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Contrasts between the practice and listening and reading skills teaching of English language

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Abstract.- This paper analyses the difference between teaching and practicing listening and reading skills in the context of learning English as a second language (ESL). A systematic literature review examines recent studies published within the last five years on pedagogical approaches. The results indicate that active teaching, which includes keyword identification and inference strategies, is significantly more effective than repetitive practice, allowing students to apply these skills more effectively in real-life situations. It is concluded that structured instruction is key to fostering deep learning, while unguided practice may limit the effective development of these skills.

Keywords: English listening comprehension, English reading skills, teaching strategies.

Contrastes entre a prática e a enseñanza de las destrezas auditivas y de lectura de la lengua inglesa

Resumen: Este artículo analiza la diferencia entre la enseñanza y la práctica de las destrezas de comprensión oral y escrita en el contexto del aprendizaje del inglés como segunda lengua (ESL). Una revisión sistemática de la literatura examina estudios recientes publicados en los últimos cinco años sobre enfoques pedagógicos. Los resultados indican que la enseñanza activa, que incluye estrategias de identificación e inferencia de palabras clave, es significativamente más eficaz que la práctica repetitiva, ya que permite a los estudiantes aplicar estas destrezas con mayor eficacia en situaciones de la vida real. Se concluye que la enseñanza estructurada es clave para fomentar el aprendizaje en profundidad, mientras que la práctica no guiada puede limitar el desarrollo eficaz de estas destrezas.

Palabras clave: comprensión oral en inglés, capacidad de lectura en inglés, estrategias de enseñanza.



I. INTRODUCTION

Listening and reading skills are fundamental to mastering a second language and have long been a central focus of educational research in English language learning. However, a clear distinction exists between teaching these skills and merely practicing their use [1]. In this context, this paper addresses a key challenge in English language instruction: the tendency of many teachers to prioritize repetitive practice over effective instruction in listening and reading comprehension. This imbalance often leads to a disconnect between instruction and training, resulting in superficial learning. Consequently, students may complete listening and reading exercises without acquiring the essential skills to apply them independently in real-life contexts.

This study examines the distinction between teaching and practicing listening and reading comprehension skills in the context of learning English as a second language (ESL), emphasizing that repetitive drills alone are insufficient to foster comprehensive skill development. It identifies and differentiates strategies that focus on effective teaching methods from those that rely solely on repetitive practice through a systematic review of the literature. In addition, the study provides concrete examples to illustrate how targeted instruction can play a critical role in improving the acquisition of these essential skills.

This study is based on the premise that teaching a skill involves breaking it down into its essential components, equipping learners with the techniques needed to address it effectively, and providing them with opportunities to apply these techniques in meaningful contexts. In contrast, practice often emphasizes the repetition of tasks or exercises intended to assess the learner's ability to perform the skill, often without guiding how to improve or achieve mastery [2]. In the realm of listening, effective teaching requires instructing students to predict information from contextual clues, identify keywords, and distinguish between various accents or speech registers. Similarly, in the case of reading skills, teaching focuses on guiding students through scanning techniques, inferring meaning, and synthesizing information. Unguided practice, by contrast, is often restricted to having students read texts and answer questions without fostering a meaningful reflection on the comprehension process itself.

This study employs a systematic literature review to explore the effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches in teaching listening and reading comprehension skills. By synthesizing existing research, the review provides a comprehensive overview of the current stage of knowledge in this area. To ensure a holistic perspective, the review includes studies that examine both instructional and practice-based aspects of listening and reading comprehension methodologies.

II. DEVELOPMENT

This section delves into key issues related to the definition and characteristics of listening and reading skills, including the distinctions between practicing and teaching in these areas and the pedagogical strategies for teaching listening, among other topics. These discussions are grounded in the perspectives of various authors. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, this analysis offers a robust foundation for understanding how English language teaching can be enhanced.

A. Definition and characteristics of listening and reading skills

Listening and reading skills share fundamental cognitive mechanisms, such as interpreting linguistic signals and constructing meaning. However, they differ significantly in the sensory channels involved and the specific cognitive demands placed on the learner [3]. In listening, cognitive processing begins with the reception of sounds, followed by sound discrimination and word identification, which demand high levels of selective attention and auditory memory. In addition, listeners must process the information in real-time, which adds complexity because they cannot control the reception rate.

In contrast, reading relies on visual decoding, requiring the recognition of written words. Readers, however, have greater control over the processing pace, allowing them to pause, reread, and analyze the text in more detail. Despite these differences, both listening and reading depend on broader language competencies, including a strong command of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.

A key source highlights that listening and reading skills are focused on comprehension [4]. Listening comprehension involves recognizing spoken words, understanding the structure of speech (such as sentence construction), and deducing the meaning of a message, even in the presence of difficulties such as unfamiliar accents or background noise. Effective listening also requires quick decision-making and the ability to predict content.

In contrast, reading comprehension entails interpreting a text, recognizing grammatical structures, and linking explicit and implicit ideas. Readers must infer unstated meanings within the text, making inferential skills essential. While reading allows for greater reflection and analysis, listening depends more on immediate context and nonverbal cues. Despite these differences, the two skills share similar cognitive foundations.

Developing English communication skills involves both listening and reading. Communicative competence extends beyond speaking and understanding a language to using it appropriately in various contexts [5]. Listening is crucial in social interaction and dialogue, enabling people to understand their interlocutors and respond appropriately. Poorly developed listening skills can greatly hinder the flow of conversations, highlighting the essential role of listening in effective communication.

B. Differences between teaching and practicing listening and reading skills

Effective teaching of comprehension and reading skills requires a structured methodological approach that goes beyond repetitive drills. It involves equipping students with strategies to understand, process, and apply these skills profitably. In the case of listening comprehension, this involves techniques such as identifying key terms, inferring meaning from context, and using auditory and visual cues, all within a framework that divides the skill into manageable stages. Similarly, reading instruction centers on guiding students through techniques such as scanning texts, synthesizing main ideas, and interpreting metaphors and inferences, fostering a deeper understanding of the material [6].

In contrast, listening and reading comprehension often rely on repetitive exercises that do not address the underlying strategies needed for improvement. For example, listening comprehension activities may consist of answering comprehension questions after listening to recordings but often lack detailed feedback or guidance on techniques for improving listening skills. Similarly, reading practice consists of reading passages and answering questions without explicit instructions on reinforcing comprehension or retention in memory.

The key difference between teaching and practicing is their long-term impact on skill acquisition. Teaching comprehension and reading strategies empower learners to tackle a variety of English texts and conversations autonomously. It fosters in-depth learning by instructing students on what to do and how to apply specific strategies, leading to a more solid and transferable mastery of these skills.

However, practice often prioritizes surface-level learning, allowing students to complete exercises without gaining the ability to apply these skills in real-world contexts. For instance, a student who practices listening solely through recordings might become adept at answering specific questions but struggle in spontaneous conversations or interactions with native speakers. Similarly, students who practice reading primarily through comprehension questions may lack the strategies to navigate academic or complex texts. These shortcomings emphasize the importance of pairing practice with explicit instruction in skill-building techniques to ensure effective learning.

An example of listening instruction involves a teacher guiding students to identify keywords in a recording and predict its content before listening [7]. Students then apply this strategy while listening to a conversation or speech, receiving feedback on their predictions, and refining their comprehension in real-time. This approach enhances listening skills and fosters active engagement and strategic thinking. In contrast, a typical practice exercise might involve listening to a recording and answering multiple-choice questions about specific details without guiding on improving listening comprehension.

Similarly, in reading instruction, students might be taught techniques such as scanning texts, identifying main concepts, and summarizing information. These strategies are then applied in activities involving various text types, enabling practical application and reinforcement. In contrast, reading practice without instruction may consist of reading a passage and answering comprehension questions, offering little to no guidance on techniques for analyzing or interpreting the text in depth.

C. Pedagogical strategies for teaching listening

Strategic approaches to teaching listening go beyond passive exposure to auditory content. Teachers must prioritize learners' ability to anticipate, analyze, and effectively process auditory information. These include teaching learners to identify key information, make inferences, recognize patterns in speech, and prepare them to cope with various English communication situations [8].

Prediction is one of the most effective strategies for teaching listening skills, as it enables students to anticipate the content of what they will hear based on contextual clues or keywords. This allows students to activate their prior knowledge and develop hypotheses about the forthcoming information. This not only enhances their focus and attention but also improves overall comprehension.

Active listening is crucial, as it necessitates the listener's full engagement in the comprehension process. In this approach, learners are instructed to identify key concepts, make inferences, and actively track the discourse, rather than only passively absorbing the content [9]. Furthermore, activities designed to enhance active listening may include recognizing repeated words or phrases, taking notes on essential topics, or posing questions during the listening process to ensure accurate understanding.

Similarly, auditory discrimination, i.e., distinguishing between sounds and words in a foreign language, is a fundamental listening skill. It can be developed through activities that require students to differentiate between similar sounds, identify intonation patterns, or distinguish between words with similar phonetic features. For instance, practicing minimal pairs (words that differ in only one sound, such as boat and vote) can help students refine their listening accuracy.

In this regard, identifying key concepts is equally crucial for effective listening. Students need the training to recognize the most important ideas or messages in a speech rather than getting caught up in every detail. This skill can be developed through practice such as summarizing or extracting general information before delving into specifics. Using key idea checklists or creating concept maps while listening can help students organize the information visually.

Several studies have shown that explicit instruction in listening techniques is far more effective than mere practice. For example, one study revealed that students who received training in metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their listening comprehension, showed significant improvement in processing auditory information compared to those who only engaged in listening practice. [2].

D. Pedagogical strategies for teaching reading

Teaching that provides students with the skills necessary to interpret, analyze, and critically comprehend texts is essential to teach reading effectively. Therefore, reading instruction should focus on techniques that foster deep and autonomous comprehension [10].

Critical reading demands an active approach from the reader going beyond the mere decoding of words to question, interpret, and analyze the content of a text. These skills can be developed by guiding students to identify the main arguments, assess the validity of the information, and understand the author's purpose. Activities such as engaging in content discussions, identifying biases, and comparing various perspectives contribute to developing critical reading skills.

In analytical reading, students are taught to break down a text into its constituent parts to understand how the information is organized. This involves teaching them to identify the main ideas, recognize the connectors between the different sections of the text, and analyze the language used, including the structure of the argument.

Making inferences—conclusions that are not explicit in the text—is one of the most essential reading skills. Teachers can support students in developing this skill by encouraging them to predict content before reading and to hypothesize about the meaning of ambiguous sentences or implicit contexts. Additionally, inference-based questions or tasks that require learners to complete sentences based on contextual clues can be especially effective [10].

Information synthesis is the ability to join ideas scattered throughout a text and combine them to create a coherent conclusion or summary. This skill can be taught by using organizing graphics, such as concept maps or flowcharts, which help students visualize how different ideas within the text are connected.

In this context, direct instruction in reading skills such as inferencing and synthesis is far more effective than repetitive reading practice without guidance. According to one of the studies reviewed, students who received targeted instruction in reading skills showed significant improvement in their comprehension and analysis of texts, compared to those who only practiced reading alone without the necessary instructional support [11]. This suggests that reading practice alone does not substantially enhance a student's deep understanding of texts.

E. Impact of practice without teaching on the learning process

Without adequate instruction, an exclusive emphasis on practice significantly hinders the development of listening and reading skills. Without explicit guidance, students fail to acquire the cognitive tools necessary to navigate complex communicative situations focusing solely on the repetition of drills. In listening, students may develop basic skills to answer questions about specific details, yet they often struggle to understand and process auditory information in real-world contexts. Similarly, repetitive reading practice without strategy instruction limits students' capacity to critically and analytically interpret texts.

In this context, practice without instruction can hinder long-term academic progress since students are not adequately equipped to apply the skills learned in the classroom to more demanding scenarios. According to a recent finding, students who practice skills without receiving explicit instruction often demonstrate superficial improvements in their performance but fail to develop robust communicative competencies [12]. This deficiency can negatively impact their ability to perform effectively in academic and professional settings that require advanced listening and reading comprehension skills.

Repetitive practice alone is not sufficient to develop complex foreign language skills. While practicing is essential to automate certain language abilities it often leads to superficial learning if not complemented by effective instruction in cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Conversely, students who receive explicit instruction in listening and reading exhibit better long-term retention and are capable of transferring their skills to new and challenging contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study involved a systematic process of identifying, selecting, analyzing, and summarizing relevant scientific studies that evaluate the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches to teaching listening and reading skills. This process was carried out through the following four steps:

A. Establishment of selection criteria

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to guarantee the relevance of the studies selected for the review. The research included met the following requirements:

- Languages: Publications in English and Spanish.
- Dates: To ensure data accuracy, publications from 2019 to 2024 are included.
- Focus: Research that addressed the teaching or practice of listening and reading skills in the context of learning English as a second or foreign language.
- Study design: Empirical research, theoretical reviews, and case studies comparing pedagogical approaches to teaching or reading practice.

Therefore, studies that did not focus on listening and reading skills or those that focused on digital technologies or platforms without providing a comparison of pedagogical approaches were excluded from the literature review.

B. Search for information sources

The bibliographic search was conducted using academic databases such as Scopus, Scielo, Dialnet, and various academic repositories. Keywords in both English and Spanish were employed including terms like listening comprehension, reading skills, practice-based learning, and teaching strategies for English comprehension, among others. To optimize the search and ensure the relevance of the results, Boolean operators such as OR and AND were used allowing for more refined and targeted searches.

Table 1 provides an overview of academic publications focused on teaching listening and reading comprehension in English, detailing key journals, countries, and periods of heightened research activity. The analysis reveals that from 2020 to 2024, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, Mexico, and France have led research efforts in this field contributing the highest volume of publications. Notable journals include Horizontes, Educación, and ResearchGate, among others. The table also highlights the use of search strings in both English and Spanish exploring teaching methods and the integration of technology in this domain emphasizing the multilingual approach. It is worth noting that this table does not establish relationships between the contents of each row.

Table 1. Main journals reviewed, main countries that addressed the topic (period 2020-2024), years with the highest number of publications and with the best results.

Main journals reviewed	Main countries that have addressed this issue (period 2020-2024)	Years with the greatest publications number on the topic	Search strings with the best results (in English and Spanish)
Magazine Horizons	USA	2021	Teaching methods AND listening skills OR reading skills AND English
Magazine Education	United Kingdom	2024	Pedagogy AND listening OR reading AND English
Culture, Education, and Society	Australia	2022	Effective strategies AND teaching AND listening OR reading AND English
ResearchGate	Spain	2023	Comparative studies AND teaching AND listening OR reading AND English
International Journal of Foreign Languages	Mexico	2020	Technology integration AND teaching AND listening OR reading AND English
Atlantis Press	France	2021	Multilingual approaches AND listening OR reading AND English

Research source: Own elaboration.

Table 2 evaluates the quality of the reviewed publications, presenting 13 accepted studies and 53 rejected ones. The evaluation is based on key criteria such as journal prestige, methodological rigor, academic quality, and relevance. The most significant articles focus on areas including the development of language learning theory, oral communicative competence, curricular and methodological approaches, phonological awareness, and theories related to listening skills.

Table 2. Evaluation of the quality of publications analyzed and rejected studies, and articles with the best contribution.

Evaluating the quality of publications	Studies analyzed	Discarded studies	Articles with the best contribution
Prestige of the magazine	13	53	The Development of Language Learning Theory Based on Best Practice: A Literature Review
Review of the methodology used			Oral communicative competence in the mother tongue for learning development: Systematic review
Academic rigor			Curriculum, teacher training and methodology approaches in teaching and learning English: a literature review and analysis of results
Relevance			Vocabulary in English Language Learning, Teaching, and Testing in Vietnam: A Review
Citations and references			Phonological awareness in early reading: A systematic review
Transparency of results			The Importance of literature for Teaching foreign languages in Primary Education

Research source: Own elaboration.

C. Analysis and synthesis

The selected studies were analyzed qualitatively through a thematic approach, focusing on the critical distinctions between teaching and practicing listening and reading skills. The data were organized into categories to identify the methodologies employed, their effectiveness, and their impact on student learning outcomes. The synthesis was presented in a narrative format, emphasizing the similarities and differences among the studies reviewed.

IV. RESULTS

The methodology described above enabled us to identify significant differences in how listening and reading skills are taught and practiced in the classroom. The literature review revealed that, although these skills are crucial for mastering a second language, pedagogical approaches that rely solely on repetitive practice fail to foster their holistic and autonomous development.

Teaching listening skills in a foreign language is a complex process that goes beyond the use of audio resources [13]. In this context, teaching listening involves breaking down the skill into essential components, such as the application of metacognitive strategies, predicting information based on context, and recognizing phonetic and phonological features [7]. Teaching students to identify keywords, decode sentences, and differentiate between various accents is an effective pedagogical approach that enhances listening comprehension.

On the other hand, listening exercises often rely on listening task repetition [2]. While this type of practice can be very useful for assessing students' comprehension levels, it does not lead to significant improvements in their listening skills [13]. Basic practice without proper instruction fails to equip students with the necessary tools to develop deeper comprehension strategies. This lack of guidance can hinder their overall progress in communication situations in everyday settings [12].

Furthermore, the studies reviewed demonstrate that teaching these skills involves more than simply assigning texts for students to read and answer questions about. Effective reading instruction includes providing students with active reading strategies, such as scanning, identifying key ideas, drawing conclusions, and synthesizing information from various types of text [10]. These approaches encourage students to engage with texts more critically, enhancing both their comprehension and their ability to apply these skills in academic and professional contexts [1].

On the other hand, reading practice often focuses on repetitive activities, neglecting the application of specific strategies. For instance, exercises like reading a book and answering multiple-choice questions, help assess immediate comprehension but do not always teach students how to approach and analyze material effectively. Without explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies, students may engage in superficial learning, completing tasks without developing a deeper critical understanding of the content [9].

Building on the theme discussed, the research conducted enabled us to identify and examine the approaches adopted by researchers, leading to the establishment of the five key categories. These categories allowed for a comparison of the teaching and practice of listening and reading comprehension skills in English language learning. This analysis highlights critical distinctions between teaching and practicing these skills.

Table 3. Contrasts between teaching and practicing listening and reading skills in English language learning.

Category	Articles	Teaching listening	Listening practice	Reading teaching	Reading practice
Main focus	Vocabulary in English Language Learning, Teaching, and Testing in Vietnam: A Review	Keyword identification, intonation interpretation, and accent differentiation.	Listening to tasks repetition without developing specific strategies focus.	Scanning, identifying key ideas, synthesis, and critical inferences.	Reading repetition and multiple-choice exercises without a focus on critical analysis or comprehension strategies.
	The Development of Language Learning Theory Based on Best Practice: A Literature Review				
	Approaches to curriculum, teacher training and methodology in teaching and learning English				
	A bibliometric analysis of academic literacy				
Strategies used	Reading comprehension as a technique of expression	Using prediction, recognizing sound patterns, and developing skills to identify contextual details.	Repetition exercises to assess immediate understanding.	Use of active reading strategies, such as synthesizing information and concluding.	Repetitive reading exercises without explicit instruction on how to improve reading skills.
	Gamification in learning environments for teaching bilingualism				
	Phonological awareness in early reading: A systematic review				
	The Importance of literature for Teaching foreign languages in Primary Education				
Effectiveness	Is Mind-Reading a Unimodal Capacity?	It promotes active and autonomous understanding, improving students' abilities to interact in real contexts.	It provides immediate results but does not promote significant improvement in listening comprehension skills.	It encourages critical reading and deep understanding of texts.	Superficial Understanding results.
	Oral communicative competence in the mother tongue for the development of learning				
	Learning English through digital tools				
learning influence	The Development of Language Learning Theory Based on Best Practice: A Literature Review	It facilitates cognitive and metacognitive skills development.	It may result in stagnation as students do not develop strategies to improve their listening comprehension.	Develop critical thinking skills and the ability to extract and interpret information.	It limits autonomous and deep learning.
	Oral communicative competence in the mother tongue for the development of learning				
	Phonological awareness in early reading: A systematic review				
	The use of comprehensible input in the English classroom: a critical review				
	Basic cognitive processes and reading comprehension in first-cycle students of the special education degree, from the Faculty of Education, Art and Communication, 2023-2024				

Research source: Own elaboration.

The table compares the teaching and practice of listening and reading skills based on the literature studied highlighting key differences. In listening, teaching emphasizes word and accent recognition, while practice often lacks effective strategies for deeper comprehension. In reading, critical thinking is promoted through teaching, but practice tends to be repetitive and superficial. The strategies employed vary between prediction practice in listening and active reading. Regarding effectiveness, some methods encourage autonomy and critical thinking, while others lead to superficial learning or stagnation. The impact on learning is varied, with some studies highlighting cognitive development, while others suggest more limited progress.

CONCLUSIONS

Research reveals a significant gap between the practice of teaching English and the development of listening and reading skills. The findings emphasize that the real challenge lies not in performing isolated exercises, but in integrating these practices within a coherent pedagogical framework. It has been observed that combining theoretical knowledge with practical exercises without a clear connection does not effectively foster skill development. To improve listening and reading abilities comprehensively, an approach addressing both cognitive and metacognitive development is necessary.

The analysis shows that success in teaching listening and reading is tied to a student's ability to apply knowledge in various contexts. Repetitive drills alone are insufficient to achieve meaningful skill transfer. A pedagogical framework that promotes metacognitive awareness is essential. This awareness allows students to adapt their listening and reading strategies according to the context, which is crucial for effective communication in English.

The pedagogical implications of these findings call for a reform of teacher training programs. Educators must be equipped not only with specific teaching techniques but also with an understanding of how students construct and apply knowledge in diverse communicative contexts. This is essential to overcome the limitations of traditional methods, which often focus excessively on repetitive practice without context or a focus on metacognitive development.

Finally, there is a clear need for more sophisticated assessment frameworks to evaluate listening and reading skills in English learning. These frameworks should go beyond immediate test results and assess students' ability to apply their skills in real-world, complex situations. This requires redefining success criteria in language learning, emphasizing student autonomy and their capacity to navigate various communicative contexts.

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