How can the implementation of children's literature support the literacy development in a group of first graders at Institución Educativa San Juan Bosco?

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Abstract

This action research project was done to improve literacy development in 1st graders students through the use of children's literature as a method to promote Spanish and English writing. The project was carried out at Institución educativa San Juan Bosco during two school terms in a first grade. Data was gathered through a focal group, an interview and a reflective journal, these ones were triangulated and analyzed afterwards. Findings revealed that the use of Children's literature not only promoted the development of literacy, but also fostered the participation, the imagination and the recognition of meaning through images.

Key words: Children's literature, Literacy development, reading aloud, getting content through images.

Degree requirement

This action research project was submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of

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Preface

This project was developed by an undergraduate student of University of Antioquia from the ninth semester of Foreign Languages Teaching in Medellin, Antioquia. This Investigation aimed to help improve some issues found at a public Institution through an Action Research project that had an observation phase, an action plan phase and an application phase where results were shown on paper.

School context

This action research project took place at I.E. San Juan Bosco which was located in the northeastern area of the city in Campo Valdes neighborhood. The school housed a student population that roughly went up to a thousand girls. The administrative staff consisted of a principal, two coordinators, thirty-four teachers, a psychologist, an assistant teacher and five nuns from the school religious community. The school had two shifts in order to embrace the whole student community. Students from 5th to 11th grade attended classes in the morning, and students from preschool to 4th grade in the afternoon. Physically speaking, the school was a four story building with twenty-three classrooms, two computer rooms, a small library, a chemistry lab, an office for the psychologist and for the assistant teacher, a small teacher's lounge. It also had a chapel that was used as a meeting hall for school activities, a large patio with two sport courts, one for elementary and the other one for high school. It also had a cafeteria and a snack station.

As for the school philosophy, their principles are based on Christian values as the pillars for an integrated education that contributes to the construction of a civil society. A philosophy shaped by the meaningful words said by the founder Juan Bosco. The pedagogical model of the school has been constructivist oriented; that is, a model reflected in the daily life of the classroom inviting students to work collaboratively and making sense of what they learn.

There was not availability of English Teachers for primary section since teachers were to teach all the subjects, including English, no matter if they were proficient in the language. They did not even have a syllabus for the class. The 1st grade classroom where I carried out this research project was located on the second floor furnished with a chalkboard next to the teacher's desk, green curtain for the windows, a video beam, a computer and a bookshelf to store books and learning supplies such markers, colors, pencils and so on. There was also a

first-aid kit just in case. There were fifteen double student desks organized in semi-circle or horse shoe shape to promote interaction and better control the discipline of the class.

This class consisted of forty five students whose ages ranged from 6 to 8 years old, they were good at following instructions although sometimes they became uneasy. Their attention span was kind of short. They were very playful and some of them were still in the process of learning how to write. Most of them came from extended families. It was the first time they had an English class. They were always enthusiastic and very talkative. Some of them still tell on others and want to be called first.

The methodology of the class was mainly focused on drill repetition, writing down list of words and listening to the teacher telling stories. Kids also had the opportunity to sing, play and dance.

My Cooperating Teacher held a degree in Primary Education. She had five years of experience as a primary teacher. She used to believe that learning a language happened when children and are given opportunities to participate.

Problem statement

After observing this class for about one month, I decided that what I wanted to do is to mediate the writing and reading process since the girls were in 1st grade. In this grade, they were supposed to learn how to read and write in Spanish. Furthermore, as their English language teachers, I was invited to support their acquisition of the English language as well. On the other hand, I had the chance to observe that in the middle of activities they tended to misspell words and to get confused with the sound of words and letters. One of the issues that called my attention in this class was the fact that they got very easy involved in class activities and they showed great interest in learning the language.

I had the opportunity to observe that their homeroom teacher taught her classes using the grammar-translation method since she used to translate the words and expressions in English; things like the date were translated and written into Spanish without not an accurate pronunciation of English language:

"The teacher asked them to write the date but in Spanish. She said the students were in a process since many of them do not know how to write. At a point, she was tired of the chit chatting and told them to call their parents and tell them about their bad behaviour." (Journal Entry: August 02nd, 2017)

Nevertheless, there were some situations in which students were participating actively and it was not anything related to the language but related to the stories, they paid more attention when the teacher was telling a story.

"She told them a story in Spanish and they needed to tell some activities from the story during the week. They participated actively and paid attention. Even they answered some requested questions." (Journal Entry: August 02nd, 2017).

Also, when images were displayed and students were to identify, I noticed that it was easier to do it without the use of Spanish or translation:

"I started to say the name of the figures in English but at the same time asking them in Spanish because they were 1st grade girls that means 5 or 6 years old girls." (Journal Entry: August 08th, 2017).

Once I started teaching these kids, I noticed that my focus of attention was addressed to their difficulties to follow instructions and spell words in Spanish. Considering that they were in the process of learning how to read and write. I observed that they did not have the

chance to value reading and to value themselves as readers, that is, they were not exposed to authentic books they could talk about. They just became word callers. As Salmon (2001) said, "to the extent that children are exposed to texts, they are more and more interested in conquering written language. Although at this stage the illustrations still help them to predict meanings, children will gradually focus more on the text." (p 59)

Considering all these aspects, I started to think of the best way of including some texts in the classroom to invite the girls to read and write through stories and the most important, improve their literacy taking into account real life situations.

Learning arises from experience, hence the concept of curriculum goes beyond the classroom. Dewey's concept promotes the idea that education should lead the student to an understanding of the world in which he/she lives. Therefore, their conception of the classroom must have a close relationship with the real world where children can connect life experiences with reading, writing, mathematics, sciences, among other knowledge (Dewey, 1938).

Bearing in mind all these features, I decided the best way of supporting the literacy development process was through the use of children's literature since it guided students to combine these stories with their lives and experiences. Literature could help them improve their reading and writing skills as they are given authentic demonstrations on how language is used to tell stories.

Theoretical framework

"Literature has the power to help children learn to read and

to make them become readers". (Huck, 1998)

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After having explored some texts related to my topic, I decided to come up with the following concepts that not only framed the theory of my research project, but also helped me gain perspective to better understand my issue.

Children's Literature

It refers to the body of written works such books, stories and poems that are printed all along with illustrations produced with the intention of entertaining and instructing young people. This includes, picture books, lullabies, fables and folk songs. Charlotte Huck (cited by Short, 1998) affirms that literature is both a mirror and a window on life (p.11). As children read books of their interest, they discover themselves reflected in the books. They have the possibility to make connections to their lives and expand their knowledge of themselves and the world around them. On the other hand, literature has the potential to transform children's lives. Charlotte Huck (cited by Short, 1998) believes that literature connects the heart and the mind (p.11). Traditionally speaking, our schools have been more focused on developing the mind; that is, thinking and reasoning, and have failed in connecting the mind with the heart. Literature helps teachers connect feelings and thinking.

Literature provides children with the possibility to stretch their imagination; that is, to think if alternative ways to come up with solutions or looking the other side of problems. Our imagination encourages to go beyond to *what is* to *what might be* (Short, 1998. p 13). Literature invites children to consider "what if" to explore the world and become heroes. In a world full of problems, hope and imagination have to encourage children to become strong and strive for other possibilities of life.

The Roles Literature Plays

As a language teacher, I have consider very important to think about how literature con not only become an alternative way to promote literacy development, but also as a way of knowing. That is, as a way to know about themselves, about the others and the world around them. Kathy Short (1998) identifies four roles literature plays in the classroom. Literature as a way to: learn language, explore content area, know the world and critique the world.

Reading as a process of inquiry brings the possibility to connect all these roles. As kids are given opportunities to read, they naturally learn about written language. They are given demonstrations on how ideas are put together. As a teacher, I can also help my students explore content area topics when if I organize my lesson around themes or topics of their interest. Students learn about art, music, geography, and math and so on. Literature also enables kids to live inside the world of stories and experience life in different ways. They can also refer to what they are going through. Finally, Short (1998) asserts that literature can be also used as a way to critique the world, particularly in relation to social, political and cultural issues (p.27). Our thinking is usually influenced by the community and the world we live in. By doing so, children and teachers together can understand better the problems around them and make their voices be heard.

The Power of Children's Literature

Experienced teachers have reported the influence literature has to help children learn to read and write. For Charlotte Huck, a primary school teacher in Arizona, literature has to power to influence our thoughts and feelings (1998, p.3). She also affirms that literature has the power to provide children with vicarious experiences; that is, they have the possibility to learn from the characters they find in their favorite stories. Literature also has the power to make children more knowledgeable; that is, they have to possibility to

expand their knowledge travelling to other worlds. Literature also has the power to expand children's imagination; that is, to make them create alternative worlds where everything is possible. Finally, Mrs. Huck asserts that literature has the power "to take you out of yourself and return you to yourself" (p, 4). Certain books have the power to move children's emotions or enlarge their thinking as they identify with some characters they end up disliking or loving.

Literature and Writing

Teachers and researchers have recently started to appreciate the impact literature can make on writing. Learning language in our schools has been always devoted to transcribe written texts from the board. Children are usually given a list of vocabulary to transcribe into their notebooks, make a drawing and sing a song. Books and stories are barely used with the intentions of promoting the literacy development in primary school.

In working with first graders, we can find a sea of possibilities to enrich the literacy development with books and stories. Children can retell and rewrite the stories they love to be told. They can also emulate the demonstrations given in the books they read and rewrite the words and ideas they like. Thee can also write stories on their own or respond to the stories they find appealing for theirs searches. They can read with the same intonation and pleasure their teachers read to them. Literature has the power to help them learn to read and make them readers (Huck, p12). Literature gives children the chance to increase their vocabulary and expand their knowledge of the world.

Writing Development

As Ken and Yetta Goodman (1990) described in their research on literacy development, children learn to read and write going from invented spelling to a more conventional way of language; that is, they start inventing words until they become

convinced as a reader that there are certain conventions of language, we have to follow to make our writing be understood. Children begin by producing scribble writing (Freeman and Freeman, 2014. p.161). It gradually takes purpose. They usually move from drawing to scribbles and then to more recognizable letters. They come to understand that writing is used to make their intentions obvious. To express what they think and feel.

When it comes to writing development in first grade, Freeman and Freeman (2014) affirms that it is important that teachers consider the understandings children have constructed about print as they start school. First graders are usually familiar with the vowels and consonants, that is, the alphabet in Spanish. They are learning to read and write through the alphabetic and syllabic method. According to Ferreiro and Teberosky, children in the early phonetic stage are expected to make a connection between the physical aspects of producing a word and the spelling of the word. Each letter stands for one syllable in the word. They also know that words have multiple meanings depending on the context. When reading, illustrations help make them make meaning out of print. That is, they relate print and image to make meaning.

However, emergent Spanish writers generally write vowels first. Spanish is as a phonetic language has a consistent correspondent between the five vowel sounds and the five vowels letters used to represent them (Freeman and Freeman, 2014, p.186). On the other hand, Spanish speakers are raised in environments influenced by English print. This mixture usually have interference effects on the learning of both language. Children learn to discriminate sounds of words and letters with the help of teachers. First graders can play with alphabet cards. Freeman and Freeman affirm that teachers should read to them, do language experience activities and make sure there is a lot of pint up around the room (p.193)

The importance of reading aloud

According to Charlotte Huck (1998), reading aloud is important at all levels of education, for it helps provide the motivation for learning to read and reading. (p.5). When a teacher reads to his or her class and shares a story, those kids start to associate reading with pleasure. Then learning to read opens the gate for individual enjoyment of reading. Reading aloud to the class help children develop the sense of story and knowledge about concepts of print. Children begin to understand narrative conventions such as beginning or ending a story.

Children also learn issues related to directionality, language structure and story structure. They learn to predict the action of a story and confirm what they predict. Research shows that reading aloud to children has a significant effect not only on literacy acquisition (Durkin, 1966; Clark, 1976) but on language development (Chomsky, 1972; Wells, 1986). On the other hand, Cochran-Smith (1984), affirm that when an adult reads to a child, an interaction is established to contribute to set a positive emotional attachment between the adult and the kid, and later on, between the kid and the reading activity.

Research question

How can the implementation of children's literature support the literacy development in a group of first graders at Institución Educativa San Juan Bosco?

General objective

• To support the literacy development through the implementation of children's literature in a group of first graders at Institución Educativa san Juan Bosco

Specific objectives

- To describe first graders' literacy development through the implementation of Children's literature.
- To relate fist graders' literacy development with the reading aloud event.
- To analyze first graders' literacy development in relation to stories and books.

Action Plan

This action plan was proposed and followed during one year. It evolved as a cyclical process in which planning, observing, acting, and reflecting took place all the time (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005).

The first semester was established to observe a group of 1st graders (Girls) in the Institución Educativa San Juan Bosco and reflect all the insights in a journal, thanks to these reflections it could be determined the issue to follow and be able to state the problem that was happening in the classroom. When the concerning topics were discussed with the teacher along with the help of literature, the research question was set and modified according to the reflections done after all the observations in the journal; we agreed that the literature was an useful field to work on the literacy development of 1st graders. Taking into account all this criteria the action plan was elaborated having as target describe, define and analyze and ready to be implemented for the second semester of the Research project.

During the second semester the Action plan was shared with the CT and it was divided in four moments: the unit planning where all the activities were chosen for the classes, taking into consideration the Basic Learning Rights by The Ministry of Education, the unit implementation in which Children Literature was used as a tool to foster the literacy, employing Reading and writing aloud, (Pearson and Gallagher, 1993), the data collection methods were useful to define with an interview to the CT and analyze through a focal group in how Children's literature support literacy development along with the reflective journal

started from the beginning of the project and finally the analysis and interpretation helped to triangulate the information and get results

Development of Actions

The development of the actions was put in action on the first two terms of the year after sharing the proposal with the CT and choosing the literature to work on the class, also bearing in mind the Basic Learning Rights set by the Ministry of Education for First and second grade.

The planned activities were shared with the girls and started to be implemented on early March due to some setbacks, one of them was related to the classroom equipment since the video projector did not work and it was repaired until late February. This month without applying the plan I advanced with some instructions associated with actions and positions in the classroom and activities corresponding to the content expressed in the stories and matched with the Learning Basic rights; the girls were understanding instructions in English, just a few of them are new and were a little bit lost but the rest of them were keeping up with the things to do. I learnt to believe in the girls, believe in their abilities to understand more instructions in English, in fact, one of them told me that they were not recognizing the instruction because I was speaking in Spanish (Personal journal, February 8th, 2018).

Because the projector was not working, we decided to look for another classroom but this change affected the girls' behavior and the progress of the class was interrupted; since they were restless, talking and expected to be writing and doing activities on their notebooks, instead.

When finally the technical issues were solved in the classroom, the class was divided into three moments; the first one was having an initial and final stage in the class through a

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song; the second moment was to use the reading aloud and the third moment was developing an activity related to the writing exercise.

Throughout the semester, we used "If you are happy" song at the beginning and at the end of the sessions; they stood up and sang by following the movements of the song and the subtitles containing the lyrics. Next to the last activity, we could use two stories called Sometimes (Baker, K. 2003) and Things I Like (Browne, A. 1989) with which reading aloud was fundamental to the third moment of the class that was exerting the writing activity. Following an order, when we get to the writing part the drawings were really important to identify the actions in the story and make a connection between the image and the letters. There were a couple of sections to identify letters in English and the practicing of them was crucial to use them in a spelling activity where they were encouraged to spell a set of words.

The interview to the teacher and the focal group were carried out in late May to identify and analyze how the activities worked on the classroom and helped to the development of the girls' literacy. The interview consisted of questions asking about her beliefs and opinions of the literature in the classroom and how the students received this content in the developed activities. On the other hand, the focal group questions were made up of 9 questions and they were connected to the stories read in class and how much they remember and learn from them. At the end of the term, a final exam was applied to identify the meaning of some images coming from the stories we read in class.

Findings and interpretations

After triangulating the information gathered at different times and from different sources (Johnson, 2005, p. 83), I decided to follow a three-step process proposed by Parson and Brown (2002, as cited by Mertler, 2006, p.125) to conduct the analysis of this study: organization, description and interpretation. The organization step involved a reduction of

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information through the development of a categorization system. I accomplished this by searching for words or phrases that begin to repeat themselves throughout the scripts. I used different color markers to organize the emerging categories. Then, I continued describing the main features or characteristics of the categories resulting from the coding of data. Finally, I examined events, behaviors and other observations for relationships, contradictions and similarities. The idea was to look for aspects of the data that helped me answer my research question. Through this analysis process, I decided to come up with four final categories which have been identified as follows:

Benefits of Literature

In regard to this category, I found that my cooperating teacher considered that the use of literature nurtures children literacy process since they are exposed to authentic texts where they observe how English language is written and how words are pronounced. As it was evidenced in the teacher's interview, "...the development of the orthography for example, begins with the visual aspect of writing where kids learn how to write a letter". As I mentioned in the theoretical framework, when kids are given opportunities to read, they naturally learn about written language. Books give demonstrations on how ideas are put together.

Literature and Language Learning

I found that the use literature to support the literacy process in my class had a great impact since kids were able to picture themselves as potential readers and writers. As it was evidenced in the focal group conducted with the kids, " ()...because we can write invented stories we want to create or stories already made, using known words to come up with a story ". According to Huck (1998), literature has the power to stretch students' imagination as they

can create alternative worlds based on the stories they have heard. That means then, literature gives kids the opportunity to expand their future perspectives as they grow. On the other hand, pictures, images and illustrations help children associate print with meaning. That is a natural way to learn language. "()... We can understand easier with drawings since we are being taught letters and words right now, and learning them to use them". According to Ferreiro and Teberosky, children in the early phonetic stage are expected to make a connection between the physical aspects of producing a word and the spelling of the word.

English and Spanish differences in literacy development

According to this category, I found that girls were able to notice the differences between these two languages and find easier interpret print with the use of image as part of the acquisition and learning process. According to the girls' answers, "()...Through drawings we can see the shape and we can identify the meaning, over the time we will get the meaning without the image, taking into account the differences between English and Spanish languages and letters". As it was evidenced in my theoretical framework, when reading, illustrations help make them make meaning out of print. That is, they relate print and image to make meaning. It can be inferred that the process of understanding reading is a visual exercise as students start to relate images with the content, giving them the opportunity to know the sound of the letters and complete words as well.

Literature and Language Learning

Definitely, literature became an authentic source to promote literacy development in primary education. Literature has the power to help them learn to read and make them readers (Huck, p12).As children got engaged in stories and books, they were given demonstrations on how language is used. They had the chance to learn new words or expand their vocabulary.

They also learn the sense of story to make their own version of stories. Re-writing their favorite stories helped them become aware of spelling and pronunciation. They also discovered that through literature they can learn about themselves, the others and the world in general. In other words, I find that literature gave children the chance to increase their vocabulary and expand their knowledge of the world.

Conclusions

Considering that the main purpose of my project was to support students' literacy development, I could say that it was a very enriching experience not only for kids, but for my professional development. Students had the opportunity to experience language learning from a more interactive and natural perspective. As an English teacher, I had the chance to explore alternative and innovative ways to promote literacy development in class.

As I intended to describe my first graders' literacy development through the implementation of Children's literature, I could conclude that the use of illustrations helped children construct meaning and learn new words. Pictures and images are read first. They tended to associate image with print.

Relating fist graders' literacy development with the reading aloud event, allowed me realize the importance of my role in providing them with meaningful demonstrations. As language teachers we are invited to model students' language use. As I read with intonation and pleasure, children felt motivated to emulate my demonstrations. They learned to keep track of reading by pointing words and sentences with their fingers or a ruler. This was an evidence of the involvement and engagement I obtained with this methodology.

As I set on analyzing first graders' literacy development in relation to stories and books, I found that the roles literature plays had an impact on my students learning of language, especially those roles related to language and content learning. They remembered those

stories they could connect with their lives. Those stories with images and pictures that called their attention.

As a suggestion, I would invite teachers in general to adopt and implement children's literature activities in their classes since they do not demand a lot of preparation and materials is fun for children, and, especially, foster the development of literacy by allowing students to read and write through stories.

Reflection

The practicum was a really enriching experience since I learned from the school, the teachers and the students and it gave many positive resources to the different aspects I have in my life.

Talking about my personal participation, I needed to be more sensitive and patience with the students issues, considering I was sharing with little girls and they had some situations I needed to deal with. I learnt to be more understanding and listened more before judging. I learned to better distribute my time as for the preparation of activities at home, university and work.

In relation to my role as a teacher, this was the first time I was involved in a public institution working with children. I was very reluctant to work with them as well as teaching in a public school. I found that certain issues around the school and the classroom itself, may affect the effective learning processes of students, such as the amount of students per class. This can slow down the quality when teaching and paying attention to all of them. It was difficult to know and be sure about their individual learning processes. Besides that, I spent a lot time telling the students off because of many reasons such as they were talking to each other, doing other activities or playing with toys. Thanks to these circumstances, I discovered some strategies to make them get more focused on the class activities.

Regarding my researcher side, I found it difficult due to all the time consuming when reading, analyzing and writing. It was an everyday challenge that I accepted and finished with love and dedication. I could say I became more sharp-eyed when it comes to details happening in the classroom, since observation gave me tools to understand inside situations and connect them with possible solutions; and the most important, from now on I will always say to myself the things I could have done better in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Student focal group

- 1. ¿Cómo les ha parecido los cuentos que hemos leído en clase de Inglés?
- 2. ¿Cuál cuento recuerdan más y por qué?
- 3. ¿Qué palabras en Inglés recuerdan haber aprendido en los cuentos?
- 4. ¿Cómo es mejor aprender Inglés, con listas de palabras o leyendo cuentos? y por qué?
- 5. ¿Creen que los cuentos les ayuda a aprender Inglés? Cómo?
- 6. ¿Creen que leyendo cuentos aprendemos a escribir? Explica.
- 7. ¿Que diferencia hay entre escribir en Inglés y escribir en Español?
- 8. ¿Entiendes lo que escribes en Inglés?
- 9. ¿ Cómo les ayudan los dibujos e imágenes de los cuentos a entender el Inglés?

Appendix B

Teacher's interview

- 1. Qué piensas del uso de la literatura infantil en la clase de Inglés?
- 2. Cómo crees que la literatura infantil contribuye al aprendizaje de la lengua?
- ¿Cuales son las características del proceso de aprendizaje de la lectoescritura en este grado?
- ¿Consideras que la literatura infantil favorece el proceso de adquisición de la lectoescritura? Cómo?
- 5. ¿Qué diferencias ha observado entre aprender a escribir y a leer en Inglés y Español?
- 6. ¿Has observado alguna dificultad en el aprendizaje del Inglés?
- 7. ¿Cómo es la actitud de las niñas frente a la clase de Inglés

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English exam 2nd Grade, Second term

Name:_____Date:_____

Choose the best answer according to the picture



a)The boy is playing with carsb)The boy is playing with toysc)The boy is playing with dollsd)The boy is playing with books



a)The boy is playing with girlsb)They boy is painting

c)They boy is riding a bike

d)They boy is dressing up



a)The boy is dressing up

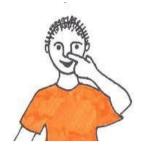
b)The boy is playing with toys

- c)The boy is riding a bike
- d)The boy is doing homework



a)The boy is riding a bikeb)The boy is playing with toysc)The boy is doing homeworkd)The boy is dressing up





a)Pat your head

b)Wiggle your hips

c)Touch your nose

d)Sit down



- a)Wiggle your hips
- b)Touch your nose
- c)Pat your head
- d)Hands up

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a)Pat your head

b)Stamp your feet

c)Wiggle your hips

d)Hands up



a)Wiggle your hips

b)Pat your head

c)Touch your nose

d)Sit down