

## Evaluating metacognitive strategies to comprehend narrative texts

### Evaluación de las estrategias metacognitivas de comprensión de textos narrativos

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#### Abstract

One of the most worrying areas in education today is reading comprehension. The conceptualisation of the comprehension process has been enriched in recent years as metacognitive aspects have been included as an essential strategy to optimise its development. Certain instruments are used to evaluate metacognitive strategies for comprehending expository texts at school, but not for narrative literary texts. This paper is aimed to develop a Questionnaire of Metacognitive Strategies to Comprehend Narrative Texts (CEMCoTeN is its Spanish acronym) to help improve comprehension processes and their didactical development. The instrument was completed by 610 University of Castilla-La Mancha students. The results reflect three different metacognitive factors that relate to the comprehension of narrative texts: Global Reading Strategies, Customization Strategies and Creativity Strategies.

#### Resumen

Una de las áreas educativas de mayor preocupación en la actualidad es la comprensión lectora. La conceptualización del proceso de comprensión se ha enriquecido en los últimos años incluyendo los aspectos metacognitivos como una estrategia esencial para la optimización de su desarrollo. Existen diversos instrumentos para evaluar las estrategias metacognitivas de la comprensión de textos expositivos escolares, pero no así de textos literarios narrativos. El objetivo de este trabajo ha sido desarrollar un Cuestionario de Estrategias Metacognitivas de Comprensión de Textos Narrativos (CEMCoTeN) para que pueda servir de ayuda en la mejora de los procesos de comprensión y en su desarrollo didáctico. El instrumento fue completado por 610 estudiantes de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha. Los resultados diferencian tres factores metacognitivos en la comprensión de textos narrativos: Estrategias Globales de Lectura, Estrategias de Personalización y Estrategias de Creatividad.

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## Introduction

Achieving good reading comprehension is a main educational objective and an increasingly essential prerequisite to attain success in today's societies (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). The 21st-century society considers it essential that all citizens, particularly young ones, have the required skills to access information and to transform them into knowledge. This is possible only if individuals are able to acquire reading skills from reading and writing practice (Gutiérrez-Braojos & Salmerón, 2012).

Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) used the term reading metacognition to refer to knowledge about the cognitive skills and mechanisms required to understand a text. Recent studies have placed special emphasis on the fundamental role that reading metacomprehension plays in a good reader's skills (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey & Alexander, 2009; Pearson, 2009), in such a way that good readers are aware of the strategies they use and the control of their use (Carrell, 1998; Flavell, 1979).

In recent years, research into improving reading comprehension has focused on teaching the comprehension strategies employed by people with good reading comprehension levels (Berkeley, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2010; Dole, Nokes & Drits, 2009; Gayo et al., 2014; Jitendra, Burgess & Gajria, 2011; Solis et al., 2011). Several studies have shown that training in metacognitive skills improves the reading comprehension of expository texts (López-Escribano, Elosúa de Juan, Gómez-Veiga & García Madruga, 2013; Madariaga & Martínez, 2010; Soriano, Sánchez, Soriano & Nievas, 2013). Studies have basically centred on the comprehension of expository texts given the relation between developing reading comprehension and successful school learning (Johnston, Barnes & Desrochers, 2008; Madariaga & Martínez, 2010; Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012).

Although the importance of efficiently dealing with different texts has been acknowledged (Tolchinsky & Solé, 2009), not much

attention has been paid to studying the metacognition of narrative texts. However, training reading citizens should be one society's basic objectives because, among other reasons, reading will "model a person's civic and cultural attitude" (Molina-Villaseñor, 2006, p. 104). Someone who is devoted to reading will seek new learning situations, will use innovative strategies to learn, and will promote self-learning (Guthrie et al, 2007; Wigfield et al, 2008; Oistein, 2009). Reading habits are also related with school performance (Yubero & Larrañaga, 2010) because enjoying reading is a very important factor for students' academic performance, and is even placed above their family's socio-economic status (Kirsch, de Jong, Lafontaine, McQueen & Mendelovits, 2002). Logan, Medford and Hughes (2011) stated that reading for pleasure would be a good way of improving education standards and reducing social exclusion.

### *Evaluating metacognitive strategies*

Many instruments are available, which evaluate the metacognitive strategies that students use while reading expository texts (i.e., *Index Reading Awareness* by Jacobs & París, 1987; *Metacognitive Reading Awareness* by McLain, Gridley & MaIntosh, 1991; *Reading Strategy Use* by Pereira-Laird & Deane, 1997; *Escala de Conciencia Lectora* by Jiménez, Puente, Alvarado y Arrebillga, 2009). The most internationally used instrument to evaluate metacognitive skills for reading is the *Metacognitive Awareness Reading Inventory* (MARSI, Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). MARSI not only evaluates the self-perceived use of metacognitive strategies while reading expository texts, but also centres on the specific reading of academic texts. Its objective is not to measure comprehension, but to test the metacomprehension strategies employed by, and help students to enhance the skills they do not use in order to develop them to improve their comprehension capacity. In this way, test results are used to plan sessions and to organise classroom activities. MARSI is a list of 30 statements and each one is associated

with using a type of strategy. Students must indicate the frequency with which they use it on a scale that goes from Never to Always. Three subscales group the items: 1) Global Reading Strategies -which consist in the reading strategies related to readers' reading control and management; 2) Problem-Solving Strategies -which are the strategies linked to overcoming obstacles in order to comprehend a text; 3) Reading Support Strategies -these being the strategies readers adopt to better comprehend the text-. The original version was designed for Secondary Education students and high internal consistency was obtained:  $\alpha = .89$ . Subsequent studies with similar samples confirmed this instrument's reliability: Cromley (2004),  $\alpha = .71$ ; Cromley & Azevedo (2004),  $\alpha = .87$ ; Cromley & Azevedo (2006),  $\alpha = .88$ . MARSIS has been applied to university students. Its psychometric properties have proved adequate, with reliability between .77 and .89 (Al-Dawaideh & Al-Saadi, 2013, Gómez, Solaz & Sanjosé, 2014; Qun, Roehring, Mason & Meng, 2011). To study its convergent validity, several authors have employed the correlation with the self-information measurement of readers' skill (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Qun et al., 2011). A value of .33 between the MARSIS score and the reading range informed by participating subjects has been obtained.

We are unaware of the existence of any specific instruments that evaluate the characteristic metacognitive strategies adopted to comprehend narrative literary texts.

### *Reading comprehension of narrative texts*

Textual comprehension varies according to the type of tasks and cognitive demands required (López-Escribano et al., 2013). Readers activate distinct metacognitive strategies in accordance with the activity they must perform and the type of text they face: select information, interpret its meaning, or activate one's own experience and knowledge that reading provides. Narrative texts are characterised by the presence of characters who undertake several actions which, in turn, give way to

events that are causally connected. Readers' activity consists in, among other matters, bridging the gaps that appear in the sequence of described events, which entails making inferences in constructing their representation (Gárate, 1994).

From the socio-cultural paradigm, special importance is attached to narrative activities as a cognitive process (Bruner, 1991; Vygotski, 1994). We ought to think that narrative structures help organise knowledge and make progress in the social comprehension of the world through the realities that stories reflect. The pedagogic value of reading lies in narrated, real or fictitious experiences, which open up life expectations to us, and can reinforce us personally by offering social reading and personal development possibilities. More than 25 years ago, Bettelheim (1986) considered that given their plot and outcome, folk and fairy tales are excellent resources to help solve emotional conflicts and to build a better balanced personality. Todorov (1991) stated that "...literature is about human existence... It would mean nothing if it did not allow us to understand life better" (p. 73). Similarly, Burns (2005) indicated that narrations can help us to improve, be enriched and become stronger. According to Parkin (2004), listening to, and talking about and discussing a story, permit analytical thinking to enable us to then transfer what has been learnt to our own real situations. Méndez (2006) stressed the psycho-pedagogic function of literary reading as far as readers' personal lives are concerned, along with their comprehension of the surrounding reality. Basanta (2010) also considered that reading could be our main ally to discover reality. Along the same lines, in 2001 the European Commission stated that reading goes beyond the school education setting as it contributes to not only individuals' social integration, but also to their personal development.

For reading to provide us with such benefits, we must go beyond simply decoding signs and enter the personal construction

of the text. Attaining the reading skill from narrative texts is achieved only by executing active reading, during which readers need to get involved in the text and start building it as they advance with their reading. This process takes place only when subjects interact with the text, and when they make reading their own and create their own reading. Readers have to use the text as a chance for emotional, cultural and personal reasoning (Pérez-Tornero & Sanagustín, 2011). Within this conceptual frame, narrative reading requires reflecting on and analysing the text, one's personal empathy with the text, and making the text one's own. It is absolutely necessary to place oneself in an interactive process between the text and readers, where readers integrate the story from their own former experience, and assign a personal meaning to the text through which they can understand the characters, their expectations, intentions, beliefs, and the reasons for and the consequences of their own actions (Yubero & Larrañaga, 2013).

### Objective

The objective of the present study was to devise an instrument to evaluate metacognitive strategies to comprehend narrative texts. By taking a similar structure to the MARS items, and having theoretically reviewed the metacomprehension strategies of narrative texts, a questionnaire was devised and tested with university students.

## Method

### Participants

Six hundred and ten University of Castilla-La Mancha students (Spain) participated in this study. They were aged 18-54 years (mean age of 21.74 years; standard deviation of 4.25), of whom 75% were under the age of 22 and 80% were female. The students who formed the study sample were studying the Degrees of Education, Social Education and Social Work, which explains the gender bias of our sample.

### Instrument

The original questionnaire had 36 items, which included the strategies (cognitive processes) that readers had to adopt to read narrative literary texts. Students had to indicate the frequency with which they used these strategies on a scale from 1- *Never* to 4- *Always*.

Students also had to answer two questions about their voluntary reading activity. The first one was about frequency, and the second question asked about the amount they read. The first question asked them about information on the time they spent reading voluntarily (1- *never*, 2- *hardly ever*, 3- *on occasion in a trimestre*, 4- *on occasion in a month*, 5- *once or twice a week*, 6- *everyday or nearly everyday*); the second question asked them about the number of books they had read in the last year (1- *none*, 2- *1 or 2*, 3- *between 3 and 5*, 4- *between 6 and 10*, 5- *between 11 and 15*, 6- *between 16 and 20*, 7- *between 21 and 50*, 8- *more than 50*).

### Procedure

The questionnaire was completed in university classrooms. The university students who participated did so voluntarily and anonymously, and they had 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

## Results

A free factorial analysis with Varimax rotation of all the items was firstly run in order to know the instrument's underlying structure. Five factors were obtained which explained 61.59% of variance. The first factor grouped the items that represented a customisation activity of the text; i.e. "I consider why the characters in the book behave in a certain way", with 15.27% of variance. The second factor was made up of the items which referred to creative activity; i.e.: "I try to guess what will happen while I read", which explained 14.25% of variance. The other three factors, which explained 32.07% of variance (12.56%, 11.19% and 8.32% respectively), represented the global metacognitive skills to help comprehend a given text; for



example, in factor 3: “When the text is difficult, I pay more attention when I’m reading it”, in factor 4: “I stop now and again to think about what I’m reading”, and in factor 5: “I go back to pick up the thread when I’m not concentrating”.

The specific weight of each item in the communality of the questionnaire was analysed. In order to obtain a shorter questionnaire and guarantee the validity of the final instrument, those items with a value below .500 were removed. Table 1 shows the values of the 17 original questionnaire items, which made up the finally proposed instrument.

Table 1. Communality of selected items

Original item	Extraction
7	.593
9	.664
12	.605
14	.625
17	.595
18	.705
20	.725
21	.708
22	.760
24	.607
29	.759
30	.566
31	.724
32	.625
33	.740
34	.658
35	.659

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin’s measure of sample adequacy, KMO= .86, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity,  $\chi^2(136)= 2459.78$ ,  $p< .001$ , both confirmed the goodness of performing the data reduction analysis in the final test. A factorial analysis with Varimax rotation was run by fixing the structure on three factors. The results confirmed the structure encountered in the original questionnaire (table 2) by distinguishing among Customisation Strategies, Creativity Strategies and Global Reading Strategies, which explained almost 46% of variance and gave a total scale reliability of .83. The Global Reading

Table 2. The factorial structure of the Questionnaire of metacognitive strategies to comprehend narrative texts (CEMCoTeN, its Spanish acronym)

Item	GRS	CsS	CrS
1. I stop at some paragraphs to reflect on them	.571		
2. I pay attention and read carefully to make sure I comprehend what I’m reading	.715		
3. I go back to pick up the thread when I’m not concentrating	.636		
4. I can deduce a vision of reality from reading		.707	
5. I relate the text to real life and I also compare it to real life.		.703	
6. When the text is difficult, I pay more attention when I’m reading	.488		
7. I consider why the characters in the book behave in a certain way		.496	.424
8. I stop now and again to think about what I’m reading	.461		
9. I resort to my experiences to help me understand what I’m reading		.670	
10. I imagine being in the characters’ place		.598	.410
11. I analyse the characters and imagine how they feel		.528	.468
12. I check my comprehension when I come across contradictory information	.531		
13. I try to guess what will happen as I read			.740
14. When I don’t understand the text, I read it again to improve my understanding	.611		
15. I imagine how I’d like the story to unfold			.783
16. I check if what I assumed about the text is right or wrong			.687
17. I try to guess the meaning of the words or sentences I don’t know	.484		
% Variance	15.99	14.99	14.89
Reliability	.72	.77	.78

Note: EGL: Global Reading Strategies; CsS: Customisation Strategies; CrS: Creativity Strategies.

Strategies (GRS) in the rotated structure moved to the first factor. The second factor was made up of the items selected from the Customisation Strategies (CsS). The third factor grouped the Creativity Strategies (CrS).

The three factors were related, and the value between the specific narrative text strategies was higher, the CrS and the CsS,  $r = .76$ ,  $p < .001$ , than for the GRS, GRS/CsS:  $r = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ ; GRS/CrS:  $r = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The CEMCoTeN Questionnaire (see Annexe 1) obtained suitable convergent validity values for both the frequency of voluntary reading,  $r = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the amount of voluntary reading,  $r = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ . The obtained values confirmed the relation between the study variables and the distinct nature of the concepts being evaluated.

The student gender analysis confirmed the superiority of females in all the components of the metacognitive strategies to comprehend narrative texts (table 3).

Table 3. Comparing the means of the CEMCoTeN Questionnaire factors according to gender

Strategy	Males	Females	t	p	d
GRS	2.99	3.10	-2.21	.027	.09
CsS	2.99	3.15	-3.52	.000	.14
CrS	3.05	3.29	-3.15	.002	.13

Note. EGL: EGL: Global Reading Strategies; CsS: Customisation Strategies; CrS: Creativity Strategies. Measurement scale, from 1- Never to 4- Always.

## Discussion

One of today's most worrying matters is reading comprehension. The conceptualisation of the comprehension process has been enriched in recent years and includes metacognitive aspects as an essential tool to optimise its development. Different instruments exist that evaluate the metacognitive strategies to comprehend expository texts used at school, but the same cannot be said when talking about narrative literary texts. From socio-constructivist assumptions, we understand the evaluation of comprehension metacognition to be situations

of interaction which allow cognitive processes to be observed and analysed in order to determine how to positively influence improvements in reading processes. Based on MARSÍ, our questionnaire was devised to evaluate metacognitive strategies to comprehend narrative texts. The objective of creating CEMCoTeN was to obtain an instrument to help readers and mediators to make a diagnosis that allows us to detect cognitive comprehension strategies that are not activated in reading narrative texts and to, thus, plan efficient intervention. Along the same lines for metacognitive strategies to comprehend expository texts (López-Escribano et al.; Madariaga & Martínez, 2010; Soriano et al., 2013), it is noteworthy that the work conducted on metaknowledge in practicing voluntary reading will increase the possibilities of readers' development.

As in the questionnaire by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002), some of our questionnaire items share a structure on two factors. Our results reveal that although Creativity and Customisation share common strategies, they can be considered to differ in the reading process.

A detailed analysis has indicated that the GRS factor is made up of cognitive strategies that allow readers to monitor and control the linear text comprehension process. CrS correspond to inferential text reconstruction processes, and also to the connotative level that Méndez defines (2006), while CsS reflect about personally making the text one's own and applying literary discourse to life itself as a socio-cultural learning process. The latter would correspond to the personal comprehension concept presented by Sipe (1998, 2002), which consists in making connections among our life, the storyline and the characters in the narration. So this would take a two-way form: using the text to comprehend ourselves and to comprehend our life using the text. These connections between the text and life, and between life and the text, underline readers' awareness of their reaction and feelings with literary aspects.

Our results revealed that females did a better job with all the metacognitive comprehension strategies. This same finding has been reported when metacognitive comprehension strategies have been used with expository texts (Al-Dawaideh & Al-Saadi, 2013; Jiménez et al, 2009; Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012).

Nonetheless, our study results must be interpreted carefully, mainly because the data were obtained by self-reporting techniques, with the consequent influence of social desirability. Nor should we forget that our study is a cross-sectional type. So the analysed relations did not necessarily demonstrate causality. Consequently, it will be necessary to conduct longitudinal studies in order to confirm the obtained data. It will also be worth replicating the data with larger samples and with other age groups from different regions.

We believe that studying the specific weight of each factor in the construction of reading habits is a future research line.

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## Annexe 1: Questionnaire of metacognitive strategies to comprehend narrative texts (CEMCoTeN)

Mark the degree to which you use the reading strategies below when you read a narrative literary text

1	2	3	4
Never	Very rarely	Quite frequently	Always

1. I stop at some paragraphs to reflect on them.	1	2	3	4
2. I pay attention and read carefully to make sure I comprehend what I'm reading.	1	2	3	4
3. I go back to pick up the thread when I'm not concentrating.	1	2	3	4
4. I can deduce a vision of reality from reading.	1	2	3	4
5. I relate the text to, and compare it with, real life.	1	2	3	4
6. When the text is difficult, I pay more attention when I'm reading.	1	2	3	4
7. I consider why the characters in the book behave in a certain way.	1	2	3	4
8. I stop now and again to think about what I'm reading.	1	2	3	4
9. I resort to my experiences to help me understand what I'm reading.	1	2	3	4
10. I imagine being in the characters' place.	1	2	3	4
11. I analyse the characters and imagine how they feel.	1	2	3	4
12. I check my comprehension when I come across contradictory information.	1	2	3	4
13. I try to guess what will happen as I read.	1	2	3	4
14. When I don't understand the text, I read it again to improve my understanding.	1	2	3	4
15. I imagine how I'd like the story to unfold.	1	2	3	4
16. I check if what I assumed about the text is right or wrong.	1	2	3	4
17. I try to guess the meaning of the words or sentences I don't know.	1	2	3	4