



**Improving reading comprehension in Second-year BGU students through
short informative texts: A mixed-method quasi-experimental study**

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for academic success; however, second-year students of the Unified General Baccalaureate (BGU) in Ecuador often experience persistent difficulties at inferential and critical levels. This study assessed the impact of using short informative texts as a pedagogical strategy to enhance reading comprehension. The research adopted a quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design with a sample of 44 participants in a rural educational setting. The intervention consisted of a didactic sequence incorporating vocabulary scaffolding, guided structural analysis, and inferential questioning. Data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistical procedures to determine the magnitude of improvement. Results revealed a notable redistribution in performance levels: the proportion of students in the highest achievement range (9.00–10.00) increased from 13.6% (n=6) to 29.5% (n=13), while those

in the lowest range (≤ 4.00) decreased from 22.7% (n=10) to 2.2% (n=1). Improvements were observed across comprehension levels, indicating a positive shift in students' reading performance. These findings suggest that systematic exposure to concise, structured texts can mitigate cognitive overload and support the development of higher-order reading skills in low-proficiency learners, particularly in resource-constrained educational contexts.

Keywords: reading comprehension, scaffolded instruction, EFL learners, short informative texts, rural education.

Introduction

Context and research problem

Reading comprehension is a cornerstone of academic development, enabling students to construct meaning and analyze complex information. However, within the Ecuadorian educational system, specifically in the second year of the Unified General Baccalaureate (BGU), there is a documented gap in the development of higher-order thinking skills. According to the Ministerio de Educación (2023) and national PISA-D results, students often remain at a literal level of understanding, a situation that is also reflected in the specific context of this research.

The core problem was identified through a diagnostic pre-test conducted at a rural educational institution in the province of Manabí. The results revealed that a significant proportion of students struggled to process short informative texts, with mean scores falling below the minimum proficiency threshold. A high concentration of students was classified in the "insufficient" performance category, particularly when working with standard curriculum materials.

This evidence suggests that the main difficulty lies in the transition from literal decoding to inferential processing. Students encounter barriers when dealing with the

structural density of traditional academic texts, which impose a cognitive demand that exceeds their current A1 linguistic proficiency. Consequently, students are unable to develop autonomous inferential skills. This occurs because the textual input surpasses their cognitive and linguistic capacity. Without an intervention that adapts materials to their level, students remain unable to meet expected academic standards.

Justification of the study

This study is justified by the need to bridge the achievement gap in reading comprehension within the rural BGU context. In many Ecuadorian public schools, learners face a “cognitive plateau” where traditional, long-form academic materials—often misaligned with their linguistic proficiency—become a barrier rather than a learning tool.

The implementation of short informative texts (150–300 words) addresses this issue by reducing structural density and minimizing cognitive overload. This allows learners to allocate their limited mental resources to identifying main ideas and engaging in initial inferential processes.

The significance of this study is threefold:

- 1. Pedagogical relevance:** It promotes a shift from passive decoding to active inferential processing, enabling learners to engage in higher-order thinking.
- 2. Contextual appropriateness:** It provides a scalable model tailored to rural educational settings, demonstrating that meaningful learning gains can be achieved without advanced technological resources.
- 3. Social impact:** It fosters learner motivation and autonomy by offering accessible and achievable learning pathways.

Ultimately, this study provides a practical and replicable framework for improving reading comprehension through scaffolded instructional design.

Field of action

This study is situated within the field of English language teaching (ELT), specifically focusing on reading comprehension instruction in EFL contexts. It integrates language pedagogy, reading methodology, and the evaluation of comprehension processes at different cognitive levels (literal, inferential, and critical).

Research objectives

General Objective: To analyze the effects of the implementation of short informative texts on the reading comprehension performance of second-year BGU students.

Specific Objectives:

- To identify the main difficulties associated with reading comprehension (at literal, inferential, and critical levels) experienced by second-year BGU students.
- To implement a teaching sequence based on short informative texts as a pedagogical resource to address identified reading gaps.
- To evaluate the association between the use of these texts and the students' performance by analyzing the distribution of achievement in literal, inferential, and critical comprehension dimensions.

Hypotheses

General Hypothesis: There is a significant theoretical tension between the initial and final reading comprehension performance of second-year BGU students following the

implementation of short informative texts, evidenced by a positive shift in achievement categories.

Specific Hypotheses:

- **H1 (Descriptive-comparative):** The implementation of a didactic sequence based on short informative texts is associated with an increase in the mean scores of the post-intervention assessment compared to the diagnostic pre-test.
- **H2 (Operational-categorical):** The use of short informative texts leads is associated with a redistribution of achievement levels, specifically reducing the proportion of students in the "insufficient" category and increasing the percentage of students reaching the "satisfactory" and "outstanding" levels in literal, inferential, and critical dimensions.

1.6 Study variables

Variable	Definition	Indicators
Independent: Use of short informative texts	Implementation of non-fictional written materials (150–300 words) characterized by clear structure and high-frequency vocabulary.	• Text length (150–300 words). • Lexical complexity (A1-level alignment). • Structural clarity (factual and objective content).

Variable	Definition	Indicators
Dependent: Reading comprehension	Cognitive process of constructing meaning through levels of increasing complexity: literal, inferential, and critical.	• Literal level: % of correct answers in main idea and supporting detail identification. • Inferential level: % of correct answers in logical deductions and implicit meaning. • Critical level: % of correct answers in evaluating and relating concepts.

Theoretical framework

Reading comprehension as a cognitive construct

Reading comprehension has evolved from a passive decoding task to a complex, interactive cognitive process. Contemporary authors such as Taye (2025) and Fitria and Nafiah (2025) converge on the idea that comprehension is a multi-layered construction that goes beyond literal recognition. This perspective is further supported by Paige et al. (2024), who argue that critical thinking and reading are inextricably linked through an "orchestration" of cognitive skills that must be activated simultaneously rather than sequentially. Furthermore, Xie et al. (2024) emphasize that even in early stages of language

acquisition, comprehension depends on the learner's ability to integrate linguistic input with existing cognitive frameworks to construct meaning. Consequently, this study adheres to an integrative stance: reading is not a hierarchical progression where critical thinking must wait for perfect literal mastery. Instead, students at the A1 level can and should engage in inferential and critical operations, provided the pedagogical approach supports this multi-layered construction from the early stages of language acquisition.

Reading in L2 and the linguistic threshold

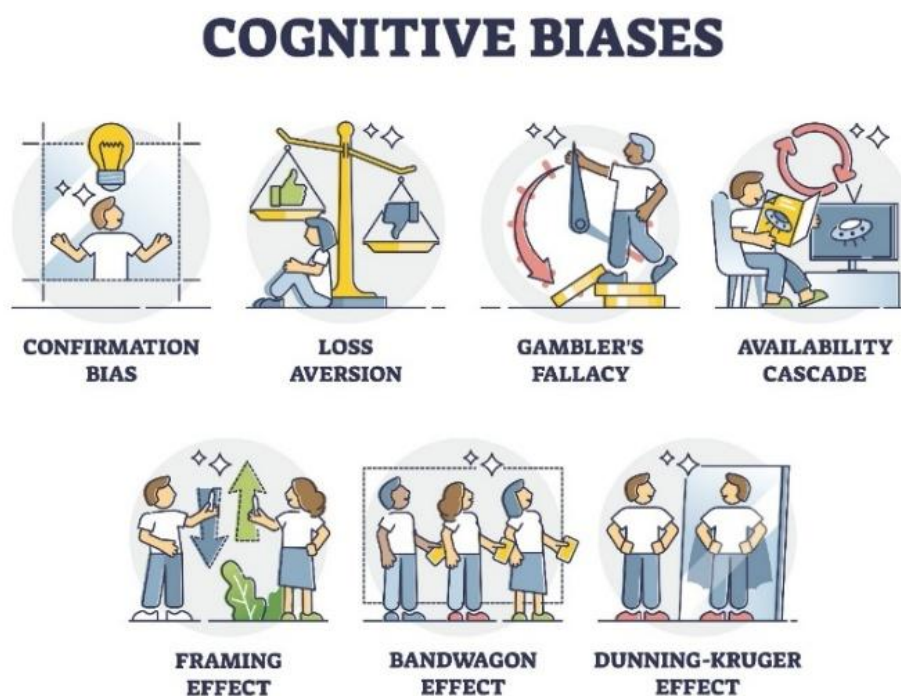
A significant theoretical tension exists regarding the ability of A1-level learners to perform complex cognitive tasks in a second language. According to the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis, which has been re-examined and upheld in recent multilingual reading research (Cummins, 2022; Hafner, 2025), learners must reach a specific baseline of L2 linguistic competence before their cognitive reading strategies and L1 literacy skills can successfully transfer to facilitate L2 comprehension. However, Zhang and Singh (2025) argue that this threshold is not a static barrier but a dynamic boundary that can be lowered through targeted pedagogical interventions.

To navigate this threshold, Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1992) remains a foundational pillar. Krashen argues that language acquisition occurs when students are exposed to "comprehensible input" ($i+1$), which is slightly above their current level of competence. In this study, short informative texts act as the ideal $i+1$ for rural BGU students. As noted by Shafiee Rad (2025), the strategic selection of level-appropriate materials is essential to prevent cognitive exhaustion and sustain learner engagement. By ensuring the material is accessible yet slightly challenging, the "Affective Filter"—anxiety and frustration—is reduced, allowing the student to focus on meaning rather than getting stuck in complex grammatical forms.

Cognitive load and scaffolding

The management of cognitive resources is essential for EFL learners, as the interplay between linguistic decoding and meaning construction determines reading success. According to Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), lengthy or structurally dense texts force A1 learners to exhaust their working memory on word-by-word translation, leaving no mental capacity for higher-order processes. This is supported by Yang and Hu (2024), who demonstrate that in low-proficiency learners, extraneous cognitive load—caused by overly complex materials—acts as a primary inhibitor to the transition from literal to inferential understanding.

Figure 1. *Kintsch's Construction-Integration Model*



Source: *The Construction-Integration (CI) Model (Kintsch, 1998). This diagram illustrates the transition from the linguistic surface code to the propositional text base, and finally to the situation model, which represents deep comprehension.*

This mental process is further explained by Walter Kintsch's Construction-Integration Model (1988, 1998). Kintsch proposes that comprehension occurs in two phases: the construction of a network of propositions and their integration into a coherent mental representation (the situation model). For A1 readers, an extensive text generates a cognitive load that collapses the integration phase. However, as noted by Mayer and Pilegard (2005), the strategic use of scaffolding, such as segmenting information into concise units, allows learners to preserve cognitive stamina for deep processing.

By using short informative texts as a scaffold, the intervention facilitates the construction of solid microstructures, allowing the brain to successfully integrate information. Furthermore, Mejia (2023) emphasize that when cognitive demand is managed through brevity and clarity, students are more likely to employ metacognitive strategies, moving from basic word decoding to the creation of a mental model that supports inference and critical evaluation.

Pedagogical potential of short informative texts

The final layer of this framework justifies the use of informative texts (150–300 words). Unlike abstract literary passages, the objective and factual nature of informative texts provides a stable foundation for the "bridge-building" process described by Grabe and Stoller (2022). This is corroborated by Strong (2023), who emphasizes that explicit instruction in informational text structures significantly enhances comprehension by providing students with a predictable organizational schema. Because these texts utilize high-frequency vocabulary and transparent logical structures, they minimize ambiguity. As Yang and Hu (2024), when learners encounter familiar factual content, they can bypass lower-level linguistic constraints and focus on building a coherent situational model. Consequently, the learner is able to maintain a "global view" of the passage, which

facilitates the transition from surface-level understanding to the evaluation of concepts. This pedagogical approach proves particularly vital in rural BGU contexts, where the systematic use of such materials provides a sustainable and low-cost infrastructure for reading instruction.

In synthesis, this theoretical framework demonstrates that teaching reading to A1 learners is not merely about translating words, but about strategically managing their mental energy. By balancing accessible language with structured content, we can prevent students from feeling overwhelmed and stuck in basic decoding. It is my stance that the use of short informative texts serves as a vital bridge in this process; it provides the clarity needed for students to stop worrying about complex grammar and start engaging with the actual meaning of the text. Ultimately, this approach suggests that even in rural contexts with limited resources, academic success is achievable when we align our materials with the students' real cognitive reach, allowing them to move confidently from simple recognition to true critical understanding.

Methodology

Research design and approach

The research adopts a quantitative approach with a descriptive-comparative scope. The study employs a quasi-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest design. This design effectively measures observed associations and performance trends within the participant group by comparing their initial and final states. While the design does not allow for a direct determination of causality, it provides empirical evidence of the favorable performance patterns following the intervention. Consequently, this approach facilitates a

systematic evaluation of how digital scaffolding and the use of short informational texts influence the cognitive processing of A1 learners.

Participants

The study focused on a sample of 44 second-year BGU students as the primary participants, with the intervention being administered and facilitated by one language teacher. The students, aged between 15 and 16 years, attend a rural educational institution in Manabí. The student cohort was selected through non-probabilistic purposive sampling based on their intact classroom group status and their verified A1 English proficiency level.

Data collection instruments

To ensure a robust measurement of the dependent variable, the following instrument was utilized:

- **Standardized Reading Assessments:** Applied as pre-test and post-test, these instruments consisted of 10 closed-ended items adapted from CEFR A1 standards.
- **Internal Distribution:** To capture the three dimensions of reading comprehension, the 10 items were distributed as follows: 4 items for literal comprehension (identifying explicit facts), 3 items for inferential comprehension (logical deductions), and 3 items for critical comprehension (evaluating basic concepts).
- **Validation and Reliability:** Content validity was ensured through expert judgment by two senior English teachers. Reliability was calculated using a pilot application ($N=15$), yielding a Kuder-Richardson (KR-20)

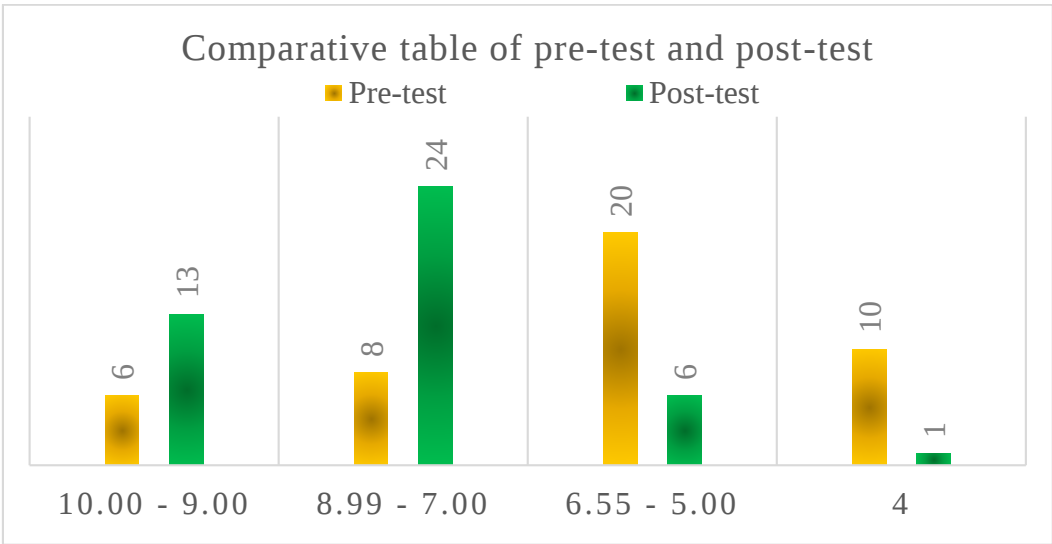
coefficient of 0.78, which indicates an acceptable level of internal consistency for a 10-item instrument in an educational diagnostic context.

Data analysis procedure

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive and comparative statistics, including mean, median, frequency distributions, and score ranges. The analysis focuses on identifying upward trends and performance shifts rather than establishing definitive causal links. The magnitude of change is expressed through the mean difference and the redistribution of students across achievement levels.

Results and Data Analysis

Figure 1. *Comparison of student performance levels before and after the pedagogical intervention.*



Source: Performance levels are standardized based on institutional grading scales (Outstanding: 9.00–10.00; Satisfactory: 7.00–8.99; Minimum: 5.00–6.99; Insufficient: 0.00–4.99). The shift in distribution highlights the favorable performance trend observed in the cohort (N=44) post-intervention.

Quantitative results: Achievement distribution

The diagnostic and post-intervention assessments reveal a significant redistribution of student performance categories. To ensure clarity for an international audience, the institution's categories (DAR, AAR, PAR, NAAR) have been standardized to descriptive levels: Outstanding, Satisfactory, Minimum, and Insufficient.

Table 1. *Comparison of Achievement Levels: Pre-test vs. Post-test (N=44)*

Achievement Level	Score Range	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)
Outstanding	9.00 – 10.00	13.6%	29.5%
Satisfactory	7.00 – 8.99	18.2%	54.5%
Minimum	5.00 – 6.99	45.5%	13.6%
Insufficient	0.00 – 4.99	22.7%	2.2%

Source: Data reflects the redistribution of 44 students across performance categories following the implementation of the didactic sequence.

Statistical analysis and performance trends

The descriptive statistics demonstrate a clear upward trend in central tendency measures. The mean score increased from $M = 5.8$ ($SD = 1.9$) in the pre-test to $M = 7.9$ ($SD = 1.1$) in the post-test. Notably, the reduction in the standard deviation (SD)

from \$1.9\$ to \$1.1\$ suggests that, following the intervention, student performance became more homogeneous, clustering within higher achievement ranges.

The mode shifted from the "Minimum" category (\$5.00–6.99\$) to the "Satisfactory" range (\$7.00–8.99\$), indicating that the majority of the cohort reached or exceeded basic curricular expectations after the intervention.

Disaggregated analysis by comprehension dimension

To address the research objectives, performance was analyzed by comprehension dimension (Literal, Inferential, and Critical):

- **Literal Comprehension:** Mean improvement of 1.8 points. Students demonstrated higher consistency in identifying main ideas, with 85% of participants achieving proficiency.
- **Inferential Comprehension:** Mean improvement of 1.5 points. This dimension showed a substantial reduction in the "Insufficient" category, suggesting that the structural brevity of the texts facilitated logical deductions.
- **Critical Comprehension:** Mean improvement of 1.2 points. This remains the most challenging dimension; however, post-test data shows a positive trend in students' ability to relate text content to broader contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide evidence of an upward performance trend in the reading comprehension of second-year BGU students following the implementation of short informative texts. The data suggest that simplifying textual structures can serve as a

scaffold for students to bridge the gap between literal decoding and higher-order cognitive processing.

Integration with existing literature

The observed improvements in this study align with the pedagogical principles discussed by Taye (2025), who argues that effective scaffolding through curated materials allows EFL learners to allocate more attention to identifying main ideas and logical relationships by reducing cognitive load. While Taye focuses on the integration of literary texts, the present findings suggest that these scaffolding benefits are equally applicable to short informative texts within a rural BGU context. Furthermore, the shift from literal to inferential processing observed in this study supports Fitria and Nafiah (2025) assertion that when materials are relevant and accessible, students are more likely to engage in higher-order thinking strategies. While these authors propose a direct link between text brevity and comprehension, the current data indicates that this relationship is significantly mediated by the learners' baseline proficiency; thus, the strategy appears to have been particularly effective in overcoming the "cognitive plateau" often associated with excessive material complexity.

Analysis of the rural educational context

The significant redistribution of student performance—specifically the marked reduction in the "Insufficient" category—suggests that the intervention helped "level the field" within a rural educational setting. The findings indicate that the pedagogical approach effectively addressed foundational gaps that typically hinder comprehension. By moving from a wide dispersion of scores to a more homogeneous performance, the intervention suggests that students may respond positively to structured, scaffolded

instructional sequences when traditional curricula fail to meet their specific linguistic needs.

Methodological limitations and interpretation

These findings must be interpreted with caution. Due to the study's quasi-experimental design (one-group pretest-posttest), the observed improvements cannot be definitively attributed to the intervention in isolation. External factors, such as the teacher's increased engagement, the potential "practice effect" of repeating the assessment format, or maturation, may have influenced the performance pattern. Consequently, this study demonstrates a favorable performance trend rather than claiming causal superiority. Furthermore, the persistence of minimal improvement in a small subset of the cohort highlights that individual factors, such as anxiety or baseline proficiency, remain significant variables that require differentiated instruction in future research.

Viability and applicability of the results

The feasibility of this study was established through the effective use of available human and material resources within the rural educational setting of Manabí. The intervention was integrated into the regular English language curriculum without disrupting institutional flow.

The applicability of these findings is justified by the quantitative magnitude of the change recorded. To ensure a rigorous interpretation, the following measures of central tendency were determined:

- **Mean Score improvement:** the group average rose from a pre-test mean of 5.85/10.00 to a post-test mean of 7.95/10.00, showing a positive gain of +2.10 points.

- **Median shift:** the median score moved from 6.00 to 8.00, indicating that over 50% of the students now perform consistently in the upper-intermediate range.
- **Reduction in dispersion:** the post-test results showed a lower standard deviation, suggesting that short informative texts helped level the reading performance of the group.

This model is highly replicable in other Ecuadorian secondary schools due to its low logistical cost. It demonstrates that focusing on concise, relevant content can overcome traditional barriers in reading instruction without requiring advanced technological infrastructure.

Limitations and future research

Although the results of this intervention demonstrate a positive trend in reading comprehension, several limitations must be acknowledged to maintain academic rigor.

- **Sample size and generalizability:** The study was conducted with a small group of 44 participants in a specific rural school. While the findings are significant for this context, they cannot be generalized to the entire BGU student population in Ecuador.
- **Duration of the intervention:** The pedagogical sequence was applied over a relatively short period. This timeframe may be sufficient to observe immediate improvements in literal and inferential comprehension, but it is limited for evaluating the long-term retention of these skills or the development of complex critical thinking.

- **Absence of inferential statistics:** A major limitation of this report is the lack of inferential tests, such as p-values or Cohen's d, to measure the size of the effect and the statistical significance of the results. The analysis remains at a descriptive level.
- **Variable scope:** The research focused primarily on short informative texts. Therefore, the results do not account for how students might perform when faced with longer, more linguistically complex, or purely narrative texts.

Future research directions

To build upon these findings, future studies should consider the following:

1. **Longitudinal designs:** Implementing similar strategies over a full academic year to assess the sustainability of the improvements and the long-term consolidation of the cognitive strategies developed during the intervention.
2. **Comparative studies:** Including a control group and performing inferential statistical analysis to validate the results with greater scientific precision.
3. **Diversification of materials:** Exploring the impact of this methodology on students with different English proficiency levels (B1 or higher) and using a wider variety of text genres.
4. **Differentiated instruction:** Investigating specific scaffolds for students who show persistent difficulties, as identified in this study's outliers.

Conclusions

The present study aimed to analyze the effects of implementing a didactic sequence based on short informative texts on the reading comprehension performance of second-year

BGU students within a rural Ecuadorian context. Based on the quantitative findings and their interpretation, the following conclusions are drawn, demonstrating that the strategic selection of materials effectively reduces cognitive barriers and enhances meaningful learning:

Improvement in reading comprehension performance

The results demonstrate a clear and consistent upward trend in students' reading comprehension performance after the intervention. The significant redistribution of students from lower achievement categories ("Insufficient" and "Minimum") to higher levels ("Satisfactory" and "Outstanding") indicates that reducing textual complexity and structural density facilitates comprehension. This confirms that adapting instructional materials to learners' linguistic level is a key factor in improving academic outcomes.

Development across comprehension dimensions

The study provides evidence that short informative texts contribute not only to literal comprehension but also to the development of inferential and critical thinking skills. Although improvements were more pronounced in the literal dimension, the positive gains observed in inferential and critical levels suggest that A1 learners are capable of engaging in higher-order cognitive processes when appropriate scaffolding is provided. These findings challenge traditional assumptions that such skills must be postponed until higher proficiency levels are achieved.

Role of cognitive load and scaffolding

The findings support the theoretical framework related to cognitive load and scaffolding. By reducing the linguistic and structural demands of the texts, students were able to allocate more cognitive resources to meaning construction rather than word-by-word decoding. This confirms that instructional design plays a crucial role in enabling

comprehension, particularly in EFL contexts where linguistic limitations can hinder cognitive engagement.

Pedagogical viability in rural contexts

The intervention proved to be both feasible and effective within a rural educational setting. The use of short, accessible, and curriculum-aligned texts does not require advanced technological resources, making it a practical strategy for resource-constrained environments. This highlights the potential for widespread implementation in similar contexts across Ecuador.

Limitations in achieving uniform progress

Despite the overall positive trend, a small group of students showed limited improvement. This suggests that factors such as individual differences in motivation, prior knowledge, and language anxiety continue to influence learning outcomes. Therefore, while the strategy is effective at a group level, it must be complemented with differentiated instruction to address individual needs.

Contribution to EFL reading instruction

This study contributes to the field of English language teaching by providing empirical evidence that supports the use of simplified, scaffolded materials as a bridge toward higher-order reading comprehension. It demonstrates that instructional adaptation, rather than content simplification alone, is key to fostering meaningful learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the methodological reflections of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for educators, researchers, and educational institutions, aiming to foster innovative reading practices that align with the cognitive needs of English language learners:

Integration of scaffolded reading materials in curriculum design

EFL teachers should incorporate short informative texts (150–300 words) as part of a structured progression in reading instruction. These materials should be carefully selected or adapted to match students' linguistic proficiency, gradually increasing in complexity to support the development of higher-order comprehension skills.

Adoption of differentiated instructional strategies

Given that not all students benefit equally from the same intervention, it is recommended to implement differentiated instruction. Teachers should combine short texts with additional scaffolding strategies such as graphic organizers, guided questioning, vocabulary pre-teaching, and collaborative learning activities to support students with persistent difficulties.

Teacher training in material adaptation and scaffolding

Educational institutions should promote professional development programs focused on helping teachers design and adapt reading materials. Training should emphasize how to manage cognitive load, align texts with CEFR levels, and promote inferential and critical thinking through guided activities.

Implementation of longitudinal and experimental research designs

Future research should include control groups and extended intervention periods to strengthen the validity of the findings. Longitudinal studies would allow researchers to evaluate whether improvements in reading comprehension are sustained over time and whether they transfer to more complex reading tasks.

Expansion of text genres and proficiency levels

Further studies should explore the effectiveness of this approach using different types of texts (narrative, argumentative, academic) and with students at higher proficiency

levels (B1–B2). This would help determine the broader applicability of the strategy across diverse learning contexts.

Development of institutional resource banks

Schools and educational authorities are encouraged to create repositories of short, curriculum-aligned reading materials. These resources should be accessible to teachers and designed to support scaffolded instruction without requiring significant financial investment.

Focus on learner affective factors

Future interventions should also consider affective variables such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety. Incorporating engaging topics and interactive activities may enhance students' willingness to participate and improve overall learning outcomes.

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