

Improving Reading Comprehension Skills through Reading Strategies Used by a Group of Foreign Language Learners

Nancy Gómez Torres

nancy.gomez@upbmonteria.edu.co

Jhon Jairo Ávila Constain

jhon.avila@upbmonteria.edu.co

Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana – Montería

A research study included the examination and implementation of a variety of strategies in order to improve students' reading comprehension skills in a foreign language. Reading is the process of identification, interpretation and perception of written or printed material. Comprehension is the understanding of the meaning of written material and involves the conscious strategies that lead to understanding. The reading strategies are conscious techniques or unconscious processes employed by readers in their attempt to make sense of the written text (Barnett as cited by Gascoigne, 2005). Thus, the main goal of this piece of research was to implement some reading strategies in 2 elementary courses in EFL in order to obtain better results in the middle and long term in class and on ECAES, MICHIGAN, MELICET and PET tests.

Key words: reading, comprehension, strategies, question, answer, relationship, graphic, organizer

La investigación se basó en el estudio e implementación de algunas estrategias para incrementar el nivel de comprensión lectora en estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera. El término *lectura* se define como el proceso de identificación, interpretación y percepción de material escrito o impreso. Y el término *comprensión*, como el entendimiento de los significados del material escrito, a través de estrategias conscientes, las cuales conducen a su entendimiento. Las estrategias de lectura son técnicas conscientes o procesos inconscientes empleados por el lector para darle sentido a un texto (Barnett citado por Gascoigne, 2005). Por esta razón, el objetivo principal de esta investigación fue implementar algunas estrategias de lectura en dos cursos de Inglés elemental como lengua extranjera, para obtener mejores resultados a mediano y largo plazo en el desarrollo de las clases, en el mejoramiento del nivel de comprensión lectora, así como también en los exámenes ECAES, MICHIGAN, MELICET and PET.

Palabras clave: lectura, comprensión, estrategias, pregunta, respuesta, gráficos, organizadores

Introduction

Many people think of reading as a skill that is taught once and for all in the first few years of school. They see reading as a simple process: readers decode, figure out how to pronounce each word in a text then automatically comprehend the meaning of the words as they do with their everyday spoken language (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). However, reading is not a straightforward process of lifting the words off the page. It is a complex problem-solving process in which the reader makes sense out of a text not just from the words and sentences on the page, but from ideas, memories, and knowledge evoked by those words and sentences as well as experience. Reading is the process of identification, interpretation and perception of written or printed material. Comprehension is the understanding of the meaning of written material and involves the conscious strategies that lead to understanding. The process of reading deals with language form, while comprehension has to do with the final result, which deals with the language content. Furthermore, reading establishes a link between the writer and the reader. It involves the recognition of words, phrases, and clauses, and in some respects, it can be considered a simpler process than comprehension (He Ji Sheng, 2000).

On the other hand, comprehension is a much more complex psychological process which includes phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic elements, as well as cognitive and emotional factors.

It is important to have in mind that reading is influenced by many situational issues such as society, culture, religion, background, likes, and particular purposes. Thus, before proceeding, it will be useful to look at some more attempts to define reading comprehension. Here are some definitions: Good or proficient readers do not necessarily read all the text with equal ease or success or poor readers will not always have a hard time with all texts (Czico, Greenleaf, Hurwitz and Schoenbach, 2000). On the other hand, effective reading comprehension also depends on the strategies the reader uses. According to Urquhart (1987), comprehension has to do with the different products of the reading process, the results of the different standards which readers set for themselves, partly because of their purpose in reading, and because of the nature of the text. Comprehension is affected by the reader's background knowledge which may be related to his/her cultural background (Steffensen & Joag-Dev, 1984).

Bormuth (1969) sees comprehension as an increase in information as the consequence of reading. Other authors, such as Kucer (2005), affirm that there is comprehension when readers have understood a text and are able to give a coherent account for various aspects of it. Calfee and Curley (1984) state that comprehension happens when readers recognize organizational structures and are capable of modifying them for their own purposes.

Urquhart (1987) states that Baker and Brown do not actually define comprehension, but rather describe nine activities for achieving good comprehension. Some of them are establishing purposes for reading, modifying reading rates and strategies in accordance with different purposes, and identifying the important elements of a passage (Baker & Brown, 1984). Based on Bensoussan's theory, readers compare the ideas in the text with their own schemata. Their background knowledge makes it possible to create models, which include the knowledge itself and information about how it can be used. Comprehension is produced when new information is connected with old knowledge. However, without the correct type of pre-existing knowledge and with an inappropriate schema, the readers can miss the meaning of the text. In this way, comprehension becomes more difficult (Bensoussan, 1998).

As can be inferred, there are a great number of definitions for reading comprehension, just as there are for strategies. Here Barnett's definition will be introduced. For this author the reading strategies are conscious techniques or unconscious processes employed by readers attempting to make sense of the written text (Barnett as cited by Gascoigne, 2005). However, "when readers did not use appropriate reading strategies, they had problems with guessing the meaning of words, relied on word by word translation, often made inaccurate guesses and could not retain the meaning of what they read...". (Hosenfeld, 1976).

On the other hand, different reading researchers emphasize different reading strategies which can be used to create better or proficient readers.

The Problem

Considering some of the issues stated by the scholars quoted above, we concluded that some students at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Monteria, present low reading comprehension and lack or inappropriate use of reading

comprehension strategies which have caused low performance in both English and Spanish classes and on tests. Therefore, the main objective of this research was to implement some reading strategies in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses to obtain better results in the middle and long term in class and tests such as ECAES, MICHIGAN and MELICET or PET T, as well as to improve the English level at this institution.

To carry out this research, some strategies were selected and adapted with the purpose of learning ways to effectively support students' efforts to read and comprehend texts as well as to train them to become proficient independent readers outside of the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Reading strategies provide important tools to help you help understand any type of text much more easily. It all depends on the reader's background knowledge concerning the language and its culture, as well as the kind of article you are dealing with.

When strategies are appropriately used, you may get the most out of the reading by making a minimal effort. Based on the texts taken into the classroom, the teachers may make use of a number of strategies that lead to a better assimilation or comprehension for the students to interact with them; among these, we can mention the following, which will be defined below: *Brainstorming*, *Graphic Organizers*, *KWL (Know-Want-Learn)*, *Comparison-Contrast Charts*, *Question-Answer Relationship* and *Reciprocal Teaching*.

Brainstorming is a technique used to come up with as many ideas as possible concerning an issue in order to find a solution or to have a better understanding of the issue. The following extract about brainstorming has been taken from the following web site:

<http://www.mindtools.com/pages/Supplementary/BrainstormingHistory.htm>

“At first, Osborn [1940] referred to brainstorming as a ‘think up’ process and ‘think up’ had four fundamental rules. These four rules in brainstorming history stated the following:

- The goal of a ‘think up’ session would be to come up with as many ideas as possible.

- There would be absolutely no criticism of any thoughts or ideas.
- No idea should be considered too outlandish and such ideas would be encouraged.
- Members of a ‘think up’ team should build upon one another’s ideas”.

By 1940, Alex Osborn considered that the conventional methods of overcoming obstacles and creating new ideas were too inhibitive and not conducive to real creativity; that is why he introduced the concept of *brainstorming*, which spread worldwide quite rapidly. Thus, before having students talk about a major topic, it is essential to activate their background knowledge, taking into account the linguistic competence and the level of knowledge they have about the topic. One way to carry out this kind of *brainstorming* activity is by engaging the students to think of an issue and, based on it, start thinking of other concepts relating to it, so that the students can have a wider idea of what they want to talk or write about. It is like this, that they can relate to concepts which may make the task easier.

Then, the idea behind it is fairly simple. Students try to think of a word or phrase associated with the topic. The teacher writes it down on the board, makes students associate it, create new concepts or ideas, and compares them after a reading of the text has been completed and some questions or reflection may accompany it.

Comparison-Contrast Charts. They are useful for looking for two quantities and, in doing so, the students can come up with similarities and differences they get from the reading. First, you look at the similarities. Then, you consider the differences, making sure to indicate on what criteria you are drawing out the dissimilarities (Jones, 2007).

Graphic Organizers. Jones states that graphic organizers are also known as *pictorial organizers*, *webs*, *maps* and *concept maps*. Graphic organizers are basically visual ways to represent information. Students can create maps that display the information once it has been arranged:

- “According to main ideas, subtopics and details.
- In sequence.
- To show the relationships between the different parts.
- According to the similarities and differences between two or more concepts.
- By its components, as in the elements of a story.
- ...and lots of other ways”.

K-W-L. This strategy is the creation of Donna Ogle (1986). It is a 3-column chart that helps capture the *Before*, *During* and *After* components of a reading text.

- **K** stands for **Know** (What do I already know about this topic?)
- **W** stands for **Will** or **Want** (What do I think I will learn about this topic?) or (What do I want to know about this topic?)
- **L** stands for **Learned** (What have I learned about this topic?)

Question-Answer relationship(s). Jones (2007) refers to Question-Answer Relationships as a way to help students realize that the answers they seek are related to the type of question that is being asked; it encourages them to be strategic about their search for answers based on their awareness according to the different types of questions they are looking for. Even much more importantly, it is through understanding that the students will be able to find a solution to the questions provided regarding the information from the text and on what they already know about the issue.

Reciprocal Teaching. Palincsar & Brown (1984, 1986) compiled four comprehension strategies, these being *summarizing*, *questioning*, *clarifying*, and *predicting*, to carry out reciprocal teaching. This strategy is not exactly aimed at having a student in front of the class playing the role of a teacher nor taking turns by telling others the main ideas from the text, but promoting comprehension and providing their own points of view about it.

Below there are some tasks or strategies by which a student or teacher may approach a reading comprehension text:

“Right There” This type of questions requires you to refer to the passage and find the correct information in order to answer the questions provided. These are sometimes called literal questions because the correct answer can be found somewhere in the passage. They sometimes include phrases like the following: *“According to the passage...” “How many...?” “Who is...?” “Where is...?” “What is...?”*

“Think and Search” This type of questions usually requires you to think about how the ideas or the information from the passage relate to each other. You will need to look back at the passage, find the information the question refers to and try to figure out how the information or the ideas fit together. They sometimes include phrases like *“The main idea of the passage is...” “What caused...” “Compare and contrast...”*

“On My Own” This type of questions can be answered by using your background knowledge on the topic. This type of question does not usually appear on tests of reading comprehension because it does not require you to refer to the passage, but it is expected that you answer based on your experience or what you know. They sometimes include phrases like these: *“In your opinion...” “Based on your experience...” “Think about someone or something you know...”*

“Author and You” This type of questions requires you to use ideas and information that is not stated directly in the passage to answer the questions, but it also requires you to think about what you have read and state your own ideas or opinions. They sometimes include phrases like *“The author implies...” “The passage suggests...” “The speaker’s attitude...”*

Methodology

Qualitative research was applied to carry out this research project.

Subjects

The subjects at the very beginning consisted of 50 second semester students majoring in business administration, economics, law, psychology, mechanical engineering, civil engineering, electronics engineering, agro-industrial engineering, social communication and journalism at a private university on the northwest coast of Colombia. However, 12 of them dropped out of the English course. These individuals were enrolled in an elementary interdisciplinary class of English. They belonged to the middle and upper middle social class and their ages ranged between fifteen and eighteen.

Instruments

It was necessary to use several samples of data collection that were divided into some categories:

Pre-test, Class, Survey, Post-test, Interviews.

- **Pre-test:** The participants took a written test to determine the reading comprehension level they had and the strategies that they use to cope with a text in English.

- **Class:** The participants attended some classes where the teacher explained to them the reading comprehension strategies to realize how they perform when reading a text in the target language.
- **Survey:** The researchers prepared a Habit Survey to learn what their reading habits and hobbies were.
- **Post-test:** The students re-took the pre-test, but this time participants were expected to apply some of the reading comprehension strategies provided in class.
- **Interview:** The learners answered an interview, which was tape-recorded, which inquired what reading strategies they have used and how they felt while taking the programmed workshops during the course.
- Then, the collected data were analyzed to establish if there was any difference before and after the post test.

To analyze the data, triangulation was applied.

Testing Procedures

During the first week of class, all subjects took a reading comprehension pre-test. Fifteen weeks later, when the subjects finished the sixty-four hour English course, they were given the same reading comprehension test as a post-test. The rationale for using exactly the same test for both pre- and post-testing was to assure an exact, comparable test, thus avoiding the problem of equating different forms of pre-test and post-test. The sixteen-week interval between administration of the test was deemed long enough to control for any short-term memory effect since subjects were not provided with the correct answers after the pre-test.

Materials and Training Procedures

The subjects followed the textbook, **American Headway**; however, English teachers were allowed to use any textbooks and materials to develop their own tests. Therefore, the teachers (the researchers) selected eight reading passages from a variety of sources which were covered during the semester. The reading passages were chosen on both the basis of subjects' and teachers' presumed interest and for their readability.

Prior to the training, the teacher and the class had a general discussion about strategic learning and strategic reading. In the discussion, reading strategies and

strategic reading were defined. The teacher, along with the participants, discussed why learning and practicing effective strategies were important. In addition, the teacher clearly and explicitly explained the specific procedure of the training method and its benefit. Next, the teacher conducted pre-reading activities in order to activate students' background knowledge related to the topic and content of the reading passage. After that, the teacher asked the students to read silently the assigned section of the passage. In the beginning, the students were given enough time to read an assigned section of a passage; however, as time went by, they were gradually given less reading time. From the very beginning, students were encouraged to participate during the process and use the reading comprehension strategies not only in the classroom but also outside it, so that the training could be transferred to other reading tasks.

Data Analysis

After having explained a strategy to the participants, they were given some readings and worksheets which they were expected to answer using that specific strategy. Once, the subjects were asked to send an e-mail with an attached file containing a task which, of course, was related to the strategy studied in class. The different worksheets were collected, checked, and corrected, and in the next session, the students received feedback. This activity was done during the whole process. At the end of the semester, the participants were interviewed. In that interview, they expressed how they felt, their opinions about their participation in the research, and the strategies they considered the most relevant and useful. The data were used to answer the research question.

Findings

In this study, the reading strategies selected played a significant role because they promoted students' participation. For instance, when using brainstorming (before starting to explain or read a new topic or article), students came up with interesting, outstanding and current ideas, confirming what Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) affirm that comprehension is affected by the reader's background knowledge, as well as what Bensoussan's (1998) theory states: that when student's schemata is activated, the comprehension process is accomplished. This strategy was used in all the reading passages. One of the readings was "The Story of St. Valentine" and the teacher asked the participants questions like these:

Who is your best friend?

Students' answers were: My best friend is (best friend's name). Or some just gave their best friend's name.

Why is he or she your best friend?

Students' answers here were:

Because S/He is friendly, an excellent person. He understands me, helps me. She is good, intelligent, loyal, authentic, honest, crazy, nice, cheerful, funny, professional, sociable, tall, confident, and unconditional. S/He likes parties.

Other questions were as follows:

What is / are the most important thing(s) in a friendship? In a love relationship?

Here it is possible to see that they are quite critical.

I think the most important is honesty, unconditional love, loyalty, sincerity, responsibility, confidence, friendship, comprehension, responsibility, confidence, emotional support, sex, and money.

The last two questions were What is love and friendship day? And what do people usually do on this date?

The most impressive or real answer for the first question could be as follows:

It is a commercial date. For the last question, they responded: People give candy, flowers, cards, sweaters, and money. They have sex, go to parties, restaurants, motels, and discos. People also drink alcoholic beverages.

For this reading, besides brainstorming, the "K. W. L." strategy was used. Students were given a table to fill in. When using this strategy students applied, as Ogle (1986) states, higher-order thinking strategies which helped them construct meaning from what they read and helped them monitor their progress toward their goals. Students were asked to write in the "K" column what they already knew about the topic, in the "W" column what they want to or will learn, and in the "L" column what they learned after having read the text. Once participants finished the activity, they were asked to go back to the "K" column and see if any of their prior knowledge was inaccurate, to check any of them that were inaccurate, according to the text and rewrite any of their statements that were inaccurate to correct them. Then subjects

were asked to go to the “W” column and check any of their questions that the text did not answer. These questions were posed in class to see if somebody knew the answer(s). Otherwise, they had to be prepared to bring these unanswered questions up the next class, or tell how they would find answers to them and where they would look to get the answers. A sample of information provided by them was as follows:

Table 1. Sample of information provided by students

<p style="text-align: center;">K What do I Already Know</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">W What do I Think I Will Learn? Or What Do I Want to Know?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">L What Have I Learned?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saint Valentine’s Day is a date very important in the entire world. • Also is a historic date around the world. • In this day the boy and girlfriend relation give presents: chocolates, flowers and cards... • In many countries this date is called LOVE DAY. • The Saint Valentine’s is an important day for many people. • In this moment the persons celebrate with your friends, family or other people. • This day is celebrate on September 20th is named The Love and Friendship Day. Realized party, I think that a kiss under the water could be very romantic with the light of the moon. • People usually give presents as cards, flowers, and so on. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe that the text will show us the story of the Saint Valentine’s Day. • I’d like to know: -where it was born? -why was it born? -when was it born? -how was it born? -how was it celebrated many years ago? • To me I would like to know about different cultures that live in other country. When is celebrate Saint Valentine’s Day? • Also I think that the text speak on as the people enjoy this day with your friends. • It is a text about the love and friends or some boys and girls in love. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I learned that Valentine was a roman priest that married a lot of couples even the emperor had a law to prohibit married. And he died on February 14th so that’s why we celebrate on that day in honor of St. Valentine. • We celebrate Valentine’s day on February in honor of St. Valentine. For his history in Roma, because while he was in prison he sent out letters to his friends and all the people that he loved. • The text says that Valentine was a priest that he did fight for the love between people of Rome when the emperor canceled all marriages.

Other strategies explained were “COMPARISON - CONTRAST CHART” and “GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS”. Unfortunately, when students were asked to apply these strategies the results were not the most accurate. They had some difficulties finding the appropriate piece of information to complete the exercises, even though they understood most of the texts used in this activity. Students uttered that it was one of the most difficult strategies to use because they had not received enough training.

On the contrary, when participants were explained the strategies “QUESTION ANSWER RELATIONSHIP - Q.A.R” and “RECIPROCAL TEACHING” and then asked to use them, the reading comprehension results were much better. These strategies were used to read the readings: “SUMMER PLANS, NIKKI’S FIRST PLUNGE and LET’S DO IT AGAIN”.

Before participants were given the test with the pre- and post-reading questions, the researcher simulated a situation in which he dropped some coins to see students’ reaction. He observed and took note of some of them. For example, some participants just tried to find out what that sound was, others from where it came, a few (two or three) attempted to pick the coins up, a few made comments like these: **“huyyyy teacher”, “son mías”, “regálemelas” “profe, se le cayeron”, “teacher – pointing at the coins”,** and still others apparently did not realize what had just happened. It was done with the purpose of activating student’s schemata. Once this situation was over, the teacher gave the questionnaire to the subjects to start working on. What can be inferred by the answers provided in the pre reading questions is that most of the students would tell the person what had happened confirming the researcher’s observations.

The pre- and post-test results showed that nine out of thirty-eight participants, that is 23.6%, got lower results on the post-test. Some of these participants were interviewed to find out the reason that they scored lower. The most common reasons they adduced were “I had to take two or three final exams or I had to finish a ..(subject)..paper, so I needed the time to prepare them. Therefore, I did not read the test carefully and did not answer thoroughly”. These participants took less time to hand in the test. Others, before starting to answer the test asked: “Is this test going to be graded? or Will the result of this test affect my final grade”? They played down the importance of the test, although they had been warned that this was a research study that did not affect their English subject grades. The results of the pre- and post-test are shown in the bar graphics below.

On the other hand, nine other participants, that is 23.6%, got exactly the same result on the pre-test and post-test.

Finally, after the data were analyzed, it could be concluded that 20 participants out of 38, that is more than 52%, got a better performance on the post-test. For instance, participant 19 selected only one correct answer on the pre-test and on the post-test he chose five out of seven (See participant 19’s performance in Figure 1).

On the other hand, participants 27, 32, 33 and 38 are similar cases as the one pointed out above. Figure 1 shows the total number of participants, the number of questions and the results of the pre-test and post-test of a reading comprehension passage, respectively. The first nine participants refer to those who got a lower result on the post-test. The other nine participants scored exactly the same on both tests. Finally, it should be noted that the last twenty participants did much better on the post-test.

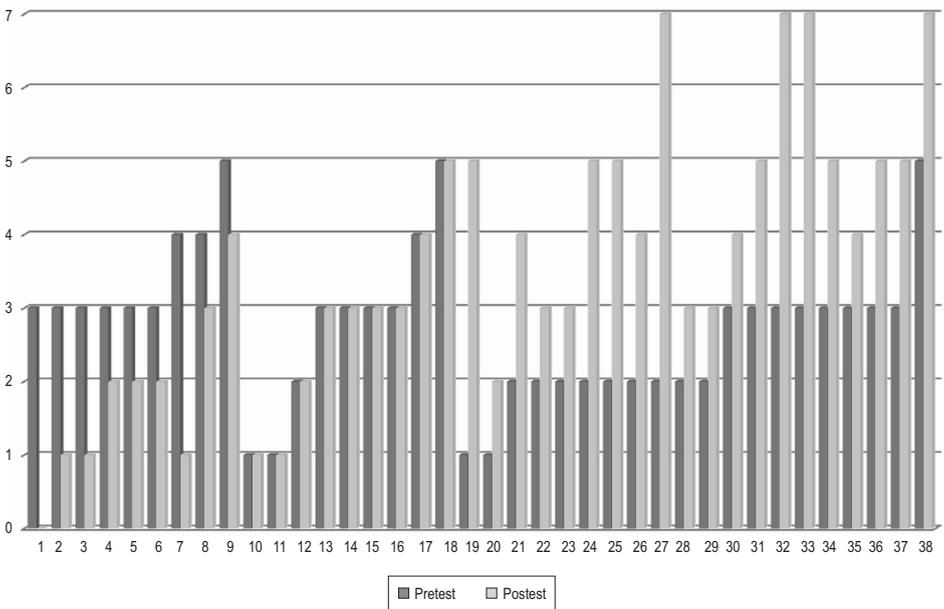


Figure 1. Pre- and Post-Test Reading Comprehension Results.

Additionally, participants not only improved their reading comprehension strategies, but also improved their composition skills by writing down a summary of a passage provided, which was another strategy exploited during this research study. When students were asked to write down a brief summary of the provided text, which was the pre- test, many of them were not successful at all. Some just wrote isolated words such as “*I, you, him, them, he, she, we, this, that, dime, besieged, seldom, dropping*”. Other

participants wrote some ideas as follows: *“The siren is attractive sound for people in the city, always;”* *“The people know the sound and stop the cars;”* *“The writer the text said that he preferred silence and not the sounds exaggerates everyday in the night”*.

After the participants were trained in learning how to write a summary, they came up with samples like these:

Sample 1: *“The text talk about sounds and the connection that it had with the author. He said that sounds are very important in our life, but we usually don’t pay attention to any of these. He is from Connecticut and he is not used to sounds, but in New York people don’t care about sounds”*.

Sample 2: *“In the text, we can see that the writer speaks about the sounds as an important part of our lives. In the big cities, the sounds are ignored, but in the small cities or towns the sounds are more heard than in the big cities”*.

Sample 3: *“The text talks about different sounds created by emergency’s cars and people’s reaction. Generally, they attract people’s attention”*.

Based on the results of these samples, it can be concluded that the learners were meant to summarize the main ideas from the readings provided. Although they made some mistakes, in terms of coherence and cohesion, it is evident that there was an improvement in their summaries.

Conclusions

The data showed that after implementing the reading comprehension strategies, the participants could get better results after having taken mid- and long-term tests in the English course. However, they have not taken ECAES, MICHIGAN or MELICET tests, yet. Thus, the main objective has partially been reached. For these reasons, the Language Center staff decided to implement these strategies as part of the process for the teaching and improvement of the reading comprehension skills.

On the other hand, most participants preferred not to read, but devoted their time to doing something completely different such as practicing sports, chatting, listening to music and watching T.V., giving, as a result, an unsatisfactory development of the reading comprehension process.

Throughout the study, the researchers realized that the strategies that students used more often to read faster and more efficiently were the following: :

:question-answer relationship (Q.A.R.), summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting. On the contrary, comparison, contrast charts and graphic organizers were the most difficult for them to use because they considered them to be complex in application.

Although the students' affective filter was not taken into consideration in the research planning, it is necessary to highlight the participants' positive attitudes during their English language lessons towards both the professor and the subject since, as they said earlier, they became confident in the use of the reading comprehension strategies, which let them reduce their anxiety. Furthermore, in the development of the different tasks, they had an active participation due to the fact that they were at the center of the learning process.

Finally, after having integrated the reading comprehension strategies into the curriculum, we find that it is still important to be aware of the progress of both participants and groups so that feedback can be provided based on the outcomes. When students engage in meaningful reading tasks, as Wang & Han (2001) state, their motivation increases and the effect of learning is much more powerful.

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The Authors

Nancy Gómez Torres is the Coordinator of the Language Center of Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana – Seccional Montería. She holds a B.Ed. with a specialty in English-Spanish from Universidad del Atlántico. She is a master's candidate in Applied Linguistics to the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language from Universidad de León y Jaén – Spain.

Jhon Jairo Ávila Constain is a full time teacher at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana – Seccional Montería. He is currently studying for a master's degree in education with an emphasis in English at Universidad del Norte – Barranquilla.