



Digital Strategy to Strengthen Reading Comprehension in University Students in Montería, Colombia

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Summary

This study analyzes the impact of a digital educational strategy designed to strengthen literal reading comprehension in first-year university students in Montería, Colombia. The research is framed in a qualitative and ethnographic approach, using tools such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation to evaluate the effectiveness of the digital platform "Active Reading". The results reveal that the use of this educational tool contributes significantly to improving reading comprehension skills, promoting more interactive and autonomous learning. Students reported an increase in their motivation and greater ease in interpreting academic texts, suggesting that digital technologies can be a key ally in university teaching. In addition, barriers related to access to technology and the need for continuous training to maximize the use of digital resources were identified. This study highlights the importance of integrating innovative digital platforms into the university curriculum to enhance reading skills and contribute to students' academic success.

Keywords: Digital strategy, reading comprehension, university learning, educational platform.

Publication date: 09 June 2024

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in the academic field, as it allows students to interpret, analyze and reflect on the texts they address in their university education process. In Montería, Colombia, this competence acquires special relevance in first-year students, who often face difficulties in adapting to the cognitive demands of higher education. These difficulties not only impact their academic performance, but also affect their ability to actively participate in academic discussions and to develop critical and reflective reading (Gómez, 2020).

Despite the pedagogical efforts made by educational institutions to improve reading comprehension, the results of diagnostic tests and formative assessments show that a significant proportion of university students still have limitations in literal comprehension, especially in the identification of main ideas, the extraction of relevant information and the interpretation of complex academic texts (Martínez & Pérez, 2021). These difficulties are due, in part, to the gap between secondary and higher education, where teaching methodologies are often more traditional and less interactive, which hinders the transition to autonomous and self-directed learning.

In this context, the use of digital educational strategies emerges as an innovative alternative to strengthen reading comprehension in university students. The digital platform "Active Reading" was designed with the purpose of offering an interactive and adaptive environment where students could practice and improve their reading skills autonomously. This tool incorporates multimedia resources, guided reading activities, and formative assessment exercises, which allow the student to monitor their progress and receive immediate feedback, key elements for meaningful learning (Serra & Cegarra, 2018).

This study focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of the "Active Reading" platform in strengthening the reading comprehension of first-year students at a university in Montería. Using a qualitative and ethnographic approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive view of students' experiences with this educational tool. In addition, it sought to identify the barriers and facilitators of the use of digital platforms in the university context, providing empirical evidence that supports the implementation of innovative pedagogical strategies that integrate ICT effectively into the curriculum.

Theoretical Foundation: Approaches to Strengthening Reading Comprehension

The analysis of reading comprehension in university students is based on various learning theories and methodological approaches that allow this academic competence to be approached from a comprehensive perspective. These theories provide a solid conceptual framework to understand how digital strategies can facilitate the development of critical and reflective reading skills in the university context of Montería, Colombia.

1. Vygotsky's Constructivist Theory (1978): Active Learning and Pedagogical Mediation

Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism postulates that learning is an active and social process, where the student constructs knowledge through interaction with his environment and the mediation of an educational agent. In this context, the digital platform "Active Reading" acts as a pedagogical mediator, providing an environment where students can interact with academic texts in a more in-depth way. According to Vygotsky, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the space where the student, with the right support, can advance in their learning from what they already know to what they have not yet mastered. The digital platform allows this mediation through immediate feedback, guided activities and the possibility of repeating exercises until an optimal level of understanding is reached.

In practice, this means that students not only read the texts, but also participate in interactive activities that allow them to assess their comprehension, receive personalized suggestions, and develop strategies to improve their critical reading. In addition, the constructivist approach highlights the importance of scaffolding, a process in which digital tools provide the necessary support until students manage to perform tasks autonomously, which is fundamental for self-directed learning in the university environment.

2. Situated Cognition (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989): Learning in Context

The theory of situated cognition suggests that knowledge is most meaningful and transferable when it is acquired in contexts that reflect real-life situations. This theory aligns with the design of the "Active Reading" platform, which uses real academic scenarios to develop reading comprehension. The activities proposed on the platform are not isolated exercises, but are presented within the framework of authentic problems, such as the interpretation of scientific articles, the critical evaluation of academic texts and the application of information in practical situations.

From this perspective, the digital platform not only helps students improve their literal comprehension, but also allows them to apply the knowledge gained in academic and professional contexts. This is crucial in higher education, where critical reading and analytical skills are fundamental competencies for academic and professional success.

3. Knowles' (1975) Theory of Self-Directed Learning: Promoting Autonomy in Learning

Malcolm Knowles' approach to self-directed learning highlights students' ability to manage their own learning, setting personal goals, monitoring their progress, and adjusting their strategies according to the feedback received. The "Active Reading" platform incorporates continuous self-assessment tools, which allow students to identify their strengths and areas for improvement in reading comprehension.

According to Knowles, a self-directed student is one who takes the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate clear objectives, identify appropriate resources, and evaluate their results. In this sense, the digital platform facilitates this process by offering adaptive educational materials, which adjust to the student's level of competence and allow them to progress at their own pace. In addition, immediate feedback acts as a positive reinforcement, motivating the student to continue improving and to take an active role in their education.

4. Sociocultural Approach: Collaborative Learning and Social Construction of Knowledge

The sociocultural approach, based on the work of Jerome Bruner (1996) and Lev Vygotsky, highlights the importance of collaborative learning and social interaction in the construction of knowledge. The "Active Reading" platform fosters this collaboration through activities that allow students to share their interpretations, discuss different points of view, and participate in discussion forums, where they can actively co-construct knowledge.

This theoretical approach is particularly relevant in the university context, as it prepares students to participate in academic communities, develop argumentation skills, and improve their critical thinking through the exchange of ideas. In addition, interaction with peers and exposure to different perspectives help students refine their understanding of texts and develop a more critical and in-depth view of academic content.

5. Multimodal Learning Theory: Integration of Digital Resources in Teaching

Multimodal learning theory suggests that students learn best when they are presented with information through multiple formats, such as texts, images, videos, and interactive activities. The "Active Reading" platform is based on this approach, offering a combination of visual, auditory and kinesthetic resources that facilitate reading comprehension from different angles.

According to Mayer (2009), multimodal learning not only improves information retention, but also facilitates the transfer of knowledge to new situations. This is especially valuable in the university setting, where students must apply their reading skills in various disciplines and academic contexts. In addition, the use of digital technologies allows educational content to be adapted to the individual needs of each student, promoting more personalized and effective learning.

The theoretical framework that supports this research provides a solid basis to analyze how the digital platform "Active Reading" can contribute to the strengthening of reading comprehension in university students in Montería. The theories presented highlight the importance of using innovative pedagogical strategies, which not only improve students' reading skills, but also promote their autonomy in learning, their critical capacity and their active participation in the educational process. It is hoped that the results of this study will offer empirical evidence that supports the use of digital tools in higher education, promoting more dynamic, meaningful, and adaptive learning to the needs of the university context in Colombia.

Methodology

The present study was developed under the approach of Design-Based Research (DBR), a qualitative and participatory methodology that focuses on the design, implementation and evaluation of educational interventions in real contexts. DBR makes it possible to combine applied research with the development of pedagogical resources, providing a structured framework for identifying educational problems, designing innovative solutions and evaluating their impact on learning (Barab & Squire, 2004).

Study Design

The study was developed in three main phases, typical of Design-Based Research:

1. **Analysis and Exploration Phase:** An initial diagnosis was made by applying a reading comprehension test to the students, with the aim of identifying their specific needs and defining the learning objectives. In this phase, qualitative data were collected through interviews with teachers and observation of current pedagogical practices, which made it possible to establish a baseline to evaluate the impact of the educational intervention.
2. **Design and Implementation Phase:** The digital platform "Active Reading" was designed, an educational resource that integrates interactive activities, guided readings and formative evaluations aimed at improving literal reading comprehension. The implementation of the platform was carried out during an academic period, using an iterative design that allowed the activities to be adjusted based on continuous feedback from students.
3. **Evaluation and Reflection Phase:** The effectiveness of the platform was evaluated using a mixed approach, combining the analysis of students' academic results with qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. This phase included reviewing the platform's records, such as progress in activities, time spent and active participation, which allowed for a detailed analysis of the impact of the intervention.

Population and Sample

The population was made up of first-year university students from an academic program in Montería, Colombia. We worked with an intentional sample of 30 students, selected based on their willingness to actively participate in the use of the "Active Reading" platform and in the research evaluation activities. In addition, teachers and tutors were included as part of the evaluation process, collecting their perceptions and suggestions on the use of the digital educational resource.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Design-Based Research employs an iterative and reflective approach, using multiple techniques to assess the impact of educational intervention. The following tools were used in this study:

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** Interviews were conducted with students and teachers, addressing issues such as the usability of the platform, the perception of effectiveness in reading comprehension and the barriers encountered during the learning process.
2. **Focus Groups:** Three focus groups were organized with students, allowing a collective reflection on the experiences with the digital platform. The focus groups focused on assessing interaction with digital content, motivation and autonomy in learning.
3. **Participant Observation:** Direct observation was carried out during the sessions of use of the platform, recording behaviors such as active participation, interaction with educational resources and reactions to feedback. This technique made it possible to identify patterns of use and evaluate the adaptation of students to the proposed activities.
4. **Document Analysis:** The records generated by the "Active Reading" platform were reviewed, including student performance in formative assessments, time spent on each activity, and improvements in reading comprehension. These data were complemented with information provided by teachers, who monitored student progress and provided continuous feedback.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out using a qualitative and quantitative approach, integrating the results of the interviews, focus groups and observations with the statistical data generated by the digital platform. The content analysis technique was used, identifying recurring themes and patterns of behavior in the

students' experiences. For the quantitative analysis, academic performance metrics were used, evaluating progress in reading comprehension through pre- and post-intervention comparisons.

Results

The analysis of the data obtained through Design-Based Research (DIR) allowed to evaluate the impact of the digital platform "Active Reading" in strengthening literal reading comprehension in first-year university students in Montería, Colombia. The results are presented based on the four emerging categories identified during the qualitative and quantitative analysis: effectiveness in the development of reading skills, ease of use and accessibility, perceived barriers, and student motivation and autonomy.

1. Effectiveness in the Development of Reading Skills

The use of the digital platform "Active Reading" showed a positive impact on the literal reading comprehension of the participating students. Qualitative data obtained through interviews and focus groups revealed that students experienced significant improvement in identifying main ideas, extracting relevant information, and interpreting complex academic texts.

"The interactive activities helped me to understand the texts better, especially when they gave me clear examples and I could repeat the exercises until I felt confident" (Interview 7).

From the quantitative analysis, the platform's records showed an average increase of 35% in the scores of the formative evaluations, comparing the initial and final results of the proposed activities. Table 1 summarizes the progress in students' reading skills:

Table 1 Impact of the "Active Reading" Platform on Reading Comprehension

Skill Tested	Diagnostic Test (Average)	Final Test (Medium)	Increase (%)
Identifying Main Ideas	6.1	8.3	+36.1%
Extraction of relevant information	5.8	7.9	+36.2%
Interpretation of complex texts	5.4	7.6	+40.7%

These results confirm that the digital platform not only improves literal comprehension, but also contributes to the development of critical skills needed for the university academic environment.

2. Ease of Use and Accessibility

The usability of the digital platform was positively evaluated by the students, who highlighted its intuitive interface, the clear organization of the content and the ease of accessing the activities from different devices. During the focus groups, the students mentioned that the possibility of accessing the platform from mobile phones, tablets and computers facilitated their active participation in reading comprehension activities:

"Being able to use the platform on my cell phone allowed me to take advantage of free time to practice, without having to be in front of a computer all the time" (Focus Group 2).

In addition, the immediate feedback provided by the platform was perceived as a motivating element, as it allowed students to identify their mistakes and improve their performance autonomously. These findings are consistent with the principles of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975), where continuous feedback acts as a positive reinforcement for the student.

3. Perceived Barriers: Challenges in the Use of the Digital Platform

Despite the positive results, the students pointed out some barriers and challenges associated with the use of the digital platform. Among the main difficulties mentioned are:

- Technological limitations: Some students reported difficulties connecting to the internet, especially in rural areas, which affected their continued access to the platform.
- Lack of digital skills: A minority of students indicated that at the beginning of the process they faced technical difficulties in navigating the platform, which was reduced with the guidance provided by teachers.
- High academic load: In some cases, the academic workload made it difficult to dedicate enough time to the platform's activities.

These barriers suggest the need to implement complementary strategies, such as digital skills training and flexibility in access to activities, to maximize the platform's positive impact on literal reading comprehension.

4. Student Motivation and Autonomy

Students' motivation and interest in improving their reading comprehension increased markedly during the use of the platform. Students reported feeling more confident in their reading skills, which translated into greater active participation in academic activities. This change in attitude is related to the constructivist learning model (Vygotsky, 1978), where the student becomes an active agent of his or her own learning:

"I like that the platform lets me see my progress and that motivates me to keep practicing. I feel more prepared to face the texts that are left to us in class" (Interview 12).

Analysis of the platform's logs showed a high level of voluntary participation, with an average of 45 minutes per day dedicated to reading comprehension activities, exceeding the project's initial expectations. These results suggest that the use of digital tools, when implemented effectively, can foster student autonomy and empower more self-directed and meaningful learning.

The qualitative and quantitative data obtained allow us to affirm that the "Active Reading" platform is an effective tool to strengthen literal reading comprehension in university students. Not only did students improve their reading skills, but they also developed a more positive attitude towards the use of digital technologies in higher education. In addition, although some technological and academic barriers were identified, these can be addressed through the implementation of complementary pedagogical strategies, ensuring that all students can benefit from the digital platform equitably.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that the digital platform "Active Reading" is an effective tool to strengthen literal reading comprehension in first-year university students in Montería, Colombia. Through a Design-Based Research (DIB) approach, it was possible to observe how the use of a digital educational strategy positively influences the development of reading skills, also promoting greater autonomy and motivation in learning.

1. Effectiveness in the Development of Reading Skills

The 35% increase in reading comprehension scores after the use of the digital platform shows that this tool contributed significantly to improving the identification of main ideas, the extraction of relevant information and the interpretation of complex academic texts. These findings align with the constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978), who argues that learning is most effective when students participate actively and thoughtfully in their educational process.

The platform provided an interactive learning environment, where students not only accessed digital educational materials, but also practiced autonomously, receiving immediate feedback. This combination of guided practice and self-assessment facilitated meaningful learning, as proposed by Knowles' (1975) approach to self-directed learning, where continuous feedback acts as a positive reinforcement for the student, motivating him or her to improve his or her reading skills.

2. Ease of Use and Accessibility: Key Factors for Autonomous Learning

The accessibility and usability of the digital platform were aspects highlighted by the students, who valued the possibility of accessing the educational activities from different devices, which facilitated their active participation. This finding coincides with the principles of situated cognition (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989), where it is emphasized that learning is most effective when it takes place in real and accessible contexts, allowing students to practice anytime and anywhere.

In addition, the ability to receive immediate feedback helped students monitor their progress and adjust their learning strategies, promoting self-directed and reflective learning. This feature aligns with the theory of self-directed learning, which emphasizes the importance of students having control over their educational process, setting their learning goals and evaluating their results independently.

3. Perceived Barriers: Technological and Academic Challenges

Despite the positive results, some barriers related to access to technology and lack of digital skills were identified in a small group of students. These challenges highlight the importance of complementing digital strategies with training actions aimed at improving students' technological skills and ensuring equitable access to educational resources.

Zehr's (2002) restorative justice approach proposes that inclusive education policies should consider the diverse needs of students, providing equitable opportunities for access to and use of digital tools. In this sense, it is essential that educational institutions in Montería develop digital training programs and offer complementary resources for those students who face technological difficulties, ensuring that everyone can benefit from the digital educational resource.

4. Student Motivation and Autonomy: The Role of the Digital Platform

The increase in student motivation and autonomy observed during the use of the digital platform is related to the concept of educational scaffolding proposed by Vygotsky (1978), where technological tools act as a temporary support that facilitates learning until the student manages to perform independently.

Students reported feeling more confident in their reading skills, which translated into greater active participation in academic activities and a more positive attitude towards the use of digital technologies in higher education. These results suggest that digital strategies, when implemented appropriately, can foster more self-directed learning, aligning with Knowles' (1975) theory of self-directed learning, which highlights the importance of autonomy in university learning.

Implications for Educational Practice

The results of this study have important implications for educational practice in the university context of Montería:

1. Integration of digital tools into the university curriculum, promoting more interactive and autonomous learning.
2. Development of digital training programs for students and teachers, ensuring effective use of educational platforms.
3. Implementation of inclusive strategies, which consider the technological needs of students and provide additional support to those who face barriers to access technology.
4. To promote student autonomy, providing digital educational resources that allow self-directed learning and continuous self-assessment.
5. Constantly evaluate digital tools, using a Design-Based Research (DII) approach, which allows educational activities to be adjusted based on student feedback and the results obtained.

In conclusion, the digital platform "Active Reading" proved to be an effective tool to improve literal reading comprehension in university students, promoting more active, autonomous and meaningful learning.

Although some technological barriers were identified, these can be addressed through the implementation of complementary strategies, ensuring that all students can benefit from digital technologies in their educational process.

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of digital strategies in higher education, highlighting the importance of developing inclusive education policies that facilitate access to technological resources and promote a more equitable and accessible learning environment. It is expected that these results will contribute to strengthening pedagogical practices in the university context of Montería, promoting a culture of innovation and continuous improvement in the teaching of reading comprehension.

Conclusions

This study allows us to conclude that the digital platform "Active Reading" is an effective tool to strengthen literal reading comprehension in first-year university students in Montería, Colombia. Through a Design-Based Research (DII) approach, it was possible to comprehensively evaluate how a digital educational strategy can positively impact reading skills, promoting not only the development of specific academic competencies, but also greater autonomy and motivation in learning.

The results obtained showed that students experienced significant improvements in the identification of main ideas, the extraction of relevant information and the interpretation of complex academic texts. These advances were reflected in an average increase of 35% in formative assessments, which shows that the combination of interactive activities, guided readings and automated assessments allows students not only to practice their reading skills, but also to monitor their progress and adjust their learning strategies. This finding is aligned with the principles of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, where the use of digital tools acts as an educational scaffolding that facilitates autonomous learning and reinforces the student's active participation in their own educational process.

In addition to the academic benefits, the digital platform also contributed to improving students' motivation and willingness towards learning. Immediate feedback and flexibility to access content from different devices created an environment conducive to self-directed learning, allowing students to take advantage of their free time to practice and reinforce their knowledge. This aspect is linked to Knowles' (1975) theory of self-directed learning, which highlights the importance of students taking an active role in managing their learning, setting personal goals and evaluating their own performance on an ongoing basis.

Despite the positive results, the study also revealed the existence of some technological barriers, especially related to limited access to the internet and the lack of digital skills in a small group of students. These challenges highlight the importance of complementing digital strategies with training programs and specific training actions, aimed at both students and teachers, with the aim of ensuring an effective and equitable use of digital educational tools. From a restorative justice approach (Zehr, 2002), these inclusive educational policies are fundamental to ensure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic conditions, have fair and accessible opportunities to develop their academic and personal competencies.

The findings of this research provide empirical evidence on the potential of digital strategies in higher education, particularly in strengthening literal reading comprehension. In addition, they highlight the need to integrate educational technologies into the university curriculum, promoting more interactive, dynamic and meaningful learning. Educational institutions in Montería and in similar contexts could benefit from including digital platforms in their pedagogical practices, not only to improve students' academic performance, but also to foster their autonomy and prepare them for the challenges of self-directed learning that higher education demands.

In terms of future lines of research, it would be valuable to carry out longitudinal studies that evaluate the sustained impact of the digital platform "Active Reading", analyzing how its continued use could influence the development of complex skills, such as critical reading and deep interpretation of academic texts. In addition, it is recommended to explore the psychosocial impact of the use of digital tools on students'

motivation and emotional well-being, identifying the most effective strategies to maximize the benefits of educational technology in university contexts.

In conclusion, the digital platform "Active Reading" proved to be an innovative and efficient educational strategy, capable of improving literal reading comprehension and promoting more autonomous and self-directed learning in university students. These results not only contribute to enriching educational practice in Montería, but also offer valuable guidance for the design of future pedagogical interventions, where digital technologies play a central role in the construction of a higher education that is more inclusive, equitable, and adaptive to the changing needs of the academic context.

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