



RevistaDigital
» PALABRA

Revista Palabra
ISSN 2145- 7980
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Colegio Guillermo León Valencia
Colombia

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English Strategies for Reading Comprehension, used by Ninth Graders from
Colegio Guillermo León Valencia.
Revista Palabra, vol 2, Enero 15 de 2013, p.73-83
Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Seccional Montería
Montería, Colombia

Disponible en: <http://srvzenu.monteria.upb.edu.co/revistapalabra/?p=267>

ENGLISH STRATEGIES FOR READING COMPREHENSION, USED BY NINTH GRADERS FROM COLEGIO GUILLERMO LEÓN VALENCIA.

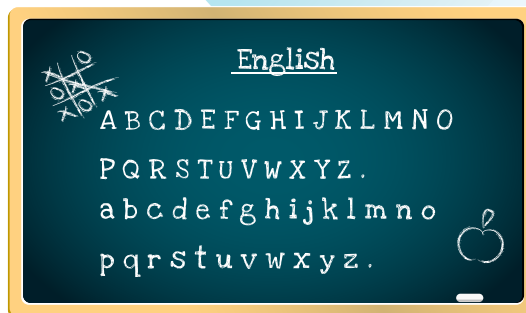
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» Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es identificar las estrategias de lectura empleadas por los estudiantes de grado noveno, usando instrumentos de recolección de datos tales como una encuesta adaptada del “Inventario de Uso de Estrategias de Language” sugerido por Andrés D. Cohen, Rebecca L. Oxford y Julie C. Chi; y una observación que sigue el protocolo propuesto por Rebecca Oxford, teniendo en cuenta grupos de estrategia de memoria, cognición, compensación, metacognición, afectividad y estrategias sociales. Este artículo también pretende analizar la existencia y uso de estrategias y su relación con la comprensión lectora de los estudiantes.

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Palabras Clave: Estrategias de aprendizaje de una lengua, Estrategias de lectura y Comprensión de lectura y Entrenamiento en estrategias.

» Abstract

The focus of this study is to identify the reading strategies employed by students of ninth grade, using data collection instruments such as a survey adapted from the Language Strategy Use Inventory suggested by Andres D. Cohen, Rebecca L. Oxford and Julie C. Chi and an observation which follows a protocol by Rebecca Oxford, taking into account the strategy groups of Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social Strategies. This paper also points to analyze the existence and use of strategies and their relationship to the students' reading comprehension of texts.

Key Words: Language Learning Strategies, Reading Strategies, Reading Comprehension, Strategy Training.

Introduction

The main issue of this paper is to present the results taken from the identification of reading strategies use employed by a group of students from Colegio Guillermo León Valencia, in the city of Duitama, so teachers can know the way

in which students support their learning and the reading comprehension level they reach through the use of such strategies. This also attempts to show the importance of strategy training in any level, so learners acquire the ability to work with strategies and know how to take advantage of their implementation.

In the following lines we will present a conceptual framework of Language Learning Strategies, Reading Strategies and Reading Comprehension. Then, we will present the design of the study along with the findings, an analysis of the collected data and their conclusions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study asks the following question: What reading strategies are being used by students of ninth grade from Guillermo León Valencia school in Duitama and, how do they relate to their reading comprehension development?

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This research review treats the conceptual framework of Language Learning Strategies, Reading Strategies, Reading Comprehension and the analysis of the theory with the findings.

Language Learning Strategies

We conceive the learning strategies as a set of steps that are used to develop certain task efficiently and which are especially important, as Oxford (1990) pointed out, “because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning

strategies result in improvement proficiency and greater self-confidence”. Nowadays, strategies are known as a main instrument in the competences development and many teachers are concerned to reinforce the language learning through strategies mastering. In this way, they have become aware that they are not just instructors but facilitators, guides, or diagnosticians. Therefore, a teacher must have in mind the features that Oxford (1990) mentions:

1. Problem Orientation. They are tools used to solve a problem or situation and achieve a goal.
2. Action Basis. The language learning strategies are actions or behaviors accomplished by students to enhance their learning.
3. Involvement beyond just cognition. Language learning strategies involve cognitive and metacognitive functions.
4. Direct and Indirect Support of Learning. According to the role they play, the strategies can be direct or indirect which are equally important and serve to support each other in many ways.
5. Degree of Observability. Some of the strategies can be easily observable but some others cannot.
6. Level of consciousness. Strategies can be conscious or subconscious behaviors, depending on the degree of internalization the learner has done of them.
7. Teachability. Learning strategies can be done through strategy training, which is an essential part of language education. Strategy training helps guide learners to become more conscious of strategy use and more adept at employing appropriate strategies.

8. Flexibility. Learning strategies are adaptable to different tasks and can be employed in different sequences.

Reading Strategies

Reading strategies are included in the big cluster of language strategies and are focused on reading processes that take into account memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective and social strategies. These are oriented to the pre, while and after-reading steps and take aspects of language like phonetics, semantics, syntax, morphology and grammar establishing connections to the human thinking processes such as analyzing, inferencing, creating, reasoning, guessing, among others.

Reading Comprehension

It is a process of establishing connections between one's prior knowledge to new information in order to give responses to different inquiries. An optimum level of reading comprehension shows an effective strategy use and a high development of language skills. According to the reading expert Katherine Maria (1990) reading comprehension is defined as the holistic process of constructing meaning from written text through the interaction of (1) the knowledge the reader brings to the text, i.e., word recognition ability, world knowledge, and knowledge of linguistic conventions; (2) the reader's interpretation of the language that the writer used in constructing the text.

THE STUDY

Overall design of the study

The descriptive study had three phases; the first one was the application of a survey on Language Strategy Use, to elicit information about the most common strategies employed by the

participants when reading a text. The second phase was an observation based on a protocol, in which the researchers checked the students' use of some specific reading strategies with two different texts in English and, the third phase was the analysis of the gathered information related to reading comprehension level.

Research Setting and Participants

The setting for the current study was a public school in Duitama, Boyacá called "Colegio Guillermo León Valencia". The study involved 59 students from two ninth grades of English class, aged 13-17. There were 24 male and 35 female students. The participants' level of English language ranged from elementary to intermediate. English classes are scheduled three hours per week.

Instrumentation and data collection procedures
The first instrument of this study (the survey) was designed to find the presence of language learning strategies used by the participants. This instrument was designed based on the Language Strategy Use Inventory suggested by Andres D. Cohen, Rebecca L. Oxford and Julie C. Chi (2005), it was applied in Spanish language in order to get more valid information and avoid misunderstandings. The second instrument was a protocol of observation designed on "Strategy Applications Listed According to each of the Four Language Skills" suggested by Oxford (1990) in which 25 statements were chosen regarding the information the participants delivered in the first instrument.

The information was obtained from a normal classroom routine during a period of a month, in order to help the learners discover strategies that could help them master a new language.

Results and Discussion

After analyzing the survey results, the data are shown in the following chart:

ESTRATEGIA	USO LA ESTRATEGIA Y ME GUSTA	HE PRACTICADO LA ESTRATEGIA Y LA USARÍA DE NUEVO	NUNCA HE USADO LA ESTRATEGIA PERO ME GUSTARÍA APLICARLA	ESTA ESTRATEGIA NO SE ADAPTA A MI ESTILO DE APRENDIZAJE
1. Leo tanto como me sea posible en inglés	8	12	38	1
2. Trato de leer textos en inglés que me parecen agradables	9	26	18	6
3. Busco material de lectura que esté de acuerdo con mi nivel de lengua	10	20	23	5
4. Hago un plan de lectura que incluya cómo voy a leer, cómo voy a supervisar lo que estoy leyendo y cómo evalúo lo que entendí del texto	4	9	37	9
5. Primero hago una lectura rápida de un texto académico para extraer la idea principal y luego lo leo cuidadosamente	9	22	23	6
6. Leo varias veces historias o diálogos hasta que los entienda	15	29	11	4
7. Pongo atención a la organización del texto, especialmente a los títulos y subtítulos	12	19	23	5
8. Realizo resúmenes de la lectura constantemente en mi mente o en las márgenes del texto	1	8	42	8
9. Hago predicciones acerca de lo que estoy leyendo	15	19	17	8

ESTRATEGIA	USO LA ESTRATEGIA Y ME GUSTA	HE PRACTICADO LA ESTRATEGIA Y LA USARÍA DE NUEVO	NUNCA HE USADO LA ESTRATEGIA PERO ME GUSTARÍA APLICARLA	ESTA ESTRATEGIA NO SE ADAPTA A MI ESTILO DE APRENDIZAJE
1. Leo tanto como me sea posible en inglés	8	12	38	1
2. Trato de leer textos en inglés que me parecen agradables	9	26	18	6

The results of the survey indicated that there was a tendency (six out of nine statements) to the fact that the participants have never used such strategies but they would like to employ them in their reading tasks; which implies that the learners show an intrinsic motivation to enhance the language strategies repertoire they currently have.

In three of the suggested items, most of the participants expressed they “have practiced the strategy and will use it again”; which suggests that they are aware of the use they have done of some of those strategies and recognize their effectiveness and therefore, are willing to use them in future tasks.

In a third place there were the participants who said they “use the strategy and like it”, and it is feasible in the statements numbers 6 and 9 (fact that we could corroborate through the second instrument too). And, in the last place, there is the smallest amount of participants who reported that “such strategy does not fit for them”.

Taking into account these results, we can say that most of the participants show a self awareness of the existence and necessity to employ a group of strategies that could benefit their learning.

In the second phase of this study, we carried out an observation supported by a protocol from which we gathered the following information:

STRATEGY GROUP	STRATEGY SET	STRATEGY	YES	NO
Memory	Creating mental linkages	Placing new words into a context		X
Memory	Applying images and sounds	Using Keywords	X	
Memory	Employing action	Using physical response or sensation	X	
Memory	Applying images and sounds	Semantic mapping		X
Cognitive	Practicing	Repeating		X
Cognitive	Receiving and sending messages	Getting the idea quickly	X	
Cognitive	Analyzing and reasoning	Reasoning deductively		X
Cognitive	Analyzing and reasoning	Analyzing expressions	X	
Cognitive	Analyzing and reasoning	Translating	X	

Cognitive	Creating structure for input and output	Taking notes		X
Cognitive	Creating structure for input and output	Summarizing		X
Cognitive	Creating structure for input and output	Highlighting		X
Compensation	Guessing intelligently	Using linguistic clues		X
Compensation	Guessing intelligently	Using other clues	X	
Metacognitive	Centering your learning	Overviewing and linking with already known material		X
Metacognitive	Centering your learning	Paying attention		X
Metacognitive	Arranging and planning your learning	Setting goals and objectives		X
Metacognitive	Arranging and planning your learning	Identifying the purpose of a language task	X	
Metacognitive	Arranging and planning your learning	Planning for a language task		X
Affective	Lowering your anxiety	Using laughter	X	

Affective	Encouraging yourself	Making positive statements	X	
Affective	Encouraging yourself	Taking risks wisely		X
Social	Asking questions	Asking for clarification and verification	X	
Social	Cooperating with others	Cooperating with peers	X	
Social	Cooperating with others	Cooperating with proficient users of the new language	X	

Through the observation we could determine that the participants employ many other strategies apart from the ones they reported, but they do it in a subconscious form. For instance, when they were asked if they carried out a reading plan, 37 of them answered they did not do it; however, during the observation, we could notice that they did it through getting the idea quickly, using clues such as pictures, association of words and identifying the purpose of a language task. On the other hand, some of the strategies categorized as “employed” were corroborated through the observation. (For example “I make predictions about what I am reading” was feasible through asking questions and guessing intelligently).

Conclusions

Analyzing the survey and observation results, we found out that most of the students use a wide repertoire of strategies but they are not aware of such usage because they do not know how to name the process they follow and do not consider that activity as a tool for reading comprehension. For instance, when

they use affective strategies (using laughter or making positive statements), they are not conscious that these lower their anxiety and encourage themselves to develop the cognitive processes; they perceive these processes just as socialization behaviors. Also, when they are reading and asking questions for clarification and verification or cooperate with peers, it is seen as daily behaviors in class routines not like learning strategies.

Based on the survey, we can assure that learners are willing to know and employ other strategies that complement and improve their learning process. Such fact is a reference for teachers to consider strategy instruction as an important step in their daily teaching practice.

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