

Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Acquisition in the EFL Classroom

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CHAPTER 5

Reading Authentic Material Texts: What strategies do good students use for successful reading?

Claudia Patricia Brunal Morales
Orlando Ramón Mass Montes

Resumen

En este estudio se investigaron las estrategias utilizadas por estudiantes competentes en el uso del inglés para comprender lecturas de material auténtico de un colegio privado. Los participantes fueron 10 estudiantes de noveno y décimo grado del colegio La Salle de Montería. La información fue recolectada usando tres procedimientos diferentes: dos actividades de lectura, observación de la clase (la cual se llevó a cabo a ver como los estudiantes desarrollaban las actividades), una entrevista con los estudiantes y una entrevista con el profesor. Concluimos, que los estudiantes aprovecharon su conocimiento previo para completar las actividades. También nos dimos cuenta, que la atención en clase ayuda a los estudiantes a tener éxito en inglés en las siguientes habilidades de la lengua: escucha, habla y lectura. Finalmente, nos pudimos dar cuenta de que el uso de los materiales auténticos y la atención de los estudiantes afecta positivamente su desempeño y ayuda a ampliar sus ideas acerca de un tema específico.

Palabras clave

Materiales auténticos, estrategias, comprensión lectora.

Abstract

A study investigated the strategies used by proficient English students of a private school to comprehend authentic reading material. Subjects were 10 students from La Salle School in Monteria. These students were in ninth and tenth grades. Data was gathered using three different procedures: two reading activities, classroom observation (which was carried out to see how students dealt with the activities), an interview with the students and another interview with the teacher. -It was concluded that students took advantage of their previous knowledge to perform the activities. We also realized that attention in class helps the students to do well in English through activities such as listening, speaking and reading activities. Finally, we realized that the use of authentic material with attentive students affects positively their performance and helps them to widen their ideas about a specific topic.

Key words

Authentic materials, strategies, Reading comprehension.

1. Introduction

There are many authors that consider reading as a valuable tool for learning a foreign language. People who learn a second or foreign language empirically devote many of their learning time to the reading part (Suringi 1998). Dechant (1991: vii) cited in Suringi (1999) states that “Effective reading is the most important avenue to effective learning as reading is so interrelated with the total educational process that educational success requires successful reading”. Through reading students can learn much more vocabulary than they do through other language skills, besides they become familiar with grammar unconsciously. Reading has been called a passive skill, but in fact, it involves the reader in much the same way as listening includes the hearer (Landry 2002). This means that reading is not just sitting to scan a text but getting deeply into the intention of the writer and the message included in the text. In terms of what texts English learners should read, there are several theories that consider the use of authentic material beneficial for the student’s learning process. According to Guariento and Morley (2001) authenticity can be a way of maintaining or increasing the student’s motivation for learning, since, it gives the learner the feeling that he or she is dealing with real language.

The objective of this study is to identify what strategies good English learners use to deal successfully with authentic reading material. We also want to know if the use of authentic reading material affects the students’ performance when coping with non-teaching purposeful material. We also analyzed which activities they performed better in and in which they had problems. The subjects for this paper were 10 high school students from a private institution in Monteria. They were chosen among the best English learners in 9th and 10th grades. The study subjects are aged between 14 to 16 years. All of them show an excellent academic record, not only in English, but also in other school subjects.

2. Literature Review

In her study “*Reading Strategies for Beginning and Proficient Readers*” Atterman (1997) centered her research on the importance of improving higher order thinking skills in third grade students, which are crucial

for obtaining higher performance in the academic field. For developing her study, Atterman(1997) took into account the American belief that reading is the most important skill to be developed in school.

“*Teaching Reading Strategies in an Ongoing EFL University Reading Classroom*” Song (1998) modified a training method developed by Brown and Palincsar (1984), which involved four different strategies: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. She wanted to know if the training in reading strategies could increase the reading ability of EFL college students. Results obtained indicated the effectiveness of such a training. She also reported that the performance in some kind of reading comprehension questions is improved by the training method.

A third research we took into account was “*Reading Skills of Golden College Students*” done by Isonio (1996). This investigation comprised two different studies. The first one examined results of a reading assessment from 1991 to 1995, as well as the role of reading skills in the success of students. This study showed that students who had taken more English classes in high school obtained higher reading test scores. In the second study, a reading assessment test was applied to 19 students at the beginning and at the end of critical reading skill course. The study showed that 15 out of the 19 students showed increased score in the final test which meant an improvement of their reading skills.

The last work we analyzed was done by Sugirin (1999) at a university in Indonesia. In his work “Exploring the Comprehension Strategies of EFL Readers: A Multi-Method Study” he investigated the strategies used by language learners to comprehend texts in English. She used a multi-method approach to check on the validity of the individual methods. She also applied interviews, observations and a reading comprehension test. The results of this study showed that the readers shared features of both poor and good native readers.

3. Theoretical Framework

We supported our study taking into account some reading concepts, reading strategies and authentic material theory. We started by talking about reading in general, then what strategies and skills were used by

students according to some previous studies and some authors. Finally, we talked about the use of authentic material and its advantages.

According to the schema theory presented by Grellet (1991) as cited by Mass, Brunal and Guzman (2003), reading is an interactive process between what readers already know about a given topic or subject and what the text provides them with. Thus, previous knowledge about a topic turns the process of reading into a successful activity since the reader deepens his ideas. Nunan (1999) cited in Mass, Brunal and Guzman (2003) notes that reading is a constant process of guessing, and that sometimes what the reader brings to the text is often more crucial to what he finds in it. That is why students should be taught to use what they know previously to grasp new unknown elements, whether these are ideas or words (Grellet, 1991, p.17).

In order to accomplish any reading activity, it is necessary for students to apply some strategies and skills. According to Johnston & Byrd (1983); Paris, Lipson & Wixson (1983); van Dijk & Kintsch (cited in Carrell et al, 1998) strategies refer to actions readers select and control to achieve desired goals and objectives. It means that strategies are used deliberately in order to produce or influence the goal Wellman (cited in Carrell, et al, 1998). Thus, the use of strategies occurs when readers need to accomplish a specific task.

Similarly, Carrell, et al. (1998) as cited in Paris et al. (1991, p. 611) asserts:

“Skills refer to information-processing techniques that are automatic, whether at the level of recognizing grapheme-phoneme correspondence or summarizing a story. Skills are applied to a text unconsciously for many reasons including expertise, repeated practice, and compliance with directions, luck, and naive use. In contrast, as stated above strategies are actions selected deliberately to achieve particular goals. An emerging skill can become a strategy when it is used intentionally. Likewise, a strategy can “go underground” (cf. Vygotsky, 1978) and become a skill. Indeed strategies are more efficient and developmentally advanced when they become generated and applied automatically as skills. Thus, strategies are “skills under consideration” (see Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1983).

To continue with the reading strategy concept, Carrell, et al. (1998) say “reading strategies are of interest not only for what they reveal about the ways readers manage interactions with written text, but also for how the use of strategies is related to effective reading comprehension.” On the other hand, Anderson, cited in Carrell, et al. (1998) discovered that, “relationships between strategies and comprehension are not simple and straightforward, which means that the use of certain reading strategies does not always lead to successful reading comprehension, while the use of other strategies does not always result in unsuccessful reading comprehension.” According to Carrell, et al. (1998) Anderson results suggested that “there are no simple correlations or one-to-one relationships between particular strategies and successful or unsuccessful reading comprehension.” This indicates that reading comprehension depends on the student’s ability to choose the appropriate strategy or skill to fulfil the task. Anderson cited in Carrel et al. (1998) concludes from his data: “successful second language reading comprehension is not simply a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but the reader must also know how to use it successfully and [to] orchestrate its use with other strategies. It is not sufficient to know about strategies, but a reader must also be able to apply them strategically” (1991: 19) Some of the strategies suggested by Grellet (1981) include the following:

- › **Previewing:** reviewing titles, section headings, and photo captions to get a sense of the structure and content of a reading selection.
- › **Predicting:** using knowledge of the subject matter to make predictions about content and vocabulary and check comprehension; using knowledge of the text type and purpose to make predictions about discourse structure; using knowledge about the author to make predictions about writing style, vocabulary, and content.
- › **Skimming and scanning:** using a quick survey of the text to get the main idea, identify text structure, confirm or question predictions.
- › **Guessing from context:** using prior knowledge of the subject and the ideas in the text as clues to the meanings of unknown words, instead of stopping to look them up.

- › **Paraphrasing:** stopping at the end of a section to check comprehension by restating the information and ideas in the text.

Some other aspects in reading comprehension have to do with the readers' condition towards reading. According to Goodman and Smith cited in Van Duzer (1999) psycholinguistics considers that readers make use of sound-letter correspondence and syntactic knowledge, but they also receive support from their experiential background knowledge (schemata) to predict the meaning of the text and then corroborate their predictions. Van Duzer also suggests that readers may be influenced by the literacy practices in their culture. She cited Rance-Roney (1997) who states that readers approach reading in English differently from the way they approach it in their native language.

As it was stated above, students use various tools to achieve a good performance in reading activities, mainly their background knowledge. There are also some conditions good or fluent readers use. Van Duzer (1999) noted reading as an active and complex process of comprehending written language including many different skills. She provides a list of characteristics fluent readers have:

Fluent readers

- › read with a purpose (to get information or for pleasure) and understand the purpose of different texts (e.g., ads to encourage buying, editorials to present and influence opinions, recipes to give instructions);
- › read quickly, automatically recognizing letters and words, maintaining a flow that allows them to make connections and inferences that make the text understandable;
- › use a variety of strategies, depending on the text, to read efficiently (e.g., varying reading speed, predicting what will happen next, previewing heading and illustrations);
- › interact with the text, making use of background knowledge as well as the information on the printed page; evaluate the text critically, determining whether they agree or disagree with the author; expect to understand the text and get meaning from it; and usually read silently.

Use of authentic material

Guarriento and Morley (2001) suggest that the use of authentic material in the language classroom is valuable in the learning process.

An authentic text is one 'created to fulfil some social purposes in the language community in which it was produced' (Little *et al.* 1988, p. 27). It means that, as Little suggested, exposing students to this language community allows them to create an effective competence in the target language. This according to Guarriento and Morley (2001) can be a way of maintaining or increasing student's motivation for learning, since it gives the learner the feeling that he or she is dealing with real language. The use of authentic material, as suggested, offers the students from upper levels the possibility to develop their skills and to increase the quantity and range of acquired language.

(Guarriento and Morle cited on Ellis 1990, p. 195) consider that 'authenticity' lies not only in the 'genuineness' of text, but in what kind of tasks teachers can apply with it in order to foster learners proficiency in the target language, since input itself is not enough to do so. Thus, creating activities in which students can provide their own ideas toward the text, may help students to develop critical thinking and critic others ideas.

In the above matter, there are four broad schools of thought regarding task authenticity: 1) *Authenticity through a Genuine Purpose* (Willis, 1996, p.18). He argues students have the chance to interact naturally, in 'real time', to achieve a particular communicative goal. 2) *Real World Targets* Long and Crookes (1992) say that pedagogic task must relate to 'real world' target tasks. 3) *Authenticity through Classroom Interaction* (Breen 1995, p. 67) supports all the materials and situations around the learners which offer 'sufficient authentic potential for communications'. 4) *Authenticity through Engagement* which Widdowson (1995) believes that the success of the authentic material depends on students' interest in it.

4. Methodology

The study was implemented on ten students in the age group of 13 to 16 years of ten chosen, 2 of them were in 9th grade and 8 were in 10th grade at La Salle School in Monteria. These participants were selected because of their good academic performance in English classes. These students are also good students in other areas and subjects. They have a positive attitude towards school and are devoted learners.

In this study, two reading activities using authentic texts were given to the subjects. These activities consisted of three different kinds of tasks. Firstly, they had to answer a reading comprehension task based on the article and their own experiences. Secondly, they needed to provide synonyms to different words from the text. They were allowed one hour to accomplish the task and were not permitted to use dictionaries. While doing the activities, an observation form was completed to see the students' attitude and behaviour. Once they finished the two activities they were interviewed to identify which strategies they used to complete the task. Then, the activities were checked to see how well the students did and in which task they performed better. Finally, in order to collect more data that allowed us to clarify some of the findings, an interview was carried out with the students' teacher in order to see how well they performed in English.

5. Findings

In order to identify the categories in this study we analysed the interviews with the students, the teacher, the activities themselves and the notes from field observation. After analysing the data three categories emerged. The first one was called **previous knowledge**. It had to do with all the information students had about the text they read. The second one had to do with the **students' attitude in the English classes**. Here they all agreed that concentration in classes helped them a great deal. Finally, **reading strategies** as a category was basic for our study. In regards to this last category, they used different strategies that were identified in the data collected. Various theoretical studies about reading strategies confirmed our findings.

Previous Knowledge

In the data gathered, we were able to notice that one of the strategies the students applied in the activities had to do with their previous knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, personal experience and information they acquired from other sources.

To the question how they obtained the meaning of the words in the vocabulary part they said in general:

"We identified the meaning of the word straight from the sentences and found a synonym that fitted there."

But some others said:

"...we read all around the word to identify the meaning... and because we knew the other words we could get it."

They also stated that they saw the words previously in other contexts and texts. This gave them the opportunity to provide a synonym or just explain the meaning in English. We also noticed that when answering the questions many of them took into account grammar, thus their answers were quite correct. Even though some answers did not correspond grammatically, they were meaningfully correct. In activity 1 (see appendix 1) in part B the question was:

- What was Jim Richardson doing in Kakamega?

The student's answer was:

- He was have to taking photos an experiment in biotechnology for that month's article on genetically engineered foods.

In activity 2 (see appendix 2) one of the questions was:

- *What did the Wrights want to know about Inca site?*

The student's answer was:

- How did the Inca get their water?

In activity 2 question 5 was:

- If you were a tourist in Machu Picchu, what would you like to know about it?

The student's answer was:

- I would like to know about they're culture, they're people.

Students used grammar incorrectly such as the use of tenses and adjective pronouns. One of the examples shows that they answered a question with another question as we usually do in Spanish.

In activity 1 (see appendix 1) in part D, the participants had to construct sentences using the words in part C.

One of the students wrote:

- I'll try to stuck my shoes because I broke my shoes.

Other students wrote:

- *A baby doesn't must pop the toys into the mouth.*
- *All the garbage was pop into the can, the green one.*

As we can realize they tried to communicate the meaning of the words not taking into consideration if they were properly used.

Question in which they were asked about their own opinions, they said:

- *"This was quite easy because we just had to write what we know about the topic."*

Here they tried to explain to us that there were many things they could say since they did a great deal of exercises like these in English classes. It is interesting too when they say that they had heard or read about the topics like this in Spanish and in other contexts. Here we may conclude that good students may say or write in English about what they know based upon their cultural background. In this concern, the English teacher plays a very important role when using authentic texts in which students can understand that English is not just a subject, but also a way of communication. When this fact was asked in the interview the students answered in this way:

- *“We are willing to do the activities because we know that dealing with it, we are able to learn and use words and expressions to communicate in our daily life.”*

Students’ Attitude in the English Classes

In this category we found that positive attitude is quite helpful for students in the English classes. When we asked them about their attitude in the classes, most of them said that they paid close attention to what the teacher did in the class. To every detail they said and most importantly they participated a lot in the class activities. One of the students stated:

- *“Sometimes, classes turn boring, but we try to keep focusing in the activity.”*

They stated that when students do that it is not necessary for them to study hard at home but they just need to review and remember the topic covered in class.

Some of the students reported the following:

- *“I’m responsible in my classes. I always pay attention in the class, my parents don’t force me to study because they know I’m very responsible”.*
- *“At home I don’t study that much, I think that when being in the class it is basic to pay close attention to it. If students do that, they*

just go home to review what they did in the classes and immediately they remember it. But if you don't pay attention when evaluations come, other students have to study hard and sometimes they don't know what they are doing".

- *"If you don't pay attention in classes, what you should have learned in five or six months, you are not going to learn it in just two hours."*

They also said that in this way they saved time, thus they were able to do different things like listening to music, surfing the Internet and reading books in English.

The students mentioned the fact that their parents do not oblige them to study because students' parents know that they are responsible students. On the other hand, one of the students said that his father and mother demand a lot of study from him. However, he feels satisfied with this demanding attitude from his parents, because it has helped him a lot in his studies, especially English.

- *"My father asks me to read in English all the time, sometimes I feel compelled to do it, but some others I think it has helped me a lot".*

In the interview to the teacher he said that these students were disciplined, finished their tasks on time and more importantly they were interested in the English classes. In terms of class procedure, he said that he did many reading activities. He sometimes asked the students to bring in articles from the Internet, like news, headlines and other materials to share in class. He noted that when students brought in that kind of material their attitude was different in the classes. They participated more and felt more confident in front of the class. He also stated that the participants of this research liked to be the first in every activity.

In this category, we could corroborate what Widdowson says about the success of authentic material which he suggests that it depends on students' interest to it.

The Use of Reading Strategies

It was clear when analysing the data that the participants of this study used certain reading strategies. It is important to say that they were not aware that they were doing so. They said in the interview that they did what they usually do when reading in Spanish. We were able to compare these strategies to some theories about reading. We found that the participants used strategies like scanning and skimming and other ones that are called studying strategies.

Bearing in mind the information collected, most of the students applied skimming and scanning. Some of them stated,

- *“I read the text to know what the question was about, then I analysed word by word trying to get the idea to answer the question.”*
- *“I first read the question and tried to understand it and then I went to the text looking for similarities with the question.”*

As stated above, once the student identified key words, he scanned for it in the text and skimmed in the paragraph to obtain the answer.

In the third part of the two reading activities where the students had to grasp the meaning of the given words from the context of the text, inference was the most used strategy. Some students said in the interview:

- *“I identified the word from context and then looked for a meaning that could replace it.”*
- *“I identify the words in their context and try to find them some synonyms.”*

In another part of the activities students applied skimming to get the main idea from the text as some students stated:

- *“I interpreted the text as a whole, the basic ideas, and took the main ones from each part (paragraph) and then come out with the gist of it.”*

- *“I read the text carefully and take the main idea from each paragraph.”*

In the observation stage, we noticed that they spent some time reading the question and referring to texts more than once. When checking the activities, we realized that some of words were underlined, which means that they focused on those specific words to solve the task.

6. Conclusions

In this study, the data revealed that good students use several strategies to complete a reading task. To begin with, they take advantage of their previous knowledge to become familiar with the text they are dealing with. Thus, it becomes easier for them to complete both comprehension and vocabulary questions. Secondly, they pay so much attention to the teacher’s explanations in class that they do not need to study that much at home. It means that when dealing with new activities, reading a text does not demand too much effort from them to do it.

We may also conclude that the use of authentic material in reading activities affects the students positively, because it gives them the opportunity to interact with real language. It also widens the students’ ideas and vocabulary towards a known subject. We also determined that this kind of material is not difficult for these students.

Finally, the use of strategies also plays an important role in accomplishing reading tasks. It is important to say that they were not aware of what strategies they used, which means that this students devote too much time in their native language to reading activities.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Reading Comprehension Activity 1

A. Read the following article.

KENYA

Daredevil Gastronomy

When in Kakamega, eat as the Kakamegans do

Photographer **Jim Richardson** says he's "always shied away from adventurous eating" while in the field. But visiting the western Kenya town of Kakamega while photographing an experiment in biotechnology for this month's article on genetically engineered foods, he was persuaded by a market vendor to try a local seasonal delicacy: white ants, or termites (left).

"They're eaten either fried or straight alive," Jim says. He opted for the straight alive version. "You reach in, grab a handful of about seven or eight at a time, and pop them into your mouth." No, they don't taste like chicken, he adds. In fact, they don't taste like much at all. "They don't have a lot of flavor, but they have a certain textural quality," he notes. "The lingering aftereffect is of white lacy wings stuck in your teeth."

Jim says he began work on the assignment "totally information-challenged," knowing little about the biotech wars. He came away from it fearing not the effect genetically engineered foods would have on human health but their potential dangers to the environment.

Taken from National Geographic magazine 2002.

B. After reading the article, answer the following questions:

1. What was Jim Richardson doing in Kakamega?
2. What was he persuaded by in Kakamega?
3. What is the reading about?
4. Have you ever eaten something unusual? What?
5. Suggest another title for the article.

C. Write the meaning of the following words or expressions from the article in English:

1. Shied away _____
2. Pop into _____
3. Persuaded _____
4. Stuck _____
5. Opted _____

D. Write sentences using the words/expressions from part C.

1. Shied away: _____
2. Pop into: _____
3. Persuaded: _____
4. Stuck: _____
5. Opted: _____

Appendix 2

Reading Comprehension Activity 2

A. Read the following article.

How Did Machu Picchu Work?

Studying the infrastructure of an Inca site

When Ruth Wright, a Colorado lawyer, first visited Machu Picchu with her daughters in 1974, she was, like most visitors, “blown away” by the legendary Inca site. But when she returned home, she was puzzled: How did the Inca get a water supply so high up on an Andean mountain?

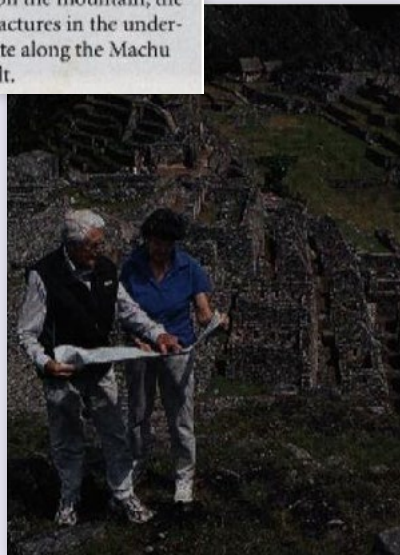
After two decades spent seeking a permit that would allow them to investigate, Wright and her husband, Kenneth, a civil engineer (above), finally began to study the site’s infrastructure in 1994. They examined the layout of the buildings and how the fountains were designed. They also analyzed the types of roofs used and what crops the residents grew on the terraces. They ended up with the most detailed map ever made of Machu Picchu, where 16 fountains once

flowed, and gave invaluable assistance to our own cartographers in producing the supplement map in this issue.

“Basically, we’ve studied city planning there,” Ruth says. Ken adds: “We’ve studied hydrology, engineering, how it endured for 500 years without turning into a pile of rubble. The Inca created a functioning community without a written language, iron and steel, or the wheel.” The Wrights surveyed the site again and again, turning up information in some cases only after hacking away forest vegetation that had buried foundations, walls, and a trail.

So how did the Inca get their water? They built a canal to channel water from the natural spring on the mountain, the result of fractures in the underlying granite along the Machu Picchu fault.

Taken from National Geographic magazine 2001.



B. After reading the article, answer the following questions:

1. What did the Wrights do to study the infrastructure of Machu Picchu?

2. What did the Wrights do to have the map of the infrastructure?

3. What did the Wrights want to know about Inca site?

4. What is the principal idea of the article?

5. If you were a tourist in Machu Picchu, what would you like to know about it?

6. Finally, how did the Incas get their water?

C. Explain the meaning of the following expressions/words from the article:

1. Blown away _____
2. Was puzzled _____
3. Layouts _____
4. Endured _____
5. Hacking away _____

D. Fill in the blank spaces with the following words or expressions: Blown away, puzzled, layouts, endured, hacking away.

1. The engineers should investigate the _____ of the construction.
2. The tourist was _____ looking at the Taj-Majal.
3. The farmers were _____ the forest to find the way.
4. Sometimes I am _____ about how some inventions work.
5. I didn't know how that old house _____ over time.