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STUDENTS' ABILITY TO IDENTIFY MEDIA BIAS IN WRITTEN PRESS

HABILIDAD DE LOS ESTUDIANTES PARA IDENTIFICAR EL SESGO MEDIÁTICO EN PRENSA ESCRITA

María Piedad Rivadeneira Barreiro¹

Universidad Técnica de Manabí, Ecuador

ABSTRACT

The intention of this study is to analyze the relationship between reading comprehension and students' ability to identify media bias in written press. The participants for this study were sixty EFL students from a language department of an Ecuadorian university. There was no random assignment of participants to the control and experimental groups. Information was obtained from a questionnaire by Browne and Keeley (2004). Data was coded manually, and the outcomes showed no significant

improvement in students' ability to identify media bias referred to the variable "time". Also, there was no significance in the interaction of the variable "time" and the variable "group", and there was little difference in the two times the test was taken by both groups.

KEYWORDS: Media bias, written press, reading comprehension.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es analizar la relación entre comprensión lectora y la habilidad de estudiantes para identificar el sesgo mediático en prensa escrita. Los participantes de este estudio fueron sesenta estudiantes de ILE de un departamento de idiomas de una universidad ecuatoriana. No hubo asignación

¹ Profesora de Inglés de la Universidad Técnica de Manabí, Ecuador. Doctora en Educación con Mención Internacional otorgado por la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5725-6248> <http://bit.ly/2MtrmaeX> mprivadeneira@utm.edu.ec +593979153759



aleatoria de participantes a los grupos control y experimental. La información se obtuvo de un cuestionario de Browne y Keeley (2004). Los datos se codificaron manualmente, y los resultados no mostraron una mejora significativa en la habilidad de los estudiantes para identificar el sesgo de los medios referido a la variable "tiempo". Además, no hubo significancia en la interacción de la variable "tiempo" y la variable "grupo", y hubo poca diferencia en las dos veces en que la prueba fue tomada por ambos grupos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sesgo mediático, prensa escrita, comprensión lectora.

INTRODUCTION

Few studies related to media bias have been published objectively (Groseclose & Milyo, forthcoming). This kind of bias is reduced when the news market has more competitors (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2005). Traditionally, the use of media has been used in countries to foster democracy, nonetheless, some voters and political commentators consider that media lacks objectivity (Chiang & Knight, 2011). In this sense, media could be potentially biased to empower or protect specific groups in our society.

The interest in understanding how readers process information to avoid being fooled by fake news is of vital importance in this study. Then, it is important to comprehend what happens while students read and analyze if those who understand what they read would be able to detect slanted information. Along the text, there will be a review of relevant literature about the topic and the results of this study.

MEDIA BIAS

Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002) identify two types of media bias. Thus, "one bias, which we refer to as ideology, reflects a news outlet's desire to affect reader opinions in a particular direction. The second bias, which we refer to as spin, reflects the outlet's attempt to simply create

a memorable story" (p. 1). Anyway, studies in media bias conclude that consumers select media which biases relates to their beliefs or preferences (Gentzkow, Shapiro & Stone, 2015).

Along time, media has played an important role in our society. Media inform different audiences. Nonetheless, some people consider that media is biased as it was shown in a study conducted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1999), where news reporting was considered slanted by 78% of the participants (as cited in Baron, 2006).

The literature has also shown that powerful groups have used media to reach their goals. That is the case of England using a more professional propaganda against the German Reich during the First World War. There is evidence that powerful groups create advantages over small groups. But what one can do to detect bias in media? According to Xiang and Sarvary (2007), people do less effort to process information from media. This could explain the advantage of media over audiences.

On the other hand, if people are doing less effort to detect bias in media, it is probable that they are not using reading strategies to understand what the press informs. If the press seeks consumer preferences, bias will be guaranteed, and this could facilitate the work of not understanding what is read and being manipulated by the media. Hence, classic economic theory recommends competition in media and no influence from external forces to eliminate bias.

READING COMPREHENSION

Reading is a skill that should be fostered from early elementary school. Sometimes, intervention programs are needed because students do not develop decoding skills (Kendeou, Van den Broek, White and Lynch, 2009). There are some theories behind reading that try to explain what happens behind this process, but researchers



continue working to comprehend what occurs while reading.

It is quite interesting what Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) explain about the bottom-up and top-down interactive process. The bottom-up process provides the reader sensitiveness to new information that do not fit their hypotheses about a text. On the other hand, the top-down process helps the reader to choose possible interpretations from the content (as cited in Alyousef, 2006). It is not clear yet how these two types of knowledge interact while reading.

Some factors such as motivation, engagement, school resources, among others are involved while reading. Guthrie (1996) highlights motivation and cognitive characteristics of the reader as factors that engage in building knowledge, using cognitive strategies and interacting with the text (as cited in Alyousef, 2006). All this could lead to analyze the possibility of including tasks that focus on reading strategies and encourage critical thinking to differentiate biased information from that which is not biased.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives and research questions

The goal of this study is to analyze the relationship between reading comprehension and students' ability to identify media bias in written press. Thus, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: What is the relationship between reading comprehension and students' ability to identify media bias in written press?

RQ2: Does training in reading comprehension helps to identify media bias in written press?

Participants

Sixty EFL students from a language department of an Ecuadorian university participated in this study. There was no random assignment of

participants to the control and experimental groups. At the beginning of the study, they were attending a fourth-level English course in a language department that offers six levels of English as part of the curriculum for all university majors.

Instruments

The instrument used to achieve the objective in this study was a questionnaire by Browne and Keeley (2004). This questionnaire was used after reading a newspaper article and it was taken as pretest and posttest by all the participants.

Procedures

This study required students to read a newspaper article in Spanish to complete a questionnaire by Browne and Keeley (2004). This questionnaire was used to analyze the relationship between reading comprehension and students' ability to identify media bias in written press. During the process, students were explained vocabulary related to this questionnaire that was used as pretest and posttest. Ten experts in economics, education, technology and administration validated students' responses.

Data analysis

Data was coded manually by considering three similar students' responses as a pattern (Hatch, 2002, as cited in Saldaña, 2009).

RESULTS

The results revealed no significant improvement in students' ability to identify media bias referred to the variable "time". This is shown in Table 1 where the value of the significance for this variable (.081) is greater than .05. In addition, there was no significance in the interaction of the variable "time" and the variable "group", as it is shown in Table 1 where the significance value (.883) is greater than .05.



Table 1.

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
TIME	Sphericity Assumed	4,800	1	4,800	3,158	,081
	Greenhouse-Geisser	4,800	1,000	4,800	3,158	,081
	Huynh-Feldt	4,800	1,000	4,800	3,158	,081
	Lower-bound	4,800	1,000	4,800	3,158	,081
TIME * Group	Sphericity Assumed	,033	1	,033	,022	,883
	Greenhouse-Geisser	,033	1,000	,033	,022	,883
	Huynh-Feldt	,033	1,000	,033	,022	,883
	Lower-bound	,033	1,000	,033	,022	,883
Error(TIME)	Sphericity Assumed	88,167	58	1,520		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	88,167	58,000	1,520		
	Huynh-Feldt	88,167	58,000	1,520		
	Lower-bound	88,167	58,000	1,520		

a. Computed using alpha = ,05

On the other hand, Table 2 displays a contrast of the pretest and posttest in both groups. The significance values (,179 and ,254) in the control and experimental groups show that there was little difference in the two times the test was taken by both groups.

Table 2.

Pairwise Comparisons Regarding the Variable Time

Group	(I) TIME	(J) TIME	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^a	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^a	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	1	2	-,433	,318	,179	-1,071	,204
	2	1	,433	,318	,179	-,204	1,071
Experimental	1	2	-,367	,318	,254	-1,004	,271
	2	1	,367	,318	,254	-,271	1,004

Based on estimated marginal means

a. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of this study show an irrelevant improvement in students' ability to identify media bias referred to the variable "time". Also, there was a small difference in the two times the test was taken by both groups. The group of participants showed problems related to grammar, vocabulary, semantics, syntax, and low-level critical thinking skills.

These results show that training in reading comprehension do not help to identify media bias in written press and therefore no relationship between the two variables. It is important to mention that an earthquake occurred during the study. This situation and other factors were limitations that could have affected the outcomes. Additionally, the low quality in Ecuadorian Education affects students' literacy and probably their ability to identify media bias.

Although the results cannot be generalized to all the population due to the sample size, it is important to consider that this kind of study could lead to improve reading comprehension and students' ability to identify media bias. The act of manipulating audiences is a reality that powerful groups apply through persuasion and seduction. Therefore, it is necessary to foster appropriate reading instruction programs and prepare our students to be aware to slanted information.

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