

Improving Reading Comprehension in Students: An Examination of Structured Teaching Models and Strategies

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Abstract: *In the modern educational reality, understanding is the basis for managing and expanding knowledge. Especially nowadays, where the rapid increase in information is reality, the education of students is considered of utmost importance and primary necessity, in order for them to become competent and critical readers and able to manage and process this volume of information according to the occasion and the goal they want to succeed. This study investigates the challenges students face in reading comprehension and how structured teaching models and strategies can address these issues. It presents students perspectives on their difficulties and explores the potential of specific teaching models and strategies to enhance their reading comprehension skills.*

Keywords: reading comprehension, teaching models, strategies, educational pedagogy, student engagement

1. Introduction

Literacy plays an important role in modern societies and it is a basic pursuit of every state and educational system. Reading in particular, through which the individual gains access to knowledge and learning, it is considered a critical process for the individual's cognitive and psychosocial development. Although significant progress has been made in the fight against illiteracy, a part of the population is still unable to read or understand what he reads due to inherent difficulties (e. g. disabilities, special learning needs, etc.), social causes or some emotional factors. More generally, it has been found that although reading proficiency is achieved, the degree of reading comprehension varies.

Reading comprehension in the educational process for both the student and the teacher is a requirement skill. It is a complex cognitive process, in which the reader tries to "communicate" with the text, to access it building meaningful representations (McNamara & Magliano, 2009; Perfetti, 2007), combining elements with his own knowledge about what he reads (Kouloubaritsi, 2002) and activating various mechanisms and factors, cognitive, linguistic, emotional.

Reading comprehension refers to the construction of meaning that is achieved through interaction and engagement with the text (Guthrie, 2001). It is considered an essential skill that must be acquired in order someone to be considered a proficient and sufficient reader. It concerns all subjects and for its mastery, structured teaching should start from the first school years of primary education. When the reader truly understands, he goes beyond the level of literal understanding and interacts with the text. What is required in the learning process it is not only accessing the text but also its understanding, interpretation, evaluation and further processing.

1) Teaching Reading comprehension in contemporary society

Reading according to Porpodas (2002), it is the "structured synthesis of two functions, decoding and understanding". This definition leads to the dual consideration of reading: as a cognitive function and as an information processing process. Several scholars recognize reading as an intentional cognitive interactive process between the reader and the text (Falke, 2008; Halliday, 1979; Norris & Philips, 2004), while others distinguish two dimensions in reading: the process and the product (Alderson, 2000). Despite the different approach, they all agree that reading is a particularly complex cognitive process, during which a variety of mental and linguistic processes are activated, with the decoding, understanding and interpretation of the text as key components.

The understanding of the text and especially the understanding of the meaning of a text it is a requirement of the reading process (Teng, 2009) as well as a condition for the teaching and knowledge of all the cognitive subjects of the curriculum (Iwai, 2009). Successful reading, both as a process and as an outcome, it is a perennial goal for all educational systems (Alexander & Fox, 2004), and that is why literature speaks of teaching reading and teaching reading comprehension by teachers (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005) depending on the reading models that may be adopted (Baumann, Kame'enui & Ash, 2003; Guthrie, 2003). The teacher's contribution to teaching reading comprehension is important (Phelps, 2009). Teaching reading is a very serious matter, and for its constructive and successful mastery it is required detailed planning, setting clear goals and direct teaching of reading skills, connecting it to authentic learning experiences (Blair, Rupley & Nichols, 2007). Reading comprehension is a skill of primary importance in human life, as it provides the ability to construct meaning and communicate with others and the environment.

It is also considered to be an important and necessary skill for students both in school and in their daily lives. For this reason, it is a basic pursuit of Curriculum for all students and a requirement of the learning process. In order to achieve it,

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higher cognitive functions are activated which must also be coordinated with each other, as it is not enough for students to only read a text but also to access it meaningfully, to understand it by formulating assumptions, making interpretations, evaluation and adopting critical attitude towards it (McNamara & Magliano, 2009).

The ultimate goal of teaching reading comprehension is to make students active readers. Active readers are defined as those who read texts with fluency, speed and accuracy, they observe the structure and organization of texts, they monitor their understanding as they read and use strategies such as summarizing, making predictions, integrating new knowledge into existing knowledge to make mental representations and draw conclusions. Active readers also have a rich vocabulary and typically have multiple reading experiences.

In literature, the term "self - regulated reader" is also found and refers to the one who "sets realistic goals, chooses effective reading strategies, regulates the level of understanding of the text to be read and evaluates his progress based on the goals set". This reader uses a variety of strategies (Brown et al, 2007 ` Stahl, 2004) choosing each time the most appropriate one for the given reading text, while simultaneously regulates and evaluates its effectiveness. When a strategy proves ineffective in a specific situation, it is replaced by a more appropriate one. Reading comprehension is high due to the use and exploitation of strategies to access the meaning of a text. Nowadays the instruction of reading comprehension has been considered more important than ever. The rapid increase in information makes it necessary to train students in its understanding and critical management. Consequently, teaching comprehension should be a key pillar of the learning process from the early school years.

1.1 Theories and Models of reading comprehension

Various theories and models have been developed concerning reading comprehension (Vamvoukas, 2012; Guthrie, 2003). Theories of reading comprehension reported in the literature can be divided into three main categories: cognitive, psycholinguistic, and sociocultural theories. Cognitive theories separate reading from comprehension, considering them as two separate cognitive processes. In fact, comprehension along with decoding are considered skills necessary for reading.

In contrast, psycholinguistic theories identify reading with comprehension and do not separate the two processes. The reader guesses the semantic identity of the word and by extension the entire text. Reading is always done with the ultimate goal of understanding and it is the basis of the reading and cognitive process. These are the most influential theories and they are particularly associated with the holistic approach of Frank Smith (2006) and Goodman (1987). This approach emphasizes the reader's interaction with the text, reading - for - meaning, reading as a "psycho - linguistic guessing game".

Finally, in sociocultural theories, reading is considered as a social process, which is related to the processing, production

of meanings and their critical evaluation. This approach belongs to the New Literacy schools, which are based on Vygotsky's Socio - cultural theory and Social Constructionism. This theory accepts as a basis that students build their knowledge in various social environments including the school classroom. This position constitutes a fundamental shift from the view that meaning is found within texts to a view of literacy as an active process of transformation of texts, while at the same time it emphasizes the contribution of education and society to the learning progress and development of students.

1.2 Factors affecting reading comprehension

In the process of reading comprehension, various factors related both to the reader (Aidinis, 2012), the text and the environment that comes into play and influence. To achieve reading comprehension, the reader should have developed both basic reading skills (accurate and fluent decoding, rich vocabulary) and use higher reading skills such as relating knowledge to new information, organizing and collapsing of the semantic points of the text (Kamil et al., 2008). One more factor that affects reading comprehension is the educational level of the family and the wider socio - cultural environment. These factors seem to influence the attitude of students towards reading, as it has been researched that children, whose parents have a higher educational level and a positive attitude towards reading and love of reading, they also acquire the same positive attitude toward reading.

1.3 Teaching Method

Effective learning is a primary goal of every educational system. Particularly in the field of reading comprehension, the teaching method followed by teachers (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005) contributes decisively to effective learning. The teaching method is the choice of the path that the teacher will follow during the lesson and the cycle that he will complete to reach the predetermined goal. A critical communicative instruction that utilizes various models it can contribute to the personal and social awakening of students (Kossivaki, 2005) and to the activation of their active and participatory involvement, which is a demand in modern pedagogy.

1.4 Strategies

The term strategy denotes the method by which the achievement of a specific goal is sought through a planning of actions, adapted to the learning needs and the student's personality. These are cognitive activities, where readers put into practice *before*, *during* and *after* reading a text with the aim of an adequate understanding of the text and they constitute specific research strategies, methods or procedures. The use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies determine how effective and successful learning can be, as well as the development of important skills. All students do not learn the same and do not utilize the same strategies. The type of strategies, the frequency, the quantity, the way and the degree they apply them it varies from student to student and also depends on the type of text, the level and the depth that the reader wishes to make in the text under study. The use of strategies requires a very clear

teaching framework, clear and unambiguous aims and objectives, flexibility and correct choice in terms of use as well as continuous self - evaluation.

The metacognitive strategies are also important because the student uses to plan, monitor and evaluate his learning process. These metacognitive strategies contribute to the self - regulation and autonomy of the student's learning as well as to a deeper and more accurate understanding of the text (Aarnoutse & Schellings, 2003).

2. The Research: Students' Beliefs concerning reading understanding

In this field of improving and empowering students' reading comprehension a survey was conducted in order to explore their perceptions regarding the difficulties they face in a text and what they think it would be helpful for them to overcome them. In other words this survey aims to explore the challenges students face in reading comprehension and explores the potential of specific teaching models and strategies to enhance their reading comprehension skills.

2.1 The Purpose of research

The purpose of this research is to detect and collect data through questionnaire from students transitioning from Primary to High School about their reading comprehension difficulties in certain kind of texts and their perceptions of various teaching models and strategies that could help them to overcome them. The choice of the class was purposeful as the students were on the verge of transition to High School and belonged to the target group that we wanted to investigate. This study provides valuable insights into the challenges students face in reading comprehension and offers potential solutions through structured teaching models and strategies.

2.2 Research questions

Our initial hypothesis considered that the ability to read texts is influenced both by the characteristics of the individual, by

the type of texts, by teaching, methodological tools and also by the wider environment.

Our main hypothesis was that: a) teaching method affects students' reading comprehension and b) that also, the exploitation of strategies and alternative approaches and techniques helps all students. Consequently, a structured and methodical teaching can contribute to the achievement of reading comprehension. The questions arising from the problem developed concern whether: a) teaching method and strategies affect reading comprehension. b) There is a correlation between student gender and reading comprehension.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of this study a questionnaire was designed and distributed to 6th Primary and 1st High School students in regional and urban areas of the Prefecture of Chania in order to record and explore their opinions concerning reading comprehension, a process that was the first stage of our research (the questionnaire was pilot tested in a random sample of 55 students). The reliability test (Cronbach's alpha) for the variables of this group of questions is 0.861 (over 0.7) which means that it is very reliable. We thought that the collection and processing of the statistical results in combination with the bibliographic research would contribute more to the field of understanding, which is of major importance for the educational process.

4. Results of the Study

The research sample consists of 235 students who attend the 6th grade of primary school (107 students, rate 43.7%) as well as the 1st grade of high school (138 students, rate 56.3%) in schools of Chania. Students had to answer in certain questions regarding language courses. The questions that make up this group are presented in the following tables together with their mean values and standard deviations.

Graph 1: Students of the sample by gender and study class (percentages)

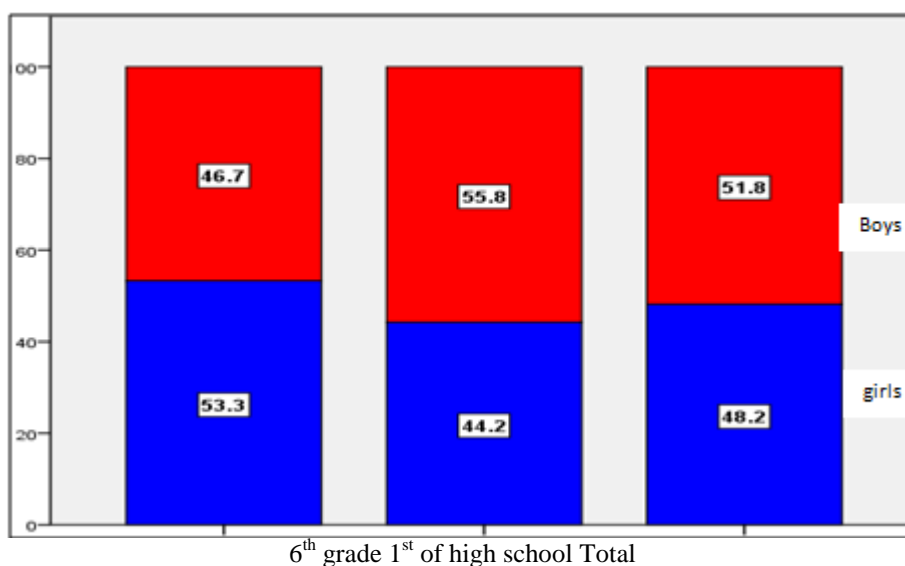
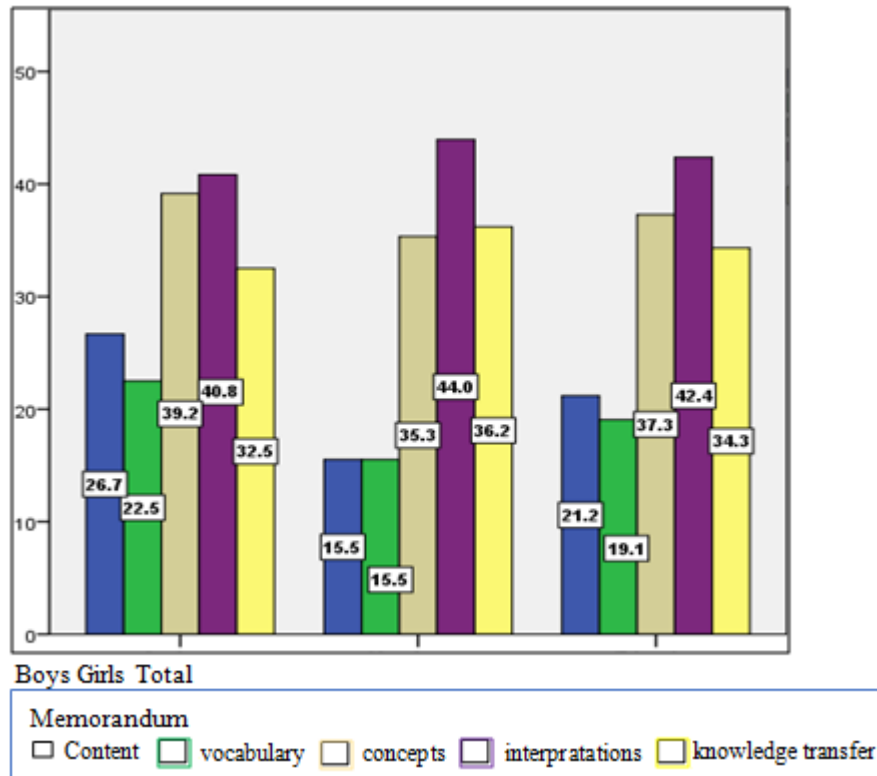


Table 1.1: Mean value and standard deviation of students' responses (scoring from 1 - 5) to the individual difficulties of the question "In language courses (Modern Greek language, literature, etc.) in terms of understanding the texts what are the difficulties you may face?"

Difficulty in	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
A1 – finding information (who is speaking, to whom he is addressed, e. t. c.)	1, 78	0, 95
A2 - Vocabulary (unknown words, et. c)	2, 12	0, 94
A3 - the trending of meaning	2, 24	1, 07
A4 - the interpretation of events	2, 25	1, 12
A5 - distinguishing the important subjects from the minor ones	2, 32	1, 05
A6 - finding the structural elements of the text	2, 14	1, 01
A7 - familiarity with the type of text	1, 97	1, 07
A8 - drawing conclusions	2, 03	0, 99
A9 - Utilizing existing knowledge	1, 93	1, 12

Percentages of each difficulty in the question I find it more difficult to understand overall and by gender.



Percentages of each difficulty in the question I find it more difficult to understand by grade level.

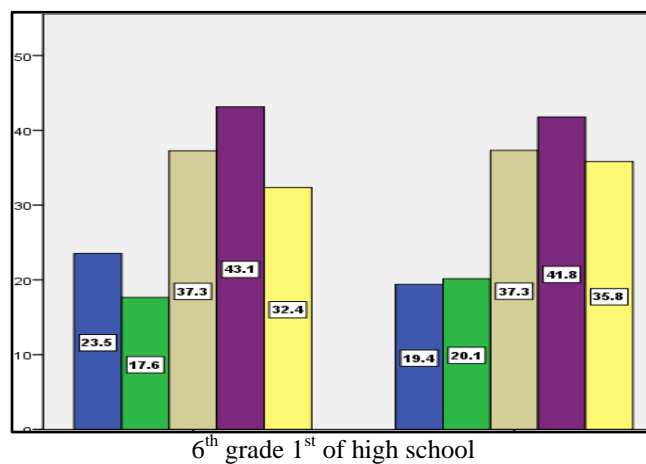


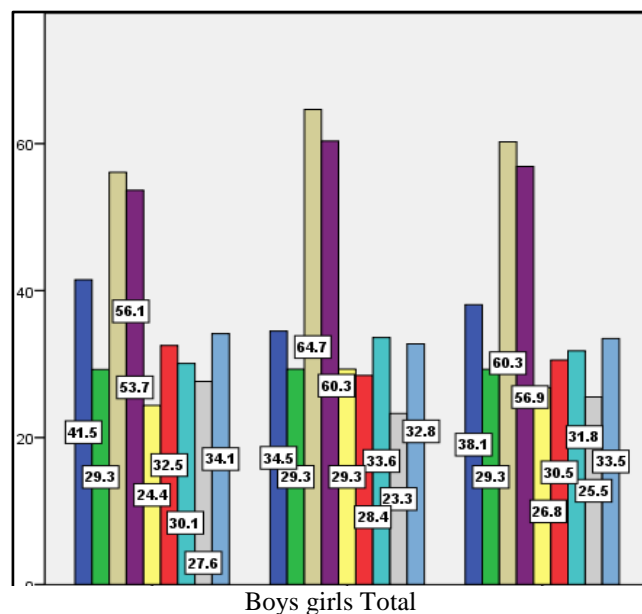
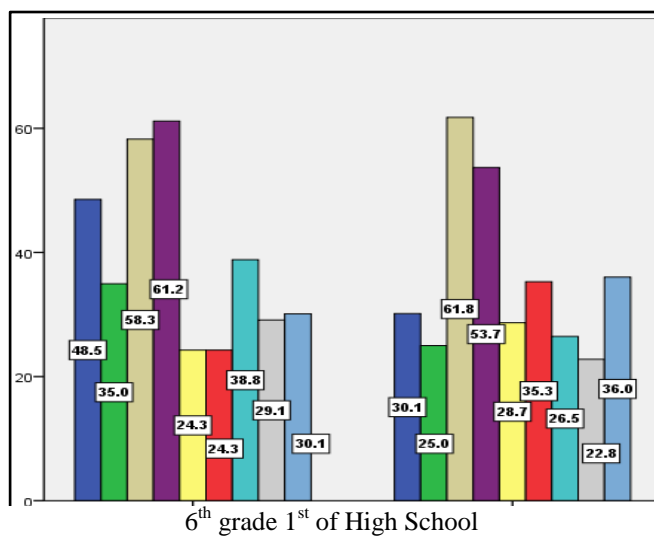
Table 2.1: Mean value and standard deviation of the students' answers (scoring from 1 - 5) to the individual ways - techniques of the question "B. Describe in what way – techniques the teacher can help you"

way – techniques	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
B1 - With vocabulary teaching	3, 02	1, 24
B2 - By teaching building blocks	3, 04	1, 17
B3 - With training in the type of text (literary, historical, etc.)	3, 11	1, 20
B4 - By teaching the structure of the paragraph	2, 95	1, 31
B5 - With mind maps	3, 00	1, 40
B6 - With active critical thinking strategies (brainstorming)	3, 10	1, 35
B7 - With cooperative teaching	3, 40	1, 32
B8 - Use of images - familiarity with multimodal texts	3, 29	1, 31
B9 - Reading aloud by the teacher and analysis of the main points	3, 41	1, 28
B10 - Using critical questions	2, 99	1, 26
B11 - By continuous self - evaluation and discussion	3, 00	1, 28
B12 - Underlining main points - topic sentence	3, 36	1, 36
B13 - By association and use of assumptions	2, 87	1, 20
B14 - By using contexts	2, 62	1, 24

Table 3.1: Mean value and standard deviation of student responses for better understanding methods (scoring from 1 - 5).

Method - strategies	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
C1 - With demonstration by the teacher	3, 41	1, 29
C2 - Using visual and auditory stimuli	3, 31	1, 33
C3 –with scaffolding	2, 92	1, 06
C4 - With gradual help	3, 01	1, 25
C5 - By continuous self - evaluation and discussion	3, 18	1, 29
C6 - With multiple examples	4, 10	0, 95
C7 - By working in groups/team work	3, 46	1, 36
C8 - With small project - scenarios	3, 36	1, 39
C9 - By reading books	3, 07	1, 27
C10 - With activities that are meaningful to me and playful in nature	3, 44	1, 41

Percentages of each help in the question “I am most helped with... in total and by grade



Percentages of each help in the question "I am most helped with" in total and by gender.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the difficulties which students encounter in reading comprehension and how a teacher may help them according to them. This study aims to explore the challenges students face in reading comprehension and how these can be mitigated through the use of structured teaching models and strategies.

From the tables above, it appears that there difficulties that students face up in reading texts. The table 1.1. reveals that no difficulty exceeds the average of the scale (3.0) with the most important being focused on *distinguishing the important issues from the minor ones*, on the *interpretation of the facts* as well as on the *rendering of the meaning*. Examining, if we have statistically significant differences in the individual difficulties by gender or class of study, we perform the χ^2 test. From this test it follows that this is statistically significant in relation to gender and questions A2 - *In the vocabulary (unknown words, etc.)* and A8 - *In drawing conclusions (Tables 1.2 and 1.3)*. In relation to the study class, the χ^2 test is not statistically significant for any difficulty. This finding is in agreement with literature. It has been researched that reading comprehension is also affected by the gender of the readers. Girls appear to develop a more positive attitude towards reading (Krokou, 2011; OECD/PISA, 2009), as well as in way they process the text (Kintsch, 1986). Also, this survey pointed out that the choice of reading and text genre also varies depending on gender and age (Malafantis & Chrysos, 2013).

Of the five difficulties (*content, vocabulary, concepts, interpretations and reductions*), the largest percentage (42.4%) is gathered by interpretations, followed by concepts with 37.3% and reductions with 34.3%. In percentages by gender, we observe that girls have a higher percentage than boys in interpretations (44.0 against 40.8%), while in concepts we have the opposite (girls 35.3% and boys 39.2%). Finally, in reductions they are again preceded by girls (35.2% girls and 32.5% boys).

As far as the techniques/strategies concerned, the research highlighted some interesting topics. The methods - techniques, which received the most positive rating from the students on average, are the following three: a) B9 - *Reading aloud by the teacher and analysis of the main points (3.41)*, b) B7 - *With cooperative teaching (3.40)* and c) the B12 - *Underlining main points - thematic proposal*. Finally, it is pointed out that only three modes fall below the middle of the scale (3.00). An another important finding is that girls have higher mean values than boys in all ways - techniques, while 6th grade students have higher mean values than 1st high school students in 11 out of 14 ways. These findings are in accordance with several other researches. Reading comprehension depends both on the basic and higher skills that readers possess such as decoding, fluency, prior knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, metacognition and on the style and content of the texts, as well as the application of comprehension strategies (Edmonds et al., 2009) and the influence of the learning environment. Porpodas (2002) talks about cognitive infrastructure, the ability of the reader and the nature of the text, while Giasson (2014) also takes into account the learning environment (class' conditions, instruction, teaching model, teacher, other students). An important factor that seems to greatly influence reading comprehension is the text itself and the textual genre to which it belongs. Literature places particular emphasis on the knowledge of the structural elements of the various textual genres, because it has been proven that when students have a good knowledge of the structure of the various texts, they are more effective as readers as they can also organize their mental patterns before reading

(Kouloubaritsi, 2003 ; Matsangouras, 2000) and also they can form expectations for the text to be studied (Kouloubaritsi, 2003: 49). Research has also shown that when active readers distinguish the type of text (Mihalits, 2020), they activate the corresponding knowledge and are able to be engaged in further processes more actively (Wolfe & Woodwyk, 2010 ; McNamara, 2004), as each text type has specific linguistic/stylistic conventions and characteristics and serves a different function and communicative role (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2019; Michalis, 2020). Best, Floyd & McNamara (2008) thoroughly investigated the effect of text genre on reading comprehension. Both these and other researchers have shown that students respond better to narrative texts than to non - narrative texts, due to both their structure and language and the fact that this type of text is familiar to students since they were young children and first graders (Williams, 2018).

As far as the teaching method concerned that helps students' comprehension and understanding, it seems that the method that received the most positive rating from students on average is C6 - *With multiple examples (4.10)* followed by C7 - *With group work (3.46)* and C10 - *With activities that they are meaningful to me and playful in nature (3.44)*. Girls have higher average values than boys in all methods, while 6th grade students have higher average values than 1st high school students in seven out of ten methods. Several researchers recommend the explicit teaching of strategies (Kamil et al., 2008). It is a modern teaching approach based on modeling and guidance by the teacher, linked to the technique of scaffolding and aimed at full application by the students themselves and their transfer to various other contexts (Duke, 2000). Explicit or explanatory teaching is the most appropriate model for teaching reading comprehension (Duffy & Roehler, 1987; Giasson, 2003; Palinscar & Brown, 1985; Pearson & Dole, 1987). Its philosophy is based on providing the maximum possible support at the beginning of teaching by the teacher and the gradual removal of him with the aim of developing the autonomy of the student (Giasson, 2011: 40).

Students of our research expressed their opinion on how a teacher can help them in reading comprehension through a structured teaching framework with a specific purpose and goals, which should be communicated from the beginning to the students providing a series of motivations. According to Polychroni et al. (2017), even the most able and talented students may not engage in an activity, such as reading a text, if they are not motivated to do it, as its achievement does not require only the ability of the student but also the corresponding motivation.

Finally, of the seven aids listed in the questionnaire question: *when processing a thematic unit takes place, it helps me ... (the analysis and processing, keywords, connection to the present, use of questions, the title, making use of art and images, the use of multimodal texts and media)*, the largest percentage (73.3%) is gathered by keywords, followed by analysis and processing with a percentage of 51.2%, as well as the use of questions with a percentage of 47, 5%. In the percentages by gender, we notice that girls have a lower percentage than boys in keywords (72.6 vs.74.0%), but in analysis and processing

they are ahead (girls 51.2% and boys 48.0). The latter also occurs in the variable use of questions with girls showing a percentage of 47.5% and boys 46.3%. (Graph 7.1a). This finding is also in agreement with literature. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies that each student uses depend on each learning profile, needs, special circumstances, individual differences and characteristics. In addition, a large scale of motivations contributes significantly to reading comprehension. Contemporary studies support that teaching strategies is an important factor in improving reading comprehension for all students, as they are predictive factors of text comprehension (Stahl, 2004; Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2009).

6. Conclusions

Reading comprehension is a basic human literacy skill and its acquisition implies its systematic, organized, structured teaching from the first school years of education in order to be constructive and successful. It requires detailed planning, setting clear goals, utilizing strategies, and directly teaching reading skills, connecting to authentic learning experiences (Blair, Rupley & Nichols, 2007).

There are various types of teaching models based on the goal to be achieved each time. The one which is selected each time has to respond to the real needs of students, to use a structured teaching framework with a specific purpose and goals communicated from the beginning to the students and to provide at the same time a series of motivations. The teaching of strategies should be done in the appropriate context and in accordance with the developmental level of students.

The role of teacher is crucial, as he motivates the students with his method to manage the text, making predictions and discussing the problems. The teacher mediates to clarify the difficult - to - understand points of the text and prompts them.

The teacher's contribution to teaching reading comprehension is important (Phelps, 2009). According to Ward, "learning is more than memorizing facts; it's coming to understanding. "Therefore, the basic aim of all modern educational systems is the restructuring of programs and the enrichment of teaching with strategies that will prepare, educate and cultivate the modern, critical, active thinking citizen.

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