

1. Chapter one: Introduction

1.1. Introduction and Contextual Background

Reading comprehension, including its environment and its elements, has received much attention when it comes to exploring it in the native language of any person. However, little research has been conducted about this process in bilingual individuals. So, what does reading comprehension mean? When explaining the term *comprehension*, Smith (2004) refers to it with other terms such as *understanding* or *making sense*. This can be compared with Rholetter's (2014) definition for reading comprehension which says that it is "the process of making meaning of a text" (para. 1). Also, the only way to accomplish the reading comprehension process is through the interaction produced between both the reader and the text (Rholetter, 2014).

Beyond the definition of reading comprehension, the real question for this study is not what readers comprehend when they read but how they achieve that understanding. One way to accomplish this comprehension is through reading strategy use, which Kolić-Vehovec and Bajšanski (2007) define as the restorative actions used to overcome comprehension problems. Aside from reading strategies, Kintsch (1998, as cited in Evans, 2011) says that "readers construct meaning while integrating their existing knowledge with incoming textual information" (p. 54). Evans (2011) also restates that "an essential principle in reading theory is that meaning is not something that is retrievable from a text, but is instead a feature of interaction between text and reader" (p. 54).

Another very important factor to take into consideration when creating meaning out of a text is the comprehension monitoring process (a valuable resource to draw meaning

from text); it has been argued that only good readers have access to this resource. Wagoner (1983, p. 328, as cited in Kolić-Vehovec and Bajšanski, 2007) defines comprehension monitoring as “an executive function, essential for competent reading, which directs the reader’s cognitive processing as he strives to make sense of incoming information” (p. 198). Meanwhile, there are several variables that influence the acquisition of the literacy skills; De Sousa (2012) says that some of these variables are language factors, language background and the educational context in which readers are involved.

The reading comprehension process, the reading comprehension strategies, as well as the reading monitoring process are equally important when an L1 speaker is reading in a foreign language. As Cummins (1979, as cited in Melby-Lervag and Lervag, 2014) says, second-language learners can perform well in the reading comprehension skill because, as with other language skills, this can be transferred from the first language.

The question now for this study is how to define a second-language speaker or a bilingual individual. Baetens Beardsmore (1986) says that “bilingualism as a concept has open-ended semantics” (p. 1). This is because bilingualism can be defined depending on many perspectives such as ability, use, balance of two languages, age of acquisition, development, among other variables. (Baker, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, the present research will provide its own definition of bilingualism due to the fact that no other existing definition fits the description of the participants in this study. This definition, presented in chapter two, takes into consideration other already established definitions. The definition will then draw on the concept of bilingualism as the “active, completely, equal mastery of two or more languages” (Braun,

1937, p. 115, as cited in Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, p. 82); and “the alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual” (Mackey, 1970, p. 555, as cited in Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, p. 86), as well as on the concept of bilinguals, as “(...) those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives” (Grosjean, 2010, p. 4).

Finally, and very important for this research, students should be able to use their L1 (native language) when reading in an L2 (second language). As Perry (2013) explains, the actual use of the L1 in L2 reading comprehension is to be a tool to understand, to define the meaning of words, and to construct the meaning of the text.

1.2. Research Problem and Research Objectives

As mentioned previously, using reading strategies clearly enhances the comprehension of texts. However, the problem that this research project will address is that it remains unclear whether people, particularly students who speak at least another language, transfer to their L2 the reading strategies used in their L1, and whether this transfer helps them improve their reading comprehension.

As a consequence, the objectives of this research project are to determine: 1) the extent to which bilingual International Relations college students transfer reading strategies when reading texts in both Spanish and English, 2) the extent to which this transfer helps International Relations students understand the readings, and 3) the level of awareness International Relations students have of their own reading strategies and of their comprehension monitoring process.

1.3. Research Questions

Derived from the former general objectives, the present project will answer four research questions:

- 1) What kind of reading strategies do bilingual International Relations college students use (if any) when reading texts in both their L1 (Spanish) and their L2 (English)?
- 2) Are the L1 reading strategies transferred to the L2 reading?
- 3) Are International Relations students aware of reading strategy use and of their comprehension monitoring process?
- 4) Do International Relations students use their L1 while reading in their L2?

1.4. Justification of the Study

The reason to conduct this investigation is that the topic of reading comprehension is still puzzling, particularly when related to the strategies that bilingual readers use and to their comprehension monitoring process. Much research has been conducted on the reading comprehension of first language speakers but a lot less has been done on comprehension of bilingual speakers. The present investigation will concentrate on the latter context to expand the research in the field.

Despite the fact that this investigation only includes International Relations students, it might contribute to other fields that promote bilingual instruction, and bring benefits to the Language Department of the UDLAP as well since, depending on the results, specific reading strategies could be introduced in English language courses to guide the students' reading comprehension performance and to encourage their transfer of literacy strategies from Spanish to English.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

Generalization of results was a difficult aspect to cope with and probably the most noticeable limitation of this research because the number of bilingual participants was not large. Similarly, the time to conduct the research was also limited. Because generalizing results was not appropriate, concentrating the discussion on the most relevant results was the best option.

1.6. Description of the Study

This study has a qualitative approach. It includes a general investigation and an analysis of specific results. It also looks at the different reading strategies that bilingual International Relations college students use when reading in their second language in an academic context. The investigation also examines their monitoring process when reading. The study includes two Spanish and two English reading exercises in order to explore the transfer of reading strategies as well as student awareness of the process mentioned above. A more detailed description of the participants, the materials to be used and the methods followed in the study is included in chapter three of this research project.

1.7. Structure of the Thesis

This first chapter has introduced a review of the core literacy concepts, the research problem, goals and questions, and the justification, limitations and description of the study. Chapter two consists of a detailed theoretical background about the main topics of this investigation; some of them have been already introduced in this chapter. These concepts are reading, the reading comprehension process, reading comprehension strategies, the reading monitoring process, language skills, bilingualism and bilingual students. Chapter

three explains in detail the methodology followed to conduct this study (participants, materials and steps) and how data results will be analyzed. Chapter four presents the results obtained in the study and its analysis. The fifth chapter presents the discussion of results and chapter six includes the conclusions of the present research study and some suggestions for further research. This investigation includes as well a reference list and an appendix section with the instruments used in the research.