

Stories from my Town

Cindy M. Bohórquez Rúa

Universidad de Antioquia

Research and Practicum Advisor

Isabel C. Cadavid Múnera

Medellín

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Abstract

This action research report describes how storytelling became a useful strategy that favored fifth graders' meaningful learning of English in a public institution at the municipality of Girardota. Outcomes revealed how telling students stories about their town and daily experiences became a meaningful learning process in which they improved not only their understanding of English, but also their writing and pronunciation skills. They also increased their confidence and participation in class. This paper indicates the importance of taking into account students' prior knowledge, likes, and interests to incorporate them in the English class. It also corroborates the importance of using diverse educational materials to support students' understanding of oral and written texts.

Keywords: Meaningful Learning, Storytelling, Stories, Prior Knowledge, Visual Aids

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

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Preface

“Stories from my town” is the final outcome of my research project carried out with a group of fifth graders at Institución Educativa Colombia in the municipality of Girardota during the year 2016. The objective of this project was to discover the impact of implementing storytelling on students’ meaningful learning in the English class.

The development of this project started with observations of the English classes and reflections about them that allowed me to find that English learning was considered as an activity of grammar-translation with little connection to students’ life and experiences. Through this project, fifth graders were exposed to different stories in English related to their life in the town which at the same time were linked to the English syllabus of the school. These storytelling events were supported with the use of different visual aids like images, puppets, body gestures, etc. in order to help children understand the plot of the story. The results revealed that using this tool in the English class can be useful, not only to favor students’ meaningful learning and understanding, but also to provide them with the opportunity of becoming more confident.

This paper presents the context of the school, the description of the problem found in the English class, as well as the research question and objectives that guided this project. It also includes the theoretical framework that supports it, and the process of data collection and analysis and results obtained.

Description of the Context



During the first semester of 2016, I started my academic practicum as a requirement to complete my studies on the Foreign Language Teaching Program at the University of Antioquia. Therefore, I started the development of my research project by observing the English class of fifth grade (5-01) at a public institution. Since the beginning, I kept a journal to record my observations, reflections and comments about each English session. Then, I taught some classes. During the second semester, I was the English teacher for this group at Institución Educativa Colombia in the municipality of Girardota.

Institución Educativa Colombia was created because there was a need for building new spaces for education in the town. Consequently, in 1962, a lot was bought to Ana Botero to build a public institution for girls. It was bought with money given by the Alliance for Progress (The United States of America Support for Latin American Countries). In 1964 the school was opened with the name “Escuela Urbana de Niñas”. The first principal was Reverend Mother Maria Josefina.

Nowadays, the school's name is Institución Educativa Colombia. It is a public coeducational school located in Calle 5A # 14A-62 in the Aurelio Mejia neighborhood. This school promotes the values of joy and respect to transform the social, scientific and technological environments. The school also believes that its graduates should be able to lead social, productive, corporate, cultural and administrative processes that begin with a human and holistic education. The school has an average of 1,300 students in the 5-18 age range distributed in different levels: preschool, elementary, middle and high school that work in two school shifts: in the morning from 6:00 am to 11:45 am, and in the afternoon from 12:00 to 6:00 pm.

The physical structure of the school is divided into four floors. On the first one, we can find a cafeteria, the principal's office, the coordinator's office, the teachers' office, the secretary's office and the psychologist's office. We also find two bathrooms (one for girls and one for teachers), the library, the auditorium, seven classrooms, and two courtyards. On the second floor, there are six classrooms and a computer room. On the third floor, you can find a computer room, a bathroom for boys, eight classrooms and one courtyard. Finally, on the fourth floor we find another computer room. This school has a classroom for every subject; when a class is over, the students move to another classroom for the following class.

The English classroom is located on the third floor. It is equipped with one chalkboard, one white board, one desk for the teacher, a shelf, and a TV set. In addition, there are 42 chairs organized in seven lines. There are also two fans and four big windows in one side and a small one in the other side. Those elements make the classroom a proper place for learning. In this English class there were 39 students between 9 to 14 years old; 23 boys and 16 girls. There were five students over age (between 13 and 14 years old). They belonged to different social strata: one, two and three. Most of them were very active, participative and attentive. They enjoyed the

activities proposed in the English class and they were motivated about learning the language.

The English teacher of this group was the English teacher for fourth and fifth grades. She was my Cooperating Teacher (hereafter CT). She has a degree on Childhood Education and Language from Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia. She has been an elementary school teacher for 18 years. She has been teaching English at Institución Educativa Colombia for three years. Although she does not know much about English, she loves this language and she shows motivation to learn it. This is the reason why she has taken some English basic courses in an academy in order to improve her proficiency in the foreign language.

During the classes I observed, I noted that my CT followed the requirements given by the institution regarding the teaching of English. According to the English syllabus, teaching a foreign language must be based on the grammatical basic knowledge of the mother tongue. In this case, “the only immediate and doable alternative is to explain the Spanish grammar and syntax in the English class, in order to establish clear relation parameters between the two languages” (p. 2). Therefore, my CT uses the grammar-translation method to help students to understand what they are working on.

Currently, the high school English teachers are implementing some English projects to promote the use of this language in the institution. Those projects are:

Bulletin boards: Every month, students from elementary and high school grades share information about different topics. Sometimes they are related to celebrations in English-speaking countries.

Digital resources: Using tablets, students from eleventh grade create online English games. Later, those games are provided to other students in the English class to facilitate their learning of this language.

Radio Station: It provides students with the opportunity to listen to music in English. The radio station is used sometimes in the afternoon, and only high school students have access to it.

With the implementation of the three projects mentioned above, the school is looking out for new ways to teach English and provide the students with the opportunity to develop their communicative competence in a meaningful way.

After observing this context, I was able to analyze the situations that took place in the institution, specifically in the English class. This information allowed me to find an interest to be studied in my Research Project. In the following section, I will introduce the description of the problem that raised the need to carry out this work.

Statement of the Problem

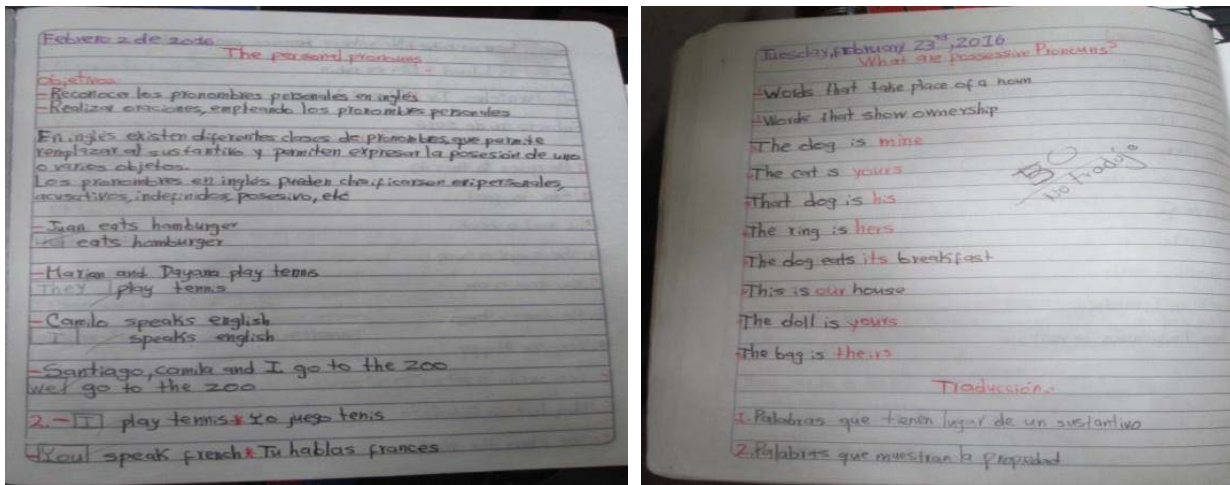
Before my practicum started, I had expectations, concerns and questions related to the school and the students. Some of those concerns were about discipline and misbehavior problems that are common in public schools. I was also interested in discovering the attitude that students had towards English. During the first observations, I focused on general aspects about every event that happened in the class: students' behavior, class management, teacher and students' interaction, and students' learning process. I noticed that there was a positive class atmosphere because there were not severe problems with discipline that interfered with the development of the English class. Although sometimes students talked loudly and walked around the classroom, they were very active and participative in the activities proposed by the teacher.

After observing more classes, having conversations with my CT, the principal, the coordinator, some fifth graders, and reviewing the syllabus, I could notice that the activities developed in the English class aimed at grammar and translation and therefore students did not have the opportunity to develop their speaking or writing skills. They were mostly focused on

copying from the board and repeating aloud the sentences already written on it. Consequently, there was no chance for students to use the language in a meaningful way because they could not connect it to their situations, realities, needs and likes.

Furthermore, I found that all the classes followed the same sequence: explanation of the topic with examples provided by the teacher, written exercises, and finally, a group activity. Therefore, the teacher always followed the same strategy to explain a topic: she explained it in Spanish and gave examples which she wrote on the board; the examples were written in English with their translation into Spanish. As an evidence of this, I have a quote from my journal in which I described a class where the students should complete the sentence with the right pronoun: “*She wrote more sentences on the board in English with their Spanish translation next to it: ‘_____ play tennis *Yo juego tenis. _____ speak French *Tú hablas francés.’*” (Journal entry, February 2nd, 2016)

Some pictures from the students’ notebooks confirm this:



The examples above show that translation was fundamental in this class. The teacher wrote “*no tradujo*” (You did not translate). All the sentences should be translated into Spanish because this was an instrument used by the CT to check students’ understanding. The teacher did

not use other ways to explain vocabulary, such as using images, drawings or body gestures. The only alternative was translation.

Since in the English classes I did not observe situations in which students used the language in a meaningful way, I realized that they should be provided with opportunities to use and explore the language in a way that made sense to them. I decided that telling them stories, and using images as a support to help them understand could benefit my students. In this way, they would participate giving their opinions and ideas and they would understand what is being said in the foreign language. At the same time, they will produce written sentences related to stories. Therefore, their oral and written production might improve.

Furthermore, I wanted to promote awareness about the different uses of English so that they could see it as a tool to communicate, express feelings and emotions. Therefore, through the stories I presented language within a context and offered students the possibility to interact with situations, places and experiences that were part of their daily life at the municipality of Girardota.

As a teacher, I believe that the most important dimension in students' learning process is the engagement and involvement they develop during the classes. According to Ausubel (2000), "Meaningful learning is so important in the process of education because it is the human mechanism par excellence for acquiring and storing the vast quantity of ideas and information represented by any field of knowledge" (p. 77). For that reason, I wanted to implement storytelling as a tool to promote meaningful learning. Thus, I decided to base my research project on the following research question.

Research Question

How can the implementation of storytelling favor fifth grade students' meaningful learning in the English class at Institución Educativa Colombia?

General Objective

To analyze the impact of working with storytelling on students' meaningful learning in the English class with fifth graders in a public school at the municipality of Girardota.

Specific Objectives

- To provide students with linguistic and extra-linguistic elements to support their comprehension during storytelling events.
- To encourage students to participate in class in order to involve them in the storytelling event.
- To promote students understanding of English through the use of stories related to people, places, celebrations and means of transport of their town.

Theoretical Framework

For teacher researchers, the study of theory is essential to understand and make sense of the issues and situations that take place every day in their classrooms. Teachers must find ways to apply the theory, to examine their beliefs, to look for strategies to implement, to support their practices, among others. Based on theory, research, and knowledge of their contexts and their students' interests, concerns and necessities, teachers can make informed decisions. In this case, as the students saw translation as the only tool to learn English, my research project stemmed from my interest in exploring a way to provide fifth graders with a meaningful learning experience in the English class. This proposal is based on three main concepts regarding language teaching: meaningful learning, storytelling, and visual aids. Along this text I will

present a definition of meaningful learning, then I will explain how storytelling is developed as a strategy to promote meaningful learning, and finally, I will describe the importance of using visual aids to teach a foreign language and support storytelling events.

Meaningful Learning

As English teachers we should be aware that the world is constantly changing and so is foreign language teaching. Traditional methods, although still used by several schools and teachers, are being replaced by other approaches and philosophies that place the student in the center of the process. In this way, students will have an active role in their learning process. They will be required to participate in class through a variety of strategies that include brief questions and answers, discussions, games, drawings, role plays, among others. Learners will find their process meaningful because the topics will be connected to their experiences, interests and needs. Consequently, they will create new knowledge based on their current knowledge.

According to Ausubel (2000), meaningful learning is “a distinctive kind of learning process as well as only secondarily to a meaningful learning outcome-attainment of a new meaning-that necessarily reflects the operation and completion of such a process.” (p. 53). Once the learner's prior knowledge is activated, a cognitive process is unleashed that will allow him/her to play an active role to become the agent that expands his/her knowledge. This appreciation profoundly affects how we as teachers should face our activities and our attitude toward learners, as both the process and the outcome are affected.

In this way, meaningful learning was the core concept that I used to support my research project. Along this proposal, the term *meaningful learning* will appear many times because this is what I wanted to promote in fifth graders during their English learning process. Therefore, I

wanted them to be engaged and able to activate their prior knowledge and use it as a bridge to understand and learn new concepts or ideas.

Ausubel argued that “If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly.” (As cited in Novak & Gowin, 1984, p. 44). Following Ausubel perspective, it is essential for teachers to integrate students’ previous knowledge and experiences to new ones in order to enhance their learning. In other words, meaningful learning implies teaching students through topics and situations they are familiar with, so that they will be able to make connections to their previous experiences and background.

On the other hand, Jonassen & Strobel (2006) present five salient interdependent attributes of Meaningful Learning:

1. Meaningful learning is active: Learners are engaged in the activities because they require that students interact and manipulate the objects in that environment; therefore, learning occurs in natural contexts.
2. Meaningful learning is constructive: It is necessary that learners reflect on their activities and what they have accomplished. Therefore, learners need to learn from what makes sense to them.
3. Meaningful learning is intentional: When learners are active they have an intention which is achieving a cognitive goal. Therefore, they understand more and they are able to use the knowledge they have acquired in new situations.

4. Meaningful learning is authentic: knowledge should not be separated from reality. Students need to learn in real life, different and useful contexts because these conditions give them the opportunity of practicing and solving problems.
5. Meaningful learning is cooperative: working in groups is essential to accomplish a task. Through negotiation and conversation, which have a big value, students are able to share their views and recognize that everyone's opinion is different. For this, both negotiation and conversation should be encouraged.

The characteristics of meaningful learning mentioned above, as Jonassen & Strobel (2006) state, are “interrelated, interactive, and interdependent.” (p. 3). For this reason, teachers should always combine them in order to provide students with active, constructive, intentional, authentic, and cooperative learning.

According to Moreira, meaningful learning should follow these principles:

1. Previous knowledge: This is the essence of meaningful learning. It means that “we learn from what we already know.”
2. Questions instead of answers: Social interaction is required here. It is more important to stimulate the way of asking questions than to learn how to answer correctly.
3. Diversity of educational materials: It is very important to teach from different sources to facilitate students learning. The chalkboard is being replaced by drawings, images, stories, Power Point presentations, etc.
4. Diversity of strategies: Learners have an active participation in their learning process. Students have become the center of the class (as cited in Moreira, 2011, p. 12).

Taking into account those principles, learning is a process that places the student in the center. All the strategies and activities need to be planned thinking on students' needs and likes

as well as on their active involvement in the class. The process of teaching should help them build knowledge from what they know and bring their own experiences and background knowledge to the class.

Storytelling

As teachers, in our practice we need to use different strategies to involve students in the English learning process. Among those strategies we can have storytelling. Boje (2008) suggested that this strategy “is commonly defined using the criterion initially developed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. By such definition, narratively “proper” stories must have: (a) linear plot sequence, (b) whole coherence of beginning, middle, and ending, and (c) and should be recited by a solitary narrator.” Other authors state that “storytelling is a receptive and productive educational resource in which social values, content and language are linked and integrated.” (Télez, 1996; Hearn & Garcés, 2005; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008, as cited in García, 2015, p. 1). From this view, when teachers use storytelling in their classrooms they promote not only personal and social values, but also offer images, sounds and words that provide students with tools to learn the target language. It also allows students to get knowledge about their environment and the whole world.

Storytelling can also benefit students in the process of learning a foreign language. It increases the vocabulary and concentration, and exercises the imagination and creativity. It also provides a meaningful context and helps children to recognize patterns in language. Furthermore, storytelling gives children the possibility of familiarizing with symbols and traditions of their own culture (Maguire, 1985, p. 14). Therefore, using storytelling in the English class offers students the opportunity of improving the four skills. It also allows the teacher to introduce new content in a creative way. That content will be learned by the students through the context of a

story; for example, students can learn about places around the world, food, sports, pets, music, cinema, etc.

On the other hand, stories can be told using a combination of sounds, words, images and gestures so that the storytelling experience will allow children to have fun while they learn. They will love the facial expressions, gestures and different voices made by the teacher when she is telling the story, and at the same time they can use all those elements to understand what is being told. In order to provoke a bigger impact on students' feelings and support their process of comprehension, through the stories, it is advisable to use visual aids to reinforce and support what is being told.

Visual Aids

Pictures, images, flashcards, and puppets are elements that draw children's attention. They illustrate situations or represent something meaningful; in many cases they bring memories to people. That is probably why they are used in education. The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines audio visual aids as "an audio or visual device used by a teacher to help learning. For example, pictures, charts, and flashcards are visual aids; radio, records, and tape-recorders are auditory aids. Film, television, and video are audio-visual aids." Taking into account that visual aids are tools to help students in their learning process, I used them to facilitate their understanding of words, sentences and stories told in class. Those images allowed students to relate real places, things and situations that they already know with what they were learning.

Visual aids are indispensable to promote an effective connection between the content of the stories and their meaning. They facilitate students' understanding of what is being told because their attention is being stimulated. According to Mackintosh (1975), when students'

visual attention is stimulated, their performance will be affected. In this way, students will select information that they will keep in their memory, and finally they will be able to relate that information with ideas. Therefore, it would be necessary to provide fifth graders with didactic tools such as images, pictures, drawings and puppets that allow them to focus their attention on what they are learning to achieve the objectives of the class and to accomplish the purpose of my research project that aims to provide students with a meaningful learning experience in the foreign language class.

Since the focus of my research project was to tell students stories to provide them with a meaningful learning experience of English, I decided to create different stories that would be useful to attain my project objectives. These stories are described in the following section.

Action Strategies

For the second semester of my practicum I created four different stories related to places, people, celebrations and life at the municipality of Girardota. These stories aimed to involve fifth graders in the storytelling event so that they could learn English in a meaningful way. The stories were created according to the topics required in the school syllabus: means of transport, verbs and feelings. The chart below shows the planning of the proposal:

Action Plan		
What	When	What for
Story 1: Grandpa told me...	August	To give students the opportunity to use their prior knowledge about the means of transport in their town and connect it to the knowledge they acquire through the storytelling event.
Story 2:	September	To engage students to participate in English

Going to el Parque de las Aguas		(using different verbs) from a story that is developed in a place they know.
Story 3: A trip to the beach	September	To offer students another way to use English talking about experiences in their lives.
Story 4: A costume for Halloween	November	To encourage students to talk about events they are familiar with.

In order to achieve the purposes of this research project, I presented to the students four stories related to places, things and people of their town or situations they had experienced in their daily life. The stories were created by me and they were developed in a sequential order according to the topics that should be covered in the last two terms of the year: means of transport, verbs, and feelings.

During the implementation of the first story “Grandpa told me” I started by providing students with the new vocabulary required to understand it. They learned the vocabulary through images and pictures of means of transport and places in the town. Then I asked the students to imagine what kinds of means of transport Girardota had eighty years ago, in order to make a comparison with the current means of transport. After this, I told them a story in which my grandpa was telling me how, in the past, he and other people from the countryside used to go downtown and other towns like Bello and Cisneros. The story also showed the evolution of means of transport up to the present time. After telling the story, the students did a workshop related to it (see appendix A). Finally, we shared the answers of the workshop. Based on this story we worked on the following topics from the syllabus: means of transport and places.

The second story “Going to el Parque de las Aguas” was used to introduce a new grammar item from the syllabus: verbs. It was focused on different actions that students do when they go to a water park. I told them the story through slides that had images and short sentences. I intended to combine in this story the previous topic we had studied, namely, means of transport in Girardota with the new topic we were going to develop. The story described a trip that a group of students did to a very popular park near Girardota and all the activities they did there. After telling this story, the students wrote the sentences on their notebooks and then made drawings to illustrate them.

The third story “A Trip to the Beach” was also related to verbs, but this time the activity was different as the students created the story according to some images that I showed them. This way they could use all the vocabulary they had been learning. First, they wrote their stories on their notebooks using the verbs. Then, we edited the stories and finally, the students made a tiny book with a sheet of paper and wrote the story on it with drawings that illustrated the events (see appendix B).

The fourth story “A Costume for Halloween” was used as the closure activity for the term. The objective with this was to review different feelings and emotions. Before telling the story, we talked about Halloween and students described the costumes they wore (as they had recently celebrated it). I told students the story using slides that had only pictures and images of the town and characters. This story narrated the experience of a boy who lived in a neighborhood in Girardota buying a Spiderman costume for Halloween. He went to different stores near Girardota to find it. He had some problems but at the end, he found his costume and he was so happy. After telling the story, the students answered some questions according to it.

During the implementation of these stories and other activities in the English class, I collected data that provided me with information to recognize the effect of telling stories on students' meaningful learning in the English language class.

Data Analysis, Findings and Interpretation

Through this research project four instruments were used to collect information in order to answer the research question. One of the principal instruments was my journal where I took notes every class to obtain fundamental and precise information about the events that took place in the class and my reflections about students' attitudes, reactions and opinions.

I also made two focus groups, one at the beginning of the second semester of school year and the other at the end. Through them, I inquired about students' perceptions related to English and the stories I was using in the English classes. Similarly, I made an interview to my CT who gave her opinion about the effects that using stories in the English class had brought to students. During the process, I also kept some samples of the students' work such as drawings, creation of stories, and workshops related to the stories.

All the collected information was analyzed through the inductive process proposed by Burns (2010) which consists of analyzing the opinions of people involved in the research. In this case, I analyzed the views and perceptions of my CT and my students. I followed the five steps that the author proposes: 1) "Assembling your data": I collected all the information I had, reviewed my research question and looked for broad patterns and ideas that could answer my research question. 2) "Coding data": After looking at my big categories, I coded my data into more specific categories identifying the data sources: journal entries, two focus groups, and interview to my CT and students work. 3) "Comparing the data": When my coding was complete, I compared the data from the different sources. 4) "Building meanings and

interpretations”: I reflected deeply about what the data was telling me, I recognized connections and developed explanations with the information. Finally, 5) “Reporting the outcomes”: I thought about how I could present my research to others.

After the analysis and triangulation of the information, I found that the stories favored students' meaningful learning; most of them improved their understanding of written and oral English, and they also increased their confidence to talk and participate in class.

Storytelling Favored Students' Meaningful Learning

One of the most important achievements obtained through the development of this project was that students learned English in a meaningful way. Along the project, the students moved from translating sentences in Spanish into English or vice-versa to using English to talk about and write stories related to their town and daily experiences. Different factors allowed such movement: the activities that were planned for every class, the materials used (pictures, images, drawings, stories), the support of my CT and the students' attitude and behavior.

The following sample shows that students were able to create a story and they used drawings to illustrate it. They were able to convey meaning, not only with words, but also through the use of drawings.



Students' work, September 20th, 2016

This result implies that students had a previous process in which they learned to write sentences that allowed them to create a story directly related to their experiences, to one of the activities that students do on vacation. This exercise also indicates one of the five attributes of meaningful learning: authenticity. According to Jonassen & Strobel (2006) knowledge should not be separated from reality. Thus, this activity let students learn from their real life and gave them the opportunity of practicing what they were learning.

Another aspect that evidences students' learning was the ability of integrating, as Jonassen & Strobel (2006) declared, their new experiences with their prior knowledge about the world, which is one of the main characteristics of meaningful learning. Students were able to make connections between places, people and situations that they already knew about their town with the new knowledge they were acquiring in the classes. I stated in my journal: "I can see that the story "Going to el Parque de las Aguas" made sense to them. Students recognized the places in the pictures. This activity makes me think that through these stories and the images that illustrate them I am promoting meaningful learning. Students can use the English language to talk about the things and situations they already know." (Journal entry, August 16th, 2016).

Through the story about the evolution of means of transport in Girardota, when the students saw the pictures of buses, taxis, parking lots that belonged to their town, they immediately recognized them and they said: "Los buses de Girardota que van para el metro", "la chiva", "el colectivo de Juan Cojo", "mi papá coge el bus en ese parqueadero", "the church." (Journal entry, August 8th, 2016) [Girardota buses en route to the metro, a "Chiva" (a typical Colombian bus), Juan Cojo neighborhood bus, my father takes the bus in that parking lot, the Church.] This exercise was very interesting because the story provided them with the opportunity of recognizing means of transportation from their town through English. The same story allowed

them to make a comparison between the main square of the town in the past and present. As I pointed out “They noticed that the main square was very different because some places like the kiosco, some stores and chairs did not exist in the past.”(Journal entry, August 9th, 2016).

Girardota main square in the past



Picture found in the historical archive of Girardota Mayor's Office

Girardota main square today



Picture found on the internet

Besides the contribution of this story to students' English learning, it taught them about the history of the place where they live. Fifth graders said that with this story “aprendimos que la mitad del Parque tenía una fuente, que por aquí había vías.” (FG 1, September 13th, 2016) [We learned that in the center of the main square there was a fountain, that there were roads over there.] “Con esta historia hemos aprendido más sobre nuestro municipio.” (FG 1, September 13th, 2016) [With this story we have learned more about our town.] In addition, they said that the stories “Me enseñaron cosas nuevas que yo no conocía antes, que los buses eran diferentes, que existía el tren.” (FG 2, November 8, 2016) [They taught me new things that I didn't know about; in the past, buses were different, there was a train.] “La historia de Girardota me enseñó cosas que no sabía y cosas que ni siquiera había visto del pasado como el tren, el parque nunca lo había visto así como estaba en la historia.” (FG 2, November 8, 2016) [The story about Girardota taught me things that I didn't know about, the things that I hadn't seen in the past such as the train. I had never seen the main square as it was in the story.] As can be seen from these quotes

students gained a lot during that activity, they not only were able to recognize the places in the story and talk about them but they also gained some knowledge about the history of their town.

Students Improved their Understanding of English

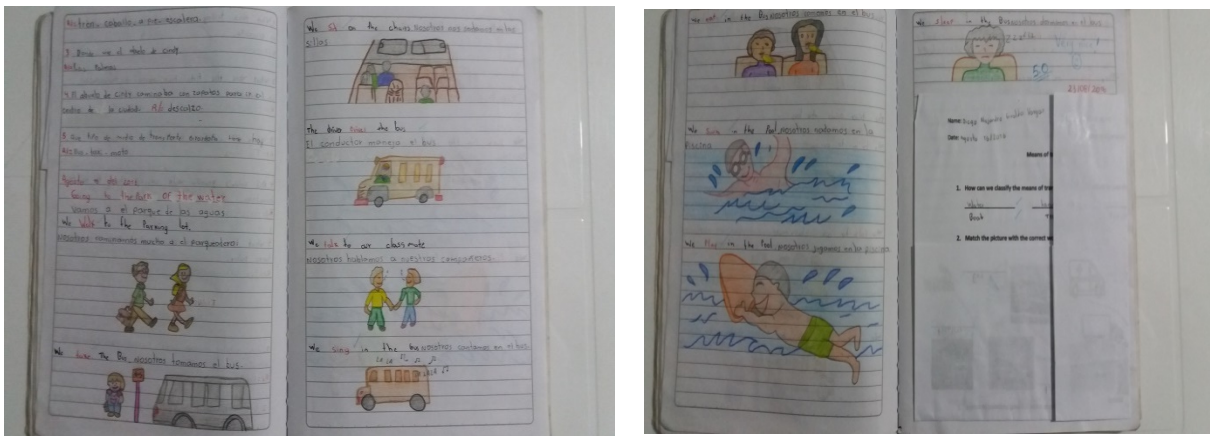
Another relevant finding through this project was that students started to comprehend what was being told and written in English. This understanding was possible through different sign systems like body gestures, images, pictures and drawings. I could make a comparison between the students' comprehension ability in the beginning and the end of the school year. As I wrote down on my journal: "In the beginning of the year, when I talked to them in English they did not understand many things, even if I used gestures. Now, they understand most of the things I tell them in English." (Journal entry, November 1st, 2016). That demonstrates that the process developed during the English classes, mostly in the second semester of the year, helped students to improve their comprehension of oral and written English.

Regarding students' comprehension of oral messages, there was a significant progress. Along the semester they demonstrated that they were able to understand verbal instructions. Some excerpts in my journal indicated that: "I asked them to imagine the types of means of transport that Girardota had in the past and then to tell me the name of those means of transport (I did it in English using body gestures). Students answer, "*train, bicycles, car.*" (Journal entry, August 9th, 2016). "I told the students that we were going to make a little book to write the story we had written. When all of them had the sheet of paper, I asked them to look at what I was doing with my paper. I taught them how to fold the sheet of paper until having a tiny book. The students were very focused on the activity. All of them were participating and following the instructions." (Journal entry, September 20th, 2016). They also comprehended stories told orally because they could answer questions related to them. In my journal I wrote: "While I was telling

them the story, I made different kinds of questions in English. For example, after telling that Martin went with his mom to a mall to buy the costume, I asked students to imagine to what mall they were going. I also asked to think where they go to buy costumes. Some students said “Éxito” “Puerta del Norte”. (Journal entry, November 1st, 2016)

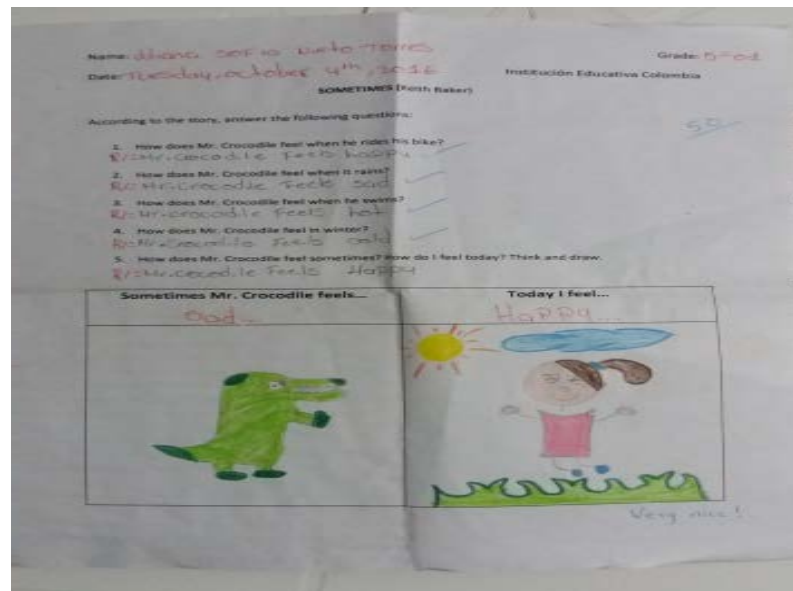
Another strategy used by students to demonstrate their understanding was the use of Spanish after I gave them instructions or presented the agenda in class. As I stated in my journal: “While I was telling the plan, the students were participating. They were trying to say what I was saying in Spanish. They also said the connectors when I was listing the activities we were going to do in the class (I always use my fingers to say first, second, etc).” (Journal entry, September 13, 2016). This shows that they were involved in the activity, they were paying attention and they were able to understand and express this understanding in their native language. In this case they were not translating isolated sentences that the teachers asked them to translate, but using Spanish to show comprehension of what was being told.

Concerning students’ comprehension of written texts, they were able to use English to understand sentences. Students’ work demonstrated that students understood the meaning of the sentences. For this reason, they were able to illustrate them through drawings.



(Student’ work, August 16th, 2016)

Fifth graders were also able to use English to answer written questions about the stories shared in class. Their work evidences that achievement.



(Students' work, October 4th, 2016)

On the other hand, in the classes, I used pictures of the places of the town and surroundings that students knew and images of characters made in cardboard. Those visual aids facilitated students the comprehension of stories and other activities developed during the English classes. Students expressed: “Las imágenes nos enseñan mucho a aprender inglés porque esas imágenes nos hacen visualizar lo que estamos entendiendo o tratando de entender y nos ayudan mucho.” (FG1, September 13th, 2016) [Images help us a lot to learn English because these images make us visualize what we understand or we are trying to understand and they help us a lot.] “Las imágenes nos guían porque ya que con estas es una forma más distinta de aprender por medio de las imágenes ya que en estas nos ayudan a guiarnos y a entender más fácil lo que trata el cuento.” (FG1, September 13th, 2016) [Images guide us because they are a different way to learn by means of images because they guide us and help us to understand easily what the story is about.] “Las imágenes nos ayudan porque cuando la profesora Cindy por ejemplo nos explica algo y nosotros no lo entendemos, por medio de las imágenes nosotros nos ubicamos

para seguir con la historia.” (FG2, November 8th, 2016) [Images help us because when Cindy the teacher for example explains something to us and we do not understand, by means of images we can follow the plot of the story.] The comments made by the students demonstrate that visual aids are an important and powerful component in the English class. Visual aids not only help students to identify and understand the meaning of what is being told or written, but they also provide a more meaningful context for students; in some way, audiovisual aids bring real events and situations into the classroom.

In the same manner, regarding the use of visual aids, my CT considers that “Las ayudas visuales son muy necesarias porque hacen que el estudiante interactúe más con la información. Si ellos no están viendo algo que les impacte, poco van a participar. Entonces las ayudas utilizadas en clase fueron muy pertinentes y ayudaron a los estudiantes a la comprensión de los temas.” (CT interview, November 1st, 2016) [Visual aids are very necessary because they make students interact more with the information. If they don't see something that creates an impact, they will not participate. Then the visual aids that were used in class were very pertinent and helped students to understand the topics.] This implies that visual materials clearly catch students' attention; therefore, learners are more involved in what they are learning which facilitates their comprehension of different stories and situations. It is important to highlight that visual aids also help the teacher to make situations and concepts comprehensible for students, providing them with a more interesting and meaningful learning process.

Students Increased their Confidence

At the beginning of the school year when I was doing class observations, I noted that there were not many opportunities for students to participate in different ways and interact with the teachers or peers in the activities proposed. During the second semester, when I implemented

different activities and stories related to students' context, I realized that they started to become involved and they wanted to participate in every activity. Along the process, they were feeling more confident, as the CT stated: "Se vio más interactividad, menos miedo, los niños ya querían participar. Todos querían levantar la mano y participar, ellos estaban involucrados en la situación de la información que se les estaba dando. Todo lo que había en las historias fue relacionado con el municipio entonces ellos ya se involucraban más." (CT interview, November 1st, 2016) [There was more interaction, they were less afraid, the children now wanted to participate. Everyone wanted to raise his or her hand and participate; they were involved in the situation of the information that they were given. Everything in the stories was related to the town, then they were more involved]. Similarly, students expressed "Cuando la teacher Cindy nos preguntaba sobre las historias a mí me gustaba participar siempre. A mí no me daba miedo de hablar" (FG2, November 8th, 2016) [When Cindy the teacher asked us about the stories I always wanted to participate. I was not afraid of talking.] "Yo soy muy penosa para hablar en inglés pero cuando la profe me preguntaba de las historias y ella me ayudaba yo respondía" (FG2, November 8th, 2016) [I am very shy when I speak in English, but when the teacher asked me about the stories and she helped me, I answered the questions.] The confidence gained during the project let students and I achieve the goals proposed because students' participation and involvement were completely necessary.

With the strategies I used in the classes, students became more involved; they linked the knowledge they were learning with the one they already had. The stories kept students focused, attentive and participative on what they were listening and seeing. They were really engaged because the stories presented to them were completely related to their lives, situations and activities they are familiar with.

Conclusion

After implementing storytelling during two terms with fifth graders, I can say that this was an appropriate strategy for my students since it favored their meaningful learning in the English class. Along the implementation of the action plan it was possible to promote different aspects among students such as active participation, involvement, confidence and understanding because the stories were related to their context and daily experiences. Further, through this strategy, I was able to identify the students' reactions towards new activities and experiences and the positive effects of storytelling.

The data showed that the implementation of storytelling had a positive impact on the students' learning process. They moved from copying from the board and translating isolated sentences to integrating their new knowledge with their prior knowledge and making meaningful connections that made sense to them. Therefore, I believe that storytelling is a useful tool that teachers can use to offer students the opportunity of learning English in a way that completely involves them in the learning process.

After the analysis of the outcomes, I can assert that English learning is more effective when students are exposed to situations they are familiar with. Telling them stories about their town, people they know and their own experiences, for instance, can make learning interesting to them. I think it is necessary to keep exploring this strategy in order to find more benefits that strengthen students' learning. If teachers create stories connected to students' cities, towns, villages, people around them and activities they do, other aspects such as social values, identity, culture and respect will also be promoted in the English class.

Reflection

During this year of practicum, I had the opportunity of experiencing different feelings and situations that contributed to my growth in my professional and personal life. This experience in this public institution made me realize the fact that becoming a teacher is not something easy that can be achieved immediately, it is a challenge and a process that requires preparation, effort, patience, willingness, enthusiasm, energy, and vocation. But those qualities are not enough to become a teacher, it is also necessary to become a researcher in the classroom to find the best ways to provide students with a meaningful English learning experience.

Being the English teacher of fifth graders along this year allowed me to validate that working with children is something that I really enjoy. Moreover, there was a nice connection between the children and me that allowed creating a positive atmosphere favorable for teaching and learning. During this process I also learned that I have a big social and moral responsibility with my students, this is the reason why I must approach them with an English learning process meaningful to them that transcends the teaching of grammar and structures. It is my commitment to offer students situations and topics that they enjoy and that are useful in their present and future life; situations in which I can teach them about values and about being good citizens. This experience also helped me to confirm that, in spite of the inconvenient situations that can be present in schools, being a teacher is what I really want to do in my life. My dream of becoming a teacher when I was a child has not changed, it still remains in my heart and I am so happy to see how it is becoming true.

Regarding my experience as researcher, this project was meaningful to me. I found that doing research is not something impossible to achieve, as I thought in the past. It is true that to do good research it is indispensable to spend a considerable amount of time during the process,

but it is possible to achieve the goals proposed. I learned that teachers should always be aware of the issues taking place in their classrooms and analyze them to implement strategies that favor students learning. I also learned that as a researcher, I need to be very organized and careful with the processes I develop always keeping in mind the participants' consent and truthfulness of the information.

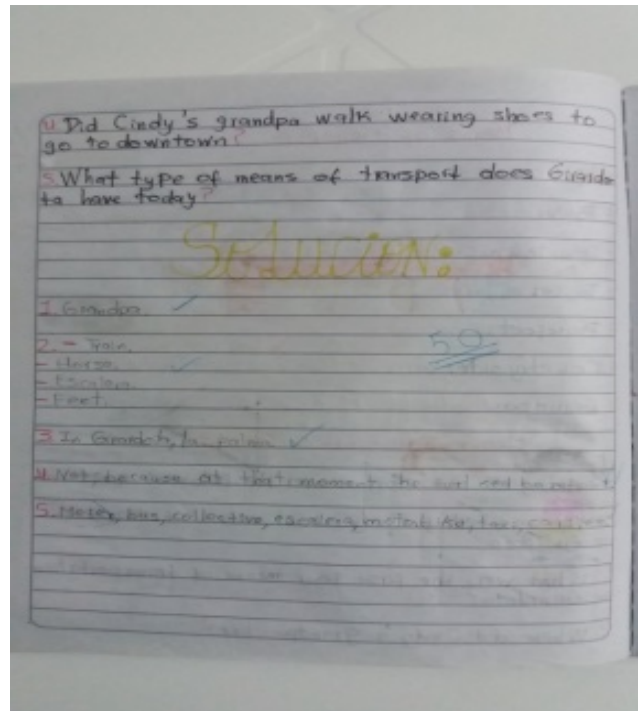
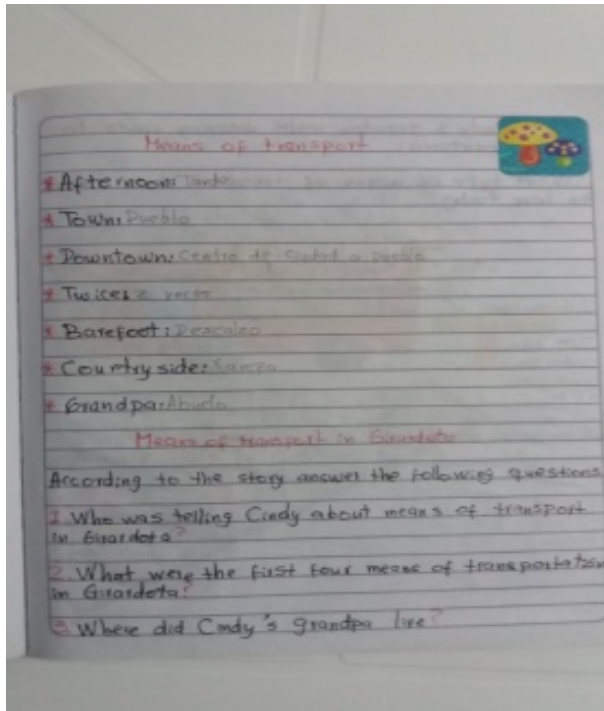
In general, this experience was very positive to me. It is wonderful to see how much I learned during this year as a teacher and researcher. I feel really excited to finish this process that offers new purposes and dreams for the future. I hope to gain more experience and become an excellent teacher who contributes to a better education in my town, state, country and world.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Students' Workshop



Appendix B: Story Created by Students

