



TEACHING AND LEARNING TO READ IN ENGLISH: A NEED AND A CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ALIKE.

O ENSINO E APRENDIZAGEM DA LEITURA EM INGLÊS: UMA NECESSIDADE E UM DESAFÍO PARA ALUNOS E PROFESSORES POR IGUAL.

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Abstract: Reading constitutes one of the most important objectives for foreign language students, due to the opportunities it provides for studying the target language, for extracting valuable information related to different knowledge areas, and even for entertainment purposes. It also offers models of written texts that may stimulate students' good writing practices. Despite the relevance of this language skill in the context of foreign language teaching, it is often regarded as a passive ability whose main objective is to reinforce the work with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and other linguistic elements in class. Under these circumstances, this paper aims to highlight the need to recognize the interactive, dynamic and social nature of reading, making emphasis on the learners' active role in extracting and constructing meanings while interacting with written texts in English. In this

sense, the article goes through the distinctive features of this skill, the processes that take place during reading comprehension, and the need to integrate them in order to achieve global understanding. The article also warns about the relevance of selecting the most suitable kinds of tasks according to the specific students' needs, characteristics, and purposes for reading. In this regard, it suggests the use of activities which favor a gradual development of skills and strategies to ensure the students' successful interaction with a variety of texts, being able to understand their content, and to make critical evaluations of the information analyzed. The paper takes as theoretical bases studies carried out by authors like Grellet (1981); Douglas (2004); Snow (2002); Harmer (1998; 2001; 2007); Hedgcock and Ferris (2009); Stoller, et al. (2013); Grabe (1991; 2004; 2014); among others who have made important contributions in this area.

Keywords: Reading; foreign language teaching; students' needs.

Resumo: A leitura constitui um dos objetivos mais importantes para estudantes de línguas estrangeiras devido às oportunidades que oferece para estudar a língua objeto, para a extração de informações valiosas relacionadas a diferentes áreas do conhecimento, e até com fins de entretenimento. Também oferece modelos de textos que podem estimular boas práticas de escrita nos alunos. Apesar da relevância desta habilidade linguística no contexto do ensino de línguas estrangeiras, ela é frequentemente considerada como uma habilidade passiva, cujo principal objetivo é reforçar o trabalho com a gramática, o vocabulário, a pronúncia, e outros elementos linguísticos em sala de aula. Sob essas circunstâncias, este artigo visa destacar a necessidade de reconhecer a natureza interativa, dinâmica e social da leitura, enfatizando o papel ativo dos alunos na extração e construção de significados enquanto interagem com textos escritos em inglês. Nesse sentido, o artigo percorre as características distintivas dessa habilidade, os processos que ocorrem durante a compreensão leitora, e a necessidade de integrá-los para alcançar a compreensão global dos textos. O trabalho também alerta sobre a relevância da seleção dos tipos de atividades mais adequadas de acordo com as necessidades, características, e propósitos específicos dos alunos para a leitura. Neste ponto, sugere-se o uso de atividades que favoreçam o desenvolvimento gradual de habilidades e estratégias que garantam a interação bem-sucedida dos alunos com uma variedade de textos, tornando-os capazes de compreender seu conteúdo, e de fazer avaliações críticas das informações analisadas. O artigo toma como base teórica os estudos realizados por autores como Grellet (1981); Douglas (2004); Snow (2002); Harmer (1998; 2001; 2007); Hedgcock e Ferris (2009); Stoller, et al. (2013); Grabe (1991; 2004; 2014); entre outros que fizeram importantes contribuições nesta área.

Palavras-chave: Leitura; ensino de línguas estrangeiras; necessidades dos alunos.

Introduction

Reading is an essential component of any language course, given its relevance in extracting information from a written text (GRELLET, 1981); in stimulating and directing our thoughts through written language (SMITH, 2004), and in the process of language acquisition (KRASHEN, 1989).

Therefore, as Harmer (1998) points out, an important part of a teacher's job is to offer students the opportunity to read texts in English, given the relevance they may have for their studies, their careers, or simply for pleasure. This author emphasizes that the exposure to English offered by written texts, also guarantees students' successful linguistic acquisition in terms of vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, as well as the construction of phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and full texts, especially when reading is relevant and interesting to them. Harmer (1998) also considers that reading offers writing models that can be imitated by students when interacting with this language skill. Finally, this author points out that reading texts in English can contribute to introduce interesting topics that promote discussion, imagination and motivation in the classroom.

The previous ideas are summarized by Richards and Renandya (2002) when they express:

In many second or foreign language teaching situations, reading receives a special focus. There are a number of reasons for this. First, many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals. They want to be able to read for information and pleasure, for their career, and for study purposes. In fact, in most EFL¹ situations, the ability to read [...] is all that students ever want to acquire. Second, written texts serve various pedagogical purposes. Extensive exposure to linguistically comprehensible written texts can enhance the process of language acquisition. Good reading texts also provide good models for writing, and provide opportunities to introduce new topics, to stimulate discussion, and to study language [...] (p. 273).

Despite the relevance of this language skill in the context of foreign language teaching, it is often regarded as a passive ability whose main objective is to reinforce the work with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and other linguistic elements in class. Under these circumstances, this paper aims to highlight the need to recognize

¹ English as a foreign language. English is a foreign language for learners in whose community English is not the usual language for communication. They may be learning English as a school subject, or for travel, business, or academic purposes (THURNBURY, 2006, p. 74).

the interactive, dynamic and social nature of reading, making emphasis on the learners' active role in extracting and constructing meanings while interacting with written texts in English.

In this sense, the article examines the main characteristics of this skill, the processes that take place during reading comprehension, and the need to integrate them in reading lessons through the selection of tasks and texts that suit the students' needs, and their level of language proficiency. The paper also warns about the importance of considering the skills and background knowledge that students incorporate to the reading activity, as well as the strategies and types of readings they will need to use depending on their purposes for reading a particular text.

Hoping to shed some light on the best ways to help our students become efficient readers in English, the elements mentioned above are viewed from the perspective of different authors who have carried out important studies in this area. To start with, the pages that follow will be devoted to examine the distinctive features of reading and the elements included in the reading comprehension process.

The interactive, dynamic and social character of reading

Reading is considered a receptive skill whose main function is to extract meaning from a written text (HARMER, 2001). For a long time, teaching this skill meant reinforcing the students' oral abilities, examining grammar, or practicing pronunciation in the second language (SILBERSTEIN, 1987; GRABE, 1991). Later, studies carried out by authors like Goodman (1967; 1985) and Smith (1971; 1979; 1982), acknowledged that reading is not only a mechanical process for obtaining grammatical information from a text, but a selective process where readers consciously incorporate elements from their personality and their own experiences to actively interpret a text by means of making predictions and inferences, based on their previous knowledge of the language and about the world.

Snow (2002) defines reading comprehension as the process of simultaneous extraction and construction of meanings through interaction and involvement with written language. This author emphasizes that comprehension is a phenomenon that occurs within a larger sociocultural context, which shapes and is shaped by the reader, and interacts with three fundamental elements: in the first place the reader,

along with the cognitive capabilities, motivation, knowledge and experiences he/she brings to the act of reading; secondly the text, including print and electronic texts; and thirdly, the reading activity, including the purposes, the processes involved, and the consequences associated with the reading act.

Alyousef (2006) explains that reading may be regarded as an interactive and dynamic process between a reader and a text, which may lead to automaticity or fluent reading. In this process, the reader tries to extract meanings from the text using his/her knowledge of the language through bottom-up processing, also incorporating his/her prior knowledge or schemes through top-down processing.

Richards and Schmidt (2010) define reading as the processes through which the meaning of a written text is understood, which involves the use of several cognitive skills, including letter and word recognition, syntax knowledge, and the recognition of text types as well as text structure. According to these authors, the resulting understanding from these processes is called reading comprehension.

Nassaji (2011) considers that reading is a complex cognitive skill which involves various sub-skills, processes, and sources of knowledge that range from the lower-level visual processes needed for decoding printed words, to higher-level skills including syntactic, semantic and discourse knowledge, as well as text representation skills and the integration of ideas with the reader's general knowledge.

Brevik; Olsen and Hellekjær (2016) express that current models see reading as an interactive process between bottom-up processing (which includes the recognition of words and relevant grammatical information in a text) and top-down processing (which involves the creation of meanings in an interactive process between the information of the text, the reader's knowledge about language and content, and his/her skills and strategies for information processing).

Shea and Ceprano (2017) emphasize that written texts serve as communication between the author and the reader. In their words, to achieve this purpose the reader needs to gather ideas and information present in the text. He/she must also analyze and evaluate the content, and make the necessary connections with his/her previous knowledge and experiences in order to detect stated and implied meanings. These authors explain that reading requires full comprehension of the message expressed, interpretation between and beyond the lines of a text, and the construction of a personal meaning, which not only implies decoding words, but also involves deciphering the messages they are intended to convey.

From the above considerations, there are some common points which need to be highlighted in order to guide the methodological work with this ability from a communicative perspective.

A first element to be taken into consideration is the idea that although reading is often classified as a receptive skill, it should not be considered as a passive one. On the contrary, it has an interactive and dynamic nature, given by the interaction that takes place between the reader and the text during the reading process in order to achieve comprehension. This interaction includes the extraction of the ideas expressed by the author, along with the construction of meanings with the help of the reader's previous knowledge of the language and his/her experiences related to the topics discussed in the texts.

A second aspect to highlight is that there are important processes that integrate during reading comprehension. The first ones involve identifying formal elements in a text, including words, phrases, and grammatical structures. The second ones include the activation of students' prior knowledge, as well as the use of skills and strategies to make inferences and interpretations about the content of a text and facilitate meaning construction.

A third point to emphasize is the fact that in order to read a given text, readers must have a definite purpose in mind, which can range from the need to search for relevant information in the academic, professional or personal contexts, to the necessity of distraction during their free time. Depending on these purposes, readers will need to use different skills and strategies to accomplish their objective when interacting with the text at hand.

A final element to be considered from the theoretical contributions made by the authors listed above is that reading has a social nature, since the act of reading takes place within a given social context. Therefore, the readers' needs, interests, and motivations regarding this skill will be determined by the sociocultural context where they interact, as well as the interpretations and assessments they will make from the written materials analyzed.

In the following pages, these elements will be examined in depth, considering their implications for the teaching-learning process of this skill.

A reader-centered teaching-learning process

As it was explained earlier, an important element to keep in mind during the conception of reading lessons is the reader, along with the skills he/she brings to the act of reading, the strategies he/she uses during the comprehension process, the purposes that he/she may have for reading a particular kind of text, in addition to his/her previous knowledge and life experiences.

Within the wide range of elements that each reader brings to the reading process, Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) highlight the different reading purposes, the students' background (including family, school and culture influences), their attitudes toward reading and literacy in general, as well as their prior knowledge related to the information included in the text. These authors also state that readers bring individual differences in personality, learning styles, reading strategies, and life experiences, so that a group of readers can find the same text at the same point in time and not necessarily have the same experiences and reactions while reading it, or make the same interpretations of it. Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) note that even the same reader interacting with the same text at different times in his/her life will experience it differently, because he/she has also changed over time.

As it was also previously stated, all these elements that students incorporate to the act of reading are determined by the sociocultural context where they live. In this respect, Snow (2002) argues:

The capabilities and dispositions the reader brings to the task of reading, his or her engagement in and responses to given texts, and the quality of the outcomes produced by the act of reading for some purpose are, themselves, shaped by cultural and subcultural influences, socioeconomic status, home and family background, peer influences, classroom culture, and instructional history. These multiple and interacting factors influence both the inter- and intra-individual differences in reading proficiency [...] (p. 20).

The above considerations imply that teachers should be aware of the students' needs, interests and individual differences during the conception of reading lessons in order to favor a student-centered teaching. However, this requirement is not always taken into account in educational institutions where English is taught as a foreign language. In this regard, Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) comment:

[...] in our observation, few teachers take the time to discover the general characteristics of the student audience(s) in their classes, let alone the specific backgrounds, interests, and abilities of the individual students.

Rather, most teachers rely on an assigned textbook to set the priorities for and deliver literacy instruction. In other words, they may allow a textbook author or publisher, who cannot possibly know the needs of a particular audience, to make crucial instructional decisions (p. 72).

The previous fact brings about that, in many occasions, the texts presented are not interesting enough for the students, or that their linguistic complexity is above the students' foreign language proficiency level, which can be counterproductive and may cause rejection for learning this skill. On this point, Stoller, et al. (2013) alert:

It is not unusual, in many classroom contexts, for students to be assigned passages that are simply too difficult for them, uninteresting, or both. Such reading experiences are frustrating and, sadly, oftentimes demotivate students (p.5).

In order to avoid such situations Stoller, et al. (2013) suggest that teachers should try to relate the readings to the students' lives, communities, experiences, immediate goals, future plans, or to texts previously analyzed by them. That is why the activation of their prior knowledge can be a vitally important factor in this endeavor.

Regarding the importance of previous knowledge activation in the process of reading comprehension Grabe, (2004) states:

Almost all reading researchers agree that background knowledge plays an important role in reading comprehension. It is well documented that readers comprehend texts better when texts are culturally familiar or when they relate to well-developed disciplinary knowledge of a reader. More generally, background knowledge is essential for all manner of inferences and text model construction during comprehension (p.50).

Concerning the types of prior knowledge that students use to understand a written text, Richards and Schmidt (2010) mention those related to the topic of the text, along with the cultural, linguistic, and general knowledge of the world they already possess. This knowledge is kept in the form of schemata² or representations of the diverse experiences lived by the students in the different contexts of their social interaction.

According to Hedgcock and Ferris (2009), such representations can be in the form of linguistic, formal, or content schemata. In the case of linguistic schemata,

² The way that knowledge about a topic or a concept is represented and organized in the mind. Schemata help us make sense of experience, and hence they are crucial in comprehension (THURNBURY, 2006, p. 202).

these authors explain that they are formal in nature and include sounds, symbols, morphemes, words, phrases, sentences, as well as markers of cohesion and reference within and among sentences. Referring to their importance during the reading process, these authors emphasize: “Linguistic schemata provide the most basic threshold for beginning to read a text. Put simply, one cannot read in a language that one does not know, even if the reader is an expert on the content of the text” (HEDGCOCK; FERRIS, 2009, p. 59).

In line with the previous statement, Horiba and Fukaya (2015) warn:

When a learner reads a text written in the L2³, there are more possibilities that the reader encounters some processing difficulties which may undermine his or her reading goal. The most likely cause of the difficulty is unfamiliarity of the language of the text and limited language proficiency of a reader (p. 23).

Based on the previous considerations it can be stated that the students' proficiency level in the foreign language will be the basis not only for text selection, but also for the general methodological conception of reading lessons. Therefore, teachers should take as a starting point the real linguistic level of the students to progressively introduce texts and activities that enable the gradual development of their reading skills in the target language.

The second kind of schemata described by Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) (formal schemata) refers to knowledge about the specific organization of different text genres. They consider that other types of formal schemata are also acquired through students' interaction with various types of textual genres, as they gain life experience. Among them, they refer to the way kitchen recipes, newspaper columns, academic papers, laboratory reports, among other text types, are structured.

With regard to the relevance of identifying textual genres in order to process meanings successfully, Douglas (2004) assures:

Each type or genre of written text has its own set of governing rules and conventions. A reader must be able to anticipate those conventions in order to process meaning efficiently. With an extraordinary number of genres present in any literate culture, the reader's ability to process texts must be very sophisticated (p. 186).

³ Second language. Refers to any language that has been learned subsequent to the acquisition of the first language L1 (THORNBURY, 2006, p. 202).

The previous statement calls for reflection about the need to take advantage of the knowledge that students already acquired in their mother tongue in relation to reading and the way different textual genres are structured, all of which can be transferable to their foreign language learning environment. In the case of university students, besides having experience with personal readings in their mother tongue (such as letters, e-mails, magazines, newspapers, among others), they are also familiar with scientific articles, reference materials such as dictionaries, textbooks, theses, and so on. All these prior knowledge can be activated in reading lessons in order to facilitate the development of their reading skills in English.

The third type of schemata listed by Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) (content schemata) are referred to the readers' prior knowledge of the ideas included in a particular text. These authors refer that content schemata are important to all readers, but may be particularly problematic for foreign or second language students, because some types of cultural information represented in written texts may cause comprehension gaps. Regarding these cultural differences, Snow (2002) claims:

We view learning and literacy as cultural and historical activities, not just because they are acquired through social interactions, but also because they represent how a specific cultural group or discourse community⁴ interprets the world and transmits this information (p.20).

In relation to the difficulties in comprehension caused by cultural elements included in texts written in a foreign language, Grabe (2014) observes: “L2 readers will encounter distinct social and cultural assumptions in L2 texts that they may not be familiar with or find somewhat hard to accept” (p. 11).

It is clear that these cultural differences may be an obstacle for students when interacting with written texts in English, produced in sociocultural contexts that may be unfamiliar to them. This means that along with the linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences (CANALE; SWAIN, 1980; CANALE, 1983) that students need to interact with these kinds of texts, teachers must encourage their awareness about the “cultural knowledge and assumptions that could affect the exchange of meanings and might lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication” (LITTLEWOOD, 2011, p. 546).

⁴ A group of people involved in a particular disciplinary or professional area (e.g. teachers, linguists, doctors, engineers) who have therefore developed means and conventions for doing so. The type of discourse used by a discourse community is known as a genre (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 175).

This kind of knowledge can be introduced in the classroom by means of authentic materials⁵ related to the ways those other cultures live and think. Teachers may take to the classroom topics of cultural, academic, or affective interest, where students may be able to compare their customs, values and ways of life to those from people belonging to these other cultural environments.

In the case of Higher Education, teachers can use video sequences available on the internet, so that students may see through their own eyes the way university students live in other parts of the world, especially in those countries where English is the official language, such as the cases of England, Australia, the United States, among others, which house some of the most recognized and important universities around the world. Teachers may also use texts with information about these universities, their location, main characteristics, the different specialties they offer, as well as the main academic activities that students perform in these higher education institutions. This information may be compared to the students' own experiences, as a way of raising their motivation towards reading texts in English, as well as their interest for learning this foreign language in general.

The activation of the types of schemata described earlier will demand the acquisition and practice of certain reading skills and strategies, which involve the use of two fundamental types of textual processing. In the upcoming pages, these processes will be referred to in detail.

Bottom-up, top-down and interactive approaches to teaching and learning reading

Horiba and Fukaya (2015), observe that reading comprehension usually implies an interaction between linguistic and conceptual processing. Commenting on the basic requirements for reading comprehension, these authors stress that its primary demands include the recognition of words, the extraction of semantic propositions

⁵ In language teaching, the use of materials that were not originally developed for pedagogical purposes [...] Such materials are often thought to contain more realistic and natural examples of language use than those found in textbooks and other specially developed teaching materials (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 43).

from sentences, and the establishment of connections among the ideas from different sentences. They warn that it is also important to activate general knowledge related to the topic of the text, to make connections between different kinds of textual information, and to establish logical relationships between this kind of information and the reader's general knowledge by means of making inferences (HORIBA; FUKAYA, 2015).

All of these actions involve the use of two fundamental types of textual processing: lower-level processes and higher-level ones (GRABE, 1991; 2014). The former are also known as bottom up processes, with an emphasis on textual processing at word and sentence levels, while the latter are also recognized as top down processes, and are based on prior knowledge, experiences and values that readers incorporate to the reading activity (GRABE, 1991; UR, 1996; WALLACE, 2001; DOUGLAS, 2004; HINKEL, 2006; HARMER, 2001; 2007; HEDGCOCK; FERRIS, 2009).

Grabe (2014) explains that lower level processes are not necessarily easier than higher-level ones. In fact, he notes that in some respects they may be more difficult to develop for students learning a second language. Among the skills required for this type of processing, this author mentions the automatization of letter-sound relations which, in his opinion, is the basis of all alphabetic reading and also supports syllabic reading systems. Another element that Grabe (2014) includes in this first text processing level is vocabulary knowledge which, in his words, is directly related to reading ability. Finally, this author refers to the strong relationship between language knowledge (syntax and discourse awareness) and second language reading comprehension.

Regarding higher-level processes, Grabe (2014) points out that they include the comprehension of a text through a semantic network elaborated by the reader based on the ideas extracted from the text, which serve as the basis for creating an initial model of comprehension. This initial model is expanded based on the reader's prior knowledge to interpret the text in a personal way, using strategies to construct meanings from the selection of relevant information that will be learned and stored in their long-term memory⁶.

⁶ Part of the memory system where information is stored more permanently (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 359).

The integration of these two types of textual processing is of paramount importance for teaching reading. It allows students to make use of their previous knowledge about the foreign language, along with the experiences acquired in the course of their lives about certain topics, activities and social situations, in order to achieve global comprehension of a written text.

In addressing the need to encourage students to integrate these processes during reading, Ur (1996) explains:

The construction of meaning that occurs in reading is a combination of bottom-up processes [...] and top-down ones [...] It is very difficult, sometimes impossible, to read successfully a text where our own schemata cannot be brought to bear. Thus, learners should be encouraged to combine top-down and bottom-up strategies in reading, which means in practice doing such things as discussing the topic of a text before reading it, arousing expectations, eliciting connections between references in the text and situations known to the learners (p.141).

From this perspective, Douglas (2004) notes:

For learners of English, two primary hurdles must be cleared in order to become efficient readers. First, they need to be able to master fundamental bottom-up strategies for processing separate letters, words, and phrases, as well as top-down, conceptually driven strategies for comprehension. Second, as part of that top-down approach, second language readers must develop appropriate content and formal schemata-background information and cultural experience to carry out those interpretations effectively (p.185).

The previous considerations imply that in order to achieve a successful comprehension of a written text in a foreign language, students will require the use of knowledge related to the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions of grammar (NUNAN, 1998; CELCE-MURCIA; LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999). They will also need to use knowledge related to the discourse, sociolinguistic, strategic, and sociocultural areas (CANALE; SWAIN, 1980; CANALE, 1983; CELCE-MURCIA, 1993; 1995; 2007; LITTLEWOOD, 2004; 2011). This will allow them to process the information included in a particular text and construct meanings by analyzing and assessing the ideas expressed by the author, based on their own points of view and personal opinions in relation to the ideas and topics covered.

The implementation of the types of knowledge mentioned above during the reading act will demand from the students the use of reading skills⁷ and strategies⁸

⁷ Text processing abilities employed in reading [...] that are relatively automatic in their use. For example: recognizing words, recognizing grammatical functions of words, noticing specific details, making inferences, making comparisons, making predictions (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 484).

that allow their successful interaction with the texts analyzed. In this sense, teachers should select the most suitable types of tasks to be used at the different reading stages (before, during and after reading) in order to favor the gradual development of these skills and strategies.

The stages of a reading lesson: goals and types of activities

In line with the previous ideas, Grellet (1981) suggests using a global approach where students can first anticipate elements present in the text, starting with a general understanding within their reach, and gradually moving towards a deeper and more detailed comprehension. In his opinion, this type of procedure is fundamental for the development of inference skills, anticipation and deduction, and may contribute to increase their confidence when analyzing authentic texts which usually include vocabulary and grammatical structures that can be difficult for them.

In this sense, Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) consider that at the pre-reading stage, teachers should first think about what students already know about the content, structure and language of a given text, to activate their schemata. These authors explain that preparing students for reading can increase their interest, confidence, and motivation to read a text, and may facilitate understanding. They also consider that pre-reading activities provide an excellent opportunity for the teacher to introduce reading strategies that can be extremely useful for various types of reading that students can do in the future. In their opinion, such activities may include prior information about the author of the text, the date or place where it was written, as well as historical, cultural, or technical information present in the text.

Richards and Smicht (2010) define pre-reading activities as the ones students perform before reading a text in order to prepare for reading. In their words, these activities may be aimed at teaching vocabulary in advance, activating the students' background knowledge and reading strategies, predicting the content of a text, generating interest for a particular topic, and checking ideas or understanding of a topic.

⁸ Ways of accessing the meanings of texts, which are employed flexibly and selectively in the course of reading and which are often under the conscious control of the reader. Strategies serve to make the reading process more effective (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 485).

Among the activities suggested by different authors (GRELLET 1981; TUDOR 1989; UR 1996; WALLACE, 2001; HEDGCOCK; FERRIS, 2009) for the pre-reading stage are: making predictions about the content of a text (based on the title, using pictures, tables of content, etc.); predicting the answers to pre-reading comprehension questions and then verifying the veracity of the predictions during reading; writing their own questions about a text based on the title; brainstorming⁹ possible words or ideas related to the topic or title of the text; using semantic mapping¹⁰, multiple choice activities, among others.

Once the students made predictions about the topic, the content and the possible vocabulary present in the text during the pre-reading stage, the teacher can move to the while-reading stage. At this phase, students will be able to verify or refute their predictions by doing activities that enable them to search for general or specific information that can support or expand their previous linguistic, formal, and content schemata related to the text being analyzed.

An important aspect to consider at this stage is that reading purposes will determine the level of task demand, ranging from the identification of main ideas or supporting information, to a high level of detailed understanding (GRABE, 2014) which, in terms of teaching this skill, means that students should be aware of these purposes in order to perform a particular type of reading.

In this sense, Grellet (1981) points out:

One of the most important points to keep in mind when teaching reading comprehension is that there is not one type of reading but several according to one's reasons for reading [...]. By reading all texts in the same way, students would waste time and fail to remember points of importance to them because they would absorb too much non-essential information (p.17).

Considering the previous idea, one of the primary reading strategies that the teacher must encourage in the students is identifying their purposes for reading, and adjusting them depending on their needs (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010; GRABE, 2014).

⁹ (In language teaching) a group activity in which learners have a free and relatively unstructured discussion on an assigned topic as a way of brainstorming generating ideas. Brainstorming often serves as preparation for another activity (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 61-62).

¹⁰ A classroom technique in which a visual representation of ideas in a text or conceptual relationships within a text is used to assist with the reading of a text. The semantic map may be teacher or student generated (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 520).

Thus, if the purpose of an activity is to locate specific information in a text (a date, place, etc.), students should scan¹¹ through it to locate that particular information without trying to understand every detail. On the contrary, if the activity requires them to look for general information, they should skim¹² through the text in order to find general ideas, disregarding secondary details. Besides, students might choose to extensively¹³ read some materials for pleasure or to improve their language proficiency.

In addition to the reading purposes described above, students sometimes will need to achieve a deeper comprehension of the text, which enables them to understand its logical organization and structure, to interpret the author's intentions, and to identify the linguistic resources used to convey certain ideas, all of which will demand an intensive¹⁴ reading of the text.

The types of reading mentioned above will be used depending on the type of text to be analyzed and the purposes for reading it (GRELLET, 1981). In this sense, the conception of while-reading activities should guarantee a transition, which starts with tasks that initially require the students to quickly skim or scan through a text to look for a general idea or a particular piece of information, to activities that demand a detailed understanding of the text.

Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) consider that while-reading activities become more important when texts are extensive, when content or grammatical structures are unfamiliar to students, or when the textual genre is challenging for them. In their opinion, it is during this stage where comprehension problems are more likely to arise, causing frustration and confusion. These authors emphasize that this phase is of great relevance in helping students to develop and practice fundamental reading strategies, especially in the academic context, such as highlighting or annotating relevant information, questioning and responding, outlining or charting, among others.

Some useful activities to be used at this stage include: matching activities, right or wrong questions, multiple choice questions, information transfer activities (from charts, diagrams, graphs, tables), note-taking and outlining, ordering tasks, text editing tasks, open questions, among others (GRELLET, 1981; DOUGLAS, 2004; HEDGCOCK; FERRIS, 2009).

¹¹ (In reading) a type of reading strategy which is used when the reader wants to locate a particular piece of information without necessarily understanding the rest of a text or passage (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 508).

¹² A type of rapid reading which is used when the reader wants to get the main idea or ideas from a passage (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 509).

¹³ Extensive reading means reading in quantity and in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 212).

¹⁴ Intensive reading is generally at a slower speed, and requires a higher degree of understanding than extensive reading (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 2010, p. 212).

Finally, at the post-reading phase, students should critically evaluate the contents and information included in the text and compare their points of view to those offered by the author (GRELLET, 1981). At this stage, they should summarize the content of the text, think critically, and make reading-writing connections. These goals can be achieved through creative, interesting and stimulating activities, such as writing summaries, making debates, responding in writing or in discussion to questions about the text, conducting research projects related to the contents of the text, among others that should go beyond the mechanical comprehension questions used by traditional methods (HEDGCOCK; FERRIS, 2009).

Based on the previous considerations, it can be stated that at the post-reading stage, it is important to include activities where students can reflect about the value of the contents of a particular text from the linguistic, affective, academic and professional points of view, as well as their applicability in the different contexts of their daily interactions. This will increase their motivation and interest for reading other texts in English and will raise their awareness about the importance of this language skill.

It can also be expressed that most of the activities used at this stage should be aimed at encouraging critical attitudes in students about the topics analyzed, by adding a degree of discussion and debate about the points of view expressed. This will require the integration of reading with other linguistic skills such as speaking, listening and writing.

Conclusions

Reading texts in English favors students' language acquisition, since it offers ideal models of the way different textual genres are structured and organized. It also guarantees students' contact with interesting and relevant topics, which promotes debates and discussions inside the classroom. This may contribute to enhance the students' language proficiency level and to develop different knowledge, skills and competences related to other important areas of their lives, which may also lead to their linguistic, academic and personal growth. This is why it is important to recognize the interactive, dynamic and social nature of this language skill, and to conceive its

teaching-learning process considering the prior knowledge that students incorporate to the reading act in order to provide opportunities for the construction of meanings, based on what they already know about the foreign language, and considering their personal life experiences.

In this sense, teachers must be aware of the students' needs, interests and individual differences during the conception of reading lessons in order to favor a student-centered teaching-learning process. It should start with a detailed analysis of their real language proficiency level, along with an awareness of what they know about different textual genres, and about the topics to be introduced in class. On these grounds, teachers will be able to activate the students' background knowledge to encourage an active acquisition and development of their reading skills. Teachers will also be able to select the most suitable kinds of texts and activities according to the specific students' characteristics, their different purposes for reading, and the sociocultural environment where they interact.

The conception of these reading activities should ensure the integration of bottom-up and top-down processes, in such a way that students might be able to make use of their previous knowledge about the foreign language, along with their experiences about certain topics, activities and social situations, in order to achieve a global comprehension of a specific text. Such activities should also take into consideration the different reading stages, and include a gradual level of complexity that allows a progressive development of the necessary skills and strategies that will eventually make possible the students' successful interaction with a variety of texts in English. Thus, they will be in a position to understand their content, and to make logical interpretations, along with critical evaluations of the information analyzed, including its relevance and application within their sociocultural context of interaction.

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