HOW

Critical Reading inside a Cross-curricular Approach

Lectura Critica dentro de un Enfoque Trasversal

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Abstract

This qualitative action research study explores six reading strategies to engage students in more dynamic reading through the implementation of workshops focused on the cross-curricular approach to develop critical reading skills among ninth graders at a public school. The study was conducted with 22 students selected, in the city of Manizales, Colombia. The data collection instruments were students' artifacts, teachers' field notes, focus group questionnaires, survey questionnaires, and documentary analysis. The findings demonstrate that the use of reading strategies within a cross-curricular approach facilitates the development of critical reading in students. In addition, the design of materials (workshops), based on topics related to the students' environment, has an impact that not only contributes to improving their knowledge of English but also to expanding their knowledge in other areas of the academic field.

Keywords: critical reading, cross-curricular approach, reading strategies, reading workshops, vocabulary

Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo de investigación acción explora seis estrategias de lectura: predecir, inferir, propósito, conectar, tono del escritor y palabras claves Para lograr la participación de los alumnos en actividades de lectura más activas, se desarrollaron una serie de talleres considerando un enfoque transversal para el desarrollo de la lectura crítica entre los alumnos de noveno grado en una escuela pública. Se realizó con 22 estudiantes seleccionados en la ciudad de Manizales- Caldas. Los instrumentos utilizados para recopilar los datos fueron los artefactos de los estudiantes, las notas de campo de

los profesores, el cuestionario de los grupos de discusión, el cuestionario de la encuesta y análisis de documentos. Los resultados demostraron que el uso de estrategias de lectura permitió el desarrollo de la lectura crítica en los estudiantes. Además, se llegó a la conclusión de que el diseño de materiales (workshop) basados en temas relacionados con el entorno de los estudiantes no sólo contribuyó a mejorar su conocimiento del inglés, sino también para ampliar sus conocimientos en otras áreas del campo académico, relacionado directamente con un enfoque intercultural.

Palabras clave: lectura crítica, enfoque transversal, estrategias de lectura, talleres de lectura, vocabulario

Introduction

The present qualitative action research study explores the development of ninth graders' critical reading through teacher-designed workshops focused on a cross-curricular approach. Considering that these students must be exposed to literature in all their academic subjects, reading must be a fundamental and complementary part of any educational institution to awaken their critical and comprehensive analytical abilities. However, in most institutions, reading has become only an academic practice since students read to pass exams, do in-class presentations, and fill-in-the-blank in grammar-centered activities, which derives in reading for a passing grade. This is why, I decided to engage ninth graders in an active and more demanding reading process that entails making sense of what they read and assuming a critical stance of the implicit information in cross-curricular reading texts. I did so by using six workshops in which learners were exposed to reading strategies. Experts such as Cohen (1990), Carrell (1989), Grabe and Stoller (2002), Pani, (2004), and Block and Israel (2005) were considered for the study since they talk about reading strategies. They affirm that reading strategies are important mental processes to make sense of what students read. Sari et al., (2020) argue that teachers need to be prepared on how to design effective reading comprehension strategies and how to teach these strategies to their students. I as a teacher, must act with the awareness that we can transform, through our teaching practices and resources.

For the above-mentioned reasons, this research study aims to respond to the bilingual educational policies stated by the National Ministry of Education (MEN) regarding the English proficiency level that high school graduates should have, which is B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (MEN, 2002) for the English language teaching learning and evaluating. Therefore, to accomplish this policy, this project seeks to achieve the Basic Standards of Competence (MEN, 2006) set as a graduate requirement for eleventh graders, so that they can demonstrate they are skillful critical readers. For the before reason, this research study contributes to developing my ninth-grade students' critical reading, and at the same time their English language proficiency level. In doing so, I consider the insights of scholars like Conley (1992), and Brown and Atkins (1994), who state that

good reading habits have been operationally defined to embrace multiple abilities. Using contextualized reading for the workshops on the good reading habits stated by the cited authors.

Include owning a need for information, knowing what to read, being able to locate information from various media, applying critical thinking to what is read, recognizing a writer's purpose and tone, making inferences, connecting reading material to own experience, identifying key vocabulary, as well as being able to communicate expanded information in speaking and writing contexts.

To carry out this study, an action research design was adopted. To collect data, I used instruments and techniques such as observations, a focus group, a survey, and school documents. To analyze the procedure, I triangulated and validated the collected information.

The findings confirm that, by using reading strategies, the participating students changed their traditional reading to a more active, so that they could read the texts more broadly. Furthermore, their motivation to read increased; likewise, they were able to react to texts by giving their opinion and interacting with partners with themes related to their context. In addition, the students used English as the target language to enrich their vocabulary. They understood that the use of these reading strategies can help not only to improve their reading comprehension in English but also to gain experience and use the skills automatically through learning and practice.

Literature Review

Critical reading has become an important skill to be promoted in EFL teaching because most learners are not yet able to read critically. This is especially true in most of the public schools' evidence in my work as an English teacher, most of the students do not assume a critical stance of what they read. According to Kurland (2000a), "Critical Reading refers to a careful, active, reflective, analytic reading" which involves reflecting on the validity of what one has read considering prior knowledge and understanding of the world. The three constructs presented here are reading strategies, critical reading, and the cross-curricular approach.

Reading Strategies

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These strategies are conscious techniques or unconscious processes employed by readers in their attempt to make sense of the written text (Barnett, as cited in Gascoigne, 2005). Hence, the use of strategies like writer's purpose and tone, making inferences, connecting reading material to own experience, and identifying key vocabulary. Developing reading skills is a complex process of understanding a written text that involves a conscious process that leads learners to be more efficient readers through practice.

English language teachers need to face the problems of students and develop these skills through practice. Consequently, teachers must promote reading strategies, as one of the main goals to enhance better reading comprehension skills in the school. Reading strategies is the broad term used to describe the planned and explicit actions that help readers translate printed material to meaning. According to Cohen (1990), reading strategies are "those mental processes that readers consciously choose to use in accomplishing reading tasks" (p. 83). Reading strategies are mental processes that learners apply in their process of reading that help them improve in their procedure of academic future and professional development.

Pani (2004) defines reading strategies as "the mental operations involved when readers approach a text effectively to make sense of what they read. Good readers apply more strategies more frequently and more effectively than poor readers" (p. 355). Teachers can help improve student comprehension through the instruction of reading strategies like writer's purpose and tone, making inferences, connecting reading material to own experience, and identifying key vocabulary. With the before strategies used learners go more than an explicit reading comprehension.

Critical Reading

In the current society and everyday life, I frequently demand to deal with sociocultural issues, make decisions, and solve problems. To encounter the problems mentioned effectively and efficiently, I need to be able to critically evaluate and analyze what I see, hear, and read. The critical reading skill is important for students to be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read; it can be executed with the practice reading strategies to have a position compared to what has been read. Anderson (2003) asserts that "critical reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning". Likewise, Pirozzi (2003) defined critical reading as a very high-level comprehension of written material that requires the reader's interpretation and evaluation to separate important and unimportant information, opinion, and facts, and determine the writer's purpose and tone. In Wallace's words (1992), critical reading is an interpretation more than comprehension. Based on these insights it can be affirmed that critical reading is a process that allows students to go beyond using reading material between the lines, to practice critical reading to activate and build thinking. For the previous reason, teachers should encourage students to formulate questions to challenge and improve their thinking skills instead of looking for answers in the given text to certain questions that are superficially found in the text. To develop critical reading skills in the English classroom, students should be taken further through the development of reading strategies to motivate them to ask themselves about the information they are reading. In this way, they can reflect on what to do with problems related to their environment.

Cross-Curricular Approach

Cross-curricular refers to competencies that are not related to the content of one or more content subjects, but that can be taught, practiced, and applied. Cross-curricular give an advantage for students to read about their context. Likewise, if teachers design material with content to explore notable subjects, problems, and questions, students can hold a wide range of reading, expanding concepts, enriching background knowledge, and fostering attitudes about reading topics. According to Beane (1995), "young people are encouraged to integrate learning experiences into their schemes of meaning to broaden and deepen their understanding of themselves" (p. 616). Moreover, Timmerman (2017) argues that, in practical terms, cross-curricular teaching covers various activities: "Teachers can plan it individually or collectively, links between subjects can be made as other subjects can partially be used to explain one concept in a subject, a large variety of projects can be led by teachers, etc." (p. 2). According to this definition, the use of cross-curricular initiatives in the class motivates teachers and schools to achieve meaningful achievements since cross-curricular integration makes a positive result for students' learning process and the teachers' work. Teachers still need to be experts in their topics to set up cross-curricular approaches. Thus, teachers need to be conscious about their relevant role in education; cross-curricular approaches give teachers a great option to foster students' competence; and to implement the cross-curricular approach to develop critical reading.

Participants

The research involved 22 students from 14 to 16 years old. The participants take four hours of English class weekly. They were selected first on a convenience sampling basis (Cozby, 2000). The ninth-grade class was part of the researcher's academic duty; also, because in the diagnostic stage of the study, data showed that they needed a good basis on their English language and, they presented a lack of reading strategies, they were passive in their reading, they did not react to the readings, I could observe that students need to improve their reading skills. Therefore, they needed to reinforce their English learning skills, so that they could face new challenges in their academic or future professional life. In this case, to be able to read critically and comprehensively passages of different types.

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Research Instrument

During the diagnostic stage, the problematic situation of the lack of critical reading skills was identified with data collection instruments and techniques. Students' work was used to analyze their language performance; this visual and physical material collected from

them corresponded mainly to reading comprehension activities, how they worked, and what they did when exposed to reading activities.

Field notes were taken during the observation stage. I could write students' reactions, about the process of completing language tasks. Through this instrument, I could find that the students reacted positively to visual input, but I also found they had weaknesses like translating words frequently failing to read texts comprehensively, and lacking vocabulary to express their ideas; additionally, the data in this instrument, showed low interest in using reading strategies.

A survey questionnaire was administered to collect data about their opinions, perceptions, concerns, learning techniques, and tools to study EFL. According to the students' opinion, they develop strengths, learning techniques, and main skills with this instrument. I confirmed that most of the students did not use reading strategies. They ignored that those strategies existed; this instrument made it evident that they lacked English reading strategies and critical reading skills.

National policies concerning the Basic Learning Rights (BLR) serve as a guide in the English area as a fundamental tool. These rights describe knowledge and skills that students must learn and develop in the English area from sixth to eleventh grade (MEN, 2006). In addition, the school EFL curriculum looks to achieve a level of English proficiency pre-intermediate (B1) at the end of the eleventh grade. In summary, the data analysis in the diagnostic stage shows that the students reported multiple weaknesses in their reading skills.
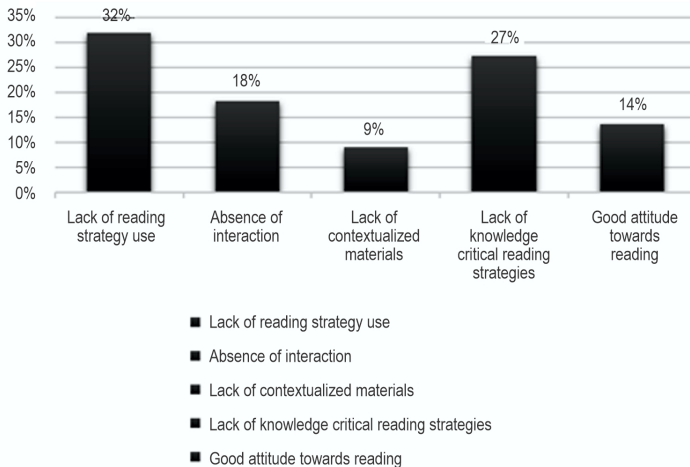

Figure 1. Categories of Analysis in the Diagnostic Stage

Pedagogical Intervention

Design Stage

According to the weaknesses identified in the diagnostic stage, I decided to develop an instructional design that included six workshops. These workshops contained short texts related to their environment. To approach the texts, the students were instructed on how to use reading strategies such as inferring, predicting, connecting, establishing the writer's tone and purpose, and listing keywords.

The format of the workshops followed the three reading stages by Brown (1994). Before, while, and after reading. In the pre-reading stage, students constructed new words, received the input they needed to understand the texts, and became familiar with new vocabulary. The second stage of each lesson was the while reading, in which the students were instructed to use their critical reading skills and get a hold of vocabulary and input to understand the information included in the text. The previous stage includes critical reading assessment through reading and the students' reaction to the topic.

Moreover, this study considered the cross-curricular approach focus in the areas of Natural Science, Social Studies, and Ethics. In consequence, the topics of the workshops were based on the focus studies belonging to programs related to this area (Health Science). These topics were chosen after conducting a survey in which the students expressed what they wanted to work on and the workshops. According to Ball (2008), "content knowledge is crucially important to the improvement of teaching and learning, attention to its development and study has been uneven" (p. 2); therefore, it is essential to give importance to the content taught in class and combine it with the foreign language to achieve better and permanent students' motivation and results.

Action Stage

During the pedagogical intervention, four instruments were used to follow the students' performance. A teacher journal was used to record the researcher's observations and insights while conducting the six workshops. The non-participant observation form was used to record the observer's descriptions and insights while the learners performed the six workshops. A student self-assessment form helped to collect information about the students' reflections and insights about their performance in the reading tasks. A reading rubric form facilitated a report of the student's performance in the main reading task of each workshop.

Evaluation Stage

In this section, the evaluation of the whole process is presented. To confirm if the students learned to use the planned reading strategies previously implemented to develop

critical reading through a cross-curricular approach, a final reading task was designed and implemented. This task helped to determine whether the strategies explored in the project were applied by the students independently. It consisted of a text referring to a familiar topic chosen by the learners in the survey (cannabis and its effects on human behavior and health problems). In the reading task, I intended to know if the learners were able to recognize and use the implemented reading strategies automatically.

In the evaluation stage, I used two instruments: a questionnaire survey to collect the learners' opinions, insights, and reflections about their progress in reading, and a reading rubric form to determine the results of the student's reading performance after having completed the six workshops.

According to the students' self-evaluation, it is evident that through the workshops developed the learners perceived they had good progress in their reading skills. They said that they learned and now know what reading strategies they should consider when reading to go beyond literal information. As displayed in the graph, most learners assessed themselves with high scores (4 or 5) in all aspects, which means that after the research project implementation, they saw themselves as good readers, because they were able to put into practice the different strategies they were exposed to and take advantage of them inside the cross-curriculum orientation of the proposal. According to Figure 2, the identification of the author's intention and tone were the strategies in which they were most successful with scores of 4 and 5 as reported by 22 students. In the second place, the use of previous knowledge, inferences, and identifying the author's purpose were perceived as successful according to an average of 21 students. In the third place, connections were also perceived as effective since 21 students assigned scores of 4 or 5 to this strategy. These perceptions were ratified by the learners' comments in the assessment in which they stated that:

> I learned to use strategies that allow me to have a better reflection on the readings.
>
> I did, with these strategies I developed my understanding skills in a broader way.
>
> The strategies I learned were not usual, I didn't know them in English, it could be that I used them in Spanish, but I wasn't aware of the importance of their use, but now I know how they work.
>
> These workshops were a way of learning to read differently that helped me to read in a different way.

Figure 2 below also shows that a few students (3 out of 22) still reported some low scores (3) in the reading strategies identifying the author's purpose and intention, connections, and inferences. To this respect, they explained their difficulties with comments that highlighted their weaknesses in going beyond the literal reading making inferences or connecting the reading to their context or previous knowledge: *One of the most difficult strategies for me was to infer the information from the text. Reading clues were difficult to identify in a text. The grammar in reading was very difficult for me.*

Concerning vocabulary, students concluded that this was a different way to learn unknown words with real pictures of their context and integrated topics related to knowledge in their daily interaction. This result corresponds to the cross-curricular themes and the vocabulary aspects explored in the self-assessment form. For the cross-curricular themes, 17 out of 22 students chose option 5 and 5 option 4; for the vocabulary item 11, students selected score 5, and 7 learners chose option 4; additionally, for the vocabulary recognition, 10 learners chose option 5, 8 learners' option 4, and only 4 students chose score 3, which means that they identified and contextualized vocabulary expressions concerning the texts. The students commented that one of the most favorable points was the design of the workshops since they were divided into steps where first they found the new vocabulary with drawings associated with each meaning, some of these photos were with themselves as protagonists which called learners' attention; for example, the students' reactions and perception about the use of the vocabulary in the workshops are presented below:

What I liked most was the design of the workshops with real photos of my context. This called my attention because while reading I learned through the drawings the new vocabulary that was related to the topics. The vocabulary presented through familiar pictures helped me to better retain the new words, so I could memorize and recognize them in the readings. Drawings and illustrations in the text helped me to remember the text, it is like making pictures about it in my memory.

Back to Figure 2, the data show that the students perceived that they made significant progress in using the language forms studied in each workshop. They asserted that they used English appropriately to express their point of view about the themes. As seen in the graph, 15 out of 22 learners gave themselves a score of 5 while 5 assigned 4 and 2 assigned 3 correspondingly to the language use aspect; this means that they used the language forms effectively in real context based on the readings. The students who chose option 3 indicated that they still had doubts about the use of the language when answering questions related to the text. According to the student's comments, they practiced the language structures not only through the reading of the texts but also through their writing and speaking performance when reporting their comprehension of the content of the readings. They stated that they improved their ability in the language, acquired the language for the principal objectives of each lesson, and achieved the pragmatic purpose being the main goal. This improvement was confirmed by the following excerpts from the self-assessment form:

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The use of the English language in these workshops was a way to practice the different structures of the language in contexts that surround me through reading and writing.

It was a little difficult for me to read in English in a text. Identifying grammatical structures in texts was a slow process but with practice, I think I could improve.

It was a different practice where I reinforced my knowledge of the language in a different way not through common sentences but through texts.

Finally, the students' self-assessments also included their perceptions about their critical reaction to written texts. In this section, 17 students chose score 5, and 5 students selected score 4; this means that they learned to use implicit strategies to practice critical reading and react to the information and that they were able to express their opinion about a given reading discussing their views about issues related to their social context. Only one student chose score 3 demonstrating that they were not sure about expressing their opinions in a different way than the writer's position. These findings are evident in the following learners' perceptions.

> *The workshops were very good because they dealt with interesting topics from my context, this motivated me to read, and I learned to read in a different way. Now I know that I must always reflect on what I read and express my own opinion.*

> *With the different topics discussed, I had the opportunity to interact with my colleagues' exchanging experiences, opinions, views, and reactions that we had never shared before.*

> *In the discussion of the readings, I learned about my peers' circumstances that I did not know and how they cope with problems in their families.*

> *With these workshops, I learned that I could have the freedom to react freely to any topic or issue related to my social context and even discuss and propose solutions.*

This section has presented the results of data collection and analysis from the action and evaluation stage of this study, which reported a positive effect of reading strategies on the critical reading skills of ninth graders inside a cross-curricular approach.

According to the students' self-evaluation, it is evident that through the workshops, the learners perceived they had good progress in their reading skills. They said that they learned and now know what reading strategies they should consider when reading to go beyond literal information.

As displayed in Figure 2, most learners assessed themselves with high scores (4 or 5) in all aspects, which means that after the research project implementation, they saw themselves as good readers, because they were able to put into practice the different strategies they were exposed to and take advantage of them inside the cross-curriculum orientation of the proposal.

116 Conclusions

I present the conclusions of this study considering the established research question about the impact of reading strategies within a cross-curricular approach on the critical reading skills of ninth graders through a cross-curricular approach at a public school.

Firstly, the design and implementation of workshops based on a cross-curricular approach and implicit reading strategies correspond to an effective pedagogical strategy
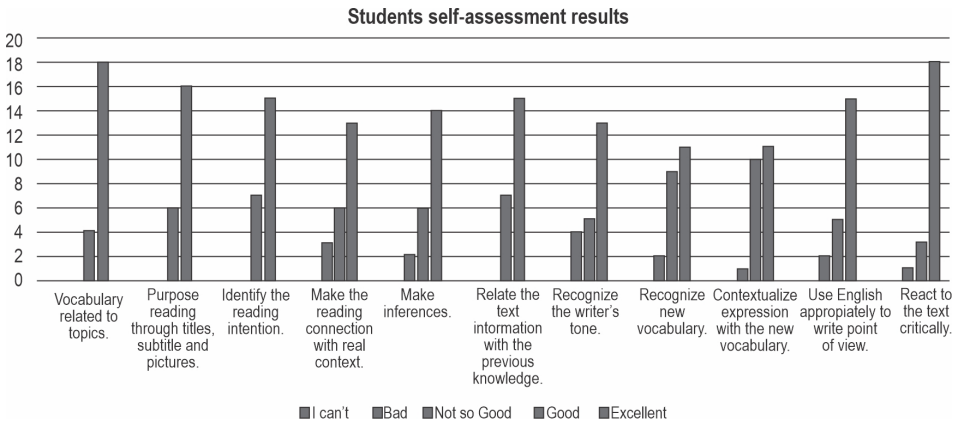
Students self-assessment results

Figure 2. The Students' Assessment of Their Use of Reading Strategies

to solve different reading weaknesses in the learners and to elicit learners' reactions to the topics. When learners start to implement the reading strategies (such as inferences, connections, identifying purpose, predictions, identifying key vocabulary and writers' tone) they are better prepared to respond to academic tasks that demand critical reading. Teachers are recommended to implement these kinds of strategies in their classes to help their pupils widen their critical comprehension of texts and the world.

Reading strategies to promote critical reading help learners move from superficial reading to a much deeper and more reflexive one. By performing each reading, the interpretation improves in each workshop until developing the final task, demonstrating a continuous improvement in the use of reading strategies through practice. As well as showing that they understand the texts and become familiar with the reading strategies. When learners are exposed to these types of reading strategies, they automatically work with them together to build the process of meaning easily. Teachers at the secondary and high school levels must promote these strategies to prepare the students for higher-level reading tasks such as standardized tests.

Secondly, with the training in the use of reading strategies, students sometimes showed more difficulty with some strategies than with others, which is why including reading strategies in their daily practice helps them develop critical reading comprehension. Therefore, teachers are strongly advised to do explicit teaching of reading strategies to provide learners with the tools to become aware of their thinking and react to the content of any reading material.

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The teaching of reading strategies through the design of critical reading workshops motivates the participation of the students also making them aware of the existence of such strategies and helping them to learn how to apply them consciously and unconsciously. It also benefits the development of abstract thinking, critical attitude, and more analytical response-ability. Also, better decision-making processes in their academic experience.

Third, critical reading strategies help learners to recognize cross-curricular vocabulary that works as a bridge between the content and the language that encourages the students toward the class and stimulates their curiosity for the language learning process making a connection to the reading themes. As well, cross-curricular vocabulary fosters motivation and positive attitudes toward the target language, which is why, school curricula should include these types of reading strategies.

Teaching how to read critically with specific reading strategies with the use of themes related to the learner's social context encourages their participation in class because they can demonstrate knowledge, read, and learn more. Additionally, sharing their opinions with this kind of reading becomes critical to their realities. In this respect, teachers are encouraged to promote critical reading strategies in their lesson planning to make their classes more interesting for the students and their levels of reading more active.

Regarding vocabulary recognition, I can conclude that according to the student's reactions, reading strategies help students to recognize new vocabulary related to their context with familiar topics. In addition, students deduce meaning and make inferences, connections, and predictions that encourage their interest and promote their critical analysis of content.

Fourth, in terms of critical reading, teaching reading strategies is one of the most powerful skills to be acquired, for many factors that affect this process: educational and social background, social interaction, previous experience, inference capacity, and vocabulary. In this respect, Hannon (2012) affirms that reading comprehension is a complex ability that combines many cognitive processes. Due to the increasing need to go beyond literal reading, it is necessary to develop reading through the use and practice of these strategies to help learners change basic reading to a more complex one.

Implementing a cross-curricular approach with reading about the student's context develops critical reading skills in the English classroom. With this approach, students learn how to react using reading strategies as a tool to express their point of view by evaluating the writer's opinion and background with arguments and reflections allowing them to discuss different views between themselves. In other words, this type of reading develops a critical reading with an active process that involves students' interaction with the information in the reading to understand it in its entirety. I agree with Wallace (2003), who states that the text

is the starting point and that the students make the meaning of the texts with their reactions to them.

The application of an interdisciplinary approach encourages students to take an active part in class taking advantage of their previous knowledge. The inclusion of content related to the causes and consequences of drugs, food waste, pregnant teenagers in Colombia, etc. Specific topics related to the students' interests and life motivates them to carry out the activities and play a more active role in their reading process. Teachers are invited to do so in their classrooms to improve the reading performance of their students.

Regarding the recognition and use of language forms, I can conclude that reading reinforces the student's knowledge base in linguistic factors such as syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, etc. Students learn in an implicit form that language allows them to express their feelings more naturally. Some learners had a lack of language production in writing with many errors. Then, the teacher had to intervene to help these students to reflect on their own mistakes. These factors play an important role in determining their results.

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