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IMPROVING COMPREHENSION, ATTENTION AND MEMORY IN HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The present study proposes an intervention which aims to improve Reading comprehension, oral comprehension, attention and memory. The sample was composed by 19 senior students of a private high school in an urban setting, with ages ranging from 17 to 20 years old. It was used the Reading Comprehension Test for Preparatory School, subscale Understanding Paragraphs of the CELF-4 Spanish version and the NEUROPSI Attention and memory. According to the diagnostic, the sample was divided in two groups; students with deficit (minimum in three processes) and without deficit. The results showed significant changes in all processes for both groups, so students with shortcomings improved their performance achieving the expected level to their development stage. Similarly, students without deficiencies also increased their performance after the intervention. Likewise, the group with deficiencies presented similar results to the group with no shortcomings in the oral comprehension, attention and memory. However, there were still significant differences in Reading comprehension among the two groups.

Public Significance Statement: The Reading comprehension assessments prove that there are shortcomings to apply inferential reasoning, as a consequence there is a low Reading comprehension level in students.

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Therefore, a psycho-education program was designed to improve comprehension, attention and memory in senior year preparatory students.

Keywords: attention; memory; reading comprehension; oral comprehension; high school

RESUMEN

Mejorar la comprensión, la atención y la memoria en la escuela secundaria. En el presente estudio se plantea una intervención con el objetivo de mejorar la comprensión lectora, la comprensión oral, la atención y la memoria. La muestra se conformó por 19 estudiantes del tercer grado de una preparatoria privada urbana, con un rango de edad de 17 a 20 años. Como instrumentos, se utilizaron la Prueba de Comprensión Lectora para Bachillerato, la subescala Entendiendo Párrafos del CELF-4 versión en español y el NEUROPSI Atención y memoria. De acuerdo al diagnóstico se dividió al grupo en dos, alumnos con déficit (en por lo menos tres procesos) y alumnos sin déficit. La intervención se aplicó a ambos grupos. Los resultados demostraron cambios significativos en todos los procesos en ambos grupos, de tal forma que los alumnos con déficit mejoraron su desempeño llegando al nivel esperado de acuerdo a su nivel de desarrollo. Al mismo tiempo, los alumnos sin déficit también presentaron un mejor desempeño posterior a la intervención. Asimismo, el grupo con déficit presentó resultados similares al grupo sin déficit en los procesos de comprensión oral, atención y memoria. Sin embargo, en comprensión lectora todavía existieron diferencias significativas entre grupos.

Public Significance Statement: Las evaluaciones de la comprensión lectora demuestran que en el nivel de bachillerato, existen deficiencias para aplicar el razonamiento inferencial, en consecuencia se produce un bajo nivel de comprensión lectora en los estudiantes. Por lo tanto, se diseñó un programa psicoeducativo para mejorar la comprensión, la atención y la memoria en alumnos de tercer grado de preparatoria

Palabras clave: atención; memoria; comprensión lectora; comprensión oral; preparatoria

INTRODUCTION

Different national and international evaluations have reported that in Mexico, adolescents attain a low Reading comprehension level. Not necessarily a deficit in IQ nor language skills; they can read adequately individual words, but show problems to comprehend large texts, infer the meaning of unknown words, modulate reading speed, or differentiate between facts and opinions (OECD, 2024; Valero-Ancco, Pari-Orihuelam & Calsin-Chambilla. 2024).

According with Espinosa Pulido (2024) The OECD defines reading comprehension as the capacity to understand, use and reflect upon written texts which allow reaching personal goals and develop knowledge to participate in society; this means, reading goes beyond the letter decoding process. Reading implies that the reader handles a critical thought in terms to elicit, at the beginning, certain hypothesis about a text, and as he/she reads through it, confront them with the context (García-Mogollón & Mogollón-Rodríguez, 2020).

There are various theories which intend to explain the process of reading comprehension, and each one works with different aspects, for example; the *Scheme theory* explains that understanding texts implies modifying the previous knowledge schemes according to the new information that the reading offers (Nickerson et al., 2014, as cited in Berrío-Quispe, Chávez-Bellido, Cangalaya-Sevillano & Arias-Chávez, 2024; Roldán, 2020); the *Comprehension routes model* mentions that the students don't read in the same way and recognize three types of reading comprehension routes (crystalized, strategic and non-comprehension) (Madero Suarez & Gomez Lopez, 2013, as cited in Tobón Zapata & Suarez Sánchez, 2020); the *Net model* states that knowledge is stored in a network of interrelated proposals, which are a simple knot-link structure which grows in complexity (Roldán, 2020); and the Kinscht's 1988 *Construction-Integration model*, based on Van Dijk and Kinscht (1978), which is explained later (Roldán, 2020).

In this way, reading comprehension can be understood as a process in which mental and logical operations are related, and which, in turn, constructs the meaning of a text, where the information from reading is integrated with previous knowledge, which allows the reader to form a mental representation of the meaning of the text (Smith, Snow, Serry & Hammond, 2021).

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Taking account the previous premise, reading implies not only keeping the information from the text, but going beyond: understanding and decoding information that is not literally in the text, analyze it, integrating it with previous information and apply it in various contexts (Granados Alarcón, & Rodríguez Angarita, 2024). This requires of good memory capacity and focused or selective attention (Andrade Véliz, 2020; Sigua Pacho & Idrovo Campoverde, 2021) which allows to continue in the activity.

The theoretical support of this study is comprised by the text analysis model by Kintsch and Van Dijk (1978), text analysis by Jouni (2005) and cognitive stimulation, activity fitting of different programs from the Cognitive Decline Prevention Center (Centro de Prevencion del Deterioro Cognitivo, 2008; Herrera Aranda, 2016; Jiménez Perdices & Torrecillas Narvaez, 2017).

The text analysis model considers that the reader must reshape the text, using previously acquired knowledge schemes and integrating them with the information given in the text (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978; Fuenmayor & Villasmil, 2008). Likewise, it emphasizes three comprehension levels: 1) superficial, referring only to the words and sentences meanings, 2) text basis, which refers to the text's micro and macro- structure and 3) the situation model, which allows making inferences and create information based on the reader's previous knowledge.

On another hand, to decipher the meaning of unknown words can be done by two types of analysis: context analysis and morphological analysis (Jouni, 2005); the first one is understood as the strategy to infer or deduct the meaning of a Word by its place or function in the text; and the second refers to recognizing the meaning of a word by looking at its morphological composition.

Finally, cognitive stimulation is defined as a number of activities which stimulate cognitive functions or capacities in the individual and enable powering neuroplasticity (Nebot, Burón, Pasarín, Hortal, Juárez, & Quintana, 2012, as cited in Calatayud, Plo & Muro, 2020); they also allow improving overall cognitive performance or any of its processes such as attention, memory, language, executive functions or estimation (Salazar Pérez & Mayor Walton, 2020). They are generally effective in rehabilitating cognitive functions that have been impaired by age, as in the one presented by Alzheimer's patients (Herrera Aranda & Moo Estrella, 2020). For attention stimulation, tasks such as visual cancellation or selection are suggested, while for memory, strategies related to repetition, centralization, organization, or elaboration of information are suggested.

METHOD

Objective

Improving the level of reading comprehension, oral comprehension, attention and memory in senior students of a private preparatory school.

Participants

Preparatory school students of a private school from Merida, Yucatan, Mexico participated. The sample was non-probabilistic, intentional, which consisted of 19 students, 10 females and 9 males, aging between 17 and 20 years old, with a mean of 17.

Instruments

Reading Comprehension Test for High School. This instrument was designed and validated in Merida, Yucatan (Heredia Soberanis, 2000). It contains three sections, in which a text is provided, and, afterwards, a series of multiple-choice questions and 22 inferential thinking items are made which allow assessment. Each item scoring is correct (1 point) or incorrect (0 points), and allows to know the overall comprehension of the reading. A gross scoring level is obtained, which goes from 0 to 22. The reliability and validity tests done by the author indicate that in the internal consistency, 4% of items present an optimum level of difficulty, 23% an acceptable level, and 73% a difficult level; similarly, the discriminant analysis shows that 77% of items make differences. On another part, the reliability analysis was performed by a Cronbach alpha test which yielded a scoring of .54.

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CELF-4 Spanish. Subscale Understanding paragraphs. CELF-4, in its Spanish version, has 18 assessment scales, which help determine if there is a language disorder in the individual (Semel, Wiig & Secord, 2006). It also points strong and weak language areas related to semantics, pragmatics, syntax, morphology and language skills in class. In the present study, only the *Understanding paragraphs* scale was used to evaluate oral comprehension, which consists of three readings with different types of vocabulary (two descriptive and one scientific readings). These readings are presented only once to the student, and at the end, they must answer five questions related to them. Each answer has a scoring of 1 if its correct, or 0 if its incorrect. At the end, a maximum scoring of 15 points is obtained. This scoring is transformed to a normalized scoring according to the assessment scale provided by the test.

Neuropsi, Attention and Memory. This instrument evaluates the signposting and focusing, sustained attention, selective attention, sensorial memory, working memory, short-term memory and long-term memory (Ostrosky et al. 2003). It has a total of 19 subscales, divided in the following areas: signposting, attention and focusing, working memory, coding, eliciting and executive functions. The test is individually applied. The scoring is done for each scale and subscale and at the end, the scorings of Attention and executive functions are obtained by separate from the Memory scoring. Also, a total scoring is obtained by adding the results from both scales. The direct grading is transformed into a normal scoring, according to the scales provided by the instrument, depending on the student's age and school years. Likewise, a qualitative category of the attention and memory level can be obtained according to the obtained normal scoring.

Procedure

Diagnostics. At the beginning, authorization from the school principal was requested; at the moment of applying the instruments, student's collaboration was requested through an informed consent. The Neuropsi and CELF-4 tests were individually applied with a duration of 60 minutes per student during a three-week period. A specific room was conditioned to avoid disturbances. Afterwards, the Reading Comprehension Test for Highs School was administered to the whole group in the classroom. At the end, all tests were graded and statistical analysis was done to identify those processes which were deficient.

Intervention. For the intervention program design, the scales with lower scorings from students were considered to create activities which addressed the identified needs. It was implemented through a workshop for all students from the group, regardless they didn't have any shortcoming in the evaluated processes; by the school authorities request. This workshop consisted of 11 sessions of 45 minutes each, which consisted of an introduction to the session and a recall of the previous one, two central activities and a closing. In total, 18 activities were performed, according to the group's weaknesses; in this sense, memory, attention, reading comprehension and oral comprehension were addressed.

Evaluation. It was done two weeks after the end date of the intervention. The Reading Comprehension Test was applied to the group and later, the individual instruments, fitting the corresponding classroom and reminding each student the purpose of the project and the procedure. At the end of the administration, the instruments were graded and the corresponding statistical analyses were performed.

RESULTS

To establish the effectiveness of the intervention program, the same instruments were used and the group was analyzed dividing it into students with deficiencies and without them (table 1). According to the obtained information, both groups showed significant changes in the four evaluated processes.

In the group with deficiencies: (1) they overcame their reading limitations (M = 9.33), (2) they also showed significant differences on oral comprehension as the scorings were minimal in the diagnostic process, whereas in the evaluation, they reached the expected scorings for their developmental stage (M = 9.50), and (3) in attention and memory, they also obtained scorings according to the expected after the intervention (M = 98.50, M = 93.00), overcoming the low scorings obtained in the diagnostic phase.

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In the group with no deficiencies: (1) despite their scorings in reading comprehension were within the expected levels, a significant increase was observed after the intervention (M = 11, 92, M = 112, 54, M = 104,62, respectively); (2) in the oral comprehension, the group had a shortcoming, which was corrected after the intervention, achieving the expected performance (M = 9.23).

Table 1. Differences in students with and without deficiencies by group

Measurement	M		t	df	р
	With deficiencies	Without deficiencies			•
Diagnostics					
Reading comprehension	6.17	9.00	-3.782	16.03	.002*
Oral comprehension	2.67	4.62	-1.889	16.70	.076
Attention	71.17	99.08	-4.167	9.40	.002*
Memory	74.33	94.31	-2.930	7.35	.021*
Evaluation					
Reading comprehension	9.33	11.92	-2.712	14.408	.017*
Oral comprehension	9.50	9.23	.222	12.216	.828
Attention	98.50	112.54	-2.188	8.381	.059
Memory	93.00	104.62	-1.616	8.128	.144

In addition, a t student for independent samples was performed to compare the average scorings before and after the intervention (table 2).

The results show there were significant differences between both groups in the reading comprehension, attention and memory processes. There were no significant differences observed in oral comprehension as both groups had shortcomings. However, the evaluation showed that only in the reading comprehension, a significant difference continued to exist. With respect to oral comprehension, attention and memory, both groups improved their performance in the instruments, achieving a similar level.

Table 2. Diagnostics-evaluation differences by measurement

Group	Process	M		t	df	n	р
•		Diagnostics	Evaluation				•
With deficiencies	Reading comprehension	6.17	9.33	6.635	5	6	.001*
	Oral comprehension	2.67	9.50	5.250	5	6	.003*
	Attention	71.17	98.50	3.709	5	6	.014*
	Memory	74.33	93.00	9.869	5	6	.0001*
Without deficiencies	Reading comprehension	9.00	11.92	3.406	12	13	.005*
	Oral comprehension	4.62	9.23	4.924	12	13	.0001*
	Attention	99.08	112.54	4.314	12	13	.001*
	Memory	94.31	104.62	4.189	12	13	.001*

 $[\]overline{*}$ p < .05

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to improve reading comprehension, oral comprehension, attention and memory on senior students of a private high school. The work grose from the idea that the youngsters had deficiencies in applying inferential thinking when reading, while showing low levels of attention and memory.

In general, the results proved that the intervention program to develop reading comprehension, attention and memory skills allowed the students to overcome their shortcomings and improve their performance according to

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the expected for their age and school level. Particularly, the reading comprehension level presented a strong relation to the attention process; in other words, if the students focus on the reading activity, it is possible they have a better performance in comprehension; likewise, to make inferences, it is necessary that the students activate their previous knowledge and relate them with the information from the text; finally, the oral comprehension and vocabulary allow them to predict performance the reading comprehension.

The data in the comparison by measurement indicate that, in both groups, all processes showed significant differences in the prior evaluation and after the intervention; this means that both groups were able to overcome their shortcomings and reach the expected development. In the reading comprehension, a significant increment in the mean value was observed, which indicates the students could improve their ability to make inferences based on the information from the text and relating it with their previous knowledge. The oral comprehension also showed a significant increase in the scorings, which suggests the students improved the ability to identify key information from aural texts, at the same time they increased their vocabulary. This could be explained due to a relation between the previous information the reader specifically has about the text in question and his/her lexicon quality. This relation allows the reader to understand the text in an adequate way and make inferences about it using all the information available (Villalonga Penna, Padilla Sabaté & Burin, 2014, as cited in Roldán, 2020).

In the cognitive processes of attention and memory, the mean values also increased significantly, positioning within the expected range for their age and school level, which indicates that the students improved their concentration, focusing on the stimuli of the task, while they could recall better the information of previous activities. This relates to what Martinez Pérez, Gama Vilchis, Sánchez Calderón and Ruíz Zamora (2020) mentions, since both attention and memory are closely related to the reading process. Likewise, the idea that with training, memory improves the ability to perform different cognitive tasks is supported, among them, reading comprehension (Sigua Pacho & Idrovo Campoverde, 2021).

On another hand, the results in the groups comparison indicate that, prior to the intervention, there were significant differences between the groups in three processes: reading comprehension, attention and memory. After the intervention, there was only a difference in reading comprehension, which suggests that, despite different strategies were used, the students from the group with deficiencies still did not reach the same level than the group without them. However, it must be considered that both groups improved their performance, since reading comprehension as a tool to making inferences can be improved with practice exercises, as it can be considered within the operative skills set which can be modified (Cisneros et al., 2010); therefore, it is important to continue doing activities which allow applying different inferential reading strategies.

Considering all the information mentioned above, it can be concluded that:

The reading comprehension and attention processes are strongly linked, so, if students focus on the reading activity, they can improve their performance.

In order to make inferences, the students must activate their previous knowledge and relate them with the information from the text.

The oral comprehension process and vocabulary allow predicting the performance in reading comprehension.

The cognitive stimulation programs can be effective to improve the attention and memory processes in adolescents who have an adequate decoding.

The intervention program to develop reading comprehension, attention and memory, specifically designed for this group, allowed the students to overcome their deficiencies and improve their performance according to the expected for their age and school level.

Limitations

In the present research there were variations in schedules due to issues in the groups and holidays, which forced to reschedule some sessions, disrupting the continuity of some activities.

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In the same line of the sessions' schedule, the variable attitude and participation of students during the different activities must be highlighted, as in some occasions, the activities took place immediately before break time, and students sowed tiredness or boredom at the time of the activities.

Directions for Future Research

It is suggested to replicate the same investigation in other school centers in order to look deeper into the study of reading comprehension in high school students, relating it with the cognitive processes, given the fact there are few studies on the subject. Similarly, it is recommended to conduct and evaluate interventions based on cognitive stimulation, to verify their effectiveness and extend its range of application, since it is currently used mostly with senior adults rather than in adolescents or young adults.

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