

Alternative strategies for the reading EFL classroom

Estrategias Alternativas para el aula de lectura de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a research project which objective was to analyze the impact of a program with alternative reading strategies for EFL development. This research pretends to cast new lights in the constant effort from both EFLteachers and teacher trainers to promote reading among their students, through the implementation and analysis of some specific strategies, applied on a group of students of the B.A in EFL Teaching from Fundación Universitaria Luis Amigó, focused on the increase of their motivation towards EFL reading and subsequent development of reading skills. The main results of the study show that some particular strategies such as extensive reading, the use of audio books and mind maps and the consideration of emotions in the reading EFL classroom significantly improve both reading skills and motivation towards it.

Keywords: reading, EFL, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, socialization Strategies, motivation, reading comprehension.

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta resultados de una investigación cuyo objetivo fue analizar el impacto de la implementación de un programa de estrategias alternativas de lectura para el desarrollo del Inglés como lengua extranjera.. El estudio pretende dar nuevas luces al constante esfuerzo de docentes y formadores de docentes de Inglés como lengua extranjera de promover la lectura entre sus estudiantes, a través del planteamiento y análisis de algunas estrategias específicas aplicadas a docentes en formación en el mencionado campo de la Fundación Universitaria Luis Amigó direcccionadas a mejorar tanto la motivación hacia la lectura como la comprensión generada por medio de esta. Los principales resultados del estudio mostraron que algunas estrategias en particular tales como la lectura extensiva, el uso de audio libros y mapas mentales y la consideración de las emociones mejora significativamente tanto los niveles de comprensión lectora como la motivación hacia esta.

Palabras clave: lectura, inglés como lengua extranjera, estrategias cognitivas, estrategias metacognitivas, estrategias afectivas, estrategias de socialización, motivación, comprensión lectora.

1. Introduction.

Reading as a linguistic ability has unfortunately been considered as demotivating and even useless to our students' cognitive processes, both from their perspectives and sometimes from their teachers' views as well, taking this important learning aspect to a rarely visited scenario in the constant pursuit of knowledge. Hence that the main objective of this research

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was to introduce a set of alternative strategies that would develop not only students' reading skills, but their appreciation of it.

On a more specific context, reading in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom has been even more relegated than in our first languages, as Aebersold (2002, p. 101) says "reading in a foreign language involves more variables for students than the same process in their L1", which is why the theoretical constructions regarding the motivation and the development of this purpose have been relatively few, focusing mainly on the description of its influencing factors rather than offering alternatives to improve it.

In our Colombian context this issues has been even more noticeable given the cultural background of most of our population, we tend not to read much (if not at all), even in our first language, making the transition of reading in L1 to L2 even more challenging for Colombian EFL teachers.

The new challenge for the research intended for promoting reading in the EFL classroom is then to move on from a descriptive approach to an applying one that focuses in suggesting new routes that lead us to improve not only our students' reading comprehension levels but also their degree of motivation concerning this substantial learning activity; hence, this research pretends to cast new lights in that direction, especially considering that future EFL teachers will be the ones directly involved in this demanding task.

This project had its inception in the EFL teaching experience of the researcher, both at school and university level, and her observations of how reading is handled in the mentioned scenarios; thus her interest in the promoting of reading, given that, in her perceptions, the researcher deduced a low level of motivation towards it, which leads to poor performances of reading comprehension.

2. Theoretical framework.

Going through the existing bibliography, we find that reading has been conceived from various perspectives: Goodman (1969) defines it as a “guessing game”, while Grellet (1981) assumes an opposing view when affirming that readers (at least efficient ones) use more tools that allow them to derive meaning from a text, not only limiting themselves to “guess”.

Moving on, Eskey (1981) considers the higher degree of difficulty of reading in English as a foreign language when she mentions that students have more to deal with when facing a text in this situation than when reading in their L1 due to the fact that they go from the particular to the general, making the understanding of main ideas difficult and therefore clouding the north of the text they are reading.

Now, going further into how to implement reading processes in the EFL classroom, Del Castillo (2007) says that, in their early stages, foreign language teaching methods considered the use of classical literary works as spreading agents of the target's language culture and as a methodological strategy to empower the proficiency of the same, however, these initial conceptions suggested that students should use the mentioned texts to either memorize or translate them and this way making connections between their L1 and the target language.

The communicative approach then came as part of the reply to this view of books use for foreign language education, by eliminating them completely from the classrooms and implementing the use of texts built exclusively for educational purposes, but the biggest disadvantage of this strategy was the lack of connection students made with these books and therefore they lacked motivation to read them.

During the 90s, as Widdowson (1990) emphasized on the importance of authentic material in the foreign language classroom, teachers started to regain interest in using either original or slightly adapted literature that fit the linguistic level of their students, but even considering the efforts of so many decades related to foreign language reading promotion (specifically in English), we still have not reached the desired motivation levels towards it, which is why the researcher feels that it is no longer a matter of material selection alone, but

also one of thinking and rethinking the way in which we handle this linguistic ability with our students, meaning that this is not a content issue, but a methodological one.

Oxford (1990) also gives a significant importance to reading in the EFL classroom, expressing that books provide an excellent source of information for students, and increases some other important language skills such as grammar awareness, vocabulary management and better writing techniques, which leads to an improved language proficiency as a whole.

3. Method

Subjects

This study was conducted for 16 weeks from July to November 2014. The participants were students of English Literature and Culture, a compulsory course from the BA in EFL Teaching from Luis Amigo University. Twenty-seven students, whose ages were varied, and there were 9 female and 18 male students. The students' native language was Spanish, and they were learning English as a foreign language. Their linguistic level was appropriate for the demands of the course; however, they had minor reading skills difficulties, especially with classical texts from early literary periods, since they were not familiar with some of the vocabulary and had not had a wide cultural instruction of the English language.

Study type

The approach of the study was a mixed one, using both qualitative and quantitative tools for the collection of information. A pre-experimental method was implemented, in which pretests and posttests were used to measure the motivation levels of students towards reading and their reading comprehension levels. The study did not have a control group; results were drawn from the comparison of the previously mentioned testing. To measure the motivation levels the researcher used a Liker scale with the 10 statements listed below:

- Reading is an enjoyable activity for me.
- I tend to read as much as I can.
- Reading in English is harder for me than reading in Spanish.
- I only read the books I am required to.
- I have a marked preference to certain type of books.
- If I do not like the beginning of a book, I drop it.
- My family encourages me to read.
- My friends encourage me to read.
- I think that reading in English is fundamental for my future work as an EFL teacher.
- I think that as a future EFL teacher I should encourage my students to read in English.

To measure reading comprehension the researcher used two sets of the reading section from the FCE test (available at Cambridge TESOL website), which measures three levels of reading comprehension (Mohamad, 1999): literal, interpretive and critical. Each test had 8 questions: 3 literal level questions, 3 interpretive ones and 2 critical. The tests had different topics but both were classified for measuring B2 level.

Finally, the researcher conducted series of semi-structured interviews with the subjects of the study, in order to qualify the methodological proposal she implemented with the course, and this way obtaining feedback for potential improvements.

After applying the pretests the researcher implemented the following methodological program in order to see if they strategies proposed in it could change students' views of reading as well as improving their reading comprehension levels.

Cognitive strategies:

- Extensive reading: In this strategy, students not only select the material they want to read from a wide selection of books, but also choose the pace in which they read best, preferably doing so non-stop and without consulting any words in the dictionary. Hill (2007) offers a quite interesting way of setting up an extensive reading program, regardless of how much emphasis teachers want to give it.

- Use of *i minus 1* material: In this one, the teacher selects material which is slightly below the linguistic level of his / her students, in order to promote faster understanding of the texts, but progressively moving toward more demanding material.
- Use of mind maps: Here students build graphic representations of what they read as they are doing it, considering what they think is more relevant and meaningful.
- Use of audio books: In which students read as they listen to the text, whether it is collectively or individually, integrating both visual and auditory learning.

Metacognitive strategies:

- Identifying types of readers: With the guidance of their teacher, every student tries to characterize him / herself as a reader, in terms of how fast they read, how analytical they are and how much they can relate what they read with the world around them.
- Identifying distracting / contributing factors: Here, students identify which are the features of their ideal reading environment, aspects like if they can read while listening to music (and which genre if they can), if they read best by sitting down, or laying down, or even walking, how much noise they can handle while still being able to focus on the text, etc.

- Reading through the body: In this strategy we integrate visual and kinesthetic learning by including movement in our reading lessons, for example, doing a scavengers' hunt with several sections of the same story.

Affective strategies:

- Adequate selection of material: Thinking about the right material includes considering our students' age, needs, preferences, lifestyles, among others. Having a deep knowledge of what our learners like and dislike will give very significant guidelines to develop this process, even more if we involve our students in the process. Lazar (1999) offers an alternative here with literature, saying that teachers should not be afraid of introducing "real books" (those not designed specifically for EFL teaching) with their students.
- Differentiating genders: It is of common knowledge that boys and girls have different preferences, so integrating these into our lessons and having our students understand them can bring new perspectives to our learners in terms of what they like and why they like it.
- Life stories: This strategy implies a high level of commitment from both students and teachers, since they would be sharing texts about their own lives (including the teachers) and this way getting to know the people that surround us.
- Reading through emotions: Even though this strategy works best when we have very emotional situations, it is always a good idea to include material that allows

our students to explore their sentiments, connecting what they read to what they feel and therefore making reading much more meaningful.

Socialization strategies:

- Collective text construction: This strategy not only gives our learners the opportunity of producing something new, it also teaches them to work collaboratively, respecting their classmates' opinions and gives them a sense of accomplishment since they would be creating stories that will be read by most (if not all) of their classmates, encouraging them to write and to read.
- Literary discussions: When talking about the texts we read, creating a different atmosphere for these discussions with simple arrangements such as dressing differently, maybe bringing food or something to drink, and motivating students to impersonate someone they admire or the author they are reading, can improve the quality of the conversation and increasing our students' enjoyment.
- Reading communities: This last strategy is (in the researcher's opinion) the most challenging, because it implies bringing together most of the previously mentioned techniques, in order to create a different classroom culture that influences our learners' daily lives, taking the influence of what they read to more meaningful contexts in which they can use this knowledge differently.

4. Results and discussion

After applying the pretests the results were as follow:

- Liker scale: Students acknowledge the importance of reading (94%) but admit that they do not read frequently (56%)
- FCE test: the literal level was approved by 85% of the students, the interpretive level by 52% and critical level by 30% of them.

These results set the context from which this research had its inception; they prove that not only there are very limited reading habits in the analyzed population, but that these lead to poor reading skills.

After the posttests the results were as follow:

- Liker scale: Students continue acknowledging the importance of reading (97%) and report positive changes in their attitude towards it (83%)
- FCE test: the literal level was approved by 89% of the students, the interpretive level by 77% and critical level by 65% of them

These results show a very significant change both in the perception of students toward reading, that translated into a significant improvement of their reading skills, particularly in the critical level of reading which was a marked difficulty in the pretest phase.

Regarding the interviews, students reported that the methodological proposal gave them new perspectives towards reading, broadening its perceived uses and providing them with new approaches when reading. They also expressed that by performing some of the strategies they found the reasons why they did not like reading at first, but now understand how they can change the manner in which they read, increasing their motivation towards it.

The most successful strategies of the program, and the reasons why students preferred them, were the following:

- Extensive reading: Students reported that having the option of reading what they wanted and at the pace they could boosted their enjoyment.
- Use of *i minus 1* material: They also affirmed that reading this type of texts increased their understanding and motivation towards this activity, since they did not have to overthink what they were reading.

- Use of audio books: Students felt very comfortable reading while listening, they said that it improved not only their enjoyment while reading, but also helped their listening skills.
- Use of mind maps: Students said that mind maps helped them remember details of a book much better, so they did not have to go back on their reading to check things they did not understand.
- Connecting emotions with reading: When performing reading activities that included or considered their feelings and emotions, students felt much more connected to the material, increasing their enjoyment of the texts.

5. Conclusions

The proposed methodology of this project proved effective when promoting motivation towards reading and increasing students' reading comprehension skills, especially when reading critically. The results of both the quantitative (standardized test and Liker scale) and the qualitative ones (interviews) showed that students found the strategies useful to them as readers and as foreign language teachers.

The implementation of the methodological proposal of this project can be applied not only at university level, but at other levels of education as well, such as primary and

secondary levels. The key to the success of these strategies is how willing and committed are the actors of education towards them, and how flexible their curriculums can be when adapting new teaching alternatives.

Reading methodologies in the EFL classroom have been quite the same over the past century, so there is an urgent need to change our perspectives regarding this matter, in order to provide more motivating and useful reading activities for our students; this project tried to open up new horizons to this field and, as in every learning process, it will continue being developed by this researcher so that it can continue adapting to the new demands of foreign language education.

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