



LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, BASED ON READING AS THE MAIN STRATEGY ^[1] .

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Abstract

The following article reports on a research project carried out during the year 2023 with eighth and ninth grade students from a public school called Mariscal Robledo, located in Medellín, Colombia. The objective of the study was to analyze the effects of reading in English as a foreign language as the main vehicle in the learning process of this language. This project implemented a qualitative method. The results show an influential relationship between reading in a foreign language and learning the different elements of this language. Finally, the conclusions about the strengths are discussed given the impact it had on the students' learning of vocabulary and grammar. This work focuses on the importance of reading as a key tool in the process of acquiring a foreign language. It is pointed out that reading not only promotes the comprehension of texts, but also contributes significantly to the integration of the four communicative skills, since reading is not an isolated activity, but is directly related to these skills. In the context of learning a foreign language, reading becomes a fundamental activity, since it allows students not only to become familiar with grammar structures and vocabulary, but also with the real use of the language in everyday and contextual situations.

Keywords: Reading, Foreign language, Communicative skills, Grammar, Vocabulary, Context.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is an essential challenge in an increasingly globalized world. Among the many languages that individuals may choose to study, English stands out as one of the most influential and widely used worldwide. Mastering the English language not only provides access to a wealth of cultural resources, but also academic and professional ones. Therefore, effective teaching and learning of English as a foreign language are crucial goals in contemporary education, as Suescun (2022) states, "to fully understand the teaching and learning processes, we must consider several visions of education given its multidisciplinary composition" (p. 253). This reflection focuses on a fundamental strategy for learning English as a foreign language: the use of reading as the primary tool. Reading, in addition to being an inexhaustible source of knowledge and entertainment, plays a critical role in the process of acquiring a foreign language.

Reading comprehension not only involves decoding words and phrases, but also requires the interpretation and assimilation of concepts and cultural contexts, as Cots (2007) expresses, language is a sociocultural construction that affects everyone. By exploring the interaction between reading and learning English as a foreign language, an enriching and effective pedagogical approach is revealed that promotes a profound understanding of the language and its application in real-life situations. Reading should initially be accompanied, as Ruiz (2011) indicates, "teaching reading strategies should involve demonstration by the teacher, gradual progress, extensive practice, and eventually independent use of these strategies by students" (p.52).



The integration of the four communicative skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) is essential in the process of learning a foreign language. However, reading as the primary strategy occupies a prominent place in this equation, as it acts as a bridge that connects receptive skills (reading and listening) with productive skills (speaking and writing). Through reading as the primary vehicle of knowledge, students not only become familiar with grammar and vocabulary, but they also can observe the authentic use of English in real contexts. This constant exposure to the language, through a variety of texts representing different genres and styles, is a valuable strategy for developing linguistic competence.

Constant and diversified reading provides students with a vast range of words and expressions, thus enriching their lexicon and improving their ability to understand and express themselves in English. Furthermore, reading helps students understand the meaning and contextual use of words, which is essential for fluency in the language, as Rodríguez (2017) affirms when stating that "In teaching a foreign language, reading helps improve grammar and vocabulary" (p. 63).

Literature Review

Krashen's (1982) research highlights the importance of reading comprehension in the process of learning English as a foreign language. He argues that extensive reading in the language being learned is essential for acquiring vocabulary and improving linguistic competence. He emphasizes its role in vocabulary acquisition, grammatical comprehension, and the development of critical reading skills. Additionally, it has been argued that grammar is more effectively acquired through exposure to grammatical structures in real contexts. This review also underscores how reading contributes to the effective integration of the four communicative skills, providing a bridge between them.

Israel (2017) points to the critical reading model developed by Anderson and Freebody (1981), which emphasizes the comprehension and analysis of texts as an effective tool for developing reading skills in a foreign language. On the other hand, regarding the integration of the Four Communicative Skills, the studies by Roscoe, A. and Al-Mahrooqi, R. (2014) have highlighted the importance of integrating the four communicative skills in language learning. Reading, by fostering comprehension and written expression, plays an essential role in this integration. Citing Fernández (2021):

From a linguistic point of view, reading is essential for achieving literacy: it is intimately connected with writing, and both, in turn, with the processes of speaking and listening, with which they have a complex relationship that feeds both oral and written communication. In fact, when reading, different linguistic skills come into play. (p. 32). Hamel (2021) states, "Considering that both reading and writing are central teaching objects at all educational levels and in all subjects, their development requires specific teaching methods and time" (p.77). Reading and writing are fundamental competencies for educational success as they permeate all areas of knowledge. Their proper development requires specialized teaching methods, as evidenced by the "challenges encountered" mentioned by the author.

Figuroa (2020) states, "Currently, reading is perceived as a complex cognitive activity. Hence, reading often becomes a genuine challenge for students and teachers" (p.421). Today, there is an awareness of the complex mental activity that underlies reading, making it a pedagogical challenge. Understanding a text involves activating perceptual, linguistic, thinking, and metacognitive processes in a coordinated manner. From deciphering words and sentences to relating meanings and main ideas, making inferences, connecting information with prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating the consistency of ideas are just some of the multiple subprocesses required in reading. Each one can represent a difficulty, especially for students with certain special needs.

It is therefore not surprising that reading has become a barrier for so many students. For instance, a look at the results in national and international reading comprehension assessments. For example, in the 2018 PISA test, 77% of Latin American students did not reach the desired levels; similarly, the English level of students in public institutions remains very low, as demonstrated by the Ministry of National Education's historical report on SABER 11 results (2021). This limits their possibilities for further education and reduces future job opportunities. Addressing this problem requires conceiving reading as a formative priority and as a strategic process.



For Alcaraz et al (2021), assuming the complexity of reading as a cognitive process must lead to a transformation in teaching. This demands a joint commitment from educational policies, teacher training programs, administrators, families, and, of course, teachers themselves. Only by working in a coordinated manner is it possible to turn this challenge into a genuine opportunity for improvement in schools. Reading helps students understand the structure of the language and its use in oral and written discourse, contributing to effective communication in English. Integrating the four communicative skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) is essential for effective communication in English. The literature review supports the notion that reading plays a central role in this integration.

In Vocabulary Development, Nation's research (2020) considers extensive reading an effective way to acquire vocabulary, as students are exposed to a variety of words in authentic contexts. Exposure to the language through reading provides authentic contexts and is a proven strategy for enriching students' lexicon. Longman and Hulstijn (2001) argue that repeated reading of words in different contexts helps students consolidate their lexical knowledge. Regarding the focus on grammar, Krashen (1985) suggests that exposure to grammar through reading is less intimidating and more effective than the explicit learning of grammatical rules.

Successful Case Studies, such as those conducted by Horwitz (2008) and Lee (2015), document successful experiences in implementing reading in English as a foreign language learning programs, highlighting how this strategy has significantly improved students' linguistic competence. The existing literature strongly supports the thesis that reading plays an essential role in learning English as a foreign language. It provides a solid foundation for vocabulary acquisition, grammatical comprehension, and the integration of the four communicative skills, which ultimately contributes to the development of more effective linguistic competencies and effective communication in English. This literature review lays the groundwork for the pedagogical approach proposed in this article, which highlights the importance of reading in the process of learning a foreign language.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach: This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the effects of reading in English as a foreign language among students at a public school. Specifically, it utilized a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and perspectives. The participants were 120 students enrolled in the 8th and 9th grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program at a public secondary school in Medellín, Colombia. Purposive sampling was used to select students representing a variety of English proficiency levels and reading abilities. All participants were between the ages of 13 and 17 with at least 5 years of prior instruction in English as a foreign language.

DATA COLLECTION

Multiple sources of qualitative data were collected over a 24-week period:

Student journals: Participants kept weekly journals documenting their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about English reading activities.

Classroom observations: The researcher conducted participant observations of the English as a foreign language class, focusing on students' participation and behavior during reading lessons.

Semi-structured interviews - Individual interviews with students were conducted to explore their perceptions in greater depth. Students' written work samples, reading logs, and other relevant artifacts from the reading program were collected.

DATA ANALYSIS

All data sources were analyzed using established qualitative methods:



Student journals and interviews were transcribed and coded for emergent themes using open and axial coding techniques. Classroom observation notes underwent content analysis through Atlas TI software to identify patterns related to student participation and engagement.

An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes and interpretations to emerge from the data itself. Researcher reflexivity and member checking with participants were employed to enhance trustworthiness. The qualitative case study design allowed for an exploratory examination of how reading in English affected EFL students' experiences, attitudes, and perceived competencies within their school context. Strict ethical protocols regarding informed consent, privacy, and data security were followed. Finally, through the obtained results and their analysis, the following observations, conclusions and reflections were reached.

REFLECTIONS

The literature review has made it clear that reading is a fundamental tool in the process of learning a foreign language, as it not only promotes comprehension and written expression, but also contributes to a better understanding of spoken English, as students become familiar with patterns of authentic language. This pedagogical approach offers students a solid foundation for mastering the language and more fluent communication in English. As a result, reading is positioned as a key strategy that deserves greater attention in foreign language teaching regarding the aspects as integration of communicative skills, vocabulary, and context.

Integration of Communicative Skills

Learning a foreign language is a complex process that involves acquiring four fundamental skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These skills are interdependent and complement each other to achieve effective communication in a language other than one's native tongue. Reading in a foreign language plays a crucial role in integrating these skills, as it acts as a link that connects and strengthens communicative competencies. Reading is a bridge towards developing listening skills. When reading aloud in a foreign language, the listener is exposed to the correct pronunciation of words and phrases, allowing the student to hear the correct pronunciation and intonation. This auditory exposure is essential for understanding spoken language and improving listening comprehension. Reading also contributes to the acquisition of a greater variety of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, which also enriches oral communication. Ruiz (2011) indicates that if students want to become good readers of a wide range of texts in a foreign language, they must recognize at least 95 percent of the words they may encounter.

On the other hand, reading strengthens writing ability in a foreign language. By reading texts written in a foreign language, the learner becomes familiar with grammatical structures and writing conventions. This allows them to develop an intuition for grammatical rules and textual coherence, which is essential for producing clear and effective writing. Reading also provides examples of style and tone, which is useful when writing essays, emails, or other types of texts. Furthermore, by reading literary texts, the reader is exposed to a wider range of vocabulary and writing styles, which enriches their ability to express themselves in writing.

Grammatical Structures

Learning a foreign language is a challenge that involves many facets, with grammar being one of the most crucial areas. Grammar is the structure that supports a language, and understanding and mastering it is fundamental for effective communication. In this context, reading in a foreign language emerges as a powerful tool to facilitate the learning of grammar. Reading in a foreign language offers constant exposure to grammatical structures in authentic contexts. As students read texts in the target language, they encounter real examples of how grammatical rules are used in written communication. This exposure allows them to see grammar in action and understand its practical application. Instead of learning abstract rules in isolation, students can see how they are used in real situations, facilitating understanding and internalization of grammatical structures.



As Castaño (2021) states, when reading, students see how grammatical structures are used in complete sentences and paragraphs. This allows them to grasp nuances of usage and understand how grammar contributes to the coherence and clarity of the text. Exposure to grammar in its natural context makes it easier to understand the rules and apply them effectively in writing and speaking. Instead of being limited to memorizing rules, students find examples of how verbs are conjugated, how verb tenses are formed, how prepositions are used, and how phrases are constructed in practice. This enriches their grammatical knowledge by providing them with a greater diversity of examples and contexts that reinforce their understanding of the rules.

VOCABULARY

Acquiring a foreign language is an exciting challenge that opens the door to new cultures, opportunities, and perspectives. One of the crucial aspects of this process is learning vocabulary, as without a solid understanding of words and their meanings, communication in a language other than one's native tongue becomes almost impossible. In this context, reading in a foreign language emerges as an essential tool for enriching one's lexicon and deepening knowledge of the language.

First and foremost, reading provides constant exposure to words and phrases in various contexts. When reading in a foreign language, one encounters vocabulary in authentic and relevant situations, allowing for a more effective understanding of its use and meaning than simply memorizing lists of words. Mijares (2014) argues that reading in any language constitutes a means of communication and transmission of the cultural and scientific heritage of peoples. Becoming a competent reader today, more than a luxury, has become a necessity, based on the wealth of written information that people need to understand daily. Through reading, the reader immerses themselves in stories, articles, essays, and texts of diverse nature, which facilitates the comprehension and retention of vocabulary. Furthermore, reading in a foreign language gradually expands lexical knowledge. Starting with simpler texts and progressing to more complex content allows the reader to acquire vocabulary according to their level of proficiency. This gradual progression fosters continuous learning and avoids the frustration that can arise from facing overly advanced texts. In this way, reading becomes an adaptable tool that adjusts to the individual needs of each student. Reading in a foreign language also promotes contextual understanding of vocabulary. While reading, meanings can be inferred from the context, which helps internalize words more effectively. Through reading, one learns how words are used in phrases and paragraphs, allowing for an understanding of their nuances and connotations. This contextual approach is essential for acquiring a complete mastery of a language and avoiding misunderstandings in communication.

READING AND CONTEXT

Learning a foreign language is an exciting process that involves much more than simply memorizing vocabulary and grammatical rules. To achieve effective communicative competence in a language other than one's native tongue, it is essential to understand how words and grammatical structures are used in real-life situations. Reading in a foreign language plays a fundamental role in this process, as it provides a contextualized learning experience.

Reading in a foreign language offers a window into real life in the language being learned. Reading allows for the encounter with words and grammatical structures in authentic contexts, allowing for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of their use and meaning. Instead of learning isolated words or abstract grammatical rules, students have the opportunity to see how they are applied in concrete situations. This helps them develop a more complete and contextualized understanding of the language.

A key aspect of contextual learning through reading is exposure to different styles and registers of the language. Texts vary depending on their genre, purpose, and audience. By reading a variety of materials, such as books, magazines, newspapers, blogs, and literature, students become familiar with different writing styles and forms of communication. This allows them to adapt their language and comprehension to different contexts and situations, which is essential for effective communication in real life.



Reading in a foreign language also fosters an understanding of implicit meanings and nuances of language. Every language has words and expressions with meanings that go beyond the literal definition. Through reading, students can grasp these nuances and learn to use language effectively. As they immerse themselves in literary texts, poetry, or even social media messages, they develop a sensitivity to the subtleties of the language that goes beyond basic grammatical rules. By providing real-life examples of how words and grammatical structures are used in specific cultural contexts, reading exposes students to the norms and linguistic conventions of a given cultural community. Each culture has its own norms and linguistic conventions, and through reading, students can learn to communicate precisely in a different cultural environment. Understanding the customs, values, and ways of thinking of a linguistic community is essential to avoid misunderstandings and build meaningful relationships. Hamel et al. (2021) state, "Reading comprehension is an essential communicative skill in the teaching of foreign languages as a fundamental means for knowledge and communication" (p. 3). Reading comprehension is, undoubtedly, an indispensable communicative skill in the teaching of foreign languages. It is a fundamental means for both the acquisition of knowledge and effective communication.

In the foreign language classroom, adequate reading comprehension enhances learning at all levels. It allows students to expand their vocabulary in a contextualized manner, understand and learn new grammatical structures, become familiar with pragmatic elements and communicative functions, improve spelling and writing, among other benefits. It even facilitates the development of other skills: better reading comprehension leads to better oral and written expression.

CONCLUSIONS

The learning of English as a foreign language through reading as the primary strategy has been thoroughly explored, understanding it as an essential tool in the process that plays a crucial role in the integration of the four communicative skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Through reading, students not only improve their reading comprehension skills but also strengthen their ability to express themselves in English. Grammar is acquired by observing its use in real-life communication situations. Learning English as a foreign language through reading not only provides a strong foundation in vocabulary and grammar but also fosters an understanding of authentic cultural contexts, which is essential for successful communication. Actively encouraging and monitoring reading comprehension must be a permanent objective in foreign language classrooms, given its impact on both communicative competence and academic success. It requires pedagogical willingness, teacher preparation, appropriate teaching resources, and a conviction of its importance in the comprehensive education of students. The initial quote could not be more accurate: it is an essential communicative skill and a fundamental means for knowledge, which means that the necessary conditions and strategies for its optimal development must be ensured.

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