Didactic planning for the development of reading literacy

Planeación didáctica para el desarrollo de la comprensión lectora

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to analyze the development of reading comprehension in elementary school students and the didactic planning processes carried out by teachers of that level. A mixed-cut study was carried out, with a sample of 132 students and 12 3rd and 5th grade teachers from a public school in Colombia, who were given a structured questionnaire, an objective test of characterization of reading comprehension, a documentary analysis of the classroom plans and a semi-structured interview. From this process, it is evident that even though didactic plans are designed consistent with the structural requirements, raised by the Ministry of National Education and taking into account the quality references, the objectives, strategies, activities and time indicated in these didactic plans, they do not favor the development of the reading comprehension of the students, who present difficulties in the inferential and critical levels.

Resumen

La investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar el desarrollo de la comprensión lectora en los estudiantes de básica primaria y los procesos de planeación didáctica llevados a cabo por los docentes de dicho nivel. Se llevó a cabo un estudio de corte mixto, con una muestra de 132 estudiantes y 12 docentes de 3° y 5°, de una escuela pública en Colombia, a quienes se les aplicó un cuestionario estructurado, una prueba objetiva de caracterización de comprensión lectora, análisis documental de los planes de aula y una entrevista semiestructurada. A partir de dicho proceso, se evidencia que a pesar de que se diseñan planeaciones didácticas coherentes con los requerimientos estructurales planteados por el Ministerio de Educación Nacional y teniendo en cuenta los referentes de calidad, los objetivos, las estrategias, las actividades y el tiempo indicado, las mismas no favorecen el desarrollo de la comprensión lectora de los estudiantes, quienes presentan dificultades en los niveles inferencial y crítico.

**Introduction**

One of the main skills to be developed by human beings must be reading literacy, as this not only enables the development of the curricular areas of a given educational system, but is also an essential requirement for the development of the individual in different areas, promoting their participation.

In this sense, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) defines reading literacy as: “Understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential and to participate in society.” Therefore, it is a process that allows the individual to reflect and contribute positively to the different situations that arise in the context in which the individual develops and is related to the strengthening of cognitive skills such as: inferring, relating, interpreting, reflecting and the development of critical thinking.

When we analyse the reality of our students, we find that they show great deficiencies in relation to the development of this reading competence. The latest PISA test results published in 2018 showed that Colombia regressed in this competence, scoring 425 points in 2015 and only 412 this time around. In other words, the country improved by 13 points and continues to rank below the OECD average of 487.

In the analysis presented by the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES, 2018), 50% of Colombian students achieved at least level 2 reading proficiency (408 to 480 points). Students at this level at least are able to identify the main idea in a text of moderate length and find information based on explicit criteria. However, only 1% of students were ranked as top performers in reading, i.e., they reached level 5 or 6 in the Pisa test (above 620 points), while the OECD average is 9%. At these levels, students can understand long texts, handle abstract or contradictory concepts and make distinctions between facts and opinions.

In recent years, reading comprehension has become more important and has been the subject of numerous research studies which have allowed for a deeper understanding of reading literacy and the different ways of developing it from the primary school level.

Therefore, identifying the variables related to students’ effective reading performance clearly allows for the development of true reading competence and is therefore a priority for today’s educational systems. Accordingly, reading literacy instruction has become one of the main areas of interest in relation to teaching and learning processes.

In their research on reading literacy assessment based on the analysis of teacher practice and teacher-student interaction, Robledo, Fidalgo and Méndez (2019) thus highlight the importance of the role of the teacher as a modeller of experiences that enable the development of comprehension. They conclude that the most commonly used reading strategies are cognitive, oral reading and asking questions, which require little active participation by the student in meta-comprehension skills. Therefore, the most frequent interactions are those in which teachers direct action, ordering and asking questions.

In line with the above, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2016) included the analysis of students’ reading achievement results, considering contextual variables directly related to teachers; specifically, it considered the action of variables such as: teaching time devoted to reading, teaching approach or teacher characteristics.

In this vein, Bustos et al. (2017) state that the most frequently implemented classroom interactions around the reading activity are those in which the readings appear as a means to learn rather than as explicit teaching activities for comprehension. Thus, reading structuring takes place around three basic episodes: reading aloud, interpretation and, far below, planning; the latter corresponds to that moment dedicated to presenting the text, the purposes of reading, the justification, the theme or the way of reading it.
As Cassany (2003) states, “despite being a major objective, the teaching of reading literacy is confined to the sphere of language, to the first years of school and to an analytical and mechanical methodology” (p. 194). This makes it possible to identify the didactic treatment that reading and its related processes have received as one of the causes involved in the low level of reading literacy. This situation merits rethinking the methodologies applied by teachers and the way in which they plan and explicitly teach reading, assuming that reading has acquired a new meaning, from being recognised not only as the act of translating and decoding, but also as a process of interaction between the reader, the context and the text (Solé, 2000; Díaz-Barriga & Hernández, 2002; Sahonero, 2003).

This implies a challenge for classroom practices, where educating readers is no longer enough, but they also must be critical, autonomous, self-regulated and able to cope with the demands of today’s world. This implies moving towards the application of more conscious planning processes to develop appropriate and meaningful reading literacy in order to achieve satisfactory results at the inferential and critical levels.

From the perspective of the interactive model (Solé, 1999), reading literacy is conceived as the process through which written language is understood on the basis of the interrelationship between the text, its form and content, and the reader, their expectations and prior knowledge. Reading “is essentially a comprehensive and interpretative action, which allows the reader to construct his or her own opinions based on the reading” (Cardona & Londoño, 2017, p. 377). Thus, comprehension can be taught by having students learn to process the text and its various elements as well as to handle different strategies designed for this purpose.

Likewise, three types of comprehension are defined linked to the way in which the reader manages to take over the contents of the text: literal comprehension, where the reader understands what the text says using only previous knowledge; inferential comprehension, where the reader integrates the latter with the information contained in the text; and critical comprehension, which is manifested when the reader evaluates the authenticity or validity of the source, relating it to other sources and his or her previous knowledge (Pinzás, 2007). Therefore, “in order to understand, it is necessary to strengthen several mental skills or cognitive processes, such as: predicting what a piece of writing says, contributing our previous knowledge, making assumptions and verifying them, making inferences to understand what is not explicit, constructing meaning” (Cassany, 2006, p. 21).

The teacher’s help is necessary as a mediator and facilitator of the different strategies that will allow the student to confront the text, achieving interaction between the text and its content, for the development of skills or cognitive processes on the part of the reader. “The question is to teach comprehension knowing for what reason, by whom, under what conditions and for what purposes” (Braslavsky, 2008, p. 3.).

It is essential for the teacher to be aware of the purposes of reading and writing, have a variety of intentions and modalities to which the reader can aim, and not only favour the use of a specific type of text with a single way of reading and interpreting. When planning, the teacher must also consider the knowledge students need to have in order to understand the reading material. Therefore, it is necessary to select it carefully so that students can take it over because, if the text is too complex, the reader will become frustrated and probably lose interest. On the contrary, if it is too simple, the reader will end up bored (Calero, 2017).

This way, planning is reaffirmed as an important element of pedagogical practice that requires a great deal of attention from teachers (Ministry of National Education, 2018), as it guides classroom work in an organised and systematic way. In turn, the foregoing makes it possible to respond to the needs and interests of a given institution and, this
way, not only to project what it wants to do and where it wants to go, but also makes it possible to make decisions about what it should continue to do. However, in addition to including objectives to be achieved, it is an activity that includes the set of decisions and actions required, strategies, resources and contents, all within a specific timeframe.

Taking into account the importance of reading literacy and planning as a fundamental part of the teaching and learning process, this research describes the reading literacy process developed by 3rd and 5th grade students from a public school in Colombia, and the planning carried out by teachers for this purpose.

Method

Design of the research

The methodology implemented was a mixed methodology (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista 2014), which aimed to respond to the research question: how does didactic planning favour the development of reading literacy in primary school students?

Participants

A random sample of 132 students was taken, from 3rd and 5th grade of a public primary school, aged between 8 and 10, from the municipality of Candelaria, Atlántico (Colombia), and 12 teachers who teach in those grades and in different areas.

Instruments

The quantitative component was used to characterise the students’ level of reading literacy through the application of an objective test Palella and Martins (2012), aimed at characterising fluency and reading literacy designed by the ICFES (2018), which consists of 6 indicators related to the levels of reading literacy. In order to establish the characteristics of the students as readers, a structured questionnaire designed by the research team was applied, consisting of 10 indicators distributed in two parts: the first aimed to assess the socio-economic level of the students, and the second to recognise their reading habits.

The qualitative component worked on with teachers was a semi-structured interview (Hernández et al., 2014) with sixteen questions; it aimed at analysing their perception of didactic planning and their relationship with reading literacy. A documentary analysis matrix was also constructed (Dulzaides & Molina, 2004), aimed at analysing each of the components of the teaching plans, as well as the application of the legal references established in Colombia: Curriculum Guidelines (1996), Basic Competence Standards (2006), Reference Matrix (2017), Basic Learning Rights (2017) and Learning Grids (2017).

Procedure

The validity of all the instruments was carried out by means of validation by expert judges, subject to the consideration of three suitable professionals in the field, based on the criteria of wording, clarity, coherence with the objectives and correspondence with the study variables.

The reading literacy characterisation test was applied individually and the structured questionnaire was applied in groups to the selected sample. The processing of the information collected from the instruments applied to the units of analysis was carried out by means of descriptive statistics, which made it possible to measure, predict and explain the set of items in the questionnaires applied to the students.

For the processing of the qualitative component, once the data collection work had been completed, the information obtained from the interview with the teachers and their respective classroom plans was analysed, systematising the information through a table of origin and then descriptively relating the categories of analysis worked on.
Results

Once the information was collected, it was found that 3rd grade students had a level of literal comprehension in which 71.5% are able to identify explicit information in a given text (see table 1); that is, students respond adequately to questions related to recognising the main idea in a text, recognising explicit temporal or causal sequences, identifying the meaning of words explicitly defined in the text.

Furthermore, when assessing the ability to relate information and make inferences from what has been read (figure 2), as well as to evaluate and reflect on the contents of the text (figure 3), the results show that only 37.5% of grade 3 and 5 students rank at the inferential comprehension level and 33.5% of grade 3 and 27.5% of grade 5 at a critical level.

Opposite to this, 5th grade students only reached this level in 38%.

Figure 1
Average number of responses at the literal level

Figure 2
Average number of responses at the inferential level
level; therefore, in those questions that require links of information from different parts of a text, or reflection on the structure and purpose of the text, they have greater difficulties.

From the survey applied to grade 3 and 5 primary school students, we inquired about their interests in reading, highlighting the importance of context as a determining factor in the nature and quality of comprehension, referring to this as the set of situations that surround the development of reading. Thus, most of the students consulted belong to a low socio-economic stratum, their ages range between 8 and 10 years of age; a high proportion live with their extended family, consisting of parents, siblings and one of their grandparents, with an average of 6 people per family in the household.

Only 7% of mothers had a technical and/or technological level of studies compared to only 3% for fathers, but there is a high proportion of fathers being high school graduates (Figure 4), which

![Figure 3 Average number of responses at the critical level](image)

Source: prepared by the authors.

![Figura 4 Level of parental education](image)

Source: prepared by the authors.
implies they have an acceptable level of education that would allow them to guide their children in the process of reading literacy. However, 14% of mothers and 18% of fathers did not have the level of basic primary education. This could lead to apathy or lack of interest on the part of parents in encouraging their children to read at home.

With regard to the questionnaire items associated with reading habits, it was found that 40% of the students said they read every day, 34% read sometimes, 17% read once or twice a week and 9% do it hardly ever, with narrative texts attracting their attention the most (figure 5). They also stated that what motivates them to read is the fact that it is a school requirement, the fun they find in reading and the example set by their teachers (figure 6); they would read more often if the books had more pictures, if they could choose their own reading and if they had to work with books other than the school text (figure 7).

The results obtained show that the primary school students consulted have not developed the habit that would lead them to be considered reflective, autonomous, self-regulated and competent readers.
in the context of the demands of today’s world. It should be noted that their encounters with reading are limited to the school context, and they do not receive sufficient stimulus at home to access different types of texts and suitable to their interests.

With regard to the didactic plans, it is clear that although they are designed coherently with the structural requirements set out by the Ministry of National Education, the objectives, strategies, activities and specially the time indicated in these didactic plans do not favour the development of the reading literacy of the students, who present difficulties in the inferential and critical levels.

When asked about the learning objectives and the criteria taken into account when setting them, they agree and state that they are based on the students’ learning needs and on the quality references in a coherent and consistent manner; some teachers state that their learning objectives are drawn up taking into account the three areas of knowledge, namely: attitudinal, procedural and cognitive. However, when verifying the information with what is stated in their plans, it was found that a large part of them give priority to conceptual aspects; therefore, the implementation of values or performance based on procedures is not fostered.

Concerning how they reflect the development of reading literacy from the objectives, some state that they propose different actions in each of them, aimed at improving reading literacy and reading; others implement an evaluative component of comprehension according to the subject matter, and agree that this is not always feasible, given that not all contents are suitable for working on them. Most of them take the opportunity to include it in the topics corresponding to the types of texts: narrative, informative or instructive texts; where it is possible to develop questions explicitly for them, aiming at all reading levels. The above is embodied in the various plans analysed, where teachers include objectives such as: reading and understanding texts (identifying elements and structures that characterise them), understanding and identifying the parts of a story, identifying the structure of instructional texts, and the communicative purpose for the production of a written text in recipe format, among others.

Scheduled activities include tongue twisters, word searches, timed readings, construction of stories from pictures, use of different types of texts: instructional, informative, scientific and narrative, which are planned aimed at strengthening vocabulary and boosting verbal fluency and thus reading quality, but not comprehension per se. In 3rd grade they only implement superficial and selective reading, and this is reflected in the planning of questions or activities in relation to the texts used, which lead to identifying superficial ideas without going into them in depth or carrying out quick searches to obtain specific information, such as the search for a specific grammatical category (verbs, nouns, etc.) and the identification of letters or combinations.

In 5th grade, the development of oral, silent and comprehensive reading is more evident through activities aimed at recognising textual silhouettes and resolving comprehension workshops with questions aimed at the different levels of reading.

On the other hand, the teaching strategies implemented range from the use of concrete material to contextualisation of the topics, problem solving and directed readings, giving students the opportunity to express what they know about the subject to be dealt with. Assessment strategies to evaluate and verify the level of learning performance include oral and written assessments, presentations, participation, presentations and concept mapping.

These results show that the strategies most frequently used by teachers have a cognitive nature, which means that classroom work is not only related to comprehension instruction, but also to the development of the different contents. Therefore, the active participation of the teacher in skills related to self-regulation throughout the reading activity is ignored (Solé, 1999); it must be
clear that if reading strategies are procedures and procedures are teaching content, then strategies for text comprehension must be taught, including not only the cognitive but also the metacognitive sphere (Calero, 2017).

It can be affirmed that teaching strategies enable students to construct and use general procedures that can be transferred to multiple and varied reading situations; for which it is necessary that the teacher, as an explicitly expert reader, implements strategies for reading literacy of a cognitive and metacognitive nature, giving the student a greater role in their own process of knowledge, approach and understanding of the text.

When asked about their knowledge of reading strategies related to the before, during and after moments, teachers stated that they were aware of them, although to varying degrees. The teachers participating in the study were coded 002 to 012 in order to conceal their identity. In this sense, teachers 002, 004, 005 and 007 show a partial knowledge of the subject, which is shown, for example, in the comments of teacher 002:

“Including these stages in the reading process is important, as the learner has the opportunity to explore ideas as they are imagined and what actually happens as they go through the text in three phases”.

Others relate it to the structure of the narrative (beginning, middle and end) as indicated by teacher 005:

“These stages allow them to get to know the before, during and after of a given text. For example: if we work on a story, we can determine the beginning, middle and end of the story”.

When going deeper into the strategies implemented in each of the stages, they refer to pre-reading as the space to ask the student about the subject to be developed, referring to the use of the title and the images of the selected text, and to know what the student imagines or knows about it.

In addition to this, the activities during the course are focused on developing read-alouds and asking questions about what is read in sections of the text; some include searching for unknown words.

In teacher 005’s opinion, after reading, they limit themselves to asking comprehension questions using different strategies: word searches, crossword puzzles, multiple choice questionnaires, among others, which allow us to infer that they are only working on the literal level.

As for the time devoted to reading literacy in each planning stage, it was observed that most teachers only try to develop reading comprehension in the exploration stage, which includes a timeframe of 10 to 15 minutes. Some teachers say that they devote a large proportion of their class time to developing activities related to strengthening reading fluency and therefore, in order not to neglect other subjects, they try to use the same text which allows them to integrate themes from different areas.

However, the plans reviewed do not give evidence of these statements, indicating that the activities only correspond to the study of subjects specific to the area. This may indicate that they are not carried out on a constant basis, but rather on a content-related basis.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study allow us to analyse and reflect on the performance of primary school students in terms of reading literacy. In this sense, the analysis shows that students have not developed the habit of being considered reflective, autonomous, self-regulated readers, competent in the context of the demands and requirements of today’s world.

Similarly, it is necessary to look closely at the teaching plans made by teachers at all levels for the development of reading literacy. In this regard, although the educational institution where the research was conducted has been supported by the MEN through the Todos a Aprender Programme (PTA)
since 2014, which among its main objectives or goals is to intervene in the processes of reading and writing comprehension of primary school students, the difficulty persists in the inferential and critical levels, a situation that is widespread throughout the Department of Atlántico-Colombia.

One of the factors contributing to this low level is the teacher-led planning process. The analysis of the results showed that the didactic plans are structurally designed based on the guidelines established by the MEN and taking into account each of its quality references, but in their functional part they reflect shortcomings in the planning of activities, strategies, resources and time that lead to the development of students’ reading literacy, specifically in the inferential and critical levels.

Teachers limit their planning to designing activities that only lead to the development of reading fluency and pace, which means that they neglect access to metacognitive reading skills such as reflecting on how to set a reading purpose, how to establish relationships between what the text says and their previous knowledge or experiences, or between the parts of a text, and how to draw inferences, among others. The strategies they mostly plan are cognitive, which limit the student’s engagement in skills related to self-regulation throughout the reading activity.

A high proportion of teachers confuse the stages of reading proposed by Solé (1999) and other authors consulted: before, during and after reading and the different strategies that can be implemented in each of these stages. As for the didactic resources used by teachers for the development of reading literacy, they are limited, especially those of technological use, so they work with sheet-cards, stories, materials brought by the children or provided by the teachers themselves, as the institution does not guarantee these resources nor does it have a technological platform to support the development of these activities.

The time devoted to the development of reading literacy per session is a very important variable. Such time was found to be minimal, ranging from half an hour to an hour, in many cases remaining in the exploratory or initial phase. These situations lead us to consider the need to train teachers in innovative strategies for teaching reading literacy in all grades and levels of the Colombian educational system. It would also be advisable to include prediction and inference in teaching situations as strategies to strengthen the level of analysis of texts.

Bearing in mind that students show a better performance at the literal level, it is necessary to strengthen the other reading levels, and for this it is important that the teacher not only poses questions whose answers are explicit in the text, but also promotes actions aimed at recognising implicit information.

References


