

Workshops to help foreign language learners of English develop effective reading strategies

Area: Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

The final objective of this study is to evaluate whether reading sessions for university learners of English as a foreign language help students become critical and effective readers of particular genres used in foreign language classes. In order to learn about the students' actual reading performance, we will implement reading workshops in which we will analyze the students' reading comprehension strategies. We will compare students' performance by comparing the results of reading tests administered before and after the teacher's' interventions. The participants of the study will be third-year university students (Facultad de Lenguas, National University of Córdoba).

Keywords: reading strategies - foreign language learners - genres

Introduction

As reported by several linguists and researchers (Boccia, 2013; Carlino, 2005; Natale, 2012; Navarro, 2014; Morra, 2014, among others) the successful development of students' reading skills is achieved gradually. In order to gain this, it is necessary for teachers to intervene in practices that imply the application of reading comprehension strategies, which involve students' full reflection on the texts they read at school or university. In view of this, we have designed this investigation to empower our students to become effective independent readers through an intervention with concrete reading practices. The need for this research and for workshops is the faulty performance university students have shown to have throughout their course of university studies. In particular, results in exams, term tests and the teachers' perceptions of the way students understand texts have served as the basis for the present study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that has been used to anchor the present study derives from Rose and Martin's (2012) and Hyland's (2004) approaches to reading and writing specific genres at school. They postulate that there is an important social tradition that states that studying and handling particular genres that circulate within the different disciplines contribute to developing reading and writing skills. In this investigation we only look at the problem of reading at university, since we understand that, most of the times, writing well stems from reading well. It is our intention to explore the reading skills first and then move on to the writing capacities in future research studies.

Some of the researchers consulted (Boccia, 2013; Carlino, 2005; Natale, 2012; Navarro, 2014; Morra, 2014) foster teachers' concrete interventions when instructing students to learn to read. They state that apprentices need to follow steps to develop their reading strategies. They also indicate that one can learn by the sole action of reading but if one is taught strategies and tactics to read effectively, the process is reduced in time and gains efficiency. In this study we have considered most of the experts in reading mentioned above for the design and implementation of the reading workshops for our university students.

At the same time, Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Genre Pedagogy (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Rose & Martin, 2012) promote the reading and writing of specific genres at school, and postulate that there is an important social tradition that states that studying and handling particular genres that circulate within the different disciplines contribute to developing reading and writing skills. Within the Genre Pedagogy, in particular, these researchers reveal a cycle to approaching and teaching specific academic genres. The steps that should be followed to learn how to understand and produce the different academic genres consist of (a) the joint (students and teachers) deconstruction of a genre, (b) the students' imitation of the genre, and (c) the students' reconstruction of the same genre. These stages followed repeatedly push students to reflect upon the texts used during formal instruction (school or university), to internalize the constituents of the text under study, and to eventually produce an accepted instance of the genre. In this investigation we will focus on the first phase of this cycle, which implies solely reading genres conscientiously. After a full analysis of this phase, we intend to move on to the following stages – imitation and free production of the genre – in future research studies.

Main Objective

The main objective of this study is to empower our students to become effective independent readers through an intervention with concrete reading practices. In the future we aim to encourage these same students to improve their written productions of particular academic genres. We support the idea that good and effective students' written productions will derive from effective readers.

Methodology

The methodology proposed for the study has included reading workshops in which we have analyzed the students' reading comprehension strategies before and after the teachers' intervention during the workshops. In other words, we have tabulated the results of two reading quizzes: one administered the moment the students started the workshop (without the actual teaching of reading strategies) and another reading quiz after the teacher instructed students on good reading strategies to approach a particular academic genre. The results of both tests were compared, analyzed and discussed in depth. A survey on reading strategies was also administered to learn about the students' perceptions of the way they actually read these genres.

The attendants to the workshops and participants of this study were third-year university students (Facultad de Lenguas, National University of Córdoba) who are currently taking the Grammar II course. The teachers involved in the instruction of the reading strategies were the same

teachers in charge of Grammar II. They are well aware of the Genre Pedagogy, since they are also researchers carrying out a larger study on reading and writing workshops which use this theory to help students improve their skills.

As part of the methodology used during the workshops, students were provided with some prototypical models of descriptive and expository texts they use in their real classes. After reading them, they explored the rhetorical structures and the typical configurations of these genres. We expected that these students would read more effectively after these sessions, since they had to reflect upon the constitutive parts of these expository genres and also criticize the use of their own reading strategies. In the reading sessions the students analyzed and deconstructed the genres by applying concrete reading strategies, since we considered that this technique would help them discover the obstacles that might be blocking the comprehension of the texts. In future instances we expect that they will approach academic texts more successfully. After these workshops we aim to evaluate whether these types of reading sessions help students become critical readers and thus effective ones.

Workshops

We have planned to implement five workshops of 80 minutes each. For this study we have only analyzed the results that stem from the first workshop so as to explore the preliminary results, polish up the different aspects involved in the implementation and continue having the rest of the reading sessions with a positive impact and thus making them as beneficial as possible. The workshops have been scheduled to take place once a month so that students have time in between to internalize and practice the new techniques when reading any text.

The reading material used is made up of the academic texts (expository genres) the students have to read and comprehend in their Grammar II course. The mechanics employed during the sessions is the following: first, students read half of a text (approximately a page long); second, they answer a reading comprehension questionnaire without any kind of intervention on the part of the teacher so as to be able to analyze their general comprehension of the text under study. Immediately after this task is carried out, the teacher administers a survey on the students' perception of their own reading skills. This is done to make students aware of their own reading practices. They reflect upon the way they actually read and self-evaluate their performance in terms of reading comprehension. Next, teachers intervene by going back to the texts the students have read, but this time the teachers make students share the answers with the rest of the participants and have them deconstruct the text by labeling paragraphs, underlining main ideas in each paragraph, and fully analyzing the different genre moves (schematic structure) that make up the text under study.

After the first part of the text is exhausted, students read the second part of the same text but this time they are supposed to use the strategies explained by the teacher in the intervention during the first part of the workshop. In other words, with this second text, in fact the second part of the text, students read and, on their own, apply reading strategies like labeling paragraphs, analyzing the title (or subtitles), considering the rhetorical structure of the text (grouping of ideas, moves, indicators of change of moves, etc.).

The reading comprehension questionnaires used for the first workshop were the following:

Test #1 (First part of the text)

Reading Comprehension Questionnaire

Part I

1. What is the text about? Answer in no more than 2 lines.
2. What does the ideational metafunction show?
3. What does the interpersonal metafunction show?
4. What does the textual metafunction show?

Test #2 (Second part of the text)

Reading Comprehension Questionnaire

Part II

1. What is this part of the text about? Answer in just one line.
2. Could you paraphrase in 1 or 2 lines the following extract?

“Even within the same situation, language opens up a range of options and our choices acquire meaning in relation to the other linguistic choices that could have been made but were not. However, we should keep in mind that not all linguistic choices are appropriate for all contexts.”

Both the first and the second reading comprehension tests contained questions of different types. The first question in each case was designed to measure information related to the students' capacity to understand general ideas; that is to say, it aimed to determine if the students used good skimming strategies. The second set of questions in both tests intended to analyze the students' scanning strategies. After the workshop, the teachers/researchers marked questionnaires with a scale 1–10 (1 being the lowest grade).

At the end of the workshop, after their comprehension was actually checked by the teacher together with the participants, the students themselves allotted a percentage to the understanding of the first part of the text (before the teachers' intervention) and to the second part (after the teachers' intervention). These two percentages were compared. Through this comparison, the students clearly noticed the difference between what they were able to understand just by reading the first part of the text using scarce or no reading strategies and the level of decodification of the text they gained after using the reading strategies deployed during the workshop.

Deconstruction of genres: an example

One key phase in the development of the workshop is the deconstruction of the text after a first reading. This step is part of a cycle proposed by the Genre Pedagogy and it comprises a set of strategies that empower learners to explore the “backstage” of a text. After this deconstruction phase,

learners feel confident enough to construct a text collaboratively – together with the teacher and peers – and to imitate the way in which a particular genre is organized (second phase); finally, they are ready to produce similar texts on their own (third phase). As mentioned above, during this workshop students were instructed on the first phase only. In future workshops the rest of the phases will be introduced gradually.

To carry out the deconstruction of the genre, the teacher provided students with the following text (in fact, the first part of a full article that is included in the students' reading packet for the Grammar II course):

[Language is a meaning making resource. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978, 2002, 2004) has developed a model of language in context that allows us to describe and explain its uses.]² [From this perspective, language is a resource for construing and interpreting meanings in the context in which they occur. Different aspects of the social context in which language is used, such as what is being talked about, the people involved in the interaction and the social relation between them, and the role language plays in the interaction have an influence on how language is deployed and are also influenced by language use.]³ [In other words, speakers/writers use language differently depending on the 'topic' or subject matter, who they are talking or writing to (their status, proximity-distance), and what the work language is doing in a particular communicative situation. For example, we do not talk about sports in the same way we talk about medicine; if we talk about medicine, we will make different linguistic choices depending on whether our interlocutor is our friend or our doctor. If we are talking about medicine with our doctor, an additional dimension of linguistic choice will be whether we are interacting face-to-face, on the phone or via e-mail.]⁴

After the first reading, the teacher drew the students' attention to the organization of the text in terms of ideas and also in terms of alteration of ideas. The whole group came to the conclusion that the text is divided into three main moves or rhetorical stages:

- 1) A general definition of *language* from a systemic approach
- 2) Elaboration of the general concept (detailed definition of *context*)
- 3) Rephrasing and clarification of stage 2.

The teacher also channeled the students' attention to the markers used to introduce a new stage like the connector *in other words*, which clearly signals that this upcoming stage will aim at paraphrasing what the authors introduced in the second stage when they mentioned *what is being*

² First rhetorical stage

³ Second rhetorical stage

⁴ Third rhetorical stage

talked about, the people involved in the interaction and the social relation between them, and the role language plays in the interaction. The concepts of *what*, *who* and *how* are reintroduced in the third stage but explaining more in depth what is meant by the topic (what), participants (who), and organization of the text (how) in a language interaction.

The deconstruction of a genre helps students understand the "backstage" of the text and not only helps them to comprehend the text they are reading but also empowers them to dare produce a similar text when the time comes to writing. This phase of the full cycle should be repeated many times before plunging into the genuine production of a new text of the same genre.

An example of the survey on reading strategies

After the students read the first part of the text, they were administered a survey so that they could reflect upon the reading strategies that they already handled and used when approaching texts. After the workshop the teachers/researchers marked the answers by considering the number of strategies that each student actually used. It is important to note that the questions that were tabulated for this study were the yes/no (1, 3, 5, 7, 9) and question 10.

The strategies surveyed were five. For example, if a student expressed that he/she explored the title before reading a text and found a main idea running through the text, he/she was graded 2/5, that is to say, that he/she was accustomed to employing two of the five strategies mentioned in the survey.

Below is the actual survey. It aimed at exploring the following reading strategies:

- Analysis of titles
- Skimming
- Rhetorical structure of the text
- Notes on the margin
- Fast reading

Dear students,

We kindly ask you to answer the following questions. Your collaboration will be very useful in determining some of the difficulties that students experience when reading discipline-specific materials so that we can later design activities that might help students overcome them . **For each question below, please circle the answer that best represents your opinion.**

1. Did you read the heading of the text before starting to read the text? YES NO

2. If your answer to the previous question was "yes," how important was understanding the heading for the understanding of the main point in the text?

Extremely important Very important Somewhat important Not important

3. Did you stop reading when you didn't understand something, for example, a word or expression, to figure out what that word or expression meant? YES NO

4. If your answer to the previous question was "yes," how important do you think it is to stop and reflect on what you are reading?

Extremely important Very important Somewhat important Not important

5. Did you find a main idea running through the text? YES NO

6. If your answer to the previous question was "yes," how difficult was it for you to find that main idea?

Extremely difficult Very difficult Somewhat difficult Not difficult

7. Did you pay attention to the way in which the text was organized? In other words, did you pay attention to how the main idea was presented and explained? YES NO

8. If your answer to the previous question was "yes," how well do you think you could describe for somebody else how the main idea was presented and explained?

Extremely well Very well Not very well Not well at all

9. Do you use any techniques or strategies when you read with the aim of understanding a text for your classes? YES NO

10. If your answer to the previous question was "yes," please briefly describe what you do when you read a text for your classes for the first time. You may choose one or more options:

- a. read the text quickly and then do a second slower reading
- b. stop after each paragraph and reflect upon it before moving on to the next one
- c. try to understand every line you read before moving on to the next one
- d. jot down the main ideas in each paragraph in the margins
- e. underline the main ideas while reading and then do a second reading only for those underlined parts

f. If you use other techniques, please write them down below or on the back of this page.

We do appreciate your time and help in answering this survey.

The objective of the survey on strategies was to compare the answers with the results of the reading comprehension tests referred to above; this comparison revealed important information.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

The general results of the first workshop were compressed in Table 1. The darker color was used to highlight the general tendency, whereas the lighter one pointed out the exception. The students that participated in the workshop were 9 and each one was given a code (S1–S9).

Table 1: General results. First workshop.

SS	Q1 Text 1	Q2 Text 2	Reading strategies	Percentage of understanding Text 1	Percentage of understanding Text 2

S1	3	5	5/5	65%	85%
S2	6	5	2/5	40%	70%
S3	7	0	5/5	65%	65%
S4	5	6	3/5	50%	80%
S5	6	2	2/5	55%	40%
S6	2	6	4/5	30%	70%
S7	3	5	3/5	40%	87%
S8	6	8	2/5	60%	90%
S9	5	6	3/5	60%	95%

The scores in the first column indicate the results of the first test (Reading comprehension Questionnaire 1), in which the students answered the questions before the teacher's intervention. The second column (Reading comprehension Questionnaire 2) shows the results to the answers after the intervention. The numbers in both columns represent the score given by the teacher, who used a scale of 0–10 (marks 4 and above are equal to a pass). The third column compiles the results of the survey on reading comprehension strategies. The last two columns indicate the percentages the students themselves allotted to the amount of understanding for each text.

After the results were tabulated, we arrived at the conclusion that most students improved their reading performance after the teacher's intervention. Even though the sample seems to be small, we see that six out of nine students improved their reading performance with the instruction on reading strategies. Three students showed poorer results in the second test after the intervention.

It is interesting to note that most of the students that improved their reading performance as shown by the questionnaires also acknowledged the fact that they used several reading strategies, except for S8, who expressed that he/she only was acquainted with 2 out of the 5 strategies mentioned in the survey. Conversely, two of the three students who did not have a better performance in the second test demonstrated a poor use of the reading strategies mentioned in the survey.

The percentages the students allotted to each text also showed that the students understood the second text better after the teacher's intervention. In other words, the results clearly indicate that the students perceived that the instruction of the reading strategies implemented during the workshop was effective and helped them to better comprehend the texts.

Conclusion

This study has shown that, at Facultad de Lenguas, undergraduates enrolled in the Translation and Teaching programs taking Grammar II have improved their reading strategies after taking a

reading workshop based on the Genre Pedagogy. The investigation has also demonstrated that all the students who participated in the study had a positive perception of the tasks carried out during the workshop. The results should motivate teachers of English as a foreign language to devote some of the time of their classes to teaching their students reading strategies, since that will possibly have a positive impact on the understanding of the material and thus on the learning process itself.

The present results are not enough to generalize or to plunge into a tendency; therefore, another similar study with a larger corpus is expected to be replicated with the workshops that have already been scheduled for this year. The results that will stem from them will serve to evaluate whether the meager results of this investigation confirm the fact that readers become efficient at university level after a good instruction on reading strategies. What is more, considering the analysis carried out in this study we may anticipate that after the implementation of the several workshops, students will internalize the use of the strategies taught in the first workshop and others that will help them become effective readers not only at university but also in other contexts. Moreover, a deeper analysis of the questions in the surveys and some more insights on the students' perceptions of the workshops should be part of future research studies.

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Biodata de la autora

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