ΣΟΦΙΑ–SOPHIA

Development of reading comprehension strategies for the high school Icfes (Supérate) tests, eleventh grade

Alejandro Toro Criollo*
Rosana Ramírez Toro**

* PhD in Modern Languages. University of Bourgogne LISIT 491 doctoral school, Lab EA 4178 CPTC, Centre Pluridisciplinaire Textes et Cultures. Dijon, France. E-mail: alejandro_toro-criollo@ etu.u-bourgogne.fr

** Master in French and Language Didactics. Technocritical Research Group, University of Sucre. Sucre, Colombia. E-mail: rosanaramirez@hotmail.fr

UNIVERSIDAD
La Gran Colombia

Abstract

This article presents the results of an action research entitled "Development of Reading Comprehension Strategies for the high school Icfes (Supérate) tests, eleventh grade". This pre-experimental research was carried out with a group of eleventh grade of the Santa Teresa de Jesús school in the city of Armenia, Quindío. The students had a poor level of comprehension of texts in English. This type of study requires a pre-test and a post-test, the former served as a means to evaluate the performance of the students in real tests, followed by a training course on more convenient reading strategies for the type of questions used in the high school Icfes (Supérate) tests, eleventh grade (ISG11, for its initials in Spanish). The post-test measured their performance after having finished their training in reading strategies. The purpose of this research was to improve their performance in the analysis of English texts, and to measure how training affects the performance of students in the ISG11 tests. It is concluded from this study that the reading workshops improved the students' ability to understand readings as well as the degree of familiarity with the English section of the ISG11 tests. This research provides a guide to train students in how to answer this type of test. It was demonstrated that with the training in reading comprehension and recognition of the type of items present in the English session of the ISG11 tests, students are better prepared to overcome their difficulties. As a result of this, the students had a positive performance in the real ISG11 tests, raising for the first time in five years the level of English in the institution.

Key words: Learning strategies, high school Icfes (Supérate) tests, eleventh grade, reading workshops, language teaching.

Introduction

In the context of Colombian education, students are being progressively introduced to learning English at the secondary school level as in primary school. This instruction extends to the last grade of high school in Colombia, eleventh grade. Before the end of secondary school, the knowledge obtained by students during all these years is measured by means of a standard national exam. English has become one of the most important subjects since the results of the English section are taken into account when students apply for any college degree. As a result, there should be a major emphasis on teaching English in high school and helping 11th grade students perform and succeed on this test. In addition, Law 115 of 1994, in its article number 33 section C, states as an objective for teachers to place students in a position in which they can have access to university. In this way, language teachers have to contribute by helping students learn and put into practice all the knowledge they obtain from their classes in order to improve their performance in the high school Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade.

This research was developed with a group of 11th grade students from Santa Teresa de Jesús School in Armenia, Quindío. These students had a poor level of comprehension of English texts. In addition, they were not familiar with the format of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade, and had few reading comprehension strategies that were not helpful in answering this test. Considering that the 11th grade students were exposed to this type of test for the first time, it was necessary to implement training that would improve their reading skills.

The approach adopted to solve the problem was to address the issue by implementing a training course specifically adapted to help students perform the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade. Our hypothesis proposes that when students are exposed to diverse and appropriate reading comprehension strategies, they understand texts better. The research question that guides our study is: To what extent does the implementation of a training course in reading comprehension strategies influence eleventh graders' performance in the presentation of the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test?

Concepts and terms

Learning Strategies

Over the last few decades there has been a surprising change in the way people learn languages. This has not only involved teaching, but also learning. Several researchers have focused their work on trying to understand how language is acquired, and it is precisely in this sense that the concept of learning strategies is gaining importance. Brown (1994a:104) notes: "Strategies are specific methods one possesses to deal with a problem or task. On the other hand, Ellis (1994:533) states: "Strategies can be defined as the production that exists as declarative knowledge and are used to solve some learning knowledge". Brown (1994b) points out that learning strategies direct us towards language acquisition, the understanding of which method or pedagogy benefits students to learn best depends very much on the learning strategies they implement to solve problems and also their particular learning styles. Learning strategies are divided into three broad categories. According to O'Malley and Chamot (quoted by Brown, 1994b) these are: metacognitive (planning to learn), cognitive (specific learning language), socio-affective strategies (social mediation activities). We can easily find a student using some of these strategies to perform some activity, for example, attention (metacognitive), using deduction (cognitive), and asking questions to clarify doubts (socio-affective).

Classification of language learning strategies (Rubin and Wenden, 1987)

Rubin and Wenden were two of the first authors to speak and research in the field of language learning strategies. In their classification they make an important distinction between strategies that work directly and those that work indirectly with learning. According to Rubin and Wenden, three types of strategies, which are used by students, stand out mainly. They provide important elements, directly or indirectly, to language learning: learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies.

Cognitive learning strategies

According to Rubin and Wenden (1987) cognitive learning strategies refer to steps or operations used to learn or to solve problems that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. They identify six main cognitive learning strategies that directly contribute to language learning: clarification/verification, inductive anticipation/ inference, deductive reasoning, practice, memorization, and supervision.

Metacognitive learning strategies

These strategies are used to manage, regulate or self-direct language learning. They involve various processes such as planning, prioritizing, goal setting and self-management.

Communication strategies

The authors state that people use communication strategies when they participate in a conversation. For example, if something is misunderstood people seek to clarify and as they speak, they want to get meaning from the conversation as well. They state that communication strategies are less directly related to language learning, since their focus is one of the processes of participating in a conversation and obtaining meaning or clarifying what the speaker wanted to say.

Social Strategies

Social strategies are those activities that students use and which allow them opportunities to expose and practice their knowledge. Although these strategies provide exposure to the target language, they do not contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of language (Rubin and Wenden, 1987).

Classification of language learning strategies

Oxord (1990) states that the main objective of language learning strategies is the development of communicative competence. Like Wenden and Rubin (1987), Oxford classifies learning strategies into two main types: direct and indirect. She subdivides them into six groups. In the Oxford system, meta-cognitive strategies help students to regulate their learning.

Affective strategies are related to students' emotional needs such as confidence, while social strategies are aimed at increasing interaction with the target language. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies that students use to give meaning to their learning, memory strategies are those used to store information, and compensatory strategies help students overcome knowledge gaps to maintain communication. The Oxford (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies is shown below:

Oxford Taxonomy (1990) on language learning strategies

Direct strategies

I. Memory strategies
A. Creating mental linkages
B. Applying images and sounds
C. Reviewing well
D. Employing action

II. Cognitive strategies

A. Practicing
B. Strategies for receiving and sending messages
C. Analysis and reasoning
D. Creating structure for input and output

III. Compensation strategies
A. Guessing intelligently
B. Overcominging limitations in speaking and writing

Indirect strategies

I. Metacognitive strategies
A. Centering your learning
B. Arranging and Planning your Learning
C. Evaluating your learning

II. Affective strategies

A. Lowering your anxiety
B. Encouraging yourself
C. Taking your emotional temperature

III. Social strategies

A. Asking questions
B. Cooperating with others
C. Empathizing with others

Oxford shows her taxonomy of language learning strategies in six groups by bringing together the strategies that make up each field, according to Fedderholdt (1997), the more language learning strategies students use correctly, the better prepared they will be to perfect their general skills. In addition, if students use meta-cognitive strategies they can improve their study time organization, self-monitoring, and self-assessment. Cognitive strategies help them use prior knowledge to solve new ones. Socio-affective strategies are the most common in the language classroom. For example, students use them in work groups when they ask a classmate to work together on a particular language problem. Social-emotional strategies also include asking native speakers of the language to correct pronunciation.

Strategy training for second language learners

In the teaching of foreign languages several approaches have been developed that relate to how teachers can exploit students' abilities to help them acquire the language. One way is to apply 'learning strategy training', Andrew Cohen (1990:36) explains the purpose of strategy training for second language learners. Cohen explains: "This approach is based on the belief that learning is facilitated by making students aware of the scope of strategies they can choose during language learning and use". All language learners use conscious or unconscious language learning strategies when processing new information and developing tasks in the language classroom. It is important to emphasize the idea of a problem-solving environment, as Cohen (1990) explains:

> Since a language classroom is like a problem-solving environment in which students are more predisposed to face the new input and difficult tasks proposed by their instructors, students' attempts to find the fastest and easiest way to do what is requested, i.e. using learning strategies, is unavoidable (Andrew Cohen, 1990:36)

As Oxford (1990:1) states, language learning strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed movement, which is essential for the development of communicative competence. In addition to developing students' communicative competence, teachers who train students in the use of language learning strategies can also help them become better language learners, as Lessard-Clouston (1997:3) states "helping students understand good language learning strategies and training them to develop and use them can be considered one of the characteristics of a good language teacher". Cohen (1990:38) gives a list of objectives to be implemented in training for language learners. Strategy training gives students the tools to do the following:

- Self-diagnosis of their strengths and weaknesses

- Being aware of what helps them learn the target language more effectively.

- Develop a broad mastery of problem-solving skills.

- Experiment with familiar and unfamiliar learning strategies.

- Make decisions about how to approach a language task.

- Monitor and self-evaluate their performance.

- Transfer effective strategies to new learning contexts.

If these objectives are achieved in strategy training, students can improve their performance in language learning. Reading strategy training for the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade, also takes into account the above objectives; therefore, students should have the opportunity to rehearse and evaluate themselves as they progress through the training and prepare for the test. To be successful with a project, objectives must be set, so that attention is focused in one direction and clear results can be expected.

The use of training in learning strategies in the classroom is described by several expert authors in the field of learning strategies, including Pearson and Dole, Oxford *et al*. The training proposed by Pearson and Dole (cited by Cohen, 2003), is based on learning the first language, but applicable to learning a second language as well. In this strategy training, the language teacher is the one who presents, explains and shows the students the benefits of applying a specific strategy. In addition, practical exercises in which students have the opportunity to apply the strategies by carrying out new tasks. The sequence includes the following steps:

- The teacher initially teaches the strategy with direct explanations of its use and importance.
- Guided practice with the strategy.
- Consolidation, where the teacher helps students identify the strategy and decides when it can be used.
- Independent practice with the strategy.
- Application of the strategy in new tasks.

The chart proposed by Oxford (1990) outlines a practical sequence for the introduction of the strategies. This sequence requires:

- Emphasize awareness of the strategies being studied.
- Show students the benefits of using the strategies.
- Provide functional and contextualized practice with the strategies.
- Develop self-monitoring and self-evaluation of their language performance.

Like Pearson and Dole (cited by Cohen, 2003), in Oxford's chart the use of practical exercises where students have the opportunity to apply the strategies to new tasks is a crucial component. In other words, this sequence of strategies is not mandatory for students to use, but rather descriptive of various strategies that they can use in a wide range of learning tasks.

Steps for designing a training in strategies

The following seven steps are based primarily on suggestions from Oxford (1990:204) in her strategy training:

- Determine the needs of the students and the resources available for training.

- Select the strategies to be taught.

- Consider the benefits of training for integrated strategies.

- Consider motivational issues.

- Prepare materials and activities.

- Conduct explicit strategy training.

- Evaluate and review strategy training.

By training students in the use of language learning strategies, the teacher can learn from the students, their needs, motivations, and their learning styles as well. The teacher can become aware of the language learning strategies the students are using by observing their behaviour in class.

The English section of the Icfes (Supérate) Test, eleventh grade

The English section of the Icfes (Supérate) Test, eleventh grade, includes a foreign language test: English, French and German. Students have the possibility to choose a language from these options, taking into account their training and knowledge in one of these three languages. Due to their education, most students choose English. The test seeks to examine some aspects related to communicative competence, which means that students are being evaluated on their use and knowledge of the foreign language in different contexts in which they can interact in communicative situations. However, reality shows us that the test basically evaluates form, because the only skill that is tested is reading, the rest of the skills (listening, writing and speaking) are not evaluated.

The test evaluates several specific aspects to determine students' proficiency in reading comprehension, mainly: recognizing grammatical structures, organizing and completing paragraphs, identifying vocabulary, identifying intentions and roles among participants in a conversation.

The following describes the different skills that are tested in the English section of Icfes (Supérate) Test, eleventh grade.

Competences evaluated in the Icfes (Supérate) Test, eleventh grade.

Grammatical competence: Good sentence construction skills and good vocabulary recognition skills through graphics or drawings are required.

Textual competence: A good ability to combine ideas and a good ability in coherence and textual cohesion is required.

Textual coherence: This is the ability of students to establish logical sequences in the development of ideas and textual coherence.

The main feature of the Icfes (Supérate) test is that its format is based on multiple choice, a very popular item that has been used in several English language tests such as the Melicet test, the Toefl, the Ielts, etc. According to Brown (2003) and O'Malley (1996) multiple choice items offer several advantages in assessment; for example, practicality. In other words, when printing out the test, multiple choice items save time. Its form is as follows:

Susan has been here _____ half an hour.

  a) During

  b) For

  c) While (distractor)

  d) Since

Here, the respondent is asked to identify the best/correct or most appropriate option, which is option "B". The purpose of distractors is, as the name suggests, to distract the respondent. In the case of the Icfes (Supérate) test, some common mistakes that language learners make when learning a new language are used. Brown (2003:60) establishes the effectiveness of distractors by pointing out two main objectives that the distractor must meet:

a) It must attract a sufficient number of respondents, especially those with poor performance, and b) responses must be equitably distributed among them.

There are no mathematical formulas for calculating the efficiency of distractors, however, considering what Brown has established, it can be said that the best distractors for vocabulary items are: 1) words that have a similar meaning for the correct word that are inappropriate in the context, or 2) words that are contextually related, but do not fit in the context.

Hughes (1989) demonstrated the popularity of multiple choice items in language assessment. The Icfes (Supérate) test is no exception, using this technique as their main source of assessment. This technique can be observed throughout the test and all its assessment subjects such as mathematics, biology, language, etc. and of course, in the English section.

Multiple response items are clear, simple and easy to administer, however, this type of item also has disadvantages among which, Brown (2003) and O'Malley J. M. & Valdez, L. (1996) highlight, as unrealistic tasks, a high level of anticipation: students can learn how to solve this type of item by eliminating unlikely distractors, or by various forms of logical analysis of the question structure. The assessor never knows why the learner behaved in one way or another.

Reading strategies for the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) Test, eleventh grade.

Reading comprehension strategies are tools that students can use to help them determine the meaning of what they read. In other words, reading comprehension strategies make it easier to make sense of written materials. These tools can be present in a lesson plan that can be divided into three major components: before, during, and after reading. In turn, each component should have a presentation, an example, and a practice stage. However, during the class, reading strategies are developed with each component depending on the focus of the class.

We will now explain the different types of items present in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test (Troncoso, C. & González, M., 2005) and suggest the best reading comprehension strategy that best suits this type of item for optimal performance when faced with this type of question.

Strategies for interpreting images

In this type of item students look at an image and are asked to choose the sentence that is closest in meaning, coherence and sense to the image they are looking at. In this group of questions, semantic and syntactic elements are recognized in the construction of meaning of a non-verbal text. Similarly, vocabulary recognition is examined by means of graphic drawings that constitute the context of the question. The graph may appear as an item or it may be part of the different options to be related and completed with the item. We are surrounded by symbols and graphics that communicate something to us, a clear example being traffic signs. In order to have a clear interpretation of the images, the two key reading strategies that most help students, taking into account aspects such as the visual organization of information, are:

• Associate graphic symbols with words, and

• Understand space-time relationships

Oxford (1990) states: "Association/elaboration is a strategy of memorization which involves association of the information of the new language with familiar concepts already memorized" (p. 60). According to Oxford, these strategies also involve levels of information, sequence and order, or relationships between images and words. Activities that can be used in class to implement these strategies include concept maps, websites, flowcharts, or image organizers that can help students infer responses. It should be noted that graphics and symbols can be tangible to students because they may already know their meaning in their native language; for example, a graphic showing a group of people whose difference in height is evident. Therefore, students should infer from this type of image that they should respond about something related to the physical appearance of the people. In this way, students may know the answer in their mother tongue, but knowing how to express it in English may be the problem because students may not have enough lexicon; for this reason, it is also important to reinforce vocabulary.

Paragraph organization strategies

In this type of item, the students find a paragraph in which the sentences have been scrambled. The students must give the correct order to the sentences.

In this group of questions there is an important reference to syntax and semantics through the relationship of numbered sentences and full paragraphs. In this item, students' ability to combine ideas is assessed to obtain textual coherence and cohesion. Parallel to paragraph organization, the test may propose an item of sentence construction. In this type of item, students find a situation and are asked to choose the sentence that has the appropriate meaning and grammar to respond to the situation. Also, the students are asked to analyze the semantic and syntactic construction taking into account verbal usage and emphasizing the use of the linguistic code. In addition, these questions give importance to spelling, word formation and function, word structures (syntactic aspects) and meaning recognition (semantic aspects). All of this has to be done with context in mind. The following strategies, taken from Oxford (1990), which detail what is required of students to organize a paragraph that has been stirred up, take into account cohesive devices and they are:

• Understand the relationships between pieces of information in a sentence, including elements of sentence structure, denial, and placements; and

• Identify the main idea and details that support the sentence in a paragraph.

This first strategy concerns pragmatics and syntax, which lead students to recognize what kind of element of the sentence or phrase is necessary to complete an idea, whether it is a pronoun, a connector, etc. This strategy allows students to understand the meaning of what they read, as Oxford (1990) states: "To understand something spoken in a new language, it is sometimes useful to break down a new word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph into its component parts" (p.83). The use of the second strategy in this type of item points to, according to Oxford, an alternative system of sketching, and a power of thought that involves assigning "levels of power" to the information according to whether it is a main idea, sub-theme, or detail. Classroom activities to implement these strategies include searching for the main ideas, searching for details that support the main idea; identifying the perspective of the words found in the reading, and working with referents. However, a possible lack of vocabulary knowledge could be the source of problem for students to respond to this type of item correctly.

Strategies for dialogues and incomplete texts

In this type of item, students encounter incomplete dialogue or incomplete text and must choose the appropriate word that fits semantically and syntactically within the sentence. In this group of questions, semantic and cohesive aspects are evaluated through incomplete dialogues and other interaction situations. Through different roles and messages of social interactions it is possible to appreciate the communicative purpose of the participants. Similarly, textual coherence is evaluated through established sequences of ideas to gain coherence in the text. This coherence goes beyond the simple identification of the elements (textual competence), it looks for the semantic-logical relationship and the connection that exists between the different parts of the discourse. Since in either of these two types of item, students have to choose a word or a sentence that completes the texts semantically and syntactically, it is relevant that students understand the text as a whole, as well as its parts, in order to be able to establish what is missing. Consequently, the two key reading comprehension strategies to help students complete dialogues and texts are:

1) Understand the relationships between the parts of information in a sentence, including elements of sentence structure, denial and placements; and

2) Anticipating what comes next.

The first strategy leads the student to recognize what kind of element of the sentence or the phrase is missing, whether it is an adjective, an adverb, a noun, etc. This strategy (as previously mentioned) assists students in reading comprehension. Oxford (1990:92) mentioned that: "knowing what has already been said often gives important information for obtaining the meaning of what is being said and for anticipating what will be said". This idea leads us to the second strategy: anticipation or prediction. Paige et al. (2002:219) offer the following suggestions for making predictions "try to turn each title and subtitle into a question, using words like who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Then predict what the answers might be to each question. It is also important to consider the title, the beginning of the story, the theme, etc. Using this strategy, students feel more confident in imagining what comes next.

Strategies for understanding situations and texts

In this type of item students find a problematic situation and they must imagine one possible solution among five options. In this group of questions students' ability to extract explicit information from written texts is evaluated. Students have to understand the meaning of a word or several words in a written text. Also, they must understand the general idea and intention of the author. Then, students have to make inferences and make use of semantic and cohesive elements that are part of the texts. The following strategies, taken from Oxford (1990), specify what students ask for when they need to understand a situation or a text:

• Understand cause and effect relationships, generalizations and

• Read critically.

The first strategy requires students to take the important ideas from a text for understanding the test, for example, formulating the title of a text. The second strategy, critical reading, is, according to Oxford (1990), a strategy for the development of short but coherent expressions of larger ideas by focusing on key words and main ideas. When working with these strategies in the language classroom, there are suggestions for various ways of teaching summarization; for example, an activity called "Summarize", in which students are called upon to summarize a text, taking into account the main ideas and secondary ideas of the text.

The following table summarizes the key reading strategies shown in this study of the different types of items present in the English section of the Icfes test:

Key reading strategies for Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade.

Interpreting images: Associating graphic symbols with words

Dialogues and incomplete texts: Understanding space-time relationships. Understand the relationships between parts of information in a sentence, including elements of sentence structure, negation and collocations. Anticipating what comes next

Organization of paragraphs: Understanding the relationships between parts of information in a sentence, including elements of sentence structure, negation and placements. Identifying the main idea and details that support a sentence or paragraph.

Understanding situations and texts: Understanding cause and effect relationships; generalizations and examples; comparison; contrast; opinion and argument.

Reading critically.

Materials and methods

Reading Workshops

As a crucial aspect of the pre-experimental design, the implementation of training in reading comprehension strategies has been proposed (this was the special treatment given to the group of students). To implement this training, we take as a reference the guide proposed by Cohen (1990). The reading training was composed of a series of five reading workshops based on the types of items present in the Icfes (Supérate) English test. This means that reading workshops were designed for five of the seven types of items in which the students tested and applied the respective reading strategies. Some of the question types were combined with others, mainly: comprehension of situations with text comprehension, and incomplete dialogues with incomplete texts.

Main structure of the reading workshops

Topic: the topic was given according to the title of the reading. Example: Dinner for two.

Reading Strategies: Describe suggested strategies for working with the readings, for example:

Deduce the meaning of words according to their root and their suffixes and prefixes.

Scanning (searching for specific information)

Overview (understanding the general idea of the text)

Key reading strategies for the Icfes (Supérate) test: These are the basic suggested strategies that work in the English section of the Icfes test taking into account the type of item, for example: understanding the relationships between pieces of information in a sentence, including elements of sentence structure, negation, and collocations.

Anticipating what comes next.

Type of item: this is a specific type of item present in the English section of the Icfes tests, for example: Dialogues and incomplete texts, understanding situations and texts, etc.

Activities: refers to the tasks developed during the workshops such as: analysis of examples and questions, practical exercises, tips and recommendations.

Materials: these are the resources needed for the workshops: readings, board, etc.

The training was implemented during English class hours, the schedule was four hours a week. In this way each workshop was developed weekly. Each workshop contained these characteristics: topic, key reading strategies, reading strategies for the Icfes (Supérate) tests, type of item, activities and materials. The reading exercises were used to prepare students for the test. These exercises had the same characteristics used in the tests to assess students; for example, multiple-choice answer format. In this way, the level of familiarity with the test was reinforced. At the same time, the research teacher introduced a number of reading comprehension strategies that students should need to answer such items. We designed the course programs to have a clear structure of presentation of the training in reading strategies. See Table 1.

Pre-test and post-test

A pre-test and a post-test were used to measure the effects of the treatment given to the experimental group as opposed to the control group. The pre-test: as the first component of this pre-experimental design consisted of administering an Icfes (Supérate) English test that in previous years was applied in institutions nationwide. In order to evaluate the students' performance, they were asked to answer the test under real conditions, for example, taking into account the time available for the section (40 minutes).

Table 1. Course programs designed for training in reading strategies

Time	Workshop	Objetives	Topics	Activities
1 hour	# 1 General review of the structure of the test.	To familiarize students with the Icfes (Supérate) Test for Eleventh grade, its formats and its corresponding sections.	Presentation of the different types of questions.	Group work to identify the different types of questions. General Plenary/Item Analysis.
3 hours	# 1 Incomplete dialogues and texts	To determine the main characteristics of incomplete sentences. To apply strategies to assume roles and participate in communicative situations.	Grammatical categories, concordance, relations.	Analysis of sample sentences and incomplete dialogues. Practical exercises. Tips and recommendations.
4 hours	# 2 Comprehension of situations and texts	To develop different strategies for reading comprehension. To apply techniques to identify key words in specific contexts.	Scanning, Overview	Use of techniques to find general and specific information/exercises for analysis and understanding/hands-on workshops. Discussion of tips and recommendations.
4 hours	# 3 Paragraph organization	To analyze different types of texts in order to determine their general structure. To identify the different types of connectors and their implications in text writing.	Connectors and their functions. Types of texts: descriptive, scientific, argumentative, etc.	Identify different types of connectors. Reading and analyzing different types of texts. Analysis of sample questions. Practical exercises. Tips and recommendations to manage the construction and organization of paragraphs.
4 hours	# 4 Image interpretation	To analyze the different types of images and graphics.	Search for details, description of images.	Analysis and description of images and graphics. Matching exercises. Analysis of sample questions. Practical exercises. Analysis of tips and recommendations.
2 hours	# 4 Sentence construction	Identify the smallest units of a sentence to determine their functions within the sentence.	Types of words, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc.	Exercises for the identification and classification of words. Analysis of sample questions. Practical exercises. Tips and recommendations.
2 hours	# 5 Simulation number 2 of the English test	Identify students' strengths and weaknesses when faced with the English test. Evaluate student performance during a mock Icfes English test..	All types of items included in the Icfes English test.	Analysis of sample questions. Students take the second simulation of the Icfes (Supérate) Test (first post-test). Analysis of results. General plenary session. Tips and final recommendations.

Source: Own elaboration

As a second component of a pre-experimental design, we applied an Icfes (Supérate) English test as the first post-test of this study. Its purpose was to evaluate the familiarity with the test format that students gained from training in reading strategies. As a final element of this pre-experimental study, a second post-test was administered two weeks after the completion of the reading strategy training. For this last test, as for the previous ones, the conditions were as similar as possible to the Icfes (Supérate) English test. Thus, students had to answer all 35 questions in a time limit of 40 minutes, which gave them exactly 69 seconds per question as in the real exam. This second and final post-test was aimed at assessing the level of familiarity students had gained with the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) English test and the use of reading comprehension strategies.

Results

Pre-test

The students' results in the pre-test showed that they were not familiar with the format of the test (Figure 1). The graph shows very poor performance on all types of questions tested. The number of correct answers for the interpretation of images resulted in 34%. This fact showed that a large majority of the participants did not recognize the texts according to the graphs. For the second type of item, dialogues and incomplete texts, there were 36% correct answers. What this percentage revealed was that a large part of the students had problems with grammar and with asking questions according to the answers given. The third type of question evaluated, paragraph organization, showed that only 28% of the answers the students chose were correct. This result again shows a lack of training in the test items.

This result again shows a lack of training in the test items. Finally, the results for situation and text comprehension also showed that most students had problems in reading. Students obtained only 29% correct answers on this last item. Similarly, as can be seen from the pre-test results in Figure 1, it was confirmed that the 11th grade course needs to use reading strategies for text comprehension.
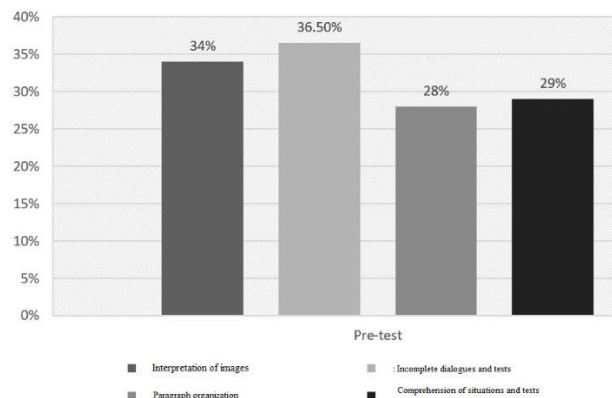
Source: own elaboration

Figure 1. Pre-test results.

First post-test

In the first post-test, although the results for all strategies except one (paragraph organization) showed a low level of progress, the results did not exceed those obtained in the pre-test. Students obtained 40% of correct answers for the interpretation of images; while for dialogues and incomplete texts they obtained 38%, the organization of paragraphs led to a very low percentage of only 24%, and, finally, comprehension of situations and texts gave a result of 44% of correct answers (figure 2).

The results of the first post-test showed low performance in the use of key reading strategies: (1) association of graphic symbols with words; (2) understanding relationships between parts of information in a sentence, including elements of sentence structure, negation, and word placement. However, students demonstrated adequate performance in the use of two key reading strategies: (1) understanding cause and effect relationships, generalizations and example, comparison, contrast, opinion, and argument, and (2) critical reading.

Poor performance in the use of key reading strategies could be attributed mainly to the following factors: First, students do not manage grammatical concepts. For example, they failed to recognize nouns, adverbs, or adjectives that could have been useful in solving the paragraph decoding item. Second, they did not possess a good lexical repertoire. Consequently, students failed to understand the cause and effect relationships in a text. In general, the results were better in the first post-test than in the pre-test. Despite this, the results were not as expected. For example, the type of item named as paragraph organization still remains the greatest source of problems for 11th grade students. In the following section, a comparison is made between the results obtained in the pre-test and the first post-test.
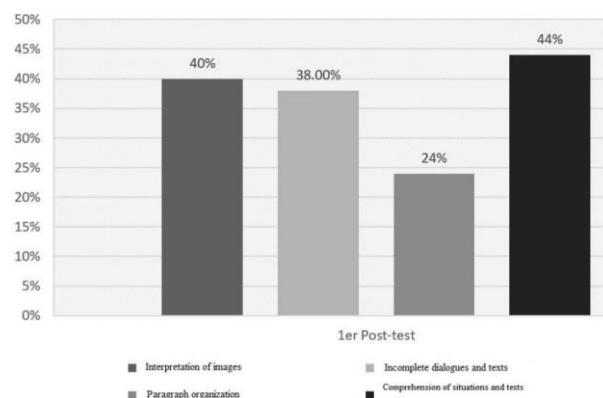
Source: own elaboration

Figura 2. First post-test results.

Second Post-test

In the second post-test, there was an improvement (Figure 3). The students' progress in handling the English test format of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade, was confirmed. The results were significant in relation to the results obtained in the pre-test, since the students were provided with tools that allowed them to become familiar with the test format and key reading strategies and thus respond effectively to this type of item. This shows that in the post-test the students used the key reading strategies that had been studied during the reading workshops. The results showed that there was relative progress in performance on a certain type of item and confirmation of a lack of ability to respond to the paragraph organization item.

The students obtained a 61% result of correct answers for the interpretation of images (1). In dialogues and incomplete texts, they obtained 53% of correct answers. In paragraph organization they got 33% of correct choices. Finally, comprehension of situations and texts resulted in 51% of correct answers.
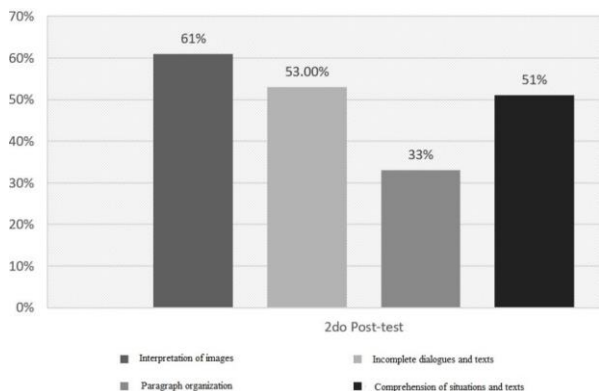
Source: own elaboration

Figure 3. Second Post-Test results.

Comparison between pre-test and first post-test results

A difference between the correct pre-test and post-test answers is shown in Figure 4. The pre-test implemented before the start of the reading comprehension training showed a low percentage of responses on all item types while the first post-test showed some improvement. The following figure shows that there is no significant difference in the pre-test compared to the first post-test except for the Situational and Text Comprehension item
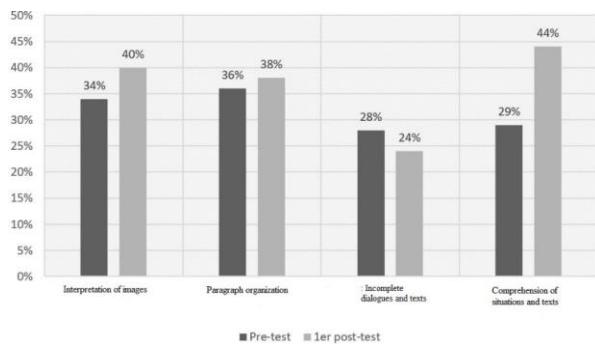
Source: own elaboration

Figure 4. Comparison between pre-test and post-test results

Figure 4 reveals that the failures present in the pre-test did not change in the first post-test in a significant way. The most important change was evident in the reading strategy: Situational and Text Comprehension. In the pre-test only 29% of the answers were correct and in the first post-test the number of correct answers was higher than 44%.

Comparison between the results of the first post-test and the second post-test

Post-test results showed high progress in terms of percentages on the first two types of questions and a satisfactory level of progress on the other two. First, while in the initial post-test the students obtained 40% in the paragraph interpretation item, in the final post-test they obtained 61%. This represented 21% progress. Second, in the item of Incomplete Dialogues and Texts, students obtained 38% of correct answers in the first post-test and 53% of correct answers in the second post-test. This resulted in a 15% improvement between the two post-tests. Third, for the paragraph organization item the results were: 24% of correct answers in the initial post-test and 33% of correct answers in the final post-test. This gap represented only 9% progress. Finally, for the item Comprehension of Situations and Texts students obtained 44% correct answers in the first post-test and 51% correct answers in the second post-test, resulting in 7% progress between the two post-tests. In summary, the students retained an unsatisfactory performance in the Paragraph Organization item while in the other three types of items assessed they showed great improvement and promising results. Figure 5.
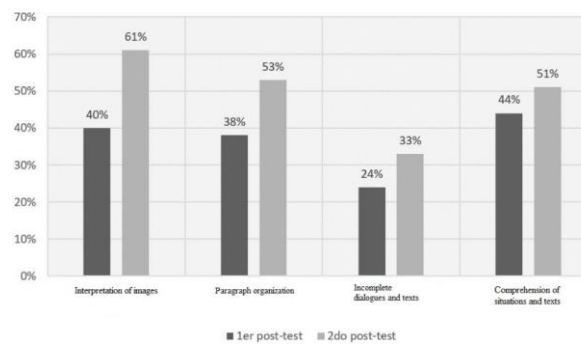
Source: own elaboration

Figure 5. Comparison between the results of the first post-test and the second post-test.

Comparison between the results of the pre-test, the first post-test, the second post-test and the actual test of the Icfes (Supérate) Eleventh grade.

The total percentage of each test applied in this pre-experimental research, which came after adding up the results of each type of question and dividing them by the number of items evaluated, showed a progressive increase (Figure 6). These percentages clearly indicate that the more students were exposed to simulation tests, the better the results they obtained. These improved results corroborated the positive effects that training in reading strategies had on these students. The following graph (Figure 6) presents the applied test scores, which also includes the scores of the English section of the actual Icfes test.
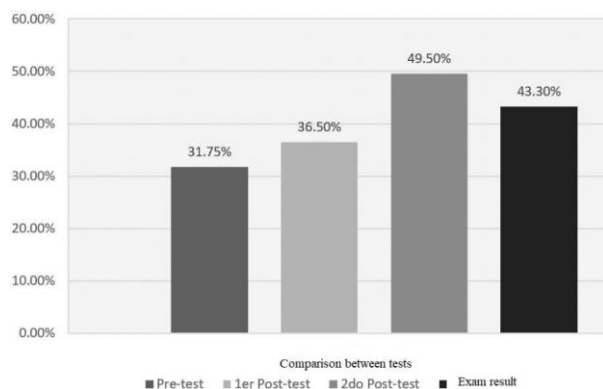
Source: own elaboration

Figure 6. Comparison between the pre-test, the post-test and the actual test of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade.

In fact, as a final source of information and essential in the evaluation of this project were the scores obtained by the students in the English test of the Icfes (Supérate) test. The results obtained by the students of eleventh grade of the Santa Teresa de Jesús school in the Icfes (Supérate) test showed a level of progress in the way the students answered the exam. They obtained 31.75% of correct answers in the pre-test and 43.3% on average in the actual test. Unfortunately, the percentages for each question type are not available and it is not possible in the future to conduct training in reading comprehension strategies focused on the type of item that was most difficult for the students.

However, the training developed and implemented in this research has been very satisfactory.

Results discussion

The analysis showed that the results of the second post-test were superior to the results of the pre-test, when the students had not been exposed to training in reading strategies. In the second post-test, the group showed great familiarity with the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, improving on the pre-test results. In addition, the reading comprehension strategies were useful for students to perform adequately on each type of question. In other words, students related what they saw in the workshops to the test by applying the reading comprehension strategies taught.

Similarly, the 11th grade students did well on the actual test and the results of this group of students from Santa Teresa de Jesús School advanced from 38.74% on the English session of the Icfes (Supérate) test to 43.3%. The progress that the institution made in the subject of English with these students was clear. The contrast between the results that the students obtained in the last four years and the current results show that they need training to perform well in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test. This training should help students become familiar with the exam and with the tools (reading strategies) that they should have available to answer the different types of items present in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade.

Progress of students in their performance in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, Eleventh grade.

Pre-test

Students were not familiar with the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade. They demonstrated greater familiarity with the type of questions in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade.

First post-test

They demonstrated a good level of familiarity with the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade.

There was no evidence of use of strategies.

Students responded randomly using anticipation as their primary technique. Reading comprehension strategies were helpful in helping students perform better on most types of items.

Second post-test

Students related what they saw in the workshops to the test by applying reading comprehension strategies.

It was demonstrated that with training in reading comprehension and familiarization with the type of items present in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade, students improved their performance on this exam. In addition, we can confidently say that if one of the main objectives that an institution has is to seek better results in the exam, training to do so is absolutely necessary. For this reason, educational institutions have to create an exclusive space for this purpose.

Conclusions

The main conclusion of this research was that training students in reading comprehension strategies has very positive effects. This can be clearly seen in the progress that the participants showed throughout the research. The reading workshops improved their reading comprehension skills and also their level of familiarity with the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade. These effects were reflected in the results that the participants obtained in the English session of the actual test. It was demonstrated that with training in reading comprehension and with familiarity with the types of items present in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade, students are better equipped to improve their performance. To this end, educational institutions need to have a space specially designed to teach students the reading comprehension strategies that best fit the questions on the English section of this national test.

The 11th grade students at Santa Teresa de Jesús School revealed problems in understanding English texts, also evidencing a poor repertoire in reading strategies. The approach adopted to solve the problem was to address these problems by implementing a training course specially designed to help the participants answer the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade. Our hypothesis is that when students are exposed to reading comprehension strategies, they understand the texts better. The research question in this study was: To what extent does the implementation of a training course in reading comprehension strategies affect performance on the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade?

Throughout this research, a number of results proved the effectiveness of the reading strategy training implemented at the institution. The 11th grade students improved their performance on the Icfes (Supérate) test, due to the reading workshops they conducted. Thus, the research question, as well as the proposed general objective were achieved, taking into account the results in the pre-test, in the first post-test, in the second post-test, and also the results in the actual test. For example, students expanded their repertoire of reading strategies. However, in the type of Paragraph Organization item the students' performance remained similar throughout this research.

After corroborating the initial observation, we also diagnosed the students' lack of familiarity with the items in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test and established a training course in reading strategies. Indeed, one conclusion of this research was that students became familiar with the types of questions present on the test. According to the research question, we concluded that if students have a clear presentation of the most relevant aspects of the test as well as an organized course, this training becomes a very effective instrument to help them practice the skills they need not only to take the test, but also to obtain good results from it. However, the teacher is expected to have very good sources and real examples, updated and adapted to accompany students in practice, guiding them in the cognitive, conceptual, methodological and practical aspects within the specific context. In addition to this, the educational institution should support the training with time and resources.

A crucial aspect that should be highlighted is the importance for students to obtain test-taking strategies developed in a course designed to take any other test.

For example, by intelligently removing distractors without guessing. In fact, people who take this type of test must undergo constant and consistent training that includes all sections of the test (not just the English section).

The short-term goal is the test itself. In fact, the ultimate goal of an English training course such as the one proposed in this study is to help students improve their general reading skills. However, whether or not they reinforce their reading comprehension skills is still unknown. Their improved scores may be the result of their recent familiarity with the test format, or because of the strategies for approaching the test that they acquired through practice in the simulations. To minimize all these extra factors, it is recommended that a second post-test be implemented some time after the training course has ended.

Recommendations

This research was aimed at all those teachers who teach in grade 11th and who have to train their students to perform satisfactorily in the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade. This study provides them with the tools to implement in a specific course for the test based on learning strategies. These are the recommendations for these teachers:

- Begin by familiarizing students with all the types of items that may appear in the English section of the test, allowing them to practice specifically on each of the seven available options.

- Each reading workshop should focus on only one type of item separately.

- Present the item type, as shown in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade, its main characteristics, along with its key reading comprehension strategies.

- Teachers are advised to be aware of the description, characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of the single response format with multiple choice.

- Students should have adequate opportunities to work on key reading strategies by conducting simulations of each question type, which should be done with or without teacher guidance. However, students' progress should be continuously monitored.

- If you want to design your own training course, you should follow the steps of the training course suggested by Cohen (2003) and Oxford (1990).

Pedagogical implications

Finally, this study could serve to establish a parameter in the implementation of a training course that will allow students to improve their skills in the target language. It is hoped that this research can be useful for school teachers and future teachers. This study shows an approach to meeting the challenge of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade, in which the reputation of English teachers is at stake. The following pedagogical implications are drawn from our study:

- An extra course is absolutely essential when the English lessons are as limited as those involved in this study.

- The Icfes (Supérate) test is a priority; therefore, it should be incorporated slowly through regular lessons. Indeed, the Icfes (Supérate) test should guide the eleventh grade program.

- It should be emphasized that the strategies that students practice in an extra course must also be practiced during regular class hours. Table 3 summarizes the strategies related to the type of questions present in the English section of the Icfes (Supérate) test, eleventh grade.

- Be prepared to cope with uneven results. That is, the same approach does not have to work with all students in the same way.

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