Artículo de investigación

Strategy Training to English Language Learners: Consolidating Reading Strategies

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Resumen

La influencia de las estrategias de lectura es significativa ya que ha contribuido a entender como los estudiantes pueden mejorar sus niveles de comprensión de lectura, y que estrategias pueden usar los estudiantes para leer más eficientemente. Este artículo presenta un proyecto de investigación acción desarrollado con estudiantes de séptimo grado de un colegio privado de Bogotá, Cundinamarca, Colombia. Los participantes son 16 estudiantes; hombres, cuyas edades oscilan entre los 11 y 13 años. La investigación tuvo un método de investigación acción mixto. La información fue recolectada usando entrevistas, pruebas, encuestas, protocolos de pensamiento, los productos de los estudiantes y diarios de campo.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza de la lectura, estrategias metacognitivas, comprensión de lectura

Abstract

The influence of reading strategies is significant since it has contributed into understanding how students can improve their reading comprehension level, and what strategies students can use to read more efficiently. This article reports on an action research study developed with seventh grade students in a private school in Bogotá, Cundinamarca, Colombia. The participants are 16 male students; whose ages range from 11 to 13 years old. The project implemented a mixed action research approach. Data was gathered using interviews, tests, surveys, think aloud protocols, students' artifacts, and teacher's journals. The results showed the positive effects of the teaching of metacognitive reading strategies in students' language learning process.

Introducción

Every student should develop their language learning skills in the best way possible considering their capabilities and the context that surrounds them. Teachers must give as many resources as possible so that students can strengthen their learning and expression capacities, and in this way, be competent in all the situations that come up with the mere use of a foreign language, either in an academic, or in a daily life context. In this study, it is expected that from the development of one language ability (reading), there can be trends (from the acquisition of learning strategies) to help students have a better academic learning process (understanding the influence of reading in their lives as students) and performance in their daily lives. Even though this topic has been thoroughly studied, it is relevant to continue studying it because as Harmer (2007) mentions "...many of them want to be able to read texts in English either for their careers, for study purposes or simply for pleasure. Anything we can do to make reading easier for them must be a good idea (pp. 68). Generations change, the perceptions on learning change, and it is important to keep track of the thinking that different generations possess.

In fact, the importance of reading in any context comes in the learning of new skills to face more advanced tasks, which also helps readers to have more understanding of different types of knowledge, connect learning, be entertained or to accomplish certain goals

they plan for themselves. Similarly, Reading contribute students understand the language (grammar features of a text, vocabulary, interpretations, the type of text, and the way to organize texts); it is relevant for students to read and have understanding (of a determined topic, a perspective, news, theoretical knowledge, or a story) in any material (types of texts) because it is going to give them more opportunities to develop their language performance, tackle their reading difficulties through varied types of texts and strategies, and produce new knowledge from what they read by being able to understand different materials using different strategies, and producing new knowledge from what they obtain. With this project, it is expected to explore the impact of the implementation of workshops about reading strategies on the understanding that students may have of a text. The goal of this study is to assess students' reading comprehension after the learning of reading strategies, and purposefully use them in their reading process, seeing the effect they may have on students' reading comprehension, if any. In terms of this study, it is conducted with high school students who are in the need of constantly consolidating their academic skills. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency for complications in reading comprehension throughout time; students who have struggled with plenty academic tasks and in national and international tests results require the use of reading comprehension strategies, which have not been very positive.

For high school educators, to teach language means developing the four language skills emphasizing on the use of language in students' real lives, but also effective reading comprehension skills need to be developed to provide students with the tools to comprehend English better, accomplish reading tasks, and be more motivated to explore the language. In

this regard, Campos (2012) states that with good reading abilities, students can be more autonomous and the motivation for the processes that reading requires increases positively, the will and enjoyment of reading is better, and the perceptions towards reading are more positive. Consequently, Campos (2012) also remarks that when students have a positive response to tools to improve language learning, classes are more fruitful, and there will be a better perception of the learning materials.

Thus, this study aims at helping students to be aware of the way in which they comprehend texts by using metacognitive strategies; this is a necessity as Turkyilmaz (2015) suggests: "students notice what they should do before reading, while reading, and after reading" (pp.16). Learning about reading involves having a plan about how to get involved with language learning, and when learners have the tools to prepare, face, and challenge themselves in different reading exercises, they will execute their tasks more proficiently, and with more motivation. When students are trained in metacognitive reading strategies, their reading awareness improves, which gives more opportunities to make learning faster, and stimulates a better reading process (Bećirović, Brdarević-Čeljo, & Sinanović, 2017).

Literature review

Reading

After analyzing different authors that discuss this concept, three proposals of definitions arose:

1. "Reading is the process of deriving meaning from text. For the majority of readers, this process involves decoding written text" (Cline, Johnstone, & King, 2006, p. 2).

2. Reading is also understood as a "process" and "product" (Purpura, 2004; Liao, 2008; Kim, 2011) of words as "…the different types of meanings obtained from the text" (Mi Soon, & Hyun Jung, 2014, p. 79).

3. Fischer (2004) says that reading is related to "the ability to make sense of written or printed symbols. The reader uses the symbols to guide the recovery of information from his or her memory and subsequently uses this information to construct a plausible interpretation of the writer's message" (pp. 11-12).

In this sense, and with these three definitions, the researcher defines reading as the process in which a person comprehends a code to give meaning and the code is understood as the text. In the reading process, factors such as perceptions, speed of interpretation, and thought processes will influence the type of understanding the reader will have of any text, being the comprehension of any text different for each person.

Reading comprehension

The conceptions of Randi, Grigorenko, and Sternberg (2005) are important to highlight how reading comprehension should be social and personal when you explore a written text. They explore the ideas of Pearson and Fielding (1991) on reading comprehension as the understanding of an idea by means of prior knowledge that can help the reader to "... make sense of text…" (p. 21). A second definition is Grellet's (1981) who

expresses that reading comprehension means that a reader should take as much information as possible from a text to use it in different tasks.

Reading comprehension involves the capacities a person has to understand not only a set of paragraphs, but the interconnection among them and their sentences. When a reader understands the connections between sentences, there is good comprehension, otherwise, as Cain (2005) mentions, there are lexical and syntactic mistakes. To improve reading comprehension and monitoring of learning, the use of metacognitive strategies with think aloud activities can be beneficial for students because they may be a tool to understand, analyze, and propose alternatives to their difficulties regarding the cohesive devices that texts offer (Allen, Jacovina, & McNamara, 2016).

Reading instruction

Teaching reading related production has focused on how to make reading comprehension teaching easier and more accessible for students (Alderson, 2000; Hinkel (Ed.), 2005; Nation, 2008; Santoso, 2015, Kung, 2019). In this sense, the teaching of reading must have the teacher's assistance to make this aspect of language learning the best one possible within the capacities that the context offers.

Reading instruction is based, in the words of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] (2000), and Shanahan (2005), on phonemic knowledge, word recognition, "fluency", the set of words that make sense in a text (vocabulary), and comprehension. Regarding the last characteristic, Learning Point Associates (2004) highlight

that the objective of comprehension instruction is to promote in students the following aspects:

• Their use of a range of comprehension strategies to deepen and enrich their understanding of what they are reading (Pressley, El-Dinary, & Brown, 1992).

• Their awareness of their own thinking processes and their conscious decisions to use different comprehension strategies as they read

• Their successful comprehension due to effort more than ability… (p.30)

Therefore, and in terms of this project, reading instruction is characterized as a process, where the use of strategies can help students gain more knowledge about what they read and reflect about what they know and how they know it. In this regard, the type of reading instruction can be defined as the teaching of metacognition applied to the improvement of reading comprehension

Metacognitive strategies

Reading comprehension involves using different mental tools to interpret, decode, and establish meanings according to what the person reads; these are called metacognitive strategies; to think about people's own learning to understand better (Karpicke, Butler, & Roediger III, 2009). Other authors that talk about metacognitive strategies are Bidabadi and Yamat (2013) who define strategy as "…a learner's comprehensive approach to a task; it includes how a learner thinks and performs when planning and evaluating his/her study behavior" (p.82). In this sense, they also say that students utilize metacognitive strategies to

organize and categorize the best strategies they can use in a language situation. To complement the vision given before, McCormick (2002) defines metacognitive strategies as "activities for monitoring cognitive processes" (p. 81). One last definition is related to the activities we do when we organize our learning (Chick, n.d.). Therefore, metacognitive strategies contribute to students' understanding of what they know, how they know it.

Metacognitive strategies are defined by Baker and Beall (2009) as the thinking about what, how, and why we learn by considering the ideas of planning, monitoring, and evaluation. For this project, the three cornerstones of Baker and Beall will be the base of the intervention since students need to learn about the stages of learning, and how they can become more autonomous from their own learning process.

Methodology

Although numerous studies have looked at approaches to teaching reading skills and the use of metacognitive strategies as tools to aid the reading process (Fitrisia, Tan, & Yusuf, 2015; Taj, Ali, Sipra, & Ahmad, 2017; Tavakoli, 2014), little specific work has been done on the analysis of the influence of metacognitive strategies on a male high school context.

Theoretical work on reading, reading comprehension, and reading instruction has showed the importance of using authentic texts as the chance to show students the correct use of strategies in different situations. Another study that analyzed the implications of teaching language using reading strategies is Elosúa, García-Madruga, Vila, Gómez-Veiga,and Gil (2013), in which by studying the use and teaching of reading strategies in

children as well as prompting the working memory, the authors analyzed the improvement of students' reading comprehension after training. The results were positive highlighting how the working memory and executive functions, classification and organization of information, are essential for a good reading process, and showing that it is important for teachers to work on these processes in order for improvement in comprehension to take place.

Another study that complements the idea of teaching reading strategies was written by Ghavamnia, Ketabi, and Tavakoli (2013). They made a project about the use of reading strategies to establish the ones students mainly used when they analyze a text. Their results showed that students use strategies while reading; however, they always aimed at understanding every single word of the text and they did not know how to explore texts. It is necessary to work on reading and pre-reading strategies for students to have a better reading comprehension level. Additionally, the authors recommend having direct instruction on strategies because this will offer students a bigger set of strategies to face reading tasks even though they also say that it is important to let students discover strategies with experience.

More examples linked to the positive influence of metacognitive instruction, in this case related to young students, are in the words of Manoli, Papadopoulou, and Metallidou (2016), in which they analyzed the effects of a strategy instruction in a group of 135 sixth graders over a three-month period. Using a quasi-experimental approach with direct strategy instruction, the results showed that metacognitive strategies have a positive effect in the classroom, helping students to be better at comprehension and interpretation of texts.

There have been studies in Colombia related to the use of reading strategies in school contexts, underlining the importance of teaching and promoting them. The research implemented by Montes, Botero, and Pechthalt (2009) demonstrates the influence of reading skills in L1 and L2 in a good reading comprehension process. In a girls' school, 29 sixth grade students were trained in reading strategies considering the assumption that they are transferable. They also used the participants' grades, a reading comprehension test, and a protocol of observation of their reading behaviors to discover that the L1 strategies are related to the L2 strategies, and that there is a positive improvement in reading comprehension since they offer a more metacognitive advantage in terms of learning and interpreting readings.

Type of study

This research study was an action research that used a mixed method for data collection. Interviews and tests were combined collecting qualitative and quantitative data to produce complementary results to support the qualitative nature of the research project. The study observed an action research methodology, which in words of Ferrance (2000), Greenwood, and Levin (2007) and Edwards and Willis (2014), is defined as a social intervention on a determined context, in which the aim is to help identify and change a problematic situation. In the case of educational settings, this type of research helps in specific classroom situations, to analyze and improve them (Stringer, 2008). This project was conducted on a specific group that demonstrated limited reading comprehension skills from a needs analysis previously mentioned.

Participants

In this study, eleven seventh-grade male students participated. The participants' ages ranged between eleven and thirteen years old. They evidenced a B1 level of English proficiency according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). This study was carried out at a private Catholic boys school in Bogotá, Cundinamarca, Colombia. This institution offers formal instruction from pre-school to high-school. The institution's purpose is to educate students through Catholic virtues and values, where there is freedom for students to be happy, and serve from the catholic point of view of life.

Research question(s) and objective(s)

The research questions are: *How does metacognitive strategy training assist A2 high school students when dealing with texts using predicting, story maps and scanning?* and *What does strategy training to high school EFL learners tell us about the way they face reading tasks?* The main objective is to assess *how strategy training assists A2 high school students' reading comprehension level when reading texts in English*. The specific objective is to *train students on a set of reading strategies through explicit instruction and practice (predicting, story maps and scanning) that will enable them to be more competent readers*.

Data management procedures

This analysis is done through the Grounded Theory as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (2015), which is rigorous and systematic. The aim of using this method is in words of Creswell (2012a), to explain in a big manner a natural phenomenon that occurs in a context; some other methods might be short in that regard. This method offers a huge view

of the context because it allows the researcher to use all the information available to analyze and generate a hypothesis of the research context. Likewise, grounded theory's data is not forced to fit into any category as it is an inductive method; thus, it generates a new theory about a specific problematic situation that may or may not be tested (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

The instruments used to collect all the information were: two interviews, two tests, one survey, one teacher's journal, and the artifacts students created. The interviews were managed manually. They were transcribed virtually and stored in a digital folder. The tests were different samples of the PET test, in which the questions were closely related to the strategies that students were going to be exposed to. The surveys were administered in a paper-based format to students, and the answers provided were digitized and stored in digital folders. Lastly, the teachers' journal was a virtual document in which the researcher submitted the impressions, perceptions, and challenges in the three stages of the project.

In the project, following the principles of Corbin and Strauss (2008), there were three types of coding used; open, axial, and selective. Open coding refers to the way in which information is organized with predetermined categories that are the result of the emphasis on the gathering and management of information. In axial coding, all the information is correlated with each other. Selective coding is defined as a way to organize and assign information to a certain category considering the pre-conceptions that the research may bring. The three types of coding were used to give more control and validity to the data.

Validation

Data were validated through triangulation using all the sources for data collection as an integration of information. By using comparison, contrasting, and uniting commonalities in the information found, the results and conclusions emerged. Now, all the information was treated with the same level of rigurosity. It is important to consider validity because in the words of Creswell (2012b), balancing information should be the aim at all moments of analysis. Validity was developed from the simplicity stand as a way to analyze data, not making every data simple, but considering that the complexities of the project had importance and helped shaping the categories as well as organize all the data that appeared throughout the project in a concrete way.

Data analysis methodology

To organize the information, the different instruments were transcribed in one Microsoft Excel file, in which data could be manageable. Using the three types of coding previously described, the categories were organized according to their repetition in counts, relevance and relationship between them.

Categories

Overall category mapping

In the coding stage, the researcher started to identify the similarities in the data and colors were assigned to identify and classify the information and the trends found (color

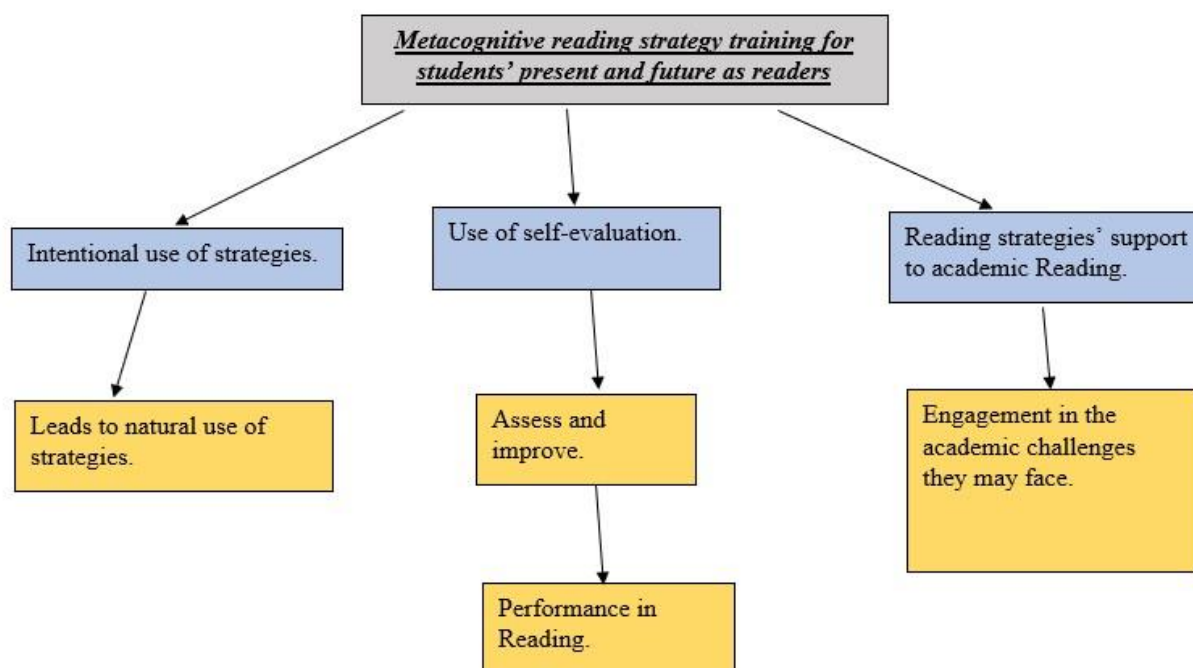coding technique) (Saldaña, 2009; Basit, 2003). All this process is shown in the final map below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Final map of results

Discussion of categories

The main category is ***Metacognitive reading strategy training for students' present and future as readers.*** The analysis started from the natural use of strategies, assessing and improving students' performance in reading, and the engagement students may have in academic challenges. After that, the intentional use of strategies demonstrates that the practice of strategies contributes to the internalization of strategies. To continue, the use of self-evaluation comes as a category that summarizes the processes that help students reflect

about their own learning process, and the support reading strategies gives them to academic reading to improve their academic performance. Finally, after analyzing the three categories, the main category was defined.

Leads to natural use of strategies

The teaching and further practice of metacognitive strategies in the classroom is a starting point to their natural use, and it propels reflection about what to do, and how to perform better in different moments of the reading process. Students affirm that the more they practice the strategy, the more natural progression there is in their minds as they see the use of the strategies in a natural, and controlled reading process. Comparing the results of the project with the ones of Montes, Botero, and Pechthalt (2009), in which students see the learning of the strategies as a positive tool to continue learning, and consolidating their language learning process, there is a positive correlation between results to consider strategies a feasible tool to enhance knowledge.

Self-evaluation as a way to assess and improve their performance in reading

The use of think aloud protocols was a contribution in students' reading comprehension process during the project because it offered students the chance to see themselves not only as good or bad readers, but they could also analyze their own behaviors while reading, taking as a base, that they are the people evaluating their own process, and not in a judgmental perspective. Students usually think of self-evaluation as only mentioning how good someone is, but there is also a component of understanding the capacities a person has, and how to improve them (Wang, 2016). The use of think aloud protocols contributes to

expanding the students' learning strategies inventory, being an exercise that with practice, students will interiorize and help them improve their reading process.

Engagement in the academic challenges they may face

Related to the previous category, it is essential to introduce and reinforce the concept of metacognitive strategies in learning; in a helpful, and fruitful learning experience. In the development of the project, students expressed positive perspectives towards learning and assimilated the strategies by studying and using real life reading experiences as a source of understanding, and knowledge that will be lasting in their lives.

The effective influence of the intervention can be seen in the results of the pre-implementation and post-implementation tests that demonstrated student's' improvement in their reading academic tasks performance such as such as reading tests as shown in Figure 1.
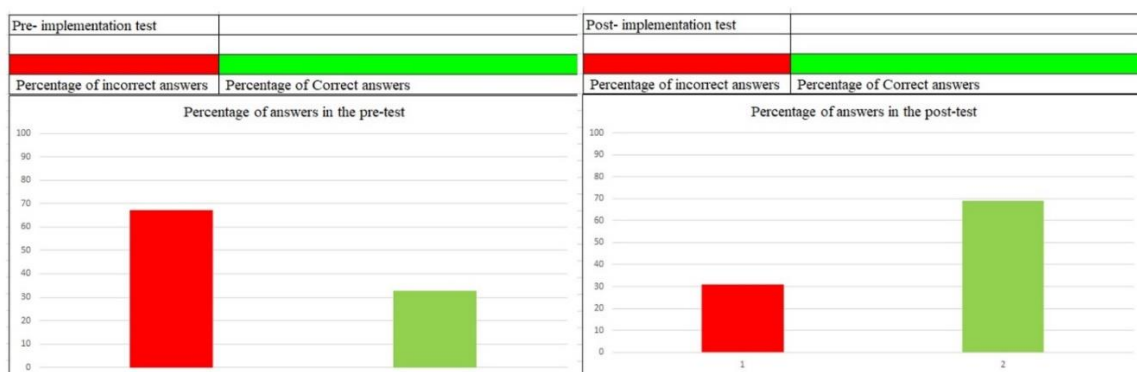

Figure 2. Results in the pre and post test

Intentional use of strategies

In this category, from the overall analysis of all the data, students expressed that the analysis that they did of their own reading helped them to understand what they did correctly

while they read, and what did not help them read with more accuracy. At the beginning of the project, it was expected that students could learn the strategies as a tool, but in the interviews, students expressed that using strategies in a more concrete and organized way had become a natural process.

The use of strategies for reading must be a tool to promote students' spontaneous process of analyzing a text in different perspectives rather than the mere decoding of messages. With the teaching and internalization of strategies, students will be able to explore a text with more security and confidence. Students highlighted the fact that there needs to be speed and a careful analysis of what someone reads, so there is a good comprehension process.

Use of self-evaluation

Students' opinions show that self-evaluation involves being aware that reading needs to be a thoughtful process, focused on comprehension and organizing time, with the motivation to improve constantly. In the teacher's journal, the researcher highlighted the fact that some students felt motivated after the implementation as they saw in it the opportunity to read more efficiently.

From the motivation that the teacher can give to students in class, and the approach the teacher gives to the language class and skill, there will be significant improvement in the learning and motivation of each person. Self-evaluation was observed from the instruments, objectives, and questions of the project as a tool to promote self-confidence in students' academic process.

Complement in students learning process

During the pedagogical implementation, and after that, students expressed their perception of the project as a companion to their language learning process. They mentioned that strategies helped them save time in their assignments and see their own process as something more than mere good or bad actions. This complement needs to come from activities that promote amusement and learning; without this just being an academic activity, students claim they can use these strategies in different situations.

Reading strategies' support to academic reading

Talking about reading strategies' support to academic reading, students see strategies learning as a complement to their academic lives. Similarly, they see the role of reading strategies as a path to have better results in future academic activities. Students consider academic reading involves the ability to understand and interpret several texts in different types of knowledge acquiring and interpretation situations. Besides, the results in the pre and post implementation tests show the positive influence of the strategies with a positive change. The learning of reading strategies comes in students' opinions as a help to improve their results in academic exams.

The training of reading strategies has a positive influence on students' reading awareness because it contributes to generating more knowledge and practice about the metacognitive reading strategies that students may or may not possess. In addition, it becomes a tool for students to use cognitively in reading moments in which they need to analyze a text beyond the understanding perspective.

Conclusion

The development of this project helped to raise awareness about what it means to be a good reader: a person that explores a text going beyond the mere understanding. From the project, the findings emerged in terms of the processes that involve being a good reader. Those are linked to categorizing information according to a need that the reader has, using a text to understand bigger phenomena, exploring the connections that the text can have with others, and making networks of information that will eventually turn into lifelong learning. Finally, it is necessary to train students in metacognitive strategies that can help them to improve and succeed in their lives as students because this endeavor will give them more tools to face academic tasks, their motivation will be more positive towards reading, and their use of language in different situations will be better. Similarly, reading strategy instruction helps students increase their range of vocabulary to understand texts. It also contributes to keep track of what they learn while reading.

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