

EVALUATIVE RESEARCH FOR ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION COURSES

John Jaime Jiménez Díaz¹

¹John Jaime Jiménez Díaz, Magíster en Didáctica del inglés de la Universidad de Caldas, Especialista en Didáctica de Lenguas Extranjeras de la Universidad de Antioquia, estudiante de Doctorado en Educación en la línea de Didáctica y Nuevas Tecnologías de la Universidad de Antioquia. jjjimenezd13@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This work attempted to look for an alternative way to allow teachers to unify criteria to define a more effective and integral methodology for reading courses. The data was collected from students, teachers and the syllabi, by means of questionnaires, interviews, and direct class observation. The interest of this research is focused on a methodological analysis of the reading comprehension courses in EFL at Universidad de Antioquia-Colombia. The specific problem of this research arises from the fact that the two English reading comprehension syllabi do not propose a concrete methodology. Every semester more than one hundred English reading courses for undergraduate students from all programs of this university are offered. The findings showed that the teachers of these courses did not handle enough theoretical foundations on the reading field, which became evident in the recurrent misunderstanding of concepts in relation to reading such as strategies, techniques, activities, approaches and methodologies. The conclusions remark that reading comprehension teachers need theoretical foundations to design and develop any EFL reading syllabi.

Keywords: *Foreign language reading, reading strategies, reading comprehension process, reading concepts.*

Recibido 31 de Marzo de 2010. Aceptado 16 de Junio de 2010
Received: March 31, 2010 Accepted: June 16, 2010

INVESTIGACION EVALUATIVA DE CURSOS DE COMPRESION LECTORA EN INGLÉS

RESUMEN

Este proyecto trata de buscar una alternativa que permita unificar criterios para desarrollar una metodología más integral y efectiva en los cursos de comprensión lectora. La información fue recolectada de estudiantes, profesores y de los programas, por medio de cuestionarios, entrevistas y observación directa en las clases. El interés de esta investigación está enfocado en el análisis metodológico de los cursos de comprensión lectora en inglés como lengua extranjera en la Universidad de Antioquia en Colombia, donde más de cien cursos de lectura son ofrecidos cada semestre a estudiantes de todos los programas de pregrado. El problema abordado en esta investigación surge del hecho de que los dos programas de comprensión lectora en inglés no proponen una metodología concreta. Los hallazgos mostraron que los profesores de estos cursos no tienen suficientes bases teóricas en el campo de la lectura, lo que se hace evidente en recurrente confusión de conceptos relacionados con la lectura tales como estrategias, técnicas, actividades, enfoques y metodologías. Las conclusiones hacen énfasis en que los profesores de comprensión lectora en inglés necesitan unas bases teóricas para diseñar y desarrollar algún programa de comprensión lectora en inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: *Lectura en lengua extranjera, estrategias de lectura, proceso de comprensión lectora, conceptos de la lectura.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The interest of this research is focused on a methodological analysis of the reading comprehension courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Universidad de Antioquia-Colombia. Every semester more than one hundred English reading courses for undergraduate students from all programs of this university are offered.

The specific problem of this research arises from the fact that the two English reading comprehension syllabi do not propose a concrete methodology.

Additionally, some reading strategies to be developed are specified, this repertoire is very limited both from teacher's and student's points of view. Consequently, most of the forty three teachers who work in these reading courses do what they consider their best in their classes. Furthermore, the results are very heterogeneous in terms of levels of achievement, and sometimes not very positive considering the high number of students who quit the reading courses.

Thus, in the first semester of the year 2006, when this study took place, 3,290 students were registered but 24% of them (794 students) did not finish or dropped out of the courses. This fact became a worry for some of the teachers in charge of these courses; then, this work attempted to look for an alternative that allowed them to unify criteria to define a more effective and integral methodology for the reading comprehension courses at Universidad de Antioquia.

The data collected for this research was gathered from students, teachers, the reading syllabi and the analysis of other documents by means of questionnaires, interviews, direct class observation, and documental analysis.

The findings showed that the teachers of the English reading comprehension courses did not handle enough theoretical foundations on the reading field, which became evident in the recurrent misunderstanding of concepts in relation to reading such as strategies, techniques, activities, approaches and methodologies.

The conclusions remark that reading comprehension teachers need theoretical foundations to design and develop any reading syllabi. And, in this sense, the Reading Strategies

Typology proposed by Nunan [1] emerged as a tool to evaluate and suggest changes to improve the teaching and learning of the Reading comprehension process.

To direct the research process I posed the following research questions:

To what extent can the Reading Strategies Typology stated by Nunan (1999) be used to evaluate Reading Comprehension Courses?

How can an English reading comprehension syllabus with a broad coverage -in terms of number of courses, students and teachers-, involve an effective and integral reading methodology?

2. OBJECTIVES

General Objective: To evaluate the design and development of the English reading comprehension courses at Universidad de Antioquia.

Specific Objectives:

- To identify the reading strategies on which English teachers focus their reading comprehension courses at Universidad de Antioquia.
- To compare and contrast the reading comprehension process in English carried out at Universidad de Antioquia with theoretical and research foundations in the field.
- To outline a methodological path for the English reading comprehension courses by considering the teachers' practices and the students' needs at Universidad de Antioquia.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is situated in the field of qualitative research based on an evaluative research since it is restricted to the utilization of scientific research methods and techniques for the purpose of making an evaluation. Then, evaluative research refers to those procedures for collecting and analyzing data which increase the possibility for "proving" rather than asserting the worth of some social activity" [2]. In the same sense, Winsett [3] says that evaluative research is the systematic assessment of the

operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy.

To evaluate L2 or FL programs, Beretta [4] says that no matter what program he looks into, the evaluator has many activities to engage in which do not require much familiarity with content. He has to identify evaluation questions, determine relevant sources of information, design the study, collect the data, analyze, interpret and finally report. Thus, Schuman affirms that *“To the extent that evaluative research can focus upon the general variables underlying a specific program and test the effects of these variables rather than the effectiveness of the program as a whole, it may hope to produce findings of grater general significance”* [2]. This author also clarifies that this type of research has no special methodology of its own. As “research” it adheres to the basic logic and rules of scientific method as closely as possible. Its canons of “proof” and its laws of inference are the same as those of any research project. It utilizes all available techniques for the collection and analysis of data and employs a wide variety of research designs. It may be carried out under experiential laboratory conditions or in the natural community” [2].

Data collection: Different sources were used to collect the data required for the development of this study, they are described below:

Documents Analysis: The documents analyzed provided information about statistics, contents and rules of the English reading courses. Statistically, reports of the students’ achievement, students’ registration and the corresponding amount of courses and teachers, desertion and cancellation were included. About the reading courses contents, the corresponding syllabi for level 1 and 2 were reviewed.

Interviews: From the 43 teachers that taught the two levels of English reading comprehension courses when this study was carried out, 15 teachers of them were interviewed. The purpose of these interviews was to gather information from teachers about the reading strategies and methodology they focused on their English reading comprehension courses. The teachers who were interviewed had at least one year experience in the program, and had taught in the first and second levels. To get more reliable information the

interviews were conducted in Spanish and transcribed by the researcher.

Questionnaires: The intention of student’s questionnaires was to gather information from the students about the reading strategies and methodology used in their English reading courses. The questionnaires were administered to 174 students from 17 different groups.

Class Observation: The purpose of the class observations was to gather direct data from teachers and students in their usual English reading comprehension classes. Then, 15 classes of 15 teachers who had provided information to this research were observed.

Data Triangulation: This technique was used in order to compare and contrast the data collected from the students’, teachers’ and observer’s perspectives, as a way to give validity to this research. After collecting the data from the different sources, they were compared and contrasted to the typology of reading strategies proposed by Nunan [1] as the basis to build a new proposal for the Reading Comprehension Courses at Universidad de Antioquia.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following topics have been considered to tackle the components involved in the reading comprehension process in EFL.

According to Grave and Stoller [5], the majority of native speakers learn to speak their mother tongue (L1) at the age of four or five years and long before they start developing their reading skills in L1. In fact, a six-year child in first grade knows about six thousand words when she starts her reading instruction in L1. This process is different from foreign language (L2) students who usually begin to read easy sentences and passages approximately at the same time as they learn the L2 language orally. It means that L2 students have neither enough vocabulary, nor grammatical knowledge as L1 students do. To differentiate L1 from L2, it is necessary to define the words *acquisition* and *learning*. According to Krashen [6], *acquisition* is related to the process the children are exposed to or when they get in touch with their native language and their interest is directed to communicate with people around them, not to grammar rules. This

process means that the children are centered on the message, and the language production is related to the context in which it is used. On the other hand, the individual's *learning* process is related to the conscious approach individuals adopt when they begin to learn another language; their interest is focused on how to say something and establish a specific order to access the language in a predictable way.

Based on the previous idea, Ellis [7] states the difference between *second language acquisition* and *foreign language acquisition*: the former occurs naturally or directly, without any instruction; the latter is directed and produced in the classroom or through any kind of instruction. In the same manner, Stern [8] says that a second language is not a native language but it is learnt, used and spoken in a native country e.g., teaching English for immigrants in the United States (TESL), while a *foreign language* is learnt and used in a foreign country, as in the case of teaching English in a public school in Medellín, Colombia.

The learning and teaching of reading skills in a different language from the native one involve a lot of methodological and linguistic issues, within the teaching and learning process, some concepts such as approach, method, techniques, strategies and activities are often used indistinctly originating confusions and misunderstandings that should be clarified with a brief description of these concepts.

Richards and Rodgers [9] present Anthony's definition that states "the term *approach* refers to theories about the nature of language and learning as practice and principles sources in language teaching". An approach is concerned with theoretical views of language proficiency that are related implicitly or explicitly to methods in language teaching. The authors mention three different views: *the structural view* in which language is considered as a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning; *the functional view* in which language is a vehicle for expression of functional meaning; and the *interactional view*, where language is seen as a tool for creation and maintenance of social relations.

According to Richards and Rodgers [9], for an approach to lead to a method, it is necessary to develop a design for an instructional system. These authors consider that *design* is the level of method that states a) how the objectives; b) how language

content is selected and organized inside the method, or the syllabus model; c) the learning tasks and teaching activities the method supports; d) the students roles; e) the teachers roles; and f) the instructional materials role. It can be said that a method is a departure point to reason and to decide a concrete way to be followed and to reach a goal. The steps taken in the path selected are not arbitrary. They are based on a reasoning process and maintained in a logical order.

The concept of *method* has also been used in the pedagogical field in a strict sense reserved to procedures that obey specific criteria or principles that guide the course of action. It makes reference to well defined guidelines, directions, oriented to investigation or knowledge acquisition.

For definitional purposes, "the term *strategies* is best defined as *abilities* that are potentially open to conscious reflection and use" [5]. A strategy is firstly an action guide, in the sense that it orients towards obtaining certain results. The strategy gives sense and coordination to everything made to reach a goal.

In reading terms, a *strategy* must be based on a method, because it is a planning system applied to an articulated set of actions that allows readers to obtain an objective. Unlike *method*, a *strategy* is flexible and can be shaped based on the goals we want to reach. Then, a strategy is an organized, formal and oriented procedure to obtain a clearly established goal. Its actually daily application requires the improvement of procedures and techniques which detailed election and design are responsibility of the teacher. A pedagogical strategy makes reference to planning the educational teaching and learning process. It involves an implicit range of decisions that the teacher must make in a conscious and reflective way, in relation to the techniques and activities that can be used to reach the course goals.

Technique is considered as a teaching procedure that helps students to be active in the learning process proposed from a strategy. Anthony (1963); in Renandya and Jacobs [10], who defines that "*techniques are specific classroom activities consistent with a method, and therefore in harmony with an approach as well*". It is also a logical procedure with psychological foundation destined to orient the learning of the student. It affects a specific sector or a phase of the course or subject:

the presentation of the course, the analysis of its contents, its synthesis, or its criticism. A didactic technique is the particular resource that teachers use to accomplish their intentions planned from the strategy. For the application of strategies, teachers can use some series of techniques to obtain the proposed objectives. *Techniques* are more restricted to some areas of the course; meanwhile strategies include more general aspects of the course or a complete educational process. Techniques are procedures through a determined sequence of steps or precise behaviors for one or several products.

Activities are related to techniques, within the process of a technique, it can have different activities necessary to achieve the results expected from the technique; these activities are still more partial and specific than the technique. They can vary according to the type of technique or the type of group with which one works. Thus, the activities can be defined depending on the learning necessities of a group.

The previous concepts have become noticeable in the field of language learning and teaching. They work as principles and existing ideas to be considered in the teaching and learning of the reading process.

The list of reading strategies is very ample and varied according to different authors such as Nutall [11] mentions strategies related to the text itself which refer to the interpretation of the text as a whole, to enrich the vocabulary which call for the use of the contextual keys, synonymous words, grammatical analysis, inference and dictionary use.

Brown [12] proposes strategies related to the referential device, which means to use graphic conventions such as font, symbols, titles, index, table of contents, diagrams, graphics, charts and maps in order to grasp the meaning of the text. Cardona [13] summarizes reading strategies described by Grillet, Nuttall and Mikulecky. Nunan [1] shares a comprehensive *typology of reading strategies* that was developed by some teachers in a Chinese university, and Grabe & Stoller [5] propose another list of reading strategies.

They notice that according to the text and purposes it is important to choose the best strategies as a way to increase students reading speed and comprehension. As it is stated in the title of this

piece of research, the study on the reading courses at Universidad de Antioquia was done using only Nunan's reading strategies typology as a framework for their evaluation.

This typology involves the following elements:

- *Having a purpose*. It is important for students to have a clear purpose and to keep in mind what they want to gain from the text.
- *Previewing*. Conducting a quick survey of the text to identify the topic, the main idea, and the organization of the text.
- *Skimming*. Looking quickly through the text to get a general idea of what it is about.
- *Scanning*. Looking quickly through a text in order to locate specific information.
- *Clustering*. Reading clusters of words as a unit.
- *Avoiding bad habits* such as reading word-by-word.
- *Predicting*. Anticipating what is to come.
- *Reading actively*. Asking questions and then reading for answers.
- *Inferring*. Identifying ideas that are not explicitly stated.
- *Identifying genres*. Identifying the overall organization pattern of a text.
- *Identifying paragraph structure*. Identifying the organizational structure of a paragraph, for example, whether it follows an inductive or deductive pattern.
- *Identifying sentence structure*. Identifying subject and main verb in complex sentences.
- *Noticing cohesive devices*. Assigning correct referents to proforms, and identifying the function of conjunctions.
- *Inferring unknown vocabulary*. Using context as well as parts of words (e.g., prefixes, suffixes and stems) to work out the meaning of unknown words.
- *Identifying figurative language*. Understanding the use of figurative language and metaphors.
- *Using background knowledge*. Using what one already knows to understand new ideas.
- *Identifying style and its purpose*. Understanding the writer's purpose in using different stylistic devices, such as a series of short or long sentences.
- *Evaluating*. Reading critically and assessing the true value of textual information.
- *Integrating information*. Tracking ideas that are developed across the text through techniques such as highlighting and notetaking.

- *Reviewing*. Looking back over a text and summarizing it.
- *Reading to present*. Understanding the text fully and then presenting it to. Taken from Nunan [1].

As to the methodology to develop reading skills in a lesson, Celce-Murcia [14] proposes three different stages for a reading class: the *pre-reading*, *while-reading* and *post-reading* stages. Each one of these phases has its own particular aims and procedures. She affirms that these stages allow students to improve their engagement with the text, answer literal, inferential and critical questions during the reading phases mentioned, and provides them with a purpose and focus for reading.

5. FINDINGS

According to the research objectives stated to orient this study three main findings became noticeable:

First, considering those stated in the reading syllabi, a number of reading strategies should be developed in the English reading comprehension courses at Universidad de Antioquia. Nevertheless, from a theoretical foundation on the reading comprehension field, the practice of reading strategies in these courses is very poor. This fact is due in part to the methodological misunderstandings and confusions teachers have towards ELT concepts such as *strategies*, *techniques*, *activities*, *approaches*, and *methodologies* and their implications for developing reading skills. These terms are considered as the same thing, and the students replicate their teachers' conceptions. Anyhow, results show that the repertoire of strategies proposed in the syllabi does not match that in the actual lessons. In fact, it is very restrictive.

Second, when analyzing the development of the English reading comprehension courses focused on the *Nunan's reading strategies typology*, it is inferred that the most used reading strategies at Universidad de Antioquia are *skimming* (27%); then, *previewing and pre-reading* (14%); *inferring unknown vocabulary* (10%); and *making conclusions* (10%).

At the same time, the least used reading strategies were *predicting*, *scanning*, *reading to present*, *and having a purpose*, according to the students (information from the questionnaires); and *using*

background knowledge, and reviewing (summarizing and synthesizing), according to the teachers (information from the interviews).

The rest of the categories from the data triangulation can be considered as *effective classroom practices* such as *high levels of interaction, interest and motivation in the classroom* which provide a positive learning environment; *classroom procedures* in terms of the *promotion of individual, pair and group work*; *stages of the lessons* that were recognized in the three sources as *introduction to the topic or getting familiar with it, the value of students background knowledge, and lesson planning*, among others.

Third, this study proved that at least 11 of the reading strategies proposed by Nunan [1] and other authors are absent from the English reading comprehension courses, they are: *clustering*, *avoiding bad habits*; *reading actively*; *identifying genres*, *identifying paragraph structure*, *identifying sentence structure*, *noticing cohesive devices*, *identifying figurative language* *identifying style and its purpose*, *evaluating* and *Integrating information*. These strategies should be implemented in order to get better results in these courses.

To sum up, the first finding points out the need for some English reading teachers at Universidad de Antioquia to check theoretical and methodological foundations in the reading field. The second finding implies that the current repertoire of reading strategies developed in the courses is very poor. And the third one remarks the reading strategies that should be taken into account in the syllabi design and implementation of these English reading courses.

Finally, it could be said that most of the Nunan's reading strategies are *implicit* in the syllabus of the English reading courses for first and second levels. For this reason, there is not a clear focus to be used by the teachers. This fact indicates that these strategies should be stated explicitly. Thus, they would not be optional, but a good route to get a more effective reading process, level and achievement.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Reading teachers should remember that the main reason for using reading strategies in class is to

improve their students' comprehension of texts. Then, teachers need to set appropriate objectives that focus the implementation of reading strategies to help students draw important information from different texts.

Reading Comprehension syllabi in a foreign language with a broad coverage, as the case studied in this research, require specific attention from administrators and teachers in order to guarantee an effective and integral methodology that benefit the students' learning and achievement. This implies that teachers should *handle clear methodological reading concepts* to carry out a more effective reading process. This means that teachers need to be constantly updated about reading issues: meeting to work, research, and colleagues groups to discuss, share and reflect experiences is the best way to improve professionally.

Through this study, it is evident that the *use of reading strategies* is an essential tool to help students become efficient readers. In these terms, as a way to overcome some of the most relevant problems in the English reading comprehension courses at Universidad de Antioquia, the use of *Nunan's reading strategies typology* can be used not only to evaluate foreign language reading courses, but also as a model to design and develop the corresponding syllabi in a more conscious and integral manner.

The literature available on reading strategies offers a wide variety repertoire both for teachers and learners. Although this research used Nunan's typology, this can be enriched and expanded by other classifications made by Nuttall, Mikulecky, Brown and Grave & Stoller. Still teachers' and learners' perceptions are very reduced in terms of the reading strategies developed in the reading courses at Universidad de Antioquia. Whether this reduced practice of reading strategies is due to misconceptions on ELT terminology or not, the fact is that a close examination to different typologies will help on one hand teachers gain awareness of the huge possibilities to render their lessons more varied and perhaps more enjoyable. On the other hand, by exposing learners to a wider variety of strategies, they might be able to adapt and use those that match their individual needs and learning styles. From what they perceive in their classes, they are not provided with too many strategies to choose from.

Bearing in mind that the inventory of reading strategies might become so ample and complex, teachers may carefully review all of them and grade them in terms of their complexity and difficulty. Thus, the syllabus for Reading Course Level 1 will intend to develop less complex and simpler strategies, and that for Level 2 will explore more complex and difficult strategies, of course without putting aside those studied in the previous level. Two main recommendations are made to cope with the high rate of drop-outs in the reading courses. In order to diminish students desertion, teachers need to:

- Explore students' reasons for course withdrawal through the use of a diagnostic tool. The information collected by this means will be used for decision making and course redesign.
- Explore students' interests and needs prior to the selection of reading materials. Reading passages must also include the use of electronic texts, considering that learners are frequently exposed to English readings through different media as part of research assignments in other classes of their major.

Although, this research study only reached the evaluation part, I definitely recommend the construction of a complete typology to design, implement and evaluate foreign language reading courses. Further studies might analyze a more real effect of the implementation of these strategies not only in the documents but also in the classroom.

Finally, as to the evaluation method of these reading courses, I would say that Colombian students have not yet understood the real meaning of qualitative evaluation. Then, they do not assume a responsibility seriously when they know they will not be "punished" with a score that could affect their academic achievement. Thus, they abandon non scored courses easily and without any consequence. This is what could be happening in the English Reading Program at Universidad de Antioquia and other institutions in Colombia. Consequently, it is necessary to design reading assessment and self-assessment tools to evaluate students' achievement and for them to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Thus students will not solely take these two reading courses for fulfilling a credit requirement, but also for the professional benefit they might gain from the use of an ample repertoire of reading strategies.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is part of a larger research study conducted to fulfill the requirements of my Masters degree in English Didactics

I wish to express my gratitude to the following people who were involved in this research project in different ways:

To the students and teachers for their willingness to participate as sources for the data collection stages. To my advisor professor Sandra Hibeth Buitrago for her academic support, and to my boss professor Adriana González for her support.

To my ex-wife Iliana and my siblings for their patience and emotional support.

Finally, I want this piece of work to become a tribute to honor my mother's memory who taught me the true meaning of devoted work.

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