

READING FOR INFORMATION AT SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on the results obtained in a study carried out in a fifth year of a secondary school to prove the advantage of limiting the objectives of English courses to Reading Comprehension in the last year of public secondary school. The procedures used to collect the data were questionnaires, tests, the school teacher's report and the research team's report. The results of this study showed that the emphasis on reading comprehension is advisable due to the English teaching situation in the North of Argentina.

Key-words: *reading comprehension; secondary school English; reading methodology; public school English.*

Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é relatar os resultados obtidos em um estudo desenvolvido com o intuito de provar as vantagens de se limitar os objetivos em cursos de leitura em inglês no último ano da escola secundária pública. Como instrumentos de coleta foram utilizados questionários, testes, relatórios de professores e de membros da equipe de pesquisa. Os resultados demonstram que a ênfase em exercícios de compreensão é pertinente devido ao sistema educacional vigente no norte da Argentina.

Palavras-chave: *compreensão de leitura; inglês na escola secundária; metodologia de leitura; inglês na escola pública.*

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1. Introduction

After five years of public secondary school, students in the North of Argentina cannot cope at all with the four skills of the English language. Some of the factors that hinder the achievement of these skills are:

- a) there are about 30 students in each class and they only have two periods a week (one of 80' and the other of 40');
- b) the English class is the only opportunity they have of speaking the language;
- c) students dislike English because they get frustrated when they realize they cannot accomplish the tasks set by the teachers.

This paper will describe a study carried out in order to:

- (1) prove the hypothesis that limiting the objectives of the English courses to Reading Comprehension in the last year of public secondary school will allow students:
 - a) to achieve competence in at least the skill most needed at university level, reading;
 - b) to realize that English is a useful subject, which will increase their motivation and interest;
 - c) to confirm or expand the knowledge students acquire in other subjects of the school curriculum;
 - d) to increase their linguistic knowledge of English;
- (2) assess the suitability of the material used in the study.

2. The study

2.1. Place

It was carried out in one fifth year class in 'Dr Arturo Illia', a public school in Salta, Argentina. It is a half day school and it is located in the downtown area.

2.2. Students

There were 28 students in the class. They came from a lower middle class background. They had studied English for four years in secondary school. They could give simple personal information, express daily routine, physical abilities, possession, make descriptions using there is / are and talk about future activities.

2.3. Frequency of English classes

Two periods a week.

Period A: 80 minutes.

Period B: 40 minutes.

2.4. Period of the school year observed

March - October

a) Classes:

Number of classes.....37

Number of classes lost by strikes.....16

Number of holidays..... 9

b) Material read: 15 texts

c) Tests given: 3

2.5. Teacher

Since the English teacher of this class had never worked with the specific Reading Comprehension methodology that we use in our university courses, she received methodological guidance before teaching each unit (each text was considered a unit). She volunteered to participate in the experience.

2.6. Material

The reasons for preparing a special anthology were the following:

- a) we wanted to apply the methodology we use in our university Reading Comprehension courses to texts related to other subjects of the school curriculum and to the interests of adolescents today;
- b) the lack of material suitable to our approach in this kind of courses.

When we chose the texts to be used throughout the course, we kept five important facts in mind:

- *authenticity* because it is important to expose students to the real language used in written material where cohesive devices, logical relationship markers and non-linguistic cues are present;
- *readability* because a text that is too difficult from the point of view of syntax, lexis or content may hinder comprehension and as a consequence students' interest in reading;
- *variety* because texts related to other subjects of the students' curricula and to their interests increase their motivation;
- *exploitability* ('facilitation of learning') because we have to be sure that students develop their competence as readers

and the skills needed to extract the content from the language that expresses it. (Nuttal:1989);

- the *lexico-grammatical system* because we also reinforce and enlarge the students' linguistic knowledge through the texts.

The activities devised were intended to develop skills in the following areas:

- *reading strategies*: surveying, skimming, scanning, intensive reading, critical reading;
- *linguistic knowledge*: identifying referents, logical sequences, word functions, verb tenses, etc.;
- *use of the bilingual dictionary*: looking for singulars, infinitives, phrasal verbs, etc.

2.7. Methodology

The methodology we use follows the transactional model of reading comprehension which is mainly based on the concept that reading is 'a meaning seeking, tentative, selective, and constructive process'. (Goodman:1985).

- a) it is *meaning seeking* because the reader's attention is very much on making sense, on understanding what he / she reads;
- b) it is *tentative* because readers predict, anticipate what is coming;
- c) it is *selective* because readers choose the information which will be most productive and useful. This selection of information will depend on the reader's background knowledge of the language, content, world and culture. So the information selected may differ from reader to reader;
- d) it is *constructive* because each reader constructs a parallel text closely related to the published one but different because this new text is based on schemas that the reader brings to the transaction.

This view on reading gives importance to *inference* and *prediction of meaning* and as a consequence our goal as teachers of Reading Comprehension should be *to help students construct their own texts, as closely related to the meaning conveyed by the author as possible.*

2.8. Language used in the classes

Students spoke in Spanish and did the exercises in this language, their mother tongue, because according to Nuttal (1989) ‘you should accept L1 responses when the FL is not being learnt for productive use and when to insist on it would produce undue delay or result in poor quality answers’.

3. Data collection procedures

3.1. Questionnaires

In order to measure the impact of the methodology and the material on the students’ attitude towards English, a questionnaire was implemented at the end of the first term. Others were given at the end of four texts read during the second term. The last questionnaire was offered to evaluate the students’ opinion about the usefulness of reading in English without necessarily speaking this language and about its effects on their daily life.

3.2. Tests

Three progress achievement tests were given to measure how much students have learnt of what they have been taught. They were all criterion-referenced tests.

3.3. Secondary school teacher’s report

She informed about the effects of the methodology and material on her students’ attitude towards English and also about her own experience as a teacher in this kind of course.

3.4. Team's report on the observations carried out in class

Every class was observed by one or two members of our team to see the students' response to the methodology and material. The aspects taken into consideration were:

- a) achievement of objectives;
- b) students' motivation and participation;
- c) suitability of tasks.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Questionnaire results

A- End of First Term Questionnaire (8 texts)		
Number of students who answered it: 24		
1 - Did you like the methodology used?		
	No.	%
a) very much	18	75
b) more or less	6	25
c) not much	-	0
2 - In your opinion, the topics were:		
a) interesting	21	87,51
b) not very interesting	2	8,33
c) boring	1	4,16
3 - Order the texts read from the most interesting (No.1) to the least interesting		
No. 1 - War Against Drugs		
No. 2 - Digestion		
No. 3 - Magnets		
No. 4 - Solids, liquids and gases		
No. 5 - Chemical Reactions		
No. 6 - Advertising		
No. 7 - Who's Who		
No. 8 - Table of Contents		
4 - Did you learn anything new regarding content		
Yes	23	95,84
No	1	4,16
5 - Did you learn to identify new grammatical structures in English?		
Yes	21	87,50
No	3	12,50

B - Second term Questionnaire applied to four different texts.
Comparative Chart.

Questions	Loading unloading a cassette 26		Save Energy 18		The History Rock and 26		Mummy Making 20	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1- The Topic								
a-very	14	53.8	14	77.7	23	88.4	18	90.0
b-not very	6	23.0	1	5.5	1	3.8	1	5.0
interesting	5	19.2	3	16.6	2	7.6	1	5.0
c-neither nor b	1	3.8	-	-	-	-	-	-
No answer								
2- The were:	No. of answers		No. of answers		No. of answers		No. of answers	
a-very	--		--		5		.3	
b-difficult	4		2		6		15	
c-easy	42		14		17		11	
d-very	11		2		3		.3	
3- Did you anything new	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a-								
Yes	19	73.0	14	77.7	18	69.2	16	80.0
No	6	23.0	2	11.1	5	19.2	4	20.0
No Answer	1	3.8	2	11.1	3	11.5	-	-
b- Content?								
Yes	19	73.0	12	66.6	24	92.3	17	85.0
No	6	23.0	2	11.1	1	3.8	3	15.0
No Answer	1	3.8	4	22.2	1	3.8	-	-
4- Reading the was:								
a-difficult	3	11.5	3	16.6	5	19.2	3	15.0
b- easy	18	69.2	-	44.4	14	53.8	4	20.0
c- neither nor b	5	19.2		38.8	7	26.9	12	60.0
No Answer	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	5.0
5- Did you need consult dictionary								
a- a lot	6	23.0	4	22.5	5	19.2	6	30.0
b- not very	8	30.7	9	50.0	11	42.3	10	50.0
c- little	12	46.1	5	27.7	8	30.7	4	20.0
d- not at all	-	-	-	-	1	3.8	-	-
No Answer	-	-	-	-	1	3.8	-	-

C - Final Questionnaire

Students present: 20 Students absent: 8

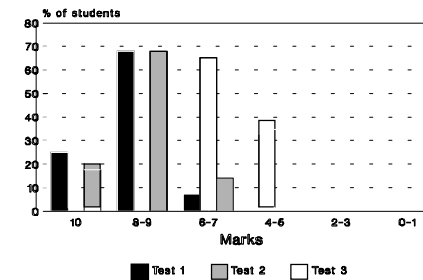
I - The experience of reading texts in English without speaking the language was:

useful 15
 interesting 9
 amusing 8
 boring -
 useless -

II - Did you have the opportunity of reading any material in English using what you had learnt in class?

Yes	19	95%	Materials:
			Handbooks 14
			Songs 13
			Advertisements 12
			Booklets 5
			Others 4
No	1	5%	What you have learnt in the course would help you
			- a lot 1
			- little
			- not at all

4.2. Tests



4.3. Reports

4.3.1. School teacher's report

- a) the limitation of the objective to Reading Comprehension is useful and necessary, since reading is the skill most needed at university level and in our society today;
- b) the texts selected were adequate to the students' interests and to their English level;
- c) activities such as surveying the text, skimming, scanning, looking for main ideas, looking for synonyms and antonyms, lexical chains, identifying grammatical patterns, word functions, logical relations in the text, etc. were relatively easy for the students except for contextual reference and the use of the dictionary;
- d) the reading strategies developed were also used by students in other subjects. This opinion was based on comments made by teachers of other academic fields;
- e) students improved their expression in Spanish. This was concluded by comparing their linguistic performance at the beginning and at the end of the course.

4.3.2 Research team's report

- a) the methodology used was appropriate:
 - 1- the main goal, reading for information, was achieved from the very beginning. This made students feel confident and increased their interest;
 - 2- the use of Spanish lowered the students' affective filter, letting them show their understanding of the text more accurately;
 - 3- students enjoyed most of the topics probably because they were varied and took their interests into account.

- b) students found comprehension exercises easier than grammar ones;
- c) most students were actively involved in the classes and highly motivated. They suggested and carried out extra activities such as poster design and slogan writing;
- d) the teacher was very responsible.

5. Conclusion

From the results obtained in the questionnaires, tests and reports, it can be concluded that:

- a) the limitation of the course objective to Reading Comprehension, using Spanish as the means of communication, was considered to be a useful, interesting and amusing experience by the students. Their motivation was increased because they felt they could achieve at least a definite goal in their English lessons;
- b) through the material chosen for the classes students confirmed and expanded their knowledge in different areas of the school curriculum;
- c) most students enlarged their linguistic knowledge, specially the identification of grammatical structures.

In the light of these conclusions, it seems appropriate to say that the results of this study confirm the hypothesis of this paper. As a consequence we would recommend secondary school English teachers to emphasise Reading Comprehension in the last year of public secondary schools.

A further suggestion from this experience would be that trainee teachers should be acquainted with the methodology (theory and practice) applied in Reading Comprehension courses where L1 is used as the means of communication as well as with materials design since they will have to prepare their own.

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