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## **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# READING COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Reading comprehension represents a fundamental orientation for the development of linguistic skills on human beings: speaking, listening, reading and writing. The process is focused on English as a foreign language. Moreover, it is an approach that serves as a reference for developing the educative and formative short, medium- and long-term processes. Understanding how you read is related with the capacity of understanding students in a language, and knowing how to use it in a specific context. Restructuring of knowing "what" and knowing "how" plays a role in student's learning process. Besides, the communicative competence: linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic are required in that process. These ones settle on the meaning of words which are elements of a text and comprehension itself. Reading comprehension on mother tongue and a foreign language has got obstacles for administrative or cultural causes. Nowadays, consequences for education are not free. In fact, comprehension process directly or indirectly influences cognitive, social and personal performance. Although theories and concepts, the negative results are still appearing. Reading comprehension in English as a foreign language is inherent in the students' education, its development is the result of a right action of didactics, pedagogy and curriculum. Therefore, the learning process is deeply affected. The most poignant is nobody does anything regarding it. Analysis and get answers might change this situation.

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# **INTRODUCTION**

The process of reading comprehension in English as a foreign language has got problems and its precarious results are not free in the different levels of education. Its causes come from fields such as economics and politics. Unfortunately, interests and needs of students are placed in a second hand; then these kinds of actions influence in a negative way the teaching/learning process of a foreign language. Never before there were many countries that needed to talk to each other. Even, there have never been many people who have wanted to travel to other countries (Cristal, 1998). In fact, in Europe, educational institutions implement teaching of many foreign languages to improve communication of the population, likewise quality of life. As a result, the educative community in Colombia is expected to speak a foreign language, because globalization demands it. Nevertheless, students are not aware of that need, then when they face in English through communicative situations, their performance is not right. Didactics directly influences in this process because according to how it is taught, students show disposition to learn or disinterest in activities inside and outside the educational context.

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Habits of people do not take limits of linearity. In educational and social fields, the uncertainty is killing them. The most poignant aspect of reading comprehension is that to the mother tongue and the foreign language, the final results do not change. Learning process is characterized by flexibility, moving away from rigidity. In fact, student converges in a flexible culture which influences to understand the reading. The goal of this article is to share concepts about reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. Basically, it describes and analyzes why there are empty concepts when individuals talk regarding teaching/learning process of that language.

Theoretical Framework: In this section, some ideas of reading comprehension in English are taken. Particularly, concepts that are shared by Paula Carlino, PhD in Psychology by the Autonomous University of Madrid. Likewise, she is a researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council – CONICET. Her approach is based on training of readers and writers, researches in psycholinguistics, cognitive and cultural psychology and production of texts. Besides, Klintsch and Steffenson & Joag-Dev are reading specialists. Also, Brown, Armbruster, Baker, Van Dijk and Goodman are theories of reference about topic taken. The literature taken by Paula Carlino addresses reading comprehension. Examples of them are the books called "Escribir, leer v aprenderen la

universidad", 1st and 2nd editions, Buenos Aires, Argentina. These books explain the importance of writing and reading skills. These ones serve as learning strategies to develop the cognitive dimension on different areas of knowledge. Students do not evolve towards a higher-order thinking skills during the process of transition from middle and high school to college or university, because their formation is characterized to be inactive and immobile. Thinking of student has to change during the educational process; action that becomes in the main character to get that goal. One of the premises regarding reading comprehension is the need to encourage pupils to read, because this activity provides strategies in intellectual production. Actually, information that professors transmit to the students is only an introduction that they can go to the sources that have referenced. Something in common, it is that professors think the readings help the learning/teaching process in different areas of knowledge. In this sense, students able to commit and cooperate to increase the number of words read daily, keeping in touch with academic production of a discipline. Well, when it has a context where knowledge related to the English as a foreign language is imparted, an interactive activity is practiced. Therefore, ideas and notions travel. A discipline is characterized for being discursive, rhetorical and conceptual. Moreover, learning process is more than acquiring concepts and methods; but managing his or her reading and writing skills. Becoming a community of knowledge implies appropriating its instituted uses to produce and interpret texts. As a result, teaching process has to deal with reading to generate critical thinking in students. In reality, there are specific aspects such as capacity of attention, environment, and development of senses which influence on reading comprehension in English as a foreign language in students.

According to that, it could be demonstrated how people read and remember something in different ways. Also, it is important to say that reading process in English differs from the mother tongue because the domain of the first one will be less than the second one (except in cases of bilingualism). Therefore, learning strategies take relevance in reading comprehension. Undoubtedly, a fundamental theoretical reference in the conception of reading comprehension is scheme theory. In the 70s, scholars from United States elaborated reading theories that emphasize the role of readers and knowledge that characterize that thinking skill. Scheme theory proposes that students read for developing different structures of reference which are activated during reading and are used to make sense of what they read (Goodman; Smith; 2014). These schemes allow readers to check their reading comprehension, fill information gaps and clarify ambiguities. Likewise, a practical reader references his/her prior knowledge to obtain text features. So, integration of previous knowledge with new information serves as a learning strategy. Researches concerning reading comprehension are based on the fact that reading is reconstructing text with cognitive backgrounds of readers. As a consequence, reading allows an interactive approach between text and reader or vice versa. When a student reads, it happens multiple transactions between thinking and written language, ascending (from text to reader) as well as descending (from reader to text) (Klintsch, 2002). Accordingly, reading process is a receptive activity, but also it is a process that requires operating on the text to achieve a coherent meaning about it. The same, reading is a strategic process because it is aimed to collect knowledge of a text. Selection is a basic procedure that transforms information into

meaning. Readers cannot exclusively focus on provided information by the text, but people should manage their interests and needs; it means, what they already know, what it is worthy and new to pay attention. Independent readers read with certain goals they use to supervise their understanding, and implement some repair mechanisms when they find problems (Armbruster; Baker; 2007). To determine the importance of reading, readers omit, select, generalize, construct or integrate information contained in texts. Thanks to this process, the reader puts aside concepts, selects affirmations that allow him/her to recover others; finally, discarding, abstracting, converting and replacing ideas (Brown; Armbruster; Baker; 2007). The results of the national test on the quality of education (ECAES) have shown that students have problems in higher education when they focus on a written text in their mother tongue or foreign language. Therefore, people in different fields of education worry about that situation. Nevertheless, everybody without exception blames individuals who work in politics, economy, education, etc., no analyzing what it's really happening. Regrettably, professors have not understood that reading comprehension is so important to assimilate information. Producing and understanding writings are unavoidable ways to learn the conceptual contents of disciplines (Carlino, 2001). In other words, practicing writing and reading skills serves as learning strategies to develop the cognitive dimension, in different areas of knowledge.

In relation to reading comprehension course in a foreign language, this type of teaching aims at learning by short time (Hutchinson; Water; 1987). Well, this course does not focus on teaching the language, but it is focused on the process, and preferably the mother tongue is used as instruction. The educational purpose is to teach to learn, and to teach to develop thinking skills. Under this perspective, teaching does not mean transmitting knowledge, but creating possibilities of its construction (Freire, 2006). Therefore, teaching process is not the simple treatment of object of study, but it extends to create conditions in which it is possible to learn in a critical way, then students become knowledge builders. By the constructivist approach, students give a meaning to a specific object of study from their prior knowledge, experiences, needs and interests as well. Such a position assumes that learning is a meaningful action for learners, in which a relationship is established between what it is already known and new knowledge. On the other hand, the curriculum structures in higher education are anchored in traditional theories which are characterized by rigidity, separation between theory and practice, and isolation of contents and experiences. Likewise, these structures are carried out in a pedagogy focused on the transmission of isolated, disjointed and fragmented knowledge that precedes application or solution of problems. Unfortunately, curriculum content and organization in higher education do not make a great impact, because the establishment of limits between contents does not address to produce experiences of integrative learning. Well, national tests serve as indicators to show failures in teaching processes. Results for the development of students' linguistic skills: speaking, writing, listening and reading, which are theoretically and methodologically misguided actions. If curriculum model in higher education exceeds classical education, and it is based on an integral and multidisciplinary structure, also it addresses in development of research programs and knowledge construction, in which contents, instruments and techniques are articulated; it would benefit professional practice and it would create an integral curriculum that will provide bases for reading comprehension in English. As a consequence, that action would allow students to achieve competences and attitudes to improve their performance. In addition, negative results in English are caused by low coverage rate in terms of time and intensity each week in elementary, middle and high school. Coverage consists in expanding the possibilities to educate as many people as possible (Ramirez, 2014). Unluckily, government tries to increase it; nevertheless, this entity joins more students to the same schools. Actually, no focusing on expanding educational institutions but hiring more teachers or professors. Then, quality moves away every single day, in fact. In relation to growth in coverage that has occurred in higher education, Colombia shows worse results than countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile. Concerning quality, it is worrisome that only 10% of institutions of higher education get high-quality accreditation. Few of them appear in world rankings, different to what happens in Chile and Argentina. Besides, poor quality of teachers is other factor that influences on education in Colombia. In this country, the official teaching career (for schools, colleges and universities), is governed by two different regulations: decree 1979 (old statute) and the law 715/2001 (the new one). Specifically, the last one created a system in which teachers are remunerated according to their quality and performance at work, being measured by means of periodic evaluations. Regrettably, most of teachers belong to the old statute, which prevents to take evaluations and these ones are remunerated for their seniority.

As well as that, private universities are hiring professors without job seniority. Perhaps, they have capacities and abilities to share know what; however, without developing reconversion in terms of horizontal knowledge with know how. Also, there are professional people who studied other careers such as Business Administration, Industrial Engineering, etc., and these ones speak English because they have a certain similarity with that language. Unfortunately, individuals are unaware of didactics, pedagogy, and other factors that impact on the teaching and learning process. Personal interests are prejudicial for teaching quality, forgetting its importance in the education. So, educational context is characterized to impose events, ignoring needs and expectations of students. Likewise, unsatisfactory results regarding English teaching are caused by lack of relevance. In other words, relevance is to teach what a student really needs to know, to perform in different fields of life. In fact, what it is teaching and learning to correspond to jobs that are being offered. By way of illustration, if you study English in any International affairs; you don't exclusively need to focus on specific exchange markets. On the other hand, you need to study for handling international businesses using different currencies.

Accordingly, relevance will have to be demonstrated during the process. Economic imperatives will sweep systems away and if universities do not adapt, these ones will be put aside (The Haya, 1991). A study carried out in 2012, by English Proficiency Index (EPI EF, for its initials), measures the use of English. The sample is taken in 54 countries, the results are: the first positions places for their high level, Sweden (1), Denmark (2) and the Netherlands (3). In the middle positions, Argentina (20), Uruguay (26) and Peru (33). In the last positions, Colombia (50), Panama (51), Saudi Arabia (52), Thailand (53) and Libya (54). The main cause for the poor performance of Spanish-speaking countries is the low quality of public schools, as well as low levels of literacy that exist in

Colombia (Elizondo, 2011). Regrettably, the educational institutions of public and private sectors have not found a way to develop strategies for accustoming students for reading, speaking and writing. Consequences are not free. In addition, there are more events that show why Colombia is placed in the last positions of different tests carried out. By way of illustrations, limited access to international exchanges and poor speaking habits in English outside the classroom by students. Nevertheless, situation is more complex, when results show a worrying context on reading comprehension in English and the mother tongue. Well, reading comprehension in children, adolescents and adults in the mother tongue characterizes with poor reading skills, because they read fewer books every single day than before. Results taken in 2012 by CERLALC (Centro Regional Para el Fomento del Libro en América Latina y el Caribe), about reading indicate that Colombia is a low level in terms of number of books read per inhabitant: Argentina reads 4.6 books per inhabitant; Colombia reads 2.2; Brazil 4.0; and Chile 5.4. For real, Colombia is not a reading country: people buy few books; and as well as that, these ones do not understand what they read. Besides, low quality of English teaching in terms of teachers do not know that language (Know what). A recent study showed that only 12% of teachers reaches the minimum level of knowledge of that language. From the opposing point of view, only 7% of high school graduates who annually takes tests achieves a satisfactory score in English. Colombian students are succumbing in an international world, where it is important to know English, the language of business. In Colombia, individuals struggle to learn a foreign language. On the other hand, in European countries are required to know a third language. Accordingly, it may be referenced positive actions of different countries to improve competences of students.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research is carried out in an academic context at UCEVA University, centering on the application of a standardized lesson planner which is focused on reading comprehension. For that reason, this study is an educational research. In fact, it is closely linked with the teaching and learning process and seeks to provide possible solutions to the problems concerning reading comprehension. Likewise, this research is based on aqualitative approach, due to it provides depth to the data, interpretation, contextualization dispersion, environment, details and experiences. It also provides anatural and holistic point of view of the phenomena, as well flexibility (Hernández; Fernández; Baptista; 2014). In fact, this approach is characterized for being inductive through observation, which allows knowing and identifying skills of reading comprehension in terms of communicative competences (linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic) in students at UCEVA University. According to Sand in (2013) this research is executed based on contributions made by action research, this one intends to promote social changes and transform social, educational, economic and administrative realities. Consequently, it seeks to improve reading comprehension in students; it means, for them to be able to identify key words in texts and points of view from different authors. Regarding its scope, it is descriptive due to it focuses on characterizing students in terms of reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. This implies that the descriptive scope seeks to specify properties, characteristics and profiles of individuals, groups, communities, processes and objects which have proclivity to analysis (Sampieri, 2014). Through this scope, data about students is collected in order to know trends, language skills and reading habits. The sample is composed by 22 students of fourth semester belonging to the Bachelor's degree program in Foreign Languages focusing on English.

How do provisions influence reading comprehension in English as a foreign language?: Although in the qualitative process the researcher himself is the fundamental instrument in the collection of data; this research proposal establishes the use of different techniques, instruments for data collection and registration; because when dealing with human beings, the data that interests are concepts, perceptions, mental images, beliefs, interactions, thoughts and experiences manifested in the language of the participants, either individually, as a group or as a collective (Hernández; Fernández; Baptista; 2014). Such instruments fulfill a specific function in the investigative process because these ones allow, in the first place, to collect the most important data, to understand and analyze them, and the second one, to answer the research question and generate knowledge. In order to answer the first objective of the research proposal, which seeks to reflect the lesson plan for teaching English as a foreign language focused on the development of reading comprehension; the interview technique is established and carried out through a structured interview guide. From the works of Hernández; Fernández; Baptista (2014), other authors have made their own definitions on interview and its components, as well as for Janesick (1998) in the interview, through the questions and answers a communication is achieved and the joint construction of meanings with respect to a theme.

In this way, it is known the opinions and even experiences of each one of the subjects interviewed as the use of the didactic unit at English classes. This interview has ten open questions related to the lesson plan and the development of reading comprehension in students and it is used resources such as paper, pencil, camera and video in order to record each of the events. At the same time, it is made a questionnaire of twentyfour (24) questions with the option of multiple answers through the Google Forms to students from the first to the fourth semester of the Bachelor's degree; there, it is tackled questions related to reading habits, language skills, information and communication technology and others, in order to get the first objective. According to the second objective, to establish a lesson plan for teaching English as a foreign language; it is carried out the confirmatory experimentation technique, with which an observation guide is made, and it is used different resources such as the lesson plan, the photographic and video camera, television, computer and other means that facilitate the process. Likewise, eight lesson plans are implemented during the semester, each of them has eleven moments; among them, the simulation of the Saber-pro test in order that students can improve their communicative competence and increase reading comprehension not only for the actual application of the test but for real life. Finally, to carry out the third objective, to analyze the result of the lesson plan for teaching English as a foreign language; it is employed the observation technique, implementing an observation guide or journal taking into account the Estándares Básicos de Competenciasen Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés established by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) in the GuíaNo. 22. It is chosen this type of data collection because it allows enriching the relationship between theory and practice, in order to analyze the results obtained after the application of the lesson plan in relation to strengthening of reading comprehension

communication skills during the educational and research process.

### **RESULTS**

While it is true, reading comprehension is considered one of the most relevant psychological processes for teaching and learning in various areas of knowledge, including English; because it helps to optimize the communication skills of the students and allows them to reach critical and creative levels during the reading process. During the structured interview conducted to some of the professors of the Bachelor's degree, it is stood out the question: How many books in English have you read yearly? What type of reading do you propose to your students to engage them? since it is obtained very enriching results in terms of the practice of reading by teachers and their proposal to encourage the habit of reading with their students. On the one hand, there is the search of academic texts to learn to teach English. On the other hand, it is found reading as a hobby, in which one of the preferred genres is the novel and finally as to the proposals to engage students with this habit, professors choose the fairy tales, because they can easily be associated with different topics, and the most cited authors are William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain and Stephen King. Now, after the application of the questionnaire to the students, in the question related to the number of books read in a year, a percentage of 64.5% shows that the majority of the students read one or two books; followed by a percentage of 17.3% corresponding to students who read three or five books.

The next percentage would be 15.5% which, unfortunately, corresponds to the students who do not read; and finally, a percentage of 2.7% which shows as low number of students who read more than six books in a year. According to the question about thinking skills in the classroom, it is evident that the most developed ability is listening with a percentage of 48.2%; and speaking with 46.4%. Then, writing with a percentage of 45.5%; and finally, it is inferred that the least developed skill in the classroom is reading, with a percentage of 42.7%. However, although reading ability is not completely developed, most students (78.2%) say that they have practiced skimming and scanning strategies; and only 21.8% of students express not having them used. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the Colombian population in general has a globalized cultural impoverishment and this can be evidenced through the figures given by the Departmento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE, 2016), which shows that the reading population of Colombia is 90.7%; however, of that percentage only 47.5% reads books; finally, the rest of the population focuses on newspapers, magazines, social networks and others. At the same time, after the application of the questionnaire to the students, it is inferred that the teaching and learning of English particularly focuses on the development of grammar and vocabulary, but it is not created spaces for reading. Then, since the lesson plan does not promote or develop the habit of such activity; therefore, the level that the student is going to show in reading comprehension to be low. Contrary to this, the proposal to implement a lesson plan focused on the development of communicative competence and the strengthening of reading comprehension in the students of fourth semester, has given a total turn to the conception that people have about the teaching and learning of a foreign language, in this case English, because the activities carried out in the classroom have enabled to the students to learn that language through the resolution of problems involving the use of itself. Through this social practice, students can interact with other subjects that are part of their social reality; which allow them to be communicatively competent in the real context. Likewise, lesson plan has a component focused directly on reading comprehension activities, issues such as the current situation of the country, topics of interest and the theme of the book "Word Link". These activities were carried out through the analysis and understanding of comic strips, cartoons, statistics, images and even contextualized texts. During the observation, it was noticed that for the students it was more interesting the dynamics of changing a common reading (text) for a reading of images, graphics and others, because this allowed them to start up their imagination, to analyze in a rigorous way each one of the elements provided and, finally allowed them to develop their creativity and criticality when making a reading. Also, during the tasks it was evidenced that the students reached the Estándares Básicos de Competencias of the Guía 22 related to: assuming a critical position in front of the point of view of the author; identifying the values of other cultures to build an interpretation of their identity; using a variety of reading comprehension strategies appropriate to the purpose and type of text; and finally, making inferences from the information in a text.

#### Conclusion

Learning process should be addressed to students and contents. So, curriculum approach has to consider spaces for practicing know what and know how which should focus on capacities and abilities of students. Therefore, learning process centered on the student, it will become in an integral human being, and not a knowledge receiver. Actually, there are causes that may affect the learning process of students, for example: lack of resources and technology, quality of teachers, reading habits and poor academic stimulus to develop post graduate programs in languages. On the other hand, there are activities that influence on a positive way regarding learning process, as examples: to access to books and the implementation of regulations about reading.

## Recommendations

It is presented contributions that were observed during the process of the investigation and that are considered important issues to take into account at the time of developing reading comprehension in the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language. First, when reflecting the lesson plan as a didactic unit, it is necessary to consider mainly the likes and interests of the students, in order to generate a harmonious and enjoyable space to increase reading comprehension inside and outside the classroom. After, the fact of establishing a lesson plan may improve the educational process if it is used sequentially and through the use of points of reference (Guiding Probing Question (S), Opening Engage 5- 10 Min, etc.). Finally, analysis of the lesson plan shows that it is necessary to increase the number of hours in order to students may get better their comprehensive reading.

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