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Exploring Social Skills and Character Education of Students through Storytelling in L2¹

Exploración de Habilidades Sociales y Educación del Carácter de Alumnos a través de Cuentos en L2

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Abstract

Little is known about character education and social skills within a transformative curriculum framework in the L2 classroom. This action research study stems from identifying peer rejection in 7th grade English language classrooms as a social issue hampering English language practices for some students. Four L2 storytelling workshops were designed and implemented adapting social and linguistic contents. Data comprising students' reactions to the content of the adapted short stories were collected using classroom interaction transcriptions, students' artifacts, field notes, semi-structured interviews with students, and the evaluation of the storytelling workshops made by the students. Data analysis demonstrates that students could learn to live in a community creating healthy L2 learning environments when there is a sense of awareness about accepting differences whilst practicing the use of the English language.

Keywords: Social relationships, social skills, L2 storytelling.

Resumen

Poco se sabe acerca de la educación del carácter y las habilidades sociales dentro de un marco curricular transformador en el aula de L2. Esta investigación acción se deriva de identificar el rechazo de compañeros de clase de inglés del 7º grado, aspecto social que dificulta las prácticas del idioma inglés para algunos estudiantes. Se diseñaron e implementaron cuatro talleres de cuentos cortos en inglés, adaptando contenidos sociales y lingüísticos. Los datos recuperan reacciones de los estudiantes al contenido de los cuentos y fueron recolectadas

128

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usando transcripciones de interacciones, artefactos, notas de campo, entrevistas semi-estructuradas y la evaluación de los talleres hechos por los estudiantes. El análisis de datos demuestra que los estudiantes aprenden a vivir en una comunidad creando ambientes de aprendizaje L2 saludables cuando hay un sentido de conciencia sobre aceptar diferencias mientras usan el idioma inglés.

Palabras clave: Relaciones sociales, habilidades sociales, cuentos en L2

Resumo

Pouco se sabe acerca da educação do caráter e as habilidades sociais dentro de um quadro curricular transformador na aula de L2. Esta pesquisa de ação se deriva de identificar a rejeição de colegas de aula de inglês da 7ª série, aspecto social que dificulta as práticas do idioma inglês para alguns estudantes. Foram desenhadas e implementadas quatro oficinas de contos curtos em inglês, adaptando conteúdos sociais e linguísticos. Os dados recuperam reações dos estudantes ao conteúdo dos contos e foram coletadas usando transcrições de interações, artefatos, notas de campo, entrevistas semiestruturadas e a avaliação das oficinas realizadas pelos estudantes. A análise de dados demonstra que os estudantes aprendem a viver em uma comunidade criando ambientes de aprendizagem L2 saudáveis quando há um sentido de consciência sobre aceitar diferenças enquanto usam o idioma inglês.

Palavras chave: Relações sociais, habilidades sociais, contos em L2

Introduction

This article reports an action research process conducted by a 7th grade English language teacher (Author 1) and by a research facilitator (Author 2). It was sought to solve peer rejection in the English language classroom through the use of L2 storytelling workshops. The left side of Table 1 illustrates the action-research stages adapted from well-known literature on action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 2009; Burns, 2015). The right hand side of Table 1 provides a more concrete illustration of what was involved in the action research study we report in this article.

Table 1. Action research in action: Exploring peer rejection in an English language classroom

Action Research Stages	What Was Done
1. Identifying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using sociograms and visual tasks to understand the social challenges 7th graders had in the language classroom
2. Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring the literature to understand mainly concepts related to character education Designing L2 storytelling workshops focusing on social topics
3. Acting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementing L2 storytelling workshops
4. Observing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thinking of what happened whilst implementing the L2 storytelling workshops Focusing on classroom interaction Analyzing students' artifacts Interviewing students Getting students' evaluations of their learning experience
5. Reflecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussing and concluding Taking research further

Based on the table above, this article is divided into five sections. The first section sheds light on the identifying stage. We used visual tasks and sociograms to identify “the classroom issue or dilemma” (Burns, 2015, p. 5) we wanted to focus on. We backed up the existence of a problem of a social order (e.g. peer rejection) which was adversely affecting the L2 learning process of a number of 7th graders (e.g. lack of language use in the classroom). So, the main emphasis of this article is on the social issues we spotted as problematic which were incidentally affecting L2 learning processes.

The second section, planning stage, turns in particular to the theoretical framework that supports the study and to the design of a pedagogical intervention where L2 storytelling workshops play a central role. This action research study holds the idea that through

adapted short stories, the English language classroom could become a healthier learning environment for all students including peer rejected students. This could be assumed if it is understood along with Althof and Berkowitz (2006, p. 497) that character education “was mostly a traditional approach, focusing on the inculcation of desirable habits.” What is desirable for these 7th graders is to become aware that social differences (of any kind) could be celebrated as part of the development of citizenship skills whilst learning English.

The third section briefly describes the implementation of the L2 storytelling workshops which were conceived as the plan of action. Short stories with a heightened social content on social rejection and exclusion were adapted for use in the English language classroom.

L2-storytelling-workshop activities were used with a twofold purpose. Firstly, students were expected to understand the short stories’ contents in order to reflect upon their own social behaviors in the classroom with the hope that this could impact in the short term their language learning environment. Secondly, students were expected to practice their English language skills using as an excuse such contents.

The fourth section or observing stage describes our understanding of what happened after implementing the L2 storytelling workshops. We collected data using various instruments (e.g. class transcriptions, students’ artifacts, students’ interviews and students’ evaluation of the workshops). Data was analyzed codifying repeated patterns or themes which ultimately constituted one analytical category (e.g. *learning to live in a community*) that shed light in our understanding of peer rejection in relation to healthy L2 learning environments through two sub-categories (e.g. *awareness of acceptance* and *building a community*).

The last section, reflecting stage, reveals our conclusions geared towards innovative directions in the practice of teaching English where learning is understood from a social perspective.

Identifying stage

This research was the result of a diagnosis and intervention in which one of the researchers (Author 1) realized that her students had problems in their social relationships. A first step to examining this situation was to explore how her students felt as learners in the language classroom, and therefore, classroom observations were conducted in three seventh grade courses where Author 1 assumed the role of a participant observer.

Based on Author 1's observations, it was concluded that some of her students did not share school activities with other classmates or games for the English class. This helped us to start understanding that some students could have been rejected by others in seventh grade. The rejected students explained that they preferred to work alone rather than doing group class work. It was clear that peer rejection was a social practice that was negatively affecting L2 learning, at least for some of the English language learners. So it was necessary to back up these initial intuitions firstly by understanding what peer rejection was about. Bierman (2004) described peer rejection at school as the social and psychological distance experienced by members within a group in terms of being liked or disliked by other members of the same group. In that sense of peer rejection, we wanted to better understand what was at stake in the seventh-grade courses in relation to peer rejection and language practice where Author 1 was teaching English and to propose a strategy pedagogically convenient to favor the social construction of a friendly academic environment for promoting better language learning practices. These middle-class 7th graders were aged between 12 through 14 years old studying at a mixed-sex state school located in Bogotá (Colombia).



Figure 1. Juanita's drawing and text about how she felt in the L2 class

132

In order to explore the seventh grade situation more deeply, aiming at obtaining a well-informed understanding, we used a visual task. Seventh graders were asked to draw and write about how they felt in the English language classroom with their peers. Drawing gave the students the ability to express their feelings or ideas about their school's environment. This was also complemented in written form. Kazmiercza's (2001, p. 181) explains "with pictures or visual images, students can make representations to communicate ideas about the

context” in which they are immersed. This activity showed that some students felt that they were being rejected. Figure 1 is just one of the examples in which the rejected students suggest that peer rejection was present in the L2 classroom and that learners were having problems with their peers. Names and initial letters used to refer to research participants are fictional. When Spanish texts were provided, they were transcribed (Italics) and translated into English (square brackets). This is to clarify that due to students’ English language proficiency level it was at times important to obtain their perceptions using their mother tongue especially during the interviews. Data coming from artifacts written in English by the research participants are used without modifying language or style.

“me siento aislada de todo y todos siempre e sido persona de pocos muy pocos amigos en el colegio por eso me siento aislada sola y no me gusta pero con tantos años de soledad ya te acostumbra”
[Sic] Juanita

[I feel isolated from everything and everyone, I have always had few friends in the school for that reason I feel lonely and I do not like that feeling but after many years of solitude I have become used to this...] Juanita

It was very frustrating to find this kind of answers in Juanita’s visual and written representation of her persona¹. We would like to say that it was even more shocking reading her text. Seventh-grader Juanita appears to enunciate that she has serious problems with classmates and with her self-esteem. Without making a semiotic analysis, the reader can see that Juanita’s drawing has special characteristics such as her facial expression that shows sadness and feelings of anger. The drawing presents some characteristics such as the positions of her face, her hands and feet that might well signal she does not like being excluded in the L2 classroom. Juanita appears not to have a socially constructed peer friendship network in her class. Estevez, Herrero, Martinez and Musitu (2006) have documented studies about aggressive and nonaggressive students where “peer friendship networks of rejected students are usually smaller in comparison with students with other social status” (p. 389). Her drawing appears to show that she is experiencing many situations that affect and hurt her feelings; furthermore, she explained that she did not experience good social relationships with her partners and that she has faced this kind of situation for a long time. This could be taken as a mere perception of a student’s drawings and texts, however a sociogram was used to further confirm the presence of students who felt rejected in the classroom and that this affects their learning process.

According to Freeman (1998, p. 213), “sociograms are maps that show how participants in a class or activity see one another as measured by given criteria. Sociograms collect second order data of participants’ perceptions”. After the students completed the visual task activity, students were given a sociometric questionnaire in Spanish which focused on the following questions:

- If you have free time at school who do you like to share it with?
- If you have to work in a group activity who do you like to work with?
- Which of your partners would you like to apologize to for having mistreated them?
- Who would you like to have as your secret friend?
- To whom of your partners would you like to offer apologies for having mistreated them?
- Which of your partners do you share time with when you are not in the school?

Student answers were used to map their social relationships and potential peer friendship networks. The sociogram showed that four of the students were facing challenging social relationships. They were not selected by their partners to participate in school activities. Due to this rejection practice, some of the students experienced difficulties working in groups because their partners did not accept them. The rejected students also demonstrated difficulties in their learning process; they did not feel comfortable participating in their English class. As pointed out in Estevez’s et al’s (2006, p. 388) study, “previous research has shown that rejected students are, in general, more at risk for academic difficulties and school failure than those students not rejected by their peers”. Following this line of thought and bearing in mind that we need to guarantee healthy L2 learning environments for language use and/or practice to take place, this study investigated at an exploratory level the social skills of a group of L2 learners, when they participated in L2 storytelling workshops. Bearing in mind the identified issue, the purpose of the present research study is firstly to determine students’ reflections made from the use of storytelling in relation to social skills in their L2 lessons and, secondly, to examine the transformations (if any) in students’ behaviors while working in L2 storytelling.

Planning stage

As the main L2 classroom issue that we identified was peer rejection, it was necessary to get informed about how storytelling is related to character education and social skills within a transformative curriculum framework.

Transformative curriculum

Language teachers need to consider students' needs and their interests so as to engage them in EFL-learning processes. According to Banks (2003, p. 6) teachers need to “acquire new knowledge, skills, and attitudes”. Teachers need to include content in their curriculum that refers to real situations and engages students in thinking about their reality and discovering solutions to their problems. Shaaban (2005) adds that teachers need to be agents of positive change in their societies by reflecting upon different social issues in their classrooms. Social issues are defined as problems that directly or indirectly affect the members of a community or society (Shaaban, 2005); in the present study these social issues are related to social relationships among seventh graders. Shaaban (2005) also adds that teachers need to include social issues in their curricula to allow students to participate and give their points of view about a specific situation. When students feel the need to express their ideas, they can use the foreign language and acknowledge the real use of the language. When students are engaged in a problematic situation about their context, they also have the opportunity to be involved in action, dialogue and reflection. Consequently, when students are immersed in meaningful tasks (e.g. L2 storytelling workshops) they gradually develop their classroom participation in the target language and at the same time their social awareness. We thought that those meaningful tasks could be designed by adapting short stories keeping the aim of helping language learners reflect on the social issues present in the L2 classroom.

Storytelling

The use of stories allows children to make connections with their reality, and in this process, students may reflect on their personal experiences and thus make possible links with the situations that the stories they read present to them. According to Mello (2001), the use of storytelling in the classroom has an influence on the students' interpersonal relationships. This could be promoted if students are encouraged to reflect on their reality, as it could be argued that

some stories give them a model to follow potentially strengthening relationships with their partners. In that sense, storytelling can increase social competence as students' attention is drawn to issues of rejection and inclusion. Young children can strengthen their peer relationships, taking into account the emotions of friends. It is hold that L2 storytelling "can indeed be a good vehicle to increasing language performance in that it has the potential to provide motivation to students" (Tecnam, 2013, p. 27). This argument is defended by a good number of scholars who have delat mainly with digital forms of storytelling (e.g. Sadik, 2008; Ohler, 2006; Castañeda, 2013). However, for the purposes of this paper we focused more on the social side of the issue (e.g. peer rejection) and by extension we looked at language learning.

We also argue that storytelling engages students in learning a foreign language because this technique provides students with an opportunity to feel more comfortable sharing ideas with their peers about stories presented in the English class. In this study, adapted short stories are presented to students so that they work on vocabulary and grammar structures according to 7th grade linguistic contents. Additionally, students reflect on the content of the adapted short stories through a number of follow-up activities that include reading, writing and speaking. In relation to L2 learning, Shelly (2010) claims that reading stories to young children helps them increase their new vocabulary and understand structures of the foreign language. Belmonte and Verdugo (2007) point out that presenting children with stories is an important mode of contextualizing and learning a new language. Young children relate to stories with feelings and personal experiences, and the stories present to them new linguistic structures, grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful context that makes the meaning of the story easy to comprehend.

Another important element of stories is the themes, such as moral values. These can provide excellent ways for the students to reflect on their feelings and emotions, and at the same time, the moral values provide students with opportunities to think about their interactions with their peers and understand the situations faced in the school world. In this line of thought, the L2 storytelling workshops were designed to help 7th graders reflect specifically upon the social issues identified as problematic in the language classroom.

Storytelling evokes different feelings and emotions, making students feel more confident about participating in various real social situations. The benefits of storytelling in combination with character education might allow the students to be engaged in different stories while they are learning social skills.

Character education

Character education (CE) improves “core values or traits as the basis of good character” (Lickona, 1991). CE is an educational movement, born in the USA that promotes intervention in the school system to guarantee good and safe environments for the students. CE is defined as “a planned and systematic approach in terms of self-respect, responsibility and honesty, etc. for being a good citizen” (Çubukcut, 2012). According to Battistich (2005, p. 10) “character education is such an approach to primary prevention and positive youth development, with the added benefits of fostering academic achievement and character development for all students.” One of the main reasons to implement CE in the school is to develop pro-social behavior and introduce core values to elementary learners. Kinnamon (2003) suggests that students who show a lack of social skills and demonstrate problems in their interactions can change positively. They can achieve good academic results and improve their social relationships.

The EFL classroom is an ideal setting to propose CE and strengthen social skills. The goals, methods and activities that teachers can propose in this framework might give students opportunities to use the foreign language in real world contexts. The students use the language according to their own interests and it is a way to creating social relationships. Students need to resort to the language form or functions to express their experiences, feelings or points of views about the topics worked on. When students work on familiar topics, they can reflect on their reality and connect such reflections with their ability to use the language. The social skills that are the key points of this intervention in the 7th grade English language classrooms are presented here as a way of improving social relationships. It is important to highlight that CE “comes in a variety of forms, and that it does work if effectively designed and implemented” (Berkowitz and Bier, 2005, p. 23). It does cooperate in bettering relationships in schools and classrooms as documented by Nucci’s and Narvaez’ edited handbook (2008) but there is “little consensus about curriculum and methods to accomplish this task” (Milson and Mehlig, 2002, p. 48). We are claiming that language learning could be a site for CE as learning the language is not understood in this article as mastering the grammar but as making sense of the world and meaning in a different language regardless of linguistic inaccuracies. We, however, agree with Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn and Smith (2003, p. 31) on the fact that “schools addressing character education of their students in a well-planned manner tended also higher academic achievement scores”.

Social skills

Social competence is indispensable in people's life. Rutherford et al (1998) consider social competence as a set of social skills that could grant a person success in social relationships. An increase in social skills allows good relationships to be shaped with peers (Dennison, 2008; Chen & Bullock, 2004). Patrick (2008, p. 2) adds:

“Social skills can be defined as the set of skills people use to interact and communicate with one another. They are based on the social norms of our society and they tell us what attitudes and behaviors are considered to be normal, acceptable and expected in a particular social situation.”

Social skills entitle people to interact with others. At different stages of life, people need to interact and relate with different kinds of individuals, for example, friends, teachers, and neighbors. In the school setting, teachers claim that misbehavior and lack of social skills are the main problems students have (Corso, 2007; Richardson & Shupe, 2003; Wood, 2006). Behavioral challenges do not permit people to learn how to relate socially with their peers and adults (Chen & Bullock, 2004). According to Fox and Lentini (2006), teachers need to look for strategies through which to teach social skills. Teachers need to introduce social skills, and engage the students in learning them, giving students possible situations in which, they can use such social skills. When teachers use stories and different kinds of activities, they could increase student contributions to class. Teachers could conceivably develop social skills and foster the motivation to transfer them to their personal lives (Chen & Bullock, 2004).

There are many social skills at work in the classroom, but according to the needs identified, we decided to work with communication, peer relations, problem solving and decision making. Communication is considered in order to privilege the good channels of communication among the students and to guarantee spaces that allow the use of the foreign language in real situations. Peer relations are used to improve and restore the participants' social relationships, especially with students who had problems with their peers. Problem solving was carefully considered since this strategy allows students to resolve a specific situation, which empowers them to interact, lead and acknowledge their partners' abilities to work in a team. Finally, decision making was used as an opportunity to acknowledge that learner attitudes and behavior can affect their peer's feelings either positively or negatively. As stated above, there is no curricular consensus on what to include to achieve CE (Milson and Mehlig, 2002). So we decided to develop the

storytelling workshops around these skills because we suspected they contributed to both CE and language learning. There is still research to be conducted in the intersection between CE and language learning and it is hoped we are contributing to this endeavor.

Designing L2 storytelling workshops

Based on the previous framework, four L2 storytelling workshops were developed with stories related to social skills throughout different activities. They were designed to give students chances to read and comprehend, and to use the language structures, vocabulary and expressions according to the topics and standards that students should learn in 7th grade; this is equivalent to an A2 level internationally. At the end of each storytelling workshop, there were reflection activities about the social skills related to the story. These activities were developed to provide students with opportunities to express their ideas, and to share and write about their own experiences and perceptions of different situations and characters in the stories using the language structures learned in the English class. Table 2 summarizes the four L2 storytelling workshops implemented.

Table 2. Summary of L2 storytelling workshops

Weeks	Storytelling Workshop	Social skills and linguistic contents	Activities
1-2-3	The Ugly Duckling	Social Skills	-To watch a video.
UNIT 1		Peer Relations Problem Solving Simple Present Tense and simple Past tense	-To Read a story -To socialize the stories -To work on a worksheet.
4-5-6	A lesson for my teacher	Social Skills	-To listen a story and work on a worksheet about the characters.
UNIT 2		Communication and Decision Making Simple Present Tense and simple Past tense	-To watch a video -To discuss the situations that characters face in the story.
7-8-9	Think before to speak	Social Skills	-To listen to a story
UNIT 3		Peer Relations Problem Solving Communication and Decision Making Simple Present Tense and simple Past tense.	-To read and socialize the story -To make drawings and to retell the story -To discuss the situations that characters face in the story. -To write a letter about the situations presented in the story.
10-11-12	A terrifying experience	Social Skills	-To read a story and work on a worksheet about the characters.
UNIT 4		Peer Relations Problem Solving Communication and Decision Making Simple Present Tense and simple Past tense	-To watch a video -To discuss the situations that characters face in the story.

As it could be inferred from Table 2, social skills were used as content for the English class to provide language learners with tools that allowed them to reflect on their reality; and at the same time, the participants used the language to express their ideas, feelings and the emotions related to their work in the English class as will be illustrated below. Finally, the stories were adapted to the students' English language level.

Acting stage

Each one of the workshops was developed or taught over a period of two to three weeks. It was necessary to think about the possible questions that allow us to know the perceptions and insights of the students in agreement to the situations that the story presented and the possible connections that they make with their reality in the classroom. One important resource that we used was visual literacy; because, through drawings the students can express different ideas about the stories. The students evidenced understanding and comprehension about the meaning of the stories. In this way the students made pictures

of the new vocabulary and it was interesting to see that students linked the new vocabulary to their activities during the intervention.

It is important to highlight that the students were organized in groups; since this technique strengthens students' interaction. This interaction empowers students to participate in school activities. This appears to guarantee good environments in the school setting. Group work also stimulates students to take different roles that lead their partners to accomplish a common goal by resolving the different situations that the students face inside the group.

Description of the context

This research was carried out at a public school located in Bogota (Colombia). The students who attend this public school belong to low socio-economic levels as specified by data from DANE³. The school has an average of 1,260 students in each of its two shifts. As mentioned earlier, Author 1's students were between the ages 12 through 14. Most of the students came from neighborhoods close to the school.

Observing stage

In order to describe the social skills of students in their daily classroom relationships while studying EFL storytelling with social values as the main content, we used the qualitative paradigm. Qualitative research is essentially interpretative; it focuses on the explanation and examination of a phenomenon. Flick (2014, p. 22) reported that ““Qualitative” research is oriented towards analyzing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local context.” Within this approach, the researcher has to take notes about a specific situation and interpret and analyze them, in order to represent these facts, the researcher needs to write about his/her findings. Some authors, such as Rossman and Rallis (2012) claim that “systematic inquiry produces new information. When this information is used to improve human conditions, it becomes knowledge” (p. 11). Taking into account the need to describe and analyze a specific situation in an EFL classroom, that of students being rejected and left out in EFL classroom interaction, it was necessary to adopt Action Research (AR) as the research method to carry out this project as stated in the introduction of this article.

³ DANE: National Department of Statistics.

AR is grounded in the qualitative research approach which purpose is to understand a specific situation in any setting. Mills (2003) defines AR as “any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher-researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular school operates, how they teach and how well their students learn” (p.5). According to Torres (s.f), AR “is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p. 1). In Action Research, the researchers identify a problematic situation in their context and in relation to it, they plan an intervention in order to look for strategies that can be useful to change or improve the situation. In this study, it was expected that adopting and adapting storytelling with contents related to human and social values could help to improve social skills and relationships within the EFL classroom. According to Burns (2010), AR “can be a very valuable way to extend our teaching skills and gain more understanding of ourselves as teachers, our classrooms and our students” (p.1). This research method fits this study since one of the main objectives is to describe students’ social skills while using storytelling as a pedagogical strategy where content revolves around social values and incidentally will describe aspects of L2 development as the main interest is communication and making sense rather than giving an account of language accuracy.

Instruments

The instruments used to gather the data were storytelling excerpts taken from classroom interaction (transcriptions) during the activities, students’ artifacts like drawings and texts, field notes, semi-structured interviews with students, and the evaluation of the workshops made by the students.

Students’ artifacts

142 Some examples of the students’ work were useful data because this gave students’ opportunities to show what they learned about a specific task. Hubbard and Miller (1999) state that a student’s artifact “is tangible evidence of what kids are able to do and the range of responses kids make to different learning tasks” (p. 102). At this point, it was very relevant to take into account the reflection of the students related to social skills.

Field notes

Kawulich (2005) proposes that “field notes are the primary way of capturing the data that is collected from participant observations” (p.10). Field notes provide descriptions regarding classroom happenings; this useful tool gives information about the participants’ behavior, insights, and perceptions.

Semi-structured interviews

With respect to semi-structured interviews, Burns (2010) proposes that these kinds of interviews help researchers organize questions to the participants but at the same time questions are more flexible to them. Therefore, participants are more confident to express their points of view about certain topics. The semi structured interviews were meaningful in this project, as they allowed changing the course of the conversation whenever it was necessary as to explore more in-depth themes of interest that emerged from the interaction. An interview protocol was developed, and students were interviewed at the end of the intervention.

Transcriptions

According to Halcomb and Davidson (2004). “transcription refers to the process of reproducing spoken words, such as those from an audiotaped interview, into written text” (p. 38). By using this instrument, we had the opportunity to understand the social relationships that seventh graders had inside the classroom. The transcriptions, made verbatim by Author 1, provide real samples to analyze students’ interactions.

Evaluation forms

At the end of the intervention, the students were given an evaluation form. The intention was to have students’ perceptions on the intervention with storytelling; to this end, students were requested to write about their favorite story, and the reasons they had to select this specific story.

Data analysis

The data analysis process of this study was based on coding procedures taken from the grounded theory approach (Charmaz,

2000; Glaser, 1978). This analytical framework proposes that the researcher reads the data several times to look for commonalities, themes or patterns (Freeman, 1998). Coding, from the Grounded theory perspective, is considered in this study as an appropriate way to analyze and explain human behavior in social contexts. A key aspect to analyze in our project was participants' reflections upon social skills through the use of storytelling in the EFL class. The storytelling strategy was used as the pedagogical intervention by which we wanted to deal with students' social skills in the EFL class.

We used processes of the grounded theory approach, like reading and rereading a corpus to bring order, structure and meaning of the data to discover what is behind a specific situation. According to Charmaz (2000), grounded theory is designed to “build middle range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (p.509). In addition to this, Glaser (1978) states that “the goal of grounded theory is to generate concepts and categories that account for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved” (p. 78). At a general level, Grounded theory permits to build descriptions and understandings for real life in specific contexts. Through qualitative data analysis, the researcher works with data gathered as a corpus with different meanings. The data are classified into essences or themes, and they are enriched into “descriptions, models or theories” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 549). Analysis in grounded theory is composed by three mayor types of coding which are open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

Bearing in mind these considerations, we started the data analysis by firstly organizing the instruments used to gather data. These instruments were coded in ATLAS.ti® according to the four storytelling workshops, and the process of the intervention. Table 3 illustrates the final corpus that was analyzed.

Table 3. Corpus analyzed

Instrument	Total
Artifacts	68
Interviews	19
Evaluation forms	14
Transcriptions	3

In regard to the validation process as a way to make qualitative data credible and robust, we used the triangulation technique, which

was used in order to have different points of view about social skills in the seventh-grade courses where this project was applied. In this process, we had to review all the instruments that we had collected about the participants, in order to find similar patterns. According to Burns (2001), “the aim of triangulation is to gather multiple perspectives on the same situation being studied” (p.163). In addition, Merriam (2009) describes triangulation as “the most well-known strategy to shore up internal validity of a study” (p. 215). This process of triangulation guarantees the internal validity of the research project.

After a long process of analysis and data triangulation, the emerging main category was “Learning to live in a community”. This analytical category was divided into two subcategories “Awareness of acceptance” and “Building a community”.

Learning to live in a community

This main category emerged from students’ reflections on social skills such as communication, peer relations, problem solving and making decisions. These social skills in combination with storytelling and character education give students opportunities to reflect on their reality, taking into account previous experiences and their social relationships in their L2 classroom. Through different stories, the students demonstrated an awareness of the situations that characters face in the stories. They also connected the story situations to personal experiences with their partners. These connections brought opportunities to reflect on their commitment to social relations within the L2 classroom and to society at a larger level. The students demonstrated the need to change attitudes about their partners, and in this way to look for positive relationships with the people around them. These patterns found in the data allowed us to proposed two subcategories to support the idea that the L2 classroom is an environment to learn how to live as part of a community. These two subcategories are “Awareness of acceptance” and “Building a community” and will be discussed below.

Awareness of acceptance

This subcategory reveals how the seventh graders became reflective learners when they discussed and explained their points of view according to situations expressed in the stories. They also said that to live in harmony with their community, it is necessary to have values such as tolerance, respect, acceptance, and communication. In the examples below, the data were transcribed with no language modifications or corrections [SIC].

The following excerpts from the interviews at the end of the intervention show the opinions that the students made in relation to the stories. It is possible to appreciate at least small changes in their attitudes towards some partners. Students were asked whether social relationships among partners improved with the storytelling activities and in LSC's⁴ words it is expressed that:

“Se vale que si porque te acuerdas que a comienzo de año, todo el mundo me molestaba porque yo era extremadamente furiosa, me sacaba mucho la rabia especialmente el señor JPB aquí presente, entonces ya he tratado como de no molestarlo tanto y no pues decir que de pronto que él molesta a los demás por alguna razón, de pronto a él también lo molestaban o algo y entonces sería no tratar de juzgarlo a él. Por ejemplo, si yo lo molesto tanto o lo molestan tanto, él empezaba a molestar a NB. La gracia no era esa por eso deje de molestarlo. No me gusta que empiecen a juzgar a los demás y trato de defenderlos en lugar de ... atacarlos”

[I think they have improved because if you remember at the beginning of the school year everybody was picking on me because I was extremely furious, I always got mad at Mr. JPB, here he is, then I have tried not to bother him and maybe he bothers others for his own reasons, maybe he was also bothered or something and it would be an effort not to judge him. For example, if I bothered him a lot or if he is bothered a lot, he would start bothering NB. But that was not good, so I stopped bothering him. I don't like people judging others and I try to defend them instead of... attacking them]

Interview–G01-LSC-13-11-2014

Similarly, AD's response was:

“Si con (MCV) porque yo antes la criticaba respecto a cómo ella era pero después del tiempo me di cuenta que ella tenía muchos problemas en la casa y los problemas que tenía en el colegio entonces yo quería ser una de las primeras personas que le abrieran las puertas para ella”

[Yes, my relationship with MCV improved because I used to criticize her in relation to her personality but after some time I realized that she had lots of difficulties at home and problems at school, so I wanted to be one of the first people to open the doors for her]

Interview-G01-AD -13-11-2014

⁵ These initial letters correspond to the way research participants were coded as part of preserving their identities.

Students were also asked how they felt about the L2 storytelling workshops and if they learnt anything from them. In SF's perspective:

“Si me parece bueno porque a veces uno tiene situaciones malas o no sólo en el colegio, en la familia que uno no se imagina pero uno viendo estás historias uno e dice no esa historia yo la estoy viviendo yo no debo hacer lo mismo y toma una correcta decisión”.

[I think this project was good because at times one has downs not just at school but with one's own family... just imagine, but one sees these things and I say to myself I'm kinda like the same, so I should not do the same and make the right choice]

Interview –G03 SC-13-11-2014

During the intervention, AG presented the following letter in which she talks about her sister who suffers from Downs syndrome. She invited her friends to know people before judging. This is an important sample of the overall findings in the study. As it could be read, AG displays writing skills in L2 where she is able to communicate her own sense of accepting difference. Whether or not the story about AG's sister is true, one could see that this 7th grader is able to express ideas that are shaping or have shaped her CE at least in relation to the third L2 storytelling workshop. This workshop had a central story called “Think before you speak” and it is about a trip on a train a father has with his previously blind son who have recovered back from such condition. During the trip, there are scenes where the little boy is bullied by other children who make fun of his reactions in relation to everything he sees. AG appears to transfer a social sense in her writing which, in spite of certain grammatical inaccuracies, addresses a social issue (e.g. accepting differences: “I accept the condicion if other people don't accept this”) and displays ability to fit into a genre (e.g. a response letter making a social invitation) with certain degree of grammar control (e.g. affirmative and negative sentences in simple present tense to describe actions and states).

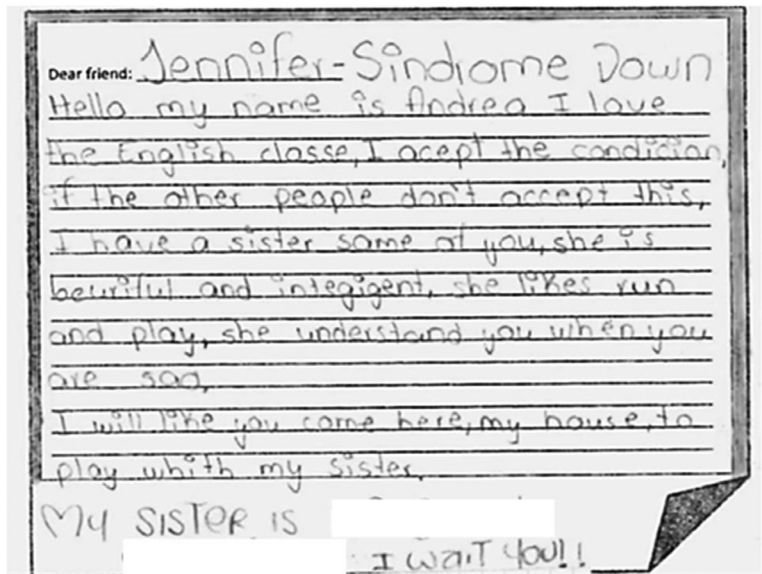


Figure 2. Letter related to one activity of the third L2 storytelling workshop.

Artifact 03-701-AG-16-09-2014

Building a community

The second subcategory emerged from participants' reflections, when they were working in groups. The students worked on social skills through the storytelling and this situation benefitted cooperative work in the classroom, in which students got involved in common goals. Kagan (1999) suggests that cooperative learning is a good way to work in the classroom because students improve their social relationships, increase their self-esteem and have better academic results. The students in Author 1's class had to work with different partners and it was interesting to see how they took different roles in the teams. The idea was to involve the students according to their abilities and set up the students that had problems in their social relationships in the same group. The seventh graders had to discuss different situations presented in the stories in order to find a possible solution. As a result of this process, the students were able to build a good environment to work; paying attention to the different points of view of their partners, respecting the differences and contributing to organizing ideas to achieve the assigned task. The students helped each other if one of them

did not understand anything. Some of them wanted to give the answer or correct their classmates.

The students appeared to understand the implications that social skills have for their social relationships. This process provided students with opportunities to work with different partners which gave them the opportunity to establish apparent new friendship bonds as expressed in the reflections below. Some students had the opportunity to change their perceptions of their partners and this situation helped them to create a good environment in the classroom. From the following excerpts the reader can appreciate some student perceptions during the intervention.

Cuando tú dices que había personas que tu creías que no ibas a poder con ellos ¿qué paso?

Me di cuenta de que no debía haber, pues como yo pensé que eso no, yo juzgué antes, de darme cuenta de que yo si podía trabajar y que trabajaban excelente.

[When you said you thought you could not handle some of your classmates, what did happen?

I realized I shouldn't have issues with them, I judged them beforehand without realizing that I could actually work with them and that they do an excellent job]

¿Tú crees que encontraste en ellos ciertas cualidades que antes no habías podido ver?

Si claro por ejemplo en George yo pensé que él no iba a poder o se iba a poner a burlarse de todo lo que contaban en la historia y no o sea lo tomó todo con mucha seriedad y así igual que Andrew, igual que Mary que todo el mundo sabe que Mary es un cuento.

[Did you see new qualities in them you did not see before?

Of course, for example I thought that George was not that able or he was going to make fun of what was told in the story but he was actually very serious about what we were doing and the same goes for Andrew, the same thing with Mary because everybody knows that she is out of this world]

Interview -G01-NB-13-11-2014

149

Students' classroom work demonstrated as well that they were using the English language to express social meanings that they constructed based on the content of the class. Data from the storytelling workshop 1 display some reflections upon the damage that rejection causes to "The Ugly Duckling" in the first story of the intervention. The

students disapproved the situation that the character of the story lived. The students acknowledged that he was rejected for being different and claimed that all people have the right to be different and to be accepted. The participants emphasized the feelings that people have, as it is shown in the next samples taken from some students' artifact and from the teacher's field notes:

"The ugly duckling was ugly for others, and for that he wasn't accepted & happy"

"Don't do bullying and discrimination for others because they stay sad"

Artifact 01-701-DM-03-06-2014

"Don't bother to people for their skin color"

Artifact 01-701-AD-NB-03-06-2014

"We must accept other as they are, no matter if it is different what matters is you heart"

Artifact 01-702-AQ -03-06-2014

"Your family not loved because is different, the poor ugly duckling became more and more unhappy because the other ducklings made fun of his appearance" (M's and S' discussion)

(Field notes -July 24th- 2014)

In the case of these artifacts, there are two types of findings. Firstly, data demonstrates that students were using simple past as planned in the fixed curriculum the school has for English language learning in terms of the written skill (e.g. use of simple past tense: "The ugly duckling was ugly for others" or "he wasn't accepted"; advising: "Don't do bullying" [sic] or "Don't bother to people for their skin color" [sic]). There were also other achievements at the oral level, for example when the 7th graders were interacting (e.g. "Your family not loved because is different, the poor ugly duckling became more and more unhappy because the other ducklings made fun of his appearance" (M's and S' discussion)). Secondly, it could be stated that students acknowledged that some people are rejected for being different. Students reflected upon this situation and gave advice to change this problematic situation that affect people's self-esteem. As for the case of the field notes, it could be seen that (M and S) suggest that people are affected in their feelings when they are not accepted totally by their peers.

The students reflected about different situations of the stories and asked for justice. They stated that nobody should suffer any discrimination. For example, in the second story “A lesson for my teacher”, one boy suffers discrimination by his teacher because of his religion. His friend’s father solved the situation in the story by using dialogue and at the same time he proposed forgiveness as a means to reconciliation. The students approved the solution due to the fact that they acknowledged reconciliation as a way to live in peace. The following picture exemplifies this concern:

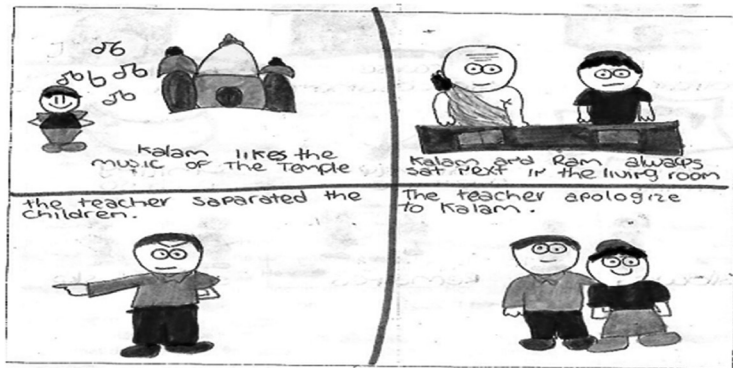


Figure 5. Artifact 01-701-LSC-AG-03-06-2014 Picture of the second story “A lesson for my teacher” drawn by LSC.

In regard to this picture, LSC stated that reconciliation is essential to maintain good relationships. In terms of L2 learning, it is evident in this artifact that the student is able to express ideas using simple present tense to describe scenes (e.g. “The teacher separated the children” or “The teacher apologize to...”). Additionally, the student expressed “likes” (e.g. “Kalam likes the music of the Temple”).

Reflecting stage

The main intention of this AR project was to identify the student social skills that are revealed when they participate in storytelling in L2 lessons. Storytelling was considered a means to engage secondary-school language learners (7th graders) in the development of different activities related to social skills, and thus the stories were used to help the students to reflect on their social skills and hopefully adjust their behavior towards classmates. The use of storytelling in the English

class apparently provided students with elements to be aware of social relationships. The L2 storytelling workshops were implemented over a period of 12 weeks and even though it cannot be argued that results completely come from such implementation some changes in students' CE were visible along with their ability to make sense orally and in written form based on the drawings that contextualized what they wanted to communicate.

It was interesting to see how the students explained their own ideas and opinions when they were stimulated to reflect on different topics related to social skills using the foreign language naturally as illustrated by some of the examples above. They felt more comfortable when sharing their points of view. They reflected on their personal experiences by connecting new experiences, and through this process they were apparently empowered to reflect on and make decisions in future situations that they may face.

At the end of the study, we also realized that the students had used the language in oral and written forms more comfortably as their performance in the activities demonstrated; the students gained more confidence to write about their reality, became familiar with the new vocabulary and used it to share experiences with their peers as in the letter we described earlier in this paper. There are of course more examples of students' work, but we will not be able to display this here due to space limitations. They were motivated to build texts that explained their personal experiences. They wrote pieces of advice or suggestions to their partners. They were attentive to their partner's ideas and in some cases, they encouraged their partners to solve a specific situation.

In some cases, the students fostered their social relationships, and they felt more confident about participating and interacting with their peers in order to take part in academic activities. The students reflected on their negative perceptions of their partners as illustrated in the interviews above. This project allowed the students to be closer to their partners, and some of the participants explained that they had changed their assumptions, misunderstandings and so forth. In addition to the fact that they had accepted their peers as part of their group, some students (called rejected or isolated) were motivated by their peers to work in the activities through positive comments. The participants acknowledged the importance of social skills to live in a community. These findings support the idea that it is possible to improve language learning environments by incorporating contents for students to deal with in the English language classroom according to their social needs.

Further studies are needed in order to correlate language improvement linguistically speaking to the use of L2 storytelling workshops. Additionally, longitudinal studies are also required in order to better substantiate such correlation.

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