

The need to teach explicitly cognates to improve reading comprehension in students of second grade in high school in Chile

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to illustrate the need for explicit instruction of cognates in English classes of second grade in Chilean high schools, to improve students' reading comprehension. Nowadays young students are not used to reading very often even in their mother tongue. There is a lack of concentration, so it makes it even more difficult to read in a foreign language piece of text with words that they barely understand. The role that cognates play in English language learning is vital as they are the bridge that connects previous words with new words and vocabulary. As Philominraj et al., (2018) suggested, it is the experience that activates intelligence and makes people get knowledge. This means that the activation of previous knowledge will create new knowledge, and little by little the learner will store more words in his little brain Otwinowska (2015). The more input students have, the more familiar they find new concepts, and that is one the main reasons why some learners feel so afraid of the English class because suddenly they are faced with new concepts, altogether, if it is difficult to understand one single word. Imagine several words in their brains at the same time, as it is in a simple reading comprehension age, it might be very frustrating trying to understand ten new words at the same time. That is why cognates separate decrease the weight of this heavy load of words, to give little life vest in between ideas, so the students perceive the new information in a slighter and more comprehensive way.

Keyword: Cognates, Explicit Instruction, Reading comprehension, Vocabulary.

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the nature of the English language, in Chilean public schools, and it's the expectations of the national curriculum, we conclude that students' performances are very low concerning what the national curriculums require the students to have as competencies, as the National Education Council points out (2017). In recent years, English has become the language of business and technology in this globalized world, so this importance has led to the mandatory implementation of a minimum level of performance of English proficiency in the four skills in Chile. According to a study carried out by the Council Culture of University of Chile, which demonstrates that 84% of Chilean people do not even understand what they read in their mother tongue. One of the factors that has affected

the most students' reading comprehension is the use of smartphones, because when they need to know some information, they just look for the summary of the book and they do not bother to work on their reading skills. All the information is immediately found in the gadgets. At Buen Pastor High School, this issue is not an exception. According to our experience in that school, most of the students do not understand or do not apply reading strategies such as predicting, making inferences, or using prior knowledge to understand what the text is really about. In the last strategy that we have mentioned, using prior knowledge, the application of cognate awareness can create a great impact in the enhancement of the level of reading comprehension in texts of elementary-level English. According to the CEFR studies carried out by Cenoz and Gorter (2021) in different countries, this is the ideal performance that the national curriculum requires students to have by the end of High School. The following study aims to explore whether the proper application of cognates teaching in ESL lessons in Secondary education in public schools would have a positive impact or not in the way students understand reading comprehension texts.

1.1 The Chilean reality

Within the proposal for the annual organization of the Chilean curriculum nowhere it is mentioned the use of cognates. The only aspect that is mentioned in reading comprehension is that the students must be able to read a wide variety of texts, literary and non-literary texts, and also what is explicitly mentioned is that students have to manifest a positive attitude towards themselves and their capacities to learn and use the foreign language, a lot of grammar is mentioned but it lacks vocabulary content. But this is not enough, students are not required to learn cognates, and that should change. At least students should know what a cognate is and therefore include in one unit of the curriculum its mandatory teaching.

1.2 Why cognates improve reading comprehension.

In a study carried out by the University of Guayaquil, Ecuador, students in tenth grade of a secondary school, in the Chimborazo Province, were trying to be taught a new strategy to improve their reading comprehension skills. So, teachers designed different digital materials to get a better understanding of the short texts they covered with the students, so the texts included the use of cognates and false cognates. The results were positive. 18 out of 20 students reported increasing marks and demonstrated more interest when working with cognates. Here in Chile students in the second grade of high school, have similar characteristics, because both are native speakers of Spanish, and Latin American students have English classes twice a week, which should show similar results as mentioned by Emilio (2022).

1.3 The cognate facilitation effect

It refers to the phenomenon that bilingual performance on various vocabulary tasks is enhanced for cross-linguistic cognates as opposed to noncognates. In a study carried out in the southern and central areas of Texas, United States, there was a study that corroborated the effectiveness of cognates. The presence of these words in small pieces of texts revealed that students of the area mostly bilinguals performed better for cognates than for noncognates and exhibited a greater number of doublet responses, this means that they provided correct answers in both languages. These findings provided great evidence that crosslinguistic similarities at the reading level allowed the improvement as mentioned by Poort, E. D., & Rodd, J. M. (2017).

2. CHALLENGES AHEAD

One of the greatest challenges for teachers nowadays in Chilean reality is to implement the use of new methods, especially in public or private subsidized schools, more innovative and creative because of the rules that are given by the Ministry of Education. The curriculum is supposed to enhance the use of vocabulary development

(input). But it seems that it does all the opposite. Every year students are taught the verb “to be” and the next year they forget it. What is more significant is the use and teaching of vocabulary, and that is our main focus as teachers. Experts suggest teaching cognates because the English and Spanish word equivalents so resemble each other. Empirical evidence, too, has shown that cognate instruction benefits Latino ELLs (Jiménez, 1997). Teachers should dare to use more cognates to introduce the new vocabulary for a text. That is our challenge as educators, and that is our ethical duty. If it is content that we consider very important in the foreign language and if it is not included, then we should look for ways to teach it on our own. Consider including some time of our lessons to cover what the Chilean curriculum is not covering, for the wellness of the future generation of students that someday will travel abroad, and will face reality, realizing that grammar is not more important than vocabulary when facing real life conversations with an English speaker of any part of the world.

3. CONCLUSION

Although this state of the art has not been implemented yet, in the last class English of the second semester that students had, they worked on a worksheet with a short paragraph and nine true cognates, with a short introduction, and their performance was very good. They could understand the instructions and write all of the cognates in the boxes below the paragraph, and apart from that, twenty-eight students out of thirty could translate the entire text, after the recognition of the cognates. When students were asked if they used the Google translation for the whole text, the reply was yes but for two or three words out of thirty-six. This little activity reflected what the expected findings were. The expected findings are that in the experimental group, there is going to be a significant improvement in the reading comprehension skills of the students, after teaching them both true and false cognates. This study gives our teachers and students the chance to find new strategies like the use of two colours when teaching cognates, for example, using blue for true cognates and using red for false cognates is a good way of recognizing new words, in our vocabulary. Regarding the control group, the expectations are that there is not going to be a noteworthy improvement in their reading skills. Some of the limitations that are going to be faced in this study though are the lack of vocabulary, both in Spanish and English. Their vocabulary is very limited and teachers of Spanish classes have noticed that as well. Another limitation is the lack of time because usually, the school's Technical pedagogical chief teacher is very strict. In a previous activity at school, little time was given, and this time, four sessions are a considerable amount of time, so the plan is to work along with the Spanish and communication teachers to carry out this research and tell them what the cognates involved in the study so they also can have one lesson with the experimental group and take a look at some similarities with English words to have a better understanding of the content.

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