

Promoting Reading Strategies in Counseling Students

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Resumen: Aprender a leer en un idioma extranjero requiere de entender las ideas y conceptos que se transmiten a través de lo escrito. Lectores requieren de hacer conexiones entre el mensaje y el conocimiento previo, relacionado al tema que se desarrolla, con el fin de lograr comprender lo que se lee. El siguiente estudio es llevado a cabo con estudiantes universitarios cursando la carrera de Orientación y llevando el curso de Inglés Instrumental I en la Universidad Nacional (UNA), Sede Región Brunca. Dado que el énfasis de estos estudiantes no es inglés, y que éste es el primero de dos cursos de comprensión de lectura que deben llevar, se ha notado que la principal estrategia aplicada por los estudiantes en este curso es la traducción. Por lo tanto, es importante que los estudiantes pongan en práctica otras estrategias que pueden ayudarlos cuando leen en la lengua extranjera. La siguiente investigación de acción tiene como objetivo exponer a los estudiantes a diversas estrategias que sean útiles para lograr la comprensión de lectura. Esto significa que además de escanear textos y contestar preguntas de información específica, los estudiantes principalmente analizarán, comentarán y/o reflexionarán acerca del mensaje que se está transmitiendo con respecto al conocimiento que hayan adquirido en su área de estudio. El estudio revela que implementar estrategias de comprensión de lectura involucra a los estudiantes en el texto, alejándolos de la dependencia por la traducción, para enfocarse más en el mensaje que le es transmitido a través del texto.

Palabras clave: Estrategias de lectura, comprensión de lectura, técnicas, modelos de lectura, etapas de lectura.

Abstract:

Learning to read in a foreign language requires students to understand the ideas and concepts that are transmitted through a piece of writing. Readers are required to make connections between the message and background knowledge related to the topic being discussed in order to reach understanding of what is read. The following research is carried out with university students majoring in Counseling and taking an English course designed to provide tools for students to access information in the foreign language related to their field of study. Since the student's major does not emphasize English, and this is the first of two reading comprehension courses that they must take, it has been noticed that the main strategy applied by students in this course is translation. Thus, it is important to have students put into practice other strategies that could aid them when reading in the foreign language. The following action research aims to expose students to other strategies that can be useful for achieving reading comprehension by analyzing, commenting, and/or reacting to the message being transmitted

according to the knowledge they have acquired in their field of study as background knowledge. The study reveal that implementing reading comprehension strategies involves student with the text, drifting them away from translation methods, and focusing more on the message being transmitted through the text.

Keywords: Reading strategies, reading comprehension, techniques, models of reading, reading stages.

I Introduction

The following action research aims to aid university students in the development of their reading skills by promoting the use of reading strategies. These are students that are majoring in Counseling, but they are currently taking the course Instrumental Use of English I at Universidad Nacional (UNA), Sede Región Brunca. This course's general objective is to apply different techniques in order to locate and comprehend general and specific ideas in texts written in English in an effective and rapid form. The course is designed to provide reading tools that will aid students in accessing documents in English that are related to their field of study. The reading skills acquired through the course will serve as an aid for students to investigate and access material found in the foreign language.

The bibliography that is recommended in the course syllabus makes use of procedures and materials which emphasize translation from the foreign language (English) to the native language (Spanish). That is, the methodology the course's book uses is mostly the grammar-translation method, so students are confronted with exercises that require them to decode texts into their native language in order to achieve reading comprehension at an intermediate-low level according to the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages)¹³. Although the purpose of the course is to enable students with reading comprehension skills, the techniques and materials used guide them to depend mostly on translation.

When referring to reading comprehension, it is not only a matter of scanning a text for answering questions with specific information. Students should go beyond this in order to analyze, comment, and/or react to what has been read. This action research aims to suggest which reading strategies can aid counseling students when reading texts in a foreign language, what activities can reduce student's dependence on the dictionary to translate, and what techniques can teachers implement to guide students in the comprehension of a text

¹³According to ACTFL (2012) at intermediate low sublevel when students read they can, "[...] understand some information from the simplest connected texts dealing with a limited number of personal and social needs, although there may be frequent misunderstandings. Readers at this level will be challenged to derive meaning from connected texts of any length." (p. 23)

American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (2012). *ACFL Proficiency Guidelines*. Retrieved November 11, 2012, http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012_FINAL.pdf

II Literature Review

2.1 Implications for Teaching Reading in the Foreign Language Classroom

Learning to read in a foreign language is not only a matter of assimilating grammar rules and memorizing some vocabulary words. This is only a small part of what developing this skill implies. It is necessary to understand the ideas and concepts that are transmitted through the piece of writing one is reading. According to Day and Bamford (1998), reading is “the construction of meaning from a printed or written message” (p. 12). This construction requires the reader to make connections between the message and background knowledge in order to reach understanding of what is read. This process takes place whether the purpose of reading is academic or nonacademic. The focus, then, should be on meaning and not only on the form or structure of the words that make up the text. Thus, the reader will have to use different kinds of clues like linguistic knowledge, structure of texts, subject of the reading, and background knowledge.

To this regard, Barnett stated, “The level of reader comprehension of the text is determined by how well the reader variables (interest level in the text, purpose for reading the text, knowledge of the topic, foreign language abilities, awareness of the reading process, and level of willingness to take risks) interact with the text variables (text type, structure, syntax, and vocabulary)”. These two variables work together to create meaning. Reading in a foreign language goes beyond knowing grammatical and lexical features of that language. Teachers need to take into account personal and linguistic characteristics when teaching students to read in a foreign language.

The primary objective of teaching reading is to achieve reading comprehension to find the meaning of what the author has presented in the text. However, comprehension is not just about recalling and stating ideas that are directly presented in the reading. Mohamad (1999) explained three main levels of comprehension. First, literal comprehension involves surface meanings, that is, comprehension of ideas explicitly stated in the text. Then, for interpretive or referential comprehension the reader goes beyond what is said and reads for deeper meanings by being critical and analytical about the text in order to find the relationships among ideas. Finally, critical reading is when ideas and information are evaluated. The final level of comprehension can only take place when the other two stages have been settled.

Common models that view the reading process from different angles are the bottom-up, top-down and interactive models. These models make assumptions about the manner in which a reader can process a text to achieve comprehension. The bottom-up and the top-down models contrast each other's, and the interactive model integrates both processes. The bottom-up model assumes that reading is a decoding process where the reader must decode letters and words moving up to phrases and clauses to achieve comprehension. In the top-down model, learners' background knowledge is essential because readers' expectations can guide the reading process based on inference for latter verification as the text is read. Grabe (2009) argued that with the bottom-up model the reader's background knowledge does not interfere in this process and thus this extreme view cannot be accurate; and the top-down model does not clear what a reader can learn from a text if the starting point is expectations about the information that will follow. So,

the interactive model combines useful elements of previous models to develop effective and efficient reading skills in students.

Teachers can divide a lesson where the skill focused is reading into three different stages which are pre-reading, while reading and post reading. Each one has a specific purpose that the students must face in the reading process. Vyas & Patel (2009) described each of the three stages. First, for the pre-reading stage, teachers should start with thought-provoking questions that will induce students to the ideas developed in the text. This can be done by eliciting or providing appropriate background knowledge to make predictions. Next, the while reading stage includes two different moments. The first moment is skimming to introduce students to the organization of the text, and scanning for specific information. The second moment is a problem-solving process of lexical and syntactic content, discourse, and sociocultural issues to overcome comprehension difficulties. The third stage, post-reading, consolidates students' language skill by engaging them in communicative group activities that encourage them to use their analytical, critical and thinking skills.

2.2 Reading Strategies

Students should apply reading strategies in order to become more skillful in understanding the text. Urquhart and Weir (1998) described some basic characteristics of strategies. They claimed that strategies are problem solving, goal oriented, purposeful, adapted consciously, and directly teachable. They also involve efficiency and selection. In this case, readers select and use specific strategies in order to approach the text and efficiently solve different tasks related to it depending on a specific purpose or goal to serve. Since the use of strategies is a conscious process applied by readers, it can be taught in class through different activities promoted by the teacher. To select a strategy, the reader uses and selects it depending on the type of text that is being read, the purpose of reading, among others.

Since the 1970s, researchers have become interested in identifying the reading strategies used by people that make them successful readers. Barnett (1988) lists the following six and a brief description of each is added:

- *Using titles and illustrations to understand a passage:* Readers can use written or visual cues to make predictions regarding the content of the reading. To apply this strategy, students pay attention to titles, main headings, pictures, graphs, and any other visual clue.
- *Skimming:* This strategy helps readers get the gist of the text as quickly as possible.
- *Scanning:* It consists of reading quickly to locate specific information within the text.
- *Guessing word meanings:* Use words surrounding an unknown word in order to determine its meaning.
- *Taking risks:* The reader consciously decides to guess at meanings of words in a given text, even though his or her predictions may not always be right.

Aside from the strategies just mentioned, Grabe (2009) adds other reading comprehension strategies. These strategies help students in achieving reading comprehension:

- *Activating prior knowledge*: It is done by making connections between new knowledge and what is known about the topic in the text encountered. With background knowledge the student can make predictions about the information that will be found in the text.
- *Monitoring Comprehension*: Readers self-monitor themselves and check for their understanding of the written passage. This is done by means of metacognition and can be considered an umbrella for many more strategies that consist of being aware of one's own understanding process.
- *Using Text Structure Awareness*: It includes identifying and attending to different discourse-signaling systems such as headings and subheadings, transition forms and signal words, patterns in text organization, among others to achieve understanding of the text.
- *Using graphic organizers*: It facilitates text-structure awareness and main idea recognition by placing the information in instruments like Venn diagrams, matrices or flow charts.
- *Inferencing*: It consists of giving a logical guess based on the facts or evidence presented using prior knowledge to help read between the lines. Like monitoring comprehension, it can be considered part of a metacognitive process that involves many other specific strategies.
- *Mental Translation*: It requires students to think aloud while they are reading.

All these reading strategies can help achieve comprehension and with explicit instruction students can learn to apply them and become strategic readers, but these strategies have to be accompanied with grammar knowledge of the language and vocabulary knowledge, in an interactive approach to teaching reading. To guide students in the development of the reading skill, all these elements must be integrated and recycled. In formal instruction of strategies, teachers must be constant in providing students with opportunities to practice the strategies once and again. Grabe (2009) referred to this by stating, "Every strategy, once introduced and practiced, must be recycled consistently and often, usually in combination with other strategies as part of pre-, during-, and postreading activities." (p. 218) Consistency is the only way that students can become strategic readers because through time they use strategies regularly and automatically when reading.

III Reflecting on Teaching Practice

3.1 Discussion of Findings and Action Plan

Through journal entries that described and analyzed the teaching and learning process taking place in a classroom of counseling students receiving their first course of Instrumental Use of English, it was noted that the main strategy applied by students was

translation. They depended mostly on the dictionary in order to achieve reading comprehension. This happened because the majority of students that were taking this course were beginners whose only formal English instruction had been in high school. The students did not have extensive linguistic and vocabulary background knowledge of the language. Even worse, they had not received any English courses since their high school graduation, approximately three to four years ago. There were five students in the group who had not received English lessons for more than five years because they had graduated from high school prior to the rest of the group and for personal reasons had not enrolled immediately in the university.

Besides the journals, a content analysis of the textbook used in the course¹⁴ was made revealing that the exercises placed a lot of emphasis on grammatical knowledge. The bibliography recommended in the course syllabus includes exercises which emphasizes translation from the foreign language (English) to the native language (Spanish). The methodology used is mostly the Grammar Translation Method. Students are taught to decode texts into their native language in order to achieve “reading comprehension” by recognizing grammar structures, and identifying vocabulary. Even though knowing about the language constitutes a helpful tool, using it to translate is time consuming and not always effective in reading comprehension, especially when students did not translate correctly.

This situation triggered the initiative of implementing reading comprehension strategies that could aid counseling students when reading in the foreign language. The research findings generated the idea of exposing students to other strategies that could be very useful for achieving reading comprehension based on the characteristics these students presented. The specific strategies chosen to explicitly teach and emphasis throughout the course were memorizing, guessing, and making predictions.

Learning vocabulary is not always easy. This is especially the case in this course because the textbook presented students with an extremely long list of high frequency vocabulary. The high frequency vocabulary was composed of words like prepositions, connectors, models or pronouns that appeared constantly in all text. It has been estimated that this vocabulary constitutes approximately 60% of any text¹⁵. This vocabulary is presented by using the translation strategy. Since the words are not presented in context, students needed to practice different memory strategies that could be useful for learning the new concepts. Memory strategies have as a principle meaning, so the vocabulary to be learned needs to be significant for the student. The specific memory strategies that were used included representing sounds in memory and grouping.

Guessing is a compensation strategy that allows learners to use the language despite their large gap in knowledge regarding the target language (Oxford, 1990). This

¹⁴ Soto Montero, A. F. (2000). *Prácticas de Comprensión de Lectura en Inglés I*. Heredia, Costa Rica: EUNA.

¹⁵ Data according to the teacher’s manual for the course textbook (Flores, A. y Chacón, X. (1999). *Guía Teórica. Comprensión de lectura en Inglés I*. Heredia: EUNA.)

was the case of most students that received the course because they had an insufficient repertoire of grammar, and especially, of vocabulary. Given the linguistic background knowledge of the group inferencing by using the clues that a reading provides would help close the gap. The clues can either be linguistic or nonlinguistic, that is, the immediate context that is provided by the text, or the student's own life experiences. Guessing intelligently when reading helps learners get past the belief that they have to recognize and understand every single word before they can comprehend the overall meaning, which is a common idea in the group. The steps taken to teach guessing were global comprehension, using questions before or during reading, immediate feedback regarding their responses, and discuss the source of guesses.

As a third strategy, readers were asked to use titles and illustrations to understand a passage. They used written or visual cues to figure out and make predictions regarding the content of the reading. For this strategy, students paid attention to titles, main headings, pictures, graphs, and any other visual clue. The activity was introduced during the pre-reading stage and verified during the post-reading stage to discuss how accurate their predictions were.

3.2 Reflecting on the Action Plan

The action plan was designed for a group of 35 students that attended English class once a week. The plan lasted a month and two weeks. Besides the activities planned to explicitly teach reading strategies, the students were constantly guided in the use of the strategies in the different texts they were assigned in class and for homework. Six different activities were designed to put into practice memory, guessing and prediction strategies. The six activities were called Rhymes, Categories, Guessing with Pictures, Crystal Ball, Protest and Anticipation Guide (see appendix for a description of the action plan activities). Two activities for each of the three strategies chosen were designed.

3.2.1 Memory Strategies

The activities Rhymes and Categories introduced memory strategies to expose students to a different form of learning vocabulary, other than translation. The material for the course presents frequently used vocabulary in the form of a list where the items are translated from English to Spanish with no context to aid students in memorizing them. Although students say the translation strategy feels 'safe and familiar', they expressed that it was difficult to learn such a long list of words with no context. Therefore, students reacted positively to the experience of learning vocabulary differently. The activity did not require them to translate and they expressed that it placed vocabulary in a context or in chunks, making it easier to memorize.

The activity Rhymes, seemed to present students with some difficulty because they have not had much access throughout the course to the pronunciation of the words; therefore, students tend to pronounce words the way they are spelled. This caused difficulty in finding words that rhymed. They needed help in finding rhyming words and it was necessary to provide a list of rhyming words. Due to the nature of the course, it is

necessary to find another memory strategy instead of this one. Students said that it would not be possible for them to apply this strategy on their own.

Contrary to the first activity, Categories seemed much more useful and practical to the students. They expressed liking that the strategy reduce the amount of words they must learn by placing these into categories, making it easier for the brain to recall them when they were reading. Students did not have trouble performing this activity. They were very creative making up categories. Some divided the pronouns and adjectives (personal, objective, possessive, and reflexive) into male, female, one person or many people. They were also very creative with the verbs; some categorized them according to actions they performed in a library or in school. Students considered this a very practical way to study the vocabulary and that they could adopt it to their own needs whenever necessary.

3.2.2 Guessing Strategies

The activities that were designed to teach students about guessing strategies were Guessing with Pictures and Protest. The activities induced students to inference ideas about the text they and initiate conversation in the group about the message the text was giving. There was a lot of participation and students had to relate the ideas provided by the author with their own background knowledge. Having students check their work with other classmates induced them to metacognitive processing of the text whenever they found differences and tried to analyze what the correct answer is and why.

Students expressed that the Guessing with Pictures activity makes them think and to really focus on meaning in order to put the text back together. The activity had them use context in order to find meaning in the text. They had to use first the linguistic and then the nonlinguistic context. When students got together to check their answers and they found differences, they discussed about the linguistic and nonlinguistic clues that they used, thus students were faced with a metacognitive strategy where they had to discuss and think about their own cognitive process.

Likewise, Protest guided students toward comprehension of the text. Once students shared their citations based on the story read, their classmates were able to correct those expressions that were not possible because it was not related to the original story and explain why it was incorrect. At the end of this activity, it is possible to determine which students really understood the text.

3.2.3 Prediction Strategies

Prediction strategies usually take place at the beginning stage of reading. The students first reaction to a text in a foreign language was to reach for the dictionary. The teaching of the prediction strategy first faced them with the idea that the reading skill does not begin with decoding the written message. They were able to practice using another approach like activating background knowledge to make predictions that will facilitate understanding during the reading stage. The two activities that introduced students to this strategy were Crystal Ball and Anticipation Guide.

As the name of the activity Crystal Ball suggests, it is designed to help students develop their prediction skills. Since students are the first that ask questions for this

activity, I found that they focus their questions more on linguistic aspects, more specifically, vocabulary. Their lack of vocabulary poses as a disadvantage to understand the message being transmitted. However, once the roles were changed and the students had to answer questions focused on comprehension, they had to respond based on what they remembered. Since students were not allowed to see the text, they could not rely on translation to answer. Instead, they had to really make use of what was understood. At the end of the activity, when students had to make predictions they could rely on their background knowledge and their comprehension of the reading. This type of activity is very important because with consistent use, students will depend less on the dictionary.

Prediction strategies seemed to give students a relieve from having to always give the correct answer. It gives them the opportunity to express their ideas. Anticipation guide is an activity that works best with a controversial topic. The topic used with students was about spanking, and as soon as the topic was presented, students were very open to share their ideas about it. When discussing the strategy they expressed that since the topic had sounded interesting, when they began reading they were not as concerned about the linguistic structure of the text, but rather the message.

Incorporating comprehension strategies into reading classes can make the class more interesting. Students are eager to participate and give their opinions. But this must go hand in hand with the linguistic aspect for English learning. With these strategies, a student expressed that she has become aware that the linguistic part of the course is only a complement to achieve the main objective which is understanding the message that another person is trying to explain.

IV Conclusions

The incorporation of the reading strategies into the course set forth ideas for language teachers to take into account when developing the reading skill:

- Students' first tendency when trying to learn vocabulary, or understand a reading is to translate. This happens especially with beginner students. Thus, it is necessary to expose them to different strategies so that they can see that translation is not the only way to confront a text in a foreign language.
- It is important to expose students to a wide variety of activities in order to respond to different learning styles. Some students are good at and enjoy playing with language; others are good at expressing themselves through drawings. Varying the type of activity gives them the opportunity to express themselves in different ways.
- Although the focus of the course Instrumental Use of English is reading, students participate and enjoy activities where they have to integrate other skills. They do this based on what they have learned in the course or previous knowledge they have about the language. The course does not always have to be limited to the reading skill. This sort of activity also brings their attention to the message, more than the linguistic form.

- When guiding students in the development of their prediction or guessing skills, it is very useful to have them give reasons for their predictions. This is done by having them discuss the clues they found in the linguistic and nonlinguistic context provided. This is especially important for those students that have trouble noticing the clues given in a context. They have the opportunity to learn from their classmates.
- Most of the reading comprehension exercises in the bibliography suggested for the course have students simply look for information given in a reading. It is also crucial for students to infer information from texts. Activities where students have to infer information is a good way to teach them to guess because when a guess is given, it is based on previous information.
- Having students express their opinions about a topic arouses their interest in a reading. This happens especially when there are contradicting opinions about the topic. Thus, when students begin reading about a certain topic, they are not just reading to answer comprehension questions, they are reading to learn about something. This is a very important aspect to keep in mind in a reading comprehension course. Students have to find the skill useful. Interest and the desire to learn something are real reading purposes.

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1st Author's biography

Ms. Gamboa holds a Master's degree in Educational Administration from Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica. She also completed her B.A. in English Teaching and the licenciante program in Pedagogy also at Universidad Nacional. She has taught for 11 years and since 2004 she has been working as an English professor at Universidad Nacional, Perez Zeledón campus. She has done research in pedagogy, education administration, and English teaching. She also worked as a teacher for an English conversational program at Universidad Nacional and as a preschool teacher for the Costa Rican Ministry of Education.

Appendix

Action Plan Activities

1- Rhymes

It consists of placing the high frequency vocabulary in a rhyme to help remember its meaning. It can be a nonsense rhyme.

Time allotted: 30 minutes

Description of instruments: Students use the list of high frequency vocabulary. They can pick any word from the list to perform the activity.

Implementation:

- Students form groups of three and choose a word from the high frequency vocabulary list studied throughout the course and find another rhyming word.
- Students make up rhymes with the chosen words.
- Students illustrate each rhyme.
- Each group shares its work with the rest of the class.

2- Categories

Students reduce the number of discrete elements by grouping high frequency vocabulary into meaningful units. Students can make up as many categories as they wish (type of words, words indicating a place, among others).

Time allotted: 30 minutes

Description of instruments: Students use the list of high frequency vocabulary. They come up with their own classification system.

Implementation:

- Students look at high frequency vocabulary from the list previously given to them. They must think of a way to classify some of these words.
- Students label the groups and classify as many words as they want to.
- Share the categories with the rest of the class.

3- Guessing with pictures

Students match the pictures from a cartoon with its caption to reconstruct the cartoon strip. Its purpose is to have students work on their guessing skills by using text structure and content clues.

Time allotted: 1 hour and 30 minutes

Description of instrument: A comic strip is used. The captions are deleted from the original strip. Students receive the captions on a separate sheet of paper. These captions have been scrambled, thus they do not appear in the same order as in the original strip.

Also, the message in each caption has been divided in order to make a matching game for students which consist on finding the other half of the sentence to complete the idea. To facilitate this, the captions have been given a format of a matching activity with two columns: one with the beginning of the sentence and the other with the ending.

Implementation:

- Students work in groups while trying to put the caption back together again by playing a matching game.
- After the captions have been put back together correctly, they must match the caption with the picture it belongs with.
- Students compare their comic strip with another group to check their work.

4- Crystal Ball

This activity allows students to work on their prediction skills by trying to guess the outcome of a reading.

Time allotted: 30 minutes

Description of instruments: An article

Implementation:

- Students silently read a specified portion of a text (such as a paragraph) at the same time that the teacher does too.
- First, the teacher covers the text. Students ask as many questions as they wish to the teacher.
- Then, students cover the text and answer the teacher's questions about the portion of the reading being analyzed.
- This is repeated several times with different portions of the reading.
- At a predetermined time, the teacher stops the reciprocal questioning routine and will ask students to make predictions about the outcome of the reading. Their predictions are written on the board.
- Both students and teacher silently read the ending of the reading.
- Discuss the outcomes of the text and compare the predictions with the real ending.

5- Protest

This activity serves as practice for students to make guesses from context. They practice guessing by inferring what different characters might have said according to the ideas developed in a text.

Time allotted: 1 hour

Description of instruments: A newspaper article with different characters involved in an event described, and a worksheet with enough writing space that contains the name of the characters that participated in the event described in the newspaper article is needed.

Implementation:

- Students pick a partner and read the newspaper article.
- Fill out the worksheet by write what each character could have said.
- Discuss the answers given with the whole group, giving reasons for the statement that they made up.

6- Anticipation guide

This activity is designed to activate a reader's thoughts and opinions about concepts to be discussed in a subsequent reading. Students make predictions about concepts to be found in the text materials. After reading they can confirm or disprove their predictions.

Time allotted: 1 hour

Description of instruments: A reading with a contradictory topic is picked in order to arise student's interest and generate discussion on the topic.

Implementation:

- Identify the major concepts to be learned in the text.
- Determine how the main concepts support or challenge students' knowledge.
- Create 3 statements that support or challenge students' beliefs and experiences about the topic under study.
- Write the statements on the board for students to read.
- Students think about the statements and check those with which they agree. (This can be done individually or in groups.)
- Discuss each statement briefly, write down how many students agree or disagree with each statement.
- Have students read the text. They must keep in mind their opinions and what the text has to say about each statement.
- Discuss what was learned