

The LM-1030 Reading Strategies Course on the Spotlight

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Abstract

This exploratory study discusses several viewpoints regarding the structure and implementation of the course Reading Strategies I (LM-1030). The study presents a diagnostic inspection drawn from students enrolled in nineteen undergraduate programs where that reading course is mandatory. Essential aspects such as methodology, instructional materials, the students' response to the reading program, and the course expectations in general are analyzed. Data was obtained from classroom observations, surveys and interviews. The results obtained reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the course and generate important implications and recommendations which may support informed decisions in the future.

Key words: reading, English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, program evaluation, needs assessment, curriculum design

Resumen

Este estudio indaga las percepciones con respecto a la estructura e implementación del curso Estrategias de Lectura I (LM-1030) en el currículo de la Universidad de Costa Rica, a partir de la información brindada por estudiantes empadronados en diecinueve carreras universitarias en las cuales dicho curso es requisito de graduación, tanto en la Sede Central como en la Sede de Guanacaste. El estudio valora el enfoque metodológico, los recursos didácticos empleados, la respuesta de los participantes y las expectativas docentes frente a la propuesta del curso. La información se obtuvo mediante entrevistas, observaciones de clase y cuestionarios. Los resultados señalan fortalezas y debilidades y son la base para justificar un futuro plan de acción y toma de decisiones a mediano y largo plazos.

Palabras claves: lectura, inglés para propósitos académicos, inglés para propósitos específicos, evaluación de programas, diagnóstico de necesidades, diseño de currículo

LM-1030 Reading Strategies I has been mandatory for students enrolled in more than thirty-nine undergraduate programs at Universidad de Costa Rica (U.C.R.) including such areas as computer science, psychology, medicine, political science, pharmacy, among others. While program administrators argue that learners are expected to carry out reading-related tasks in their professional lives, others believe that the course may lack a practical purpose to impact the learner's future careers. Its current design generates a debate as to the extent to which it accounts for the specific vocational needs of all learners in the typical multidisciplinary groups in which that course is taught. Others have suggested the need for an integrated approach and a major emphasis on productive skills in view of the increasing demand for fluent bilingual professionals nationwide. In sum, these different viewpoints suggest the need to reflect on such aspects as syllabus, orientation, learning goals and objectives.

This qualitative study explores various perspectives on the development of the LM-1030 course from data collected at two Universidad de Costa Rica campuses (U.C.R.), Liberia and San Pedro. Two sections of UCR undergraduate students enrolled in LM-1030 Reading Strategies I during the second semester of 2009 filled out an opinionnaire survey (twenty students in campus Liberia and thirty students from main campus, San Pedro). While the students from Guanacaste were mostly undergraduate majors in the area of managerial computer science, the learners at main campus were pursuing undergraduate degrees in at least 13 different fields. The investigation project also included a total of eighteen observations in both groups in a two-month period. The focus of these observations was approach, materials, resources, and learners' experiences and the data generated out of these classroom observations served to diagnose strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the course. Six instructors also contributed their viewpoints in both a survey and a personal interview.

Theoretical considerations

Because the acquisition of reading skills in a second language is a priority for millions of learners around the world, there is a growing demand for effective reading courses (Aebersold and Field, 1997). In a national context, the need to prepare effective readers has also been a crucial endeavor in typical second language learning programs.

The nature of the reading process has been explored in current research. Urquhart and Weir (1998) state that "reading involves processing language messages" (15), which implies a process of "decoding" or "transforming printed words into spoken word" (16) as learners approach linguistic information via print" (20). Snow (1996) establishes a distinction between "extensive" and "intensive" reading and define the process of reading as "a combination of bottom-up and top-down processes" (155).

While bottom-up strategies consist primarily of combining vocabulary and grammar clues to build toward meaning, top-down strategies involve “activating schemata” and “combining clues” provided by the genre of the text. Similarly, Arnold, Hosenfeld, Laciura, Kirchoffer, and Wilson (1981) found that successful readers used a variety of strategies that involved both bottom-up and top-down processes. Ur (2006) also makes an important distinction between efficient and inefficient reading in such areas as content, speed, vocabulary, motivation, and strategies as the following table shows:

Area	Efficient Reading	Inefficient Reading
1. Content	The content is accessible to the learners; they know enough about it to be able to apply their own background and knowledge.	The text is too difficult in the sense that the content is too far removed from the knowledge and experience of the learners.
2. Speed	The reading progresses fairly fast: mainly because the reader has automatized recognition of common combinations, and does not waste time working out each word or group of words anew.	The reading is slow: the reader does not have a large vocabulary of automatically recognized items.
3. Incomprehensible vocabulary	The reader takes incomprehensible vocabulary in his or her stride: guesses its meaning from the surrounding text, or ignores it and manages without; uses a dictionary only when these strategies are insufficient.	The reader cannot tolerate incomprehensible vocabulary items: stops to look everything up in a dictionary, and/or feels discouraged from trying to comprehend the text as a whole.
4. Motivation	The reader is motivated to read by interesting content or challenging task.	The reader has no particular interest in reading.
5. Strategies	The reader uses different strategies for different kinds of reading.	The reader uses the same strategy for all texts.

Source: Ur (2006). *A course in Language Teaching*

In discussing the nature of reading, Alderson and Bachman (2000) makes a distinction between reader’s knowledge and skills. While knowledge involves such variables as schemata and background knowledge, knowledge of language, genre, text type, subject matter, knowledge of the world, metalinguistic and cultural knowledge, the term “skills” refers to abilities that readers require to process information. The author points out that:

... researchers have long been concerned that readers may have relevant knowledge but that they may not possess, or have learned, the ability or skill to process text. It is possible that what distinguishes good readers from poor readers, or poor understanding from good understanding, is not

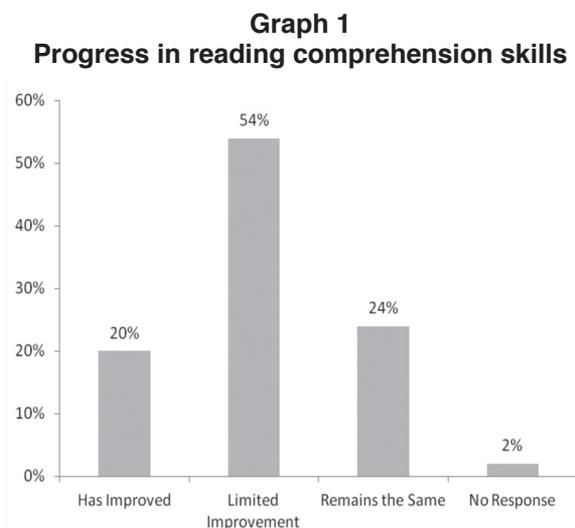
so much the existence of relevant schemata or even the ability to activate them, but a more general cognitive ability, what some researchers have called Schematic Concept Formation. (Alderson and Bachman, 2000, 48)

This overview of theoretical principles and concepts suggests that ESL/EFL reading teachers need to have solid scholarly training and knowledge, enabling them to make principled decisions to address three main challenges in teaching efficient reading courses: identifying student needs, satisfying their expectations and linguistic demands, and adopting teaching practices on the basis of scientific knowledge.

Discussion

This theoretical framework is the main reference point upon which this study was conducted. The research was intended to estimate perceptions and viewpoints in terms of how the LM-1030 Reading Strategies course has been set up and developed. Indeed, the investigation reveals diverse opinions in various areas including methodology. While a few learners consider classroom practices “boring tedious, monotonous” and “outdated,” others report having difficulties including poor grammar and low proficiency level, limited comprehension, excessive readings, and superficial handling of difficult topics.

Instructors agree that the learning goals, objectives and contents seem to encourage inefficient reading as the reading process progresses very slowly and the reader uses a narrow range of strategies to approach the decoding process. As a result, as many as 54% of the informants report poor gains in reading comprehension skills as the next figure shows:



Source: Student survey, 2009

Grabe and Stoller (2001: 191) state that effective reading instruction implies “diversifying students’ reading instruction” by exposing the students to as much reading as possible. Yet, the data generated from classroom observations evidenced few instances of exposure to extensive reading material or a variety of reading comprehension strategies.

The literature shows that knowledge of both vocabulary and grammar are closely related to reading abilities. Urquhart and Weir (1998: 191) state that this kind of linguistic knowledge leads to “automaticity” or automatic word recognition, namely the characteristic attributed to good readers who appear to be able to recognize words without any conscious thought. Classroom observations confirmed restricted attention to essential grammatical structures and lexicon. Just a few structures were occasionally reviewed briefly as the following observation chronicle shows:

Now, the class switches to a quick explanation of verb tenses, such as present perfect, past perfect and so on. The instructor writes examples on board including the main grammatical formulas and points out: “remember that this is not a grammar course. What I want you to do is to identify the patterns in context.” Then, a brief explanation of modals **can, should, and ought to** is given. The instructor explains the semantics of modals using a few simple examples on the board.

Most observations revealed signs of “light” reading instruction including extreme simplification of content and instruction which clearly contrasts with what is meant by efficient reading, that is, stimulating strategic readers who enhance their metacognitive awareness and approach both extensive and intensive reading. The following chronicle also evidences this reality:

As the students answer, the instructor briefly explains the “s” inflections in third person singular...” then, we have roots and if we attach “little things”, the function of the word changes.” By “little things”, the instructor meant prefixes and suffixes, and then gives a few examples: creation/ creative/ create/ creatively..., an explanation of the main punctuation marks such as period, semicolon, ellipsis, and quotation marks follow. She asks questions: “Why do we use a period?” A student answers: “to separate ideas.”

The simplicity which was prevalent in the texts and explanations may contribute very little to what is meant by reading fluency, automaticity, or integration of skills except for a few more complex handouts given in each class for students to carry out reading tasks.

Most observations reveal a need to spend more quality time on teaching reading since instructors would normally spend very little time on reading itself in a two hour class session, not to mention the eighteen classes observed where there was limited focus, analysis or discussion of complex texts. The typical aspects of inefficient reading classes seemed evident throughout all observations,

namely texts that were both too simple or far removed from the learners' schemata, slow reading, readers with poor vocabularies and no significant purposes, and strategies that would be most appropriate for higher proficiency levels such as inferencing, guessing meaning from context, or understanding discourse structures.

One of the instructors who coordinated the program on the Liberia campus admits that even though students learn vocabulary and structures, "they cannot put this knowledge into real practice." A former program coordinator who was in charge of the program for about three years at main campus thinks that even though the course has a foundation on general English and gives students tools to read and understand texts appropriately, for others, "it is pointless and might need revision to see if it copes with the needs of today's world." A similar position is held by an instructor who has taught the course twice at the Liberia branch. Her opinion is that its design is very "complicated" and the student's poor background in grammar makes it difficult for them to assimilate the structural component.

The present coordinator of the reading program at main campus holds a more favourable position towards the course rationale. Her opinion is that its syllabus, goals, and objectives "are aimed at the students' needs," and that most professionals require skills in reading strategies when writing their dissertations or final papers. Since most updated books are in English, many instructors assign texts or chapters in English. "When they learn the reading strategies, they feel confident to use the information in their research papers," she adds.

In regard to the course packet, the students' opinions differ. For some, it is "too long, extensive, confusing, unrelated to their majors, uninteresting, and outdated" and believe it should be "more interactive, clearer, and adapted to their basic level of English." The selection of materials related to the student's fields, according to one of the instructors, becomes a limitation because of the multidisciplinary integration of each group; therefore, "instructors must resort to very general reading."

In general, observations evidenced a narrow choice of resources which could have had an impact on the student's engagement in reading tasks. As one of the instructors suggests, "teachers should be aware of the importance of incorporating new material (updated) to make the classes more valuable and interesting." In her opinion, "the materials should be in constant change as there are many resources to be used when students are introduced with a new strategy."

Opinions vary in terms of the difficulty of grammatical structures and the presentation of linguistic items in meaningful contexts. Even though there seems to be a positive attitude towards the exercises presented in the course booklet, there are more reserved opinions about the limited vocabulary and structures which must be necessary for fluent, efficient reading.

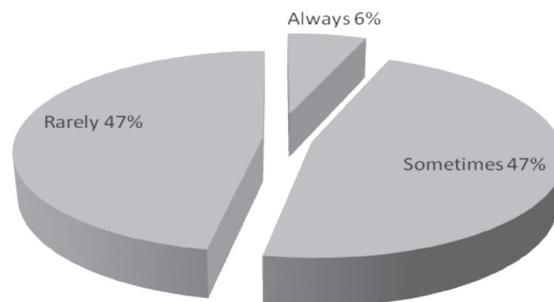
The concept of "flow" in reading comprehension has been associated to optimal experiences in the reading classroom. Grabe and Stoller (2001: 200) argue that learners who have "flow experiences" do not get distracted, become engaged in reading, and seek out reading as an optimal experience, resulting in intrinsic

motivation to read regularly. Unfortunately, productive work and willingness to engage in challenging tasks were not so noticeable in regular classes as demonstrated in the following chronicle:

A few students deviate from the class focus as they talk about personal matters. While the instructor explains an exercise, only a few of them react to ask questions... At a certain point, she realizes that a couple of students has fallen asleep “They make fun of everything. One of them lets his cell phone ring repeatedly and because it is making a funny noise, everyone bursts into laughter. The instructor tries to keep control by stressing the need to participate a lot more...and remarks that some students are skipping classes while others often quit the course for several reasons.

This circumstance finds confirmation in the data illustrated in the following figure which clearly shows unfavorable levels of learners’s commitment and willingness to engage in productive work:

Graph 2
Frequency of learners’ engagement in challenging work



Source: Student survey, 2009

Finally, there is no coincidence on the faculty’s perceptions regarding the impact of the course on the students’ specific majors. Four of them acknowledge an impact on the learner’s future professional lives in the sense that they would eventually develop the skills that are necessary to understand a text for research purposes or for their own academic, personal growth. For the faculty member who designed the course booklet, “using a dictionary, analyzing ideas, deconstructing paragraphs and a basic grammar are necessary aspects in any professional activity”, so future professionals might benefit from as much reading as possible. Similarly, another ESL instructor points out that these professionals “feel bad when they realize they do not even know how to read a basic text in English.”

However, as far as the extent to which the course responds to the learners’ present foreign language needs in a national context, instructors seem to coincide that speaking should become a priority. In other words, they favor a

syllabus design that integrates productive skills if the goal is to prepare more competitive professionals in a marketplace that increasingly urges fluent bilingual professionals in most areas.

Concluding remarks

Both instructors and students consent that the LM-1030 course exhibits both strengths and weaknesses and that a redefinition of its goals is vital. Such reformulation should involve not only addressing the issue of teaching learners with different proficiency levels and various academic backgrounds, but also making informed decisions on sound planning, appropriate materials, and strategies to account for the range of skills needed for successful reading comprehension in the target language.

Indeed, the data generated from observations and interviews suggests that learners in this program would benefit from a greater exposure to extensive reading material, a variety of strategies to help learners grasp reading comprehension and assimilate the target language form. Needless to say, it has become a priority to adopt a sound approach towards developing reading fluency, automaticity, effective content-based instruction, and meaningful integrated skills. Perhaps, the major gain of this study is to raise awareness that reading comprehension should turn into an active process with interesting content, challenging tasks, careful planning and organization as well. Thus, to attain a greater level of “flow” in reading comprehension, the materials under current use require a major fit between curriculum and learners’ needs with more relevant and up-to-date content, grammar capsules, meaningful exercises and challenging tasks.

Finally, the findings of this study justify some practical suggestions to improve the quality of the program. First, it would be vital to engage instructors in a constant reflective examination of current research in the field so as to adopt sound instructional practices in accordance the students’ language proficiency. A valuable undertaking would be to implement peer observations in order to generate an exchange of ideas, experiences, and feedback. To individualize instruction, a diagnostic test could help to determine the students’ linguistic background as the basis for adopting a solid, consistent approach. Needless to say, an integration of skills with authentic materials and challenging tasks might increase the learner’s involvement and/or engagement. Perhaps, organizing a “reading bank” with texts selected by the students according to their areas of study would turn into an effective way to supplement the course booklet. Adopting strategic approaches with more personalized instruction and a variety of experiential activities aided by technology resources would increase meaningful learning and make lessons much more dynamic.

It is hoped that the findings of this diagnostic study become a springboard for decision-making and justified substantial changes towards effective, coherent, and realistic goals for successful instruction in reading strategies.

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