

UNDERSTANDING TEXTS IN ENGLISH! A CHALLENGE FOR FUTURE PROFESSIONALS

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This project was conducted in the *Fundación Universitaria San Martín* with night accounting students who were coursing sixth semester. They were taking 3rd level of English. The purpose of the study was to improve reading comprehension through the use of some reading strategies. A group of 6 students was chosen because of their low level and difficulties in understanding texts in English. Data collection was conducted using questionnaires, teacher's observation and teacher's diary. Results showed that students mostly liked to read topics related to their programs, despite their lack of vocabulary, and they improved reading comprehension through the use of adequate reading strategies, avoiding the overuse of translation.

Introduction

The reader plays an active role in getting out of the text the message the writer has put into the text. Understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible (Nuttall:1982). The purpose of this study was to improve reading comprehension through the use of adequate reading strategies. Some reading strategies taken into account in this project were: skimming, scanning, pointing out the main idea and supporting details, predicting and deducing meaning, non-text information and non-verbal information (ibid:1982).

Difficulties understanding texts included a lack of vocabulary and structure skills as well as a lack of motivation to read were detected. The former was confronted by implementing the reading strategies and distributing a questionnaire after each lesson in order to identify strategies to improve reading comprehension. The latter was worked on by looking at the reading session in terms of three phases: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading (Harmer: 1983).

Procedure

Since difficulties reading texts in English were detected, it was decided to carry out the research project based on implementing different strategies to improve reading comprehension. This was done from February to May, 2001. A group of 6 students was selected because of their problems understanding texts in English. The methodology used for this study was action research. The collection of data was carried out through techniques such as teacher's diary, class observation and a completed questionnaire after the activities ended. Simple readings about different topics were provided the students in order to apply adequate reading strategies e.g looking for specific information or the general idea of a text; making predictions about the reading and so on. Then students answered a questionnaire to identify the strategies and the steps to be followed in the activity.

More difficult material over financial and accounting topics was included to work technical vocabulary. Then the questionnaire was handed out and the results analyzed. A final questionnaire to get the students advances or deficiencies in the reading process was filled out in the last class.

Results

Results of the study were presented in the following qualitative analysis. At the beginning of this research via questionnaires, students expressed their lack of vocabulary and structure skills and the difficulty of understanding a text in English as justification to translate word by word. The second questionnaire answered by students showed their preference for technical topics related to their interests and majors in spite of their language difficulties as well as their progress reading and understanding texts in English after having applied the reading strategies learnt in class. They were asked about what they liked most about the text worked in class. They said the topic because it was related to their majors and everybody paid more attention to the activity.

The questionnaire filled out in the last class to identify progress or deficiencies in the reading process showed that most of the students evidenced progress in reading comprehension after having applied the reading strategies. They were asked whether they noticed any progress

during the reading comprehension activities or not and which aspects contributed more to the successful reading of texts in English. One of the students said that he did not feel fear when facing a text in English now; he did not stop when he found an unknown word and had learned to read and analyze a text globally.

Conclusions

This study showed that when students applied the reading strategies learnt in class, the problem of translating word by word was avoided. They felt more confident of their abilities to understand a text in English and they improved their reading comprehension.

The implementation of selected and useful texts related to students' interests and necessities is a way to motivate them to enjoy reading and improve comprehension.

An interesting activity for further research could be the designing of some software to learn vocabulary as a tool to understanding texts in English and improving reading comprehension.

References

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