

READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCED FOREIGN LANGUAGE
STUDENTS TO DEVELOP AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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NOTE OF LIABILITY

The ideas and conclusions reached in the following paper are the sole responsibility of the author

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RESUMEN

A lo largo de los tiempo, nosotros los maestros del Inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) o como segunda lengua (ESL) hemos observado cómo los aprendices de la segunda lengua luchan cuando se enfrenta a un entorno de lectura, causando desaliento y molestia sobre el idioma. Este fenómeno de lectura ha sido investigado por muchos lingüistas, psicólogos, maestros, profesores de idiomas y algunos otros que están deseosos de encontrar soluciones que puedan ser reparadas, y aminorar tales impedimentos de aprendizaje, y al mismo tiempo engendra autosuficiente y aprendices autónomos que puede gestionar su propio aprendizaje y sobrevivir fuera del entorno protegido del aula, además de estos alumnos son capaces de recrear percepción de necesidad, conocimiento de los estilos individuales de aprendizaje, capacidad de fijar metas, monitorear su propio proceso de aprendizaje, y llevar a cabo la autoevaluación. En este estudio he compilado y apoyado la importancia del aprendizaje autónomo (lectura) y la generación de estrategias de lectura natural para facilitar el aprendizaje autónomo.

ABSTRACT

Along the time, we, EFL or ESL teachers have observed how second language learners struggle when confronting to a reading environment, causing discourage and language nuisance. This reading-tilt salient phenomenon has been researched for many linguists, psychologists, teachers, language teachers and some others who are eager to find solutions which can mend and ameliorate such learning hindrance, and at the same time engenders self-sufficient and autonomous learners who can manage their own learning and survive outside the sheltered environment of the classroom, besides such learners are able to recreate perception of needs, knowledge of individual learning styles, ability to set goals, monitor their own learning process, and carry out self-evaluation. In this study I have compiled and supported the importance of autonomous learning (reading) and the generation of natural reading strategies to facilitate autonomous learning.

CONTENT

	Pag
INTRODUCCION	7
ABSTRACT	5
WHAT DOES RESEACH TELL US ABOUT READING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE	9
AUTONOMY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNIG AND READING DEVELOPMENT	10
THE READING PROCESS	11
Reading as a Psycholinguistic Process	13
Reading as a Unitary and Selective Process	13
READING AND READING COMPREHESION	13
READING STRATEGIES	15
Metacognitive Strategies	17
Cognitive Strategies	18
Support Strategies	18
PRE-READING ACTIVITY	19
READING ACTIVITY	19
PROJECT ASSIGNMENT	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY	22

INTRODUCTION

In the last several decades, theories and models of reading have changed, from seeing reading as primarily receptive processes from text to reader to an interactive process between the reader and the text (Adams, 1990, Eskey and Grabe, 1988, Perfetti, 1985, Samuels, 1994, Stanovich, 1992, and Swaffar, 1988). Approaches to the teaching of foreign language reading have attempted to reflect this development through interactive exercises and tasks. The use of questions about a reading is an integral aspect of such activities, and in our experiences as language teachers we have seen that well-designed comprehension questions help students to interact with the text to create or construct meaning and in this way help in the development of autonomous learning.

According to Wallace(1992 p 19-32) reading is the awareness in which we use language. This knowledge is used for a purpose and it only makes sense in a context that is a part of a larger text or a situation. This purpose depends on the needs of the reader, to learn something, or just for pleasure, for these personal reasons the reading becomes highly selective, for this reason some parts of a text or a full reading might be read with greater care than others. Due to the reasons above and considering that Reading is a common activity in our daily lives, it is important to make students aware of the reading strategies and their use to improve the process of reading in order to make of it a comprehensible, interesting and enjoyable source of knowledge.

This work presents the students the most accurate use of certain reading strategies which have been supported and experienced by many important researchers. These strategies will enhance user's efficient learning level of reading to develop an autonomous reading learning process.

Researchers have been focusing on the topic how to promote the autonomous ability of the students during the last 20 years. Therefore, autonomous learning should be promoted in order to

develop students' interest in Advanced English teaching for the requirements of Advanced English Courses and modern language teaching theory. From autonomous learning, they can become independent thinkers and have a clear view of the purpose, aim and way of learning and the choice of materials in learning. Based on the above assertion, it is necessary to create a habit of reading as an effective tool to improve our communicative skills.

It is clear that, throughout our formative years, we have all read, in greater or lesser extent, a lot of texts or books tailored to our level besides, if we could analyze the benefits acquired through those readings probably we will come to the conclusion that much of the time spent on it has been beneficial indeed. However much of this reading has not been as significant as expected due to the lack of appropriate strategies for comprehension.

For Grellet (1981 p 34-98), reading comprehension means “extracting the required information as efficiently as possible” for him the main ways of reading are as follows:

- Skimming: This skill happens when the reader takes a glance of the text for the main points.
- Scanning: This skill occurs when the reader goes rapidly through a text to find a specific piece of information.
- Extensive reading: Reading longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is an activity mainly involving global understanding.
- Intensive reading: Reading shorter texts, to obtain specific information. This is an activity involving reading for detail.

From the cognitive view, reading comprehension, which is the construction of meaning from a printed or written message, is a conversation between reader and author, and thus the widely accepted models of fluent reading is an interactive one in which a variety of processes interact

with text features. There are many factors influencing reading comprehension such as reader's characteristics, nature of reading materials, and reading tasks, etc. Learning strategies are important and should be paid attention to because they are one of the major applications of cognitive theory. Oxford (1990 p 19-22) claims that "learning strategies are behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable". Learning strategies are processes students use to make their own language learning effective and possible.

The learning strategies are categorized as: cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective. A good implementation of these strategies at very early stages of reading will generate students' apprehensiveness to go beyond the borders of the classroom and initiate them in the reading autonomy field.

Therefore, all students at any learning level, but in special those at beginning ESL levels, are required to be induced in the reading comprehension process and reading strategies, in order to facilitate their future development. This process could be carefully carried out by the teachers especially at the beginner level, based on the learners' preferences (likes, social background and language proficiency). In this way inductive strategies are going to appear as the reading activities are carried on.

What Does Research Tell Us about Reading in a Second Language?

Grabe, (1991), Carell, Devine, Eskey (1988), Goodman, (1978), Huddleston, (1981) found that the process of reading in English in a second language is as similar as the one of reading English as a first language. What Grabe and the authors listed above mean with that assertion confirms that both, first and second language readers use many strategies for reading, and that the reading

process is purpose dependent. It is the context and the type of text, what matters, and then readers can interpret the text making relationships between the linguistic systems, and the use of their prior knowledge to predict and confirm meaning.

Autonomy in second language learning and reading development

Autonomy is a process of learning based on learners' own experiences and ability to develop critical reflection, decision making and independent action (Breen & Mann 1997 p 132-149).

To facilitate students' autonomy and to help them to develop their metacognitive capacity (to leave behind the teacher controlled activities to become self-sufficient reader), teachers are required to facilitate effective learning strategies. Learners need to take the control of their learning process to make it significant and part of their lives. Students are able to choose their own reading scenario, this implies, the material to be read is selected by themselves according to their interest.

Teachers are responsible of facilitating all the possible cooperation and instruction that help students to become autonomous.

Nunan (1997 p 48-53) mentions achieving "degrees of autonomy" which range from making students aware of the learning goals and materials, to making links between the content of classroom learning and the outside world.

According to Nunan, autonomous learners can be characterized as:

- willing and having the capacity to control or supervise learning
- knowing their own learning style and strategies
- motivated to learn

- Good guessers
- choosing materials, methods and tasks
- exercising choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen task
- selecting the criteria for evaluation
- taking an active approach to the task
- making and rejecting hypotheses
- paying attention to both form and content
- Willing to take risks (adapted from Dam, 1990, Wenden, 1998).

The Reading Process

According to Greenwood (1988 p 56-62), reading is divided in three parts:

-Pre-reading: In the pre-reading stages the readers need:

1. Interesting topics.
2. A purpose to read.
3. Some introduction and preparation for the text.

- While-reading: The goals of the while-reading are:

1. To comprehend the aim of the writer.
2. To understand the linguistic forms.

-Post- reading: The goals of post-reading are:

1. To demonstrate knowledge about what has been read.
2. To relate the text with the background knowledge.

Considering the division made by Greenwood, we could clearly see that the steps above contain the bases to carry out the learner toward his autonomous learning process.

Reading becomes significant, and readers become more fluent as long as reading is conducted because readers assign more meaning to what they read; besides they are actively involved in a reading dynamic process. The reader can assign meaning to the reading and the reading to the reader, nevertheless this meaning creation is directly related with factors such as: context, culture, time, situation and some others. (top down process)

On the other hand, reading is also the recognition of sounds, letters, syllables and words proceeding from outside stimulus. (Bottom up process).

For advanced readers, the bottom up and top down process comes simultaneously in scene, so readers' mind transaction (schema), and the language of the text get together to give meaning to the reader.

From this view, reading instruction takes into account comprehension strategies since the beginning stages of reading, however, some arguments say that the initial point for reading instruction should be knowledge or interpretation of the text.

In other words, what one could infer from the above is that the reading process takes in consideration not only the literature itself but the context, which goes beyond the borders as is the societal influence in meaning giving or meaning interpretation. It also entails reading is not only a part of meaning creation, reading is also a process that bears students with meaningful direct syntax and helps readers in the goal of full filling a vast amount of vocabulary in order to increase their lexicon, and their syntactical knowledge.

Reading as a Psycholinguistic Process

Frank Smith (1971 p 126-135) describes reading as a process in which there are different results of comprehension. He describes reading as “the reduction of uncertainty”, that is, as we progress

through a text, our choices depend on graphic, phonetic, syntactic and semantic information. Fluent readers predict and sample, selecting the minimal visual information consistent with their prediction.

The reading process is not only a chain of symbols; it is also the result of many situational and internal feelings. The result of comprehension and interpretation of texts shows the different linguistic and social contexts of readers.

Reading as a Unitary and Selective Process

The main principle of Smith's (1971 p 126-135) and Goodman's (1989 p 65), approach is that reading is a unitary process, which Lunzer and Gardner (1979) describe as a 'unitary aptitude'.

This view establishes that it is not possible to take into account skills as more important than others. "This unitary view of the reading process has led researchers to talk about reading strategies rather than distinct skills, which are determined by reader purpose, text type, and context. (p28).

Reading and Reading Comprehension

Theodore Clymer cited by Lamb and Arnold (1980 p 236-240), approaches a definition of reading by citing four aspects of the reading process:

1. The reader's first task, he says, is decoding the author's message.
2. The reader's next task is to understand the author's message.
3. The third aspect of reading, according to Clymer is the interpretation of the author's message.
4. Finally, readers relate the author's message with their behaviour and also internalize the message.

According to Carrell(1988 p 48) “Reading is by far the most important of the four skills in a second language, particularly in English as a second or foreign language”. Second and foreign language learners can build much of their vocabulary based on literature, as they do not have an ample background of the language as well as the culture. Books, magazines and some other reading materials are a great source of information, and later this information becomes part of learners’ repertoire. Due to this, we have to understand that comprehension is the core of a wide and complex function of reasoning. Learners benefit really much from reading understanding. Their benefits embrace linguistic, cultural, and personal gains.

Parallel to the above, when a student has difficulties answering comprehension questions, it indicates a text is too difficult for him/her and they are not retaining the information from the text being read.

Fountas&Pinnell(2007 p 385-430) provides for different kinds of learning in different ways; each element has a function related to students’ ability to construct meaning. These components work together to form a unified whole and create a solid base from which to build comprehension.

Both fluency and accuracy can impact comprehension in reading. A study conducted by Fountas and Pinnell (1996 p 186) “of over one thousand fourth graders’ oral reading fluency found that rate, fluency, and accuracy were all highly related to comprehension”. When a student’s reading is not fluent and accurate, it is more difficult for the student to comprehend what he/she has read due to the amount of time taken to decode words and complete the reading selection.

Fluency, accuracy, and comprehension are all aspects associated with reading. The purpose of including and examining each of these aspects in reading is to meet the needs of all the students in the classroom to teach students to read increasingly difficult texts with understanding and

fluency; to construct meaning while using problem solving strategies, and understand concepts or ideas not previously understood.

Reading Strategies

According to Oxford (1990 p 8-19) there is a set of strategies which will help to read more proficiently. To read efficiently you must be able to find in a passage the information which is necessary for the purpose the reader has when reading; this means you can often pay no attention to what is not relevant for your purpose when reading. To find out about this purpose the student should use tools like skimming and scanning which helps the learner to read in order to get general ideas in the text, and scanning which is reading in a deep way the text in order to obtain specific details. Moreover if the learner reads in a deep way, it is useful to take into account supporting strategies such as: highlighting, underlining, annotating, these processes emphasize information in the learner's mind, and it is helpful to review important and specific information. In occasions the learner has no knowledge of vocabulary, phrases, and concepts. In these cases it is necessary that the learner deduces the meaning from the context by referring to the words, phrases, and concepts that the learner knows. Similarly there are particular situations where the reading presents the repetition of words through the text, and then the learner may refer back to words used in other sentences, analyse the information and the meaning of the text or passage. The readers' selection of goals and objectives into the reading are followed by the questioning of what, why, how and when. Reading strategies are applied as well as an evaluation of the use of these strategies. As a result, reading strategies' knowledge is not enough and the application order becomes important. At this step the *metacognitive strategies* suit as a tool to organize the use of the strategies.

Another reading strategy is described by Irwin (1991) that states students increase reading and comprehension of a text thinking aloud or hearing others think aloud. Haenggi and Perfettip(1992 p 182-192) promoted rereading to make readers feel more confident when they answer a comprehension test. According to Nist and et al (1996 p 246) rereading is more effective than strategies like annotation and concept maps in learning the information in a sociology text. Marxen (1996 p 33-88-96) showed that rereading was as effective as underlining when learners read a business passage. Subjects who read a history text twice remember more information than others who read three times. However, people who read the text three times remember more details than main ideas. In a different study Taguchi (1997 p 11-97-119) sees that repeated reading may be a way to improve fluency in reading and in word recognition skills.

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive Strategies are a set of planned techniques internationally applied, used by learners to monitor or manage their reading. These strategies include having a purpose in mind, previewing the text as to its length and organization, or using typographical aids, tables and figures.

According to Eskey(1986 p 223) predicting or verifying predictions of the reading strategy is important when monitoring comprehension.

On the other hand, verbal reports can be involved in metacognition. According to Auerbach and Paxton(1997 p 342-237-261), metacognition, involves monitoring comprehension and skill to adapt strategies as needed. To hear the process of using and analyse reading strategies make learners aware of strategies for processing texts. Cohen (1990 p 67) suggests that when readers are conscious of what reading strategies they are using while they read, they can have more

options to improve their reading. Maclean and D'Anglejan(1986 p 42-814-826) say that the use of verbal reports is a beneficial metacognitive strategy.

Another metacognitive strategy can be that readers ask questions or questioning about material they do not understand, and try to do it according to clarifications from the teacher and other students. In this way, Grabe(1991 p 375-406) finds the importance of reading instruction, and then teachers can ask readers what is not comprehended in the text.

Dubin and Bicina(1991 p 195-215) suggest *anticipated guides*. This strategy works in reading when learners realize they have knowledge about the content of the topic; share their ideas with other students. Then in a pre-reading discussion it could be useful to analyse the expectations and predictions of the reading, and relates also the background knowledge with the reading.

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive Strategies are the planned actions readers take when comprehension problems develop.

These are procedures which the readers use while they are reading directly the text, e.g.

questioning the meaning of unknown words and rereading the text. According to O'Malley and Chamot(1990) cognitive strategies are more directly related to individual learning tasks and entail direct manipulation or transformation of the learning materials.

One cognitive strategy can be summarizing which is reducing large selections of readings to the key ideas, the main points, taking into account the general idea in a brief form.

Supporting Strategies

Supporting Strategies are the tools readers seek out to aid comprehension (using a dictionary, taking notes, underlining and highlighting the text.) In the pre-reading phase readers can have

language preparation, interest, learner's knowledge of the world, linguistic knowledge, ideas and opinion. In this phase readers generate vocabulary related to the text topic and interchange background knowledge, with peer, teacher or himself/herself. In this phase the students skim the text or read quickly the piece of text giving importance to the main ideas, after they try to read more carefully the text (scanning the text) and pay greater attention to important information, and try to relate the important points in order to comprehend all the text, in this phase students get to make questions about the text themselves.

In the second phase, when the student is reading he can reconsider the questions that he did in the pre-reading phase, after the student can take into account the background knowledge and relate it with the text content, also the student may pay attention to headings and sub-headings, and also interpreted causes and consequences about the facts on the reading or guess what will happen on the reading.

While, the student is reading he may predict the fact of the text about what will follow next, pay greater attention to the meaning of key words from the context which are essential to know the whole understanding of the text, and the student can take into account an aid which is the use of the dictionary (support strategies) or underline key words or main ideas in order to remember special points in the text. Also, the student, depending on the concentration, can visualize or imagine the descriptions which are done in the text; these are an aid to memorize features of characters, important places, different times and space in the text. An important point is that the student does not forget the purpose of the reading, while, he is reading.

After reading, the student can prove if the anticipated ideas were correct, and try to keep and pay attention on his/her own goals from the reading, or take into account relevant information for the

purpose of the reading. Depending on the purpose of the reading the student can change his/her style of reading.

It depends on the need of the student if he wants to summarize the text while or after he reads the text. According to Chen and Graves p 663-687(1995) a summary is more effective than providing background knowledge or pre-reading.

Pre-Reading Activity:

10 pictures which are really close connected to the topic are going to be presented to the students. They will give their ideas of what they now about each picture; so they can get a general view about the topic, and when the topic gets presented in detail it would be easier to be understood.

Reading Activity:

GLOBAL WARMING

Heat from the sun is held in the Earth's atmosphere by natural greenhouse gases. These keep the planet warm and without them the average temperature would be about -18°C instead of 14°C. However, more and more heat is being kept in the atmosphere because of man-made greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide (CO₂), which is produced by burning oil, gas and coal. This global warming is already causing changes in the weather all over the world.

Since the 1970s, average global temperatures have risen by about 0.6°C and many scientists believe that more extreme weather conditions have been caused by climate change in recent years. For example, New Orleans was hit by a huge hurricane in 2005. Many people were killed

and thousands were made homeless. And in the summer of 2003, 15,000 people in France died as a result of a heat wave.

Experts believe that more and more places are going to be affected by climate change in the future. And as the ice caps at the North and South Poles melt and sea levels rise further, many towns and villages near the coast will be flooded. This is a frightening thought because more than half the world's population lives near the coast

A lot has been written about what governments and businesses should do to slow down global warming. However, there's also a lot we can do to save energy at home. For example, always turn off TVs, DVD players and computer machines use 70% as much electricity on stand-by as when they're being used. Many other useful tips can be found on public information websites.

First activity, (30 seconds) students are scanning or skimming the text above and tell the rest of the class what the main idea is in the text. The teacher formulates questions and explores vocabulary.

Questions:

1. What is the earth average temperature?
2. What are the types of greenhouse gases?
3. How can Co₂ be produced?
4. How catastrophic could be the rising in earth temperature?
5. How will climate change affect the world in the future?
6. What should be done to stop the global warming?

Second activity, timed reading: (2 minutes) students are to read the passage once again, but now, they have a longer period of time to do a more detailed reading within a limit of time, besides they are required to underline the parts of the passage where answers are found, so the learners are able to give accurate responses to the questions above.

Final activity, (5 minutes) students are going to do silent reading, during this reading process, they incorporate all passage details as the reading is done at their own pace.

At the end of this activity, students are capable to supply accurate and detailed answer to the questions above.

Project Assignment:

Students are required to conduct a home reading about the effects of Forest Fire in Global Warming, which they will be presented to the class as an oral or written file. According to teacher's and student's agreement.

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