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**Perspectivas Recientes
sobre
el Discurso**

**Recent Perspectives
on Discourse**

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A PROPOSAL FOR A READING STRATEGIES TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT. *Even though the Spanish Official Curriculum stresses the use of autonomous learning strategies, there are paradoxically scarce studies regarding strategies instruction in Foreign Language Learning in Spain. The present paper is the summary of a proposal of a reading strategies training programme included in a wider project. The authors' experience, the Curriculum and the specialised literature were used in its conception and design. This resulted in a twelve-week explicit strategy training programme introductory in nature and addressed to sixteen-year-old Spanish native students, their level of English being low-intermediate. The aim of the training programme was to develop the skill of reading for different purposes (confirming expectations, getting general and specific information) by means of the strategies of predicting, skimming and scanning respectively. These would be exploited in eighteen hours, which comprised a "Preparation" and an "Introduction" session followed by a "Presentation", "Practice" and "Evaluation" stage for each one of the strategies. A "General Practice and Evaluation" section plus an "Expansion" class were included at the end. We also address the rationale behind the different decisions taken.*

KEY WORDS: *reading, reading purposes, strategy (ies), prediction/predicting, skimming, scanning, skill(s), training programme, foreign language learning, learners' autonomy.*

RESUMEN. *A pesar de que el Currículo Oficial Español insiste en el uso de estrategias autónomas de aprendizaje, paradójicamente existen escasos estudios con respecto a instrucción en estrategias en Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras en España. El presente trabajo es el resumen de una propuesta de un programa de entrenamiento estratégico que está incluido en un proyecto más amplio. Su concepción y diseño se basaron en la experiencia de las autoras, el Currículo y la literatura especializada sobre el tema. El resultado fue un programa de entrenamiento estratégico explícito de doce semanas de duración, de naturaleza introductoria y dirigido a estudiantes españoles nativos de dieciséis años con un nivel bajo-intermedio en inglés. El objetivo de este entrenamiento estratégico era desarrollar la habilidad de lectura para propósitos diferentes (confirmar expectativas, obtener información general y específica) a través de las estrategias de predicción, skimming y scanning respectivamente. Dichas estrategias se explotarían en dieciocho horas, las cuales comprenderían dos sesiones - "Preparación" e "Introducción" - seguidas a su vez de tres fases - "Presentación", "Práctica" y "Evaluación" - para cada una de las estrategias. Una sección denominada "Práctica General y Evaluación" así como una clase de "Expansión" se incluyeron al final del programa. Igualmente añadimos la justificación de las distintas decisiones tomadas.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *lectura, propósitos de lectura, estrategia(s), predicción, skimming, scanning, habilidad(es), programa de entrenamiento, aprendizaje de lengua extranjera, autonomía de los estudiantes.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The research to be reported is part of a wider and still in progress project (1) intended to implement an effective twelve-week explicit *strategy training programme* for different *reading purposes* (confirming expectations, obtaining general and specific information),

introductory in nature and addressed to sixteen-year-old students. The goal of this *strategy training programme* was to help them become better and more autonomous readers by developing their level of metacognitive awareness; by providing explicit rationale and practice of the *strategies* selected and by persuading them of the benefits of the use of strategies while *reading*.

The wider project consisted of two studies: STUDY 1, which comprised the design of the *training programme* as such; and STUDY 2, which included the actual implementation of the *programme* in the classroom. Due to space limitations, in what follows we focus on Study 1.

2. RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The reason for the conception of the project was the fact that there are hardly any studies regarding *strategies* instruction in *foreign language learning* in Spain. This is not an ideal state of affairs if we consider that the Spanish Official Curriculum for Secondary Education

- a) stresses the acquisition of a communicative competence (which includes the strategic one (p. 234), and the development of the *learners' autonomy* (p. 238);
- b) claims in "*Objetivos generales*" that one of the aims in the teaching of foreign languages is:

Utilizar estrategias de aprendizaje autónomo de la lengua extranjera elaboradas a partir de las experiencias previas con otras lenguas y de la reflexión sobre los propios procesos de aprendizaje. (p. 242).

- c) Further, in "*Usos y formas de la comunicación escrita*" it is stated as well that one of the attitudes to be developed in the students consists in the "Interés por leer textos escritos en la lengua extranjera de forma autónoma..." (p. 247)

The significance of the development of the other three *skills* being unquestioned, what seemed clear to us is that *reading* is perhaps the most exploited *skill* in language learning situations/classrooms in high schools in Spain. There still remains an emphasis on language learning through printed material owing to the following factors: large classes; the diversity of levels of proficiency found in them; the apparent easiness for the teacher in preparing

reading activities as opposed to speaking and listening ones (derived from the previous factor); the easy access to books in contrast to audio and visual materials; and the “negative” backwash effect that the *Selectividad* exam has on Spanish secondary classroom instruction (as it mainly tests the *skill* of *reading* and, to a lesser extent, of writing).

3. CRITERIA IN THE DECISION ABOUT THE TYPE OF STUDENTS TO BE TRAINED

The learners for whom this *training* was designed were sixteen-year-old students doing 3° *B.U.P.* Still acknowledging that the present-day Curriculum is not addressed for these students but rather for the *E.S.O.* and *Bachillerato* ones (following the Spanish Education Reform), these 3° *B.U.P.* students were selected because:

- a) The level of English that they should have attained up to that year (lower-intermediate in theory) should allow us to present texts demanding the use of *strategies* in the accomplishment of *reading* activities.
- b) Being a bridge for the preparatory course for university (old *C.O.U.*) and university itself, we believe that this year is ideal to make them aware of *strategies*. The 1999 *Selectividad* exam in Murcia required the display of several *strategies* in the accomplishment of the exercises provided: *skimming* and inference when choosing the best option; *scanning* when matching words from the text and their synonyms; *scanning* and inferencing when finding synonyms (from the text) of the words listed; *skimming* when completing a sentence using information from the extract; *skimming* when writing a short composition using information from the text avoiding literalness, etc.

4. CRITERIA FOR THE CHOICE OF STRATEGIES

For the purpose of the present study, *strategies* are going to be operationalized as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990: 8).

It is acknowledged that there is no general agreement among authors on the naming and distinction between *strategies* and *skills*, this being certainly the case in the field of *reading*

(see Urquhart and Weir, 1998, for a review). As an example, whereas McDonough and Shaw (1993: 107) state that *skimming* and *scanning* are “clearly useful strategies for the learner to operate”, Cohen (1990: 83) considers *skimming* a *skill* or a type of *reading*, “while reading the first sentence of each new paragraph would be a strategy for realising this skill”. Aebersold and Field (1997: 76) regard both *skimming* and reading the first line of each paragraph as distinct *strategies* (the latter being named *sampling*).

The *strategies* selected to achieve the *reading purposes* of our *training programme* (confirming expectations, obtaining general and specific information) were the following ones: *predicting*, *skimming* and *scanning* respectively. Their selection was based on our own experience, the Spanish Official Curriculum for Secondary Education, the recent views on *reading* (concerning the benefits of the use of efficient *strategies*), the characteristics of the students trainees themselves and the length and the temporal limitations of the proposed *programme*. We preferred teaching few *strategies* but in ‘depth’ –taking into account the possible inexperience of our learners in this field- than many with only some brushstrokes.

The final list of *strategies* was:

-*Prediction* (2): a *strategy* which fulfils the purpose of confirming expectations.

-*Skimming*: a *strategy* which fulfils the purpose of *reading* for general information.

-*Scanning*: a *strategy* that fulfils the purpose of getting specific information.

Skimming and *scanning* were selected due to the importance attached to them in the Spanish Curriculum. One of the “*Objetivos generales*” is:

Leer de forma comprensiva y autónoma, obteniendo informaciones globales y específicas, textos escritos de un nivel adecuado a las capacidades e intereses de los alumnos. (p. 241).

We also thought that the relevance of these *strategies* was their application to real life situations too.

Further, we believed *prediction* to be an extremely important and many times neglected *strategy* in secondary education textbooks. As Nuttall (1996: 13) claims, “Prediction is important because it activates schemata”. This view implicitly underlies some parts of the Curriculum: “Comprensión global de textos escritos relacionados con la experiencia y bagaje cultural de los alumnos” (p. 247). At this point we also took into account the top-down and bottom-up processing models of *reading* (Aebersold and Field, 1997; Nuttall, 1996).

5. THE STEPS TAKEN IN THE DESIGN OF THE STRATEGY TRAINING PROGRAMME

The steps followed in the design of the *strategy training programme* were drawn from Cohen (1998: 89-96), who claims that he largely based himself on Oxford's (1990) since

this model is especially valuable because it can easily be adapted according to the needs of various groups of learners, the resources available to a particular institution and the length of the strategy training, whether short- or long-term. (p. 89)

Here we will only mention the most important steps:

-“Determining the learners’ needs” and “Selecting the strategies”, already explained above.

-“Preparing the materials and the activities”: we resorted to already prepared ones in textbooks and adapted some of them (see below).

-Regarding “Conducting explicit strategy training”, after reading the literature (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990: 159; Cohen, 1998: 67), we decided that our *programme* would be *direct* and *explicit*: students would be informed of its value and its purpose. Even though in reality we could have resorted to an embedded *strategy training* (as little teacher training is required: O’Malley and Chamot, 1990: 153), we considered explicit *strategy training* the best option for our purpose: to raise students’ awareness as to the rationale of *strategy* use, to give students opportunities to practise the *strategies* taught and to help them understand the *strategies* in new contexts.

-“Evaluating and revising the strategy training”, which we will not report here as this belongs to STUDY 2.

Our *training programme* was a combination of O’Malley and Chamot’s (1988) (3) and Oxford et al’s (1990) (4), both for second language acquisition. The headings Preparation, Presentation, Evaluation and Expansion were taken from the first study but the content of the steps was drawn from both *training programmes*. We decided not to include a parallel training in L1 due to the students’ level of proficiency as the latter would have been an element of frustration when compared to English. The graphic schedule of the training is then, the following one:

SCHEDULE OF THE STRATEGY TRAINING PROGRAMME:

-*First week*: **Preparation** (an hour and a half)

-*Second week*: **Introduction** (an hour and a half)

-*Third week*: **PREDICTING – Presentation** (an hour and a half)

-*Fourth week*: **PREDICTING – Practice** (an hour and a half)

homework on predicting

-Fifth week: **PREDICTING – Evaluation** (an hour)

-Sixth week: **SKIMMING – Presentation** (an hour and a half)

-Seventh week: **SKIMMING – Practice** (an hour and a half)

homework on skimming

-Eighth week: **SKIMMING – Evaluation** (an hour)

-Ninth week: **SCANNING – Presentation** (an hour and a half)

-Tenth week: **SCANNING – Practice** (an hour and a half)

homework on skimming

-Eleventh week: **SCANNING – Evaluation** (an hour) + **General Practice and Evaluation** (two hours)

-Twelfth week: **Expansion** (an hour)

As can be seen, our *training* was planned to be carried out during twelve weeks. The overall number of hours is eighteen, which are not equally distributed in all the weeks. The reason is that we considered a specific activity in a certain week to deserve less time than another one (evaluation) in a different week.

In the first one we devoted an hour and a half to “Preparation”, which proved to be enough. Since we would draw on our students’ participation, in the second week the same amount of time was also given to “Introduction”.

Each *strategy* consists of “Presentation”, “Practice” and “Evaluation”, the three of them carried out in different weeks. The first two stages are devoted one hour and a half, too. However, we only allotted an hour for the “Evaluation” of each *strategy*. It should be remarked that we decided to add an evaluation stage after each *strategy* so that the students could widely discuss its usefulness (first in pairs and later with the whole of the class) with respect to their homework on the *strategy* in question. We thought that if we only included a general evaluation at the end of the *training*, they would lose track of what had previously been learnt.

“General Practice and Evaluation” is given two hours: twenty minutes to do each of the four proposed activities (in order to check whether they had learnt to do the rapid *reading* required in *skimming* and *scanning*) and forty minutes to discuss the results. Here we followed Oxford et al’s (1990) stages six and seven: to provide practice which allows the making of choices and the opportunity to evaluate the students’ success so as to develop their *autonomy* and responsibility for learning.

Finally, we inserted “Expansion” in the last week (only an hour) as we believed that it was more of an introduction to the transfer of *strategies* than a thorough course on listening strategies.

On account of space limitations we are unable to explain all the proposed tasks and will only offer Task 1 of *skimming* (from “Presentation”) as an example. (See Appendix for text and questions). Some details of “Preparation” and “Introduction” together with a brief and common description of “Presentation” and “Practice” for the three *strategies* will be supplied too.

6. EXPLANATION OF THE STAGES OF THE STRATEGY TRAINING PROGRAMME.

6.1. Preparation

The aim here, following O’Malley and Chamot (1988), is to develop students’ awareness of the *strategies* of *predicting*, *skimming* and *scanning*. Owing to space limitations we will offer very few details:

An implicit awareness of *strategies* was chosen -Oxford et al’s (1990) stages one and two. We thought that if we were going to develop a useful *strategy training* we needed to know in advance the shortcomings and the assets of our students, in our case by means of a questionnaire with questions about how they performed the activities. Both tasks were individually accomplished because we were unable to take up more than an hour and a half from their regular class time.

6.2. Introduction

Though not stated in either O’Malley and Chamot (1988) or Oxford et al (1990), we believed it necessary to start with an introductory class whose aim was to raise our students’ motivation and awareness about *strategies* and about their beliefs regarding *reading*. We would ask them whether they like *reading* in L1, in L2 and the reasons why they read in L2. As it is supposed that the latter would be mostly academic, we would offer them other types of reasons to motivate them. It would be explicitly stated that in “*Objetivos generales*” of the Curriculum one of the aims to be pursued is:

Utilizar la lectura de textos con fines diversos, valorando su importancia como fuente de información, disfrute y ocio y como fuente de acceso a culturas y formas de vida distintas de las propias. (p. 241).

They would be explained that for each reason they read in L2 English there is a type of *reading* based on the following factors controlled by effective readers (Williams, 1989: 7-11): the sort of text (do they read a novel and the contents of a reference book in the same way?); the reason and the way of reading. They would be explained that what underlies their reasons/purposes (getting specific, general or detailed information, etc.), is a different type of *reading* and that maybe they already do all this in L1 Spanish.

They will be shown that in order to be successful in *reading* there exists a series of *reading strategies* which would improve their efficiency in this activity. Then, we would provide them with Oxford's definition of *strategy* and would indicate them that our *reading strategy training programme* aims at introducing them in the knowledge of the main *strategies* in a classroom context. Because of temporal limitations and requirements from the Curriculum they would be solely initiated in three: *prediction*, *skimming* and *scanning*. They would be warned that their success does not only depend on knowing about these *strategies* but also on their attention, motivation, familiarity with the topic and complexity of the material (Cohen, 1990: 75).

6.3. Presentation

The procedure was the following one for all the *strategies*: the teacher makes use of direct explanation plus modeling. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 161), in the latter the teacher demonstrates to the student how to use the *strategy*, "often by thinking aloud about the goals and the mental processes involved". On the other hand, we included three points in each of the tasks of both "Presentation" and "Practice":

- a) Clarification of purpose (always before performing the activities). All the literature emphasizes its unvaluable importance (Cohen, 1990: 85; Aebersold and Field, 1997: 66).
- b) Objective(s): to accomplish the activities by using the *strategies* and, in some cases, to raise awareness as to their usefulness while applying them.
- c) Procedure: the way the teacher presents the activity to the students and puts it into practice.

6.4. Practice

We used Oxford et al's (1990) stage four: "allow learners plenty of time to practise the new strategy with language tasks". We believed it better to do the activities individually, as opposed to O'Malley and Chamot (1988), considering the temporal constraints and the inexperience of our students as stated in Section 4 above.

TASK 1: SKIMMING (PRESENTATION). Text taken from Thornbury (1997: 128). Questions created by us based on the author's commentaries of his lesson. (See Appendix for text and questions).

-Clarification of purpose: to answer general comprehension questions about a text.

-Objectives: firstly, the students should make use of *prediction* by their previous *reading* of the questions and by their awareness that they are dealing with an advertisement. Secondly, they should answer the questions with the help obtained in their *prediction* and with their use of *skimming* too.

-Procedure: the students are explicitly told that they will have to predict and activate their background knowledge as soon as they see that the text is an advertisement, whose basic structure is a problem-solution pattern, the second one introduced by an adversative conjunction. The teacher will encourage his/her students to read the questions before the text. With structure and pre-reading questions as 'clues', they will be able to answer the questions: for example, they know that, in general, the problem goes at the beginning of the text, and that the adversative conjunction is in the middle, followed by the solution. The teacher will underline the conjunction so that the students can see how it helps to distinguish the two main parts of the text.

7. CONCLUSION

The most important point about our *strategy training* is that it is explicit. To design it we combined O'Malley and Chamot's (1988) and Oxford et al's (1990) suggestions. Keeping our audience's (in)experience in mind we also included a general introduction to explain basic concepts of *strategies* and the foundations of our *training*.

Reading was selected as the focus of our *programme* because we firmly believe it is nowadays the most exploited *skill* in *foreign language learning* in Spanish secondary

education. The *strategies* of *prediction*, *skimming* and *scanning* were chosen given the importance attached to them in the *Diseño Curricular Base*. Obviously, our proposal contains several limitations which cannot be dealt with here: in effect, several improvements could be made for future applications in the light of the findings of Study 2. In the meantime it is hoped that the ideas contained in this paper can help others in planning their *strategy training programmes*.

NOTES

1. This project was carried out by Raquel Criado Sánchez, Francisca Cánovas Gambín and Javier García Ruiz. The director was Dr. Rosa M^a Manchón Ruiz (*Universidad de Murcia*).
2. Nuttall (1996: 13) does not consider predicting a strategy as such. Rather, "Conscious use of prediction is a strategy that can be helpful with a text that is difficult". For the purpose of our essay and taking into account our audience, we referred to *prediction* as a strategy.
3. In O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 158)
4. In Cohen (1998: 72)

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APPENDIX

Text and questions from Task 1: SKIMMING (PRESENTATION)

“German precision scales”

The trouble with most bathroom scales is that they can be very inaccurate. But these German Seca Scales are precision engineered to meet the exacting standards expected by the German medical profession. Used for accuracy in surgeries, clinics and gyms throughout the world, they'll let you monitor weight precisely in your own home. The large dial is easy to read and the mat is slip-proof for safety.

Read the text and answer the following questions:

- Which is the problem mentioned in the text?
- What are the German Seca scales?
- What are their advantages?"