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# Learning Strategies: A Means to Deal with the Reading of Authentic Texts in the EFL Classroom

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Las estrategias de aprendizaje: un medio para enfrentarse a la lectura de textos auténticos en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera

Estratégias de aprendizagem: meio para lidar com a leitura de textos autênticos na aula de inglês como uma língua estrangeira

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LUIS FERNANDO GÓMEZ RODRÍGUEZ

Colombiano. Ph. D. en Estudios de Inglés de Illinois State University. Docente investigador de la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional de Colombia. Teléfono (57-1) 594 1894. lfgomez@pedagogica.edu.co

## Abstract

English learners usually have difficulties with reading authentic texts because they are mostly used to learning the foreign language with communicative textbooks adapted to their own language levels. Therefore, this case study examined how a group of English learners used learning strategies to read authentic literary materials for the first time in their lives. Data collected through questionnaires, logs, and field notes showed that they became aware of their reading improvement with the help of these strategies. Findings showed that they used mainly four learning strategies: *creating mental linkage*, *summarizing/highlighting*, *translating*, and *analyzing*. Participants also recognized the contributions of learning strategies in their interaction with authentic texts, including self-regulation, autonomy, and responsibility for reading more purposefully.

**Keywords:** autonomy; authentic texts/materials; EFL education; learning strategies; self-regulation

## Resumen

Los estudiantes de inglés tienen dificultades al enfrentarse a textos auténticos en inglés, porque en general aprenden este idioma con textos comunicativos adaptados a sus niveles de lengua. Por consiguiente, este estudio de caso analizó cómo un grupo de estudiantes de inglés implementó estrategias de aprendizaje para leer textos literarios auténticos por primera vez en sus vidas. Los datos recogidos mediante cuestionarios, diarios de los estudiantes y notas de campo indicaron que los estudiantes fueron conscientes de su progreso en las destrezas de la comprensión escrita (lectura) con la ayuda de estas estrategias. Los resultados muestran que usaron principalmente cuatro estrategias de aprendizaje: asociaciones mentales, resúmenes o subrayados, traducciones y análisis de información. Los participantes también reconocieron los beneficios de las estrategias de aprendizaje durante su interacción con los textos auténticos, y destacaron la autorregulación, la autonomía y la responsabilidad para leer con un propósito determinado.

**Palabras clave:** autorregulación; educación en EFL; estrategias de aprendizaje; textos/materiales auténticos; autonomía

## Resumo

Os estudantes de inglês têm dificuldades na hora de se enfrentar com textos autênticos em inglês porque, na verdade, eles aprendem tal língua com textos comunicativos adaptados aos seus níveis de linguagem. Portanto, este estudo de caso analisou como foi que um grupo de estudantes de inglês implementaram estratégias de aprendizagem para ler textos literários autênticos pela primeira vez nas suas vidas. Os dados coletados por meio de questionários, diários dos alunos e notas de campo indicaram que os discentes estavam cientes do seu progresso nas habilidades da compreensão escrita (leitura) com a ajuda de tais estratégias. Os resultados mostram que foram usadas principalmente quatro estratégias de aprendizagem: associações mentais, resumos ou sublinhado, traduções e análise de informações. Os participantes também reconheceram os benefícios das estratégias de aprendizagem durante sua interação com os textos autênticos, enfatizando a autorregulação, autonomia e responsabilidade para ler com um propósito.

**Palavras-chave:** autorregulação; ensino de EFL; estratégias de aprendizagem; textos / materiais autênticos; autonomia

# Learning Strategies: A Means to Deal with the Reading of Authentic Texts in the EFL Classroom

## Introduction

Learning strategies (LS) are understood as a set of conscious operations that help EFL<sup>1</sup> learners to learn how to complete language tasks purposely. Students who do not use LS might experience feelings of frustration and fail in the attempt as they find out that developing tasks in English is quite challenging. This language is different from their own in terms of grammar structures, pronunciation, and sociocultural usage, aspects that are already tough to negotiate meaning in normal communication. Hence, one possible way to learn English more safely is through the use of LS, which are a set of useful resources for students to solve tasks in an easier way (Williams and Burden, 1997).

One of the main complicated tasks that EFL learners must solve sooner or later is to deal with authentic materials which are produced by native speakers for native-speaker audiences, and not necessarily intended for foreign language learners. The language in those authentic materials differs from the relatively easy language samples in communicative textbooks. That is why this qualitative case study reports how a group of EFL pre-service teachers read several authentic reading materials through

the conscious use of LS. For that reason, learners' opinions constituted the main focus of analysis.

## Statement of the problem

English learning has mostly been facilitated through the use of communicative textbooks that display a gradual and measured organization and review of language forms and communicative functions (Richards and Rodgers, 2006; Tomlinson, 2012). However, there is the controversy that textbooks do not always contain authentic language, and that they should not be entirely the center of English syllabi because, sooner or later, learners will have a hard time facing real language outside the classroom. Stryker and Leaver (1997), and Berardo (2006) assert that language in textbooks tends to be artificial because the main focus is the teaching of grammar forms, often lacking instances of how language is naturally produced in real life. This claim is shared by Crossley et al. (2007) who cite the statement of Long and Ross (1994) on how non-authentic texts "inevitably deny learners the opportunity to learn the natural forms of language" (p. 16). In this sense, the English taught in the classroom should be authentic for

real communication, and not only envisioned for instructional purposes. Because of the divergent views between those who favor textbooks (O'Neil; 1982; Sheldon, 1988) and those who defend the use of authentic materials (Mishan, 2005; Trabelsi, 2010; Tomlinson, 2012), the particular problem of this research study comes into play.

A group of EFL pre-service teachers of a Foreign Language Program had to take an advanced course named American Literature, which addresses the discussion of authentic literary texts in English, including short stories and drama. In a needs-analysis survey carried out in 2015, at the beginning of the course, the participants mentioned that this was the first time they were going to read authentic literary language, since in previous English courses they had studied English with textbooks, photocopied activities taken from other materials, and Internet websites to practice grammar, vocabulary, and reading. In this sense, they thought that reading the texts was going to be a challenging task.

This situation was common to students in previous semesters, since moving from the regular English courses (basic, intermediate, and advanced)

to a literature course in English had often caused distress. Each semester students have expressed continuously that although the authentic literary texts are interesting and help them to learn the language, they are more complicated to understand than the textbooks they had studied in previous courses because: (1) structures are not organized progressively as presented in textbooks, (2) reading is time consuming because students have to review the material several times to understand the events, (3) authentic texts contain many unknown words and difficult expressions never found in communicative textbooks, and (4) the author's messages have to be implied because meaning is not directly stated. The pre-service English teachers involved in this research project were not strangers to these problems because once they started to read the first literary texts, they complained about their difficulty as other students in previous courses. Since the course on American Literature encourages learners to read authentic language as part of their teaching professional training, this time they were required to use LS in order to cope with the reading under a careful self-monitoring process. The results of this experience are explained hereafter.

## Theoretical framework

### Learning strategies

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined LS as the "thoughts or behaviours" that individuals use to learn or retain new information (p. 1), while Oxford (1989) defines them as specific "behaviors or actions" employed by students "to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable" (p. 235). With them, students direct and self-regulate learning steps consciously, sometimes unconsciously, in order to achieve a planned purpose. Oxford (1990; 2001) explains that there are three important conditions for LS to be useful: first, the strategy should relate well to the second language task to be done. Second, the strategy should match the student's particular learning style (visual, auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic), which is understood as a set of personal and particular actions, behaviors, and attitudes that facilitate a person's learning process in a given situation. The third condition is that the student should use the strategy with the support of other relevant strategies. These three conditions make learning easier and more effective because the LS chosen for a specific task are personalized and adapted to learners' individual learning needs and process.<sup>2</sup>

Oxford (1990, 2001) contributed significantly with the classification of language LS<sup>3</sup> into six types (See Appendix A):

1. *Cognitive strategies* allow learners to manipulate language materials in a direct way through reasoning, analyzing, and synthesizing. They deal with the mental processes of the brain.
2. *Metacognitive strategies* are implemented to manage and organize the learning process such as identifying one's own learning style or planning a task development.
3. *Memory-related strategies* help to link one concept or idea with another, but they "do not necessarily involve deep understanding" (Oxford, 2001, p. 364). Thus, a learner can employ action to remember verbs and review several times to understand.
4. *Compensatory strategies* help the learner make up for missing knowledge such as guessing meaning from context when he/she does not know a word or using synonyms when he/she does not know the exact word.
5. *Affective strategies* deal with controlling levels of anxiety and rewarding oneself for good performance in order to fulfill a task under safe conditions.
6. *Social strategies* help the learner get support from others, such as asking questions for clarification.

Oxford (2001) points out that LS enable learners to become more autonomous, while Chamot (2005) states that LS integrate well into content-based learning and academic activities. These two particular features were important for this research because the learners had to read authentic literary texts individually and focus on content. They came prepared to class to speak about the characters' conflicts, themes, and meaning of the stories. Therefore, they needed support of Oxford's language LS to accomplish this task.

### Authentic language/materials in EFL education

Tamo (2009) states that authentic materials comprise "the language that naturally occurs as communication in the native speaker contexts of use, or rather in the selected contexts where Standard English is the norm" (p. 74). Authentic materials are real language in use, created to fulfill social purposes in a language community. Authentic aural language is presented in movies, radio shows, and songs, among others, while authentic written language appears in newspapers, magazines, books, and Internet web pages. Thus, authentic texts oppose the so-called English textbooks, which comprise gradually controlled grammatical rules and functions in order to teach language content.

Peacock (1997), Allwright (1979), and Freeman and Holden (1986) claim that authentic materials motivate learners to learn the foreign

language because they are more interesting than artificial materials like textbooks. For Little, Devitt, and Singleton (1989), authentic texts are motivating as they help learners to achieve a closer understanding of the target language culture. This idea is shared by Tamo (2009, p. 74) who provides a list of advantages of authentic reading materials:

- expose learners to real language use;
- inform learners about what really happens in the world;
- produce a sense of achievement as learners are required to do a task for life with them;
- offer a great variety of texts types (journalistic, literary, academic) that are not easily found in conventional textbooks;
- encourage learners to read for pleasure, because they deal with many topics of interest.

In this sense, authentic materials request more than reviewing aspects of language by encouraging learners to understand, infer, and analyze information and to construct meaning more naturally. Similarly, Tomlinson (2012) points out that authentic texts should involve learners to achieve communicative outcomes, rather than just practice the language.

### **Authentic literary texts in EFL learning**

The focus of interest in this study was the literary text, as it was the subject matter of study in the course in which this research was carried out: American Literature. Carter and McRae (1986), McKay (2001), and Amer (2003) affirm that literary texts in EFL education enhance language competence because they are using authentic language. Learners can achieve communicative goals from samples of real written expression. Brumfit and Carter (1984) believe that literary language not only promotes a process of interpretation and the negotiation of meanings, but is an ideal resource for language progress and a point of entry to greater understanding of other authentic texts. Likewise, Gómez Rodríguez (2014) investigated how authentic literary texts helped learners enhance intercultural competence. One of the findings was that learners became critical intercultural speakers because they were

able to discuss topics related to their culture and other foreign cultures, improving in this way their English language and critical literacy. This fact relates to Tomlinson's idea that authentic texts should involve learners in achieving communicative goals such as the discussions of content, rather than just practice language forms.

### **Research methodology**

#### **Setting and participants**

This study was conducted in an EFL American Literature class, offered by the Modern Language Program of a public University. This academic program prepares language teachers to work in public and private schools in Colombia. The Literature course is offered to seventh semester students once they have completed six previous English courses ranging from basic to advanced levels. Being a case study, that is, an empirical investigation that explores a particular phenomenon within its real-life context, the participants involved were 15 EFL pre-service teachers, aged 18 to 22, 8 females and 7 males. In previous English courses they had studied English with a textbook series. Additionally, they worked with the use of photocopied material from other textbooks and grammar books which were brought by the teachers to practice the language contents. Participants had an intermediate language level, but they had sporadic problems with grammar and pronunciation as well as some limitations with fluency and accuracy due to the fact that they were still going through a learning process.

#### **Research questions**

The study was led by the following research questions:

Which LS might language learners use to cope with the reading of authentic texts in an EFL literature class?

How might LS influence learners' reading process of authentic texts in an EFL literature class?

#### **Pedagogical intervention**

Using LS implies awareness of how to self-regulate the learning process (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992).

In consequence, the teacher-researcher proposed three *steps/moments of awareness* that were developed in a pedagogical intervention in which learners read the authentic reading materials.

*First moment: Learners identified their own learning style*

As suggested by Oxford (2001), it was a determinant condition for learners to first know their dominant learning style in order to choose which LS were more appropriate for their learning process. To do so, language learners took a 5-10-minute online test called “What’s your learning style?”<sup>4</sup> which gave the results of their dominant learning style (visual, auditory, or tactile) as well as the results of their lower dominant learning styles (see Table 1). The test contains 20 multiple-choice single answer questions, all about familiar situations of daily life in which test takers are asked to choose from a list of options what they would do in those situations, whether visually, aurally, or physically.

This test constituted participants’ first step of awareness during this experience because the test results were not only numerical, but generated a profile of the participants’ learning styles, including key suggestions and actions to learn better. The results indicated that nine participants were mainly visual learners while six were auditory learners (see Table 1).

*Second moment: Getting to know LS*

At this stage, the teacher-researcher gave a presentation about the importance of LS in language learning. Only a few learners knew some LS, but they did not have full understanding of their classification and usefulness. Therefore, learners were trained on the use of LS before actually using them. First, they were provided with a handout containing the classification of language learning strategies (CLLS) proposed by Oxford (2001) (see Appendix A). Based on their learning style, they familiarized with the LS and discussed how beneficial they were. Later, learners studied which LS they would choose before embarking in the reading of the literary material (see Table 2). This first contact with LS allowed learners

**Table 1. Participants’ learning styles**

Student’s Name <sup>5</sup>	Visual %	Auditory %	Tactile %	Dominant learning style
Erika	45	35	30	9 dominant visual learners
Camila	45	30	25	
Sara	45	30	25	
Diana	50	30	20	
Juan	40	35	25	
Sebastián	40	35	25	
Luis	45	35	20	
Andrés	50	30	20	
Natalia	40	35	25	
Angie	45	50	5	6 dominant auditory learners
Mauro	25	60	15	
Astrid	40	50	10	
Margarita	20	55	25	
Diego	35	45	20	
Felipe	30	40	30	

Source: own work

to review and put into practice the CLLS in the classroom and at home. Gradually, they set initial study plans to choose autonomously those LS that they thought were useful for helping them out to organize the reading process of the authentic texts purposefully and consciously (see Table 2).

*Third moment: Reading authentic materials with the support of LS*

EFL learners read the authentic literary material individually displayed on Table 2 by putting into practice LS at home. Before reading, they had to choose consciously the LS that would work well for the reading process. While reading, they deployed those strategies. Then, they came to class prepared with the reading, and the whole group discussed the characters, conflicts, and themes presented in the texts from a critical perspective.

**Data collection instruments**

In order to answer the research questions, students’ personal opinions were collected through three data collection instruments:



**Table 2. Authentic materials and matrix for data collection**

Author	Authentic readings	Data collection sources	Dates
Edgar Allan Poe	"The Fall of the House of Usher"	First Questionnaire and field notes	April 13, 2015
Ernest Hemingway	"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"	First log and field notes	March 26, 2015
Flannery O'Connor	"Good Country People"	Second log and field notes	April 28, 2015
Truman Capote	"Miriam"		
Tennessee Williams	A Streetcar Named Desire	Second questionnaire and field notes	June 9, 2015

Source: own work

### *Questionnaire*

Wallace (2006) states that questionnaires are introspective techniques because they involve respondents reporting on their own experiences as they answer freely open and closed-ended questions related to the main issue being under investigation. In consequence, information from participants' use of LS were collected twice through one questionnaire (see Appendix B): at the beginning of the experience when learners read and discussed the first short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," and at the end of the research experience (see Table 2).

### *Students' journals (logs)*

Journals/logs are convenient in qualitative research because they keep records of participants' points of view, ideas, or emotions, and because they can reflect periodically about their learning experiences in a written form (Wallace, 2006). Also, logs can help to identify learners' individual problems and progress, and provide basis for triangulation. For this research study participants were asked to write two journal entries (see Table 2). The journals were led by open questions, namely: "How was your experience with

the reading of authentic texts and the use of LS as part of your reading process?" Learners had to write no more than one page long to answer freely, and handed in their anonymous journals which were kept in a folder for data analysis.

### *Field notes*

Field notes were taken every class as suggested by Koshy (2005) in order to observe if participants actually implemented LS such as underlining, highlighting, taking notes, translating, or reviewing the reading material during class discussions, group work, and workshops. Also, notes were taken at the end of each class when learners were questioned about the LS they were using in their reading process.

### **Data analysis**

With the research questions in mind, the data were analyzed through a coding process suggested by Patton (2002). Participants' similar and repeated opinions about their interaction with authentic texts and the use of LS were identified. Those recurrent opinions became significant patterns. The coding process was based on the grounded approach (Freeman, 1998) through which the data were examined several times in the three data collection instruments until chief patterns emerged. Once the patterns were identified, the researcher stated them into findings in such a way that they represented the common patterns that were found from participants' personal experiences.

Additionally, the analysis took into account the frequency with which the participants reported the use of LS in the different moments of data collection. The number of times they reported having worked with LS were registered on Table 3. For instance, the first questionnaire showed that none of the learners employed the strategy *translating*. Nevertheless, the first log showed that two EFL learners had used translation, while the second log indicated that ten learners had opted to translate as part of their reading process (See Table 3). The implications of the frequent use of these strategies are examined in the findings.

Table 3. Learning strategies used by participants

Direct strategies	1st Q.	1st journal entry	2nd journal entry	2nd Q.
<b>Memory strategies</b>				
Creating mental linkage	4*	6	11	14
Applying images and sounds	2	4	1	5
Reviewing events/actions in the stories		3	4	
Reading aloud			2	
<b>Cognitive strategies</b>				
Analyzing and reasoning		2	7	10
Summarizing/highlighting		4	11	14
Translating unknown words		2	10	11
Taking notes		2	7	6
Using resources (dictionary, cell phones)			5	5
<b>Indirect strategies</b>				
	*1st Q.	1st journal entry	2nd journal entry	2nd Q.
<b>Affective strategies</b>				
Lowering your anxiety	3			
Encouraging yourself		1	1	5
<b>Social strategies</b>				
Cooperating with others	3	3	3	3
Clarification/verification	3	3	1	3

\*Number of times participants reported having used that strategy.

Source: own work

## Findings

### Learners initially struggled with authentic materials

The analysis of the data showed that learners found the first short story quite difficult because

they realized that it was not only authentic material, but contained literary language. Some of the participants' comments were:

Erika: It was difficult because there were a lot of words that I did not know. Also, the structure of the reading was different from the ones that I used to read, so it was tedious until I got familiar with it<sup>6</sup> (First questionnaire, April 13).

Sara: It has been very difficult because I had never had contact with it [authentic language]. There are very complicated grammatical structures and ideas (First questionnaire, April 13).

Most of the learners complained about the amount of unknown vocabulary and the complexity of the sentences in the material. They had been so habituated to adapted language in the textbooks in previous courses that they were distressed when reading the first short story. The main problem detected was that their lexical competence was limited, and because the language was literary, not journalistic or colloquial, this reading was "tedious" and "complicated."

Another problem arose. Although these language learners had been excited about the use of LS in the initial moments of awareness (identifying their learning style and getting to know learning strategies), it was observed that almost 60% of students seemed to lack the autonomy to use them in practice. They read the first short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher" superficially, without using Oxford's CLLS in a disciplined way. For instance, there was no evidence of highlighted keywords or of short note taking on the reading material, even though they said that they had looked up the unknown words in the dictionary and that most of them were visual learners. Some others had misplaced the sheet of the CLLS. So, the teacher had to request them to find it and stick it to the set of the reading materials so that they could use LS for the next readings (field notes, April 13). These first poor results with the use of LS were understood by the teacher-researcher as he knew that full awareness of LS required a gradual procedure, and that it was not easy for students to become autonomous right away.

Despite these initial complications and the time restriction, as the course just lasted one semester, a few, out of the fifteen participants, started to use learning strategies. As it can be seen in Table 3, column Q1 (first questionnaire), the data revealed that learners only chose four types of learning strategies: creating mental linkage (4 learners), applying images and sounds (2 learners), lowering anxiety (3 learners), cooperating with others (3 learners), and asking for clarification (3 learners). Some initial comments of those who used LS were:

Luis: I used two strategies. The memory and the social strategies. I like the social ones because I ask people about what I read and understand (First questionnaire, April 13).

Camila: I applied images and sounds because it allowed me to understand better what the writer says (First questionnaire, March 26).

Although a few language learners reported having implemented LS, it was significant that they started to explain consciously why they had decided to use them (pointing out very clearly once again that learners at times make use of LS although they are not really aware of them, and therefore they need training in the use of these strategies). Despite the fact that they were overwhelmed by the authentic readings, they actually took action to face their complexity. However, learners gave few arguments and explanations in the first questionnaire about why they had handled those strategies. Due to the poor results and the limited data found in the first questionnaire, the teacher reminded participants to use LS more often. Learners pledged to be more careful because they said that they were interested in improving their learning habits and reading process (field notes, April 13).

### **Learners self-regulated the reading process through mental linkage and highlighting information.**

One of the most significant findings in the data was that students progressively started to implement memory and cognitive LS from one reading to another, indicating that they started to create a higher level of awareness to monitor

their reading. As it can be observed in Table 3, the most useful strategies among these learners were *creating mental linkage* (a memory strategy that was deployed by four, then six, then eleven, and finally fourteen learners); and *summarizing and highlighting* (a cognitive strategy initially used by four, then eleven, and finally fourteen learners). They were implemented gradually along the experience because according to the learners' opinions, they consciously found out that these were the most appropriate strategies for reading processes.

Regarding *creating mental linkage*, the participants recognized that it was the most practical strategy to read the literary material because they were able to relate new language to concepts in memory by means of visual imagery. They imagined the events, the places, and the characters in their minds as if they were seeing a movie, creating, in this way, a mental representation of the written words. These data support this finding:

Felipe: To read Hemingway's story, I used "creating mental linkage" because it helps to associate and contextualize the words in order to understand them (First log, April 13).

Camila: I used this strategy because I am a visual learner, so I need to imagine the actions that are happening in the stories . . . I imagine pictures that can make the story take form in my mind (Second log, April 28).

Diana: I used it because I consider that making mental connections with the texts is important for me, I associated words and concepts with images (Second questionnaire, June 9).

Learners' opinions suggested that they became aware of the strategies they were using to become better readers of authentic texts. The words "I used", "I consider", and "I imagine" indicated that learners autonomously made the decision to use *mental linkage* by associating and contextualizing words and sentences with visual mental representations or vivid pictures. Furthermore, the data revealed that learners were aware of their learning style, as in the case of Camila, who stated that since she was mainly a visual learner, she decided to use *mental linkage*, a strategy that

fitted her learning necessities. So there was consistency between the LS participants decided to use and their learning style. Also, as Table 3 displays, not only the nine visual learners, but some auditory learners found *mental linkage* (association and the contextualization of words with mental representations) very useful to read authentic texts. In fact, data evidenced that those auditory learners did both, imagined the actions, characters, and events in their minds visually, while reading the texts aloud to make sure they understood:

Diego: I read aloud to listen to myself for better attention. While I am reading aloud, I can associate events with images (Second log, April 28).

Angie: I listen to the literary material because I have a computer function called "select voice," and the voice starts to read the short stories that I have downloaded from the Internet. By doing this, I get a clear idea of what the material is about (Second questionnaire, June 9).

This finding revealed that auditory learners found the way to not only read the words on paper visually, but to read aloud and seek the support of aural material, these being personal conscious choices to regulate their learning and overcome the difficult language presented in the texts.

Another similar finding was that learners mostly implemented the strategy *summarizing and highlighting*, a cognitive strategy that belongs to the category *Creating structure for input/output* (See Appendix A). As previously said, at the beginning of the pedagogical intervention, participants were not accustomed to summarizing and highlighting information while reading, and that is why they thought that the first short story was difficult. Progressively, English learners reported having incorporated this strategy more often in order to notice and receive input and new information easily from the short stories, up to the point that at the end of the experience, 14 out of the 15 participants implemented it regularly (See Table 3). In fact, the teacher-researcher observed that for *summarizing and highlighting*, learners created techniques, mainly, highlighting parts of the texts in green and pink, circling words, and using point-

ers to identify important information, underlining important ideas, and writing brief comments on the margins (field notes, March 26 and April 28). This step was a striking change which not only suggested that learners became more aware of this strategy, but were more autonomous in their attempt to overcome reading limitations. In relation to this learning strategy, the participants said:

Sara: I've learned to read the stories by underlining the most important sentences and I also take notes of the main ideas. While I am doing this, I'm picturing the setting and the actions that are happening in the stories (First log, April 13).

Sebastián: I've gotten used to highlight things like names, dates, and descriptions of main characters, also when something relevant happens to characters that make them change or transform, as it happened with the short story "Miriam." (Second log, April 13, 2015).

It is assumed that learners consciously and simultaneously combined several LS when reading the literary texts: highlighting important information (the setting, dates, names, actions, and changes that the characters had) while at the same time creating mental linkages between the words or sentences they highlighted and the mental representations they made of them in their minds. Their reading process was more self-regulated and more goal-oriented, since they discovered that with the help of these strategies they were able to do a more responsible and conscious reading in such a way that they were prepared for class discussion. Moreover, the logs and the second questionnaire showed that, at the end, learners became aware of the fact that highlighting unknown vocabulary enabled them to focus on and deduce meaning based on the context provided in the texts.

Mauro: The most useful aspect was the interpretation of ideas, not by translating word by word, but to put them in context (Second questionnaire, June 9, 2015).

Therefore, they discovered that they did not need to depend on the dictionary all the time, just when necessary. Thus, their learning process improved with a practical learning resource that they did not know about before this experience.

### Translating was used when reading authentic texts

Table 3 shows that English learners progressively discovered that translation was a suitable strategy to read authentic literary texts. At the beginning, none of the students reported the use of translating, probably because they just skimmed and read the material very quickly and because they were not aware of its expediency in the study of the target language. However, as they started to review Oxford's CLLS, just a few participants reported openly in class that they had chosen the strategy "translating unknown words" because, for example, the story "Good Country People" had many unfamiliar words for them such as "gibberish," "appraising," and "slanted forlornly" (field notes, April 28). Translating was also reported by 2 learners in the first log, 10 learners in the second log, and 11 in the last questionnaire, who claimed that it was one of the easiest strategies they practiced, especially when the context did not help them much to infer meaning:

Margarita: it is necessary to translate some words in order to understand the meaning of the story. When I read Hemingway's story, I had to find the meaning of *gimlet*, *quid*, *giant killer*, and *Swahili* (First log, April 13, 2015).

Sebastián: Sometimes I write the translation of words next to the new vocabulary (Second log, April 28, 2015).

Contrary to most language teachers' belief that language learners should not translate the foreign language into their native language (Karimian and Branch, 2013, p. 605), but they should rather be encouraged to understand meaning from context (a demanding strategy that takes time to master), there were moments when students had to translate, an effective strategy that should not be disregarded in the reading experience with authentic texts. In fact, Karimian and Branch (2013) recognizes that "the use of translation can increase our sense of security to learn what we do not know" (p. 607), a valid statement applicable to this research study because learners were encouraged to deal with authentic

literary language for the first time in their lives. In this sense, learners informed that they sometimes had to look up words in the dictionary to clarify understanding. It was also observed in class that learners wrote the Spanish translation next to the unknown words and sentences they had already highlighted on the texts, or wrote a list of new vocabulary on their notebooks (field notes, April 28 and June 9), particularly when the unknown words appeared several times in the same text and they still had not figured out what they meant, a situation they confirmed in the logs. Therefore, translating generated feelings of security and satisfaction because students could understand forms of authentic language.

### Analyzing and reasoning were accomplished during the reading practice

*Analyzing/reasoning* constituted another relevant LS that participants managed autonomously to deal with the authentic materials:

Luis: I've discovered an efficacy in my reading in terms of the words that I can infer and catch the sense of the text (First log, April 13, 2015).

Sebastián: I usually guess the meaning from the context (Second log, April 13, 2015).

Astrid: I was able to generate possible interpretations of each story which is a high level of comprehension to understand the plot (Second questionnaire, June 9, 2015).

Learners' capacity to analyze and reason during the reading process seemed to be related to the previous findings due to the fact that highlighting, translating, and creating mental linkage, enabled them to actually go through analytical mental processes in several directions. First, they were able to infer meaning of language from context in order to make sense of the events in the stories. Second, they came up with critical interpretations about the authors' themes, characters, and contents of the literary material. This fact was corroborated later in class discussions when the teacher observed that learners not only expressed their critical opinions about the conflicts in the stories, but pointed out specific passages and quotes to defend their views.

Such was the case when learners discussed the short story “Good Country People,” and referred to Hulga, one character that was arrogant and atheist. They analyzed that because of her philosophical view of life she was punished at the end of the story (a stranger deceived her and robbed her wooden leg, as she was crippled) for being disrespectful with her mother’s belief in God. They concluded that with Hulga’s punishment, the author, Flannery O’Connor, who was a Catholic, wanted to criticize the attitude of some human beings who were irreverent when denying the possible existence of a superior being (Field notes, April 28). The same situation happened during the discussion of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as readers analyzed Blanche Dubois, the main character of this play, with the support of evidence that they had highlighted in the book. They were critical when saying that Blanche Dubois became mad because she was affected by poverty, her husband’s suicide, loneliness, and a tarnished reputation due to her alcoholism and her affairs with strangers (field notes, June 9). Thus, *analyzing and reasoning* allowed learners to have a better understanding and to achieve critical levels of interpretation as they discussed literary themes as a result of a responsible and conscious use of LS during their individual reading practices. This was a major finding since these EFL learners gave critical opinions on literary issues in the target language.

### **Learners valued LS as a means to improve their learning practices**

This finding primarily answers the second research question leading this study even though it has been implicitly answered with the previous findings. In terms of their learning practices, the participants recognized the role of LS in their reading skill development.

Andrés: I think that they are very useful when each person knows his own learning style. It is necessary to know what strategies are more appropriate for each student (Second log, April 28).

Felipe: I hadn’t read authentic texts before, and I discovered they were complicated. However,

using LS facilitated the understanding of those texts (Second questionnaire, June 9).

First, participants acknowledged that LS were a facilitating factor to improve and self-direct the reading of authentic texts. Second, learners mentioned that they had created study habits in a more purposeful way. Third, they valued that they had identified their dominant learning style in this class. Thus, both visual and auditory learners commented that they had deliberately chosen strategies that fitted their learning style’s needs. Moreover, six students related the importance of LS to their future teaching career as it can be observed in this comment:

Margarita: I believe that using LS is the only way that a student can learn how to learn, and I want to teach these strategies to my students in the future (Second log, April 28).

This piece of data shows that Margarita, as other participants, found LS practical for other contexts different from the EFL American Literature class, such as classes in their native language in which they had already adopted LS to complete academic projects:

Diana: the strategies are useful tools that can support the reading of authentic texts in English, but also other documents in Spanish and in other classes (Second Log, April 28).

The fact that students reported that they had made their own choices on which strategies would work better to read authentic texts, that they had become “aware” of their learning process, and that they figured out how to plan their study, constituted salient achievements in this research experience. They created a greater sense of autonomy because they were given the opportunity to be independent by self-regulating their learning and using Oxford’s CLLS as they wanted. Furthermore, they commented that the teacher had treated them like adults by giving them the means, yet encouraging them to make their own decisions on how to learn (field notes, June 9). Learners also realized that they had overcome the fears of reading authentic texts because they were more prepared to read, reducing negative attitudes

such as frustration and procrastination when reading the materials for the course. At the end of this research experience, they were critically aware of the positive change they had made in improving their reading skills purposefully and efficiently.

Furthermore, data (Table 3) indicate that learners manipulated other strategies in a lesser degree. Nevertheless, they were meaningful in their learning process. For instance, they admitted the use of social strategies such as *cooperating with others* and *asking questions for clarification*, relevant tactics that showed them the importance of working in group to mutually understand difficult sections that caused them confusion in the authentic readings. They were able to benefit from each other's support during the reading process, instead of competing and pretending they fully managed all the material. In fact, they were not embarrassed to say openly that they needed help to understand the stories (field notes, April 28 and June 9). Likewise, one learner in the second log and 5 learners in the second questionnaire reported having used affective strategies, including *encouraging themselves* to put their fears aside in order to deal with the complications of authentic literary language.

### Limitations of the study

Since this was a case study conducted with a limited number of participants who belonged to a particular class, data analysis and findings should be understood in its particular time and setting. Consequently, findings are not definite results, and further research needs to be replicated with a greater number of participants and in other contexts. Also, time restriction (one semester) was a limitation, since the implementation of LS in EFL education requires more time. Nevertheless, findings were significant within the specific context and with the research methodology of this study.

### Conclusions

Reading authentic texts is a challenging task for EFL learners who are used to studying the foreign language with adapted textbooks. With the help of LS, they can reduce feelings of uncertainty and

demotivation, since they can become aware of how to plan the reading of these materials more purposefully. These language learners might continue having difficulties because authentic materials will always be demanding for basic and advanced English learners. However, with LS, the learning process can be monitored, planned, and goal-oriented.

In this case study, EFL learners mainly worked with four strategies: *creating mental linkage*, *summarizing or highlighting*, *translating*, and *analyzing/reasoning*. They were effective to cope with authentic literary language, and most importantly, they increased learners' sense of discipline and motivation to read. They did not feel afraid of recognizing openly that they had employed *translating*, since in previous courses their English teachers had forbidden them to translate. When they discovered that *translating* was recognized by Oxford's CLLS, they started to use it strategically.

Learners were conscious of having combined more than one learning strategy simultaneously. For instance, while they highlighted unknown vocabulary, they not only analyzed its possible meaning according to the context, but created the mental representation of the events in the stories. This is an important conclusion because learners realized that several strategies can be implemented at the same time.

Autonomy was enhanced significantly during the reading experience with the authentic literary texts. Learners valued the fact that they were able to self-regulate their learning to cope with the readings. As a result, learners came prepared to class and generated a more critical participatory environment.

Learners found LS a supportive resource to, not only read the authentic texts for this class, but also to create study habits, use them to complete tasks for other subjects, and thought of implementing them in their professional career as future English teachers.

In general, incorporating LS in the language classroom seems to facilitate EFL students' learning process. But their effectiveness depends, as Oxford (2001) suggests, on the task that has to be done, the learners' particular dominant learning style,

and the combination of other strategies. This was possible in this experience as learners successfully read authentic literary texts despite their complexity. Learning problems in other EFL contexts related to building vocabulary, listening comprehension, and argumentative competence, for instance, can be accomplished if teachers make learners aware of using this important set of strategies as part of the foreign language learning process.

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### Footnotes

1. EFL: English as a foreign language.
2. A visual learner learns better when he/she uses pictures, images, colors, flash cards, and visual strategies such as taking notes or highlighting sentences on a book. An auditory learner uses song, rhythm, and listens carefully to new information. A tactile learner prefers to learn when he/she can touch objects or do practical things with his/her hands. A kinesthetic learner enjoys doing physical activity and moving from one place to another.
3. Oxford's classification of language learning strategies is a set of cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social strategies, specially designed for language learners. This set compiles the main learning strategies that language learners can use to learn a second/foreign language more effectively.
4. This test was designed by Education Planner, a career and college planning website that helps to prepare students for important academic decisions in their lives. It is a public service of the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) created in 1963. PHEAA also provides student with financial aid services. The test is available at: <http://www.educationplanner.org/students/self-assessments/learning-styles-quiz.shtml?event=results&A=8&V=6&T>
5. Participants' identities were kept confidential by using pseudonyms.
6. These are verbatim samples taken from the data collected. Some of them contain grammar mistakes as students did not possess a full command of English.

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## Appendix A

### OXFORD'S CLASSIFICATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

#### DIRECT STRATEGIES

##### Memory strategies

- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| A. Creating mental linkages: | Grouping, associating/elaborating, contextualizing words |
| B. Applying images/sounds:   | Imagery, semantic mapping, keywords, sounds in memory    |
| C. Reviewing well:           | Reviewing after increasingly longer intervals of time    |
| D. Employing action:         | Physical response or sensation, mechanical techniques    |

##### Cognitive strategies

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| A. Practicing:                          | Repeating, formally, formulaic, recombining  |
| B. Receiving and sending messages:      | Getting the idea quickly, using resources  |
| C. Analyzing and reasoning:             | Deductive, expression analyzing, contrastively across languages, Translating, transferring |
| D. Creating structure for input/output: | Taking notes, summarizing, highlighting  |

##### Compensation strategies

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| A. Guessing intelligently: | Using linguistic and other clues   |
| B. Overcoming limitations: | Mother tongue, gesture, avoidance, topic selection, Approximating, coining words, circumlocution |

#### INDIRECT STRATEGIES

##### Metacognitive Strategies

- |                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| A. Centering your learning:  | Overviewing and linking, paying attention, just listening   |
| B. Planning your learning:   | Meta-linguistics, organizing, setting goals, identifying purposes, planning for a task, seeking times to practice |
| C. Evaluating your learning: | Self-monitoring, self-evaluating  |

##### Affective Strategies

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| A. Lowering your anxiety:             | Relaxation/meditation, music, laughter                     |
| B. Encouraging yourself:              | Positive statements, wise risk-taking, rewarding yourself  |
| C. Taking your emotional temperature: | Body awareness, emotion checklist, diary, sharing feelings |

##### Social Strategies

- |                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| A. Asking questions:        | Clarification/verification, correction   |
| B. Cooperating with others: | Peer support, interaction with native speakers                                     |
| C. Empathizing with others: | Developing cultural understanding, becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings |

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire

Answer the following questions based on your experience with the use of learning strategies.

1. What was your experience with the reading of the literary authentic texts assigned, difficult or easy? Explain your answer.

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2. Did you use Oxford's LS to read the literary texts? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

3. If your answer to the previous question is YES, which LS from Oxford's taxonomy did you mostly use to read the authentic texts? Number them from the most used to the least used.

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4. Why did you decide to use those strategies? Write your reasons very clearly.

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5. Did those LS help you to read the authentic material? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

6. If your answer to the previous question is YES, explain your answer:

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7. Were there/weren't there outcome/s of using LS when reading authentic texts?

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