

# Improving Students' Reading Skills through the Use of the WFR Activities

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This Article entitled *Improving Students' Reading Skills through the Use of the WFR Activities* is just a very short description of an action research carried out in a public school in Bucaramanga. It is related to the specific pre-reading materials and activities that can be used in an EFL classroom in order to increase and improve learners' pre-reading and reading skills. This article intends to contribute the general observations and results of the research so every EFL teacher can get familiar with some new ideas and, possibly, conceptions about the creative use of the pre-reading materials and activities in EFL classrooms.

*Key words:* WFR activities, action research, pre-reading activities, EFL

Este artículo titulado “*Mejorando las Habilidades de Lectura de los Estudiantes con el Uso de Actividades WFR*” es una corta descripción de una investigación acción, llevada a cabo en un colegio público en Bucaramanga. El artículo se relaciona con los materiales específicos de pre-lectura que pueden usarse en un salón de enseñanza de inglés lengua extranjera, con el fin de mejorar las habilidades de lectura y pre-lectura de los estudiantes. Este artículo intenta contribuir con observaciones generales y resultados de la investigación, para que los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera puedan familiarizarse con algunas ideas nuevas, y posiblemente, conceptos acerca del uso creativo de materiales y actividades de pre-lectura en los salones de clase.

*Palabras clave:* Actividades introductorias para la lectura, investigación acción, actividades de pre-lectura, enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera

## Introduction

This action research, centered on developing students' pre-reading abilities, had the final goal to prove the effectiveness of several pre-reading strategies in order to improve students' overall reading skills and to transform their perceptions about the general reading process. Thus, the research was a set of several workshops with “high necessity” students in a classroom. The workshops were composed of dynamic,

funny, motivating and creative activities, engaging students actively in their pre-reading and reading learning processes, on which they worked cooperatively and individually.

The students were EFL beginners, with a very minimal knowledge of their target language and somehow discouraged to learn English due to their difficult home and school conditions. For this reason, the research was not an ambitious project of leading students to achieve high levels of reading comprehension. It was just a very simple scheme of procedures and lesson plans aimed at augmenting lightly the students' vocabulary knowledge, increasing their awareness about the correct use of pre-reading and reading strategies and providing an opportunity for different learning situations.

Theories supporting the researchers' framework were related to active learning processes where the reading skill is regarded as a way of connection between learners' previous knowledge and the information of the target text. Here, appropriate input is highlighted for constructing meaning from the text through an appropriate reading process, divided into pre, during and post reading activities. This research emphasized the appropriate instruction of reading activities that is meaningful to the students according to their language level, needs and interests.

The article has the main goal of describing briefly the provided research in its main steps: general students' perceptions before the intervention of workshops, considerations of important researchers regarding the reading process in general, some of the workshops students were given during the research and, most important, findings after intervention. Also, some important conclusions and reflections will be presented at the end.

## **The Idea of the Research Project**

As has been said, the researcher was having several difficulties with EFL reading activities in her classroom because of the constant discouragement my students showed when reading short texts in English. Their lack of vocabulary was their main obstacle to understanding assigned stories or texts in the classroom. So, the idea was to research the appropriate strategies to introduce reading activities to my students. The investigator found the article published by the *Forum* journal called "*A ready-made reading class: Warming-up for reading*". The author of this article, Wilfredo Sequero (1998), a teacher of Simon Bolivar University, talks about a creative way to introduce

reading activities in the classroom. The core of this activity is a creative and motivating worksheet that follows appropriate steps of any reading process.

The researcher's idea was to adapt the framework of the Warming-up for Reading (WFR) worksheet to a set of pre-reading activities through the use of creative materials for her students. In this way, the investigator used Sequero's ideas (1998) to follow the appropriate steps of introducing the students to the new words of texts and appropriate reading strategies. The main advantage of WFR activities is that they provide a chance of getting students prepared for reading with challenging, attractive and motivating materials. The activities of these materials can engage students actively in an appropriate reading process and, thus, enhance the effectiveness of the reading lessons.

## **Description of the Study**

The project took place in a public school in Bucaramanga. The participants in this research were 30 students in the seventh grade whose main reading problem in EFL was their lack of vocabulary and inappropriate reading strategies. Thus, the most important goal of this research was to increase the effectiveness of reading lessons through appropriate input and pre-reading strategies. All the pre-reading strategies of this research were provided with WFR activities. The hypothesis to be proved was whether or not WFR activities were effective enough to activate and improve students' reading skills and strategies they use to be more efficient in their reading comprehension process. So, the final objective of the research was to probe the effectiveness of WFR activities with EFL beginners and the way they are encouraged to read more with WFR workshops.

Several theoretical affirmations and interesting findings in the Literature Review provided several ideas for the design of the solution strategy and were the primary support for the researchers' project. For example, Alderson and Urquhart (1984), who presented reading as an allusive and complex interaction process involving two necessary elements, a reader and a text, affirmed that "Good first-language readers will read well in the foreign language once they have passed a threshold of foreign language ability". The previous idea was the main problem shown by the pre-treatment test with the informants.

Parker (1959, as cited in Alderson & Urquhart, 1984) pointed out that "By evaluating what you read and associating what you already know with information you are acquiring, you will read with more understanding and you will remember

better what you read” This very old affirmation has been approved by many linguistics researchers and FL teachers during their projects and reading process investigations, where the importance of specific pre-reading, reading and post-reading strategies activating students’ cognitive processes has been pointed out several times. Reading activities oriented to the students’ specific necessities and increasing their cognitive and communicative competences have proved to be successful and build confidence in their reading abilities.

Another important linguistics researcher, Khairi Abdullah (1993), affirmed that “It appears that lexical and comprehension processing share the same limited resource, and automatic lexical access frees cognitive space for constructing meaning from the text.” The importance of vocabulary knowledge has proved to be crucial at the moment of dealing with active reading comprehension tasks. Key vocabulary is, many times, the main tool for predicting the content and a possible main idea of the text. When students find out the meanings of the majority of the words familiar to them in a given text, it augments their confidence for interacting with this text and accomplishing the necessary tasks.

But the main axe of Solution Strategy was Wilfredo Sequero’s proposal (1998) for reading activities. It is a kind of ready-made class with a reading workshop where students are supposed to activate their background knowledge in order to get prepared for a reading activity. Thus, the students use their pre, during and post reading activities strategies in a motivating and creative way throughout an active reading process. The advantages of WFR activities consist of students’ motivation and interests. Such pre-reading strategies as predicting and anticipating the content of a text or a story lead students’ to deeper cognitive processes, so reading becomes purposeful for them. In this way, the students focus their attention on the necessary information with the meaningful use of active reading strategies. They are encouraged to go ahead in order to check their answers and they feel responsible for their own learning process.

Based on Sequero’s WFR theoretical framework (1998), the Solution Strategy of this action research was designed. The main objective of these pedagogical interventions was to center the students’ attention on the pre-reading strategies because it was crucial for their development of reading comprehension skills. To achieve this goal, the specific purposes consisted of teaching the necessary pre-reading comprehension skills and strategies, instructing appropriately all the pre-reading and reading activities in the classroom and engaging the students in working with key vocabulary through motivating activities.

The solution was divided into three stages. The first part of the pedagogical intervention was called “*Building Vocabulary*”. Here, the students were provided several games, activities and materials with the necessary input for their posterior reading activities, where they developed their pre-reading and previewing strategies. The objective of this stage was to activate the students’ already known lexis and to facilitate automatic lexical access. In this way, such activities as Word Prediction (where the students are given topics or titles of several stories in order to write the possible vocabulary of this story, or vice versa, they create a title or predict a topic according to vocabulary they are provided with). Or, for example, Vocabulary Map (see Appendix A), where the students can be asked to draw a vocabulary map and to group all the words learnt in the last class under suitable headings or categories.

The second stage of the Solution Strategy was called “*Copying with New Words When Reading*”. The idea here was to develop the students’ capacities of using all the possible context clues of a short mini-text or a sentence in order to infer the meaning of unknown words. The idea of these activities was to activate the students’ awareness of their capacities to build an understanding of new vocabulary through active and anticipated reading strategies. During this part of the research, every student contained a Word Folder (see Appendix B) as his or her important tool of feedback related to the vocabulary learning process. The Word Folders were used by the students every time they found out a new word in a certain game, activity or contest. The students wrote it down in their folders.

For example, such activity as Big Word (see Appendix C) was very attractive for the students. They were given scrambled letters on the transparency. Their task was to unscramble the letters to brainstorm words that could be made with the letters and to write down the new words in their *word folders*. To culminate this activity, the students used all the letters to create the longest word, called *Big Word*. They also had to find all the hidden words within the *Big Word*.

In this part of the project, the students were also given an opportunity to read images. For example, they used key words in order to predict and to describe content of a short picture-story. Their task was to build the biggest number of familiar words they could see in the pictures and a native language list of 10 unfamiliar words for them. The students were encouraged to find the meaning of the unknown words in their dictionary and to write them out. All the students wrote down the new words in their *word folders*.

The final stage of the project consisted of organizing short stories through the use of key vocabulary. The main objective of this stage was to use the learnt words in

order to organize the events, identify the necessary information and overview the text. For example, students were given a short picture-story with the disorganized events, where their task was to reorganize the events and think of a clue word for each picture (see Appendix D). Finally, the teacher presented the correct order of the pictures and gave the clue words so students could compare their answers. After, the students thought of a possible sentence for each picture.

The final exercise to prove the students' achievement of pre-reading and reading strategies was the short story "We are in the forest" (Appendix E). This reading exercise followed the stages of the WFR theoretical framework proposed by Wilfredo Sequero (1998). First, the students looked at the picture, created the title and predicted the possible vocabulary of the story. Afterward, they had to read the story in order to check their predictions. They circled with a red pencil all the words they predicted and with a green pencil all the unfamiliar words. Finally, the students were asked to write down all these words in the columns of predicted and unfamiliar words.

## **Findings and Conclusions**

After completing several workshops according to the previous steps, a light increase was specially noticed and students' interests and motivation were the main factor of positive changes. To conclude, it is important to mention that the main advantage of this research was the students' increased exposure to predicting and pre-reading activities. This exposure increased students' self-confidence and enthusiasm with reading activities, heightened their reading abilities and reinforced their lexical competences and, therefore, their reading skills. During the research, the students enjoyed vocabulary contests and games. They also demonstrated solidarity and cooperative work. This kind of activities created a better learning/teaching environment in the classroom where the students were responsible and accurate with their process in general.

The same research, however, had such difficulties as constant time constraints and interruptions of schedule. It was also very difficult for the researchers to control the homework the students were assigned; for example, activities related to their work folder or dictionary activities to practice at home because of the large number of information. And, of course, some difficulties with the discipline and classroom management, because the students, many times, during participation sessions were very noisy and got distracted very easily. Sometimes, the parents' help was needed for

some home activities, surveys to fill in, and materials to bring to the next class. But many parents were not involved with their children's EFL learning process, so their lack of interest and cooperation was another obstacle for this research.

An adjustment that could benefit the researcher would be to have this action research continue for a longer period of time so teachers could provide further investigations about the possible effective pre, during and post-reading strategies to use with their students inside and outside the classroom. This research is just an initial attempt to improve the students' EFL abilities, skills, perceptions and strategies. However, the primary goal of changing the students' negative perception of the EFL reading process could be positively felt.

The researcher strongly believes that dynamic and motivating pre-reading and reading exercises can instill a certain love for reading in students' native and foreign languages, despite the "non-reading" fame of our country. So, encouraging and motivating reading activities in the classroom can build a strong foundation for future reading success. Therefore, the recommendation of this research is for language teachers to use appropriate, motivating and well instructed pre, during and post reading activities in the classroom so the students can change their minds about the reading process as a boring and difficult task, with plenty of impossible words to understand. It is well known for any teacher that meaningful and interesting activities inside and outside the classroom increase the students' desires to learn, so they discover capacities and abilities unfamiliar to them.

To sum up, it is important to point out that any EFL reading process can be approached not just as an exhausting work with the text and vocabulary memorization, but the same process can be expanded as a reading of images, pictures, people's faces, and many other elements in the students' real-life environment. Pre-reading and predicting activities lead the future reader to discover his/her interests, to challenge his/her intuition and to use his/her imagination, where a very attentive reading process comes for sure to validate the predictions. The researchers hope that the previous ideas will encourage language teachers to play a flexible, experimental and more rewarding role in the process of teaching their students EFL reading.

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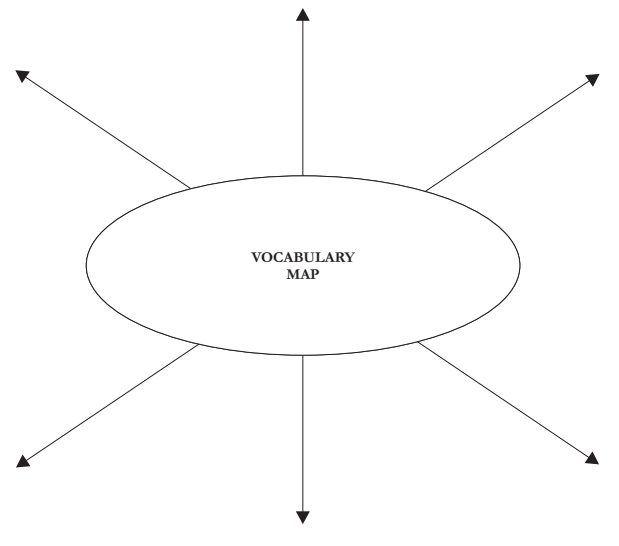
## The Author

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## Appendix A

### Vocabulary Map



## Appendix B

### Word Folder

#### *Part 1*

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**B**

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## Appendix C

### Big Word

L A S B E L B A  
A N O T U I M N  
P E L I P N A E P  
R B H O T M O A

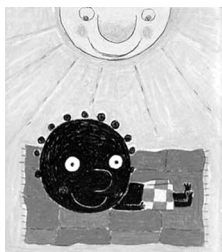
R T A R C O  
N F G S I R U  
G E N V N E I  
Y F B U R E A R

### Big Word


## Appendix D

### Picture Story II

1. Look attentively at this picture-story and order the events in the logical sequence. Use your imagination.
2. Find a key word for each picture and say it to your class.



## Appendix E

### Story: We Are in a Forest

Read attentively the story “We are in a forest” in order to check your predictions. Circle with a red pencil all the words you predicted and circle with a green pencil all the unfamiliar words.



My name is Laura. I am 9 years old. I am on vacation now but I am not at home! I am on a camping adventure with my teachers Olga and Anna, and my classmates. We walk a lot every day, we sleep in a tent, and we practice a lot of sport!

Now, we are in a deep forest! We can feel wild animals, such as wolves, bears, foxes! So, we stay together every minute because these animals are dangerous. Today we want to visit a mysterious cave! A strange monster lives there and he can be unfriendly. But I am a very courageous girl, so I want to speak to the monster. I love exciting adventures with my classmates and teacher!

*Words I predicted:*

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*Unfamiliar words to me:*

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