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Article

Difficulties in Reading Comprehension in the Early Years of General Basic Education (2nd, 3rd, and 4th Grades) in the Area of Language and Literature

Dificultades en la comprensión lectora en los primeros años de la Educación General Básica (2.º, 3.º y 4.º) en el área de Lengua y Literatura

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Abstract

The ability to comprehend what one reads is a cognitive process that must be developed during the first three grades of General Basic Education, as it directly impacts independent learning and subsequent academic achievement. However, various studies indicate that a significant proportion of students in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades of elementary school continue to struggle with understanding different written texts and with reading comprehension. This article identifies the main barriers to reading comprehension in the early grades of Basic General Education in the subject of Language and Literature, based on an up-to-date the n review and an empirical study using a mixed-methods approach.

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Methodologically, the study involved an in-depth review of recent scientific literature and a descriptive-correlational study of elementary school students. The results reveal difficulties associated with the literal and inferential levels of reading comprehension, linked to linguistic, cognitive, and methodological deficits. The article concludes by stating that the use of active, collaborative, and multisensory teaching strategies is the ideal approach for improving reading comprehension at this educational stage. This work is part of the research project "Development of Research Competencies in Teachers at Educational Institutions" (DECOMINDO) conducted by the Educational Innovation Group (GIE-IDI) at the Salesian Polytechnic University.

Keywords: reading comprehension, elementary education, learning difficulties, language and literature, early reading.

Resumen

La destreza de comprender lo que se lee es un proceso cognitivo que se debe trabajar en los tres primeros grados de la Educación General Básica, ya que impacta directamente en el aprendizaje autónomo y en la posterior dedicación académica. Sin embargo, diversas investigaciones indican que una fracción significativa de los escolares de 2º, 3º y 4º de primaria continúan presentando problemas en la comprensión de diferentes textos escritos y en la comprensión lectora. Este artículo identifica las principales barreras en la comprensión lectora en los primeros grados de la Educación General Básica en la materia de Lengua y Literatura desde una revisión teórica actualizada y un estudio empírico con un enfoque mixto. Desde la metodología, aplicó una revisión profunda de la literatura científica reciente y un estudio descriptivo-correlacional de los estudiantes de educación básica. Los resultados muestran dificultades asociadas a los niveles literal e inferencial de la comprensión lectora, conectados a déficits en lo lingüístico, lo cognitivo y lo metodológico. El artículo concluye afirmando que la utilización de estrategias didácticas activas, colaborativas y multisensoriales resulta ser el recurso perfecto para mejorar la comprensión lectora en esta etapa educativa. Este trabajo pertenece al proyecto de investigación Desarrollo de competencias investigativas en docentes de instituciones educativas (DECOMINDO) del grupo de innovación Educativa GIE-IDI de la Universidad Politécnica Salesiana.

Palabras clave: comprensión lectora, educación básica, dificultades de aprendizaje, Lengua y Literatura, lectura inicial.

Introduction

Comprehensive reading is much more than identifying words on a page; it is the gateway to knowledge and critical thinking (Chiqui, 2022) . When a child fails to understand what they read, the consequences are not limited to the area of Language and Literature but extend to all subjects and, over time, affect their confidence as a student (Cieza, 2023; Vásquez, 2022). Therefore, ensuring that students in the early grades of General Basic Education develop strong reading comprehension is not only a curricular goal but also a fundamental pedagogical responsibility.

What concerns many teachers and researchers is that this difficulty persists even among children who can already read mechanically. Granda et al. (2023) explain this clearly: understanding a text involves much more than simply repeating aloud what is written, and when students fail to move beyond that level, their gaps become evident, especially when inferring meaning, connecting ideas, or forming their own opinions (Becerra et al., 2025).

Nieto (2025) notes that 75% of elementary school students experience these limitations, with poor academic performance being the most common consequence.

Ramírez et al. (2025) assert that progress in reading comprehension involves much more than simply teaching students to break down words: it is necessary to cultivate critical and inferential comprehension skills that enable students to successfully tackle the challenges of learning.

However, several recent studies show that a significant proportion of elementary school students exhibit limitations in the literal, inferential, and critical levels of reading comprehension, even after they have developed basic decoding skills (Ramírez et al., 2025; Flores et al., 2025). These difficulties tend to be exacerbated in contexts where language disorders are present, cognitive stimulation is limited, or traditional teaching practices focus primarily on rote memorization (Yan Lam et al., 2024).

Given this situation, it is important to conduct a more in-depth study of the difficulties associated with reading comprehension during the early years of General Basic Education, taking into account both the cognitive processes involved and the teaching strategies implemented in the classroom. In this regard, this study aims to contribute theoretical foundations and empirical evidence that

promote a broader understanding of the phenomenon and guide the development of pedagogical proposals tailored to the educational context.

Reading Comprehension as a Cognitive and Educational Process

Understanding a text is not limited to recognizing words on a page; it is an active process that involves creating meaning through the reader's interaction with the text and its sociocultural context.

Chacaguasay and Larreal (2023) define reading comprehension as the strategy that allows for the integration of thinking strategies (cognitive and metacognitive) with a written text in order to grasp it in a reflective and critical manner. Thus, the process involves linguistic skills, working memory, attention, inference, and metacognition—elements that are integrated simultaneously so that the reader can actively construct meaning (Cieza, 2023).

In turn, according to Gaibor et al. (2023), reading serves as the foundation of critical thinking, such that those who adequately comprehend a text are able to analyze, reflect, and form their own judgments about what they read.

Reading comprehension is essential during the early years of General Basic Education, as it forms the foundation for learning across all curricular areas; Huamancha et al. (2025) provide evidence highlighting that reading comprehension, which begins to develop in the early years, creates the conditions that foster the acquisition of scientific, mathematical, and social knowledge, as it enables students to interpret, analyze, and relate information in meaningful ways.

Within this framework, reading comprehension should be viewed as a skill that evolves gradually. Between second, third, and fourth grade, students progress from a comprehension focused primarily on the literal meaning to more complex levels, such as inferential and critical comprehension. This progress does not occur spontaneously but requires ongoing pedagogical guidance and the implementation of relevant teaching strategies (Ramírez et al., 2025).

Levels of Reading Comprehension in Elementary Education

Effective reading is not a single skill but rather a chain of knowledge that can be represented by hierarchical levels ranging from the most basic to the most complex, beginning with the literal level, where explicit information in the text is accessed; a second inferential level, which involves making deductions and using prior knowledge during the reading process; and a critical level, which guides the

reader toward autonomy, enabling them to form opinions and make connections to their reality and context (Granda et al., 2023; Salazar et al., 2024).

Several studies highlight that during the early years of General Basic Education, the inferential level can pose challenges for students. Flores et al. (2025) note that while many children are capable of decoding texts and answering literal questions, they struggle to establish causal relationships, infer perspectives, and interpret the text's overall meaning.Quezada et al. (2024) confirm that the language and reading skills of second- and third-grade students directly influence their reading comprehension ability, with inferential skills posing the greatest difficulty. Morales et al. (2024) also argue that this difficulty persists among fourth-grade students with basic and intermediate reading levels across all three levels of reading comprehension.

These difficulties increase when metacognitive strategies—such as self-regulation of reading, asking questions, and checking for comprehension—are not employed. These are skills that, when developed early on, promote the interpretation, connection, and analysis of texts, thereby facilitating meaningful learning across various disciplines (Huamancha et al., 2025; Ramírez et al., 2025).

Difficulties in Reading Comprehension in the Early Years of Schooling

It cannot be said that difficulty in understanding a text has only one cause; the origins of such difficulty are multiple and complex. Granda et al. (2023) state that there are various factors (linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical) that contribute to poor reading performance, including a limited vocabulary, low reading fluency, low motivation, and a lack of comprehension strategies; Gonzaga (2022) confirms that second-grade elementary school students exhibit deficient levels of reading comprehension, which led us to decide to implement a model of strategies that could address these difficulties, as this is necessary from the earliest years of schooling.

This is not merely a cognitive problem. Yan Lam et al. (2024) highlight that students with language development disorders face additional difficulties in reading comprehension, especially when the text requires complex semantic and syntactic integration. Benítez (2024) adds that personal and pedagogical factors—such as lack of interest, low motivation, and poor-quality instruction—exacerbate

these difficulties in the early years of schooling, confirming that the problem extends far beyond the classroom.

On the other hand, Vargas et al. (2024) demonstrate that reading difficulties also manifest in digital contexts, where fragmented reading and information overload affect deep comprehension, both in students with special educational needs and in those without specific diagnoses.

The Influence of Teaching Practices on Reading Comprehension

Teaching practices play a decisive role in the development of reading comprehension. Cieza (2023) argues that traditional methodologies focused on mechanical reading and repetition limit the development of critical thinking and deep comprehension of texts. Peña (2025) confirms this reality in the Ecuadorian context, showing that many third-grade teachers do not master active methodologies for developing reading comprehension, which directly impacts their students' reading performance.

In contrast, recent research highlights the effectiveness of active pedagogical approaches. According to Villón et al. (2024), collaborative learning improves reading comprehension by fostering dialogue among peers, the exchange of concepts, and the joint construction of meaning. Merlin et al. (2025) confirm that active strategies applied in elementary school lead to significant improvements in all three levels of reading comprehension by placing students in charge of their own learning.

Armijos et al. (2023) add that a review of Latin American studies shows that active reading comprehension strategies produce consistent positive results when applied from the earliest years of schooling. Benavides and Zambrano (2023) complement this perspective by demonstrating that self-regulated reading comprehension supported by technological tools improves reading performance. Basuki and Purwanta (2025) demonstrate that project-based multisensory instruction facilitates the comprehension and retention of information by integrating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic stimuli.

Cognitive Stimulation and the Development of Reading Skills

Cognitive stimulation is not an optional add-on in the classroom; it is a prerequisite for students to access deeper levels of comprehension. In their systematic review, Reina et al. (2024) conclude that cognitive stimulation programs targeting children aged

6 to 12 have a significant positive impact on reading skills, particularly inferential comprehension and verbal memory.

Romero et al. (2023) confirm that Ecuadorian elementary school students have fallen significantly behind in reading since the pandemic, making it urgent to implement strategies that activate cognitive processes starting in the early grades. Bernal et al. (2024) add that the integration of digital technologies into language and literature instruction has a positive impact on reading comprehension and creativity among elementary school students. Along the same lines, Tambaco et al. (2024) demonstrate that short stories significantly improve reading comprehension among students in the lower elementary grades of the EGB.

The Role of the Teacher in Teaching Reading Comprehension

Those who teach reading have much more than a technical skill in their hands; they have the responsibility to develop readers who understand, reflect, and think independently. Wang and Shapii (2026) point out that teachers' subject-matter and pedagogical knowledge directly influences the quality of reading instruction, and that teachers who master specific teaching strategies achieve better results in their students' reading performance. Palomares (2025) adds that teachers must not only promote reading but also implement concrete classroom strategies that enable students to comprehend different types of texts and recognize how to improve their own reading process.

In the early years of General Basic Education, teachers do more than just teach students to read; they guide students to understand what they read, use comprehension strategies, and develop a critical perspective on texts. García Aguilar et al. (2025) confirm that the application of active methods and well-thought-out pedagogical strategies leads to notable improvements in the reading comprehension of elementary school students, particularly when combined with resources that stimulate motivation and reflective teaching practice. For this reason, such training is indispensable; it is a fundamental prerequisite for addressing reading challenges from the earliest years. Along these lines, Sibri and Pinduisaca (2025) demonstrate that guided reading allows teachers to model, step by step, how to think about and understand a text, enabling students to progress gradually from a literal level to an inferential and critical level.

Materials and Methods

To answer the research questions guiding this study, a mixed-methods approach was chosen, combining a systematic review of the scientific literature with a descriptive–correlational empirical study. This combination made it possible not only to understand what the theory says about the reading comprehension but also to contrast it with what occurs in a real elementary school classroom. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods provided a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. According to Creswell & Creswell (2023), this approach facilitates data triangulation and strengthens the validity of the results. In recent studies on reading comprehension, this design has proven relevant for linking student performance to the pedagogical practices implemented in the classroom (Abad Cano et al., 2025; Cuenca & Silva, 2022).

The study was conducted using a descriptive-correlational design, which allowed us to describe students' reading comprehension levels and analyze the relationship between that performance and the teaching strategies employed by the teacher. This type of design is appropriate when the aim is to identify associations between variables without directly manipulating them (Hernández & Mendoza, 2020). Related research has used this design to study factors associated with reading comprehension in similar school contexts (Rodríguez & Poveda, 2020).

The study was conducted at the Guido Garay Vargas Machuca Public School, a public institution located in the city of Guayaquil, Guayas Province, Ecuador, during the 2024–2025 school year. Sixty students in the second, third, and fourth grades of General Basic Education participated; they were purposefully selected because they were actively enrolled in the grades of interest and regularly attended classes.

Two instruments were used. The first was a reading comprehension test designed for the elementary level, based on the narrative text "La biblioteca del aula." The test explored three levels of comprehension: literal comprehension, with questions about explicit information in the text; inferential comprehension, with questions asking students to connect ideas and interpret what was not explicitly stated; and critical comprehension, with questions inviting students to express opinions and connect the text to their own experiences. The results were recorded using a rubric with four performance

levels: achieved, in progress, initial, and not demonstrated, along with their respective interpretation criteria.

The second instrument was a teacher observation form with eight criteria that made it possible to identify which methodological strategies the teacher employed in teaching reading: whether they asked inferential questions, whether they promoted collaborative work, and whether they stimulated critical thinking, among other key aspects. The intentional sampling method applied considered criteria such as enrollment, active , and regular attendance—a procedure recommended in educational field studies (Hernández & Mendoza, 2020).

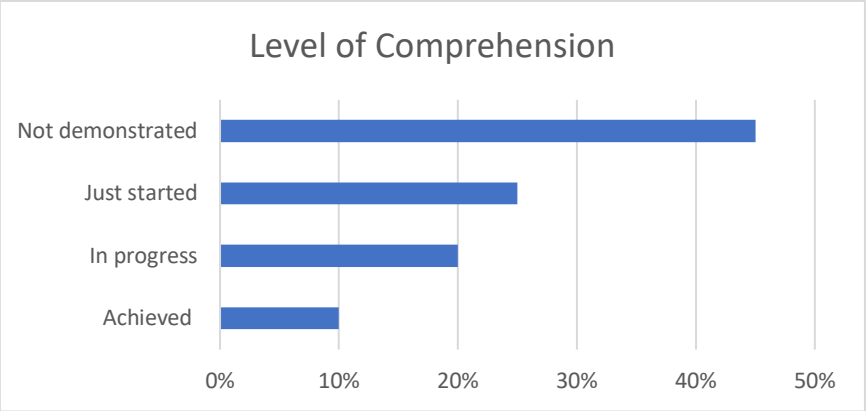
Before administering the instruments, three specialists in language and literature and reading instruction reviewed each item to ensure that they were clear, relevant, and consistent with the reading comprehension levels to be assessed. Their observations were incorporated into the final version of the instruments. **Expert judgment**, a widely used technique, ensures content validity in educational research for the application of the instrument (Escobar & Cuervo, 2008).

The researchers personally administered the reading comprehension test and the teacher observation form at the Guido Garay Vargas Machuca Public School during the 2025 school year. Each student worked individually, without external interference. Prior authorization was obtained from school officials, and teachers were informed of the study's objectives.

The quantitative data obtained from the reading comprehension test were analyzed using descriptive statistics, calculating frequencies and percentages by comprehension level and by grade. The qualitative data derived from the teacher observation form were interpreted through content analysis. The triangulation of both sources made it possible to establish relationships between the teaching practices observed in the classroom and the levels of reading comprehension achieved by the students.

Results

Table 1. *Reading Comprehension Levels Among Elementary School Students*



The data are compelling: 45% of the 60 students assessed show no evidence of reading comprehension, and 25% are barely at the initial level. This means that seven out of ten students have significant difficulties understanding what they read, even after they have acquired basic decoding skills. Only 10% reached the expected level, confirming that reading comprehension in elementary school is a real and urgent educational problem. This finding aligns with the reports by Ramírez et al. (2025) and Flores et al. (2025), who confirm that the greatest difficulties are concentrated at the inferential level from the earliest years of schooling.

Of the six teachers observed, four prioritize reading comprehension over mechanical reading, relate the text to prior experiences, and encourage active participation in class. However, only two apply active strategies and stimulate critical thinking, and only one uses visual or multisensory resources, asks inferential questions, or encourages collaborative work. This means that more than 80% of teachers do not integrate active, collaborative, or multisensory

strategies into their teaching practice, which largely explains the low levels of reading comprehension observed among students.

The reading comprehension test showed that most of the students assessed can identify explicit information in the text and answer literal-level questions. However, they exhibit significant difficulties when asked to make inferences, establish causal connections, or formulate justified opinions about what they have read. This pattern is observed across the three grades analyzed, being most pronounced in second grade, where the difference between decoding and deep comprehension is most evident.

The analysis of classroom observations showed that, of the eight criteria considered, most teachers consistently apply only three: they promote reading comprehension rather than superficial reading, connect the text to students' prior experiences, and encourage active participation during class. However, they do not implement active techniques such as discussions or games, do not promote teamwork, do not use visual or multisensory materials, do not ask questions that require inference, and do not regularly encourage critical thinking. This predominant use of traditional methods limits the creation of complex meanings and partly explains the low levels of reading comprehension observed among students.

The triangulation of both data sources allows us to identify a direct relationship between the observed teaching practices and the levels of reading comprehension achieved. Students whose teachers do not apply active strategies or ask inferential questions tend to fall into the "initial" and "not evident" levels of the rubric. This finding is consistent with the observations of (Peña, 2025; Cieza, 2023), who note that the predominance of traditional methodologies negatively impacts the development of complex reading skills from the earliest years of schooling.

Discussion

The results of this study are not surprising, but they are cause for concern. The fact that 70% of the students assessed are at the "initial" and "not evident" levels is no minor matter; it is a sign that something is not working well in the teaching of reading from the earliest years of schooling.

What is most striking is that these difficulties do not arise because the children cannot read. They can decode, identify words, and answer basic questions. The problem arises when they are asked to

go further: to infer, to connect ideas, and to express opinions. That is where 70% of them get stuck. Flores et al. (2025) and Quezada et al. (2024) confirm exactly this pattern in their studies of second- and third-grade students, which suggests that the findings of this research are not an isolated case, but rather part of a structural difficulty that recurs in various Latin American contexts.

Nieto (2025) reports that 75% of elementary school students experience similar limitations at the regional level. The fact that the data from the Guido Garay Vargas Machuca Public School come so close to that percentage confirms that the problem transcends the institution and requires a systemic response, not just isolated corrective measures.

Classroom observation provides the missing piece to understanding why this occurs. Sixty percent of the pedagogical criteria evaluated are not applied consistently. Teachers do not ask inferential questions, do not promote collaborative work, and do not use multisensory resources. Peña (2025) had already noted that many third-grade teachers do not master active methodologies for reading comprehension, and the results of this study confirm that this methodological gap also exists in other grades of elementary school.

However, it would be unfair to reduce the problem to a failure on the part of teachers. What the data reveal is more complex: the teachers observed do motivate their students, do connect texts to prior experiences, and do promote comprehension over mechanical reading. They have pedagogical intent. What they lack are concrete strategies to translate that intent into deep learning. Benavides and Zambrano (2023) and Basuki and Purwanta (2025) demonstrate that when these strengths are combined with active methodologies, technology, and multisensory resources, outcomes improve significantly. The starting point exists; what is needed is to build upon it.

Finally, these results reinforce what Wang and Shapii (2026) and García Aguilar et al. (2025) clearly argue: teachers' pedagogical knowledge and the quality of educational interventions are the factors that most strongly influence students' reading performance. Investing in teacher training is not an expense; it is the most effective decision an education system can make if it wants to transform its reading comprehension outcomes starting in the early years.

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