

## **READING COMPREHENSION: A VIABLE CHALLENGE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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**T**his study was conducted in the Diana Turbay state school with students of one eighth grade class with a low English level. The group was chosen because of their special characteristics within this public institution: their number (just eighteen students) and their interest in and motivation for learning English as a foreign language. The motivation they show allowed the researchers to observe and collect more specific information for this study and for future research on reading comprehension. Data collection was conducted using many different techniques, such as open observations, diary, surveys, students' self-evaluation and field notes. All these techniques provided information as authentic as possible. The purpose of the study was to determine if students improved their reading comprehension in English by applying specific reading strategies. Results showed that students from state schools can achieve good comprehension of English texts through adequate training despite the fact that they start their English learning so late.

Further research on this topic should study the relationship between reading comprehension in Spanish and in English. It would also be necessary to study how students can acquire language structures through reading activities.

### **Introduction**

Reading comprehension in English as a foreign language is a process where students need specific purposes to ferret out the information they require. Reading is a communicative process, so the decodification is done by the reader according to the reasons he or she has to read (Nuttall: 1982). The purpose of the study was to help the students develop reading skills by training them in the use of the reading strategies: predicting, skimming, scanning, ordering sequences, semantic context and deducing meanings (Harmer: 1983). Difficulties comprehending texts in English have been observed for quite some time. These difficulties include lack of vocabulary and structures. The first action implemented was a diagnostic test, which allowed the researchers to see the real picture of the subjects' problem. Then, a survey was answered by the students in order to show their interests in English learning. Finally open observations were carried out through two videos, field notes, English teacher's diary and students' self-evaluation at the end of each lesson.

Reading strategies were chosen by taking into account the group needs. These strategies let the students increase their skills

in reading activities step by step. At the same time, reading activities develop students process thought and provide them with useful information.

The study showed, too, that it is possible to change the dynamics of English-teaching in public schools.

### Procedure

Taking into account the PEI of the institution chosen to carry out this project, it was decided to work on reading comprehension in English classes. The idea was conceived in October 1998 and the research was carried out between February and August 1999 following the framework described below:

The methodology used for this study was classroom research. It let the researchers collect the information through techniques such as observation of different English lessons. First, a video was made using the retrospection technique based on the model proposed by Nunan (1992). This lesson was part of the diagnostic stage. Second, we collected information from field notes taken from other lessons by two teachers (observers) from different institutions and the qualified English teacher. A personal diary was kept by the English teacher. Additionally, a survey was answered by the students and their evaluation written at the end of each lesson. To analyse the information obtained researchers used checklists in order to observe specific behaviour during the activities developed in class. The information collected was compared and analysed by the

research group during their meetings after classes.

Classroom observation was carried out in English classes (three hours per week) over a six-month period. For this study, workshops guided by the teacher were designed in order to apply the strategies proposed by the researchers. The first one was a diagnosis and the others were applications of reading strategies. Each student had his own material. There was a second video to analyse and reflect upon how successful the first workshop designed to solve the problem had been.

### Results and analysis

Results of the study are presented in both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The former shows the group's motivation, interest and expectations to learn English to be relevant aspects.

We noticed in all observations of students working with reading comprehension workshops that most of them liked the activities proposed in spite of their English language difficulties. It was also noticed that students who concentrated on the different activities showed progress in the following classes. The latter shows similar aspects to the previous analysis; that is, high interest and motivation in English class (see figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 shows high scores on students' expectations in understanding texts in English (100%), in learning English (94.4%) and in working with their own material (88.8%).

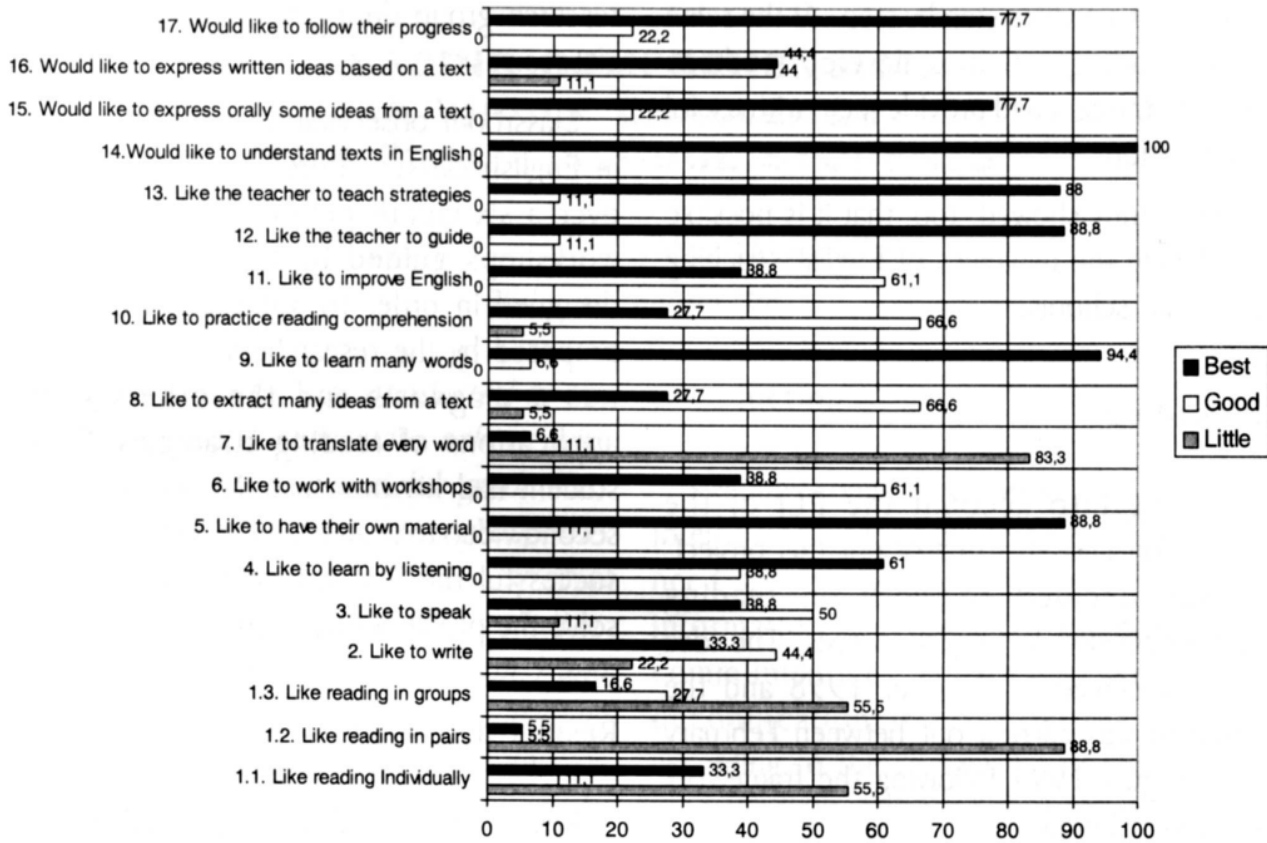
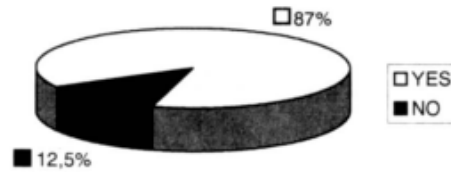
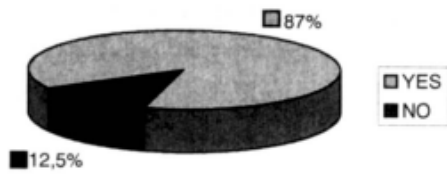


Figure 1. Students' interests in English language learning (Survey).

Figure 2 shows similar aspects. Students liked the activities designed for the workshop (93.7%) and they enjoyed the class (100%).

\*Did you understand the instruction?      \*Did you understand the reading?



\*Did you like the workshop?

\*Did you enjoy the class?

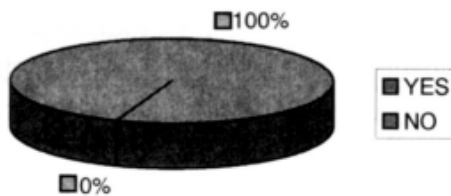
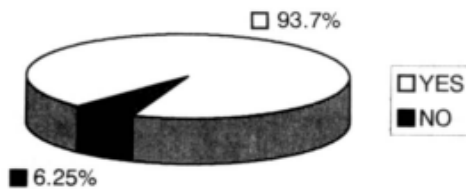


Figure 2. Students' reactions to the workshops (Retrospection)

## Discussion

The results of the analysis of the different information collected showed similar relevant aspects that allowed both students and researchers to establish a starting-point for developing this project over an extended period in order to obtain more concrete results. In other words, for both students and English teachers it is possible to acquire a good level of English reading comprehension through the implementation of appropriate material to work on reading activities. Reading is a long-term process. So more accuracy and quality in the results on reading skills development would require more time. The results presented in this study are a good beginning toward innovating and changing ineffective methods often used by some state schools.

## Conclusions

This study showed that students from state schools can improve their reading comprehension in English by applying specific strategies for reading. Workshops properly designed and guided provide the students with the possibility of retrieving

information in a foreign language and, maybe in the future, of practising this activity in a real context.

Students' motivation strengthened the application of strategies for learning the new language and at the same time it let them solve their initial problem in reading comprehension.

Public schools need to design programmes and projects in English subjects to increase low language ability levels. Reading comprehension activities can help students reflect on their benefits in the real world. Besides, reading activities in English should facilitate the practice of other language skills.

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## References

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