Reading comprehension development in the English B lesson

Myriam Monopoli

St. Catherine's Moorlands (Argentina)

Glossary of key terms

Accuracy: the correct use of a language system by a learner (knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and phonology).

Background or prior knowledge activation: students' recalling of previous knowledge of a topic before reading a text.

Bottom-up approaches: "serial models, where the reader begins with the printed word, recognizes graphic stimuli, decodes them to sound, recognizes words and decodes meanings" (Alderson, p. 16). (See also, *Top-down approaches)***.**

Coherence: "the abstract (semantic) relations between sentences or between propositions" in a text (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 151), made through "clause ordering, explicit connectives, and knowledge from long-term memory" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 15).

Communicative approaches: approaches to language learning which aim at the development of a socio-cultural communicative competence.

Discourse strategies: "various strategies used in the production, comprehension and reproduction of discourse" … Some of these may be "linguistic", i.e., those that "link textual and sentential surface structure with underlying semantic representations"… while others are more cognitive since they "involve the use of background knowledge, the use of episodic knowledge (memories in the strict sense) and the use of other cognitive information such as opinions, beliefs, attitudes, interests, plans and goals" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 61).

Facilitator or monitor of learning: teacher's role of creating the best classroom conditions or opportunities for the students to be active participants in the teaching-learning process.

Interactive reading models: reading models in which every component in the reading process can interact with any other component, be it "higher up" or "lower down". Processing is, in this way, considered to be "parallel" rather than "serial" (Alderson, p. 18).

Lesson framework: lesson plan.

Macro propositions: the global content of a text, whose main concepts are organized hierarchically into typical culturally dependent schematic structures or "superstructures" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 15). (See *superstructure*).

Macrostructure: a type of inference whose function is to reduce a text to its most important communicative message or the essential points of a text, "a model of network of interrelated propositions" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 52).

Metacognition: the process of thinking about thinking.

Metacognition techniques: learning techniques that aim at raising the students' awareness of how they learn, which help students to become more effective and autonomous learners.

Post-reading stage: the moment of the reading lesson after a text has been read and dealt with in detail (See also, *pre-* and *while-reading stage*).

Pre-reading stage: the moment of the reading lesson before reading a text in detail, which comprises activities aimed at activating students' prior knowledge of the text topic (See also, *while-* and *post-reading stage*).

Propositional strategies: reading strategies constructed through "the surface structural analysis of phonetic or graphical strings, the identification of phonemes/letters, the construction of morphemes, and the underlying semantic interpretation of lexical items, word classes and syntactic clausal structures" for the construction of the propositional text base (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 26).

Propositions: linguistic semantic units that function as psychological processing units (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).

Recalling exercises: oral text summaries.

Schema theory: a theory that accounts for the acquisition of knowledge and the interpretation of text through the activation of "schemata", i.e., networks of information stored in the brain, which act as filers for incoming information (Alderson, p. 17).

Schematic strategies: reading strategies related to the superstructure of a text (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) (See *superstructure*).

Semantic, conceptual or web maps: graphic organizers which visually display the meaning-based word connections, i.e., how a word or phrase is associated to a set of related words or concepts in a text.

Signal words: word or words that help readers to identify a particular text organizational pattern (for example, words that express concepts of cause and effect, addition, emphasis, illustration, etc.).

(To) Skim a text: to find specific information in a text.

Socio-cultural communicative competence: the knowledge of the rules of language usage and use.

Superstructure: "schemata for conventional text forms" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 88) which "guide the formation of a macrostructure" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 55)

Topic sentence: a sentence that expresses the main idea of a whole paragraph or sometimes a larger unit of discourse.

Top-down approaches: approaches that give more importance to the knowledge the reader brings to the text than to the text itself. Models of reading that stress the centrality of this knowledge are known as "schemata theoretic models" (Alderson, p. 17). (See also, *Bottom-up approaches)***.**

While-reading stage: A moment of the reading lesson in which a text is read in depth and reading activities related to it are carried out (See also, *pre-* and *post-reading stage*).

Introduction

It is widely recognized that reading is one of the most important skills for English as a foreign language (EFL) students to master. The ability to read and comprehend what one reads is crucial to success in our educational system. For academic success, for English language learning, or to expand students' knowledge of language, cultures and the world, reading comprehension has always played a central role in the curricula of the schools in this study. At present, reading comprehension is not the product of word recognition skills, grammar or world experience as separate entities, but it is considered a highly interactive process between the reader and the text, one that enables "the construction of meaning by making inferences and interpretations".[1] The importance of teaching reading strategies has been widely recognized in the last two decades as it may be one of the most effective and practical means of helping students to overcome their reading difficulties. From an educational point of view, teachers have the responsibility to bring research done in the field into their classrooms, and familiarize their students with appropriate reading strategies that will help them to become better readers.

Literature review

In the theoretical and practical research related to reading comprehension development in first and second languages, evidence shows that reading is a perceptual as well as a cognitive process, and that both bottom-up and top-down strategies are valid approaches to describe the reading process. In other words, many scholars advocate for an *interactive (constructive)* type of reading model (Alderson, 2000; Clapham, 1996; Haenggi & Perfetti, 1992; Carrell, 1992, 1988, 1984, 1983; Grabe, 1991; Bernhardt, 1991; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1989, 1983; Alderson & Urquhart, 1985; Perfetti and Roth, 1981; Meyer, Brandt and Bluth, 1980; Perfetti, Goldman & Hogaboam, 1979; Stanovich, 1980; Rumelhart, 1977). This research on the reading comprehension process, both in the mother tongue and in second or foreign languages, has been found to be closely related to the research carried out on good and poor reading skills (Perfetti and Roth, 1981; McConkie & Zola, 1981; Meyer, Brandt and Bluth, 1980; Just & Carpenter, 1980; Perfetti, Goldman & Hogaboam, 1979).

The value of the teacher's role in promoting comprehension has been investigated by Anderson (1991), Afflerbach et al (2000), Chamot (2004), Pressley (2000), and Cohen (1996), who encourage using reading strategies in the classroom with second and foreign language learners. Metacognitive elements in learning contexts have been an issue widely dealt with in first and second language research since Flavell examined the nature and development of cognitive monitoring (Flavell, 1979), and Baker and Brown discussed its importance to the process of critical reading on reading for meaning (comprehension monitoring) and reading for remembering (main ideas identification) (Baker & Brown, 1980). In regard to the explicit and direct teachability of strategies, Wenden (1998) and Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy (1990), Pressley (1995 in Nist & Simpson, 2009), Garner (1990), and Paris (1988) discuss how to apply them in learner training. Pressley & Harris (1990) claim that students must learn when and where to use particular strategies, and that teachers should encourage students to use such strategies, across the whole curriculum. Carrell (1998) argues that reading strategies can be successfully taught and that metacognitive reading strategy teaching should be a long-term educational process.

A number of reading comprehension scholars agree that it could be beneficial for EFL or English as a second language (ESL) students to have a framework of *pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading learning activities* (Barnett, 1989; Wallace, 1992; Grabe, 2001; Brown, 2001; Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Day & Banford, 2000). Pre-reading tasks draw students' attention to a text and allow them to make predictions on the text content by activating their prior knowledge and schema; while-reading activities help students to read strategically by focusing on decoding skills; and post-reading activities expand the knowledge students have acquired through reading by allowing students to discuss and critically analyse the text content, thus deepening their understanding of the text.

Since language comprehension and production do not take place in discrete units in real life, linguistic skills cannot be developed in isolation; therefore, their integration is required in language learning contexts if the aim is to produce efficient users of a language. Linguistic skills have "complex relationships of mutual support," as Peregory and Boyle claim (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997, p. 102). Communicative approaches to language, approaches that aim at developing a "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972) among students, including process-based methodologies (such as Content-based instruction and Task-based instruction), Text-based instruction and Competency-based instruction, advocate for an integrated skills approach. This implies teaching practices that integrate the four main linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in meaningful and purposeful interaction—as it usually occurs in the real world—to achieve the goal of communicative competence (Chamot, 2009; Harmer, 2007; Richards, 2006; Nunan, 1989). In such approaches the teacher adopts the role of a facilitator and monitor of learning,

[1] From Language B Teacher Support Material- Introduction. Retrieved from http://www.ibpublishing.ibo.org

setting classroom activities on a cooperative basis (Richards, 2006; Oxford, 2001). For a detailed list of interactive post-reading activities that relate reading to the other linguistic skills, see Banford and Day (2004).

Collaborative or cooperative approaches are two terms which are often used interchangeably. Panitz compares and contrasts them in order to understand the underlying nature of interactive learning. He defines *collaboration* as "a philosophy of interaction and personal life style where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning, and respect the abilities and contributions of the peers", and *cooperation* as "a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through people working together in groups" (p.1). He then details the conceptual differences between them according to Ken Bruffee (1985), Spencer Kagan (1989), John Mayers (1991), Rocky Rockwood (1995), Brody and Davidson (1998), and Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1997) (Panitz, 1997). These terms have been suggested as the solution for a wide range of complex situations in learning contexts and have established themselves as a practical alternative to traditional instruction. They are related to the learning theory of constructivism. The research carried out by Vygotsky (1980) and Bruner (1985) indicates that collaborative learning environments are necessary for learning. The most important developers of cooperative learning models are Roger and David Johnson, Spencer Kagan, and Robert Slavin. Johnson and Johnson (1991) focus on social skills and academic activities. Kagan highlights a variety of structures which are conducive to active learning and aim at developing teamwork and social skills practically for every subject and at all levels (Kagan, 1990). In the case of English language learners, he explains his collaborative-oriented structures according to Stephen Krashen's Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), in particular, the Natural Order Hypothesis (Kagan & High, 2002). Slavin's cooperative structures are drawn from both Johnson and Johnson's and Kagan's methods. He classifies his structures or methods into two categories: "structures team learning", which involves "rewards to teams based on the learning process of their members" (p. 2) and is characterized by individual accountability and equal opportunities for success, and "informal group learning", which is more focused on "social dynamic projects and discussion than on mastery of well-specified content" (p. 2) (Slavin, 2009). Many early studies on collaborative or cooperative learning focused on content areas outside the field of language learning. In the past two decades, EFL and ESL researchers have turned their attention to the possible advantages cooperative learning (CL) may have in second or foreign language acquisition (Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Haydan, 2013; Ching-Ying Pan & Hui-Yui Wu, 2013; Takallou & Veisi, 2013; Dabaghmanesh & et al, 2013; Al Odwan, 2012; Wichadee & Orawiwawatnakul, 2012; Momtaz & Garner, 2010; McCloskey, 2009; Carrió Pastor, 2006, 2007 in Carrió Pastor & Perry, 2010; Ming-Yueh Shen, & Yueh-Kuey Huang, 2007; Chen & Chen, 2005; Wichadee, 2005; Ghaith, 2003; Caposey & Heider, 2003; Cohen, 1994; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

The research carried out on the use of past exam papers as classroom material for exam preparation has not been given much consideration yet. However, a great deal of advice, recommendations, and practical tips—in the area of study skills—for the time before, during and after the exam itself have been identified. They all share the notion that the use of past papers is a valuable exam preparation technique for students to achieve better exam results by helping to familiarize them with exam formats and to increase their time management in exam conditions. (See http://www.bathstudent.com; http://www.gre.ac.uk; http://www.reading.ac.uk; http://www.intranet.ecu.edu.au; http://www.sastudy.co.za; http://www.ucl.ac.uk, among others).

The study

1. Context

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a programme of international education that has been implemented in Argentina since the late 1980s. At the time the field work for the present research was carried out, there were forty-eight secondary schools which offered their students the Diploma Programme across Argentina (in Capital Federal and in Gran Buenos Aires, as well as in other provinces such as Córdoba, Tucumán, Rio Negro, Salta and Mendoza). This two-year curriculum, for students aged sixteen to nineteen, is taught in English, French or Spanish. English B is one of the subjects offered within Group 2, which aims at meeting the needs of intermediate to advanced students of English, as an optional or obligatory subject, and at both Higher and Standard levels.

2. Hypotheses

This study seeks to explore common teaching practices for the development of reading comprehension ability among English B students in IB schools in Buenos Aires and Gran Buenos Aires.

As derived from the above purpose, it has been hypothesized that:

a) Pre-, while-, and post-reading activities are present in English B lessons.
b) Several text pre-viewing activities to activate students' prior knowledge are carried out in class in the pre-reading stage of English B lessons.
c) IB past exam papers are used as reading classroom material to develop reading comprehension.
d) The development of reading ability is integrated with listening, speaking and writing activities in the post-reading stage.
e) A collaborative approach is taken into account in reading lessons.

3. Data collection

Non-participant lesson observations and individual semi-structured oral interviews were used to gather data in this study.

A Yes/No category checklist of the classroom practices in the teachers' lessons was used to guide the lesson observation. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information on teachers' pedagogical procedures, qualifications and teaching experience. The data collected through lesson observations and interviews was compared and analysed in order to identify teachers' common practices for developing reading comprehension ability among their students.

4. Sampling selection and sampling procedure

Eighteen schools (sixteen private and two state-run institutions), situated in Capital Federal and Greater Buenos Aires which offer English B as an option within the Group 2 subjects, have participated in the present research project.

Thirteen of the teachers who were interviewed and whose lessons were observed were Argentine female graduates of teacher training colleges. One of them was an English-Spanish translator, four of them had both degrees mentioned, and two out of the eighteen teachers had completed post-graduate studies. They had from six to thirty years of work experience as general English teachers, and they had been teaching IB English B from one to twenty-six years.

The students, meanwhile, all had the same language background and were in their first year of the Diploma Programme. English B was either an optional or obligatory subject for them, according to their IB school offerings and requirements. None of them had participated in the PYP or the MYP, and they had an average of 240-minutes of English B lessons weekly. The lessons observed lasted about seventy to eighty minutes each, and they were delivered either in the morning or afternoon shift, as students attended lessons from 8 a.m. to around 4 p.m. each day, and they comprised from six to thirty-two students each.

In both observations and interviews, notes were taken and confidentiality was guaranteed. To protect the privacy of study participants, details such as school names, texts used in class, and other details have been omitted in the data described.

One teacher from each of the eighteen schools was observed and interviewed about their English B reading comprehension lessons. Data from two other lessons and interviews—not included in the study but selected at random from the same eighteen participating schools—was also gathered for a pilot test, which was conducted in order to find out whether the interview protocol and the observation checklist met the requirements of the hypotheses formulated.

Analysis of results

Pre-, while-, and post-reading activities in English B lessons

With regard to the first hypothesis on whether pre-, while-, and post-reading activities are present in English B lessons, based on the **lesson observation data** (Table 1 in Appendix 1- Figure 1 in Appendix 2), 78% of the lessons focused on pre-reading activities and while-reading activities. Pre-reading activities aimed at activating students' prior knowledge of the text, and while-reading activities were related to both text reading (aloud or in silence), and the text-based reading exercises or activities on the content of the reading text (only one of which was carried out in 37.5% of the lessons, two in 6.25%, three in 25%, four in 18.25%, and none in the remaining 12.5%) (Tables 2.0 and 2.1). The post-reading stage planned activities could not be dealt with because of lesson time restrictions. Only 11% of the lessons observed included pre-, while-, and post-reading activities, and another 11% of the lessons included just the post-reading stage (as the reading text had been worked on in the previous lesson).

The **interview data**, with respect to teachers' reading lesson planning (Table 3 in Appendix 1 and Figure 2 in Appendix 2), reveals that all the teachers assert their lessons have a while-reading stage, and 78% of them claim they also include pre- and post-reading stages in their lessons.

Regarding the reasons why the teachers plan pre-reading activities for their reading framework lessons, the data gathered (Table 4 in Appendix 1 and Figures 3-4 in Appendix 2) shows that 56% of the teachers state that the pre-reading stage allows the students to actively participate in the lesson, and 44% explain that during this stage students can share the knowledge they have about text topics. For 33% of the teachers, the pre-reading stage is a kind of introduction to the text analysis, and 28% assert that it allows students to make predictions on the text topic. 17% refer to text previewing techniques, and another 17% relate the pre-, while-, and post-reading stages framework to the methodology training they were given in their teacher training colleges as reasons for why they plan a pre-reading stage for their English B lessons. As to the while-reading stage, 100% of the

teachers associate it with the text reading and the reading activities. With respect to the post-reading stage, 50% of the teachers consider it a rounding-off to the reading lesson, 50% as an opportunity for skills integration work, and 11% refer to the methodological training they had as trainees.

Hence, the data collected in the observations and interviews supports the first hypothesis in this study (Pre-, while-, and post-reading activities are present in English B lessons), since there are three definite moments or stages in the English B reading lesson plans of the teachers participating in this research, whether or not these are labelled as such by the teachers in the interviews. The data weight is on the pre- and while-reading stages in a considerable number of lessons observed, as time restrictions did not allow post-reading stage activities to be dealt with in the same lesson.

Pre-viewing activities for the students' prior knowledge activation in the pre-reading stage of English B lessons

With respect to the second hypothesis on the pre-reading tasks that activate students' prior knowledge in English B lessons, the **information from the observations** (Table 5 in Appendix 1- Figures 5-6-7-8 in Appendix 2) shows that, in 89% of the lessons observed, the text title is read first, followed by a teacher-led discussion of the text topic or a discussion of students' background knowledge and experiences related to the text in 67% of the cases. Secondly, in 33% of the lessons observed, predictions on the text content were elicited from the students by the teacher; in 28% of the lessons text illustrations such as images, maps, diagrams, graphs and captions were referred to; and in 22% some previous research or reading on the text topic was discussed. Thirdly, layout features such as subheadings (17%), text type identification (11%), and text purpose and audience (11%) were not given much importance; nor were anticipation guides from the textbook (11%) or the teaching of new vocabulary related to the text topic (11%). Fourthly, videos related to the text topic were very seldom viewed (6%), and little consideration was given to the author's background and writing style (6%), the text sections (6%), and the text typography (6%). Lastly, neither audio-listening nor skimming activities (such as highlighting main ideas or key words or the text organizational pattern) were observed in any of the lessons.

Table 5 on the **teachers' interviews** also reveals that the number of reading activities that teachers claim to carry out in their teaching practice is greater than what was observed in their lessons: 100% of the teachers assert that they begin dealing with a new text by reading its title and holding a discussion on the students' background knowledge and experiences related to the text topic, 78% of them state that they elicit predictions from the students on the text content, 61% that they draw the students' attention to the illustrations that accompany the text and discuss them, and 50% that they refer to the text subheadings. Additionally, 44% of the teachers reported that they ask the students to do some previous research on the text topic, or show them a video to pave the way for the reading of a text. Next, 33% of the teachers interviewed said they work on different text sections or follow the textbook anticipation guide to a reading, 28% of the teachers indicated they conduct an audio-listening activity, or discuss the text author's background or writing style, the text type, the text purpose and its audience, or teach some essential vocabulary necessary for text comprehension. Only a small percentage of teachers reported (17%) dealing with the text typography as an introduction to a text reading, and none of the teachers claim to practise skimming strategies related to the text structure such as highlighting main ideas or key words or the text organizational pattern in any of their lessons.

The data collected through **observations and interviews** reveals that the classroom activity with the highest degree of representation in the pre-reading stage of a lesson is, by far, the discussion of the text title and the students' background knowledge and experiences related to the text topic. It is interesting to note that two important reading activities which pave the way for a deeper understanding of a text—the highlighting of text key words or of topic sentences and identifying the text organizational pattern and its signal words, which could help to derive the macrostructure of the text (Jacobowitz, 1988)—are not taken into consideration at all in either lesson observations or teacher interviews. Likewise, prediction-making does not seem to be given in the English B lessons the value it has in the reading process according to psycholinguistic and pedagogic research included in the literature review of this study.

In a few words, the information gathered partially supports the second hypothesis of the present investigation, since several types of pre-reading activities aim at activating the students' prior knowledge in the pre-reading stage of English B reading lessons.

In relation to the while-reading activities, a while-reading stage was observed in 89% of the lessons, since in the remaining 11% only the post-reading stage was dealt with in class.

With regard to the reading of text, in 50% of the lessons students read aloud, in 25% in silence, and in the remaining 25% they read first in silence and then aloud. In the interviews, 56% of the teachers claimed the text was read in class both aloud and in silence, 22% that they generally read texts aloud, and 11%, only in silence. As to the analysis of the text, in both the observations and the interviews, the focus is placed on propositional strategies by 100% of the teachers in whose lessons a while-reading stage was present, and 100% of the teachers interviewed. Coherence comes in the second place (69% according to the observations data and 100% according to the interview data). Macro propositions (38% and 44%) and schematic strategies (31% and 39%) follow them, at quite a significant distance behind them. Lastly, the category of other strategies (Register, Rhetorics, etc.) comes in last place with very little representation (6% and 39%, according to the observation and interview information gathered). Concerning the students' awareness of global discourse cognitive reading strategies, the observation data reveals

that 31% of teachers devoted part of the reading lesson to them, and the interview data shows a slightly higher representation (33%) of explicit teaching of global discourse cognitive reading strategies in their lessons. Whereas with regard to local linguistic strategies, 56% of the teachers dealt with them in the lessons observed and 72% of the teachers stated they dealt with them in the course of their interviews. In the lessons observed 94% of the teachers used the same popular English learning textbook and 6% had designed their own practice material (exercises), while in the interviews, 100% of the teachers stated that they resort to published textbooks. With respect to the correction and feedback of the reading exercises, it was observed that there was enough class time to correct at least some of the reading tasks given to the students in 88% of cases, while in the interviews all of the teachers asserted that correcting was part of the work done in every class (Table 6 in Appendix 1- Figures 9, 10, 11, 12 in Appendix 2).

In summary, the while-reading stage is clearly distinct from the other stages in both the lessons observed and in the interviews as it is the phase when the actual reading of the text is completed together with some exercises based on the text. Both reading aloud and in silence occurs in the English B lessons during the while-reading stage. With regard to the reading strategies dealt with in class, propositions (including lexis, morphology, semantics and syntax) and coherence are the strategies most often used, while macro propositions and schematic strategies are not strongly represented in the teaching practices at the schools which took part in this research. Additionally, in the English B lessons, metacognition activities are not given the relevance they have in the research done in the field.

IB past exam papers used as reading classroom material for reading comprehension development

Past exam papers were used as classroom materials to develop reading comprehension in only two of the lessons observed, and they were used in the same way as any other textbook or authentic text chosen for a reading lesson. As this evidence was not enough to draw definite conclusions on the use of past papers in the English B lessons, only the data collected in the teachers' interviews has been taken into account in order to confirm or reject the hypothesis on their use.

From the **interview data** on the use of past papers as classroom material (Table 7 in Appendix 1- Figures 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 in Appendix 2), 100% of the teachers state that they include past papers in their teaching plans: 83% for assessment purposes, 67% for exam practice, and 17% for diagnostic reasons. In relation to their selection and grading criteria, 83% of the teachers prefer the IB official papers, compared to the 22% who favour similar exams found in recently published non-official IB textbooks. 33% choose papers according to date and language difficulty, 22% because of their text topics, 22% take into account other criteria ("los que consiga"/"the ones I can get hold of"), and a remaining 6% select the past papers that corresponded to their exam session (May or November). Past papers are used in the English B lessons during the two years of the DP in all of the participating schools, except for two (22%). As to the quantity of past papers used, teachers report that an average of 3.62 papers are used during the first year, and an average of 4.77 papers during the second. Past papers in all the schools surveyed are completed individually by the students. With respect to the correction of past papers, 89% are corrected by teachers outside of the classroom, 17% by students individually with the marking scheme, 11% orally in class with the teacher and whole group, and finally 6% by students in pairs with the marking scheme.

In brief, according to the data gathered exclusively from the teacher interviews, the hypothesis on whether IB past papers are used as reading classroom material to develop reading comprehension is at least partially confirmed. The most important reason teachers provide for considering past exam papers to be beneficial for students is that the papers give students the opportunity to practise the exam format.

The integration of reading, listening, speaking and writing activities in the post-reading stage

As to the hypothesis on whether the development of reading ability is integrated with listening, speaking, and writing abilities in the post-reading stage, the **lessons observation** data reveals that, a post-reading stage was observed in only 22% of the lessons. During such a stage, a video related to the topic of the text from the previous lesson was shown to the students in two of the lessons, one role-playing activity in pairs based on the issue presented in the text was carried out in another lesson, and one text content summary was done orally with the whole group in the remaining one.

An exploration of the information gathered from the **interviews** (Table 8 in Appendix 1- Figures 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 in Appendix 2) indicates that all of the teachers who participated in the present research (100%) prefer, firstly, to include writing skills in the post-reading stage activities of their English B lessons. In particular, they are interested in making students practise writing the different text types required by the English B written section exam. Secondly, a large percentage of teachers (94%) have a preference for developing listening and speaking skills through class discussions, usually on controversial issues presented in the texts; and thirdly, 67% assign project work and develop research skills in order to integrate the four communicative abilities. In the course of the interviews, although they were not asked about this, teachers mentioned the fact that they sometimes make the students relate the text topic to issues in the TOK subject (33%) or, on fewer occasions, with CAS activities (6%). Finally, there is a group of teachers (44%) who choose panel debates, and recalling exercises (oral text summaries) to be carried out in class, and another 39% who prefer that students role-play different situations or watch videos related to the text topic. The activities least preferred by the interviewed teachers are written text summaries (22%), further reading on similar text topics (22%), audio-listening (17%), semantic maps (17%), and rhetorical organization templates (6%).

From the data provided above, it may be inferred that text analysis and the reading process itself are not taken much into account in the post-reading stage. Linking the pre-reading stage activities (previewing, predictions, macrostructure highlighting in different ways) to the post-reading stage (i.e., comparing and contrasting what the students said before reading a text with what they think after reading it) leads the students to think more about the text topic, thus enhancing their interaction with the text. Also, discourse reading strategies (macrostructure and schemata) and thinking skills could be emphasized if note taking and summarizing skills were included in the post-reading stage (Andersen Armbruster, 1984b; Smith & Thompkins, 1988; Nist & Diehl, 1990a) and/or different types of visual representations or graphic organizers, such as concept maps, semantic maps, and webmaps, among others, were used to examine the meaning of the text through analysis of its rhetorical structure, its main ideas and its interrelated concepts. (Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989). Thus, through these activities, speaking, listening, and writing skills could also be integrated.

Instead, the texts in the English B lessons are used as a kind of trigger for other language activities in which the linguistic skills are integrated in a more real, natural, and interactive way, as the advocates of the communicative approaches propose, while the teacher's role is more that of a facilitator and monitor of learning, setting classroom activities on a cooperative basis (as detailed in the literature review). This modality is supported by the information collected in the teachers' interviews (Table 9 in Appendix 1 – Figure 26 in Appendix 2) about the most important reasons why they use language skills integration in the post-reading stage of their English B lessons. They argue that language teaching is separated into discrete sub-skills only for practical purposes in language learning contexts (94%), that these types of activities provide an opportunity for teamwork skills development in true communicative activities (72%), and that they are a way of helping the students to acquire general world knowledge (55%).

In conclusion, the hypothesis on the integration of the reading ability with the listening, speaking, and writing abilities in the post-reading stage is at least partially confirmed through the data collected in the present research: all the teachers ask their students to do creative writing work, most of them hold class discussions on the issues read about in the texts, and more than half of them assign research projects to be completed in pairs or small groups for which the students need to integrate the four linguistic abilities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) on a specific topic related to the IB core or optional topics. The majority of them also agree that skills integration allow the students to use the language in a natural communicative way, as it occurs in the real world, outside of the classroom.

A collaborative approach to reading comprehension lessons

Concerning the implementation of a collaborative approach in the English B reading lessons, in the case of the observations, the percentages are calculated on the number of lessons that include the reading stage concerned (sixteen lessons for the pre- and while-reading stages, and twelve lessons for post-reading research projects). The group dynamics applied to an activity may vary (in pairs, small groups or with the whole class).

The **observation data** (Table 10 in Appendix 1) shows that all pre-reading stage activities observed were carried out with the whole class except in two lessons (13%) in which the teacher led a discussion on the text topic, first in pairs, and then with the whole class. In the interviews, the teachers confirmed the data from the observations, stating that text discussion related to students' prior knowledge was also carried out in pairs (28%). With respect to the use of textbooks' anticipation guides, apart from being covered with the whole class, they were also discussed in pairs 50% of the time.

As for the while-reading stage activities of the reading lessons (Table 6 in Appendix 1), the observation data shows that the text reading is done aloud, in silence, or first in silence and then aloud. Text reading is followed by text analysis and reading tasks, which are done individually by the students first, and are then corrected by the teacher together with the whole class in all the cases. The interview data confirms the observation information. Meanwhile, the teachers of the lessons in which only post-reading stage activities were dealt with report that they usually read the texts aloud in their lessons.

Regarding the post-reading stage, only four of the lessons observed (22%) included post-reading activities; yet, a higher degree of collaborative work among the students was most evident in this stage: two whole-class discussions in which the students expressed different viewpoints on the issues presented by a video, a whole-class summary on the text in which each student contributed an idea or concept to reconstruct the text discourse, and a role-playing activity done in pairs in which the students had to simulate a hypothetical situation in order to resolve a problem (Table 11 in Appendix 1).

As to the group dynamics data from the **interviews** in relation to the post-reading stage activities planned for their lessons (Table 12 in Appendix 1), the teachers state that they use whole-class work to discuss text topics (94%), to watch a video related to the text topic (50%), to construct text oral summaries (39%), to draw semantic maps on main ideas and related concept (17%) or to carry out text rhetorical structure tasks (6%). They claim that they prefer small group work for research projects (61%) and for panel debates and discussions (44% and 28%), and assign pair-work for role-playing, creative writing activities, project research work, and discussions (39%, 33%, 28%, and 11% respectively). Although one third (33%) of the teachers interviewed ask their students to do writing tasks in pairs, they all agree that it is preferable if their students do creative writing activities individually for evaluation purposes.

When the teachers are asked if they ever implement a collaborative approach in their English B reading lessons (Table 13 in Appendix 1), 67% claim that they do (in post-reading stage research projects in particular) while 33% state that they do not and

explain why not with different reasons (e.g., “es una pérdida de tiempo” (“it is a waste of time”), “no es como me gusta dar mi clase” (“it is not how I like teaching”), “no tenemos tiempo para eso” (“we do not have enough time for that”), “lo hacen en otras materias” (“the students work like that in other subjects”), “mis alumnos no necesitan trabajar en grupos” (“my students do not need to work in groups”), or simply “no sé por qué no” (“I do not know why not”).

On the other hand, the reasons the interviewed teachers gave for adopting a collaborative approach in the students’ post-reading research projects (61%)—according to a list of potential student benefits given to teachers to select the three most important ones from—were the development of: communicative skills (75%), research skills (67%), self-management skills (58%), collaborative skills (50%), motivation for language learning (33%) and thinking skills (17%) in their students. As is the case with the percentages for the previous hypotheses, these figures are calculated from the number of teachers who state that they carry out a collaborative approach in their lessons, and not from the total number of teachers interviewed (Figure 27 in Appendix 2).

Data also reveals that group formation is done by the students themselves in most cases, although teachers may sometimes form groups in a small percentage of cases (17%) (Figure 28 in Appendix 2). Likewise, the assignment of tasks generally lies in the hands of the students, though this is also done by the teachers on some occasions (17%) (Figure 29 in Appendix 2).Yet, group task achievement evaluation is the teacher’s responsibility in all cases, and not the students’ through peer, group or self-evaluation (Figure 30 in Appendix 2). Last but not least, despite the importance given to research projects by the interviewed teachers, they all acknowledge that they assign research projects for homework as they do not have enough time to facilitate this type of activity during class time.

In a few words, the fifth hypothesis on the implementation of a collaborative approach in the English B lessons is partially confirmed by the data collected in the present research. The first activity the students do when they approach a text is completed with the whole class, each student making his or her contribution to the lesson; thus, this could be considered collaborative work, as defined in this study. As for the while-reading stage, in spite of the fact that this stage lends itself to individual work (text reading and text reading comprehension tasks), a certain degree of collaboration has been observed in the lessons and confirmed in the interviews since students engage in reading the text aloud for the whole class in turns, and in correcting the exercises done as a group. It is necessary to remark also that the correction of the exercises is led by the teacher, making the activity a more teacher-centred one. Yet it is the post-reading stage which allows for truly collaborative work among students in the English B lessons in this study. The interview data shows a collaborative approach is implemented in some of the courses participating in this study through role-play, panel debates and discussions and research projects related to the reading topic.

Concluding remarks and suggestions

The purpose of this study was to explore teaching practices in relation to reading comprehension development in English B lessons in IB schools in Buenos Aires and Gran Buenos Aires. With this aim in mind, lessons were observed and interviews held with teachers and Language Department Heads or Coordinators to collect data on the topic under research. As derived from the purpose stated above, the analysis from this study provides some support for the following hypotheses:

1. Pre-, while-, and post-reading activities are present in English B lessons.
2. Several pre-viewing activities to activate the students’ prior knowledge are carried out in the pre-reading stage of English B lessons.
3. IB past papers are used as reading classroom material to develop reading comprehension.
4. The development of reading ability is integrated with listening, speaking and writing activities in the post-reading stage.
5. A collaborative approach is taken into account in reading lessons.

The reasons for the confirmation of the above hypotheses are as follows:

The observational data and interviews indicate that there are three definite moments or stages in the English B reading lesson frameworks of the teachers who participated in this research.

The *pre-reading stage* comprises activities completed before reading the text proper: activities which aim at the activation of students’ prior knowledge of the text topic, mainly through text topic discussions, and text previewing techniques rather than prediction making.

The *while-reading stage* includes the reading of the text itself and the textbook reading activities based on it. Local linguistic reading strategies such as propositions and coherence were used most often during this stage, whereas global discourse macropropositions, schematic or other types of strategies were used less frequently. In the teaching practice of the teachers who participated in this research, metacognition tasks were also not used as often as they perhaps should be based on the literature review.

As to the classroom materials used in this stage to prepare students for their English B exam, all of the teachers prefer a recently published well-known textbook, although some of them like to design their own reading exercises. The teachers interviewed also use official IB past papers for individual assessment purposes in simulated exam conditions, and for exam format practice as well. However, it would be worthwhile if more focus was placed on collaborative past papers practice where students could discuss the justifications to the reading tasks in reference to the text.

The *post-reading stage,* which begins after students have read the text and completed its corresponding exercises, is mainly considered a lesson rounding-off and an opportunity for macro linguistic skills integration. According to the research carried out in the field, and in order to bring the theoretical models of reading described in the literature review into English B teaching practice, the data collected suggests that discourse reading strategies (strategies at text-level rather than at sentence-level) could play a more significant role during the pre-, while-, and post-reading stages of an English B lesson for the students' development of their reading ability. This would allow the students to interact with a text more actively.

A greater variety of didactic techniques to activate the students' prior knowledge before reading a text could also be chosen: for example, predictions on the text purpose and audience could be elicited from the students during the pre-reading stage, and even further predictions could also be formulated while reading a text to strengthen the students' text interaction. Skimming a text for the identification of its main ideas or key words could also help students to construct meaning in their first approach to a text, and moreover, it would help to pave the way for the construction of the text macrostructure in the while-reading or post-reading stage. It is the teacher's role to familiarize the students with a wide array of pre-reading techniques to facilitate their interaction with the text.

In the while-reading stage, the students' interaction with the text could be improved if attention was given, not only to linguistic strategies or language decoding, but to cognitive strategies as well. In this way, the reading process—as described in the literature review in this study—would be better reflected in classroom teaching practices. Self-questioning and making predictions about the text are other strategies that could be emphasized in the while-reading stage since they would help to monitor comprehension and would allow students to construct meaning by making inferences and expressing their own interpretations of the text. With metacognition techniques in mind, teachers could model discourse cognitive reading strategies for students, and help students learn to internalize them, especially in the case of learners with poor reading skills. Knowledge of text organization and its textual signals could help readers identify important information as well as relationships between ideas in a text, interact with the text, and monitor comprehension. Lastly, a comment could be made on the text reading modality. The inclusion of more time for individual silent reading in English B lessons would make the lessons less teacher-centred by allowing students to develop their own reading comprehension strategies through a more personalized relationship with the text.

In both the lessons observed and teacher interviews, the post-reading stage is clearly characterized as an opportunity to include skills integration communicative activities, rather than as a moment in the lesson devoted to integrating pre- and while-reading activities with those that could be carried out after completing the text reading in depth. Text summarizing and conceptual mapping tasks are strategies that could help to organize and condense the text information for an oral presentation or written assignment, elicited by the teacher or done by the students individually. Students' awareness of metacognitive strategies in this stage too could help them to develop study skills which they could transfer to other school subjects.

The research data shows that the post-reading stage focuses mainly on macro linguistic skill development activities with the aim of expanding the knowledge acquired in the while-reading stage, i.e., individual creative writing tasks, classroom communicative activities such as role-playing, group debates and discussions, and research projects related to the topic of the text, in which the four linguistic skills are integrated in a natural way. In doing so, teachers attempt to develop not only language accuracy and fluency but also socio-cultural communicative competence in the students. In these activities, the teacher's role is more that of a facilitator and monitor of learning, as suggested by ESL or EFL communicative approaches to language learning.

Despite the fact that a certain degree of collaborative work was carried out in the pre- and while-reading stages during the observations, it was the post-reading stage in which most of the collaborative work among English B students took place.

Teachers who favour collaborative approaches in their lessons acknowledge, in the course of the interviews, that the main benefits of such approaches for the students are the development of communicative, research, self-management, and collaborative skills, motivation for language learning, and lastly, thinking skills development, in this order. The data gathered suggests that students participate actively, help and support one another, learn from each other, develop better language skills than they would in teacher-led activities, and contribute to achieving desired goals in their learning activities.

In order to bring the research knowledge into teaching practice, efforts could concentrate on giving more weight to collaborative work in pre- and while-reading, as well as in post-reading activities. Likewise, on-going, formative assessment methods could be introduced (through written journals, portfolios, or reports on process) to emphasize further the students' collaborative work and their learning process, and not only the product achieved.

It is hoped that the current research will contribute to an understanding of teaching practice in reading English as a foreign language in IB English B lessons. Additionally, the author encourages EFL and ESL teachers alike to compare and contrast their

own teaching practices in view of the current literature review as well as to launch their own research projects in the field of reading comprehension in their schools and to share their findings with other colleagues within or outside their school.

Limitations and further research suggestions

The aim of the present study was to find common teaching practices in the English B lessons in private and state-run schools in Buenos Aires and Gran Buenos Aires. As with any research project, this research had some limitations which are necessary to acknowledge in order to assist future researchers interested in carrying out investigations along the same lines.

Firstly, obtaining school permission for lesson observations and teacher interviews was not an easy task to achieve, and this fact interfered with the schedule deadlines in the research project proposed to the IB Research department. A letter of introduction of the researcher and a brief explanation of the research project was requested from the IB Research Department to be sent to the school authorities after the first telephone contact with them was made. This letter allowed arrangements to be made with the schools to observe an English B lesson and to conduct the interviews with the teacher and with the EFL Head or Coordinator. Yet, school scheduling restrictions and the lack of full-time teachers in most Argentine schools also made it difficult to respect the original research project deadlines.

Secondly, although the sample size has been quite substantial (eighteen IB schools that offer English B in their curricula participated in the present research, which is highly representative of the sample universe), some limitations with regard to the methodology of the present study may be commented on.

With respect to the lessons observed, the teachers were told beforehand by the school authorities the date and time they were going to be observed. This allowed them to prepare their lessons in advance, and to start dealing with a new text in practically every lesson observed. It would have been more interesting, in order to achieve the objectives set, to be able to observe a typical reading comprehension lesson like any other in the semester, and to have the possibility of observing more while- and post-reading activities in the lessons.

As for the interviews held with English B teachers, the number of topics to gather information on in the course of the interviews exceeded the time allotted for the interviews, as time slots had already been agreed on with the school authorities before the school visit.

Perhaps another type of methodology would have allowed for further information gathering in the same time that was invested in this qualitative study. A greater depth of data may have been obtained by conducting focus groups with participants representative of the sample (from different participating schools), scheduled according to the topic areas. This method may also have offered greater insight into the participants' thoughts and opinions.

It is acknowledged that further detailed data would have been obtained if both observations and interviews had been recorded. However, recording could have created tension and anxiety for some teachers, and it may have affected the normal development of the lesson or interview.

Since the sample in this study is homogenous (students had the same native language in all participating schools and similar educational backgrounds in the majority of them), it would be insightful to compare the teaching practices and the students' reading ability development in English B lessons in other countries as well as in other Argentine EFL learning contexts (private vs. state-run IB schools) in order to comprehend the reading learning process of students from different backgrounds and with different degrees of English proficiency. This understanding would enable teachers to develop the best learning techniques and foster better conditions for different types of students to be successful in achieving their language learning goals. Moreover, if research work in teaching and learning EFL classrooms were to be further encouraged and fostered among teachers by teachers' training colleges and professional associations, this would help to contribute to improving the standards of ESL and EFL teaching skills in our professional field.

Lastly, although there is a considerable amount of information available on language learning studies in general, not much research has been carried out on the development of reading comprehension skills among English language as a foreign language learners, and even less in Latin America. This obviously limits the pool of available studies on the basis of which future researchers can lay the foundation for understanding their research problem.

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