095	-3.510	22	.002	-10.000	2.849	-15.908	-4.092

Chart 4. T-test. Post-test

Chart four shows the mean juxtaposition between results from the comparison and experimental groups. Therefore, with 95% of confidence the two-tailed significance was 0.002. This result signified that there is a significant difference between the groups results. The experimental group obtained 59.29% of the average score; in consequence; this group obtained a higher result.

Discussion

There are a number of benefits of reading; therefore, it is crucial in the English language development. Reading is a language skill (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001) that allows readers to develop cognitive and interactive thinking (Azuerro, 2023). Reading allows the language learner to create new knowledge. It promotes the development and improvement of language (Chen, 2018). Furthermore, it improves spoken and written expressions

and gain fluency (Clay, 1985). It makes it easier for people to express their ideas and allows them to think. It improves the ability to observe, pay attention, and concentrate. Teachers must teach students the importance of reading because it is a path to knowledge and freedom and requires the active participation of the mind. Likewise, reading helps develop imagination and creativity and enriches vocabulary and oral and written expression (Elder, 2008).

In this context, this research has been developed to support students' enhancement in this field. There were some findings. First, students have a low level of reading comprehension, it was found in the pre-test. These results were similar to those found by Srisang and Everatt (2021); Renelle and Quimbo (2022); Al-Rimai and Al Masri (2021). Those authors found that students have a low level of reading comprehension and they were in the inferential level. They were able to interpret the text information but with teacher's support. However, the intended population were in the literal level only. Another finding was that there was no difference between groups similar to findings obtained by Miñoza and Montero (2019).

Therefore, a classroom treatment was implemented with those students who formed the experimental group. For this intervention, five cognitive strategies had been chosen such as scanning, skimming, questioning, and summarizing. These cognitive strategies were suggested by Wahyono (2019); and, Aziza and Abu (2019). The students from the comparison group remained in the same level; however, the students who attended the intervention had a better performance. These results were similar to those found by Wahyono (2019); Aziza and Abu (2019); and Rodriguez (2021).

At the end of the process, statistical comparison of means has been developed. Therefore, the main finding was that there was a significant difference in reading comprehension between the scores of the pre-test and the post-test of the experimental group; while the comparison group who did not attend the intervention remained the same scores. Therefore, the application of cognitive strategies is effective for reading comprehension improvement.

Conclusion

Students always need their teacher's support to improve their English language skills. In this context, teachers must develop interventions in the classroom to scaffold them to the next level until independent language users. The current research has determined the effectiveness of using cognitive reading strategies in the reading comprehension improvement of university students.

Cognitive strategies were applied during the process and the results were motivating for both the teacher and the students since they are future English teachers and need to improve their skills to contribute with education.

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