INFERENTIAL READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS ENHANCED THROUGH THE QUESTION-ANSWER RELATIONSHIP STRATEGY IN LEARNERS FROM CENTRO CULTURAL COLOMBO AMERICANO CARTAGENA.

HABILIDADES DE COMPRENSIÓN LECTORA INFERENCIAL MEJORADAS A TRAVÉS DE LA ESTRATEGIA DE RELACIÓN PREGUNTA-RESPUESTA EN APRENDICES DEL CENTRO CULTURAL COLOMBO AMERICANO CARTAGENA.

Liliana M. Del Valle Donado: Psicóloga de la Universidad San Buenaventura, Cartagena. Especialista en la enseñanza de inglés de la Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional, Unicolombo, Profesora en el Centro Cultural Colombo Americano. Email: ldelvalle@colombocartagena.com

Loraine Galván Zúñiga: Especialista en la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Licenciada en educación con énfasis en ingles de la Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional, Unicolombo. Profesora de tiempo completo de la Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional. E-mail: Loraine-22@hotmail.com

Juan Carlos Lemus Stave: Magíster en Estudios de la Cultura, con mención en Comunicación. Docente catedrático de la Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano en el programa de Comunicación Social y Periodismo. E-mail: jlemuz@unicolombo.edu.co

Ana María Cuenta De Ávila: Historiadora de la Universidad de Cartagena. Especialista en la enseñanza del inglés de la Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional. Profesora del Colegio Británico de Cartagena. E-mail: acuenta@colbritanico.edu.co

Resumen: El presente estudio de investigación acción tiene como objetivo presentar la manera en que la estrategia de relación pregunta-respuesta mejora la comprensión lectora inferencial y las habilidades asociadas a ella. Las unidades de estudio fueron nueve estudiantes a los que se les pidió que tomaran un cuestionario inicial para recopilar información acerca de sus fortalezas y debilidades relacionadas con la comprensión de lectura. A lo largo del curso, los estudiantes recibieron instrucciones sobre cómo aplicar la estrategia mencionada anteriormente. Para ello, cuatro actividades fueron implementadas en miras de obtener información suficiente. Adicionalmente, los estudiantes llenaron registros de lectura; lo que evidenció todo el proceso desde su propia perspectiva. Finalmente, los hallazgos reflejan que la intervención realizada fue significativa y que los estudiantes respondieron bastante bien a la implementación de la estrategia.

Palabras claves: Habilidades de comprensión lectora, estrategia de relación pregunta-respuesta, comprensión de lectura inferencial

Abstract: This action research study aims to present how a specific strategy: Question-Answer Relationship improves inferential reading comprehension and the skills associated to it. The study units were nine students who were asked to take an initial questionnaire in order to collect information about their strengths and weaknesses related to reading comprehension. Throughout the course, students were instructed on how to apply the mentioned strategy. Four specific activities were given to them in order to collect enough information about if the strategy was working or not. Also, students filled out reading logs, therefore information about the whole process from their perspective was gathered. Findings suggests that intervention was helpful and students responded fairly well to the implementation of the strategy.

Keywords: Reading comprehension skills, question-answer relationship strategy, inferential reading comprehension

Introduction

Reading is an essential competence in life. It is an ongoing aspect in every step of human beings. From the first stages of reading, going through readings at the school and senior years, people always face reading scenarios; some more complex than others. This implies that reading comprehension is an inescapable ability that must be strengthened throughout life.

In this line, the research project that is described had as a main focus a group of students from Centro Colombo Americano Cartagena, an institution where people study English as a Foreign Language. By the end of the courses students are hoped to be proficient on the four skills of English Language: Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing, reaching a B2 level according to the Common European Framework. However, the experience based on what teachers have observed indicates the fact that many students have poor proficiency when it comes to inferential level of Reading Comprehension.

In this context, the research question guiding this project is: How reading comprehension skills are improved through the Question-Answer Relationship Strategy? To provide a structured response to the question, the following objective is asked: to implement the Question-Answer strategy in order to enhance the inferential reading comprehension skill in students of an English class at Centro Colombo Americano Cartagena.

The relevance of this research exercise lies in helping students at "Centro Colombo Americano Cartagena, here after CCCA, become proficient readers, by focusing on the inferential reading comprehension skill, since this is the level of reading comprehension where students are showing the most difficulties, evidencing problems when it comes to make inferences about things that are not directly stated on the texts. They also show difficulties when identifying the supporting details, sequence, cause and effect relationships, interpreting figurative language, drawing conclusions, predicting outcomes, determining the mood, and judging the author's point of view, which are the most significant elements on effective inferential reading comprehension skill.

This Action Research Study aimed to present how a specific strategy: Question-Answer Relationship improves Inferential Reading Comprehension and the skills associated to it. The study units were nine students who were asked to take an initial questionnaire in order to collect information about their weaknesses and strengths related to reading comprehension. Throughout the course, students were instructed on how to apply the mentioned strategy. Four specific activities were given to them in order to collect enough information about if the strategy was working or not. Also, students filled out reading logs, therefore information about the whole process from their perspective was gathered. Findings suggests that intervention was helpful and students responded fairly well to the implementation of the strategy.

Regarding the strategy applied in this research, several authors have organized a theoretical framework that helps understand the concept. Among the reasons, there is a complex process of learning to read, the type of instruction, method for decoding, prior knowledge, a diverse population, and development of vocabulary (Caposey & Heider, 2003). In this same line, Prensky (2001) claims that reading comprehension issues lie on learners' mother tongue, and that with appropriate instruction, materials and guidance, it would be quite simple transfer those skills to a foreign language successfully.

On the other hand, Barnett considers reading strategies as conscious techniques or unconscious processes employed by readers attempting to make sense of the written text (Barnett as cited by Gascoigne, 2005). However, the literature has also drawn attention to the fact that learners might be unaware of what their strengths and weaknesses in reading are or might not know how to monitor their reading process (Zhang, 2010).

The question-answer relationship strategy, developed by Taffy Raphael (Raphael, 1982, 1984, 1986; Raphael & Mckinney 1983; Raphael and Pearson 1985), was triggered by Pearson and Johnson's (1978) taxonomy of questions, which does not classify questions in isolation but rather by considering the reader's background and knowledge and the text, doing so will reflect the current notion of reading as an interactive and constructive process influenced by characteristics of the reader, the text, and the context within the text occurs (Jett-Simpson 1990).

These are some of the exponents that have contributed to the literature review that is a fundamental axis in this research, that is to say, reading comprehension. Within this framework of theories it is important to note that the orientations of the authors mentioned were essential for the analysis of the collected data.

Methodology

A brief description will be provided on how the research question was responded. Thus, it is necessary to clarify the type of study, the advantages and disadvantages, the setting, participants, pedagogical intervention, data collection techniques, instruments, specific procedures and ethical considerations that will take place during the research.

Type of study

This study uses action research as an inquiry strategy. Action research "seeks to change the social, organizational and personal dynamics of the research so that all who participate benefit from its outcomes" (Stringer, 2013, p. 15). Therefore, it requires researchers to get actively involved in the research process to help people define their problems and support their activity to get a resolution of the implications that deal with the focus of the investigation. The first thing to do is acquiring the information by collecting data and analyzing that information in order to transform the understanding about the nature of the problem and then, this new assumption should be used as an action plan to provide a clear panorama for evaluating hypotheses (Berg, 2004; Stringer, 2013).

Action research is differentiated from other research procedures because it focuses on an action. The researcher adopts an insider position where new questions emerge through the process in relation with others in order to make improvements; it leads to how and why the improvement has occurred and how the validity of the issue has been evaluated. "Action research is about taking action (what to do), researching the action (how you find out about what you do), and learning from the process" (McNiff, 2016, p. 7).

Our research question plays a fundamental role for the choice on the type of study. Action research was relevant to take intentional action by implementing question-answer relationship in order to enhance inferential reading comprehension skill in students of an English class. We also believe that action research design is the most suitable for showing personal and collaborative work of learning as well as improving our practices for our and others' benefit.

This study was carried out in a regular class at Centro Cultural Colombo Americano, located in 4 Vientos. The English class that was chosen is taught for 2 hours a day.

For this research study, the parties involved are three teachers (the same teachers designing the present study). Other participants are the students of the English Language program at CCCA who are adults around 18 and 25 years old with different interest of learning English either applying for a job, educational or personal matters. The number of students in a regular class oscillates between 8 and 20 members, including both genres female and male.

The criteria used to select the participants was based in a typical case sampling which focuses on what is standard or typical where candidates are chosen for their likelihood of behaving like others (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim 2016). The data collected for this study came from students' artifacts, students' reading logs and open-ended questionnaire. The whole process of this action research is described in the following three phases.

Phase 1: The Diagnosis.

In this first stage of the study, the problem was identified. The direct observation of one of the teacher – researchers (participating in this study) in a regular class at CCCA, specifically course 1, showed that students were having problems when solving inferential questions after reading a text. The diagnosis started with the analysis and assessment of the reading activities done in class and also the tests given during the course. A questionnaire was then administered to the same students at the beginning of course 2. The results of the questionnaire confirmed that they perceived reading and solving questions related to texts as a very challenging task and that they were aware they lacked some of the necessary skills in order to find the correct answers to questions.

Phase 2: The intervention.

The action plan consisted of instruction on the Question-Answer relationship strategy starting on day 2 of the course. The implementation of the strategy took place every other day in order to get students to be accustomed to use the strategy when solving questions about a written text.

On day 3 of the course, students were instructed on how to fill in their reading logs. This tool allowed us to have a closer view of the process from students' perspectives and also to obtain better input on how the strategy was working or not.

The most important source of data for this research was students' artifacts, which were collected on day 4, 8, 12, and 16 of the course. These activities were conducted in 4 different classes, so that, lesson planning was necessary to

define objectives, choose the materials, the activities and the instructional procedures for each one of them.

Phase 3: Describing the impact.
The effect of the action plan was described by:

- Analyzing the results of a survey administered right after the course started.
- Analyzing students' reflections on their reading logs.
- Analyzing students' work after having done the four activities designed for the course on inferential reading comprehension.

After having collected all the data, the results obtained were described by analyzing students' answers to questionnaires, their reflections on the reading logs, and the activities they did during the course, all of this on the spotlight of the theory available regarding reading comprehension and Question-Answer relationship strategy.

Results

To obtain concrete data related to the project we collected data before, during and after the 19- day English course 2 at CCA. At the beginning of the course, students were given a questionnaire in order to collect information related to students' barriers at the moment of facing reading comprehension activities. The questionnaire focused on the inferential level of reading, which is the ability to process written information and understand the underlying meaning of the text. The first part of the questionnaire was about their interests and needs when reading. The second part described the student perception of their difficulties and how they solved these difficulties; also takes into account
their current reading habits.

As a second moment, the students were given a Reading log, this was their tool during the process; these reading logs were filled in after each class where a reading text was given in order to obtain information from students themselves about these reading activities which were done during class. The use of four specific readings in their guide book, which a specific activity was designed for each one of them, in order to develop and strengthen their inferential reading comprehension skill through the implementation of the question-answer relationship strategy. The intervention was conducted on an English Course at CCCA, specifically course two (2). Students in this course are classified on Level A1 according to the common European framework. The first part of the

intervention consisted on giving students the questionnaire, which took place on day 1 of the course. On day 3 of the course, they were instructed on how to fill in the reading log. Subsequently, they started filling out their reading logs on day 4 and continued to do so during the 4-week course. It is of great importance to point out that students participants of this study were beginners at using the language and were starting to strengthen (in some cases build) skills and abilities such reading comprehension, listening, fluency, among others.

The Questionnaire: students' needs, interests and identification of reading comprehension barriers.
This tool allowed to collect initial information about the students before starting the course that showed their interests, needs and what they identified as a difficulty when facing reading comprehension exercises. This initial information was analyzed in the following chart:

Tabla 1
Most interesting kind of English topics preferred to be read in class

Novels	1
Poems	1
Sports	2
Literature in general	1
Philosophy	1
Current events (Economy, politics, society)	3
Learning methods	3
Forms of communication	1
News	1
Comedy	1
Daily life	1

This information provided input on students, interests related to reading. One of the biggest concerns of language teachers is to develop a good level of reading comprehension on their students, help them be able to understand, make predictions, analyze, provide conclusions and enjoy reading texts. However, what students are interested in when reading, is hardly ever taken into account. Based on this, Prensky (2001) states that "the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (p.2). As a result, learners most of the time are not engaged to read texts which do not appeal to their interests or feel out of date. It is high time for teachers to provide plenty of topics, so that learners choose the one that meet their needs.

In this sense, the class showed different interests but with a coherent common one which was to be able to improve their reading comprehension skills to have access to different kinds of texts that are part of real life and that many times are not available in Spanish which becomes a constraint when developing a variety of activities related to school, university, work or even during their daily routines.

Tabla 2
Biggest challenges when reading English

| Lack of vocabulary | 7 |
| Reading | 1 |

Table 3
*Ways to surpass vocabulary barriers *participants can choose two or more options*

a. Search for it in the dictionary	6
b. Deduced by context	6
c. Help from a friend	4
	0
d. Other	0

Following the previous fact, the tables 2 and 3 showed that 90% of students identified that the vocabulary is the main obstacle and that at the same time implies a challenge that students face during their time learning the language. This aspect made them get frustrated at the moment to read or try to read more complex texts; but also in table 3 they show they have specific ways to handle with the lack of vocabulary such as using the dictionary or making interpretations of the context that at the end does not solve the problem of lack of vocabulary.

In addition to these findings, it is necessary to take into account the last two questions of the questionnaire: *"How often do you read texts in English? and what kind of texts do you read?"*; the answers showed that more than 50 percent of students do not have consistent reading habits; the average response oscillated between *once or twice a week* in contrast to the information obtained on which what kinds of material they read, which shows that 80 percent of the students read Internet articles, academic papers, books or material for their English class and also songs and movie captions. This information could lead to the assumption that students would have a high level of proficiency when comes to reading, but the variety of texts they mentioned are not reflected on their reading comprehension skills, due to lack of reading habits and vocabulary, which were identified as the main barrier when reading.

Reading logs: A tool to track the implementation of the Question –Answer relationship strategy.
As it was stated above, reading logs were the students' artifacts that allowed us to have a clear view of students' perception about the activities given. Four of these logs are directly connected to the activities proposed. These activities are:

To compare 2 sets of daily routine in a text: in this activity students were informed about the habits of a typical American. They were provided with data about their work habits, frequency, use of internet etc. Then they were given a short questionnaire where they should answer yes or no to questions related to their routine. After having finished this part of the activity, students were asked to compare the typical American routine on their own, by stating the differences and similarities they found, writing them down on a T-chart.

In the given text, to list six things that technology addicts do: Students were provided with a text about the different uses of the internet, the amount of time people spend using their computers or phones and the activities they used them for. This text also addressed the concept of "Technology Diet", and also they were given some clues about how to identify when someone is getting out of control when using the internet. After reading the text, students listed six things that an addicted to technology does, taking into account the information given by the text and students' own knowledge in order to foster their higher order thinking skills.

To predict three (3) reasons how people like their neighborhood in a picture: in this activity, students were given the picture of a neighborhood alongside the picture of three people who lived in this neighborhood and some pieces of information about them. Only the names, occupations and ages of the people on the pictures were given to students. The students were told to take into account the information given about the characters and also their gender in order to make predictions by giving three reasons whether these people liked their neighborhood or not. This information was collected on a chart.

To summarize four (4) ideas about why the village is an artsy neighborhood in an inferential paragraph: in this last activity, students read about The Village, which gives general information about different activities offered by a neighborhood in Manhattan. From there, students should answer a series of questions about the neighborhood and afterwards, organize their ideas and write a short paragraph explaining why The Village is an artsy neighborhood.

It is important to point out that these activities intended to work on the inferential level of the readings, by starting with activities such as comparing, pointing out, listing, moving to more complex activities such as making predictions and finally summarizing aspects that are not explicit in the readings to write an inferential paragraph. The activities started after class planning, once the needs and interests of the students were identified. Their needs were initially detected during class observation and were confirmed by the results of the questionnaire which indicated that the students had a previous idea about the strategies that allowed them to make inferences from texts, but lack of instruction on how to use them efficiently. However, the sequence of these activities was intended to scaffold students on the inferential level of Reading.

Table 4
*Reading strategies applied when reading English *participants can choose two or more options*

a. Summarize and generalize	4
b. Highlight key concepts	4
c. Search for specific data	4
d.Predictions	4

Regardless the fact that the table shows that students had equal answers when it comes to the question asked about *which strategies they apply when reading in English*; it should be pointed out that several of these strategies were applied by the students prior the instruction, which lead to the conclusion that the activities developed during the course were aimed to be addressed to improve reading comprehension skills, through the *question-answer relationship strategy*, which in this sense, implies guided questions where they must give coherent answers to what is asked, taking into account both the implicit or explicit information that the text can provide and also their previous knowledge. On the other hand, a major benefit of reading logs was that at the moment that each student had to think and made a reflection about the activities,

they became aware of their own learning process, what make them autonomous and independent of their knowledge, as well as when they had to answer the questions about the readings such as *if they have felt confused, how this relates to their daily life or which was the easiest part of the exercise*. That also allowed them to make connections between the topics that were addressed in these activities with their daily lives so they could become part of the exercise itself.

In the same way these activities were analyzed altogether with their corresponding activities yielded the following results:

Reading log; also the Reading log that was filled out at the beginning of the course and those logs that were not linked directly to the activities were taken into account since they targeted to the purpose of this project and at the same time became essential tools in the process of improving the inferential reading comprehension of students. The analysis of this set of

- First, taking into account the description of the four activities designed for this course, we observed that each one of the aspects of the inferential level of reading that were enhanced, lead students to the development of increasingly complex skills. We were able to come to this conclusion based on the comparison and contrast of information of the text used for the first activity with the information provided by the students after finishing the task; the enhancement of the ability to make inferences and deducting information from the text in the second activity; the third one made students go beyond in the sense that they had to extract information from the picture and establish relationships with the implicit information on it in order to be able to generate predictions about each character's opinion by taking into account how their age, occupation and gender would influence their perception about their neighborhood. Finally in the fourth activity it is explicitly tested whether the question-answer relationship strategy is effective, since the students had to interpret the text to answer the questions, so that, the activity aimed the students to be able to identify details in the reading and establish connections between what is explicitly said to information that is not explicitly stated, indeed related to "The Village", and at the end, write an inferential paragraph.

- Second, the results are confirmed by the reading logs through the description of five aspects:

a) What I have been learning, which is the identification of the central theme of the learning activity.

b) How knowing about this topic will help me, which makes the student aware of the skills

learned or reinforced by this activity.

c) What the topic reminds me of, that allows the student to connect the reading and the activity with their daily life.

d) Which part when reading the text made me feel confused, that allows to identify the

weaknesses that are presented.

e) Which was the easiest part that allows to identify the strengths at the moment of carrying out the activity.

- Third, regarding the question "*Which part made you feel confused?*" referring to it as if at some point when reading the text, the content or language had been misunderstood, the Reading log showed that since this question was asked during the progression of the course, it is of great importance to point out that on the last three dates there was a substantial increase in the number of students who responded "*I was not confused*" when they filled out the reading logs; which allowed us to conclude that there was an improvement in the comprehension of the texts, which is shown in the following graph, where it can be observed that starting from date 2 there is a first indicator of this improvement expressed textually by the students and reflected in the responses to the activities; that reaches its peak between dates 4 and 7. It should be added that by date 8 not all students participated.

- This, in general shows an increase of the level of students understanding in comparison with the first reading log and the last one. The highest points of comprehension were shown during the activities where the question-answer relationship strategy had already been implemented.

Discussion and conclusion

Through this dissertation, it was possible to respond to the main question of this study: *How inferential reading comprehension skills are improved through the question – answer relationship strategy?* Considering the analyzed data throughout this research the following conclusions have been drawn:

- The difficulties participants had when facing the challenge of reading inferentially seem to be due to not having been familiar with enough reading strategies, such as summarizing, making differences and

similarities, paraphrasing, analyzing and synthesizing information.
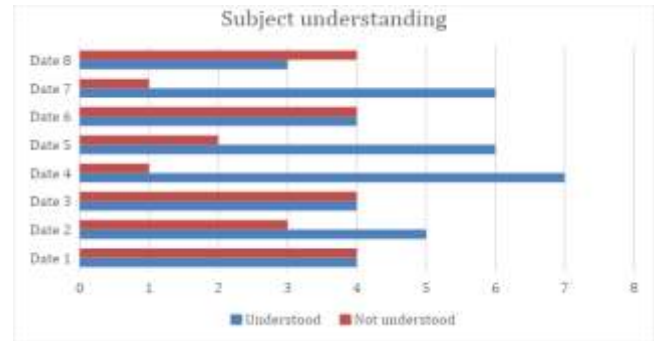

Figure 1

Level of students' understanding towards the subject

- The participant students are aware of the importance reading has for their performance on the different levels of the English courses at Centro Colombo Americano, and show great interest in being instructed on how to answer the questions they are asked after reading different kinds of texts.

- Students' perception in regard to the kind of English topics is supported by the fact that learners prefer readings that suit their needs in life. Some of them, prefer reading about sports because they are athletes; others are inclined to economy, politics, and society as a result of their careers. Therefore, to have learners hooked on reading, as teachers we may offer plenty of options for them to choose the one that fit their English level, interests and feel attractive. After that stage, it would be easier to introduce reading strategies to support their inferential comprehension through different activities (written, oral) since they will comment on topics they really enjoy.

- The students are also aware that reading comprehension is one of the main aspects to be proficient in English and that is an aspect that is not isolated from their daily lives but on the contrary, related to it very closely, since they face many written text in English when developing activities for their classes, jobs, daily activities such as watching TV, reading the news, among others.

- After the intervention, we can conclude that the inferential level of reading was enhanced, leading the participant students to the development of increasingly complex skills when facing reading material. The improvement on the inferential level of reading comprehension was perceptible from the

moment the students were able to make comparison and contrast information from written texts; they also developed the ability to make inferences, deduct and extract information from the texts, establish relationships with the implicit information on them in order to be able to generate predictions; the students were also able to interpret the texts in order to answer questions by identifying details in reading material and establishing connections between what is explicitly said to information that is not explicitly stated, allowing them to write an inferential paragraph.

● The information provided by the reading logs, allowed us to conclude that the implementation of the Question-Answer Relationship Strategy was successful, since students themselves, during the last 3 dates when Reading Logs were filled out, explicitly stated that they "were not confused" when reading the texts that were provided in class, showing major improvement since date one, when most of them answered they were confused when facing written texts and their corresponding reading comprehension activities.

● Based on the results of the present study, implementing the Question-Answer Relationship Strategy in all levels of the English courses At Centro Colombo Americano Cartagena, will be beneficial for all the students, starting from beginner levels, since this strategy would allow students to have better reading comprehension skills, which at the end will represent major improvements when facing reading material in both academic context and real life situations.

● This study opens a door for teachers who are reluctant to implement different strategies on their classes, maintaining the strategies that are suggested by the textbook, and that at some extent, are not getting them to achieve their goals when comes to reading comprehension on their students. The Question-Answer Relationship Strategy can be implemented from course 1 on, allowing students become familiar with it, therefore, their implementation will become natural when facing reading comprehension activities, allowing students to get the most out of this strategy in order to successfully comprehend a text at any level.

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