

***ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES
METHOD AS A PROPOSAL FOR
PEDAGOGICAL MATERIAL DESIGN
FOCUSED ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE
READING COMPREHENSION FOR
HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS***

Milena Lizeth Caicedo Getial
Lisseth Carolina Valenzuela Delgado

University of Nariño



Traducción: De la Portilla Guerrero Diego Fernando
Revisión: Cepeda Ortiz diego orlando
Departamento de de Lingüística e Idiomas
Facultad de Ciencias Humanas -Universidad de Nariño

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Abstract

This article arises from an educational experience that highlights the difficulty faced by higher education students from various professional backgrounds in understanding written texts in English. It also demonstrates insufficient recognition of vocabulary and deficiencies in retaining information about grammatical structures specific to the foreign language.

Considering the difficulties faced by university students in English reading comprehension, mentioned above, we focus on the framework of the educational program "Occupational Health and Safety Administration" at Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios. This has led to a qualitative research supported by the "English for Specific Purposes" (ESP) method (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 9), using the focus group technique based on observation, interviews, and surveys. The intention is to promote the learning of technical vocabulary and expressions in English, and through reading exercises, to consider communicative objectives to make the most of it and reinforce reading comprehension.

Additionally, with the mentioned ESP method, the aim is to encourage the design of proprietary materials that contribute to motivation in acquiring a foreign language. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify a context, its characteristics, the specific content, and objectives through a process of constant reflection and evaluation.

Finally, it is assumed that proper reading exercise requires language and its skills, leading to an interactive process of meaning creation and serving as an organizing principle for text structures, an important fact in the process of learning English as a foreign language.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), reading comprehension in the field of higher education, materials design.

Resumen

El presente artículo surge como resultado de una experiencia educativa que pone en manifiesto la dificultad que presentan los estudiantes de educación superior de diversos perfiles profesionales, para comprender textos escritos en inglés. También, se exhibe insuficiente reconocimiento de vocabulario, y falencias para retener información sobre estructuras gramaticales propias del idioma extranjero.

En consideración a las dificultades de los estudiantes universitarios, mencionadas anteriormente, frente al proceso de comprensión lectora en inglés, nos centramos

en el marco del programa educativo "Administración en Seguridad y Salud en el Trabajo", en la Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios; lo que ha dado lugar a una investigación de tipo cualitativa apoyada en el método "Inglés con Propósitos Específicos" (ESP – English for Specific Purposes) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 9), tomando la técnica de grupo focal basada en observación, entrevistas y encuestas. Con la intención de propiciar el aprendizaje de vocabulario técnico y expresiones en inglés, y que a partir del ejercicio lector se contemplen los objetivos comunicativos para sacar el mayor provecho y reforzar la comprensión de lectura.

Adicionalmente, con el mencionado método ESP se busca incentivar el diseño de materiales propios, que contribuyan a la motivación en la adquisición de un idioma extranjero. Para lo cual es necesario identificar un contexto, sus características, el contenido determinado y unos objetivos, a través de un proceso de reflexión y evaluación constante.

Finalmente, se asume que el ejercicio adecuado de la lectura requiere del lenguaje y sus habilidades, lo que conduce a un proceso interactivo de creación de significado y así mismo sirve como principio organizador de las estructuras del texto, un hecho importante en el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras Clave: Inglés con Propósitos Específicos (ESP) en educación superior, comprensión lectora, diseño de materiales.

Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language has not only been a challenge for university students but also for teachers who are aware of the multidisciplinary inherent in the different profiles of professional careers. Added to this are the results of communicative skills tests, where reading comprehension as a key formative axis shows poor performance.

Based on the authors' own pedagogical experience in teaching English, this research is driven by the interest in investigating the latent needs of the university population in this field. This has led to the construction of significant concepts to seek alternatives that can offer a theoretical basis, such as the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach, and also promote the design of proprietary materials by teachers, serving as a tool to improve reading comprehension in the foreign language.

To achieve this, the following concepts are succinctly elucidated in relation to the research objectives:

ESP (English for Specific Purposes)

The foreign language, English (FL), is currently positioned as the primary language of mediation in relationships in different fields, such as work, education, commerce, tourism, entertainment, and science; therefore, it is recognized as a Lingua Franca (LF). Consequently, the number of non-native speakers is higher, surpassing the group of native speakers. Due to this fact, those committed to teaching this language are constantly seeking strategies and methods to improve or develop language skills that also meet the learners' needs.

Therefore, it is worth noting that in the area of teaching and learning English as a Second Language, there is a teaching strategy called ESP; consolidated as an approach oriented towards addressing the specific communicative needs of students to develop competencies that help them participate significantly in occupational and/or academic contexts related to their professional profile.

It is valid to mention that since ESP is a teaching method of the foreign language focused on a specific subject, the objectives of the method are aimed at the development of specific skills, with an emphasis on teaching technical vocabulary and expressions used in the daily work of the profession to which the ESP course is focused.

Additionally, this approach aims to provide learners with tools that will allow them to use the language in communicative situations within their work environment. In this sense, Hutchinson (1987) asserts that by adapting an English course considering the skills of the students, it generates greater motivation and calls for effective second language learning.

Therefore, ESP turns out to be a method that can transform the teaching of the foreign language at the higher education level not only focusing on grammar or simply on text translation, but also providing students with training focused on their area and on the development of other communicative skills, including comprehensive reading of texts in English.

Reading Comprehension

Throughout history to the present day, one of the fundamental pillars of the functioning of our society has been the assimilation and appropriation of knowledge through reading, this daily dynamic in any context is a driving force that mobilizes the world, as long as it reaches its ultimate goal, reading comprehension.

It is essential to understand that in the educational field and in every knowledge-generating field, the current

world demands constant training and updating, so a fundamental tool to stay at the forefront is reading, but it can be exploited to the fullest if its central objective, comprehension, is not fully achieved. (García, Arévalo & Hernández 2018)

Reading comprehension comes from a great interpretative process that combines the handling of basic knowledge, in terms of sounds, letters, words, and sentences, whose association process becomes automatic. Authors Block & Pressley (2002) consider comprehension as a process of assimilation and coupling of meaningful knowledge. The reader assumes the new information found reasonable and integrates it with everything he already knows. These activities inherent to the human being function in a continuous complement of variables, comprehension represents the dependent variable and vocabulary, fluency, phonetics, etc., the independent ones, with these in turn, processes such as causality, specification, or comparison are developed by the human being to discover the main idea of the text. (Muñoz & Ocaña, 2016)

Currently, different researchers, teachers, and students agree on the significant role of text comprehension in academic environments, which represents a fundamental pathway to access a discipline, and in terms of acquiring specific disciplinary knowledge, it also allows the association of individuals interested in these specialties (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004).

Parodi (2005) emphasizes the need for students to develop discursive competencies to accept academic challenges and overcome them satisfactorily. In the case of this research, it focuses on reading comprehension in the learning of the English language, because it is considered globally, in economic and academic terms, as the lingua franca (Cobb and Horst, 2021; Dudley-Evans, St John, 2006).

In academic processes, university students often encounter a large number of texts focused on their disciplinary areas of study written in English, such as research, scientific articles in books or journals, or all kinds of material published on the internet, which, for some, understanding has represented a difficulty. Therefore, this represents one more reason to develop this important and necessary skill, such as the comprehension of disciplinary texts in English, especially considering all the resources that students can take advantage of, which are written in this language (Dhieb-Henia, 2003).

As a result of the interaction with the written text, an individual extracts and constructs meaning simultaneously, but it is of utmost importance to understand that, with only the qualities of the text, comprehension is not possible, so three essential

elements must be considered: the reader, the text, the activity, and the context.

Firstly, the reader as an active subject is a central element, being the one who constructs a mental representation through various cognitive processes such as identifying the immediate meaning in written words, constructing the appropriate proposition, and then understanding its textual structure, integrating it with the knowledge they possess. (Cassany, Luna & Sanz, 2014)

Considering the text, it refers to the different written manifestations that establish communication. A great variety of text types have been generated, which can vary according to type, genre, style, etc. Its purpose is to contain, propose, and organize the author's intention. It is responsible for promoting interest in discovering the central ideas and purposes of the authors. (Sandoval & Casas, 2011)

Next, Snow (2002) explains that activity is an action that involves tasks at different moments of reading. Each individual, consciously or unconsciously, selects activities according to the purpose and complexity of the text. For example, activities related to linguistics or semantics are applied to decode a written text. External processes such as skimming to grasp some ideas before deep reading or studying the sections of the text in advance with the purpose of retaining the most information, etc., are also carried out.

Finally, the context intervenes in reading practices due to the constant interaction with different social environments in which the reader lives, such as home, neighborhood, school, work, etc. From an early age, humans shape their behavior as they understand how the world works, which in turn influences the comprehension of the diversity of reading topics. (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

The design of materials based on ESP in relation to reading comprehension ability.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, based on teaching experience, the authors of this article have been involved in the process of searching for resources, adapting them, and selecting sources of information for their own benefit and that of the students. All these tools have been used on numerous occasions in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. According to Bautista (2013), when the teacher, immersed in their educational context, creates or adapts resources primarily taking into account all those inherent needs, then the process of material design emerges.

First, to understand what material design refers to, its concept must be defined. Salinas (1992) explains in general terms that this notion of creation refers to the

description and formation of an element, to its way of imagining and sketching it out.

Throughout educational experiences, foreign language teachers have been exposed to the continuous supply and demand of resources generated for teaching, such as primers, textbooks, instructions, and a variety of physical resources, and now, increasingly, games, videos, websites, etc., which are responses to the continuous demands of the different ways and styles of learning of students, which constantly change and adapt to new trends.

Tomlinson (2012) explains that the resources mentioned above represent what we generally know as "materials," and additionally when all these share the same interest, which is to promote and facilitate learning for students, then that is when "Material Design" takes place considering one's own experience, methodology, and reflection in this process. (Núñez and Téllez, 2009).

During the significant task of teaching and learning, there is also the constant responsibility to seek tools that allow students to acquire knowledge in a meaningful, understandable, and motivating way. In the particular case of the institution to which the research is directed, the tools used often contain material that does not have a connection with the current context or the targeted study population. De Mejía and Fonseca (2006) argue that teachers can easily find materials from various parts of the world, however, they do not always adapt to any context, especially regarding aspects such as history or culture. Therefore, this is another reason to contribute convincingly to material design and to get closer to the students, their daily concerns, and of course, the situations they face every day.

The purpose is not to design materials that are considered perfect, but to promote the pedagogical adaptation that learners need, knowing that each one is different, but that they share very valuable common characteristics. Authors like Jo McDonough, Christopher Shaw, and Hitomi Masuhara (2013) argue that the task of designing materials has the utmost importance. First, it is necessary to identify and know who the specific knowledge is directed to, which in this case is the English language. Therefore, these authors explain that some aspects to consider are: age, interests, language proficiency level, educational and academic level, among others. This will allow the educator to situate themselves in a specific context, which will make knowledge construction more specific.

Consequently, another important pillar to consider in material design is to carry out a needs analysis of the learners, taking into account what they know and what they need to know, what they can and what they find difficult to do, always with the intention that these

factors guide pedagogical dynamics and make them more effective. Núñez & Téllez (2008).

As well as identifying needs, it is also fundamental to determine objectives and goals. Graves (1997) explains that in the learning process, one reflects on the reasons for obtaining knowledge, thus there is a direction with a sense of ownership of goals to be achieved and forming a path to traverse.

Another aspect to consider is the organization of content and activities. Initially, Graves (1997) tells us that we must start with those topics that are simple and gradually move on to the most complex ones. Taking tools for organizing activities that can represent attractively and clearly the learning focus that you want to give to the class.

Finally, as teachers, it is necessary to reflect together with the students through previous and subsequent questions about the materials, in this way, flaws can be detected and thus reassess the needs of the students, establish a new organization of contents, and select activities that contribute mostly to the achievement of established goals. (Núñez and Téllez, 2009).

The design of materials should be a call to teachers to awaken students' interest, to intrigue students and colleagues about what resources and methodologies have yielded positive results in different processes, and to be in continuous analysis of educational practice. While we can draw on different examples for material design, our mission should be to focus on our own context and its needs.

Methodology

The research approach is qualitative, considering the data collection techniques of focus groups and surveys based on needs analysis. This allows the opportunity to better understand the behavior of learners from their own reality, not only regarding their academic performance but also their feelings, thoughts, motivations, etc. From Ferrance's perspective (2000), this approach serves to inquire into one's own educational practice, detailing meticulously and systematically through different research techniques the real learning situation of students and their personal needs.

Methodologically, action research is also considered, as it allows researchers to actively engage in the investigative process, based on what happens with the study population and analyzing the reasons behind the difficulties that result in improvements. In fact, the proposal of this research regarding the development of materials contributes possible solutions to the

problems of English reading comprehension evidenced in university students.

Discussion

Tomando Taking as the first foundation of interest for analysis the observations made on the educational practice of the authors in this article and the reviews of the academic performance by university students at Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, different difficulties have been evidenced that students face in learning English as a foreign language in the context of higher education.

Throughout the semesters in different training programs, students generally take English levels within undergraduate careers. However, serious problems are observed regarding grammatical knowledge and there is a significant deficit in vocabulary, which limits the understanding of English texts (basic, intermediate, and advanced), which are a great source and basis of learning. Learners claim that, despite having seen different topics and quite a bit of vocabulary in their previous English levels, all of this is easily forgotten. Additionally, it is noticeable that learners do not know grammatical categories even in their native language. Therefore, when discussing verbs, nouns, adjectives, among other categories, reading comprehension becomes even more complex.

These difficulties are repeated every semester. The learner forgets what is taught or does not learn it, and in some cases, purely memoristic learning of grammatical structures or rules is identified, with the inability to apply the acquired knowledge constructively to daily situations in their educational context. Neither is the development and consolidation of cognitive strategies verified to enable them to address the problem precisely and focused on future work contexts.

The aforementioned is evidence of how the teaching and learning process of the English language has not responded to the current demands required by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), where its approach is oriented towards action in which the language is a communication tool that allows students to interact in authentic situations, demonstrating its real utility and developing tasks of various kinds and applicability that generate theoretical but also practical knowledge in their academic and work life.

Likewise, one of the greatest concerns of university institutions is to provide training in the second language focused on the presentation of Saber Pro Tests, with the aim that the educational community performs in the best way in the English tests demanded by the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) at the national level. This goal is

common for different educational entities, but reality presents us with a series of situations that hinder the achievement of good results by undergraduate students in higher education. On one hand, we face quite heterogeneous groups of students in terms of specific English knowledge, and with different ages, tastes, expectations, etc. But they share similar training interests since they belong to specific training programs and seek to obtain common competencies that allow them to perform in the job market.

Currently, it is openly stated that English is the universal language and that one cannot survive in this globalized world without knowing it, yet students reach the end of their careers with very little or no preparation. Therefore, we cannot assume acceptable levels of comprehension and reflection skills in the language itself.

Finally, it is important to mention that to overcome these obstacles, mechanisms must be proposed, such as new strategies when learning and/or teaching the structures and functions of the foreign language, associated with their corresponding uses in the training programs, established in the foreign language, and supported by mastery of topics that contribute to their specific knowledge. As this research does through the proposal of designing materials based on the English for Specific Purposes method.

Conclusions

Various situations in the academic and work environment arise for university students, which involve immersion in the English language, and the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) model allows not only vocabulary and grammar to be covered but also presents real contexts where learning the foreign language truly reflects its importance and applicability.

The combination of specific knowledge of a discipline and the foundations of knowledge of the English language is offered by the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) model, which through achieving its balance allows higher education students to obtain greater competence in their academic process and in their future work.

The timely and appropriate selection of materials in a specific area is very important for their adaptation in the English teaching process following the ESP model. This is achieved by basing on the contextual needs of the learners and thus selecting the strategies to be used and the study contents.

Reading comprehension in the language learning process represents significant utility, especially with reference to obtaining vocabulary, identifying tenses, and recognizing grammatical structures, which serve as a link to search for a diversity of sources of knowledge.

As English language teachers and based on educational practice, it is considered of utmost importance to inquire into the difficulties and specific needs of the university population, of which it has been observed that students face the challenge of assuming a learning that sometimes feels alien to them, and which has also been perceived through daily practice as educators.

Finally, facing the interest and concern for seeking the best alternatives of teaching methods and material design, there are multiple alternatives, unfortunately, these sometimes do not adapt to the context in which one works, and what is even more worrying, does not fully arouse students' interest in learning. Therefore, in the search for alternatives for the creation of materials, the focus on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged as a valid tool to promote adequate learning and for its significant contributions involving reading comprehension in the foreign language.

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