

Improving Reading Skills through Skimming and Scanning Techniques at a Public School:
Action Research

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This action research is aimed at improving reading skills by making use of skimming and scanning techniques with high school students from a public school. Data were gathered through participant and non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews, then analyzed by following the content analysis suggested by Powell (2003). After analyzing the data four main categories emerged: scanning and skimming help to change students' perceptions towards reading, motivation increases the effectiveness of skimming and scanning techniques, positive student perceptions towards skimming and scanning techniques, and students' improvement in the reading comprehension process.

Key words: skimming, scanning, improvement.

Resumen

Esta investigación acción tuvo como objetivo mejorar las habilidades de lectura de estudiantes de secundaria de un colegio público haciendo uso de las técnicas “skimming” y “scanning”. Los datos fueron recogidos a través de observaciones participantes y no participantes y entrevistas semi-estructuradas. Luego fueron analizados por el modelo sugerido por Powell (2003). Después de analizar los datos, cuatro categorías principales



emergieron: Scanning and skimming ayudan a cambiar percepciones de los estudiantes hacia la lectura, la motivación aumenta la efectividad de las dos técnicas, percepciones positivas de los estudiantes hacia las dos técnicas, mejoría de los estuantes en el proceso de comprensión lectora.

Palabras clave: Reflexión, Práctica docente, lenguas extranjeras.

Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers appreciate the value of developing their students' receptive skills. Mastering these skills enables learners to achieve a successful learning process. According to The Common European Framework (CEF), receptive skills involve listening and reading competences; receptive activities include silent reading and following the media. They are also of importance in many forms of learning (understanding course content, consulting textbooks, works of reference and documents).

In the Colombian context students have had difficulties when taking English tests due to students not understanding what they have read and understanding what one reads is vital in order to pass an English test. According to Ríos & Valcárcel, (2005), in Colombia, students in public high schools tend to have low levels of English, which makes reading comprehension challenging.



After carrying out some observations we realized that students at a Colombian high school had difficulties when reading texts and trying to answer comprehension questions. When students read aloud they made lots of pronunciation mistakes because they read as the words were written; the students did not take into account that each language has its own phonetic rules. This was also evident not only in classes but also when they took different examinations in which the main component was reading. We examined the low scores obtained by the eleventh grade students in the “ Pruebas Saber 11^o” exam. The researchers also implemented a diagnostic test, which allowed them to see the real picture of the subjects’ problem.

Some studies have shown the effectiveness of the skimming technique to improve reading (Rahmawati, 2008; Agudelo et al, 2006) . Other studies have focused on the use of scanning techniques to achieve better results in reading comprehension (Maxwell, 1978). On the other hand Maxwell (1969) conducted a study making use of the two techniques and the results revealed that students prefer to scan for details rather than skim for main ideas and many students are unable to skim for main ideas. Taking into account the previous theory, this study aimed at improving reading comprehension skills through skimming and scanning techniques. Likewise the grand tour question that guided this research was: how does the use of skimming and scanning techniques improve the reading skill of students at a public school?



Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework was based on the main foundations of reading comprehension as well as skimming and scanning techniques. First, we present the Bilingual National Plan (BNP). Second, we provide definitions of the communicative approach, reading and reading comprehension, skimming and scanning techniques. Finally, we present a review of relevant previous studies done on reading comprehension.

The Communicative Approach

This project was based on the communicative approach since this approach aimed to train students for real communication as stated by the British Council, where the communicative approach is based on the idea that learning a language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning. In other words, the students were involved in real communication where the language was a key element to facilitate learning through communication in action. In order to achieve this objective, it was necessary to work on natural strategies or authentic texts to introduce the students to a communicative classroom environment which allowed them to learn to use the language.

Besides, to develop real communication inside the classroom, Nunan (1991) suggested five basic principles of the Communicative Approach: 1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, 2) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation, 3) The provision of opportunities for learners to



focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself, 4) An enhancement of the learner's own personal experience as important contributing elements to classroom learning, 5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Reading

This study adopted a definition about reading proposed by Goodman (1969), stating that reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs. There is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encoded thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is not just a receptive process, it implies a complex process in which the readers identify basic information and are able to predict, to infer, to argue and to recognize writers' points of view. According to Partnership (2005) reading comprehension is about understanding a text which is read through the process of constructing meaning from a text. Comprehension is a constructing process because it involves all elements of the reading process working together as a text is read to create a representation of the text in the reader's mind.



Skimming

Maxwell (1969) defines skimming as getting the main idea or gist of a selection quickly in a written text where the students develop powers of inference through systematic practice which encourages them to anticipate the content of a text. Similarly (Allen, 1997) points out that the skimming technique is a useful tool to help students extract from the text key words that permit them to infer the general sense of a text, which lets them interpret a text faster and advance in the reading process.

Scanning

With this technique, the students look for specific information within a text such as dates, names, places, among others. According to Maxwell (1970) scanning, which is defined as the ability to locate specific facts and details quickly, is regarded as a desirable reading skill and is taught in most developmental reading courses.

Methodology

This research adopted an action research design since action research is useful to give a solution to problems inside the classroom. Action research addresses our efforts regarding group social situations in order to confront common problems including the people who are involved in them. This kind of research has been very useful regarding educational problems. Action research carries out a rationalized six-step procedure, which consists of: identifying problems, analysis of problems, formulating ideas or hypotheses,

gathering and interpreting data, implementation -action and evaluating the results of action (Burns, 1999).

Context of the Study

This research project was developed at a public school located in Pamplona Colombia. This school had about 300 students and most classes last 50 minutes, and in some cases, classes are extended to 90 minutes, to be taken once or twice a week. Most of the students were part of the lower-middle class. The students we worked with were seventh graders between nine and ten years old organized into two groups, one with thirty-three students and the other one with thirty-four students.

Data Collection Instruments

When doing an action research project, it is important to choose data collection techniques in order to identify and justify monitoring or observing what happens in connection with the research problem itself (Burns, 1999). That is why we used participant and non participant observations and semi- structured interviews.

We used classroom observations because through them we were able to extract real data from real situations. “By using observations you can analyze and study the environments that data come from. In others words, through observations we were able to describe perfectly not only the features of the participants, but also the context to which the participants belong” (Cohen & Manion 1994, cited in Perez 2010). Our role in these



observations was as non-participant observers since we observed some classes of our supervisor teachers in order to identify the problem and as participant observers since the teacher trainees were in contact with their students by participating actively in the classes. Mac and Ghail (1994) pointed out that the participant observer collects data by participating in the daily life of those he or she is studying. 'The approach is close to everyday interaction, involving conversations to discover participants' interpretations of situations they are involved in' (Becker 1958, p. 652).

We considered interviews important to our research because through them we managed to learn about the participants' experiences in using skimming and scanning techniques,. In addition we kept in mind the participants' opinions to support our interpretations. According to McNamara (1999) interviews are useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information about the topic. Interviews may be useful as a follow up to certain respondents to questionnaires, e.g., to further investigate their responses. Moreover, these interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the researcher to pose more questions freely. We also used open-ended questions, some suggested by us and some arising naturally during the interviews. Bernard (1988) stated that semi-structured interviews are often preceded by observation, informal and unstructured interviewing in order to allow the researchers to develop a keen understanding of the topic of interest necessary for developing relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions.

Data Analysis

Before starting the data analysis process we transcribed the interviews and took notes during the observations, then we put them in a chart in order to contrast the data we gathered from both instruments. Once that was done, we began analyzing the data through the content analysis suggested by Powell (2003), which is described as a qualitative approach to analyze, interpret and reflect upon narrative data. While using this approach, the following steps were pursued:

1) We got to know the data by understanding and re-checking the data collected. We read and reread the data several times in order to get familiar with them.

2) We focused the analysis by reviewing the purpose and the key research questions to be answered, and keeping these in mind while we read once again the data.

3) We classified the information, by identifying themes or patterns and organizing them into coherent categories. In this stage we used color coding, coloring in a different color what we found similar in the data. Once completed, we identified different themes and organized them into different categories.

4) We identified patterns and connections within and between the categories; next we assessed the relevance of each category, capturing similarities among the categories and creating super categories if necessary.

5) Interpretation; we gave rich and detailed descriptions of the findings, by attaching significance and meaning to the analysis.

Findings

This section presents findings about the improvement in reading skills through skimming and scanning techniques. It is important to state that our goal in this action research was to give answers to the questions that guided this research especially to the grand tour question although it was a question that involved several aspects.

After analyzing the data gathered through the observations and the interviews, the following categories emerged:

These techniques help to change students' perceptions when reading

The implementation of this action research helped students change their beliefs and perceptions about reading and transform their reading practice for the better. It is important to remark that their insights turned out to be positive related to reading and skimming/scanning techniques.

Through the observations and the interviews, we realized that the participants did not like reading texts, especially English texts because they did not understand them, because of the lack of vocabulary they had. They thought that to understand a text they needed to know the meaning of every word; when the participants were asked about their



pleasure of reading, they answered: *Avril's opinion: No, ..porque me parece muy difícil, por el vocabulario y palabras que uno desconoce*". In addition, the participants realized that through the use of skimming technique they did not need to know the meaning of all the words in a text in order to get the main idea of it.

In the same way, the participants had not used these techniques before, therefore when they had to do reading exercises they had difficulties because they did not understand the texts, failing to answer the questions that the reading texts contained. We can back this up with one of the participant's views: *"No había utilizado estas dos técnicas anteriormente ya que no las había escuchado."*

Moreover, we observed that when the participants had to do reading exercises they did not like to do them, but after the implementation of these techniques the participants seemed to like it, since the students' participation in the classes was constant. It seems that the participants realized that the techniques were useful to answer questions from texts.

"Well students, a minute to read quickly the following text and tell me the general idea of it, so students, which technique are you going to use? All the students said: skimming teacher so let's do it! All the students started to read the text actively and after a while several students raised their hands: "teacher, teacher es acerca de Jennifer Lopez y Marc Anthony"; the teacher said: wait, wait students one by one please because it is difficult to listen to all of you at the same time."

Likewise, through the interview we confirmed what we had observed since the participants answered that the techniques had been useful in several aspects within their learning process: *“Estas dos técnicas me han beneficiado mucho ,en clases, en exámenes, ,entrabajos,etc.”*

Motivation increases the effectiveness of skimming and scanning techniques

When we started carrying out this project, one of our goals was to motivate the participants to use these techniques all the time since we knew that by doing it, students could get interested in reading texts. Calderon Guerrero and Carvajal (2007) stated that a person who is motivated to do something can get better outcomes. Similarly, Grellet (1981) stated that “Motivation is of great importance when reading partly, because most of what we usually read is what we want to read, but also, because being motivated means that we start reading the text preparing to find a number of things in it, expecting to find answers to a number of questions and specific information or ideas we are interested in”

“The teacher asked students to read the first text in order to get the general or main idea of it. To motivate the students to read the teacher told them words such as “quickly, quickly, do you know what is the general idea of the text? The students seemed to be motivated, and after half a minute they had the main idea of the first text. José said: es acerca de un cohete que va a ser lanzado por la NASA? The teacher asked all the students

in the class, is that correct or incorrect? Students answered “correct teacher” the teacher said: “Excellent Fabian that was the answer, keep on working in that way; all right what about the next text?”

Furthermore, another way of motivating the participants was through the texts they read since they were short, illustrated and the topics caught the students’ attention: When the researchers asked participants if they were keen on the readings worked on in class they answered: *Si claro que sí, porque los temas eran divertidos, bueno y el profesor los hacía ver como más divertidos pienso yo.*”

Students’ inclination towards one of these techniques

During the development of the different classes, we observed that the students’ interaction was higher when carrying out skimming exercises than when carrying out scanning exercises. After the interviews, we realized that the participants were more keen on working with the skimming technique than working with the scanning technique. We can corroborate this with one of the participant’s answers: Adita’s opinion: *“Personalmente skimming me resulta más efectiva ya que con ella puedo sacar la idea general más rápidamente de un texto.”* This aspect did not mean that the participants did not like working with the scanning technique but they preferred to work on skimming exercises because the scanning ones were longer and they contained more comprehensive

questions. *“Pues con el scanning es que uno debe leer mas y hay más preguntas y uno se demora mas porque aveces no sabe el significado de ciertas palabras”*

Students Improvement through Reading Comprehension Techniques

Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe action research as the improvement of practice, the improvement of the understanding of practice, or the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. Throughout the process, the researcher teachers focused on improving reading skills through skimming and scanning techniques, students carried out different activities about what they read, activities such as answering questions, circling the verbs, highlighting the words that were repeated in the texts, filling the gaps, and completing charts. During the classes, we noticed that the use of both techniques was important in enhancing the reading comprehension of the participants since the results obtained after the implementation of this project were significant. The researchers asked participants about the benefits gained after using the techniques: *“Pues se puede decir que en una evaluación o en un ejercicio pues lo puedo entender mas rápido y asi si hay preguntas poderlas responder bien”* Besides, they obtained good results in the tests they took, which contained texts where they had to read using skimming and scanning techniques.

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Conclusions

With regards the data gathered, it was concluded that the use of skimming and scanning techniques contributed to enhancing reading comprehension since after having worked with these techniques the researchers were able to verify that the participants improved their reading skills. This improvement was achieved through the attention paid by teachers to some important factors in effective learning, such as motivation, and the type of texts worked on in the different classes.

The motivation was essential since it helped to change the students' perceptions towards reading in English. For example before the implementation of the project, it was noticed that participants had a negative attitude when facing texts that required comprehension, however, after working with the two techniques their attitude changed, since the participants worked more actively and with interest on the different texts making their reading process more effective.

These findings seem to suggest that the participants preferred to use the skimming technique to the scanning one. It was observed that the students interacted more when working with the skimming technique, which did not occur when using the scanning one since some of the participants thought that the scanning activities were more complex and longer, making them lose interest.

Nevertheless, another relevant result was the combination of the two techniques since the skimming one was useful to find general information in a text quickly. In this technique the participants did not need to know the meaning of every single word, they just inferred the meaning by context taking into account the heading, subheadings and pictures in the text. However, we considered that the use of this technique was not enough to achieve the established goal for this project since there are longer texts that required more comprehension. For that reason, we decided to use the scanning technique which allowed the participants to find specific information in a long text.

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