

## A Reading Skills Method to Improve the Students' Academic Achievement

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**Resumen:** Este es un estudio experimental llevado a cabo con dos grupos de undécimo año de secundaria el cual consiste en analizar el rendimiento académico empleando una metodología a base de técnicas y habilidades de lectura. Las estrategias empleadas son rastreo de información específica, lectura rápida para identificar la idea principal de un párrafo o texto, uso del contexto para comprender el significado de nuevas palabras, empleo de predicciones o conjeturas para detectar el posible contenido de un texto e identificar el referente de algunas palabras dentro de un texto para entender más exhaustivamente el contenido del mismo. Las cinco técnicas de lectura anteriormente mencionadas han demostrado que los discentes tienen la capacidad de progresar e incrementar tanto su comprensión de lectura como su rendimiento académico. La memorización de vocabulario, hasta cierto punto, permite el asimilar conocimiento. No obstante, no es la forma más eficiente para aumentar la comprensión de lectura. Además, no tiene sentido aprender nuevos términos en forma aislada porque un vocablo podría tener variedad semántica, y la misma puede ser utilizada en un contexto particular. Según Richards (1987), sin contexto, el vocabulario que los discentes han aprendido previamente podría ser olvidado fácilmente por la razón de que la memoria es temporal. La forma tradicional de enseñar técnicas de lectura podría afectar no sólo la comprensión sino que el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes universitarios de primer ingreso ya que los mismos podrían no hacer un análisis de texto apropiado. Esto quiere decir que los estudiantes probablemente no saben distinguir una idea principal de un tópico porque éstos tienden a memorizar cada palabra nueva, y si desconocen el significado de nuevos términos dentro de un texto, entonces podrían tener serias dificultades comprendiendo el mismo como un todo.

**Palabras clave:** Habilidades de lectura, rendimiento académico, técnicas, comprensión, contexto

**Abstract:** This experimental study consists of an analysis carried out with two groups of senior high school students with whom a series of reading skills was developed. The techniques involved were scanning to locate details, skimming to get main ideas, guessing meaning from context to infer what a word means without using a dictionary, predicting a topic to know what a text might be about,

and identifying word reference to understand in more detail the relation of such words to important elements or subjects used by an author. These five skills demonstrated the learners are capable of making progress and increasing their reading comprehension and academic achievement. Vocabulary memorization, to a certain extent, permits knowledge assimilation; nevertheless, it is not the most efficient way to enhance reading comprehension. Furthermore, it makes no sense to learn vocabulary in isolation provided that a term may have a variety of meanings, and it can be used in a particular context. According to Richards (1987), if there is no context, the vocabulary that students have previously learned can be easily forgotten since memory is usually temporary. The way reading skills are traditionally taught might affect both comprehension and academic achievement of new college enrollees due to the fact that they might fail to analyze texts. This means that students probably do not distinguish a main idea from a topic, for they tend to memorize every word, and if they do not know the meaning of new words in a text, they could have difficulty understanding the text as a whole.

**Key words:** Reading skills, academic achievement, techniques, comprehension, context

## I Introduction

For many years, the teaching of English as a foreign language in secondary schools has been limited to the development of the reading skill. Even though the current syllabus of the Ministry of Public Education claims for an interactive and oral proficiency of the target language, that task is not carried out as such since the EFL country-mandated test emphasizes the measurement of knowledge that only has to do with the application of the reading skill. For such a reason, most teachers of English, who work for public institutions, dedicate the majority of class time to preparing their students to achieve their EOG (End-of-grade-test), without minding if at the end of a five-year-instruction period the students really learned to use the target language communicatively. Moreover, many instructors probably consider that teaching reading in the foreign language consists of providing learners with plenty of lists of vocabulary in isolation (without a context) and rote reading comprehension exercises that actually frustrate and lead them to end up failing the English course. This might mean that many EFL instructors are not developing effective reading strategies for the purpose of guaranteeing an academically optimum achievement. These assumptions are the result of observations done as supervisors to some cooperating teachers who lent their groups to some of our student-teachers to their teaching practicum.

Unfortunately, in Costa Rica many high school students do not have the opportunity to learn to read efficiently, for they have not been taught effective reading techniques or perhaps because most high school teachers do not actually know how to develop effective reading skills appropriately. The majority of secondary school instructors provide their pupils with an article to be read. That is to say, such educators probably do not carry out a pre-reading activity, which helps the students guess the topic they are going to read about. Such an issue usually occurs due to the limited amount of

time that teachers have since they are pressured to cover the standard course of study (syllabus). Consequently, many instructors force their pupils to read without teaching them proper strategies because their objective is to have students learn “enough” vocabulary to be able to pass the EOG (End-of-grade) test.

Albeit it is important to provide learners with vocabulary, the fact that they do not know many new words that appear in the tests does not imply that they will fail. Konaré (1994) states that “classroom reading activities are designed to teach students the reading comprehension process, not just to test their ability to come up with the right product” (p. 6).

Reading in the target language is a process that Costa Rican high school students must go through. However, the development of such a process must be effective enough so that those learners really understand what and what they are reading for. The success of this process depends upon how much comprehension of the topic they show. What is reading comprehension then? Grellet (1991) defines reading comprehension as “the understanding and extraction of required information from a written text” (p. 3). In addition, Barnett (1988) quoting Hosenfeld refers to reading comprehension as follows:

The level of [reading] comprehension of the text is determined by how well the reader variables (interest, level in the text, purpose for reading the text, knowledge of the topic, foreign language abilities, awareness of the reading process, and level of willingness to take risks) interact with the variables (text, structure, syntax, and vocabulary). (p. 2)

For most teachers of English, the reading skill is probably passive since they have students read an article and solve a set of written exercises without being introduced to a new topic through an activity that demands both student-student and teacher-student interaction. Indeed, this study is followed by a hybrid reading method which is rather active and involves the following reading techniques: scanning to locate details, skimming to get main ideas, guessing meaning from context to infer without using a dictionary, predicting a topic to know what a text might be about, and identifying word reference to understand in more detail the relation of such words to important elements or subjects used by an author. These five skills demonstrated the learners are capable of making progress and increasing their reading comprehension and academic achievement.

To read well, it is necessary that learners exercise intelligence through the development of attractive and challenging learning situations which relate the written text to the expectations and living conditions of the students. Such expectations may vary from wanting to read the lyrics of a popular song to newspaper ads, magazines (non-fiction) or even literature (fiction). For this reason, it is commendable that teachers offer a variety of texts and remember that many students in a same class might read at very different levels of difficulty, similar to the manner they usually do in the mother language.

To sum up, reading activities for both improving academic achievement and increasing comprehension should be interesting, amusing, and useful so that they lead learners to a pleasant or beneficial outcome.

The objectives and research questions that this study centers on are listed below.

In general, this investigation aims to accomplish the following objectives:

General Goal:

-To develop effective reading skills to enhance the students' comprehension and the academic achievement for the purpose of creating a reading comprehension methodological approach.

Specific Objectives:

-To determine if the development of the reading comprehension methodological approach augments the students' comprehension and academic achievement.

-To implement two didactic units from the textbook "Interactions I: A Reading Skills Book" with two eleventh-grade groups from a public high school.

## **II Framework of Reference**

The myth that the reading process is a passive skill has existed since a long time ago due to the erroneous beliefs that were held when the teaching of languages began to develop. In fact, when the student placed his eyes in front of the reading, there was no interaction between learner and text. As a result, the information provided by the reading was an isolated and unique truth that was to be accepted with no questioning, downgrading the learner's prior knowledge and background. As it is clearly inferred, one of the strongest myths was to believe that there was nothing in the student's mind, and therefore, no interaction took place. Then, whatever was written down was considered to be the only knowledge the pupil had to acquire and accept.

Nonetheless, studies in applied linguistics began to refute such beliefs by remarking that all human beings possess a latent psychological structure that is activated whenever new information is found. That discovery led to the conclusion that the individual carries a broad knowledge of the world in the brain that comes into play every time a new situation is encountered. What each piece of writing represents is the knowledge or experience that the author expresses in order to share it with the reader. It would be odd to think that every person in the world experiences feelings that belong only to him or her. It is at this point that the interaction between reader and text becomes a game where two different worlds trace their similarities and differences; a game that should result in a marvelous trip through wisdom and sharing. Smith (1988) holds that "understanding or comprehension is the basis of reading and of learning to read. What is the point of any activity if there is no understanding" (p. 6). Consequently, the world around us full of intentions, knowledge, and expectations that are somehow related to new situations. In the case of the reading process, a combination of what is already known plus the new information is of great importance to achieve global understanding of what is read. Every piece of reading is meaningful by itself, as its main purpose is to inform and to share with the reader. Notwithstanding, the relationship between reader and text becomes worthwhile if the reader is able to make associations with his knowledge and the outside world.

Thus, reading depends upon everything that is around. The questions that are asked by the reader also depend on the type of reader. What all readers have in common

is their search for answers, and a great deal of their answers can be predicted on the basis of possible alternatives. They can range from a single word to abstract symbols and point of view of the author. As a result, reading is not identifying letters in order to recognize words and sentences. The process of reading comprehension goes beyond identifying single words and letters. Indeed, any reader attempting to understand word by word without regarding the text as a whole would be willing to experience a failure of comprehension.

The knowledge that people possess in order to understand written language resides in long-term memory. Thus, when past experiences are recalled, new understanding of the language and the world is brought about.

Nonetheless, it would be easy to infer that what is in our head constitutes only memories. It is true that there are many memories, but those recalls have a specific meaning. They are related to what individuals know and experience. That is known as cognitive structure. Events are remembered when they have a particular significance or a powerful effect. Then, when memories are recalled, they come to make linkages with the real world. Certainly, the human brain is not like a glass that is filled with liquid. Instead, it is a system of knowledge organized into a world view based on interactions and patterns.

Many researchers have pointed out different processes that the brain follows in the reading process. They have compared their findings with others and have realized the complexity that reading implies. Long and Richards (1987, p. 39) quoting Goodman describe the following five processes:

1. *Recognition-initiation*: This happens once there is contact between eyes and text.
2. *Prediction*: This is the need to find some established order or significance.
3. *Confirmation*: Verification between what was expected and the actual information.
4. *Correction*: When the predictions are not true, the brain disconfirms them and concentrates on the new information.
5. *Termination*: This one is executed when the reading task is completed. Nevertheless, this last stage can occur at any point in the reading due to different reasons such as non-productiveness of the task or information already known.

As it was explained before through the five mental processes, the reading skill requires concentration, creation of relationships, and conclusions derived from the whole experience. Such a task cannot be considered an easy one at any level. Experience and research have been in charge to confirm that this process is always accompanied by cycles that are part of the individual's nature, and in consequence, it cannot be regarded as an easy process since the brain is not a simple organ, either. These processes are considered part of the reading skill although they are basically mental. All these mechanisms are ways in which the reader accomplishes the task; nevertheless, it does not mean that all readers follow the process in the same way. The change takes place when

the reader discovers that a specific step does not meet the need that is to be fulfilled at a particular point along the process. This awareness leads the reader to make use of other strategies to look for the necessary comprehension.

Consequently, the reader is not able to predict the processes to be used since it depends on several factors such as time, level of complexity, and degree of comprehension among others. This point is somewhat related to individual differences since people are different and therefore learn in different ways. As an illustration, it is worth mentioning some individual learner differences that may help or hinder the learning process. Within this group, *age* is considered to be of importance since the available evidence suggests that age alters the rate of acquisition. Rate and success of second language acquisition appear to be strongly influenced by the age of the learner. Where rate is concerned, there is evidence to suggest that older learners are better.

In a study of Dutch learners, Ellis (1994, p. 105) quoting Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle found that “although the adults (fifteen years and older) outperformed the children (six to ten years), the teenagers (twelve to fifteen years) learnt more rapidly than both. It would appear that although age improves language learning capacity, performance develops in the teens.”

A very important theory in this issue is the critical period hypothesis. It states that there is a time when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly. Ellis (1994, p. 107) quoting Penfield and Roberts refers to this stage as follows:

The optimum age for language acquisition falls within the first ten years of life. During this period the brain retains plasticity, but with the onset of the puberty this plasticity begins to disappear. They suggested that this was the result of lateralization of the language function in the left hemisphere of the brain. That is, the neurological capacity for understanding and producing language, which initially involves both hemispheres of the brain, is slowly concentrated in the left hemisphere for most people. This neurological change results in difficulty that older learner’s experience.

On the other hand, *intelligence* is a very important factor to take into account when analyzing second language learning. This term is used to refer to a hypothesized general factor which underlies the ability to master and use a whole range of academic skills. It is underlying ability to learn rather than the actual knowledge that is supposedly measured by intelligence tests.

Ellis (1994, p. 110) citing Older and Perkins has argued that “there [is] a global language proficiency factor which accounts for the wide variety of language proficiency measures.” In relationship with this issue, aptitude is also of great significance.

Ellis (1994, p. 112) naming Carroll states that “aptitude corresponds to the kinds of skills Cummins identified as cognitive/academic language ability, than the kinds of skills involved in basic interpersonal communication.”

Another factor that has been considered is *cognitive style*. This term refers to the manner in which people perceive, conceptualize, organize, and recall information. Each individual is thought to have a more or less consistent mode of cognitive functioning. Various dimensions of cognitive style have been identified. These are usually presented

as dichotomies. The dichotomy which has received the greatest attention where second language acquisition is concerned is that of field dependence-independence. The terms do not really represent alternatives, but poles on a continuum, with individuals varying in the extent to which they learn towards dependence or independence. Research shows that the effects of cognitive style are related to age. Thus, field independence is facilitative in the case of late adolescents but not before.

To continue, *attitude and motivation* play a major role that cannot be left out. Ellis (1994, p. 116-117) quoting Schumann lists attitude “as a social factor with variables such as size of learning group, and motivation as an effective factor.” Ellis (1994, p. 117) citing Brown distinguishes motivation and attitude. He identifies the following three types of motivation:

1. *Global motivation*: It consists of a general orientation to the goal of learning a second language.
2. *Situational motivation*: It varies according to the situation in which learning takes place.
3. *Task motivation*: This is the type of motivation for performing particular learning tasks.

Ellis (1994, p. 117) referring to Gardner and Lambert states that they draw a basic distinction between an “integrative and an instrumental motivation to second language learning.” The former occurs when the learner wishes to identify with the culture of the second language group. Instrumental motivation takes place when the learner’s goals for learning the language are merely functional.

Lastly, it is relevant to overview the role of *personality*. By and large, in psychology, personality has been explored in terms of a number of personal traits, which are said to be constituents of the personality of an individual. Cattell, quoted by Ellis (1994, p. 119-120), actually attempts “to measure personality using a series of dichotomies, seen as poles, such as cool, warm, shy, venturesome, not assertive, dominant.” Eysenck, cited by Ellis (1994, p. 120), identifies “two general traits, again represented by dichotomies (extrovert-introvert) and (neurotic-stable). However, with some exceptions, second language researchers have preferred to develop their own range of personality traits, calling them anything from social styles to egocentric factors.”

In summary, there are some mental, social, and psychological factors that must be taken into account when people start learning a second language.

All these factors overlap and have a close relationship with the different language skills. Nonetheless, as it was pointed out before, the reading skill is one ability that involves all the already explained factors although there seem to be wrong ideas and assumptions that are still present and need to be clarified in order to help students along the teaching-learning process and also guide many teachers who perhaps ignore all these aspects and lack the necessary training to enrich their actual performance in the classroom, especially when dealing with reading comprehension, which is the focus of this study.

### III Methodology

This is a type of experimental study based on quantitative research which used the direct interaction with the participants, the administration of a pretest at the beginning of the research as well as two posttests as verifying instruments. The results will help authorities in charge of the educational system, in-service teachers, and researchers to make decisions when selecting or devising a personal research approach. Gay (1992, p. 298)) defines an experimental study as "...the only method of research that can truly test hypotheses concerning cause-and-effect relationships." She also states that such a method "represents the most valid approach to the solution of educational programs, both practical and theoretical, and to the advancement of education as a science" (Gay, 1992, p. 298).

The population sample was composed of two eleventh-grade groups of approximately thirty students each from Liceo Fernando Volio Jiménez, located in Palmares Pérez Zeledón. In addition, the selection of the institution was done randomly, considering only academic high schools from Pérez Zeledón County.

### IV Conclusion

The teaching of reading comprehension in public high schools should be given the necessary attention since it is the skill that is tested the most during the school year and the EGO (End-of-grade) test. Nonetheless, through this research, we were able to demonstrate that the selection or design of an effective reading method does help to increase both comprehension and academic achievement. During the performance of this study, the students of the experimental group felt much more encouraged and willing to learn than the students of the control group. In addition, vocabulary was enhanced and learned more meaningfully by using a context provided by different kinds of texts. The successful results in terms of academic achievement and reading comprehension were not obtained overnight. This method proved to be rather effective, yet it is time consuming. In other words, the more it is applied, the better results are guaranteed in any particular teaching context.

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I have been working at UNA for 14 years in the Associate, Bachelor and Licentiate's degree programs. I have also been a thesis director in the licentiate program. Besides, I worked for 2 years in the CONARE-MEP training program. I have done research in applied linguistics and linguistics to be presented in different congresses and seminars.

Manuel Navarro Godínez

Manuel Navarro Godínez has been an EFL teacher for over fifteen years. He is a graduate of Universidad Nacional with a Licentiate's degree in Applied Linguistics and another one in School Administration. He has taught EFL in elementary, middle, and high school. He has also worked as a career teacher at Universidad Nacional for eight years. Manuel has three years of international expertise, having taught ESL at KES (Knightdale Elementary) in North Carolina, USA. He has also worked as both high school principal and assistant principal for two years. He is the chair of the EFL team and currently teaches English to second –year career students at Universidad Nacional, Campus Coto as well as some service courses to students of other majors. Manuel is also studying for his Master's degree in Second Languages and Cultures at Universidad Nacional.