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Students' Language Skills Development through Short Stories

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to share with English teachers the findings of a research project whose main goal was to describe the impact of developing students' linguistic competence through listening and reading short stories. It was carried out among third-semester students at Universidad Santo Tomás - Tunja (USTA). The main theoretical aspects that support this study are: English teaching and literature, teaching English through short stories, and encouraging student speaking by using short stories. The study was carried out within the framework of collaborative action research. Hence, the instruments used to gather information were: student artifacts (written compositions and oral reports), the teacher's journal, and a survey. Some of the most important findings were: that students showed a significant gain in vocabulary and expressions through reading and listening; that reading was useful for improving their oral competence; and that the students' exposure to the target language engaged them to improve their language acquisition and practice. This research also fostered students' awareness of literature.

Keywords: short stories, foreign language teaching and learning, language skills, cultural enrichment.

Resumen: El propósito de este artículo es compartir, con profesores de inglés, los resultados que surgieron de una investigación cuyo principal objetivo fue describir el impacto del desarrollo de la competencia literaria de los estudiantes de tercer semestre de la Universidad Santo Tomás, seccional Tunja (USTA), por medio a través de la escucha y la lectura de cuentos cortos, con el fin de mejorar sus habilidades lingüísticas. Los principales aspectos teóricos que apoyan esta investigación son: la enseñanza del inglés y la literatura, la enseñanza de inglés a través de historias cortas y el fomento del habla de los estudiantes mediante el uso de historias cortas. La investigación fue llevada a cabo bajo la metodología de investigación-acción colaborativa. Los instrumentos utilizados para recoger información fueron: artefactos de los estudiantes (composiciones escritas e informes orales), el diario del profesor y una encuesta. Como los hallazgos más importantes se destacan: que los estudiantes adquirieron gran cantidad de vocabulario y expresiones por medio de la lectura y la escucha, útiles para mejorar su competencia oral, y que la exposición de los estudiantes a la lengua inglesa les sirvió para mejorar su adquisición y práctica con esta. Además, la investigación alentó la conciencia de los estudiantes hacia la literatura.

Palabras clave: cuentos cortos, enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, habilidades lingüísticas, enriquecimiento cultural.

Résumé: Cet article vise à partager avec les professeurs d'anglais les résultats d'une recherche dont le principal objectif est de décrire l'effet du développement de la compétence linguistique chez les étudiants au moyen de l'écoute et de la lecture de récits courts, ceci dans le but d'améliorer leurs compétences linguistiques. L'expérience a été menée avec des étudiants du troisième semestre de l'Université Santo Tomás de Tunja (USTA). Les aspects théoriques qui sous-tendent cette recherche sont: l'enseignement de l'anglais et de la littérature, l'enseignement de l'anglais au moyen des récits courts et encourager les étudiants à parler grâce à l'utilisation d'histoires courtes. Il s'agit d'une recherche de type recherche-action collaborative. Les données

collectées sont les suivantes: les compositions écrites et les comptes-rendus oraux, le journal du professeur et un questionnaire. Les résultats les plus significatifs sont: acquisition plus importante de vocabulaire et d'expressions grâce à la lecture et l'écoute, amélioration de la compétence orale, perfectionnement de l'acquisition et de l'utilisation de l'anglais. Autre apport non négligeable est celui d'avoir sensibilisé les étudiants à la littérature. Mots-clés : récits courts, enseignement et apprentissage d'une langue étrangère, compétences linguistiques, enrichissement culturel [This paper is one outcome of the research project "Students' literature development through reading and listening", carried out by research group Expedicionarios Humanistas (Humanist explorers) (Colciencias code: COL0034236), funded by Universidad Santo Tomas Tunja (USTA- Tunja).] #1 Introduction

Mots clés: récits courts, enseignement et apprentissage d'une langue étrangère, compétences linguistiques, enrichissement culturel.

Introduction

Education in Colombia is currently undergoing some changes that have to do with the development of new tendencies in English learning and teaching processes. It has been affected by globalization and how universities and schools share information in different parts of the world. Likewise, people feel the need to learn English, because it is used for business, education, science, technology, traveling, and work, among other activities. Professors at Universidad Santo Tomas (USTA) are interested in looking for new ways to motivate students to learn this language, because some students are tired of current methodologies; for example, the use of textbooks that in many cases have a strong emphasis on grammar, but not on the development of communicative skills. These textbooks are, however, mandatory for the institutions. In other cases, teachers work with isolated activities that do not contribute in a meaningful way to the learning process.

This study was supported by authors like Custodio and Sutton (1998), Elliot (1990), Riwes (2010), Koutsompou (2015), and others who have worked with short stories and literature in their academic practices. Hence, the activities applied in this study allowed students to develop the communicative skills and to build autonomy and responsibility for their learning process.

This article reveals the findings of a qualitative action study conducted in a private university in Tunja, Colombia. According to the characteristics of this study, teachers' journals, questionnaires, and students' artifacts were used to gather information. The study was carried out through the implementation of four workshops as a way to enhance students' awareness in listening and reading literature in the target language. It also engaged students in practicing their English, particularly orally, without neglecting other skills. Additionally, the project's insights are valuable for professors and students to replicate the activities performed in this study for teaching another language. It is likewise expected that the results will help many students to enrich their cultural background, academic performance, and professional lives.

Statement of the problem

The demands of education in recent years have demonstrated the need to learn English in order to be competitive in different fields (education, economy, science, and technology, among others). In reply, the Colombian government has established programs such as the National Bilingualism Program (2004-2019) and the National Plan of Bilingualism (2004-2019) in order to support and motivate the acquisition of this language. Nevertheless, studies by Katsos (2011) and Sánchez (2013) show that the English level in Colombia is lower in relation to neighboring countries (Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, among others), in spite of the government's efforts.

The information above demonstrates that not only institutions, but also teachers must be involved in the improvement education in English learning. If we really want to see changes, research and implementation of different materials, strategies, and activities are ways to achieve better results. In fact, the government and institutions are looking to improve people's communication. As such, this study proposes some workshops based on literature as academic material to contribute to and reinforce the development of students' language skills.

In order to verify students' problems in oral communication, a single diagnosis was carried out with a group of third semester students. First, students did a brainstorming activity while looking at the pictures, titles, and subtitles of the short story "David and the great detective." Next, they read and listened to the story. Finally, the students had to retell what they understood of it. Before presenting the oral reports, students created a written draft as a support document for preparing their oral presentations. This is one of students' compositions:

The history was about David, David a small boy live in London. David dont like go a school. David prefer stay in home read detective stories, his favorite activity. David not have many friends, he alone all time. He prefer read and write histories of detectives. David need go to the school, but it is late, his mother angry. David no have friends in school. He have problems with boys. He have problems with the teachers and mother. (Student 1, April 2/3, 2014)

At the end of the activity, students presented their oral reports about the story. The results showed similar patterns: when they had lower comprehension of the story, students did not have good fluency in talking about their understanding. Moreover, they produced incomplete, broken, and meaningless sentences. Sometimes they preferred to retell parts of the stories word for word. The students' difficulties with understanding, language use, and oral performance in telling the story was the reason for implementing actions that permitted them to improve their language skills through this research project.

Literature review

The theory which supported this project was taken from different authors' perspectives and research on the following topics: English teaching and literature, teaching English through short stories, and motivating students' speaking by using short stories (Amer, 2012; Kohan and Pourkalhor, 2013; Pardede, 2010; Sepahvand, 1914; and Sakthivel, Phil, and Kavidha, 2010).

English teaching and literature

Literature shows students a different and fantastic world full of new experiences, adventures, places, characters, fantasy, knowledge, and universal topics that encourage them in reading. It is also a way to know more about the world we live in, taking into account that writers create testimonies of people's lives. Custodio et al. (1998) explain that "literature can open horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 20). In addition, literature becomes a great tool for teaching because we are not only teaching a language but also a people's customs.

Literature was chosen to carry out this study because it provides quality models of language for developing language skills. Hence, through short stories, students can be in contact with real language, which is meaningful for them in terms of knowledge, culture, and language acquisition. Elliot (1990) says that through literature, students can internalize the language at a high level, which is relevant in language learning. Koutsompou (2015) argues: "The purpose of using literature in a language classroom is to make the class interactive and it can be stated that an interactive class can obviously improve communicative competences of the learners and keep a lasting impact on their mind" (p. 75). In fact, one of the advantages of teaching through literature is the change in the class dynamic which contributes to a favorable environment for teaching. Thus, students usually have a good attitude to a variety of activities.

Additionally, Riwes (2010) breaks the paradigm of the use of a textbook as the basis for teaching a foreign language. He proposes the implementation of literature because it is a rich source of "authentic material" through which students have direct contact with native speakers. He also maintains that literature is an aesthetic representation of the spoken language in a cultural context. Hence, literature is a complete material that can contribute as an approach to developing the process of teaching and learning a foreign language.

Throughout the years, literature has been used to teach foreign languages due to its benefits in terms of contents and language usage. It has been considered the best way to acquire vocabulary, expressions, and also knowledge. Hence, Collie and Slater (2005) point out some specific benefits of working with literature in the classroom, such as: it is authentic material that demonstrates people's cultures, it provides knowledge from

every corner of the world, and it enhances language enrichment and motivates students' involvement in the field.

In addition, Maley argues that literature is a potent resource because it has the following characteristics: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power, and ambiguity (as cited in Hişmanoğlu, 2005, p. 54). Literature is universal because it is a common aspect in all cultures; it expresses people's customs, problems, experiences, beliefs, and expectations, among others; literature is non-trivial because it is an authentic material and is not designed for teaching; it involves personal relevance in relation to the writers' sensations and experiences; it has a great variety of topics, including a wide range of themes in all fields of human sciences such as law, medicine, farming, ecology, religion, engineering and the economy of countries, among others; aspects that can go beyond reality and serve as an input to discuss and generate debate; literature also contains ambiguity, which means that each person can react in different ways and readers have different perceptions according to their background. Finally, literature is a genuine source to be used in the foreign language classroom as a powerful tool and is considered an appropriate material for encouraging students' learning and language improvement.

Teaching English through short stories

As we have seen, short stories are suitable for teaching a foreign language; however, teachers must choose appropriate materials according to their students' language ability. Otherwise, reading could be a very difficult task for them. In this regard, Hişmanoğlu (2005) argues: "When selecting the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students" (p. 57). In fact, it is necessary for teachers to learn to know and understand their students in order to guide activities in a meaningful way, which can contribute to guaranteeing the success of academic work.

In coherence with the previous assertions, the use of short stories in English classes is a way to find methods that motivate students' language learning because stories provide numerous benefits for teaching; the language used in these stories is commonly understandable for students and facilitates their engagement in reading. Likewise, Kohan and Pourkalhor (2013) mention some advantages of teaching English through short stories: "they make the students' reading task easier, they help students to be more creative, they raise cultural awareness, they reduce students' anxiety and help them feel more relaxed, they manage universal language and they involve fiction" (p. 3). In fact, these ideas guide teachers' work with meaningful activities that contribute greatly to students' learning.

In addition, Pardede (2010) found in his research that short stories are interesting to use as material for personal enjoyment and also help students achieve better mastery in the development of language

skills. Hence, teachers can implement activities that involve student motivations as a way to improve their language acquisition. When students are immersed in a story, language is seen as a natural process through which they can identify the functions of words in the sentences. Sakthivel, Phil, and Kavidha (2010) observe that “[b]y reading a piece of literature learners can understand the diverse use of words, phrases, phrasal verbs, multiple meanings, idioms, among others” (p. 230). These arguments evidence how teachers can use short stories because they encourage interactive language work which is both meaningful and interesting for students.

Encouraging students’ speaking by using short stories

Learning a second language requires a specific environment. In the Colombian context, we learn English as a foreign language, and the interest people have in another language depends on their personal goals. This study chooses listening and reading as means to encourage students to speak because the goal in a language learning process is for students to learn how to communicate. In this sense, Pardede (2010) argues: “Short stories can also be a powerful and motivating source for teaching both speaking and listening. Oral reading, dramatization, improvisation, role-playing, reenactment, and discussion are more effective learning” (p. 22). This recommendation illustrates the importance of developing language skills in the classroom to strengthen students’ self-confidence to form relationships through language use.

Specifically, Chamot (2004) believes that speaking is the most important skill to acquire and that it is relevant to assessing students’ progress in terms of accomplishments. She likewise describes three areas of knowledge which are essential to language learning, as follows:

- Mechanics, which involve grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary: the use of the right words in the right order and with correct pronunciation.
- Functions related to transaction and interaction and how clearly and precisely the message is given in good communication.
- Social and cultural rules, which involve turn-taking and the length of pauses between speakers, as well as the role and relationship between the speaker and the listener.

All of these aspects are important to demonstrating students’ oral production and should be taken into account by teachers when planning activities.

In addition to speaking, this study implements listening and reading as a way to encourage the development of language skills because these activities are considered authentic models of language use. Through them, students can internalize structure and pronunciation at the same time. Likewise, listening exercises help students to develop their aural comprehension, which is essential to communication. Through the activities carried out in this study, students had the opportunity to

identify and report relevant information and give their opinion about the different stories studied.

During listening and speaking activities, the teacher's role is important not only in planning and performing the activities, but also in providing appropriate feedback that motivates students' language use. Richards (2008) argues that feedback is necessary during or after the activities to correct grammar, pronunciation, coherence, and cohesion. This process also helps students create their own improvement plan, considering that mistakes should not be an obstacle to communication, but rather a normal way to improve language use.

Research methodology

This study relied on the cycles of action research methodology as proposed by Hine (2013). This method allows for the implementation of some strategies such that the researcher can observe, reflect, and take decisions about classroom practices. It also involves the teacher and the students working together to improve their skills, techniques, and strategies. The workshops were analyzed and improved based on data collected. The role of the researcher was that of a participant observer since she was responsible for selecting the material, creating the workshops, and guiding classwork.

According to Burns (1999) there are some characteristics that guide action research, and they were considered to develop this study, as follows:

- Reflection: Based on his experience as an English teacher observing students' needs in terms of English communication, Burns identifies students' interests to improve communicative skills, especially oral production. Therefore, this study aims to enhance students' language skills through short stories as a way to improve English use.

- Planning: Four workshops were planned based on short stories with different activities that encouraged the practice of communicative skills. At the same time, some additional supported guides were proposed as a mechanism to help students improve their language production according to their particular needs. This stage included the selection of instruments for gathering data, including student artifacts, a researcher's journal, and a survey.

- Action: Four workshops were developed, based on the same number of stories. Each one had different activities, including group and individual work. Students listened to and read the stories and reproduced what they understood in different ways (describing the characters, talking about specific events in the story, retelling a different chapter, and creating the end of the story). Additionally, three support guides were applied in between the workshops in order to help students correct their mistakes and improve their English language use.

- Observation and reflection: After data collection, the results were analyzed through the categorization process, and some conclusions were presented.

Setting and population

This research was developed at USTA – Tunja, where the Language Department is responsible for teaching English in all the university's programs. Students take five English levels from elementary to upper intermediate, and it is a mandatory subject in the first semesters of the curricula. This study was carried out with 52 third-semester students (two groups); four workshops were applied in both groups, but data were collected only from a sample of 16 students from both groups.

The techniques for data collection were:

- Artifacts. According to Goetz and Le Compte (1984), artifacts are things people make and do during a research process. Artifacts were used in this study in order to capture the students' production in the development of the different workshops (see an example of an artifact in Appendix). These allowed the students to prepare written drafts and therefore helped them to organize their ideas. Also, the researcher could review the paper in order to provide feedback for students, correcting their language production, cohesion, and coherence. These papers were also used for students as a first draft for their oral reports.
- The researcher's journal. Burns (1999) states that journals provide detailed descriptions and interpretations of a specific event. This instrument was used by the researcher in order to take note of relevant events in the development of the workshops. Hence, the researcher wrote about students' reactions, attitudes, feelings, progress, likes, and dislikes during the development of the different workshops.
- A survey. This technique was applied to students individually at the end of the study. Through this instrument, students could express their weaknesses, strengths, and personal perceptions during the process of the workshops.

Research questions

Main question.

§ What is the impact of developing the students' literature competence through reading and listening to short stories in order to improve their language skills during their third semester at USTA – Tunja?

Sub-questions.

§ In what way do listening to and reading short stories in English enhance students' written and oral production?

§ How do students build interest in literature through listening to and reading short stories?

Pedagogical intervention

This study fostered listening and reading activities through short stories in order to enhance students' language skills development. The researcher

designed and applied four workshops, each based on a different story. She was totally immersed in the students' process in order to provide feedback on pronunciation, correct papers, and develop support guides (on conjugation, punctuation marks, use of connectors, and who/where/when/what expressions) in order to help students improve their language use at the end of each workshop. These guides were created based on the students' mistakes detected in their written papers and oral reports.

Figure 1 shows the cycles of the study, including the application of four workshops based on short stories and three support guides in between as support for improving students' mistakes in language use.

Figure 1

Process followed in the research project

In this way, the following procedures were carried out during the English classes:

§ First, four short story adaptations of classic texts with listening support were selected: "The Ghost of Genny Castle" (Escott, [1998] 1999); "Frankenstein" (Shelley, [1818] 1994); "The Picture of Dorian Gray" (Wilde, [1890] 1997); and "The Mysterious Island" (Verne [1874] 2006).

§ The researcher shared the project with the students, explaining the importance and benefits of developing research procedures in terms of innovation in strategies and language usage.

§ The researcher explained the reading processes (pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading) to the students, using examples.

§ First workshop: Students used the pictures from the story to make predictions about it. Then they listened to and read the story. Students were divided into four groups (the same as the number of chapters of the story) in order to create a written summary of the main ideas of each chapter. The researcher made corrections to the students' papers. The students orally reported the summary of each chapter with the aid of the pictures.

§ Second workshop: Based on the stories' titles and subtitles, the students answered questions posed by the researcher in order to infer what the story was about. The students then read and listened to the story. In pairs, the students created a written description of the story's characters, taking into account their values, weaknesses, strengths, physical and emotional description, and their role in the story. The researcher made written corrections of the students' papers. Finally, the students gave oral presentations in front of the other groups with the aid of the pictures.

§ Third workshop: The students looked at the cover and the chapter titles and tried to guess the content of the story. The students then read and listened to the story. Individually, the students identified a specific scene and wrote a complete description of it. The researcher reviewed the students' compositions and helped them with pronunciation. Finally, the students presented the oral reports in front of the group.

§ Fourth workshop: The students did a brainstorming activity about what they had heard or knew about the story. The story had 12 chapters, but the students only listened to and read through chapter 11 so that students could then create the end of the story. In small groups, the students wrote the end of the story using their imagination. The researcher made the necessary oral and written corrections. The students presented their oral reports in front of the remaining groups with the aid of pictures.

Overall, the students worked hard in the areas of reading, listening, writing, and speaking and enjoyed the variety of activities, as well as the stories.

Data analysis

Data analysis was done using the grounded theory approach because it allows the researcher to organize information in a systematic way, and to analyze and interpret the information gathered. Opei argues that “grounded theory is a process of collecting data and undertaking data analysis to generate categories (a theory) to explain a phenomenon of interest” (as cited in Chong and Yeo, 2015, p. 258). Thus, in this study, the information was collected from three instruments and coded in order to identify relevant words or phrases. Next, it was labeled in order to highlight relevant material. Finally, categories were created in order to guide the analysis and answer the research questions.

Findings

Taking into account the research questions and the data collected, two categories and three sub-categories were created. Each is described below with its characteristics and dimensions:

- 1st Category: Students’ cultural awareness and development through short stories
 - Sub-category: Vocabulary acquisition
 - Sub-category: Short stories as a language model for improving students’ language skills
- 2nd Category: Students’ approach to literature through short stories
 - Sub-category: Students’ cultural enrichment through literature

First category: Students’ English cultural awareness through listening and reading short stories

Our goal as English teachers is to create environments and activities that truly motivate students’ acquisition of the language. In fact, there are many textbooks that present a variety of grammar explanations, exercises, and activities in order to capture students’ attention and better ensure their learning. Nevertheless, this kind of material generates routine and

boredom. Frequently, there are no possibilities for practicing language in a communicative way.

The implementation of short stories in English classes was carried out in this study as a way to change the class dynamic and look for spaces and methods in which the students and teacher could take advantage of literature in terms of language use, language practice, knowledge acquisition, and enjoyment.

Vocabulary acquisition

When students are faced with an English text, one of the principal obstacles is the students' lack of vocabulary. For example, at the beginning of the workshops, the students and researcher realized that one barrier was that students did not understand the text at all because there were many new words and expressions. Therefore, throughout its development, this project supported students in the acquisition of vocabulary, expressions, and also pronunciation, which was relevant for them when speaking about different aspects of the stories. In this regard, Chang (2009) concludes in one of his studies: "From the L2 [second language] listening instruction perspective, as students showed a great interest in concurrent listening and reading, L2 language teachers could provide them with a good deal of aural input to foster more linguistic elements, e.g. vocabulary, idioms, and the rhythm of spoken English" (p. 662). These arguments show the comprehensive nature of literature for inclusion in the classroom, considering the variety of activities that can be done with it. In this sense, one of the students perceived the value of this work for her English learning process: "It was interesting because the reading and listening activities allowed me to increase my vocabulary and helped me improve my English communication" (Survey, student 1, 13-05-14).[1]

In fact, students were conscious of their lack of vocabulary during development of the different workshops but they were also aware of their own progress in this aspect, as was perceived by the teacher in the fluency of their written and oral reports. The researcher reported her perceptions regarding this aspect: "After the second workshop, students showed better understanding of the texts. In addition, the acquisition of new expressions facilitated their written and oral communication" (Researcher's journal, 20-04-14).

During the fourth workshop, a group of students wrote the end of the story for *The Mysterious Island*. The appropriation of vocabulary, fluency, and structure improvement can be observed in the following excerpt:

Smith became the leader of the group, he saw the danger nearer because the island was going to do explosion soon; so, he guided the men to build a beautiful and strong ship, it was done in a week using the materials of the island. When they finished the construction, Smith decided to go, after a month in open sea, they arrived to a fantastic island (Artifact, student 7, 21-05-14)

The development of workshops and support guides helped students with their language improvement, and these processes helped them feel greater self-confidence in their communication. According to Küçükoğlu & Sariçoban (2011), “[r]esearchers show that among other literary genres, short stories are the most preferred ones in language classrooms” (p. 160). However, August, Carlo, Dressler, and Snow (2005) assert that more research is necessary regarding vocabulary, given the importance of this aspect in learning another language. In conclusion, a lack of vocabulary could be an obstacle in students’ communication; it is therefore necessary for teachers to encourage this aspect in daily classes in order to improve their language learning.

#3 Short stories as a language model for improving students’ language skills

The activities developed in this study motivated students’ listening, reading, writing, and speaking practice, which makes them very complete as teaching material. Students were exposed to the target language during long periods of time, and the researcher took advantage of this particular environment in order to guide students in communicative activities.

During the students’ compositions and oral reports, the researcher detected different mistakes in the students’ production, such as: language structure, use of connectors, and conjugation, among others. However, these mistakes generally occur in students’ learning processes but do not interrupt their communication, as can be observed in the following student artifact: “The people didn’t know what was happening Dorian in house, because he had parties, invite woman beautiful leave and drink too much alcohol, have disorganized life” (Artifact, student 9, 21-05-14).

The progress of the activities showed that students were improving their language skills. As such, in the first workshop, students showed lack of vocabulary and incorrect sentence structure, and they failed to follow a coherent order of ideas. To help students correct their mistakes, the researcher designed and applied the support guides, which were useful for them as demonstrated in their written compositions prior to the oral reports. One student’s first written draft was as follows: “Claire was vacation on December in the house of her aunt; she was so excited about to know the Genny Castle” (Artifact, student 10, 21-02-14). Later, the student made some corrections and improved his composition based on the support guide and the teacher’s guide, as follows:

“Claire went on vacation to her aunt’s house. She was so excited to know about Genny’s Castle, but her aunt said to her that it was dangerous because of the falling walls, but she did not understand this One day, Claire’s aunt had to go to the church of Genny and Claire went too. While her aunt where in the church, Claire decided to go to buy something for Christmas, like paper and other things. (Artifact, student 10, 21-05-14)

In the sample above, the student increased the number of sentences and tried to follow the comments and feedback given by the researcher. Though the second text is not perfect, it is considerably improved, and the student was able to communicate his understanding of the story, which is a benefit in his learning process.

Additionally, the researcher recognized the students' performance and the importance of offering them the necessary tools for improving their language use:

I realized that when students began to develop their first workshops, they tried to do their best, but there were many aspects to consider about the use of verbs, punctuation, spelling, and so on... but with the second written draft, it is clear that they improved a lot. This shows that the strategies carried out in this research process were meaningful for students' language skills development. (Researcher's journal, 23-04-14)

Regarding oral communication, one of the students shared the following observations: "I realize that I was able to improve the way I do written compositions in English and it has helped me improve my oral production, now, I can speak more fluently than before" (Survey, student 11, 15-05-14).

In addition, this material was appropriate for the students to use in order to have a model of language. These high quality texts served as a guide for language acquisition, and the students could review the structure of the language and analyze the use of specific expressions according to the situations in which the characters were depicted. In this regard, Obediat argues the following: "Literature can help learners obtain a competence in the foreign language, learn the usage of idiomatic expressions, speak accurately, and become more fluent and creative in the target language" (as cited in Babae and Roselezman, 2014, p. 81). As a matter of fact, the material itself was the most valuable contribution of this research as it involved the necessary elements for improving students' language skills:

During students' written work, I realized that they came back to the stories in order to read the events again and also to get the vocabulary needed for their own production; in addition, they analyzed the structure of sentences, shared the information with the group, and sometimes asked the meaning of expressions or ideas when it was necessary for their understanding. (Researcher' journal, 17-03-14)

It is relevant to highlight that the short story activities worked with in class were guided by the teacher to increase students' writing, speaking, and coherence. Successful communication means being able to organize words correctly in oral or written form. In this regard, Hoey (1996) argues that cohesion is how certain words are grammatically connected in a sentence or text. In fact, language acquisition is a process learners have to follow and it includes making mistakes, which are corrected through practice with the guidance of teachers or by the students themselves.

The previous excerpts demonstrate that short stories are meaningful materials to be implemented in English classes as they allow for development of students' language skills. The listening, reading, and writing processes employed in the workshops improved students' self-confidence regarding their English oral production. In this sense, Sepahvand (1914) states: "short stories may help students learn the four skills —listening, speaking, reading, and writing more effectively due to the motivational benefit embedded in the stories" (p. 1849). Hence,

the researcher's role was to encourage students to speak, creating spaces for them to discuss their personal understanding and also use their imagination to recreate the events in the stories. Hişmanoğlu (2005) is in agreement regarding the benefits of teaching languages skills in an integral way for language use. It is clear, then, that listening to and reading short stories facilitate speaking because these activities provide students with language patterns and engage their oral production. Furthermore, literature can be used as the main material in English classes. It helps to change the dynamic and is a tool for fostering students' reading strategies.

Second category: students' approach to literature through short stories

This category highlights the students' approach to literature through reading stories because at university, they generally read only about topics within their own field of study; it also explains the contact students had with other cultures and their enrichment in terms of knowledge.

Considering that short stories are a part of literature, students receive many benefits while working with this kind of material because it involves language, customs, traditions, religion, and economy, among others, which are important for students' development as professionals and in general for their daily activities.

Literature gives testimony of people's cultures, and this study immersed students in learning another language and another culture through the implementation of short stories in the English classroom. As the stories took place in European countries, such as England, France, Germany, Russia, and Italy, among others, students could learn about people's customs in those regions, including lifestyle, food, clothes, behaviors, and how the weather influences people's routine in different seasons. Students could learn about how they celebrate special holidays like Christmas, family gatherings, and what the traditional dishes are in the regions mentioned. In this regard, one student wrote the following: "People's customs are different in different regions of the world. For example, their music, food, festivals, etc.; also, we are learning about people's feelings and their relationships" (Survey, student 6, 13-05-14).

Likewise, the researcher observed that students were interested in the characters' lifestyles and their daily routines. These aspects made the stories more interesting for them, as the researcher noted in her journal:

During class, students felt particular interest in people's customs, the way people lived two hundred years ago, when real life mixed with mythology, which was the situation in the Genny's Castle story, because the owner of the castle was a rich farmer who had many servants. In that time people believed in and practiced witchcraft. (Researcher' journal, 20-03-14)

Literature in the form of short stories facilitates learning about aspects of foreign cultures and also builds students' respect for other people's customs, taking into account differences among ethnic groups. In this regard, Amer (2012) argues that "[s]tudying literature from another culture gives learners insight into the values and customs of other places. Literature is a powerful tool in teaching the relativity of cultural values and the inherent problems in cross-cultural communication" (p. 3). In addition, literature allows us to know how people think, act, and speak,

according to the situation, moment, and place. This is an example of people's lifestyles.

Students' cultural enrichment through literature

Literature, in the form of short stories, is a great source of knowledge acquisition. It helps develop students' background and exposes them to new information, which also promotes their learning about multiple topics. For example, in *Frankenstein*, the main character, Victor, traveled through different countries in Europe pursuing his studies and adventures. In some cases, students engaged in looking for additional information about the different regions where the character traveled in order to understand the story better, and as supporting information to organize or support their written compositions and oral reports. In this regard, Hişmanoğlu (2005) argues: "Literature provides more creative, encrypted, and challenging texts that require personal exploration supported by prior knowledge for advanced level readers" (p. 62).

The use of stories also contributed to encouraging students' interest in historical aspects because some stories, like *The Mysterious Island*, cited some specific historical moments, for example, when Cytrus Smith, one of the main characters, participated in the American Civil War (1861-1865), which was also part of people's real lives. For this story, students had to go deeper into the topic in order to better understand the context of the events in the story.

Additionally, literature gives testimony of social changes, ideologies, interests, political issues, and economic developments. Because of that, literature becomes a means to communicate real events that have transformed a society. In this sense, Pokrivčák et al. (2010) argue:

The problem was not that some writers addressed the difficult lives of the poor at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, but that a particularity was made to be a norm —i.e., that the writers who did not address the issues of the "working people" (the proletariat) were excluded, ostracized, labeled as the enemies of the system, and, finally, prohibited to publish. (p. 14)

Thus, short stories also evidenced this kind of testimony through their characters. These are events that help us understand not only historical events but also current situations because many circumstances we experience today are the consequences of those in the past. In this sense, one of the students said: "I liked working with the stories because we had the opportunity to learn how people lived in specific times in history. I learned things I did not know, especially about the European continent" (Survey, student 3, 13-05-14).

In addition, the researcher noted the students' reactions to the acquisition of knowledge along the different workshops:

The activities done in class were meaningful for students, considering that short stories offered them the opportunity to acquire information about historical events and knowledge in different fields like chemistry, philosophy, among others; information that engaged students in learning through reading this kind of texts. (Researcher's journal, 20-04-14)

Furthermore, some students' opinions show how they interpreted the stories in relation to people's experiences. One student stated: "I like the Mysterious Island Story because it has adventure; it also tells us the real life of people who had to escape from their towns due to the violence" (Survey, student 3, 13-05-14). For another student, "The stories about pirates teach how many people have been victims of thieves in the sea and many pirates were important in people's history because they stole treasures from cities, for example in Cartagena, Colombia" (Survey, student 5, 21-05-14).

These excerpts show that students appropriated knowledge, acquired information about people's lives in different moments of history, and compared the situations in the story with real life. In this sense, Sepahvand (1914) affirms the following: "students may gain insight into literature by gaining entrance to a world familiar or unfamiliar to them because of the cultural aspects of stories, and taking a voyage from the literary text to their own minds to find meanings for ideas, resulting in critical thinking" (p. 1849). Listening to and reading short stories was a great opportunity for students not only to improve their language use but also to improve their background knowledge, which is important for their lives.

Conclusions

This study provides evidence that listening to and reading short stories in the foreign language engaged students in developing their language skills. Thus, they practiced reading, listening, writing, and speaking simultaneously, which is a strength in language acquisition because it simulates real-life communication. The long listening and reading sessions offered students important exposure to the target language, which served as a model for their production. The written compositions, focused on different activities, allowed students create a draft to prepare their oral reports and improve it with the development of support guides and the researcher's guidance.

Short stories were a language model for students to understand the function of the language and improve grammar use, cohesion, and coherence. Moreover, working in groups created situations for students to share their ideas, practice writing and oral skills, and share their perception about cultural and historical aspects. The acquisition of vocabulary and expressions strengthened students' communication, and this made them feel greater self-confidence, especially during the oral interventions. In addition, students showed interest and enjoyment during the development of this research project as a product of the variety of activities. They also had fun because the stories captured their attention from beginning to end. Finally, given the positive results of this study, it is recommended that teachers add this type of activity and material in the English classroom as a way to motivate students' language practice.

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Appendix A

A student's written paper sheet based on one chapter of a story

Appendix B

Survey

Notes

1. How did you perceive your approach to literature through reading and listening to short stories in English?

2. What did you learn through reading and listening to short stories?
3. What difficulties did you have during reading and listening to the stories in English?
4. What difficulties did you find in your oral and written production during the development of this project?
5. What is your opinion about the use of short stories in the English classes?
6. Please mention some suggestions about the activities that were carried out in this course.

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