

A COMPARISON OF READING COMPREHENSION  
IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH<sup>1</sup>

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I. Introduction

The opinion is frequently voiced by language teachers that it is senseless to teach students to read in a foreign language before teaching them to read in their mother tongue. By "reading in their mother tongue" is usually meant "reading well in their mother tongue", rather than simply being literate in the mother tongue. The assumption being made is that if, for example, a student cannot read well in Spanish, he will not be able to learn to read in English. In other words, it is assumed that there is a close relationship between reading ability in Spanish and ability to read in English: that the lack of ability to read in one language will imply a similar lack in the other, and that ability in the one will predict ability in the other. These assumptions and suppositions, however, are rarely put to the test. To gather empirical evidence on the matter was the aim of this research project.

A further, related, question which the research sought to investigate was: Is the students' knowledge of English, or English proficiency, a more important precondition for English reading comprehension than their reading ability in Spanish? That is, can they learn to read English regardless of their reading skills in Spanish, provided they are proficient enough in English? The answer to this question about the importance of English proficiency

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was usually given in the affirmative by the proponents of audio-visual methodologies, for example, up until only a few years ago. More recently, however, methodological approaches to the teaching of reading comprehension have come into conflict with the previous 'proficiency-first' view, and, based on the assumption that reading comprehension can or should be learnt before a student has received a thorough course in general spoken English, there now exists an increasing number of commercially available ESP courses, for example, which implicitly or explicitly contradict that previously strict audiolingual principle by their very existence. In other words, a strictly orthodox user of the old Collier MacMillan English 900 series, for example, would introduce the written form only of these English base sentences which the student had already mastered and could produce orally. The student's being taught to read the English of his engineering texts was anathema and entirely out of the question for reasons founded in that methodological approach.

How might these matters be investigated? A variety of possible procedures suggest themselves, but we need at least the following instruments:

Firstly, to find out how our students read Spanish would require a test of some kind. Hopefully, the results of such a test would give us a valid, reliable and objective measure of their reading ability in Spanish. Secondly, since we want to compare their reading ability in Spanish with their reading ability in English, we will need a reliable measure of their reading comprehension in English. This, of course, would require that our subjects have some previous knowledge of English. So we would also need a measure of their knowledge of English, which might be supplied by a proficiency test, for example. Then we must compare the results of the three measures - reading in Spanish, reading in English, and English proficiency - in order to find out what relationship or relationships exist, if any.

What are some of the possible implications for teaching which we might expect to come out of the comparison of these three measures of our university students?

1) We might find no relationship whatsoever between reading comprehension in Spanish and reading comprehension in English. In other words, those who did well in reading and understanding Spanish didn't necessarily do well in reading and understanding English. If this were the case, we might assume that there were two entirely different fields of knowledge and ability; one in Spanish, and another one, independent of the first, in English.

Such a result, i.e. no relationship between reading in Spanish and reading in English, would suggest that we might discount Spanish reading ability as a factor which might effect our teaching approach to reading in English.

2) We might find a strong relationship between reading ability in Spanish and reading ability in English. This sort of result would lead us to assume a possible large amount of transfer of reading skills from Spanish to English, which might conceivably be exploited through the teaching of reading strategies helpful in both languages, for example, instead of considering these strategies to be language-dependent, and therefore to be taught in different courses. Such a reading-strategies course could perhaps be designed which might be offered by the university to all entering students, and not only to these who are studying English as well as their academic field or profession. Or, such a reading-strategies course might be offered as a pre-requisite to taking a particular English reading course.

3) We might find that a strong relationship existed between previous knowledge of English, or English proficiency, and reading comprehension ability in English. If this were the case, we might simply teach general English courses and not design ESP reading courses in particular fields of study, or programs in English for Academic Purposes. This has been the assumption common in the past, when courses to teach reading as a separate ability in English were simply not offered, since reading was assumed to be a logical by-product of general knowledge or proficiency in spoken English. The problem with that approach was that it based its assumption on methodological considerations of what was the best way to teach oral English. The specific teaching of reading was at best downgraded and postponed until the student's oral production was considerable. The point is that whatever pedagogical approach is adopted, it be adopted not only on the basis of intuition and suppositions, but also on the basis of empirical data. Thus the aim of this study is to gather some facts about the nature of reading ability in English and Spanish, which might then lead us to modify our approach to the teaching of reading.

## II. The experiment

This experiment was designed as a preliminary exploration of the relation between reading in Spanish and in English.

### 1) The sample

Twenty-eight Mexican students registered in the Master's, program in Administration and at the same time taking a general English course participated in the experiment. The tests were administered to all the Administration students present in the English class on successive days. Those who took all three parts of the battery were included in the study.

### 2) Instrumentation

Two reading texts were selected from the field of administration for testing. One was taken from a textbook in English on human organization and has a high cognitive or conceptual level of content and ideas (Text B). The second text is also from a textbook in administration, but is at a comparatively low level of cognitive difficulty, and contains fewer vocabulary items which are specific to administration. (Text A)

Each of the original pieces was then translated into Spanish and revised and edited by native Spanish-speaking teachers of English and of Administration to ensure the Spanish translations were correct and readable. After translating the two original texts into Spanish, we had a total of four texts: the originals in English, and their translated versions in Spanish. For each of the four texts, comprehension questions or items were written, using both multiple-choice and true-false formats. The test items were designed to test over-all general understanding of the text, awareness of the difference between information and presented as personal opinion of the author and information presented as fact, inference, logical extensions of the arguments presented, direct reference, etc. (for examples of the tests see Appendix)

Besides the four reading comprehension tests, the TEAL test battery of English language proficiency for adult students (Caroline Clapham, 1975) was applied to all the subjects to measure their general knowledge of English.

### 3) Method

Of the four reading comprehension tests, two were given to each subject, one in English and one in Spanish. The subjects were selected at random to receive one or the other of the alternate pairs of tests, half receiving text A in English, text B in Spanish; the other half receiving text B in English and

text A in Spanish. Thus

- a) one group of students did:
  - 1) text A in English (easy text)
  - 2) text B in Spanish, and
  - 3) the TEAL proficiency test
- b) the other group did:
  - 1) text B in English (difficult text)
  - 2) text A in Spanish, and
  - 3) the TEAL proficiency test.

Each pair of comprehension tests was administered during a one and a half hour class period. The TEAL proficiency test was given in a separate period. Both class periods used for the test applications fell during the last week of classes in the English course. The students seemed generally agreeable to participation in the experiment.

### III RESULTS

The tests were scored, and item-analysed. Poor items were removed and the tests rescored. Although the texts had been selected to represent two distinct levels of difficulty, at least for a native speaker non-subject specialist, texts A and B turned out to be of equal difficulty in English for these subjects, the mean being 11.6 (53%) on A and 11.1 (53% on B). In other words, for our testees the comprehension tests in English were statistically equivalent measures of English reading comprehension. The Spanish versions, however, seemed to show up at least some of the differences between the two original texts, in the sense that one had seemed to us to contain greater cognitive or conceptual difficulty of content and more specialized vocabulary. In Spanish, the mean for text A was 17.2 (82%) and for text B 13.0 (72%).

It is interesting that the two texts appear to be different from each other when readers are reading in their mother tongue, but that when they read in a foreign language, the differences disappear. The reason for this could be that the problems of reading in a foreign language are greater than any inherent conceptual or linguistic difficulties that might exist in one text and not the other.

Concerning the relationship between reading in Spanish and reading in English, the primary objectives of the experiment, we found positive but low correlations between the subjects' performance on one as compared to their performance on the other:

- |    |                       |     |           |
|----|-----------------------|-----|-----------|
| a) | B English = A Spanish | .44 | (p < .05) |
| b) | B Spanish = A English | .56 | (p < .05) |

In other words, there was a relationship between reading comprehension in English and reading comprehension in Spanish. That is, the students who did well in reading in Spanish tended to do well in reading in English as well. This tendency or relationship was not found to be strong enough to be able to predict a student's score on one test, given his results on the other.

The strongest relationship encountered was between English language proficiency as measured by the TEAL test, and reading comprehension in English (Teal with B English .67, p < .05). This finding is of considerable importance, since it suggests that the student's knowledge of English is much more important to his comprehension of English texts than is his reading ability in Spanish. Although the finding is not surprising, since one would not expect students with poor English to be able to read well in English, it is important because it appears to provide some sort of answer to those who feel that reading ability in one's mother tongue is the most important determinant of reading ability in English. One should be cautious, however, in interpreting this result, as a correlation does not imply a causal relationship. It does not follow that a concentration on improving our students' general proficiency in English will lead to a commensurate improvement in English reading ability. However, there is a suggestion that it is even less likely that improving Spanish reading ability will lead to an improvement in English reading.

It should be noted that the easy text (Text A) correlated at a considerably lower level with TEAL than the difficult text (.42 v .67). This might be taken to mean that knowledge of English is less important to the understanding of an easy text than to the comprehension of a difficult text. Certainly it indicates that one should be careful about generalising results gained from the use of certain texts to statements about reading ability in general, regardless of the nature -linguistic and conceptual - of the text. Furthermore the difference between the two correlations of the English and Spanish texts might well be attributable to the difference in texts. That is, it could be

generally true that the ability to read a difficult text in Spanish will correlate higher with the ability to read an easy text in English, than the ability to read an easy text in Spanish will correlate with the ability to read a difficult text in English. Such a conclusion is entirely speculative at present.

#### IV Conclusion.

The research posed the following questions:

- 1) How well can our students read Spanish?
- 2) Is their Spanish reading ability related in any way to their ability to read in English?
- 3) Is their proficiency in general English more important than reading ability in Spanish as a pre-condition to their learning to read English?

The results of the study indicate a positive tendency for reading ability in Spanish to relate to reading ability in English. This relationship, however, is far from close, which is perhaps somewhat surprising, at least for these who hold the view that there is a necessarily close connection between the two.

The study also found that the best predictor of reading ability in English was not reading ability in the mother tongue but proficiency in the foreign language. However, as the text variable was also seen to have an effect, no general conclusion can be reached. Therefore, at this stage no recommendations can be made as to the type of course that might be helpful for students who need to learn to read in English. Nevertheless, we feel that such recommendations might change if subsequent studies should provide clearer answers to our questions. Further research into the nature of the relationship of reading in Spanish and English is clearly necessary, possibly concentrating on measuring reading strategies (the process of reading) and on measuring the various sorts of information (the product of reading: factual, inferential, evaluated, etc.) that can be extracted from text.