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Development of critical reading and its contribution to reading comprehension

Desarrollo de la lectura crítica y su aporte en la comprensión lectora

Edelita Risco [iD]

Abstract   The current reality of Ecuadorian educational institutions demands urgent changes in the development of the subject of Language and Literature that favor special attention to the act of reading and, therefore, reading comprehension. Therefore, this research aimed to develop a didactic strategy for developing reading comprehension in students in the eighth year of Higher Basic Education at the Elías Cedeño Jerves Educational Unit in Canoa, San Vicente, Manabí. So, it is framed in the qualitative methodology under the case study method. The key informants were thirty eighth-year students surveyed as a study technique. The results allowed us to observe that the application of didactic strategies of a playful and interactive nature favors students' cognitive skills development. Therefore, it allows them to understand literary texts and develop autonomous learning.

Keywords   didactic strategy, reading comprehension, skills.

Resumen   El contexto actual de las instituciones educativas en Ecuador demanda cambios urgentes en el desarrollo de la asignatura de Lengua y Literatura, con el objetivo de priorizar la lectura y mejorar la comprensión lectora. En este marco, la presente investigación tuvo como propósito diseñar un sistema de actividades de comprensión lectora orientado al desarrollo de la lectura crítica. El estudio adoptó un enfoque cualitativo y se desarrolló bajo el método de estudio de caso. Se evidenció que la implementación de estrategias didácticas de carácter lúdico e interactivo facilitó significativamente el desarrollo de habilidades cognitivas en los estudiantes, promoviendo tanto la comprensión de textos literarios como el aprendizaje autónomo. Estos resultados resaltaron la importancia de integrar enfoques dinámicos e interactivos en la enseñanza para fomentar competencias críticas y autónomas en los alumnos.

Palabras clave   estrategia didáctica, comprensión lectora, comunicación oral.

✉   Edelita Risco
edelita.risco@utm.edu.ec

Unidad Educativa Elías Cedeño Jerves, Canoa, Manabí, Ecuador.

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Introduction

In today's society, where information is omnipresent and circulates across all contexts of people's lives, with unpredictable advances in science and technology and the widespread presence of media and information in households, having individuals passionate about reading becomes crucial and necessary. Moreover, there is an urgent need for active, critical, socially, culturally, and environmentally responsible readers. From this perspective, the act and habit of reading becomes a complex, personal, and exclusive activity for each individual. Certain factors play a decisive role in achieving compelling reading in critical reading. Critical reading is essential for better comprehension (Nisar et al., 2023).

According to UNESCO, millions remain illiterate for various reasons, including the lack of resources to access Education (Wood, 2020). Those who have access to formal Education need to gain the basic skills needed to learn to read, which prevents them from developing critical reading skills for any text (Ciuffetelli & Conversano, 2021). This situation represents a significant concern for the educational system and society as a whole, as the absence of critical readers could lead to significant issues in various areas: social, cultural, economic, and political.

In the Ecuadorian context, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), 27% of Ecuadorians do not have a reading habit. The most common reasons include a lack of interest, time constraints, and concentration problems (INEC, 2017). These figures are alarming, especially in a 21st-century knowledge society, highlighting the urgent need for schools, as formative and educational agents, to have committed educators implementing didactic strategies that promote critical reading, particularly among adolescents with greater access to information.

Critical reading is fundamental to the educational process. It serves as the foundation for acquiring other knowledge and broadens the understanding of objects and subjects in nature, establishing itself as the central axis of the teaching-learning process. Mastering this skill facilitates access to higher educational levels and contributes to academic and professional success from high school to university (Golden, 2023). Therefore, promoting reading habits and critical comprehension in students from an early age is crucial.

One of the essential skills for students is knowing how to read. This ability enables them to perform various functions and activities in their daily lives, both inside and outside the school setting (Parker et al., 2022). Learning to read begins in the early years of schooling when students recognize letters, opening the doors to knowledge. As they progress in their studies, so does their learning in the reading process, transitioning from learning to writing to understanding what they read. However, the goal should go beyond mere reading comprehension; reading should become an activity that enriches life rather than merely an academic task.

Freire argued that the primary goal of critical reading is to uncover the truth. Reading is not limited to the ability to reconstruct the general meaning of a text (understanding what is read); it also requires being aware that, beyond communicating ideas, the text conveys the thoughts and feelings of the author (Woolley, 2011). When the reader understands both the message and the sender, it is possible to achieve a constructive critique of the text.

Critical reading is one of the most important objectives for the education system at all levels, as it is a fundamental activity for developing individuals' critical and creative thinking. Critically reading a text involves going beyond the written words: the reader recognizes letters and pronounces sounds but feels, gets emotional, communicates, and comprehends what they read. In this context, the main objective of this article was to design a system of reading comprehension activities to foster the development of critical reading in eighth-grade students of Basic Higher Education at Unidad Educativa Elías Cedeño Jerves, in Canoa, San Vicente, Manabí.

Methodology

The level of this study corresponded to a qualitative investigation. The related variables were critical reading and reading comprehension. From a population of 90 students, a sample of 30 eighth-grade students from Basic General Education was selected. The sampling method used in this study was non-random, carried out through intentional sampling by the researcher. A six-item questionnaire was employed as the data collection technique.

The variables in this study were critical reading and reading comprehension. Critical reading was measured through the prior selection of texts, reading actions during the reading process, and actions taken after completing the reading. The reading comprehension variable was evaluated through the comprehension of words, sentences, texts, and their relationship with prior experience. A questionnaire was applied as the measurement tool.

Results and discussion

When asked about their actions when they did not understand the meaning of a word in the text they were reading,

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20% stated that they analyzed the context or situation in which the unfamiliar word appeared. In comparison, 80% indicated that they recalled or searched for synonyms. By referring to the context, they tried to understand the meaning of a sentence; in other cases, they reread the text to find relationships between sentences and understand its intention. To grasp the general content of the text, 70% of the students expressed that they extracted the main ideas. In comparison, 20% paraphrased the paragraphs to understand the meaning according to their prior experiences.

Approximately 57% said they rarely relate the texts they read to their daily experiences, while 40% indicated that they always use this strategy. Additionally, around 74% of the students said that to understand the intention and meaning of the text, they analyzed the language used by the author, while 27% reviewed whether the source was updated to the current context.

About 60% of the students used strategies to detect errors in the text, identifying possible causes such as spelling and logical connectors. Twenty percent reported that, upon finishing the reading, they generated new knowledge and proposed improvement actions to construct or reconstruct the meaning or intention of the text. Meanwhile, another 20% needed to apply strategies, completing the reading without performing comprehension or metacognitive actions.

The results indicated the need to implement didactic actions that promote the development of cognitive skills in reading comprehension, aiming to achieve the three major processes involved in critical reading: interpretation, organization, and evaluation. After analyzing the reality of the reading comprehension of eighth-grade Basic General Education students, a system of activities was proposed to encourage reading in the classroom.

Before designing the system of activities to achieve critical reading through reading comprehension, it was necessary to review the concept of a system of activities. According to Santovenia (2010), a system of activities is "a teaching proposal consisting of a set of collectively planned activities" (p. 3). The proposed system was based on the following design (Table 1).

The proposed activity system for developing critical reading is a comprehensive pedagogical tool designed to strengthen reading competencies in eighth-grade students of basic general Education. This approach is grounded in the theoretical foundations of reading comprehension and focuses on developing cognitive skills at the literal, inferential, and critical levels. Additionally, it incorporates interpretive, organizational, and evaluative processes essential for fostering critical reading in the classroom.

The design includes three main activities. The first activity focuses on literal comprehension through identifying and retaining explicit information, such as characters, keywords, and main ideas. This stage establishes a solid foundation for more complex analysis. In the second activity, students delve into inferential comprehension by deducing implicit aspects, formulating hypotheses, and filling in missing details from the text, promoting deeper thinking. Finally, the third activity encourages critical evaluation, where students analyze and

Table 1. Design of the activity system for critical reading

Component	Activity
Introduction	The proposed activity system is based on the theoretical principles previously described. The activities in this design aim to develop cognitive reading comprehension skills: literal, inferential, and sociocultural. Each activity facilitates the achievement of critical reading through its three processes: interpretative, organizational, and evaluative. This activity system is designed for a reading class with eighth-grade students in a general basic education setting. The teacher generates interest in the activities through motivational discourse, encouraging responsible participation, individually or in groups. The reading material for the class will be the first chapter of the book The Lost World by Arthur Conan Doyle. The system comprises the following activities: **Activity 1.** Locate, identify, and retain explicit information from the text. **Activity 2.** Deduce and infer the meaning of the text. **Activity 3.** Make value judgments about the content of the chapter read.
Organization	Students are organized into teams of four. The estimated time for each activity is 15, 20, and 15 minutes, respectively.

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Component	Activity
Tasks	**Activity 1** Search for the meanings of unfamiliar words. Recall passages and details from the chapter read. Identify the primary and secondary characters and the main idea of the chapter. Guiding questions: What is the text about? Who said it? What caused the topic? **Activity 2** Uncover implicit aspects of the text. Complement details not included in the text. Formulate hypotheses about the characters. Guiding questions: What conclusions does the author reach? What is the meaning of the word…? **Activity 3** Formulate opinions predicting outcomes or consequences. Differentiate facts from opinions. Propose an alternative title for the chapter. Guiding questions: What type of text is it? What does the author mean by this expression…? What do you think of what the author proposes?
Resources	Printed chapters from the book, highlighters, dictionaries, pencils, erasers, colored cards, and paints.
Process	**Activity 1** The teacher projects a motivational video related to the reading. Through the "Earthquake" dynamic, groups of four students are formed. Students underline unfamiliar words with highlighters and write them on cards. They then take turns reading the chapter and dividing the paragraphs among themselves. Finally, each group writes down identified characters, draws representative scenes from the chapter, and agrees on the central idea to present to the class. **Activity 2** Using the drawn scenes, each team considers what events should be explicitly included in the reading. They modify a paragraph to complement the story. The team selects one character to describe their role and propose alternative roles. All of this will be shared with the other teams. **Activity 3** Teams make predictions about the next chapter and write an alternative name for the current chapter. The teacher chooses one team representative to present this activity.
Evaluation	The teacher provides each team with a peer evaluation sheet, allowing them to rate team members' participation on a 10-point scale. Additionally, using the guiding questions, the teacher administers a written test for students to answer.
Conclusion	The teacher invites students to voluntarily share a general conclusion about the activity and commit to reading the next chapter. Finally, the teacher provides feedback and conducts a general reflection on the activity.

make value judgments, predict outcomes, and suggest new interpretations, such as alternative titles for the chapter read.

The system also stands out for its dynamic organization. Students work in teams of four and use resources such as highlighters, cards, and dictionaries, stimulating collaborative and active learning. The methodology includes creative tasks, such as drawing scenes and modifying text fragments, helping students connect emotionally with the reading and fostering imaginative thinking.

Lastly, assessment and feedback are key aspects of the system. Through peer evaluation sheets and an individual test, both group participation and individual performance are assessed. The activity concludes with a general reflection, consolidating learning and motivating students to continue reading. This system represents a comprehensive and effective pedagogical proposal for developing critical reading in students.

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Conclusions

Implementing playful didactic strategies allows students to focus better on reading objectives by relieving tension and facilitating text assimilation through entertainment. Interactive strategies are helpful for both individual and group reading, as they promote interaction among students and their environment. Reading comprehension involves developing cognitive skills applied sequentially, enabling students to use appropriate strategies for each reading stage, understand the text, and recreate the knowledge acquired. A well-planned activity system is an effective didactic strategy that teachers can implement to motivate reading and foster critical comprehension, contributing to developing critical-thinking students and enhancing an essential process in teaching and learning. Despite its importance, reading remains a challenge in many school contexts.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Edelita Risco: Conceptualization, data curation, research, methodology, software, visualization, writing the original draft, writing, review and editing.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

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