

Attitudes of students from bachelor's degree programs related to the implementation of the extensive reading technique in the English courses as a foreign language

Actitudes de los estudiantes de programas de licenciatura relacionadas con la implementación de la técnica de lectura extensiva en los cursos de inglés como lengua extranjera

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Abstract

This study sought to identify the attitudes students from bachelor's degree programs may have towards the use of the extensive reading technique implemented in the English courses. The study analyzed three attitudinal values: Affective, cognitive, and behavioral measured by using a questionnaire and focus groups. The sample consisted of 56 participants studying bachelor's degree programs at the University of Cauca in Colombia. Results indicated that most of the students responded positively towards this technique.

Key words: extensive reading, attitudes, EFL learning

Resumen

El presente estudio buscó identificar cuáles son las actitudes que los estudiantes de programas de licenciatura tienen frente al uso de la lectura extensiva implementada en los cursos de inglés. El estudio analizó tres valores actitudinales; afectivo, cognitivo y de comportamiento usando un cuestionario y grupos focales. La muestra fue de 56 estudiantes de programas de licenciatura de la Universidad del Cauca en Colombia. Los resultados indicaron que la mayoría de los estudiantes respondieron positivamente a esta técnica.

Palabras clave: lectura extensiva, actitudes, aprendizaje de inglés

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language is an everyday challenge due to the variety of opportunities and limitations each particular educational context has. Teachers then have the need to look for possibilities to motivate students to learn the language in a more attractive and meaningful way and search for new alternatives to do so. Bearing in mind these challenges, English teachers need to look into methodologies that help them to achieve their teaching purpose. For students who are learning English as a foreign language in a country where they do not have the opportunity for real interaction, the mastery of the reading skill is vital because of several reasons. Harmer (2007), presented two main reasons, the first one is related to the student's personal life, and his/her development in the professional field or just the simple pleasure of reading, and the second one has to do with

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the benefits this skill has for the acquisition of the language since reading helps students to improve their writing abilities, spelling and vocabulary knowledge. For this reason, one of the techniques used in the English courses is related to the improvement of comprehension of written texts through extensive reading. The extensive reading (ER) has been studied and analyzed at national and international contexts in order to understand its benefits in the learning of a foreign language. (Ruiz, N. et al. 2009), & Mikami, A. (2017). A variety of studies has also focused their attention towards the attitudes students have towards reading in general and how this technique influences these attitudes. (Porkaew, k., & Fongpaiboon, A. 2018 ;), Endris A. (2018), & Yamashita, J. (2013). The present research sought to identify, describe and analyze which are the attitudes that the students have towards ER to improve the comprehension of written texts in the foreign language by means of an action research approach. Results from this research will contribute to generate knowledge of how students from bachelor's degree programs, and who started learning a foreign language, are perceiving this type of instruction and in this way have a better understanding of this process and make the necessary changes to improve it. The question guiding this research was: What are the attitudes of first semester students from the bachelor's degree programs towards the use of the extensive reading in the English courses as a foreign language? Taking into account the results of research related to the use of this technique to enhance students reading skills, this mixed study intends to shed some light on the discussion of attitudes towards extensive reading, and its benefits on reading skills.

1.1 Theoretical considerations

1.1.1. Extensive reading

Extensive reading is a well-known approach nowadays in the field of language pedagogy to enhance input of the target language. According to Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) language acquisition occurs when learners receive messages that they can understand. However, this comprehensible input should be one step beyond the learner's current language ability, in order to allow learners to continue to progress with their language learning. Krashen (1991) created a more specific part of the input hypothesis known as the reading hypothesis, which states that the best way to read in the foreign language is by reading easy texts where the students do not have trouble understanding them. The extensive reading (ER) seeks students to read books according to their level and the main goal of the activity is to read a lot, (Nation 2013). ER encourages students to get immersed in a large amount of reading, it is an instructional option that has become very wide used and recognized in the field of second language and foreign reading teaching and learning (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). ER is based on graded readers which consist of a specific vocabulary and grammar structures shown in a progressive level. Learners will begin with the books according to their vocabulary level and when they feel comfortable about it, they will move to the next level and so on, Nation & Wang (1999).

There is a considerable amount of research inquiring about the advantages of using ER in L2 settings and the results of these investigations have demonstrated that learners get a good amount of benefits related to the language uses and language knowledge. ER has been shown to be effective in increasing reading speed and comprehension (Bell, 2001; Manson & Krashen, 1997). Other studies have also demonstrated that ER appears to lead to the gain of extensive vocabulary learning and learner's improvement in spelling and vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 1997; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). Tsang (1996) also found that by using simply readings learners improve their writing skill. ER has also stated to enrich learners' affective domain, such as motivation and attitude to read (Leung, 2002). ER is a good option to get students involved in reading in the foreign language they are learning, since it is a motivating and challenging to them. Reading graded texts helps to motivate students to read and develop fluency in reading English, increase their understanding of vocabulary and grammatical structures, and also helps them to be exposed to the target language (Hill as cited in Wan-a-rom, 2012).

1.1.2. Learners attitudes

Attitude can be defined as ‘a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some of favor or disfavor’ (Eagly & Chaiken 1993). Another definition by Hogg & Vaughan (2005) stated that an attitude is ‘a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols. Mathewson (1994) suggested three components of attitude: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. The affective component refers to how someone feels or what emotions someone has towards the attitude object. The cognitive component denotes what a person thinks or believes about the attitude object including a particular person, idea, or situation. The third component of attitude is behavioral response. This component relates to how the attitude we have has an effect on the way we act in a particular situation.

The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002) defines language attitudes as follows: “the attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other’s languages or to their own language. The way people feel towards the language, it means their attitude towards it, may have a firm connection with how people learn a foreign language, finding it difficult or easy to acquire the new knowledge. Language attitudes may have an effect on second language or foreign language learning and having better understanding of these attitudes towards the language learning will provide elements to improve the language teaching and learning. There has been a lot of research on the role of attitudes and motivation in the learning of a second language and the general conclusions illustrated that positive attitudes and motivation have a close relation to the achievement of the second language, Gardner (1985).

Learners show different attitudes towards the learning of the foreign language. These attitudes are the mirror image of the particular social setting where the learners are involved into, and they have a direct impact on the L2 acquisition. Several researchers have identified the important role of attitudes towards the target language in the learners’ motivation (Gardner, 1985; Dornyei, 1996). Dornyei suggested that learners with positive attitudes toward the target language are expected to have a more favorable learning process. Consequently, recognition of learners’ attitudes towards the foreign language they are learning is important since it provides students with alternatives to fulfill their needs in the language learning process. The affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982), suggested that language is better acquired in low-anxiety settings. In the affective filter hypothesis learners’ attitude is used as the intervening factor to successful second language acquisition in an extensive reading program (Krashen, 2004). Learners who have positive attitudes towards the learning of the target language will try to get as much input as possible to improve and learn the language more effectively. ER provides learners with texts that are set according to their linguistic level which gives them a free anxiety environment to the exposure of the foreign language, and therefore, the learning will be developed in a more accurate way.

1.1.3. Reading attitudes

Reading attitude is a complex theoretical construct to work with. There have been different definitions of this paradigm like the one given by Alexander & Fuller (1976), who viewed the reading attitude as a group of feelings towards the reading which encourages learners to get closer or avoid the reading situation. Smith (1990), stated that the reading attitude was a “state of mind, accompanied by feelings and emotions, that makes reading more or less probable”. Previous reading experiences, encounters with the reading process, the exposure to reading, and the awareness of the usefulness of reading have a close connection to students reading attitudes too (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). It can be said that what students have in mind in relation to their reading process, including the reading in the L1, represents an impact on the way they see and accept the reading in the foreign language they are learning. Bearing this in mind, I consider that by understanding their previous experiences can greatly contribute to the way the reading material is presented to the students, so they can have a better experience

that will help them to learn the language through this skill, and so far, get a positive attitude towards reading in English.

2. Method

This study is inscribed in an action research approach, which main objective is to describe what really happens inside the classroom and not what we think it happens in relation to the studied population. Mills (2003) defines action research as any systematic study carried out by teacher researchers to collect information about the ways that their educational environment operates in relation to their teaching practices as well as their students' learning process. The information is obtained with the objective of gaining insight of what is happening in the classroom to improve the educational practices in general. This type of approach also gives the opportunity to collect information about the foreign language teaching and learning processes. "Action research seeks initially to clarify the issue investigated and to reveal the way participants describe their actual experience of that issue – how things happen and how it affects them" (Stringer, 2007, p.20). The action-research as a research method tries to explain the experience of the language in the classroom in relation to our specific context of the English language teaching as a foreign language in the bachelor's degree programs at the University of Cauca. This type of research seeks to understand the ups and downs of the process, taking into account the perspective of the ones who interact in the situation and what happens is analyzed in relation to the point of view of the participants.

The methodology is of a mixed type, since in both, the data collection and the analysis of data, the qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. According to Stake (2007), the quantitative researchers stand out the explanation and the control, while the qualitative researchers stand out the comprehension of the relations among everything. In the first phase of the research a collection of quantitative data was made, through the use of one survey with closed-ended questions. In the second phase of the research, another survey with closed-ended questions was used, and by means of focus groups with open questions, the qualitative data was gathered.

2.1. Participants

The participants were superior education learners belonging to the bachelor's degree programs in Physical Education and Elementary Education, offered by the University of Cauca. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old. The sample consisted of 56 learners from the first English level course offered at the university as a part of their curriculum. Most of the students finished their high school education in public institutions which in some cases may be relevant since in some institutions the emphasis on the English as a foreign language is low, a condition that can affect learners in their learning processes at the university. Finally, the gender of the participants was selected in an equivalent manner, half males and half females.

2.2. Data collection

For Hernandez et al. (2003) the data collection implies three specific activities which are: a) to select the instrument or method of data collection from the ones available or create one. b) Apply the instruments to collect data, it means the action of the research itself. c) prepare observations and records for the analysis. In the case of this study the instruments were designed taking into account the participants; educational level, age, learning objectives, and the objective of the study; to identify the attitudes students have towards the ER.

Data collection included a survey, a questionnaire and a focus group. These tools provided significant information to identify the attitudes of the students towards the use of the extensive reading in the English course. As follows, a general outlook of each tool applied is described. The survey was done at the very beginning of the study to collect information related to general aspects from the participants and a general overview of their attitude

towards reading. It was a cross-sectional design as described by Mathers N et al. (2007), this kind of surveys are carried out at just one point in time and provide an overview of what a particular group can offer in terms of relevant information for the study.

A common approach to the measurement of attitudinal variables is the use of a questionnaire employing a Likert scale, which is mainly used to evaluate the opinion or attitude of a person. In the current study, a questionnaire of this characteristic was used. The questionnaire included the three attitudinal variables: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. It consisted on ten questions: six related to the affective component, three the cognitive component, and one the behavioral component. Participants were expected to select one option from the five given ones to represent their opinion. The options went from totally agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

To enhance in-depth information regarding student's attitudes towards the extensive reading in English, ten participants were selected at random to participate in a focus group. The focus groups supported the collecting of qualitative data as a source of follow-up data to reinforce the first method, Morgan, D (1997). The information was recorded on audio and was carried out in Spanish for participants' full understanding. According to Korman (1986), the focus groups are defined as the gathering of some selected people in advanced for the researcher to enquiry about the topic of the research based on what the participants have experienced during the research process. The information from this data collection is qualitative, which allows an in-depth analysis of the gathered information.

2.3. Procedure

At the beginning of the first academic semester of 2019 at the University of Cauca, students from two different bachelor's programs started their career. As a part of their curriculum, students from these programs must take English as a foreign language, and inside these courses the use of the extensive reading technique is used. During the first week of class students were explained what ER was, its benefits, and how to implement it. They were also informed that research regard to the extensive reading was going to be carried out during the semester and two weeks later they were asked to take an on line survey to obtain personal information from students related to background and their overview about reading in general. In this week students also took a vocabulary test to identify which was their vocabulary level to assign the readers accordingly. During the other 15 weeks, rest of the semester, students were asked to read five selected readers according to the students' vocabulary level from the initial vocabulary test presented by them. The procedure to read the readers was as follow; students were given some time during the class to read and write a summary about what they have red and the rest of the assigned reader had to be read outside the classroom, on their own time. The class met twice a week for three hours. Each reader must be read in a period of three weeks after which students were asked to present a comprehension test about the reader. At the end of the academic period a Likert scale questionnaire was applied and then finally the focus group was carried out.

2.4. Analysis

According to Stake (2007), the analysis and interpretation of data consists of giving sense to all the gathered data being initially an intuitive process explaining that there are no specific paths to understand the results. However, there are two ways to approach to the results, one is through the direct interpretation of the gathered samples and the second is through the recollection of several examples until it shows relevant information. In the particular case of this research, the first option was considered because the study proposed individual samples based on a particular context which was the purpose of the study.

The quantitative information from the initial survey and the Likert scale questionnaire was processed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and excel. On the other hand, the qualitative information

gathered from the focus groups was analyzed following the three analysis strategies stated by Creswell (2007): preparing and organizing the information, then reducing it into themes through a coding process to finally present it in figures, tables, charts or discussions. This analysis was made with help of the program Atlas.ti 8.

3. Findings

3.1. Findings from the initial survey

According to the results, the 67,2% of the students liked to read in their mother tongue, as a way of entertainment. However, just 16,4% of students had read a book in English before. 98,5% of students considered that reading in English could be beneficial for their acquisition of the foreign language. Once students have started reading in English the 76,1% of them said that they liked to read in English. 53,7% of students manifested that both, grammar structures, and vocabulary were the hardest part of reading in English. 20,9% of students said that the grammar structures were the toughest, while 25,4 % said it was vocabulary. In relation to the acquisition of the new vocabulary, 64,2% of students expressed that they looked for the unknown words in their dictionaries, just the 31,3% manifested they inferred the meaning of the word. In relation to the use of vocabulary cards, students asserted they considered this technique very useful to learn new vocabulary and 80,6% of them made vocabulary cards. The results from this survey showed that in general, students like to read in their mother tongue and that reading in English had also called their attention presenting an excellent alternative to learn the target language.

3.2. Findings from the questionnaires

The results from the Likert scale questionnaire were divided in three attitudinal variables: affective, cognitive and behavioral, and had the options; totally agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree and totally disagree.

Affective variable: questions one, three, six, and nine included this variable. To the first question which asked about if the students enjoyed the reading of the readers, most of the answers fit in the totally agree and agree option (96,4%), being the second option 'agree' the one with 62,5% of the answers. The third question requested students about their perception related to the time they were given during the class sessions to read the assigned materials, 82,1% of them considered the option totally agree. The sixth question interrogated about if they feel that when they read the more, the comprehension of the readers improved, 50% of the students chose totally agree, while 44,6% chose agree. The ninth question asked if the students felt motivated to read in English, again, 50% of the students chose agree, a 32,1% chose completely agree and the 16,1% chose neither agree or disagree.

Cognitive variable: questions two, four, five and seven, and eight included this variable. The second question asked students if they considered the extensive reading have helped them to improve their reading ability in English, 48,2% of students selected totally agree, while the 44,6% selected agree. To the fourth statement: 'I feel that my vocabulary increased, the 57,1% of students selected totally agree, while 35,7% of students selected agree and only a group representing the 7,1% chose neither agree or disagree. To the fifth question, which asked about their feeling related to having a better understanding of the grammatical structures, the 57,1% of students marked agree, while the 28,6% chose totally agree and a 12,5% considered that they were neither in agreement or in disagreement. To the seventh question which stated that the students found the extensive reading interesting and challenging, the 53,6% expressed they agree, the 28,6% stated they totally agree, and only a 14,3% had a neutral position, neither agree or disagree. The eighth statement specified that the time given in class to read was appropriated, 46,4% specified that they agree, 37,5% were in total agreement, 11,5% had a neutral position, and just a 3,6% of the students were in disagreement. *Behavioral variable:* this variable included only one last question, (number 10). After having this experience of extensive reading students were asked if

they will continue reading books in English on their own and their answers were: 35,7% of them agreed, 30,4% had a neutral position, 26,8% considered that they totally agree, 3,5% disagreed, and a final 3,5% totally disagreed. These results revealed that in general terms, students showed a positive attitude towards the reading in English through the use of extensive reading.

3.3. Findings from the focus groups

The eight questions in the focus group with the corresponding answers of students were classified into some categories to have a better understanding of what they wanted to express about their experience during the study. Aspects like: liking the readers, reading strategies, improvement of language skills, satisfaction with the ER, interest to continue reading on their own, positive, and negative aspects were taken into account to make the analysis of the information. It can be said that the deeper information gathered from this tool, showed an outstanding acceptance of the ER technique from part of the students, showing benefits in their acquisition of the English language they were learning.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In the present study, I investigated what were the attitudes that students from first semester of two bachelor's degree programs at the University of Cauca had towards the use of ER in the English course. The data collected from the initial survey showed that 67,2% of the students like to read in Spanish but only a 16,4% of them had read in English before. However, after reading the first reader in class students showed a positive reception to the activity and expressed, they found it useful to their learning process in the foreign language. As ER activities increased, students showed more confidence and less anxiety towards the reading in English.

From the questionnaire it can be said that the results indicated positive attitudes towards reading in English. Considering the variables (affective, cognitive, and behavioral) taken into account in this questionnaire; in the affective variable, students expressed their like to read the assigned readers provided in the course, they also asserted they liked that there was a set time inside the class to read. Affectively, they felt more motivated to read as well as their comprehension of the readers showed an improvement. Regarding to the cognitive variable, students responded positively to these aspects in the items related to improvement of the reading ability, the increment of vocabulary, a better comprehension of grammatical structures, and a feeling of challenge from the readings. Regarding the behavioral variable, just 26,8% of the students will continue reading in English on their own, which showed that the process had not had a strong impact on students' future behavior towards reading in English on their own.

The data collected from the focus groups was divided into three aspects close related to the specific objectives of this study such as, identification of attitudes towards the ER, analysis of strategies students used to read, and the determination of motivational factors students had towards the ER. During the focus groups students expressed positive attitudes towards the work done inside and outside the class with the readings, the ten participants in the focus groups manifested that they only found positive aspects of this technique, anyone said they found a negative aspect. Regarding the positive aspects, students talked specially about the learning of new vocabulary through the reading which helped them to read faster and have a better understanding of the readings. Some of them also expressed that reading in English helped them to improve other abilities like speaking and writing. The writing of summaries about what they had read, also helped them to practice and improve this ability. Other component which could be identified as a positive attitude was that students did like the readers they were assigned to read. They also expressed that the stories were interesting and easy to understand, according to their vocabulary level. As the readers were interesting and entertaining, they expressed they want to continue reading.

The strategies students used to read were, most of them, related to the use of translation of the unknown words. Some wrote the new words in the text itself and others made vocabulary lists. A technique to learn new words presented by the teacher to learn new words was the use of vocabulary cards, it consisted of writing the new word in English, its pronunciation on one side of the a card and, its translation on the other side. Most of the students liked this technique and made the cards to learn the new vocabulary from the readers. Some students made the reading of a text twice, first they looked for the unknown words and then they read again when they have learned the new vocabulary. One student said that she translated the first reader but that then she realized it was a waste of time and that she had not learned much in this way.

The motivational factors found in the study were related with the selection of readers for students according to their level of vocabulary since they said that, in this way, the reading became easier and made them feel confident to continue reading. Students also expressed that one of the positive aspects of the use of the ER was that this motivated them to read on their own. At the end of the process they asserted they wanted to look for books of their own interests to read in English. It generates a reading habit. After the implementation of the ER students in the focus groups said they will continue reading in English because they felt motivated about it.

Learners exposed to the ER technique show a variety of ways to do so and positive feeling to the use of this technique in their EFL classes. The inclusion of this technique in the course may well reflect a good option to enhance students in the learning of the new language through the exposure to a variety of texts according to their vocabulary level and interests. However, it is necessary to look deeper into the use of this technique, for the sake of taking advantage of its benefits. Thus, it is necessary that teachers and learners explore more alternatives to approach to the readers in the foreign language, as well as analyse of how the techniques work for students and encourage learners to participate in their learning process in order to acquire the language more accurately.

Findings in this study support the idea that the ER technique is a practical recourse to motivate, encourage and facilitate the encounter with the language in a hasty manner. The findings of this study contribute to the research in the area of ER, since, it confirmed the positive attitudes students have towards the reading in English, although recognizing long-lasting ER benefits will take time and will need to be investigated more deeply to assess if students continue with their reading process after the course is finished.

There are, however, some limitations in this study. First, the students were not able to choose the readers they read, an aspect that may affect the results since by having the opportunity to choose what they read, it is highly possible that the motivation will increase. Another aspect to consider is that this was a small-scale study and the sample may not be representative, thus it would be appropriate to carry on a similar study with a larger population to confirm the results. Finally, future studies should consider a longer duration in the time that the ER program lasts in order to have full benefits of this technique.

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