Does the Cultural Context Influence on Reading Comprehension?

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Abstract

Language is an essential tool that shapes human interactions and understanding from birth, blending innate abilities with environmental factors. Oral language is the first form of communication, while written language develops through structured learning. Piaget's theory suggests a strong connection between language development and cognitive growth, with cultural context playing a significant role. Sociolinguistic theory also emphasizes how social and cultural factors influence linguistic interactions, shaping expression in different settings. This study examined the relationship between reading comprehension and cultural identity. A reading test, featuring texts reflecting diverse linguistic and cultural realities, was administered to 120 students in Barranquilla. The test included informal, informational, and literary readings, each tied to specific contexts. The results demonstrated that students more easily understood culturally familiar texts, while unfamiliar contexts posed greater challenges. This suggests that cultural familiarity significantly enhances reading comprehension, while cultural distance can hinder interpretation. The findings highlight the critical role of cultural and linguistic context in reading comprehension. Texts aligned with a reader's cultural experiences improve understanding and retention, pointing to the need for educational approaches that integrate

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students' cultural backgrounds to enhance learning and motivation.

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1. Introduction

In the vast journey of human development, from the first whispers of life to the complex interactions of everyday life, language stands like a beacon in the depths of knowledge. It is the invisible fabric that binds us together (Lagneaux, 2018), the primordial tool that shapes our interactions and defines our understanding of the world (Ríos, 2010). But how is this language that defines us forged? What role does the cultural context play in the formation and understanding of this linguistic framework, both in its oral and written expression?

From the moment we are born, we are immersed in an ocean of sounds and gestures, where every look, every caress, every word, sows the seeds of understanding (Tapia & Duñabeitia, 2021). Language acquisition is a journey that begins from the first heartbeat, a dance between the innate abilities of the brain and the influences of the environment (Jablonka, 2017; Smith & Durham, 2019). Oral language, with its richness of tones, inflections and nuances, becomes the first echo of our voice in the world, guided by patterns established by those around us, mainly our parents.

On the other hand, written language emerges as a connected universe, as described by Ballesteros (2016), and seen as one more form of the evolution of language, it is one of the two sides of the same coin that, when combined with reading, come together in a dimension where words take shape on the canvas of knowledge. tracing paths of meaning that are intertwined with our previous experiences and knowledge. Unlike oral language, learning written language requires more direct guidance, from the hand of the adult who teaches us to decode the symbols that make up this graphic universe, but... does its acquisition develop in a better way if what we read responds to the experiences and knowledge derived from the achievement of oral language?

Jean Piaget's theory of development (Piaget, 1987) provides a solid basis for understanding the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition. Piaget postulates that language development is intertwined with the cognitive development of the individual, advancing through defined stages of assimilation, adaptation, and accommodation. From this perspective, the cultural context not only acts as an external framework for language acquisition, but also influences the way in which the child organizes and understands the world, establishing the processes and skills that he develops in each aspect of it.

Sociolinguistic theory, on the other hand, sheds light on the influence of the social context on the acquisition and use of language. This theory holds that language is not simply an abstract communication system, but is intrinsically linked to the social norms and structures of a community (Feldman, 2019; C Hamann & Ruigendijk, 2015; López Ornat, 2012; Smith & Durham, 2019). In this way, the cultural context acts as a filter through which our linguistic interactions are shaped, determining which forms of expression are considered appropriate or effective in a given environment, making the speaker a subject with communicative

competencies, to the extent that it links sociocultural factors of language use, thus allowing the use of all the semiotic systems that are available to him as a member of a community. (Fuenmayor & Villasmil, 2013)

It is here that the influence of the cultural context becomes palpable, like an invisible thread that weaves the foundations of our understanding of language (Li et al., 2023). Context not only acts as the carrier of language, but as the mold that shapes our perceptions and understandings (Palomino et al., 2022). Each culture, each community, imprints its unique stamp on the way we conceive and understand the world around us, and language, in all its forms, is no exception (Domeniconi & Gràcia, 2018).

From the above, the relationship between the foundations that support the development of language from each component and its influence on the construction of written language is clarified (Resina & Salas, 2021), which has an impact on reading comprehension. Language stands as a fundamental basis for creating and writing in the written field, being one of its most significant forms of expression. At the same time, it is a crucial element for a deep and effective interpretation during comprehensive reading (Mendoza Machado, 2021).

This allows us to establish one of the crucial relationships between the cultural context and reading and writing comprehension, evidencing how language is constructed and expressed in a specific cultural framework. It is essential that these dimensions maintain a close connection, which highlights the importance of reflecting on and studying how this relationship is addressed in the teaching of reading and writing and its levels of comprehension. If this is not the case, the educational process and the didactics used to stimulate the development of these competencies could be deficient.

And it is that, being immersed in the educational environment, it is necessary to ask ourselves; How do cultural experiences and experiences influence our ability to decipher the signs that make up written language? How does the cultural closeness between the text and the reader impact the ability to extract its meaning and build from it the inferences of a good reader?

To answer the questions, it is necessary to understand the context as the carrier of language, a language that is adopted and adapted to the individual's convenience. If this premise is taken as a basis, we could infer that one of the best ways to teach, facilitate and understand reading and writing is to present the learner with oral transformations typical of their native context, since the understanding of written language will be favored by the management and appropriation of oral language. In this order of ideas, it is preferable to teach reading and writing from a message that is impregnated and identified from what is lived and evoked from its frequent use in oral language.

Reading is then forged from its essence as "a constructive and inferential process in which the reader is not limited only to stringing together the meanings of the different words that make up the text, but, based on his or her previous knowledge and experiences (including emotional ones), reconstructs the overall meaning of the text" (Pérez & Cervá, 2009), maintaining a dialogic interaction.

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To substantiate the above, a pilot is proposed on reading and writing comprehension in secondary vocational education students, based on the hypothesis that the closer the written text is culturally and contextually, the more skilled the reading will be and the better the comprehension of it will be.

2. Discussion

"The variation of the communicative situation

It modifies linguistic behavior:

in less hostile situations the same

individuals display a behavior

fluent linguistic" (Jurado, F. Bustamante, 1997).

Clinging to experimentation, in the constant search to understand the intricate framework of language and its roots in the cultural context, a reading test is proposed that defies borders in the search for the sustenance of this hypothesis that intertwines understanding and identity. To do this, a test is generated based on linguistic nuances from various parts of the world and applied to 120 young students from Barranquilla in tenth and eleventh grade.

The test is made up of six readings, divided into three groups (informal text, informative text, literary text). Each group of readings presents 2 writings; in the first group, writings are taken from social networks, one from a person from Argentina and the other from a Barranquillero, each phrase represents the richness of the daily expression of their places of origin.

1.   Cousin, let's see when we can fix an afternoon or night and meet for a beer.

2.   Heart, we have a night of wines, music and pending conversations.

The second group of readings presents us with two informative writings about carnival; one of them transports us to the vibrant festivities of the Rio de Janeiro Carnival, while the other takes us to the cobblestone streets where the Barranquilla carnival and its dances pass, each paragraph explaining occurrences of the cultural diversity that defines each of these world events.

1.   Belén will be honored by the Emperatriz Samba School Recreational Guild during the parade of samba schools at the Rio de Janeiro Carnival in 2013. School board representatives were in Belén on Saturday to present the school's plot and invite composers to participate in the best samba contest with the theme "La Para" – Brazil's Muiraquitã – where dances such as Capoeira, Frevo, Lambada and Axé will also be presented. The carnival theme is signed by Mario Monteiro, Kaká and Cahe Rodrigues Monteiro. The Empress promises to thrill fans around the world.

2.   The evening will be in the framework of a folkloric and musical show that has the choreographic direction of Danilo Peña, called 'Carnival of Barranquilla: Joy, Party and Fantasy', which has the participation of 200 dancers who for more than forty-five minutes will pay tribute to the Caribbean through its different rhythms (cumbia, porro and mapalé) and his music

teachers Joe Arroyo, Esthercita Forero and Pacho Galán. The characters of the songs of the bride of Barranquilla, 'Joselito Carnaval' and 'Juanita' will be common threads in which the Harlequin Devils of Sabanalarga, image of the 2012 party, will be presented.

And finally, in the third group, we immerse students in literary narratives that are intimate with the streets of Barcelona and Barranquilla, where the characters come to life between the pages and whispers of a real past. These writings, which we will not be able to display because they are part of literary works, contained segments such as these:

1.   Barcelona, December 1957 (extracted from "THE PRISONER OF HEAVEN". by Carlos Ruiz Zafón) (Zafón, 2011).

-       "That year Christmas dawned every day of lead and frost."

-       "A bluish gloom dyed the city and people passed by wrapped up to their ears and drawing with their breath traces of steam in the cold."

-       "While he smoked and meditated on what he should do, Armando took out a piece of page from La Vanguardia that he had been carrying in his pocket for days." There, buried between advertisements for sashes and briefs on the current affairs of shows in the Paralelo"

-       "… it was said that no one had ever managed to escape from that impregnable fortress of Montjuic".

2.   Colombian Atlantic Coast, year 1928 (extracted from "LA CASA GRANDE". by Álvaro Cepeda Samudio) (Cepeda, 1962).

-       "She followed a strange rule to choose my dresses according to the weather, according to the heat, the wind and the rain. I, on the other hand, believed that I should dress according to the games I thought of for that day."

-       "… she opened drawers, closed drawers, ordered the disaster of the first battle around the aguamanil, collected everything that had been scattered on the floor or put it back in its place, without being alluded to."

-       "… if the father saw them dirty with mud at lunchtime, he punished me harshly."

-       "… I forgot about my anger and as Isabel tickled the soles of my feet, we both laughed and I let myself put my shoes on without protesting."

-       "… My sister would get off the chair and go to the cemented and clean courtyard where the gigantic caimitos covered almost the entire sky."

-       "It rained in the early morning, we are going to catch crickets among the begonias. When it rains, the begonias always wake up full of crickets."

As can be detailed, they experimented with writings that went beyond reading comprehension, with a journey that shares not only the written letters, but also the linguistic and cultural identity of the places where they occur, a key factor that provides interpretation to the text.

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Literacy may not provide tools to decipher what an Argentinian means when he asks "when we fix the afternoon or the night", and if the reader does not have the knowledge of the meaning of a beer, then the comprehension of his reading will be lost.

On the other hand, under the anchorage of their own realities, it is surely easier for a native of Barranquilla to transform grapheme-phoneme, interpret information and comprehend reading, when reading cumbia, porro and mapalé, than when reading Capoeira, Frevo, Lambada and Axé. The same will happen when a child growing up in a relentlessly temperate climate reads "drawing with his breath traces of steam in the cold", or "the Avant-garde", or "Parallel" or "Montjuic".

In the experiment, the 120 students were faced with a questionnaire designed to test their comprehension and retention of the text, which also invited them to reflect on the resonance of each reading in their own being.

To understand reading in all its complexity, it is essential to consider the detailed process involved. Goodman (1976) cited by (Romero & Gómez (2009) describes it as a psycholinguistic game where the reader unravels the meaning based on his or her own expectations based on linguistic indicators that have been developed throughout the interaction with his or her environment. This process implies a close relationship between the semiotic production of space, the context and the idea conveyed in the text.

According to the research of Lizarazú Bernal, (2018), students take a passive stance before reading, limiting themselves to a literal interpretation. To blur literacy, it is necessary to provide tools that stimulate the reader's analytical participation, taking them to an inferential level through interaction with the text, promoting a greater approach to the interpretation of reading and allowing a deep understanding of the implicit message.

In this order, text comprehension implies the construction of meanings through a cognitive effort that requires prior knowledge and motivation. This understanding implies that the more familiarity there is between the language of the author and the reader, the easier, more agile, efficient, and comprehensive reading will be (Gladic-Miralles et al., 2018). That is, the understanding of a text is subject to the reader possessing cultural richness in the field in which it is inscribed.

Authors such as Eco (1987) cited by (Mondaca & Quintana, 2012), mention how presenting rote and decontextualized reading exercises to students in a classroom, makes the exercise lose value, turning it into a completely visual decoding activity, ignoring the importance of the relationship between the competitive development of reading and their social formation, establishing social barriers that diminish their taste for reading.

For Mendoza (2003) cited by (Romo, 2019):

"Reading is a process of constructing meanings from textual stimuli, in which not only the text or the work are the elements that provide information and content, but, in order for the true effect of reading to be produced, it is necessary to also count on the contributions of the receiver and on the activation of that personal knowledge relevant to the understanding of what is exposed and presented by the text" (p. 175)

When accessing a text that does not belong to the reader's domain, the reader could be clouded by the lack of knowledge of words, of which it will not have semantic or conceptual representation, so that the lexical recognition of them will be altered, thus compromising the final meaning of the writing. On the contrary, the fact that the reader can access a piece of writing with familiar content will facilitate its reading, supported by facilitating conditions such as frequent oral use, which will dynamize its visual recognition, and thus its semantic location in a context.

The importance of knowledge of words and context in learning to read and write is exalted in the research carried out by Díaz et al. (2015), in their work they sought to highlight the importance of various dimensions involved in learning to read and write. In the results of the research, the third most important aspect was related to the dimensions of the child's knowledge, which included aspects such as interests, previous experiences, motivations and individual and family characteristics within their social and cultural context. Respondents emphasized the relevance of recognizing and respecting the special needs and language particularities of children from vulnerable social backgrounds, valuing their interactions and avoiding overriding their personal history, as this is essential to work effectively and respectfully.

That is why, we could do print reading or global reading (not phonetics, since it would imply the syllabic reading of a word due to its ignorance), in a more agile, fast and comprehensive way, of words that even their pronunciation is different from their writing, if it becomes familiar; then, even if we only speak Spanish, we could fluently read the word McDonalds or even overlook what in Spanish would be a spelling error if we readChevrolet, because they are socially established words with which there is frequent contact. The opposite would occur with Peppermint or Arnica at the time of its automatic reading, unless we are related, due to particular situations, with aromatic plants. Hence, prior knowledge allows for greater fluency in automatic reading, while at the same time making a better understanding of the content of the text.

All this theoretical conceptualization explains the results obtained, since for the students the second readings, in the three groups, were always more familiar, therefore, easier to read and more understood, since they came from culturally known spaces.

From these conceptualizations, reading should be considered a communicative process in which various actors converge, such as the text itself, the reader and the writer; allowing everyone to play an active role in all parts. The text, generating a hieroglyph that deciphers the reconstruction of reality transmitted by the writer, who writes it from his experience and experiences, and the reader, who decomposes it to understand it from his own (Ballesteros, 2016).

The experiment, then, allows us to report that the students had a 45.7% higher accuracy rate when asked about the message that invited wines, music and conversations, than when arranging an afternoon or evening and a beer. A 31.4% more correct answer in the second reading of the second group when proposing, after the reading, information about the prizes, dances and places referred to and immersed in the informative reading about the Rio carnival and the Barranquilla carnival.

The results of the third group of readings show errors in interpreting "La Vanguardia" as a news medium, compared to the ease they had in interpreting that crickets were hidden in the begonia.

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This supports that the learning of reading and writing is commanded by the interrelation between language, thought and experiences. According to this foundation, two types of information are involved in the reading process; one of a visual nature and the other of a non-visual nature. The visual information corresponds to the graphic signs, graphemes, provided by the author. On the other hand, the reader's prior knowledge, referring to his language and the appropriation of the subject treated in the writing, represents the non-visual element; therefore, the comprehension of the text will be subject to the interaction of these two referents. However, non-visual information is privileged because it is this that allows the lexical interpretation of the content, since the exact decoding of what is written is not enough for a fluent and comprehensive reading (Escudero, 2010; Henao, 1988). Therefore, reading writings with content specific to the context will facilitate reading and favor the understanding of their information.

Now, when establishing a relationship of this type, between the depth and complexity of reading comprehension and the systematicity of superficially automatic reading, it is important to direct the processes of acquisition of reading comprehension skills in students, to a transit through the discovery of facilitators that allow them to understand how, from their entry into processes of cultural knowledge, they will be facilitated to appropriate the message that the written text carries in its lines. In the process of teaching reading skills, it is not only a matter of guaranteeing those who learn to access quality reading material, but of changing the mental constructs, concepts and ideologies of those who mediate reading and how and with what they do it. (Ballesteros, 2016)

Therefore, by understanding reading as a communicative tool, each person who deciphers it from its active manifestation in the message and not as words to be decoded, will understand its function as a cultural phenomenon linked to human sensitivity, which includes their interests and experiences from the personal, social, economic, scientific and professional levels.

3. Conclusion

This reflection paper underlines the crucial importance of cultural context in language acquisition, emphasizing the reflection of language comprehension skills in its written form. Through a conceptual and reflective analysis, it is evident that language is more than a mere communication system; It is a dynamic construct influenced by the individual's social and cultural interactions.

Research has shown that, from birth, human beings are immersed in an environment rich in linguistic stimuli that shape their ability to understand and use language. This process is not isolated, but is deeply intertwined with the individual's cultural experiences and social context. Thus, Jean Piaget's theory of language development and the contributions of sociolinguistics provide a robust theoretical framework that highlights how language and thought evolve together, influenced by the cultural and social environment.

The results of the experiment with students from Barranquilla clearly reflect that the cultural closeness between the text and the reader significantly improves reading comprehension. The students showed greater accuracy and fluency in the interpretation of texts that were culturally

closer to their daily reality. This suggests that familiarity with the cultural context not only facilitates the decoding of words, but also allows for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the text.

In educational terms, these findings have important implications for literacy education. An approach that integrates the student's cultural experiences and contexts should be encouraged, as this not only improves motivation and interest in reading, but also enhances comprehension skills. Teaching reading and writing based on culturally relevant content that is close to the student facilitates more effective and meaningful learning. (Sastre-Gómez et al., 2017)

Although it is true that reading involves decoding graphic signs and converting them into phonemes and meanings, this is an approach focused on mechanical reading and does not consider crucial elements for reading comprehension; This reflection paper highlights the need to reevaluate the didactic methodologies used in the teaching of reading and writing. Authors such as Vromans et al. (2023) indicate within their research on intercultural learning in the classroom: facilitators and challenges of the learning process, that for the development of processes of comprehension of texts classified as academic, a didactics according to their needs is required and that the students who participated in the study learned through reflection on previous intercultural experiences and explored their own cultural values, which is important for intercultural competence, with which the theory presented in the course and the learning tool facilitated abstract conceptualizations.

Observing teaching from a multimodal approach allows us to see how teachers use multiple semiotic resources that are assembled as strategies to teach their learners to read and write. Yousefpoori-naeim et al. (2023) cited by (Bernal Saire et al. (2023) "point out that the characteristics of the reader and the intervention of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors determine students' performance in the comprehension of academic texts."

These resources can lead those who promote them to understand reading as a form of production and access to knowledge and, therefore, to elucidate it as a two-way process of acculturation, where culture leads the subject to facilitate comprehensive reading, at the same time that it acculturates and creates culture, by leading him to know what the world expresses to him in scientific advances, literary and technological for their personal or professional growth.

Reading must therefore be understood as a dynamic and multifaceted process that goes beyond the simple decoding of words, where individuals not only interpret the text in isolation, but also actively interact with it, constructing meanings through the integration of their previous knowledge and various textual and situational signals. This process is deeply influenced by the social and cultural context of the reader, which highlights the subjective and contextual nature of reading comprehension, where each reader, with his or her unique background of experiences and knowledge, can extract different interpretations of the same text, enriching his or her understanding through a complex and continuous interaction between the text and the context in which it is situated. (Romo, 2019)

The inclusion of texts that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of students can be an effective strategy to improve reading comprehension and promote a more inclusive and equitable education. Thus, the idea that language, in all its expressions, is not a static entity, but a living

tool that evolves and adapts to the context of the speaker, is reinforced. For this reason, and under the use of new technologies that respond to the demands of interests close to the new generations, it would be very easy to build individualized writings based on the reality of each student as a teaching strategy and strengthening reading.

In addition, for (Marín et al. (2017) cited by (Esquivel (2018).current teaching methods have led to give a new direction to the patterns of education, the emergence of new technologies, induce their articulation with the competencies in the learning models; strengthening the processes in order to respond to the demands of today's society.

In conclusion, the cultural context plays a fundamental role in education, which is inherent to the human being, where the transmission of the living legacy of experiences and knowledge allows the oral or written tradition to be maintained, thus facilitating the understanding of the world and enriching individual and social life. (Tobón, 2016) This same context then becomes an evolving one, a challenge towards the journey of discovery, a journey in the constant search for new horizons and challenges, formation and understanding of language, oral or written. The interrelationship between language, thought and cultural experiences not only facilitates the acquisition of it, but also enriches the comprehension of reading. This perspective highlights the importance of considering reading as a deeply personal and culturally framed act, which varies from one individual to another and from one community to another, reflecting the diversity of human experiences.

It is therefore essential that educational processes recognize and value this interconnectedness, promoting a pedagogical approach that reflects and respects the cultural diversity of the participants in the process. By doing so, not only is reading comprehension improved, but also a more humane education is fostered and sensitive to the realities of each individual.

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