Methodological strategy to improve reading comprehension in Language and Literature in Higher Basic Education

Estrategia metodológica para mejorar la comprensión lectora en Lengua y Literatura en escolares de Educación Básica

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a fundamental element in the learning process, which allows students to understand, interpret, and analyze the information contained in texts. The objective of this work is to contribute to the improvement of reading comprehension in high school students of an educational institution in the city of Quito, Ecuador, through the design of a methodological strategy. This research is based on the diagnosis of skills related to each of the levels of reading comprehension, using a mixed approach with descriptive and explanatory scopes. The results of the diagnosis show deficiencies in the critical level of reading comprehension in the group of students with whom the study was conducted. To conclude, the importance and urgency of having a methodological strategy to develop the different levels of reading comprehension, oriented to critical thinking and adapted to individual needs, is emphasized.

Keywords: Teaching skills; Linguistics; Basic education; Comprehension; Critical thinking

Resumen

La comprensión lectora dentro del proceso de aprendizaje es un elemento fundamental, debido a que permite entender, interpretar y analizar por parte de los estudiantes la información contenida en textos. El objetivo de este trabajo es contribuir al mejoramiento de la comprensión lectora en estudiantes de Básica Superior de una institución educativa de la ciudad de Quito Ecuador, mediante el diseño de una estrategia metodológica. Esta investigación parte del diagnóstico de habilidades relacionadas con cada uno de los niveles de comprensión lectora, para ello, se recurre al enfoque mixto con alcance descriptivo y explicativo. Los resultados del diagnóstico evidencian deficiencias en el nivel crítico de la comprensión lectora en el grupo de estudiantes con quienes se realizó el estudio. Se concluye resaltando la importancia y urgencia de contar con una estrategia metodológica para abordar los diferentes niveles de comprensión lectora, orientada al pensamiento crítico y adaptada a las necesidades individuales.

Palabras clave: Habilidad pedagógica; Lingüística; Educación Básica; Comprensión; Pensamiento crítico

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a process in which the reader interacts with the text to reach an understanding, using the experiences that arise as they decode the words, phrases, paragraphs, or author´s ideas. Reading comprehension is a fundamental element within the learning process, as it allows students to understand, interpret, and analyze the information contained in texts. Alvarez (2023) argues that reading is essential for young people because it strengthens vocabulary, knowledge, memory, and concentration, enhancing writing and imagination, as it fosters empathy and prepares them for life with wisdom.

In other words, through the development of this skill, learners are able to extract the meanings of words, relate information, grasp main ideas, etc., which leads to critical thinking. For this reason, it is essential to promote and strengthen this skill from the beginning of children formative process.

Recently, this process has been deteriorating, especially when society has been forced to change the mode of teaching (UNESCO, 2020), which complicates the assimilation of reading processes. This problem is reflected in Ecuadorian education, which has shown a 49% deficit in reading comprehension—a percentage resulting from a test conducted in 2017 on Ecuadorian ninth-grade students, approximately 347,000 in total, whose purpose was to measure knowledge and skills at the national level via the PISA-D test. It is important to note that this test is conducted to measure scientific, mathematical, and reading competencies. In reading competence, the goal is to assess whether the student has the ability to understand, reflect, interact, and use written texts to achieve development and potential in their knowledge and facilitate their participation in society (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018).

In this context, educational reports, such as the PISA-D tests of 2017, reveal low reading comprehension among Ecuadorian students at each educational level. Therefore, it can be inferred that teachers have difficulties with the didactic process or in improving their practices to adequately manage methodological strategies, so as not to negatively affect the learner, regardless of educational level, and to eliminate the disinterest in reading, which leads to a lack of reading habits.

This problem has become more pronounced due to the mandatory confinement caused by the global pandemic, as the teaching-learning method changed dramatically for schoolchildren, triggering a disparate acquisition of knowledge. From this perspective, Vacarezza (2020) states that education has experienced significant changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with both teachers and students altering their perceptions of how to conduct the educational model. It is now necessary to consider different roles, such as information provider, model, facilitator, planner, and resource developer. Consequently, to achieve positive results in didactic processes, it is essential for teachers to train, understand, and master strategies to apply them in a novel, creative, and systematic manner.

According to Cassany et al. (2003), it is important for teachers to exhibit flexibility in their practice when reading, evaluating, and grading students' writing activities, to look beyond the mistakes in writing and to support students in their transition to writing. Additionally, it is important to read what they write to understand their stance on a specific topic presented in class. In this way, the role of the teacher in society takes on greater importance and requires that they be prepared to provide children with the necessary resources in terms of innovation and creativity (Choquichanca & Inga, 2020).

It is important to note that reading comprehension is not only conducted in the area of Language and Literature but it is interdisciplinary. In the educational field, it is reinforced across various academic areas, such as Mathematics, where students must apply a process that starts with understanding the problem when solving a numerical problem; in Natural Sciences, when understanding that some human activities are causes of global warming; in Social Studies, when students generate a value judgment or critical judgment for each historical event that occurs locally or globally; and in Cultural and Artistic Education, when analyzing a work of art where they can communicate their point of view with supporting arguments. Therefore, it is necessary to motivate children to engage in animated, novel, and creative reading, so that reading becomes an educational, familiar, and personal habit. In this sense, it would be essential to approach a series of activities within a methodological strategy to improve reading comprehension in the area of Language and Literature for upper basic education students, serving as a significant contribution to other academic areas.

These activities consist of activating skills that involve self-reflection and conscious control of one's thought processes through procedures that facilitate the acquisition of information from the text, allowing for the reactivation, rethinking, or searching for more effective techniques and strategies for text comprehension.

According to Ayala & Arcos (2021), for a child to feel motivated to read, the materials that the

REBE. Revista Boliviana de Educación / Volume 7 / Issue 12/ January-June 2025
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12

teacher will use must inspire their curiosity and it should be contextualized—meaning that they should present familiar situations for the child to capture their attention. Therefore, it is essential for area coordinators to ensure that this process takes place as planned, taking into account the texts to be used, which must align with the institutional context (Aponte, 2019).

These methodological strategies are linked to various curricular activities implemented in the classroom, according to group age, school level, and the different levels of reading comprehension, enabling progress in development and allowing for the achievement of critical thinking in students. However, it must be considered that the traditional classroom does not contribute to a good development of reading comprehension; for this reason, the activities to be carried out must extend beyond the conventional format, exploring educational environments through dynamic readings and educational richness (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997).

Because reading comprehension is a skill acquired through practice, spaces must be created where students have the necessary tools to meet the proposed challenges, having the confidence to access useful materials and information provided by them (Chica et al., 2022). From this perspective, the need arises for teachers to acquire new competencies regarding the methodological strategies that will be used in the classroom to improve reading comprehension.

In this sense, reading comprehension plays a crucial role in the learning process and academic development, as it influences individuals' ability to assimilate new information, solve problems, and participate effectively in society, allowing for assessment through specific reading comprehension tests that address various skills, such as detail identification, inference, interpretation of meanings, synthesis of information, and critical evaluation.

Indeed, this permits a deeper exploration of the importance of the subject, which goes beyond the early grades, covering the entire curricular plan. As Guaraca & Erazo (2022) state, reading, viewed from a scientific perspective, is a complex process that involves the activation of numerous neurons and areas of the brain, as well as the integration of cultural heritage, experiences, needs, and knowledge of the reader. For this reason, it is essential for personal development and learning, as it influences all educational areas and levels, interacting with the content of subjects during the teaching-learning process.

Consequently, one of the most common problems in the academic field is the difficulty in developing reading comprehension as a skill (Berrocal & Ramírez, 2019), since it is not enough to have the ability to read; it is necessary to do so competently, as academic achievements depend on it (del Río Pereda, 1985). In this perspective, Solé (1992) broadens the notion of reading comprehension by considering that the act of reading is an interactive process between the reader and the text, where the reader seeks to meet their reading objectives and, during this process, the meaning of the text is formed from the reader's construction. Although the text itself has a meaning, the significance it acquires for the reader is not simply a reproduction of the author's original intention, but rather a construction that involves both the text and the reader's prior knowledge.

In this way, reading comprehension is a skill that develops itself throughout the educational process; therefore, there are various methodological strategies used by teachers, which depend on the educational level, students, context, materials, and the teacher's interest (Jenkinson, 1973).

The strategy is based on various activities that assist the teaching-learning process in collaborative, cooperative, and individual ways. According to Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (2018), this process involves providing structured support to students as they develop skills.

It is important to highlight that, based on reading comprehension; this could include guided discussions, reflective questions, and the introduction of comprehension strategies. Piaget (2014), states that students are already capable to reason themselves from diverse perspectives and in a more abstract manner.

In relation to this, it can be inferred that the level of reading comprehension that upper basic education students should have developed is the critical level. In this context, considering it as a dynamic process of interaction between the text and the reader, three levels of reading comprehension are identified by authors such as Strang & Rogers (1965), Jenkinson (1973), and Smith (1989). These levels provide a conceptual framework that allows for addressing and understanding reading comprehension from different perspectives.

Each of these levels provides a unique perspective on how the reader engages with and assimilates the information contained in the text, thus enriching the understanding of this complex process.

The commonly recognized or used levels of reading comprehension are: the literal level, the inferential level, and the critical level. Each level builds on the last, so they are not independent but sequential, and they must be developed progressively

REBE. Revista Boliviana de Educación / Volume 7 / Issue 12/ January-June 2025
ISSN: 2710 - 0537 / ISSN-L: 2710 - 0537 / www.revistarebe.org

13

at each educational level.

The literal level is the most basic because it focuses on the direct understanding of the information present in the text, where readers comprehend the most explicit ideas, extracting the facts, main ideas, details, and concepts expressed in words and sentences literally. Furthermore, this level serves as a foundation for achieving optimal reading comprehension.

At the inferential level, readers go beyond the obvious information, making inferences based on what is implied in the text. This involves analyzing and combining the information present to understand concepts, causes, or effects of events that are not clearly expressed, such as unfamiliar words or phrases, and thus interpreting the author's intention.

The critical level is more complex because it requires the reader to evaluate the information presented through a deeper analysis of the text. Here, readers not only comprehend the information but also question, compare, contrast, and critically evaluate the content to draw their own conclusions or judgments, thereby developing connections between the reading and their prior knowledge.

To achieve or develop the critical level, it is essential to be an effective reader; this is where critical reading is fixed, as it involves active reading that fosters a reading habit on students as they delve into each text paragraph by paragraph, where the reader stores the most important ideas, and upon completing the reading, can generate an overall summary of what has been read (Pressley, 1999). This provides the opportunity to discover, interpret its content, and express various viewpoints on the author's writing style or the text read.

However, for students to understand and remember what they read, as well as to realize when they do not understand and be able to address it, strategies must be implemented. This is possible as long as a specific strategy is applied to help the reader enhance his ability to distinguish and infer implicit aspects presented in the texts (Pressley, 1987).

Freire (2014) states that in any formative practice, two roles coexist in educational praxis: the one who teaches and learns, and the one who learns and teaches. From this point of view, it can be interpreted that education is not carried out only by the teacher; rather, the educator and student are simultaneously participants in the acquisition of knowledge.

Thus, both play a crucial role in the execution of the methodological strategy for reading comprehension, with the teacher providing guidance, demonstration, and feedback, fostering motivation and commitment during the process. On the other hand, students, by engaging in the execution of the methodological strategy, build new cognitive skills that enable them to be aware of their own reading processes.

The importance of this work lies in contributing various activities that are included in a methodological strategy aimed at fostering comprehensive education, a strategy that can be applied to different contexts and disciplines. In other words, it aims to generate a positive impact on learning by strengthening the development of the critical level in reading comprehension, which implies an appropriate development of cognitive skills through constant practice.

To achieve this, it is essential to start with a diagnostic assessment in the area of Language and Literature to understand the reading comprehension level of each student, as well as to set forth theoretical foundations that serve as a guide for articulating a series of learning activities for upper basic education students at a private educational unit in the south of the Ecuadorian capital.

METHOD

Regarding the research methodology, this work employs a mixed approach with descriptive and explanatory elements under a non-experimental design. The study consists of obtaining qualitative data through interviews with discussion groups. As for the quantitative data, it was collected through the application of a diagnostic test, with the purpose of better understanding the phenomenon or issue from different perspectives.

By combining description with explanation, this approach generates knowledge that can be directly applicable in practical educational contexts because integrating different perspectives creates new ideas that contribute to the advancement of knowledge. Furthermore, this work does not only limit itself to mentioning a problem but also proposes an intervention alternative through the design of a methodological strategy that will contribute to developing or improving the critical level of reading comprehension among the students addressed in this study.

The application of the diagnostic test was conducted with a group of 26 students, consisting of 12 boys and 14 girls, belonging to ninth grade at General Basic Education in the upper sublevel, whose ages range from 14 to 15 years.

The diagnostic test is designed based on the skills established by the Ministry of Education in Ecuador, with the purpose of identifying any deficiencies in reading comprehension levels. This test includes a preliminary reading (a fragment from a book) followed by a questionnaire featuring questions that

REBE. Revista Boliviana de Educación / Volume 7 / Issue 12/ January-June 2025
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14

assess the literal, inferential, and critical levels. For the literal level, two questions are created; for the inferential level, three options are formulated; and lastly, two questions are made for the critical level. It is important to highlight that the questions in the questionnaire are open-ended, allowing students to respond in their own words.

RESULTS

The findings of this research focus, on one hand, on the diagnostic evaluation of the key competencies that students should possess regarding reading comprehension; and, on the other hand, on the design of a specific methodological strategy aimed at effectively improving the critical level. This strategy seeks not only to measure reading comprehension levels but also to identify areas for improvement and provide guidance for developing skills in this area.

Results of the diagnostic evaluation

Regarding the results obtained from the diagnostic reading comprehension evaluation conducted with the ninth-grade students of General Basic Education at the upper sublevel, it is evident that 3.85% have mastered the learning (ML); 34.62% have reached the learning (RL); 30.77% are close to reaching the learning (CR); while 30.77% have not reached the learning (NLR). The previous information can be seen in the following Table 1.

Table 1. *General results of the diagnostic test*

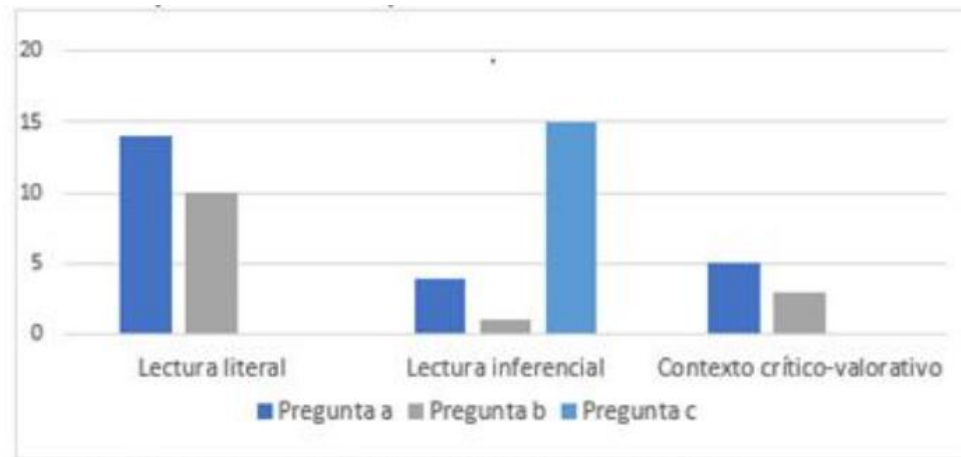| DOMINATES	ACHIEVES	NEXT	DOES NOT ACHIEVE	TOTAL
N.	1	9	8	8
%	3.85%	34.62%	30.77%	30.76%
Note: The data shows the results in a quantitative form.				

To expand on the information regarding the results of the diagnostic test, Figure 1 presents the results of the responses individually for each question formulated in each item. These are presented by each level of reading comprehension in an ascending manner. The collected responses will serve as a starting point to suggest a methodological strategy aimed at improving the reading comprehension process in Basic Education students.

In Figure 1, it is evident that at the literal level, students do not face significant difficulty; two questions are modeled about the initially read fragment for example: who is the principal character of the story according to the fragment, and what type of narrator is presented in this fragment of the book "Perfume" by Patrick Süskind. In contrast, at the inferential level, significant difficulty is evident in question b, which refers to the meaning of the word "Ephemeral" according to the context; for option a, they are asked the reason why it is mentioned that Jean-Baptiste Grenouille has fallen into oblivion compared to other brilliant and abominable characters of the time. In literal c, they must create a graphic that contains a brief summary of the fragment of the novel "Perfume," read in point 1.

Finally, at the critical-evaluative level, difficulties are presented in questions a and b, with both showing low results and low comprehension in their development. The question for literal a is: How does the author describe the prevailing stench in cities in the eighteenth century? For literal b: What is Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's only ambition according to the fragment?

REBE. Revista Boliviana de Educación / Volume 7 / Issue 12/ January-June 2025
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15

Figure 1. *Results by level of reading comprehension*

Nota. La figura presenta los resultados por cada ítem.

Design of the methodological strategy

Based on the previous findings, a methodological strategy aiming to improve reading comprehension at the critical level is designed. Firstly, some theoretical foundations presented in previous paragraphs are systematized; secondly, a series of activities are planned, as shown in Table 2.

This strategy seeks to comprehensively address the deficiencies identified in reading comprehension, utilizing activities that actively engage students, promoting reflective critical thinking. Additionally, it aims to adapt these activities to individual needs and learning styles to enrich the learning experience, fostering deeper participation in the critical-level reading comprehension process, as this is where students show a notable deficiency.

Table 2. *Activity planning by class period*

CLASS	OBJECTIVE	THEME	ACTIVITY	TIME	ORIENTATION	RESOURCES
1	Read autonomously different types of paragraphs according to their communicative intent. (O.L.4.6)	Type of texts according to their intent (Descriptive, explicative, argumentative, narrative).	LL.4.3.2. Construct implied meanings by inferring the theme, viewpoint of the author, motivations, and arguments of a text.	2 periods	Conduct comparative readings with different types of paragraphs through a reading comprehension process at the critical level.	Language and Literature text at page 9
2	Read and understand the editorial article and its characteristics. (O.L.4.6)	Editorials and other opinion articles.	Develop critical criteria to distinguish different perspectives on the same theme.	2 periods	Infer the theme through questions and answers among peers, sharing in class. Read opinion articles using comprehension resources.	Text of Language and Literature at page 9, Newspaper Editorial

REBE. Revista Boliviana de Educación / Volume 7 / Issue 12/ January-June 2025
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16

CLASS	OBJECTIVE	THEME	ACTIVITY	TIME	ORIENTATION	RESOURCES
3		Textual argumentation	LL.4.3.2. Construct implicit meanings by inferring the theme, author's point of view, motivation and text arguments. Interpret the author's intent critically.	1 period	Assess opinion articles based on clarity and editorial criteria. Differentiate between theme, problem, data, and ideas from the author, and formulate arguments supporting or refuting the author's position.	Assess opinion articles based on clarity and editorial criteria. Printed material with different argumentative texts

Therefore, this methodological strategy includes the careful selection of reading materials that challenge and stimulate critical thinking, as well as the implementation of activities that encourage reflection, debate, and deep analysis of texts. Educational institutions expect to incorporate it into their planning. Furthermore, it can be used to teach students to question, evaluate the information they find in texts, as well as to develop skills to identify biases, fallacious arguments, and underlying viewpoints. Additionally, it is crucial to incorporate continuous feedback and positive reinforcement to encourage the development of critical reading comprehension over time.

Considering that a methodological strategy includes a different teaching-learning approach, its application within the classroom is essential because it involves a continuous evaluation process aimed at monitoring students' progress in their reading comprehension, allowing educators to identify areas for improvement and adjust the strategy as necessary to ensure positive outcomes based on individual needs, with the goal of ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

DISCUSSION

When analyzing the results obtained from the diagnostic evaluation of reading comprehension carried out with ninth-grade students of General Basic Education at the upper sublevel, it is necessary to mention some important aspects regarding the percentages reflected in Table 1 and Figure 1, where a variety of performance levels is visualized, highlighting a considerable proportion of students who are close to reaching the learning objectives.

However, a significant percentage does not reach the learning objectives, which may require additional attention regarding reading comprehension levels. Therefore, it is emphasized that activities should be implemented within the curricular framework, underscoring the essential role of the teacher in fostering students' critical ability. This perspective suggests that teaching should not focus only on reading but seek to develop critical-thinking readers. For this reason, the importance of re-evaluating teaching is taken into account, suggesting a deeper approach to forming critical readers. Additionally, the necessity to consider the specificities of each student is highlighted.

REBE. Revista Boliviana de Educación / Volume 7 / Issue 12/ January-June 2025
ISSN: 2710 - 0537 / ISSN-L: 2710 - 0537 / www.revistarebe.org

17

It is essential to include questions that require the creation of creative graphic organizers and to manage roles to strengthen knowledge acquisition because, based on the results; this activity could be a positive strategy for assessing summary and/or synthesis abilities.

Taking the above mentioned into consideration, emphasis is placed on what Freire expresses regarding the coexistence of roles in educational practice. Additionally, Piaget's stages are mentioned, where he states that students in the upper sublevel of Basic Education are at an appropriate age to work on the critical level of reading comprehension. Similarly, Vygotsky and Bruner recommend that knowledge acquisition is possible and enriching when it occurs within an educational context (peers) to facilitate analysis.

The various activities within the curricular and academic scope are considered important for addressing the different reading comprehension skills, from literal comprehension to critical interpretation with a specific focus on the areas where students show the most difficulties.

Therefore, highlighting the results obtained along with the theoretical foundations supported by the research confirms that reading comprehension is a fundamental skill developed throughout the educational process. Thus, various methodological strategies should be emphasized in teaching practice, considering the educational level, students, context, and other factors influencing the teaching-learning process.

For this reason, the suggested methodological strategy includes activities that encourage students to interact reflectively with the content, challenging them to analyze, interpret, evaluate, and distinguish information, considering different perspectives from their peers and forming informed opinions.

Thus, the direct relationship of the activities with specific topics, such as rock art, the origin of writing, and opinion articles, allows students to apply their knowledge in meaningful contexts, fostering a deeper critical understanding by relating information to real-world situations. It also encourages the ability to express and support opinions collaboratively while working among peers, contributing to the collective construction of knowledge. Consequently, activities go beyond superficial comprehension, prompting students to analyze and question the ideas presented in the texts.

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of the diagnostic evaluation helped clarify the indications of suspected low reading comprehension because ninth-grade students in upper Basic Education exhibited deficiencies in reading, suggesting that it might affect their reading comprehension levels. For this reason, the evaluation helped reveal an important factor for the development of each of the levels. Ultimately, the results acquired by the diagnostic evaluation indicate that students need to develop their critical level, which is notably deficient, while the inferential level only needs to be strengthened, and the literal level presents no issues.

To determine whether the critical level was appropriate for the ninth-grade students in upper Basic Education, a search for theoretical foundations that support the present work was planned. These corroborate the importance of having good reading or reading fluency to adequately develop each of the levels.

A detailed understanding of the reading comprehension issues among ninth-grade students in upper Basic Education has been obtained, emphasizing the importance of critical ability in this process. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehensively address this skill by developing a series of activities that encourage a deep and reflective analysis of texts.

This study highlights the need for the use of activities to develop the critical level of reading comprehension, emphasizing critical thinking and adapting to individual needs.

It is important to note that the levels of reading comprehension commonly recognized and utilized in the educational field are three (literal, inferential, and critical), whose learning is developed in an ascending and interconnected manner as academic advancement occurs.

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18

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19

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20