





# The English Reading Strategies of Two Colombian English Pre-service Teachers\*<sup>1</sup>

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This study focuses on the findings of a research project that aimed at identifying the English reading comprehension strategies used by two preservice English teachers, one a successful reader and the other one a less successful reader. The participants were students of a B.Ed. undergraduate program at a public university located in the Colombian Eje Cafetero. Methodological procedures included the collection of reading data through think-aloud protocols, and analysis was based on the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Findings suggest that three main differences characterized the reading of the two TEFL readers: the number of strategies evoked, the frequency of their use, and the effectiveness of the strategy used by each reader. The article addresses implications for reading instruction and research based on both cases.

**Keywords:** strategies, reading comprehension, metacognition, pre-service teachers.

Este estudio reporta los resultados de una investigación acerca de las estrategias de comprensión de lectura utilizadas por dos estudiantes de una licenciatura en inglés: uno con mejor suficiencia lectora que el otro. Los participantes son estudiantes de un programa de licenciatura de una universidad pública localizada en el eje cafetero colombiano. La información de la lectura de los participantes fue recolectada por medio de protocolos de pensamiento en voz alta (*think-aloud protocols*) y el análisis se realizó utilizando el método de comparación constante (Glaser y Strauss, 1999). Los hallazgos sugieren que la lectura de los participantes se caracterizó por diferencias en tres áreas: el número de estrategias evocadas, la frecuencia de su utilización y la calidad del uso de las estrategias por cada lector. A partir de los dos casos, se discuten implicaciones para la enseñanza de la lectura y para futuras investigaciones.

**Palabras clave:** estrategias, comprensión lectora, metacognición, maestros de inglés en formación.

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1 This study is part of a larger research project that investigates the English-Spanish reading comprehension of pre-service English teachers. The research was approved by the Vicerrectoría de Investigaciones at Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira in 2009.

Cette étude présente les résultats d'une analyse de lecture réalisée par deux étudiants d'une université située au cœur du pays; actuellement ils sont inscrits dans un programme d'enseignement d'anglais. L'étude se centre sur leurs techniques à fin de se rapprocher du texte et d'en améliorer sa compréhension. L'information ci-dessus est l'aboutissement d'une lecture réalisée d'après une méthode de pensée à voix haute (think-aloud), et d'une analyse conséquente, effectuée selon un processus de comparaison permanente (Glasser & Strauss, 1999). Les résultats suggèrent que la lecture des participants se distingue par des écarts dans trois domaines: le nombre de stratégies évoquées, la fréquence d'utilisation et la qualité de son emploi par chaque lecteur. À partir des deux cas on discute les implications visant l'enseignement de la lecture et des futures recherches.

**Mots-clés:** stratégies, compréhension de lecture, métacognition, étudiants d'enseignement de l'anglais.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is an urgent need to increase the reading skills of school-age Colombian students. The ICFES test (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior), a nation-wide standardized test for high-school students, shows that Colombian high school graduates do not reach high levels of reading comprehension. The reading results in 2010 show that the large majority of 11th grade-student population (the last grade level in Colombian high schools) scored “average” and “poor” (ICFES, 2010). According to this test, an average score means that the reader

[...] demonstrates a reading process that emphasizes (i) implied relations between parts and units, (ii) a global comprehension suggested superficially on the text, and (iii) a kind of comprehension that moves between the local propositions of the text and a global understanding of the text structure (ICFES, 2006; authors' translation).<sup>2</sup>

That is, students that score average in the reading test demonstrate that they can comprehend the text globally, but do not reach levels of comprehension that enable students to think about the purpose and structure of a particular

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2 “Estar ubicado en el rango medio nos dice que el estudiante (lector) realiza un proceso de lectura en el que prima: (i) el establecimiento de relaciones implicativas entre las partes y el todo, (ii) una determinación global de lo dicho y sugerido en la superficie textual, (iii) un tipo de comprensión que se mueve entre las proposiciones locales del texto y una estructura de sentido global” (ICFES, 2006: 24).

text. A significantly smaller percentage of Colombian high-school students reached higher levels of reading comprehension on this test. According to the 2006 ICFES test scores, only 0,72% of high school students demonstrated comprehension that revealed the students' capacity to

[...] generate questions about the content, but also about the 'why' of the content, its organization and structure, and about the perspective and views that may be intertwined in what apparently are only phrases on a text" (ICFES, 2006: 24; authors' translation).<sup>3</sup>

These results suggest that in Colombia, at the end of more than a decade of schooling, students are able to decode text and understand its generalities, but are less able to make sense of text at a level that encourages strategic reading and an analysis of its content (Keene, 2008).

At an international level, reading outcomes for Colombian students are less hopeful. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an assessment given by the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD), compares the academic performance of 15 year-olds in 56 countries world-wide. The 2007 results of this test showed that reading scores for Colombian youth were significantly below the average of countries such as Korea, Finland, United States, and Canada. Most Colombian students scored at level 1 (the lowest) or below this level (PISA Executive Summary, 2007). These results are worrisome, especially when we consider that the students who took these tests are close in age to entering the Colombian higher education system, where optimal reading skills are required to successfully acquire knowledge from written text.

The poor reading proficiency that Colombian students have in Spanish will most likely negatively affect their reading abilities in a foreign language. We know that the literacy abilities that a bilingual person possesses in one language may transfer to the other language (Cummins, 1979a; Goldman,

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3 "cuestionarse sobre el contenido, pero también sobre el porqué de ese contenido, su disposición y su estructura, sobre las perspectivas y visiones que pueden estar tejidas en las que aparentemente sólo son frases de un texto" (ICFES, 2006: 24).

Reyes & Varnhagen 1984; Jiménez, García & Pearson, 1996; Kamhi-Stein, 2003).

For students who are in Colombian undergraduate foreign language teacher education programs and who are at the same time learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), poor reading abilities in Spanish may deter them from accessing an English text at a level high enough in order to acquire information pertinent to their field and to expand their linguistic abilities, as well as to be able to teach reading to other English foreign language learners.

One cause for the poor reading ability in Spanish among Colombian students is that they may not have an awareness of the reading strategies that they may need to apply when they read to reach comprehension. By virtue of cross-linguistic transfer, lacking knowledge on how to apply reading strategies when reading in Spanish may imply also a lack of reading strategy use when reading in English. Although some studies have explored aspects of strategic English reading among Colombian university students (Aguirre-Morales & Ramos-Holguín, 2009; Poole, 2009), the body of research on the English reading of the Colombian EFL population is still sparse. As a result, we have drawn from research conducted with school and college-level EFL/ESL students in other countries and from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. More particularly, reading research that focuses on the process of English reading among Colombian pre-service English teachers is still lacking. With this study, we seek to address the void in the literature pertaining to the use of reading strategies of this population when reading English text. Our study explored the reading strategies of one successful and one less successful TEFL reader when reading text in English. The following research questions guided our inquiry:

1. What characterizes the English reading performed by the less successful TEFL student?
2. What characterizes the English reading performed by the successful TEFL student?
3. What are the needs in terms of reading comprehension strategies for each one of these students?



## 2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

We draw from constructivist views on reading, which emphasize the active construction of knowledge by individuals as a result of their experiences with literacy, which are enabled or disabled by their cultural surroundings (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). The concept of reading for information as the result of hypothesis testing and inference (Tracey & Morrow, 2006) is used here to understand how the two readers in this study interacted with the English text. In the process of reading, readers create and test hypotheses for comprehension, as well as infer information to complete voids in meaning (Rudell & Rudell, 1995). Through making cognitive connections and using cognitive strategies, readers are able to fill in the meaning gaps and reach text comprehension. In reading, cognitive strategies involve interacting with the text, manipulating the text mentally or physically or applying a specific technique to access information from the text (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007). Examples of cognitive skills include organizing information, summarizing content, and integrating new with old information. The conscious application of cognitive strategies to comprehend reading involves possessing *metacognitive* skills. Metacognition has been described as “one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products” (Yin & Agnes, 2001: 1) or “the process of thinking about one’s own thinking” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006: 61). Examples of metacognitive strategies applied to reading include selecting or directing one’s attention to special aspects of text, monitoring one’s comprehension of the information, selecting relevant information to remember, and evaluating one’s comprehension after completing the reading task (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007). Researchers have found that the use of metacognitive strategies characterizes the reading process of successful second-language readers across age groups (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Jiménez et al., 1996; Yin & Agnes, 2001; Zhang, 2001).

Reading comprehension, as conceptualized in this study, focuses on the students’ meaning construction abilities through the use of cognitive abilities and their capacity to manipulate their metacognition, that is, their ability to know when and how to use cognitive strategies to gain text comprehension.

In building meaning from the text, readers make connections between the text and their previous knowledge in order to assimilate text information or to allow inferential elaboration. This phenomenon is known as schema (Anderson & Pearson, 1984) or world knowledge. Because the process of linking the information of the text to information owned by the reader implies a cognitive connection, the use of schema or world knowledge is viewed as part of the strategy repertoire that readers use to unlock the meaning of text in the present study.

Studies on bilingual reading across age-groups have shown that more efficient reading is often the product of a better command of metacognitive knowledge and the bilinguals' use of their L1 (first language) knowledge to support their comprehension of English text (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Jiménez, 1997; Jiménez et al., 1996; Kamhi-Stein, 2003; Yin & Agnes, 2001; Zhang, 2001). Kamhi-Stein (2003) reported that the two more proficient readers of a group of four college Latina students considered their native language as a useful resource to comprehend English text, and perceived reading as a process of meaning construction. The findings in that study indicated that these two students used more strategies conducive towards high-level text-based comprehension processes. Fotovatian & Shokrpour (2007) found that the better English readers among a group of college-level Farsi speakers used more metacognitive strategies, more frequently, and more effectively than the poorer readers. These researchers also reported that metacognitive strategies were the least known category of strategies among the readers (apart from cognitive and socioaffective), being the poorer readers the most unfamiliar with the metacognitive category. The findings by Fotovatian and Shokrpour (2007) suggest that the unfamiliarity with metacognitive strategies may be due to the lack of explicit strategy instruction.

The importance of explicitly teaching metacognitive reading strategies has been highlighted by several researchers (Pressley, El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, Almasi & Brown, 1992). Teachers need to direct attention more explicitly to the process of comprehension *while* students are reading, rather than to the processing of text *after* students have completed their reading (McTavish, 2008). As Block (1986) pointed out, reading ins-



truction has traditionally emphasized the *product*, rather than the *process* of comprehension. Reading researchers have found that young English language learners (ELLs) in Hispanic language minority contexts seem to benefit from metacognitive and cognitive strategy instruction (Jiménez, 1997; Jiménez et al., 1996), but the lack of instruction of reading comprehension at school is noticeable (Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008). For example, before Jiménez (1997) implemented cognitive strategy instruction to seventh grade Latina/o children at-risk of reading failure, he noticed that the children's overall perception was that "reading [was] an almost complete mystery" (p. 235), an observation that derived from the generality and vagueness of the children's reports. Jiménez found that the use of Spanish in the cognitive instruction facilitated the children's comprehension, and that the children's metacognitive comments at the end of the instruction indicated shifts in their view of literacy.

One area in which explicit instruction may be necessary to bilingual ELLs is in recognizing the relationships between their two languages, especially the lexical cross-linguistic connections. Nagy, García, Durgunoglu, and Hancin-Bhatt (1993) and García (1998), noticed that the bilingual children in their studies did not often recognized Spanish-English cognates in the texts they read to support their comprehension. This finding is puzzling because it is easy to assume that the orthographic similarities of some Spanish and English words would immediately send a clue to the bilingual reader and trigger connections between languages. However, this does not seem to be the case. Nagy et al. (1993) suggested that cognate instruction could enhance the children's recognition of cognates. García (1998) suggested that the ability to recognize cognate information may be developmental, and that instruction may enhance bilingual readers' use of this resource.

Two studies on reading comprehension strategies carried out in Colombia reveal that both male and female university students may be aware of the metacognitive reading strategies they use (Poole, 2009), and that the instruction of reading strategies can positively impact the students' metacognition and confidence (Aguirre-Morales & Ramos-Holguín, 2009). With the purpose of comparing reading strategy use across genders, Poole (2009)

applied a survey on reading strategies to a group of 352 male and female university students. Poole (2009) found that the male and female students reported using similar strategies but with differences in frequency, the females being the ones using problem-solving, support strategies, and individual strategies more often. Aguirre-Morales and Ramos-Holguín (2009) designed strategy instruction to teach business administration students in a distance program to read in English independently. The strategies taught to the students were reading non-text information, skimming and scanning, using contextual reference, predicting, and using true/false cognates. Based on students' reports and teacher's observations, the researchers concluded that explicitly teaching these reading strategies enabled the students to reflect on their learning and to enhance their metacognitive processes and confidence to work independently. Although the findings from these two studies are informative, they target university students from programs other than teaching English and the data was mainly collected from the students' reports on the strategies or their use, and not on the actual use of strategies when reading. The present study seeks to address this methodological issue by examining through think-aloud protocols the reading process of two EFL readers enrolled in a Colombian undergraduate foreign language teacher education program.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Context & Participants**

Mario and John<sup>4</sup> are 5<sup>th</sup> semester students at a Colombian undergraduate foreign language teacher education program in a public university located in the Eje Cafetero or coffee region of the country. With 5 years in its development, the program graduated its first cohort in mid-2009. In its 10 semesters, the program seeks to train professional English teachers with high English proficiency levels, a strong pedagogical component, and research experience acquired through the development of a thesis.

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4 Pseudonyms were used for participants and institutions.

Up to the 4<sup>th</sup> semester, students in this program should have completed and passed several courses taught in English: Four levels of English (i.e., basic, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced), two levels of English pronunciation, one English conversation course, and one research introductory course taught in English. In addition to the courses taught in English, the students in the program also take linguistic-related subjects in Spanish, their native language. At this level, students in the program are expected to be able to read narrative and descriptive English texts with comprehension.

Mario and John were chosen for this study based on their academic performance in the program. In the program, Mario has proven to have successfully acquired a level of English proficiency that enables him to communicate effectively and to be academically successful. He has received high grades in most of his courses, all of which required demonstrating proficiency reading and writing in Spanish and English. On the other hand, John's journey through the program has been more trying. He has failed several of the core English courses, and has had difficulties understanding what he reads in English. At the time of data collection for this study, John was taking the advanced English course for the second time, and was struggling to get good grades in this course.

### **3.2 Methods for Data Collection**

The data for this study were collected through think aloud sessions conducted by the first author (Angela) while the students were reading. Think-alouds, a type of reading verbal protocol, have been widely used in reading research to uncover the mental processes readers perform while reading (Jiménez, García & Pearson, 1995; Kamhi-Stein, 2003; Pressley & Hilden, 2004). One of the researchers first explained to the students how to think aloud while reading by modeling with two paragraphs from a Time Magazine article previously marked. The marks indicated the places on the text where the researcher would stop to say out loud what was going through her mind. The marks were placed at the end of every sentence purposefully. We predicted that positioning the stop marks at the end of each sentence could possibly interfere with intersentential connections, but it also could uncover com-

prehension monitoring strategies when the participants were trying to put the information from sentence to sentence together. Some marks were also deliberately placed on certain unknown words to indicate to the students that they could stop their reading and think aloud at places that were not necessarily the end of a sentence. After the researcher finished modeling, she asked the two students to try thinking aloud while reading with an excerpt from another Time Magazine article, in preparation for the think aloud that yielded the data for the study.

For the think-aloud, the students were asked to read an English excerpt from Kohn, Landon & Kohnstamm's (2006) "Colombia", a traveler's guide written in English targeted to non-Colombian tourists. The excerpt read by the students was titled "La Gran Carnaval" [sic] and described the Colombian Carnival of Barranquilla. The text was selected because it depicted a familiar topic to the students, although not closely related to their local cultural background. A not entirely familiar text was deliberately chosen to challenge the students to use their background knowledge to uncover meaning of culturally-based information. For example, in the text, "the burial of Joselito Carnaval" proved to be an aspect that pushed the students to make connections between their cultural knowledge of the Coast's traditions in order to make sense of the text. For one of the students, Joselito's ritual was not explicitly known, and he tried in many ways to make connections and associations that allowed us to see the strategies he used to understand the reading. Both students were given the choice to report their thinking in English and/or Spanish. The think-aloud sessions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

We talked with the students at the end of the session about the difficulties they had with the text. In these discussions, we found out details about the way the students applied their interpretation from the text as they read. The conversations at the end of their reading also revealed some of the students' habits when reading.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Our analysis followed the principles of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) for qualitative data. The students' copy of the text had marks on the parts of the text where we wanted the students to stop to think aloud. Together, we read through the students' think-aloud reports and compared their statements with the original text to check their accuracy on decoding and comprehension. Initially, we took as a unit of analysis the pieces of text within the points that indicated to the students when to stop. However, when the students read past these points, we analyzed the piece of text as they originally read it. We analyzed each piece of text read by the students for the strategies the students used to make sense of that particular piece. We made notes on the side of the transcript, as a first attempt to code specific strategies or reading behaviors. As we read and found examples of similar uses of the same strategy, we compared and contrasted these uses with the previous ones and reanalyzed the code that we assigned to make it more accurate. For example, when we first identified the students' use of translation (English into Spanish) into the L1 when reading, we coded this event as "L1 Paraphrased Translation". As we encountered more examples that could have been coded with the same label, we found that the translations the students made varied. Some translations were paraphrased but fragmented, and other translations were paraphrased and accurate. Also, students produced literal translations of the English text. We figured out that we should assign different codes to these different renditions of translated versions of the text. Therefore, we came up with "L1 Paraphrased Translation/Fragmented", "L1 Paraphrased Translation/Accurate", "L1 Literal Translation/Accurate", and "L1 Literal Translation/Inaccurate". To decide whether or not the students used a particular strategy effectively, we judged whether what the students said out loud made sense in the context of the topic of the text, or whether their thought process guided them towards making sense of the text they were reading. For instance, if the text triggered the use of prior knowledge in the students, and their prior knowledge enabled connections that helped them understand the text, we coded this instance of strategy use as "effective". On the other hand, if the students used a strategy that moved them away from the comprehension of the text, we coded the instance of strategy use as "ineffective".

We read the analyzed data two more times, paying close attention to the codes that we used, and striving to identify the strategy or reading behavior in the most accurate way possible. As a result, some codes were revised and others confirmed. The findings in this study derived from categorizing the codes into more generally interpretive concepts.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Characteristics of Reading: Number, Frequency, and Accuracy of Reading Strategy Use

Three main characteristics differentiated the two readers' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies for comprehension: The *number* of strategies evoked, the *frequency* of their use, and the reader's *effectiveness* in application of the strategy. Table 1 shows the total number of strategies used by each participant, the total number of instances of strategy use, and the percentage of effective strategy use. Tables 2 and 3 show in detail the individual strategies used by each participant, the number of times that each strategy was used effectively or ineffectively, and the percentage of effective use for each strategy.

Participant	# Strategies Used	# Instances	Effective Use (%)
John	7	33	36
Mario	14	39	90

Reading Strategies	John			
	Used	Effective	Ineffective	Effective Use (%)
Paraphrased Translation	X	3	5	38
Evoking Prior Knowledge	X	3	1	75
Visualizing	X	2	1	67
Monitoring Comprehension*	X	-	3	0
Figuring out Unknown Words	X	-	2	0
Recognition of Text Structure*		-	-	-



<b>Table 2 John's Individual Reading Strategy Effectiveness (continuation)</b>				
Noticing Novelty	X	1	1	50
Interpretive Paraphrasing L2		-	-	-
Confirming Predictions/Inferences		-	-	-
Inferencing		-	-	-
Summarizing		-	-	-
Making Connections With Personal Experience		-	-	-
Reading Ahead		-	-	-
Rereading		-	-	-
Cognate Use	X	3	8	27
Identifying Function of Symbols on Text*		-	-	-
Awareness of Audience*		-	-	-
<b>Totals</b>	7	12	21	36

Note: Metacognitive strategies are marked with a star (\*). All others are cognitive strategies.

<b>Table 3 Mario's Individual Reading Strategy Effectiveness</b>				
Reading Strategies	Mario			
	Used	Effective	Ineffective	Effective Use (%)
Paraphrased Translation		-	-	-
Evoking Prior Knowledge	X	2	-	100
Visualizing		-	-	-
Monitoring Comprehension*	X	4	-	100
Figuring out Unknown Words	X	3	3	50
Recognition of Text Structure*	X	4	-	100
Noticing Novelty		-	-	-
Interpretive Paraphrasing L2	X	5	-	100
Confirming Predictions/Inferences	X	1	-	100
Inferencing	X	4	-	100
Summarizing	X	2	-	100
Making Connections With Personal Experience	X	1	-	100
Reading Ahead	X	2	-	100
Rereading	X	3	-	100
Cognate Use	X	2	1	67
Identifying Function of Symbols on Text*	X	1	-	100
Awareness of Audience*	X	1	-	100
<b>Totals</b>	14	35	4	90

Note: Metacognitive strategies are marked with a star (\*). All others are cognitive strategies.

Table 1 show that in terms of the number of strategies used, the data shows that Mario used more strategies (14) than John (7). Table 2 indicates that John utilized *paraphrased translation*, *evoking prior knowledge*, *visua-*

lizing, monitoring comprehension, figuring out unknown words, noticing novelty, and cognate use, a total of 33 times. The only metacognitive strategy that John used was monitoring comprehension, which he evoked 3 times ineffectively. Table 3 shows that Mario, on the other hand, evoked more strategies more times than John. Mario used *evoking prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, figuring out unknown words, recognizing text structure, interpretive paraphrasing in L2 (second/foreign language), inferencing, confirming predictions and inferences, summarizing, making connections with personal experience, reading ahead, using cognates, re-reading, identifying function of symbol on text, and awareness of the audience*, a total of 39 times. In addition, Mario used more metacognitive strategies than John (i.e., *monitoring comprehension, recognition of text structure, identifying functions of symbols on text, awareness of audience*), with greater frequency (10) and always effectively. These findings suggest that, although both participants showed a similar overall frequency of use, strategy use was spread over more varied types in Mario's case. As to the *effectiveness* of their strategy use, the data indicates that John was able to effectively use the strategies he evoked 12 times, while Mario was effective 35 times. This represents a 36% effective strategy use for John and a 90% effective strategy use for Mario. As is discussed later, a strong contrast in the effectiveness of strategy use translated into marked differences in the participants' global reading comprehension.

John, the less successful reader, used some of the strategies he evoked more often than others (e.g., evoking prior knowledge, visualizing, and paraphrased translation). Although John tried to apply these strategies to reading, he often did not use them accurately. For example, he used paraphrased translation 8 times, and 5 of these times his translation was inaccurate. He evoked cognates 11 times, but was unsuccessful in using the cognates to his advantage 8 of these times. The inaccuracy of his application of the strategies often inhibited him from interpreting the text correctly. Unlike John, Mario used a wider variety of strategies with more frequency and accuracy.

As a result, Mario interpreted the text more effectively.

#### **4.2 John: Fragmented Strategy Use Conducive to Unsuccessful Reading Comprehension**

John was more confident reporting his comprehension of the English text in Spanish. Despite John's choice of Spanish to report his interpretation of the text more clearly, the manner in which he used the strategies he evoked often produced a faulty interpretation of the text. His poor use of reading strategies soon revealed to us that John lacked strong reading skills, which deterred his comprehension of the text. In other words, John's ineffective use of reading strategies was mostly due to his fragmented approach to strategy use.

##### *a. Fragmented Paraphrased Translation*

A prevalent strategy in John's think aloud data was paraphrased translation, that is, the translation performed by bilinguals where they use their own words to express in the native language the meaning of L2 text (García, 1998). In the Carnival text, John produced a total of 5 instances of fragmented paraphrased translations (that is, inaccurate paraphrased translations) and 3 of accurately paraphrased translations. When John attempted to translate, most times he failed to convey the meaning of the text accurately. The following example illustrates this interpretation:

Text: "The festival preceding Ash Wednesday February or March paralyze all normal city activities such as urban transport and commerce as the streets are taken over by dancers, musicians, parades and masquerades."

John: El festival se da principalmente entre febrero y marzo todos los años. Hmm... el transporte y todo el comercio crece. Se hace más... factible, es más vistoso. Crece el comercio. En las calles y en los músicos, todo eso.

[The festival is held mainly between February and March every year. Hmmmm... transportation and all businesses grow. It becomes more... possible, more flashy. Business grows. On the streets and in the musicians, all that.]

In this excerpt, John produced a Spanish translated version significantly different in meaning from the original English text, as a result of adding inexistent information in his Spanish translation (underlined text) and from skipping information in the English text (bold text). We noticed in this example as in others that John always wanted to show that he understood the text regardless of whether or not he comprehended the text entirely. John seldom reported that he did not understand parts of the text, although it was obvious he was not comprehending what he read. His behavior led us to interpret that perhaps fearful to lose face in front of the researchers, he may have chosen to make up information to complete his paraphrased translation, regardless of its accuracy in meaning. In studies of younger bilingual learners, the use of paraphrased translation has facilitated reading comprehension (García, 1998). However, we found that, by and large, John used paraphrased translation in a fragmented way by omitting and inventing information, thus producing inaccurate interpretations of the translated text. In other words, John did not use the paraphrased translation strategy to his advantage.

*b. Inconsistent and Fragmented Use of Information from Cognates*

John sometimes avoided the use of key cognate words that could have provided important clues to figure out the message from the text, and other times he used the cognates inaccurately. Notice that key cognates in the example above such as “paralyze”, “normal”, “activities”, and “urban”, were not addressed by John in his report. Had he used the information conveyed by these words in Spanish, more elements would have been accessible to John to comprehend the message in the text.

In instances where John noticed and tried to use cognate words to convey comprehension, he often ended up with a faulty interpretation of the text. In the following example, John uses the cognate words “plan”, “photograph”, “film”, and “event” to construct a paraphrased translation that did not reflect the meaning of the text accurately.

Text: “Be on guard, especially if you **plan** to **photograph** or **film** the **event**”.

John: Hmmm... es un plan durante el cual usted puede *take photographs*, tomar fotos, filmar los eventos.

[Hmmm... it's a plan during which you can take photographs, take photos, video tape the events.].

John's quick interpretation of the word "plan" led him to interpret the message of the text incorrectly. John disregarded important language that conveys caution such as "be on guard" and "especially if you"...". As a result, the message of caution that the author wants to convey to the reader was replaced by a simple description of a "plan". In this example, although John used cognate words from the text to support his comprehension, his interpretation was still far from the message on the text.

John's lack of use of cognates is puzzling, because we assumed that students like John who has been educated in a Spanish monolingual context should be able to recognize these words and thus be able to interpret them in English. Like the students in Nagy, García, Durgunoglu, and Hancin-Bhatt (1993), John, did not use cognates to aid their English text comprehension. The students in the Nagy et al.'s (1993) study were much younger than John and had fewer opportunities to develop literacy in Spanish, which may explain why they did not take advantage of the cognates. However, in John's case, his lack of cognate use may suggest that lack of cognate recognition could also occur among older EFL learners. It is possible that a poor reader, regardless of their bilingual status or age, may tend to not use cross-linguistic resources—such as cognates—spontaneously. The students in the Nagy et al. (1993) study learned to pay attention to cognates after some instruction. This observation makes us wonder if explicit cognate use instruction is also necessary for older readers.

### *c. Failure to Address Unknown Words*

In all instances where John found unfamiliar words in the text, he focused his attention on the unknown word and got stuck trying to guess its meaning. Even when he attempted to read ahead to use the context, he failed to infer the meaning of the unknown word. The following examples illustrate

the way in which John addressed the words “booked” and “crowded”:  
Example 1:

Text: “Unless you have booked a room well in advance”.

John: Advance, unless you have booked, a room...well in advance...advance...booked...a menos que usted haya booked a room well...habitación, book, well in advance...it’s confusing here.

Researcher: What’s confusing?

John: “Unless you have”...the grammar. “Unless you have booked”. Book es libro. But with “ed”.

Researcher: It’s probably a verb, right?

John: Yeah. Well in advance...una habitación. El cuarto bien...advance...ad...[thinks for a while]

Researcher: So, what do you do there, John? You’re stuck there. Te atrancaste ahí. What do you do to be able to understand more?

John: Wrong way. Wrong way. I don’t connect the ideas. And booked, booked room...advanced...algo avanzado. No logro coger la idea.

Example 2:

Text: “Unfortunately, as at all such crowded events...”.

John: Hmm...such crowd...crowd...this word I saw yesterday [thinks] Crowd, crowd...unfortunately...desafortunadamente los eventos...hmm...I don’t remember.

Researcher: What do you do when you find a word that you don’t know?

John: In this text?

Researcher: Yes.

John: debe ser que to search, looking for...crowd [thinks for a long time].



Researcher: What do you do? Are you going to stay there forever trying to remember the word, or are there other things that you can do as a reader?

John: at such crowd, crowd, los eventos... todos los eventos están... crowd. ¿Partidos? ¿Separados?

In these two examples, John seems to focus his attention on figuring out the words, first without the context, and then with some surrounding context. John initially interprets the word “booked” literally (*libro*), but when he realizes that it is a verb, he runs out of options. Even when he tries to use the surrounding context, as in “a menos que usted haya booked a room well... habitación, book, well in advance”, he does not seem to be able to make the connection that the text was referring to “accommodations”, a concept presented in the previous paragraph. In the second example, John experiences a similar difficulty with figuring out the word “crowded”. He remembers seeing the word before and focuses on remembering the word by heart, without resorting to use other text-based strategies. This finding can be contrasted with that of the proficient bilingual reader in the Jiménez, García, and Pearson’s (1996) study, who like John, often identified unknown vocabulary in the English text. However, she differs from John in that she engaged in evoking relevant prior knowledge and actively sought vocabulary learning opportunities from unknown words, while John seemed to only be puzzled and blocked by unfamiliar vocabulary.

When we asked John about how he proceeded when he encountered an unknown word when reading by himself, he immediately said “Busco en el diccionario” [I look it up in the dictionary]. John’s evident lack of a repertoire of strategies for figuring out the meaning of words when reading suggests that he heavily relies on out-of-text resources and not on the resources provided by the text, in order to make meaning of written messages. Studies of reading with proficient bilingual young readers and with older EFL readers suggest the context as a key element to figure out unknown words (Jiménez et al., 1995; Jiménez et al., 1996; Zhang, 2001). John’s prevalent immediate use of the dictionary to address unfamiliar words while reading leads us to suggest that he has not had enough cognitive practice working with the context of a text, and has not had sufficient experience to use the context as a scaffold when guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words.

*d. Lack of Monitoring Comprehension*

The examples presented above suggest that in general, John's reading lacked monitoring for comprehension. His often quick and unrevised interpretations of the text hinted that John does not often revise his understanding of what he reads. We confirmed this hunch with several examples from his think aloud. A particular example was one in which we asked him to stop and think aloud after he read the word "spirits" in the context of drinks. John interpreted "spirits" as a Spanish cognate of "espíritus" (ghosts), and we wanted to test whether John would be able to revise his first interpretation of "spirits" once he noticed words that referred to drinks and liquor in the text. After reading the two statements surrounding the word "spirits", which clarified that the word refers to "drinks" and not to "ghosts", John did not revise his interpretation despite the fact that it did not make sense with the upcoming ideas in the paragraph:

Text: Apart from the official program, it is a round-the-clock party, fueled by large quantities of spirits. An estimated 100,000 cases of rum and aguardiente (anise-flavored liquor) are sold.

John: Hum...habla de espíritus, cantidades de espíritus. [It talks about ghosts, numbers of ghosts]. But I didn't know about this part in Carnaval de Barranquilla!

Notice that John could have used two clues from the text to revise his first interpretation of the word "spirits". The first clue was embedded in the phrase "large quantities of spirits", which indicates that spirits is a non-countable noun. With this clue, a more strategic reader may have been able to stop and consider whether "espíritus", a countable noun, could be the right meaning of the word (large numbers of spirits vs. large quantities of spirits). The second clue was in the context of the statement immediately following the word "spirits", which referred to alcoholic drinks. Nevertheless, John did not use either one of these two clues to infer the meaning of "spirits". Instead, John chose to accommodate the interpretation of the whole text to his understanding of the word "spirits" ("I didn't know about this part in Carnaval de Barranquilla"), and he did not question or revise his

interpretation using information from the text. An important metacognitive strategy, monitoring comprehension has been identified as a major characteristic of EFL successful college-level reading (Zhang, 2001), where more successful readers differed from less successful ones in that they knew the importance of checking comprehension. John's data did not indicate that he engaged in revising his understanding of the text.

### **4.3 Mario: Higher Reading Proficiency and Coordinated Strategy Use Conducive to Successful Reading Comprehension**

From the onset of the think-aloud, Mario decided to report his thoughts in English. Although his oral language proficiency is still developing, Mario managed to effectively demonstrate his comprehension of the text through his second language. Unlike John, Mario soon demonstrated that not only he possessed more effective strategies for reading comprehension, but also that he was able to evoke more metacognitive strategies.

#### *a. Accurate Interpretive Paraphrasing in L2*

Mario showed a tendency to make a paraphrased interpretation of the text. We refer to this reading behavior as “interpretive paraphrasing” because Mario did not just repeat the text in his own words. Instead, he contributed extra information to his interpretation, mostly coordinating his understanding with the use of previous knowledge, inferences, and summaries, thus producing a rich and accurate interpretation of the text. While John used paraphrased translation (i.e., paraphrased the text in Spanish), Mario used English to yield his interpretive paraphrasing. This choice suggests Mario's higher English proficiency. The following excerpts illustrate Mario's application of interpretive paraphrasing of the English text:

#### Example 1:

Text: ...paralyzes all normal city activities...

Mario: So, they don't work! They don't do all more normal activities that is common in Colombia. They celebrate for entirely, yeah? They don't work that day. That is amazing, ok?

### Example 2:

Text: When thousands of party-goers put on costumes.

Mario: Yes, they get dressed with special dresses.

Text: And file through the streets.

Mario: Ok, so they walk for the streets with special costumes.

### Example 3:

Text: On Monday, there is El Festival de Orquestas, a marathon concert of Caribbean music groups.

Mario: They expose all the Caribbean music they have.

In the three examples, Mario depicts immediately his comprehension of the text by using accurate inferences. For instance, in the first example, he infers from the phrase “paralyze all normal city activities” the thought “So, they don’t work!”, and he continues by adding his opinion “That is common in Colombia”, and his reaction “That’s amazing”. In the second example, Mario accurately paraphrases the meaning of the text and summarizes by saying, “Ok, so they walk for the streets with special costumes”. Notice that in the phrase “and file through the streets”, Mario did not get stuck in the meaning of the word “file”, although this was most likely an unfamiliar word for him in such context. Unlike John, Mario seemed to be able to put together the meaning suggested in the previous sentence with the elements from the second to produce his interpretation, regardless of whether he understood the meaning of one isolated word. In the third example, he takes advantage of the cognates “marathon” and “Caribbean” to produce the paraphrased interpretation “They expose all the Caribbean music they have”. The interpretive paraphrasing strategy seemed very natural and automatic for Mario. His interpretive capacity seems to be one that comes from knowing how to access the text for comprehension and from using the material embedded in the text to his advantage.

### *b. Recognition and Use of the Text Structure*

A metacognitive reading strategy used by Mario throughout the text was the use of text structure. In this case, he outlined the order of the information on the text to produce a summary, and depicted the most important parts of the text. In the following example, Mario reads and orally identifies the places in the text where the author gives clues to the reader about how the text is structured. At the end of the reading, he produced a summary where he highlighted the information gathered by using the text structure.

Mario: [Reads] “The Gran Carnaval”...the title of the text”.

Text: The carnival begins on Saturday with La Batalla de las Flores.

Mario: The first thing exposed.

Text: It continues on Sunday with La Gran Parada.

Mario: It’s the second thing they celebrate.

Text: On Monday, there is El Festival de Orquestas.

Mario: It’s the third thing they celebrate. It’s the third day.

[Summarizes using the Outline]

Text: Apart from the official program, it is a round-the-clock party.

Mario: Maybe apart the official program, La Gran Parada, La Batalla de Flores, and all those things, people just...feel in a party.

In this example, Mario identified the title of the text first and the sequence of activities mentioned in the text by labeling them with the order in which they appeared (“The first thing exposed”, “It’s the second thing they celebrate”, “It’s the third thing they celebrate”). Thus, he identifies that the text has a sequential structure, and he takes advantage of this structure to make a mental map of the text. In the summary he provided, he uses the outlined information to summarize his comprehension so far (“La Gran Parada, La Batalla de Flores, and all those things”), and to continue adding the ideas from the text (“People just feel in a party”).

*c. Sophisticated use of Prior Knowledge*

Like John, Mario was aware that he could use his prior knowledge to figure out information from the text. However, Mario utilized his prior knowledge in a more sophisticated manner than John, recalling his culturally-based knowledge to make connections to the text. In the following example, Mario announces that he will use known information to interpret the concept of the “symbolic burial of Joselito Carnaval”:

Text: [The Carnaval concludes on Tuesday with a symbolic burial of Joselito Carnaval]

Mario: They buried him. I have a previous knowledge and I think I am going to use it here. I know that dead and in Pacific places and Atlantic places usually when a child when a child died they say good-bye to him with a party, they don't say good-bye to him crying or doing things we make here sometimes. Maybe that burial was too important and Joselito was a man with amazing energy, yes? And he was a really good man so they didn't wanna to say good-bye to him ah...crying, and think that they consider that as a party, to burial, a symbolic burial of Joselito Carnaval. As the thing that people made with Celia Cruz and the thing that people did with Fanny Mickey.

Although the burial of Joselito carnival was not related to the wake and funeral rituals that Mario referred to in his interpretation, Mario made a connection between the text and his prior knowledge that led him to the idea that the burial of Joselito Carnaval was not a gloomy event. In his interpretation, Mario accessed cultural knowledge he possessed (“They don't say good-bye to him crying or doing things we make here.”) and recalled similar events (“As the thing that people made with Celia Cruz and the thing that people did with Fanny Mickey”) to render his interpretation. Mario's strategy use, like the effective readers in studies of reading comprehension (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Jiménez, 1997; Jiménez et al., 1996; Kamhi-Stein, 2003; Yin & Agnes, 2001; Zhang, 2001) demonstrated that he could effectively use the cultural, experiential, and linguistic knowledge in his native language to support his comprehension of English text.



#### *d. Multiple Strategies to Figure out Unfamiliar Vocabulary*

Unlike John, who resorted to one only strategy to figure out unknown words (i.e., focus on the unknown word in isolation), Mario seemed to have a larger repertoire of strategies to cope with unfamiliar vocabulary in the text. For example, Mario tried to identify phonetic similarities between English words to figure out the meaning of the unknown word. When he read “a float parade”, he said, “I don’t know what a float is...I don’t know if with like a party...parade, parade, float parade”, thus associating the word “parade” with “party”. Mario also used neighboring words and the surrounding context to figure out the meaning of unknown English words.

Text: [An estimated 100,000 cases of rum and aguardiente]

Mario: They show our traditional liquid, our traditional alcohol. [An estimated 100,000 cases of rum] I don’t know what rum means [and aguardiente] oh! Rum! Oh, yes! Rum is another alcoholic drink. [...] because rum and aguardiente both are similar things.

When Mario encountered a word to which he could not apply the strategies above, he did not focus his concentration on the specific word, but rather continued reading, thus taking advantage of the overall meaning of the text for general comprehension. Unlike John, who dwelled on the word and could not continue reading to figure out the general meaning of the text, Mario did not seem to feel constrained by one word to continue understanding the text. Instead, he gave the meaning of the word a try, and when he realized that the meaning did not fit, he announced that he would proceed to use the context. In the following example, Mario was able to use the context to figure out the cautionary message that the text wanted to convey by using the phrase “as at all such crowded events”:

Text: Unfortunately, as at all such crowded events...

Mario: Crowded events ... crowded, crowded, crowded, crowded. I just saw that word few days ago and now I can’t remember. The word “crown” is similar, crown in English, yes, but it is not related with that, it’s different. Crowded. \*I try to deduced because of context. [Reads] “Unfortunately, as at all such crowded events, it’s a focus for all sorts of local and visiting thieves

and robbers.” Ah! Yeah! As all celebrations, I think [reads] “as at all such crowded events”, as all celebrations, yes, with festivals and things like that [reads] “It’s a focus all sorts of local and visiting thieves and robbers.” So, the people must be careful at that time during the festival. People must be careful, yeah? Because thieves and robbers, ah... *aprovechan*, what is the word for that in English?

A main characteristic of Mario’s approach to unfamiliar vocabulary was his insistence in the search for meaning despite the presence of unknown words. Like John, Mario encountered difficulties with the use of the word “book” in the context of “unless you have booked a room well in advance”. However, Mario used more strategies to identify the meaning of this phrase, which resulted in more effective meaning-making than John’s. Like John, Mario examined the word “book” morphologically, figuring out that it was a verb. But, contrary to John, who gave up the search for the meaning of the word “booked”, Mario realized that figuring out the part of speech that the word represented was not enough to make meaning of the phrase. In the following excerpt, Mario’s think aloud unveils his process of making meaning of the whole idea in the text:

Mario: Only if you have booked, booked, booked, I know the word booked, maybe it is used as a verb here or as a noun, I don’t know [reads] “only if you have booked a room”. Booked, maybe check, [reads] “a room well in advance”...uhm... I see “unless” as a connector too. I think is like “*sin embargo*”, maybe. [reads] “Unless”. I don’t know, a recommendation, [reads] “unless you have booked”, or “*no está de más*” [reads] “unless you have booked”... I don’t know... [reads] “unless you have booked a room well in advance”. Yes, I think I was saying it right, [reads] “only if you have booked a room well in advanced, because you can almost forget about finding a place to stay”. I think I almost right.

When he finds out that focusing on the meaning of the word “booked” was not going to be fruitful for his overall comprehension, Mario proceeded to further explore the meaning of the whole sentence by using other elements within the phrase. For example, Mario translated the meaning of the connector “unless”, replaced the verb “book” with the verb “check”, and used the context given by the second clause of the sentence “..., you can almost forget about finding a place to stay” to figure out the meaning of the entire

sentence. His statement “I think I was saying it right” indicates that Mario understood the message of the text. When asked to explain how he figured out the meaning of the phrase “unless you have booked a room well in advance”, he replied:

Mario: I try to separate the word and to check for example “book”, that it is a noun, yeah, “book”; and I try to deduce that it’s used as a verb there, “booked, booked”, yeah? In past verb, in past. [reads] “Unless you have booked a room”, or unless you have checked a room, maybe.

The data underscores Mario’s interest to make sense of what he reads, even if it takes focusing on a sentence for a longer time. Like Mario, younger proficient bilingual readers such as those in Jiménez, García & Pearson’s studies (1995, 1996), demonstrated a heightened tendency to make sense of the text, even if it meant to persevere and to go back to the part where the meaning was not clear.

#### **4.4 Conclusions of John and Mario’s Reading Performance**

The two cases presented here depict undergraduate students of teaching English as a foreign language who are different in their reading proficiency, as revealed by their reading comprehension strategy use. Mario’s heightened sense of strategies and when to use them while reading seemed to make the difference between his and John’s reading proficiency. Mario’s case aligns with the finding by Fotovatian & Shokrpour (2007), where the better EFL college-level readers used more cognitive and metacognitive strategies, more frequently, and more effectively than the poorer readers. In other words, the number and the quality of reading strategies do matter when it comes to comprehend written text. The fact that Mario rendered his think aloud in English suggested that he felt more confident of his oral English proficiency than John. From interacting orally with the students in English, we knew that Mario’s oral English was more developed than John’s, and initially thought that Mario’s higher oral English oral proficiency could have positively impacted his reading performance. However, after analyzing the thought processes of Mario’s think-alouds, we realized that it was Mario’s more sophisticated reading abilities, and not his oral English proficiency,

what made him a more successful reader than John. We feel confident to suggest that even if Mario had more limited English oral skills, he still would have been able to produce an accurate comprehension of the text, even if the report was in Spanish.

In John's case, a small repertoire of strategies, together with a fragmented strategy use, made it difficult for him to comprehend the text. Undoubtedly, John's low English oral proficiency level, and lack of extensive vocabulary in English was an additional factor that constrained his interpretation of text. However, we concluded that John's comprehension difficulties in English were seemingly due more to his reading abilities, and not to his English proficiency. His comprehension was highly inhibited by his inability to make cognitive connections as he read and to evaluate what "his mind was doing" –through metacognition--to make sense of the passage. We speculate that if John knew more about reading strategies and how to apply them in Spanish, he would have been able to use these strategies when reading in English.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION AND RESEARCH**

The importance of explicitly teaching reading strategies has been highlighted by several researchers (Pressley et al., 1992). The findings in the present study lead us to agree. Readers like John, who are in the process of developing English skills and lack reading comprehension abilities, could benefit highly from explicit strategy training. Teachers of students like John could help them improve their reading comprehension by reading aloud to the students and engaging in think-alouds to show how readers can use make sense of a text by using strategies. From this study, we particularly highlight three strategies that can be readily used by teachers in their reading classes, regardless of the language of instruction: Evoking L1 prior knowledge, making cross-linguistic connections through words, and exploiting the text structure. Mario's sophisticated use of his prior cultural and linguistic knowledge in the L1 enabled him to make connections that allowed him to understand the ideas in the English text. We are left to wonder whether John had a similar knowledge of the cultural traditions in Colombia. Teachers

should encourage students to use their previous experiences and knowledge to make sense of text, and in the case that students do not have the appropriate prior knowledge to comprehend a passage—which could have been John’s case— teachers should build students’ background knowledge.

John’s lack of use of cognate words to understand English text makes us realize that Colombian undergraduate foreign language teacher education students, and possibly English students in general, may require explicit and direct training on how to use cognates to their advantage. Our experience teaching English makes us realize that English instruction for EFL students may put too much of an emphasis on the explicit instruction of false cognates (e.g., embarrassed, attend, molest, constipation) in an attempt to prevent students from miscommunicating with their interlocutors. We think this is an important instructional task, one that English teachers should do. However, true Spanish-English cognates are much more common than false cognates in text, and the findings in this study suggest that teachers cannot take for granted that students will be able to recognize them. It would be worthwhile to provide instructional opportunities to explicitly teach our students the cross-linguistic connections of low frequency cognate words (e.g., inculcate/inculcar, arrive/arribar) and of less transparent cognate words (e.g., peril/peligro; code/código, acquire/adquirir). This type of instruction can help students and teachers develop a curiosity for the origin of words and a heightened awareness of cross-linguistic lexical connections.

Mario’s use of the text structure to support his comprehension demonstrated a heightened use of metacognitive skills, which he directed to paying attention to how the text is written. Mario’s case shows how readers can use the structure of a text as a resource for comprehension. Teachers can raise awareness in their students of the way writers structure their sentences, paragraphs, and entire compositions to aid their reading comprehension. Teachers can encourage the development of conceptual maps based on texts to help students visualize the structure of the text.

Earlier in this paper, we argue that L1 reading strategies impact reading in English, and we believe that this was the case for John and Mario. Nevertheless,

due to the scope of the present study, the two cases were limited to their strategy use when only reading in English. Research efforts towards the exploration of *bilingual* (rather than *monolingual*) reading skills among the EFL pre-service teacher population are worth undertaking. A bilingual perspective on the use of reading strategies could further inform the reading performance of EFL learners. It is paramount that further research with pre-service teachers in foreign language education programs explore the L1 reading comprehension strategy use in this population and examine the potential that explicit strategy instruction may have in their bilingual reading development. Effective reading instruction to students in TEFL programs today may have the potential to positively impact their future classroom reading instruction tomorrow.

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