

How to Improve Sixth Graders' Reading Comprehension through the Skimming Technique^{*}

Cómo mejorar la comprensión de lectura de estudiantes de grado sexto a través de la técnica del 'vistazo'

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This project was developed at Venecia school morning shift located in Tunjuelito, Zone 6 in Bogotá. Population involved consisted of forty-four, sixth-grade students. The pupils were between 11-13 years old, whose social and economic conditions were difficult.

Our goal for this project was to introduce the skimming technique to familiarize students with it to make the reading process easier since reading in a foreign language implies a complex process and students need useful tools to confront a text in an effective way. Through different reading workshops worked in classes we discovered that reading can be a meaningful and interesting process for students. According to the findings, we concluded that the skimming technique was very easy to apply and it was appropriate for reading and comprehending a text.

Key words: Skimming technique, meaningful reading, innovation

Este proyecto se desarrolló en el Colegio Venecia Institución Educativa Distrital, jornada mañana, localidad 6 de Tunjuelito en Bogotá (Colombia). Los estudiantes que participaron en el proyecto cursaban grado sexto. Tenían entre 11 y 13 años de edad y vivían en condiciones económicas y sociales difíciles.

Puesto que el proceso de lectura es complejo y los estudiantes necesitan herramientas útiles para enfrentarse a un texto de manera exitosa, nuestro objetivo fue familiarizar a los estudiantes con el uso de la técnica del *vistazo*, de tal manera que el proceso lector fuera más fácil. A través de diferentes

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talleres de lectura trabajados en clase, descubrimos que la lectura puede ser un proceso significativo e interesante para los estudiantes. De acuerdo con los hallazgos concluimos que la técnica del *vistazo* fue apropiada y fácil de aplicar para leer y entender un texto.

Palabras clave: Técnica del *vistazo*, lectura significativa, innovación

Introduction

Reading is one of the two language receptive skills. It gives students the possibility of accessing written materials on practically any subject. There are several techniques for confronting a text. One of them is the skimming technique which consists of identifying the topic of a text and the general ideas of it.

At the site <http://www.lengua.profes.net>, skimming is defined as a reading technique that permits the reader to reduce the numbers of the words without affecting the sense of the text. The purpose is to capture the totality of the ideas of the text.

Based on this, we decided to introduce the reading technique of skimming to sixth graders at Venecia School since they were first-year high school students. Initially the students had the opportunity to apply this technique, step by step, to simple texts in the foreign language; English, in our case. The skimming technique, in order to be useful to students, needs to be practiced a lot. We designed several workshops for applying and practicing it.

The emphasis of this technique is on general comprehension, as stated before, which includes paying little or no attention to unknown words. Reading techniques are suggested to get students out of the common habit of reading word by word and going to the dictionary to look up the meaning of every unknown word.

Justification

Sixth-grade students have had little practice in the reading comprehension process in the foreign language because they have not had contact with texts like poems, tales, rhymes, or different readings taken from a real context. This fact occurs due to the following main reason: In primary school, the English teacher teaches through different and isolated activities without meaningful contexts.

We introduced the skimming technique to sixth-grade students in order to familiarize them with a new process, then we worked with texts of progressive difficulty in order to improve the skill of reading comprehension. Although in our school there is a licensed English teacher for the primary level, she only explores the oral skill, using different activities that make English more enjoyable for children.

Therefore, the other skills such as writing and reading are not worked on at all. Our choice also took into account that sixth grade is the first stage of high school and it is necessary to develop the reading skill from the very beginning of this cycle, because at this level students should start to develop more complex competences than the ones worked on at primary level. Success in knowledge acquisition depends on the efficient process that they perform in this field. Besides developing this skill, students can access information from a new

culture and better understand a globalized world in which English is one of the main languages.

Reading in a foreign language is a difficult task in our school. Students try to understand something from a passage or a text using a dictionary and translating word by word because they do not identify the logical and rhetorical relations in a given piece of writing which are necessary to interpret and decode a text. Consequently, we tried to explore a technique for comprehensive reading which would help sixth grade students overcome such difficulties, and not just for this grade.

Moreover, as English teachers we consider that it is relevant to help students develop reading strategies, so they can confront more efficiently and comprehensively texts in order to be more competitive in the labor context, considering that the world is global.

Finally, nowadays, the ICFES test demands that students demonstrate a good performance in the skill of reading. The skimming technique can be useful to improve this skill because the exam is based on reading comprehension, and the technique helps achieve that purpose.

Research Objectives

We developed our project based on a diagnosis we did with sixth graders and according to the results, we stated the following research objectives:

General Objectives

To implement the technique of skimming for reading comprehensively in the EFL class for sixth grade students.

Specific Objectives

To familiarize students with the skimming technique.

To have students practicing the skimming technique.

To provide students with exercises to find the main ideas of a text.

To have students applying the skimming technique to different texts in different subjects.

To show students they can understand a text without knowing all the vocabulary.

Type of Project

We consider that our project proposal focuses on the innovation aspect, because we want to apply non-traditional methodology for developing reading comprehension in our classes.

As Markee (2001) says: "Innovation will be defined as proposals for qualitative change in pedagogical materials, approaches, and values that are perceived as new by individuals who comprise a formal (language) education system" (p. 120). With this project, we wanted to develop the reading process using the skimming technique, through different and meaningful activities that permit sixth grade students to enjoy learning how to read in a comprehensive way. For this purpose, we proposed designing interesting workshops based on attractive and real readings, in order to increase students' motivation, because this is a main factor affecting reading approximation.

Curriculum innovations should be sensitive to the local setting. This has resulted in what has been called a more person-sensitive approach to curriculum project

management. Our project proposed taking into account that the reading skill has had little practice even in the mother tongue, and it is necessary to develop different and innovative activities to make this skill more attractive for students, bearing in mind their contexts, needs and expectations in order to have an impact on the English curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

This section has the purpose of providing theoretical support on the skill of reading and the skimming technique. We consider here aspects such as reading definition, comprehensive reading, the skimming technique and classroom approximation to reading.

These theoretical aspects were relevant in supporting this project in order to determine the usefulness of the skimming technique in comprehending a text in an efficient way.

There are many definitions of the reading process, and we identify with this one: "Reading is a receptive language process in which the reader recognizes and decodes any kinds of symbols. This process ends when the reader gives sense and meaning to the decoded written language and transfers the information understood into his experience and thought". (Ríos & Valcárcel, 2005, p. 60).

Even though from the start, decoding is a necessary part of the reading process, this definition goes beyond that. It implies understanding and using the acquired knowledge to be able to infer, to argue and to propose, and in this way to be a competent reader.

Another view is expressed by Grellet (1981, p. 4): "There are two main reasons for reading: reading for pleasure, reading for information". In our project we consider

it important to familiarize students with the skimming technique to help them get information in a general way from a text, but also for students to begin to read for pleasure. Furthermore, sixth grade students need to acquire at least one technique (skimming) for efficient reading comprehension. No one doubts that the ability to read and understand written texts in English is a great advantage for an adequate performance in the modern real world. Additionally, the main language of the academic world is English.

In the same way, as teachers, it is necessary to design reading materials focused on students' needs and interests. Thus, students enjoy their own learning, making it more meaningful.

What Is Reading Comprehensively?

Reading comprehensively, first, implies the capture of the writer's purposes. Also it implies that readers identify basic information, are able to predict, to infer, to argue and to recognize writers' points of view.

According to Alderson & Urganhart (1984, p. 95): "The reading comprehension process focuses on three elements: The text being read, the background knowledge possessed by the reader, and contextual aspects". He suggests that background knowledge is a helpful tool when a person confronts a text since he can reorganize his knowledge and put it together better. To comprehend a reading it is necessary that the reader can extract the key words in order to capture the whole sense of the text.

Another consideration can be expressed like this: Reading is an active skill. It constantly involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking oneself questions. It is possible, for

instance, to develop the students' powers of inference through systematic practice or introduce questions which encourage students to anticipate the content of a text from its title and illustrations or the end of a story from the preceding paragraphs (Allen, 1997). Based on this statement, the skimming technique is a useful tool to help students extract from the text key words that permit them to infer the general sense of a text, which lets them interpret a text faster and advance in the reading process.

A final point is contained in the following observation: "Reading involves many periods of mulling over ideas and translating information into a more familiar framework. What is acquired from the text is a richly interwoven structure consisting of material generated from the conscious interplay of the two". (Alderson, 1984, p. 65).

Skimming Reading Technique

The process of reading is very important because it helps to develop thought and active cognitive processes such as inferring, categorizing, arguing, predicting, etc. There are different techniques to make the reading process more effective. For this project we concentrated on the skimming technique. Synthesizing Grellet's (1981) claims, the skimming technique has basic characteristics. It is an activity which requires an overall view of the text in order to find the general contents and ideas of the written material. Also, skimming is going through the reading material quickly to find out how it is organized or to get an idea of the intention of the writer.

For this project the emphasis was on general comprehension of texts, with little

or no attention paid to unknown words. As Cross mentions (1991) there are some strategies used in reading which can help students understand a text more easily. These activities include combining sentences, filling the gaps, completing tables and graphs, selecting a summary, matching nouns and verbs, comparing versions, and identifying facts. It is then suggested that, to get students out of the common habit of reading word by word or line by line and into the process of relatively quick skimming, there are some specific activities that permit the extraction of a general idea, such as recognizing similar words in English and Spanish, identifying unknown vocabulary, inferring meaning from context and detecting typographical clues and often repeated words.

In our innovative project, we selected activities which we considered appropriate to sixth grade students, such as filling the gaps in phrases related to main topic, with students required to fill in the missing words. Another activity was underlining words in the text which appear similar in English and Spanish to help students become familiar with the text. In this same way, they could understand the whole meaning of the text. These activities permitted students to comprehend the whole meaning of the text even without knowing all the words.

Additionally, the activity in which students had to complete tables and graphs was very useful in helping them infer the meaning of the text.

From the questionnaire given to students after the workshops, we observed that these activities were very useful to students because they could understand the whole meaning of the texts and they became aware that reading in English is not a difficult process.

Classroom Approximation to Reading

The skimming technique is introduced to students in order to make them proficient in reading comprehensively. “By helping students read in English we put the vast world of English printed matter within their reach” (Dobson, 1980, p. 151). In other words, reading can help students understand foreign culture; through readings they can access information they want to know, such as favorite singers, famous people and, in some cases, historical and scientific events.

Although there are many possible strategies for reading comprehensively, we decided to apply the skimming technique because we consider that students neither read comprehensively nor apply any technique while reading a text. We wanted to introduce students to this technique since they need to understand the gist of a text as a first step to understanding all of it.

Methodology

When selecting reading materials, we initially tried to find simple texts related to students’ context and culture, looking for things relevant to their lives, with limited but unknown vocabulary and simple grammatical structures.

For example, the first reading was a text on a popular Colombian singer, Shakira. The teacher played a major role in this workshop because the new technique of skimming was unknown to the students. The instructions were given in Spanish for the sake of making the new technique very clear to the students. The other workshop was about school life in which we selected different activities and an easy reading (See Appendix 1).

To gather the data, we applied a **questionnaire** (See Appendix 2) with seven questions. The information collected during the second academic semester of the year 2006 was collected in ten classes where relevant data were recorded. We used the questionnaire after applying workshops, and the students answered freely. This tool was designed to discover what the students knew about the skimming technique, and to find out their attitudes, expectations and feelings towards it. Students were asked to give their opinion on the workshops. Through questions, we looked for information about the vocabulary found in the text; the comprehension level obtained, the usefulness of the technique introduced, and, in general terms, their opinion of the activity.

Also, the teacher-researcher used **field notes** from direct classroom observation (See Appendix 3) because this was the method of registering the relevant information for our project. As Burns (1999) considers, “Notes, or field notes as they are often referred to in qualitative research, are descriptions and accounts of events in the research context which are written in a relatively factual and objective style” (p. 87). With this instrument the researcher recorded what she observed, such students’ attitudes and comments, and took notes about the development of the classes. Those notes were very useful in allowing the teacher-researcher to see that the students enjoyed the activity and identified with the topic of the text. Therefore, they enjoyed the work.

Our field notes included reports on the function of group work, interesting or common errors made by students, conversation and interactions between participants, non-verbal

information and reflections about the classes (See Appendix 3).

Findings

Students were highly motivated, participated actively and were ready to give an answer when requested.

We also noticed in the workshops that the students liked this technique. They mentioned that they found it easy, and that they understood it.

In the analysis of the workshops we discovered that the students made few written mistakes, and they could read in English without problems because they applied the technique's exercises. Pupils believed this technique is easy to apply and brings many advantages in comprehending a text. These activities included: recognizing similar words in English and Spanish, underlining known and unknown words, identifying frequently repeated words filling in the blanks, multiple choices, completing a chart according to information given, etc.

Following on from our innovative project we proposed implementing a reading technique called skimming, whose purpose was that students understood a text in a meaningful way. The analysis of the instruments applied allowed us to find out some students' impressions and opinions about this technique.

In relation to the questions asked in the questionnaire, 44 students gave their impressions and ideas about the skimming technique and the activities in the workshops.

Our data indicated that 75% of students found the activity "excellent", and 18%

considered it "good". From these answers we can conclude that the workshop was very well-received. In addition, 77% of students said the instructions were clear and precise. This is a key to success in reading comprehension.

We could infer the level of comprehension of a text. The majority of the students understood almost all the text. This reflects a high level of comprehension when students dealt with a text.

With reference to the skimming technique, the answers were positive, with students considering that this technique was easy and a good method for understanding a reading.

A great number of students considered vocabulary was easy to understand. In fact, the selected texts were easy to comprehend because pupils could understand the chosen vocabulary. From these findings, we can say the text was motivating for the majority of students.

Lastly, we wanted to have an impact on the curriculum, proposing reading comprehension as an effective way to access all areas of knowledge, through application of this technique in other academic fields in an interdisciplinary way.

Based on our analysis we organized the findings in three categories: motivation, familiarization with the skimming technique and progress in the learning process.

Motivation

From the beginning, one of the recurrent aspects in our project was motivation. It has become one of the key concepts to take into account in any learning process. A person who is motivated to do something can get better outcomes. Bearing in mind that reading is a complex process that involves

not only decoding words but also the whole meaning of a text, the motivation of the reader is important. We can back up this observation with this students' answer: "*The workshop was easy to understand and the topic turned out to be interesting.* (Students' survey number 33). Through reading, they can access knowledge, enjoy themselves, and learn at the same time.

Grellet (1981, p. 89) says: "Motivation is of great importance when reading. Partly because most of what we usually read is what we want to read, but also because being motivated means that we start reading the text preparing to find a number of things in it, expecting to find answers to a number of questions and specific information or ideas we are interested in".

Into our innovative project, we observed that the skimming technique made the reading more pleasurable for students and allowed them to read a text without using the dictionary. "...*Students went to the board, they were very motivated and answered the questions correctly. The use of the dictionary wasn't frequent.*" (See Appendix 3). When students developed workshops, they enjoyed them because these activities were a new methodology used in our English classes, taking into account students have difficulties understanding a foreign language.

To introduce the skimming technique in our classes, we designed three workshops. The first one was about Shakira, and students liked it because she is a well-known and important singer and many students' fans. We saw this idea in this pupil's answer: "*I liked this activity because it was about Shakira and I love her. I have her last compact disc at home*" (Students' survey number 07). Other workshops were called *My School* and *I Am*

a Bee. These readings were meaningful for students and focused on their reality. This idea is corroborated by Gebhard (1996, p. 213): "...we can do our best to introduce students to readings that match their interests, mostly through extensive reading activities."

Finally, as the activities developed, students were happy because they understood the readings and they found many words they knew. We have a piece of evidence about this: "*It was easy and I understood all the text*". (Students' survey number 43).

Familiarization with the Skimming Technique

One goal of our project was to get students familiarized with the skimming technique. In this sense, we can argue students did, in fact, become familiar with the technique, since the majority considered it easy to apply.

This fact permitted us to introduce students to the development of workshops in a confident class environment that produced a good result: students could answer questions about readings freely. We evidence this aspect in this statement: "*Students paid attention, they participated a lot in the class although, sometimes, two or three students answered at the same time* (Field notes, session number 01, September 15th, 2006). In addition, we can back up this finding with the assumption that students want to implement this reading technique with other readings and texts in their mother tongue. With regard to this, we found this evidence: "*This technique is so good for understanding texts in English and other languages*" (Students' survey number 23). In other words, students got used to applying the skimming technique as a useful strategy comprehending different texts.

It is also important that pupils should be helped to apply the skimming technique to get the author's general idea, and they should be oriented with clear and precise instructions in order to familiarize them with this technique. Here, the teacher's role is very important because if students understand the technique they can apply it in different circumstances. We can observe the importance of this with this quotation: "*Instructions were clear and I could answer in my workshop*" (Students' survey number 17).

Progress in the Learning Process

The third category concerned progress in the learning process. Workshops were designed with students' interests and likes in mind. During the development of the workshops the English teacher-researcher observed that students worked with interest and enthusiasm, and they could arrive at a better reading comprehension of the text through the skimming technique.

In relation to vocabulary, students worked through different exercises such as underlining similar words in English and Spanish, and circling words frequently repeated. In this way the students noticed that unknown vocabulary was not an obstacle in comprehending a text. This aspect could be seen in the fifth question of the questionnaire, where 93.18% of the students responded that the vocabulary was easy to understand. As well, in the open questions, the majority of students showed that they found the vocabulary easy to understand. In the same way, we discovered that a well-planned activity, well-designed material and instructions well-given by the teacher are factors that facilitate the learning process

and make the adventure of learning more enjoyable.

Conclusions

To sum up, our proposal led to the development of a pedagogical innovation that brought students a useful tool for comprehending a reading in an effective way.

Our objective was to help sixth grade students to find the meaning of a whole text through the skimming technique. We believe that students can succeed in the academic world if they know how to extract the principal ideas from a text.

After applying different reading workshops, we concluded that students had acquired the ability to comprehend a text. We can infer this from answers given in the questionnaire.

We acknowledge the fact that perhaps we had very high expectations in terms of what we and students could do. We certainly believe that there is a myriad of possibilities we can explore in our EFL classes, and the skimming technique for reading a text is just one of them. However, we think that it is important that we examine our own context in promoting the development of techniques for reading comprehensively.

From our findings we conclude that the skimming technique permits students to capture key words and the whole meaning of a text. In this sense, we can say that students can comprehend and paraphrase a text, which permits students to become proficient readers. When students get the general meaning of a text, they engage in a complex mental process in order to interpret and criticize a text.

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Appendix 1: Reading Workshop

Skimming Strategy

Venecia School

Name _____ Level: 600

Before Reading

1. With two lines, underline the words that are similar in English and Spanish
2. Underline the words that you know
3. Circle the words that appear in the text several times
4. Put a square around the words whose meaning you don't know





My School

1. I like my school. It is big and it has many interesting places.
2. My favorite place is the chemistry lab. I like it because I can do many
3. experiments there. My brother prefers the gym. He's very good at sports
4. and plays basketball with his friends there every day. There is also a
5. library in my school. It has lots of mystery stories and science-fiction
6. books. It's a great school.

Complete the following table according to the reading:

| Line | The underlined word | Refers to |
|------|---------------------|-----------|
| 1 | It | |
| 1 | it | |
| 3 | there | |
| 4 | his | |
| 4 | There | |
| 5 | It | |

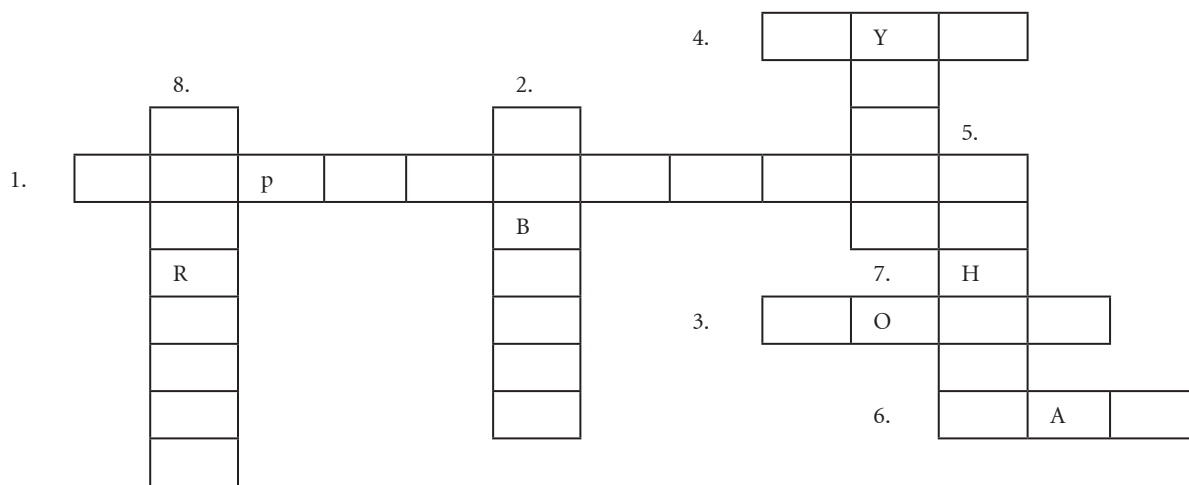
Match the places with their corresponding activities:

| Places | Activities |
|---|-------------------|
|  | to experiment |
|  | to read books |
|  | to study |
|  | to play ping pong |

Fill in the following table with Yes or No.

| | Read books | Experiments | Play games | General study | Physical exercise |
|---------------|------------|-------------|------------|---------------|-------------------|
| School | | | | | |
| Gym | | | | | |
| Chemistry Lab | | | | | |
| Library | | | | | |

Read the text and complete the puzzle



1. The place to make _____ is the lab.
2. There are many books in the _____ .
3. You can find different stories in a _____ .
4. In the _____ people practice physical exercise.
5. Children go to _____ .
6. Place to make experiments.
7. I go to school to _____ .
8. A gym is a place to _____ .

Appendix 2: Questionnaire Used to Find Out Students' Opinions on the Use of the Skimming Technique in Class

Institución Educativa Distrital Venecia (Morning Shift) Questionnaire

Target: Sixth grade students

Subject: English

Date: September 6, 2006

People in charge: PFPD RED PROFILE 2006 Teachers

Objective

To know students' opinion about the functionality and applicability of the skimming technique when reading texts in English and the possibility of using this technique in other subjects.

Dear students: The purpose of this questionnaire is to know your opinion about the activity done in the English class that dealt with the "skimming technique" applied to reading comprehension.

Cross (X) the answer that better suits your point of view. Your sincerity will be of great help to us.

1. The activity done was
a. excellent. b. good. c. average. d. deficient.
2. The instructions to do the activity were
a. Clear and precise. b. Confusing. c. Impossible to understand.
3. From the given text, you understood
a. everything. b. almost everything. c. little. d. nothing.
4. For you, the skimming technique for reading comprehension was
a. easy. b. hard. c. impossible to apply.
5. Vocabulary in the given text was
a. comprehensible. b. totally unknown. c. impossible to understand.
6. In your opinion, the topic of the text was
a. interesting. b. boring. c. little interesting.
7. Would you apply this technique to other readings either in Spanish or English?
Yes___ No___
Why?

Appendix 3: Field Notes

| Lesson Plan One | |
|--|--|
| Date: September 12 th Topic: Skimming Technique | |
| Teacher asks students to read Shakira's text. Everybody reads the text. Students recognize known words. Teacher explains the skimming technique. | It was easy to explain. Students paid attention all the time. |
| Students work in individual way but they can talk with partners to share ideas about reading. Then children begin to develop activities. | During the English class, students participated in an active way. On some occasions 2 or 3 students answered at the same time, but their answers were right. They went to the board, they were motivated and answered the questions correctly. |