

Exploring EFL Students' Reading Comprehension Process through Their Life Experiences and the Sight Word Strategy

Exploración de la comprensión lectora de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera a través de sus experiencias de vida y la estrategia *Sight Word*

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Due to the role language and literature play in the construction of social, economic and cultural systems, reading comprehension has become a growing challenge. This study examined how the relationship between English as a foreign language reading comprehension and life experiences while using the *Sight Word Strategy* could prove significant. Fifth graders at a public school in Bogotá participated in this study. Data were collected using tape recordings, field notes, archival data and students' reflections. Analysis indicated that comprehension and construction of meaning were generated by sharing life experiences and through the interaction produced in each one of the *Sight Word Strategy* stages. The study suggested further research into a more encompassing definition of reading comprehension and life experiences correlation as an appropriate goal for English as a foreign language.

Key words: Construction of meaning, life experiences, reading comprehension, sight word strategy

Debido al rol que juegan la lengua y la literatura en la construcción de sistemas sociales, económicos y culturales, la comprensión de lectura se ha convertido en un desafío cada vez mayor. Esta investigación examinó cómo la relación entre la comprensión de lectura en inglés como lengua extranjera y las experiencias de vida durante el uso de la *Sight Word Strategy*, podrían resultar significativas. Estudiantes de

quinto grado de una escuela pública en Bogotá participaron en este estudio. Los datos se recogieron mediante grabaciones, notas de campo, trabajos y reflexiones de los estudiantes. El análisis indicó que la comprensión y la construcción de significados fueron generadas por compartir experiencias de vida y a través de la interacción producida en cada una de las etapas de la *Sight Word Strategy*. El estudio sugirió investigaciones futuras respecto a una definición más amplia de la correlación entre comprensión lectora y experiencias de vida, como una meta apropiada para el inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras Clave: comprensión lectora, construcción de significado, experiencias de vida, sight word strategy

Introduction

Throughout the history of mankind, education has provided people with skills that prepare them physically, mentally and socially for the world they live in. For us, as foreign language teacher-researchers, one of the most important of these skills is the reading one which, within education, requires an understanding of the role language and literature play in the construction of socioeconomic and cultural systems (Goodman, 1996). This research gives one a perspective on the ability to read by considering students' life experiences as a way to comprehend foreign language texts as well as to understand and respect a different culture while using the *Sight Word Strategy* (Fry, 1999), which provides learners with the necessary tools due to the constant social evolution.

This research, based on the premise that comprehension must be the true and final goal of all instruction in reading, proposed a strategy that has not been used in the Colombian context, but in contexts where English is spoken: the *Sight Word Strategy* (Fry, 1999), allowing learners of a foreign language to infer and comprehend foreign language readings when relating them to their life experiences thus going beyond textual information. This study, grounded on an innovational and leading-edge scheme that materialized as an alternative to improve reading comprehension, involved and recognized the learners' voice, understood by us as their life experiences within the teaching-learning process. Hence, the development of students' personal and collective identities, constructed by interacting with the texts and sharing or discussing ideas as stated by the Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá (2007), allowed students to state a point of view and to be part of a group, learning values such as respect and tolerance for the others.

To conclude, this research project, by enhancing reading and by making the role of the student within the teaching-learning process active, contributes to the way

English is perceived. It also confirms that reading is not merely a decoding process but a socio-cultural process that helps learners to construct meaning and identity through imaginary worlds. Furthermore, the use of the *Sight Word Strategy* in a non-native context as inspiring part of this research project, helped us to understand how the teacher, by being conscious of his/her students' needs, can apply and/or modify what others have said as an alternative to educational problems.

Literature Review

In the last few decades, reading has received considerable attention in the English as a Foreign Language field by both teachers and researchers due to its relevance for students and professionals in several areas. Bearing in mind our experience as foreign language students and teachers, we understand that reading constitutes the basis of the foreign language itself because, while reading, the apprentice learns about grammar structures and vocabulary as well as to understand and recognize something of the culture of the language being learned. This belief is supported by Jiménez (2000, p. 5) who states that “reading is the most significant skill in the academic programmes where English is taught, since it helps learners to enlarge the knowledge of the language and of the universe in general”, meaning, that learners do not merely learn about letters, words and grammar structures but to reject and/or approve assumptions, concepts and interpretations made by others in a foreign language that otherwise could not have been understood in the mother tongue as stated by Barbero (personal communication, August 11, 2010). In this sense, this study conceived reading as the core involving concepts such as Life Experiences, mainly conceptualized by views of Freire and Macedo (1987) and Comprehension, emerging from the *Schemata Theory* described by Nuttall (1996) and Kern (2000).

When talking about the importance of reading, it is relevant to discuss its definition which, as Ferreiro (2002) affirms, varies according to the epoch and to the purpose of the reader. The epoch in which our research project was carried out was a period in which reading went beyond the purpose of just being informed to include being aware of the world, of the people and of the social situations they create in order to understand and to discover how to be part of it.

In order to have a clear conception of reading, we considered two authors' views. The first one was Goodman (1996), who defines reading as a *receptive language process* where there is an interaction between language and thought, involving the author's

ideas expressed in written language and the reader's experiences and knowledge that constitutes thought. Under this conception, we could infer that reading is not just decoding words but relating the information the reader gets from that process to his own thought with the intention of understanding the author's message or, as defined by Goodman (1996), the process of *constructing meaning*. Consequently, we assumed that the meaning each reader constructs varies in relation to another reader because it depends on the ideas, values and experiences of each of us.

Anderson (2004, p. 598) corroborates that reading is conceived to be an interactive process when announcing that comprehension is developed by the learner in three significant moments: before, while and after reading. Before reading, the reader speculates and hypothesizes as to what the text is going to be about by looking at the title or the pictures found in it. In the second moment, while reading, the reader confirms or reshapes the hypothesis s/he created in his/her mind and makes new representations along the reading. In the last moment, after reading, the reader establishes concrete thoughts and notions based on the previous hypothesis and her/his prior knowledge and experiences. These moments, by taking place in the reader's mind, corroborate the fact that comprehension is achieved when the reading evokes a learner's experience (s) which is the determinant factor in the representation and interpretation of a text. Considering this, and as stated by Zuñiga (2001), the elements that intervene in the reading process are *the reader, the text and the reading environment*.

In order to broaden the scope of the comprehension concept, it was relevant to consider the *Schemata Theory* to explain how knowledge is organized in our minds and how this organized knowledge intervenes in the comprehension act. Nutall (2000) defines *schema* as a mental structure, which means that it is abstract because it does not relate to any particular experience and that it is a structure because it is organized. This organized knowledge works as a scaffold, where the old information and the new provide a slot with the aim of comprehending by allowing the reader to make inferences or mental representations about the text and to go beyond the literal information. It is important to clarify that the knowledge of the world differs with each learner as a result of his/her culture and past experiences, thus, bringing to light more than one interpretation of a text. Kern (2000) elucidated this theory by establishing a distinction between two kinds of *schema*: *Formal and Content*. The first one refers to form-related aspects of language use (such as grammar structures, syntax, semantics, etc.) and the second to background

knowledge. Based on this distinction and the preliminary definition of reading as a process that goes beyond merely decoding and the influence of the reader's life experiences, we could state that *content schema* plays a more important role in comprehension than *formal schema*.

In keeping with this idea, Goodman (1996) declared that it is necessary to be aware of why people read and what they are trying to achieve through it, in order to understand reading itself. All of us can think of different aims for reading, but whichever the reader's purposes are, reading must give an opportunity to create carefully reasoned as well as imaginary worlds filled with new concepts, creatures and characters by integrating personal experiences in real contexts to facilitate understanding and to make sense of what is being read. In our view; the personal life experiences the reader brings to the reading comprehension process makes it significant, were based on daily events, lifestyles, settings, and different situations involving home, school, family meetings and interactions. These interactions allowed the reader to find a text meaningful as long as he/she finds her/himself and his/her own reality within, since, as sustained by Goodman (1996), making sense is constructed by means of the reader's own values, appreciations and experiences by acting upon the text, finding connections, establishing relationships, interpreting and going beyond the literal material. In addition to this, Freire and Macedo (1987, p. 29) announced that "reading is not merely reading words but involves reading the world and bringing that world into our reading". This concept gathered much of reading through our own experiences by embracing them and making them part of the reading itself, thus constituting a relationship and expressing our understanding of the world, society, and the construction of sociocultural systems. In this sense, we could assert that the reading comprehension process works as a reciprocal process, where the reader is providing the text with his/her own experiences and the text, at the same time, is able to offer the reader new, significant knowledge.

In summary, the examination of diverse definitions and theories about the reading process and the confrontation we made with our own beliefs led us to conclude that reading does not mean to decode words, but to understand how all of them work as a whole and how, by relating their meaning to our own experiences or previous knowledge, they allow us to comprehend which constitutes, after all, the essential objective of the reading process.

The Sight Word Strategy

The *Sight Word Strategy* is established in some research done by Fry (1999) about the English reading process by studying kids' literature available in The United States. Through it, words are introduced to children as whole units instead of analyzing their sub-word parts and, thanks to the familiar themes on what books are built from, learners' life experiences can be related to it by endorsing comprehension. Furthermore, Fry (1999) exposed the importance of graphics within kids' literature arguing that images, by representing the written language, help the learners to understand their meaning and their function in view of the fact that concrete nouns are learned easier than abstract words. This strategy was presented to the learners in three stages in this study which we denominated pre-reading, reading and post-reading, allowing both students and teachers to develop a meaningful class through the use of reading tasks as well as to be able to use learnt concepts in real contexts as stated in the approach.

The first one, the pre-reading stage as its name says, prepared the learner to be able to understand the reading by introducing the vocabulary found in the book and related to the book's topic. Enlarging the learner's sight vocabulary is the "hallmark of a successful reader" (Johnson, 1998 in Monroe & Staunton 2000, p. 32). The reading stage was the central part of the *Sight Word Strategy* and was developed most of the time in groups of 3 students. They shared personal experiences and related them to the text, negotiating words' meanings and generating hypotheses in order to comprehend. This stage, as cited by Fredericks (2003, p. 22), "gives children the opportunity of using their reading skills in real and meaningful contexts" and the fact that those students' personal experiences were integrated in, increased understanding.

At last, the post-reading stage was built on a successful completion of the reading stage, where meaning and understanding of the given text were discussed either orally or in writing. Oral discussions, bearing in mind Henning and Pickett (2000, p. 23), "are an important step when introducing new words because each student is encouraged to participate and by relating those words or a specific text to students' life experiences, students reflect on their own reading processes and how their interpretations are influenced by particular cultural assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values".

Setting and Participants

This research took place in a public school located in Bogotá where we worked with 36 fifth graders, all between 10-12 years old. The five students, Piper, Bella, Susie, Bob and Fletcher, were chosen at random as the research population for our study and their names were changed for reasons of privacy. The criterion to select the participants, as mentioned before, was at random in order to avoid researchers' beliefs and feelings interfering with the investigation.

Data Collection Instruments

Our research proposal was a Qualitative Case Study grounded on Merriam's (2005) ideas. We based our investigation on a descriptive and exploratory Case Study that according to Merriam (2005, p. 49) "is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observation of educational phenomena". This assumption fits with the intention of gaining an in-depth understanding of the reading comprehension process as well as the context in which it was carried out and the implementation of an innovative strategy (the *Sight Word Strategy*, Fry 1999) rather than confirming a hypothesis. The research study was adjusted as it progressed and its purpose was to capture knowledge, meaning and interpretations shared by the selected 5th graders about the phenomenon exposed on the research question, which could not be measured quantitatively. The data collection process was done within the natural setting of the case, following Shagoury and Miller's (1999) research procedures and data collection process. Therefore, having the opportunity to explore the instruments directly in our classrooms led us to realize that there were only 4 instruments that could provide us with the information we required. The instruments were field notes, tape recordings, archival data and students' reflections.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis we followed in order to answer the research questions contained organized stages under the names of data organization, summary, reduction and categorization (Shagoury & Miller, 1999). As a consequence, three categories and one subcategory emerged. Their analysis indicated that the participants constructed meaning and knowledge when they were able to bring to mind their lived experiences and that they got engaged within the reading process

when the books evoked those experiences. What is more, all the categories were related one to the other showing aspects of the reading comprehension process that are knotted and significant as a whole, indicating that the construction of meaning or comprehension is a process that is subject to the reader’s self and sphere, in which reflection and ideas exchanged had been determining factors. Table 1 displays the categories and the sub-categories for each of the questions posed.

Table 1. Categories derived from data analysis

Main question	Sub-questions	Categories	Subcategories
How is reading comprehension generated by the use of the Sight Word Strategy (Fry, 1999) and its connection with the EFL student’s life experiences?	What is the engagement EFL students establish with reading when considering their life experiences?	Tying up reader’s Cognitive and Affective Dimensions for Understanding	Familiar Practices as Portrayals of Knowledge
	What is the affinity among reading and the use of the Sight Word Strategy (Fry, 1999) telling us about students’ reading comprehension process?	Contributions as an Outsider as a way to Assemble Personal & Collective Identities	Interweaving: Intrapersonal & Interpersonal Interactions within the Sight Word Strategy

The first category, as seen in Table 1, aimed to answer the first sub-question. Its name makes reference to the readers’ *cognitive* and *affective* dimensions stated by Ruddell and Unrau (2004), who were involved in their meaning construction process and who gave account of their interpretations and understandings based on what they had lived. Considering Ellis, Flaherty and Flaherty (1992), by grounding interpretations on lived experiences the readers are enabled to connect the inside to the outside, revealing their feelings, sensations and concepts towards the new information. In this sense, lived experiences work as a conversation through which we can come to know ourselves and others and the positions from which we and they speak to construct meaning. The information obtained from the participants with

respect to this matter revealed that the lived experiences they brought to mind while reading and sharing with peers in order to comprehend included sensations, emotions and concrete knowledge to disclose what they knew and how they made it work as a bridge, allowing them to understand foreign language texts, as well as supporting the importance of readers' prior knowledge and the role *Content Schemata* plays in the reading comprehension process as described by Kern (2000).

In McRae's view (2010, p. 184), the fact of recalling lived experiences full of emotions "allows readers to understand a person's lived experience and through that identity is that useful concepts are used to build understanding of the world around us", confirming that lived experiences support the development of emotions and it is through these experiences that readers understand others' points of view regulating their own meaning construction process.

Referring to Ellis et al. (1992, p. 3), the readers' *cognitive* and *affective dimensions* are assumed to have different perspectives: "While some people describe emotions as elements of rational behavior, others describe cognition as an ingredient of emotional processes". This position led us to think that the interpretation given to a text must be grounded either on reasoning, sensations or both. Based on the analyzed data, we could evidence that in the *meaning construction process*, these dimensions worked together founding readers' personal point of view on solid knowledge and sensations derived from their lived experiences thus making it possible for them to argue, examine and share with others. According to Ruddell and Unrau (2004), by working together, the *cognitive* and *affective* dimensions allow the readers to recall experiences that enable them to give explanations of what they have read as well as to give interpretations that differ from those of other readers since, as sustained by Goodman (1996), making sense is constructed by means of a reader's own values, appreciations and experiences.

The first and only subcategory also responds to the first question and alludes to the role readers' families experience when played within the *cognitive* and *affective* dimensions at the time of reading and within the meaning construction process since, as evidenced in the data, readers' most important lived experiences belonged to the home context. The link between the previous category and this sub-category was determined by the sensations and prior knowledge that lived experiences within the family context evoked in participants' interpretations thus making them similar. The terms familiar practices were selected to corroborate reading as a social practice

where different perspectives and life experiences within diverse social contexts converged, shaping and transforming readers' perceptions about this act. Similarly, by denominating the familiar practices as portrayals of knowledge, we identified the daily life events described by the participants as instruments used to learn from others based on the prior knowledge each one of them had developed within a family environment.

Considering Graves' (2000) thesis about how the reading act is always altered by the family without considering the context where it is taking place, we could state, based on the data analysis, that this influenced not only the readers' decision to get engaged with a text but the ways in which the text itself is engaged. In this sense, familiar practices help readers to understand and to perceive reading as a practice with significant and intentional purposes within specific contexts and concrete activities since those practices are the ones readers call to mind to make sense of what is written.

The second category, by conceiving reading as a social practice as stated by Ferreiro (2002), established a relationship between foreign language texts and readers' *personal* and *collective identities* (as revealed by the participants) by bringing to mind past experiences in order to make sense. They reflected their personal points of view by comparing and contextualizing the readings to their own reality. Hence, we assumed *personal* and *collective identities* as the way students perceived and made sense of themselves, of others and of their context through foreign language readings, modeling and recognizing their role within society as well as respecting and learning from a foreign culture. By using the word outsider, we referred to how these identities have been constructed by readers not only in terms of what they have experienced but in terms of what they had witnessed and how, by observing others and the way they act or think, readers assumed positions that influence their reading interpretations.

In order to have a clear conception of the term identity, we considered Appiah's (2005, p. 65) view, which claims that "the contemporary use of identity refers to such features of people as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion. The use of the term reflects the conviction that each person's identity- in the older sense of who he or she truly is- is deeply inflected by social features". Therefore, we could imply that even though the term identity is generally perceived as the relation of the singular human being to him or herself, to their actions, experiences, wishes, dreams or memories, the term thus always includes a relation to others and to a socio-cultural life.

When talking about the importance of the relation to others in reference to the development of identity, we considered it pertinent to make a distinction between *personal* and *collective identities*. To do this, we reflected on Straub's (2002, p. 3) view, which affirms that "personal identity is meant to characterize the consciousness a human being has of him or herself. The term *collective identity* in contrast, refers to conceptions of sameness or similarities with others". In this sense, we could assert that a *personal identity* is thereby ascribed to a *collective identity* often as a group, society or culture, which cannot be developed without considering referential acts.

With reference to this, Harré (2003) argues that we exist as people for other people and for ourselves as individuals, leading us to conceive reading and readers' witnessed experiences as a reflection of their *personal* and *collective* identities. Thus, texts heighten readers' identities by establishing meanings and assumptions based not only on their personal beliefs but also on their being aware of their role within others' perceptions developing a sense of change contained by their opinions.

Finally, the third category aimed to give an answer to the second sub question. This category, by considering readers' lived experiences understood by us as their voices, is closely connected to the role language plays in the meaning construction process as previously described by us when considering Goodman (1996). Language, by being the cause of the readers' knowledge of the world established through interaction, helped them to test and support their texts interpretations in others' opinions, beliefs, assumptions and ideas, which, as seen in the previous categories, facilitated readers' construction of *personal* and *collective identities* and affective conditions. In this sense, the word selected to describe this category –interweaving– illustrates the importance of sharing and discussing orally participants' lived and witnessed experiences and how, through them, reading becomes meaningful, corroborating its social condition since, as stated by the Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá (2007), the interactions produced in the educational setting are the basis of future interactions within different social contexts.

Findings

At this point it is important to state that the three categories and one subcategory that emerged from the data analysis are directly linked to the sub-questions due to the

relevance of answering these first so the main question could be answered too. The first and second categories as well as the sub-category revealed that EFL students get engaged in foreign language readings as long as the texts presented to them manage to bring to their minds past experiences filled with emotional aspects and prior knowledge since readers act upon readings on the basis of the meanings that the words have for them. Furthermore, by recounting and sharing lived experiences and collective knowledge that have been significant for each reader during the reading process, this process becomes significant as well.

The categories also evidenced that readers' lived experiences were reflections on how participants identify, denominate and interpret their familiar practices and the influence these have in their reading comprehension process. It is important to bear in mind that familiar practices linked to reading perceptions have been shaped by historical contexts, institutions and intentions of the members of each family, influencing readers' *personal* and *collective identities* (Schwartz et al, 2009). Moreover, we could assert that the *cognitive* and *affective dimensions* described by Ruddell and Unrau (2004), by being built by the reader within familiar practices and by being recalled at the time of reading to make sense of it, determined EFL readers' involvement with foreign language texts. Additionally, students' excerpts displayed that reading can be seen as a social practice as long as learners who hold a socio-cultural condition are able to build their own identity as well as to play important roles at the time of helping with the construction of the others' identities.

In reference to the third category, we perceived interaction as a reciprocal and mutual action whereby learners could assume the role of sharing, negotiating and supporting each other's positions; thus, they were able to construct meaning and become significant helpers at the time of facilitating that construction for the others (Goodman, 1996). What is more, the *Sight Word Strategy*, by introducing words as whole units instead of analyzing their sub-word parts, permitted learners to connect what they had lived to the print, allowing both *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal* interactions (Ellis, 1999) along each one of its stages, thus transforming EFL learners' reading comprehension process into a meaningful and evocative practice by providing a supportive classroom environment where readers could observe and listen to their classmates' stories demonstrating that meaning is conveyed not only through words but also through actions.

Conclusions

In an attempt to compile the outcomes of this study, it is important to first highlight that the main purpose was to provide answers to each one of the inquiries proposed by us as a result of our pedagogical experience in a public school in Bogotá. These questions, by being closely related to the reading comprehension process according to Goodman (1996) and the use of an innovative strategy, the *Sight Word Strategy* (Fry, 1999), caused a great impact on our research process since different perspectives, theories and assumptions were consulted and either rejected or approved by us when delimiting the educational issue at the time of analyzing data. Furthermore, researching and putting into practice the use of a strategy that has been used in a native context and that allowed learners to incorporate their personal experiences into their learning-teaching process enabled us to find meaningful answers to a specific EFL concern and to understand what students do when they are reading and how this influences their personal and social growth.

In view of the above outcomes, we could finally determine that the answer to the main question -How is reading comprehension generated by the use of the Sight Word Strategy (Fry, 1999) and its connection with the EFL student's life experiences? - was that this process is produced by conceiving reading both as a social practice (where participants' sociocultural identity emerged from the way they have lived and made sense of themselves building their own identity as well as assuming important roles at the time of helping in the construction of others' identities) and as a whole, where students' textual interpretations are built by means of background knowledge and interaction. Likewise, we perceived how this strategy could be applied in an EFL context due to the possibility of sharing and interchanging concepts and interpretations in each one of its stages, which provided a supportive classroom environment.

Pedagogical Implications

Building on the insights emerging from the theories of Goodman (1996, 1998); Freire and Macedo (1987) and Fry (1999), discussed within this study as well as the data analysis results, we learned that the first and most important note that can be made of the needs for pedagogical implications is that different aspects of students' lives need to be included in the EFL teaching-learning process since those aspects are the ones that influence and determine the level of engagement within the process

itself. A good starting point for the development of this idea could be considering interactive approaches which argue that reading comprehension is a combination of readers' insights, texts features and classroom relations.

In addition, incoming teachers should be aware of concepts that will help them with the establishment of appropriate methodologies for the implementation of the reading comprehension process itself. Thus, meaning construction could be given when there is a relation between the reader's background and his/her perspective of the world, making both the reading and the comprehension concepts a dependent and a co-related process. Because of this, reading and comprehension cannot be taken as isolated processes, since a connection between the reader and his/her background knowledge from a teaching perspective is not being propitiated.

Considering the strategy we implemented, the *Sight Word Strategy* (Fry, 1999), we believe that reading in a foreign language should be approached with three phases: before, while, and after reading, in view of the fact that by interrelating emergent concepts, comprehension is achieved. Ultimately, it is necessary to intensify and facilitate the development of different strategies where reading could become an integrated basis that should be built upon pedagogical premises such as developing meaning construction and learning how to manage interaction. Additionally, it is important to be aware that the learning process depends both on the learner and his/her purpose or necessity to learn to communicate, as well as on the teacher who provides an interactional classroom environment.

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