The Use of Short Stories and Phonemic Awareness in the EFL Classroom to Improve Students' Reading and Writing Skills

La utilización de Literatura y la conciencia fonológica en la Clase de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera para mejorar las destrezas lectoras y de escritura del alumnado

SARA SÁNCHEZ VÍLCHEZ

GRADUADA EDUCACIÓN PRIMARIA MENCIÓN INGLÉS, MÁSTER EN EDUCACIÓN BILINGÜE. ASESORA TÉCNICO DOCENTE EN INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE TECNOLOGÍAS EDUCATIVAS Y FORMACIÓN DEL PROFESORADO, INTEF

Abstract

This study aims to analyse the impact of using children's literature in the English Foreign Language (EFL) classroom on students' motivation and reading habits, as well as the role of phonics and phonemic awareness in improving reading skills and confidence. The objectives include identifying students' reading habits and motivation in English and Spanish, identifying difficulties in reading English and the impact on motivation, analysing perception of time spent in reading activities, and studying the correlation between phonemic awareness and phonics in building better readers. The study will also examine the amount of new words acquired through the process and draw conclusions about the role of motivation in reading and language learning. The results show that the use of short stories in the classroom, combined with phonemic instruction, can be considered as a valuable tool in the English language classroom for students of all ages, as they helped students to increase spelling and vocabulary acquisition. Both factors in combination have helped to increase motivation among students towards language learning. Apart from that, this combination of factors creates a synergy in which there is a continuous feedback loop between them.

Key words: literature, motivation, phonemic awareness, reading skills, confidence, language learning.

Resumen

Este estudio pretende analizar el impacto del uso de Literatura infantil en el aula de Inglés como lengua extranjera en la motivación y hábitos lectores del alumnado, así como el rol de la fonética y conciencia fonológica en la mejora de las destrezas lectoras y confianza lectora. Los objetivos incluyen la identificación de hábitos lectores y motivación tanto en castellano como inglés, así como la identificación de las dificultades en la lectura en lengua inglesa y su impacto en la motivación. Analizando la percepción del tiempo empleado en actividades lectoras, así como la correlación entre la conciencia fonológica y fonética y el desarrollo de mejores lectores. El estudio examinará la cantidad de nuevo vocabulario adquirido en el proceso y aportará evidencias sobre el rol de la motivación en la lectura y aprendizaje de idiomas. Los resultados muestran que el uso de Literatura infantil, combinado con instrucción en conciencia fonológica, pueden considerarse una valiosa herramienta en la clase de lengua extranjera ya que ayudaron al alumnado de todas las edades a mejorar la adquisición de vocabulario y el deletreo. Además de esto, ambos factores en combinación han mostrado un aumento la motivación entre el alumnado hacia el aprendizaje de lenguas, creando una sinergia de continua retroalimentación entre ellos.

Palabras clave: literatura, motivación, conciencia fonológica, destrezas lectoras, confianza, aprendizaje de idiomas.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the focus of language teaching has moved from traditional grammar and vocabulary to functional language structures for communication. The goal for students is to develop communicative competence, which can be achieved through the integration of speaking, reading, writing, and listening in a balanced and meaningful way. Teachers are encouraged to adapt their methods to meet students' needs and use a variety of resources such in order to provide a meaningful context for communication. There is evidence to suggest that incorporating literary texts, such as short stories, into language learning can be beneficial for students of all ages (Collie & Slater, 1991; Hiervela & Boyle, 1988; Pardede, 2010). By exposing students to a wide range of vocabulary and syntax, promote critical thinking and creativity apart from language skills. Short stories can offer a multicultural context and a valuable insight into the real-world use of the language, helping students to become more familiar with different cultures. Using realia, or materials not specifically designed for language learners but used by native speakers, can also be beneficial as it exposes students to language that is more authentic and closer to how it is used in real life (Swaffar, 1985). In order to become effective users of a language, students need to be competent communicators and successful readers. There are two main approaches to reading instruction: a skills-based approach and a whole-language approach (Samuels & Kamilm, 1988).

The skills-based approach to reading instruction emphasises the role of phonological awareness and abilities as foundational skills for learning to read and write. It also involves decoding letters and words, and using reading as a means of gathering new information. Regarding the complexity of text comprehension and response both are increased progressively, culminating in more natural conversations (Anderson 1992). It is highly sequenced and draws attentive to phonological awareness and reading abilities as crucial for learning how to read, whereas meaning plays a secondary role to be devoted utterly.

Recent research suggests that a combination of phonemic awareness and phonics is necessary for teaching reading skills and constructing meaning (Adams, 1994; Anderson, 2005). Children should be encouraged to read aloud and recite what they have understood from the text. The ability to

understand the information read is essential for reading instruction. Improving recognition of letters and the ability to distinguish them from phonemes can aid in the reading process. (Adams, 2005). More recently, Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) suggested that «phonological awareness and phonological abilities play a vital role in learning how to read» (as cited in Anderson, 2005, pp. 15-18). Effective second language reading also requires students to develop various skills, such as scanning for specific information, skimming for general understanding, predicting words and structures, inferring opinions and attitudes, and actively engaging with the text (Harmer, 1998).

Research has shown that the development of higher order thinking skills as well as critical thinking skims become important for language learning in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Those included among this group are the ability to understand connections between languages; use prior knowledge to deduce meaning; identify language patterns and how language is used to express attitudes and ideas; as weak as understanding how language is used for different purposes (Chamot, 1995; Tawin & Al-Arishi, 1991; Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Davidson, 1994, 1995).

While much research has been done on reading methods and their impact on reading skills and higher order thinking skills development (Carnine et al., 2010; Snow et al., 1988), little attention has been given to the relationship between motivation and reading skills development and how they are mutually interrelated. Therefore, my study addresses the following questions:

- How can phonemic awareness help students improve their reading skills and word recognition?

- How does word recognition affect the process of vocabulary learning in context?

- Does the use of short-stories lower students' levels of anxiety and how are their reading habits affected?

- How can improving reading skills affect students' motivation towards foreign language learning?

- How are students' levels of anxiety lowered as their reading skills improve and how are their reading habits increased?

The above questions led to the following hypothesis: the lack of reading skills affect students' motivation towards reading and, consequently, towards foreign language learning. By working on phonemic awareness, students' word recognition will be improved. As a consequence, reading skills will be developed. This in turn will have a positive effect on their vocabulary acquisition.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Children's literature: some introductory remarks

Children's literature emerged as a distinct form in the 17th century and evolved in the 20th century in the United States. The educational ideas of Locke (1632-1734) and Rousseau (1712-1778), which focused on habits, social conventions, and the interplay between nature and nurture, significantly influenced modern notions of education.

Literature is now viewed as a tool to improve communicative abilities and language acquisition through reading, with extensive reading instruction being demonstrated to have positive effects on language learning. Teachers should include literary texts as a means of helping students acquire the target language in a natural and effective way. The use of literature in language teaching has evolved over time, with a shift towards communicative approaches in the 1970s. Extensive reading instruction has been shown to have positive impacts on language learning (Bamford & Day, 1994, 1997).

A variety of reading techniques, such as reading aloud, shared or guided reading, should be tailored to students' age, interests, and needs. It is also crucial to help students develop their listening skills, including the ability to sound out letters and blend them, in order to promote fluency in reading. Reading stories to our students helps to develop the four basic linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an interrelated manner. At first, we should be training our students on listening skills. Then, they will practice their speaking as they make predictions or get the general gist of a passage. As suggested, these two skills should precede reading and writing, especially at early stages of their

learning process. However, by reading to our students, we are helping them to build on their reading and as a consequence, their writing would be positively affected.

Learning how to read and write fluently is vital for our students in both L1 and L2. Recent studies agree on considering phoneme recognition as a predictor of early reading skills (Hulme et al., 2002). Therefore, learning how to decode letter symbols into sounds and identify sounds and their written form becomes an essential part of their training as fluent readers. This process is known as phonemic awareness. Teaching students pronunciation should be part of our daily routine in the classroom. It is important for our students to be aware of sounds in English language as it helps them to improve their comprehension of the spoken language. As Carruthers (1987) mentioned, «since the sound system is an integral and inseparable part of any language, the study of pronunciation must form an important part of an ESL program, arising naturally from other lesson material» (pp. 194-195).

As a result, they need to be trained in how to spell words. Moreover, in order to foster an adequate spelling acquisition, instruction in phonics becomes necessary (Seymur, 1992; Seimur et al., 1992). Explicit and systematic instruction in English spelling has a significant and lasting impact on orthographic performance, which is notably different from the incidental growth in spelling (Cañado, 2003).

2.2 Reading models

Different reading models can be considered when designing our lessons, the cultural, language, and personal growth models can be used to achieve desired outcomes (Carter & Long, 1991). These models alter the roles of both students and teachers, with students becoming more involved and teachers facilitating the learning process rather than adopting a teacher-centered approach.

The cultural model focuses on the value of literature as a source of knowledge about language and culture, with a focus on using literary texts to learn about history (Carter & Long, 1991). The student is encouraged to interpret the text but, there is only one possible interpretation and this unique interpretation of the text is transmitted to the students. This

model is clearly centred in transmission of knowledge and therefore, students play a passive role, being a teacher centred model.

As far as language model is concerned it focuses on using literary texts to improve vocabulary learning and acquire new language structures, rather than fully understanding the whole text. Within this model, teachers guide the students who play a more prominent role in the classroom (Carter & Long, 1984).

However, the personal growth model aims to engage students in reading literary texts and help them become more effective readers, with a focus on the individual student's interaction with the text and encouraging reading as a personal and social activity. This model is well-suited for more communicative approaches to language teaching as it encourages students to discuss and analyse the meaning of texts and share their ideas with others, creating a natural context for communication. Teachers must be prepared to challenge students' use and knowledge of the language and help them develop their cognitive skills through progressively more challenging activities in terms of cognitive demand. Therefore, students' development of the language would gradually develop towards a more sophisticated use of their language and expressions (Cummins, 1981).

2.3 Storytelling in the EFL Classroom

The personal growth model is well-suited for communicative language teaching and can facilitate the development of students' language skills and cognitive capacities as it aims to promote student's engagement with texts and encourage reading as a personal and social activity. Likewise, we are creating background knowledge, which is highly important for reading comprehension (Trealease, 2011).

Reading aloud to students helps developing their listening skills and activates cognitive processes related to reading comprehension helping to develop all four linguistic skills in an interrelated manner; providing input for language acquisition that is comprehensible and slightly beyond their current level of understanding (Krashen, 1993). This can lead to increased vocabulary and improved quality in oral and written language, as well as increased fluency and accuracy in the target language through increased reading, speaking, and writing practice. Reading

also fosters creativity and imagination, making it an intrinsically motivating activity.

Basic reading strategies, such as scanning and skimming, are also important for text understanding (Krashen, 1983). As Harmner (2010) pointed out, effective listening and reading involves activating a set of sub-skills, such as predicting content through processing new words and expressions and considering the tone and context of the speaker. Effective text comprehension requires students to be able to use context and prior knowledge to understand meaning, skim for the general idea, understand details, scan for specific information, identify discourse patterns, and infer opinion and attitude. These skills allow students to organize their thoughts, visualize the story in their minds, and understand the sequence of events (Harmer, 2010). Mastering basic reading and listening skills and sub-skills, can significantly impact students' attitudes towards reading and language learning, leading to increased creativity, imagination, confidence and motivation (Garvie, 1990; Brewster et al., 2002; Enever et al., 2006; Wright, 2009).

To create a positive learning environment when using literature as a teaching tool, it is helpful to implement scaffolding strategies like using visuals, modifying complex expressions, introducing the topic, and predicting relevant words. This can help students perceive reading as enjoyable and lead to more engagement, which can facilitate language acquisition and lower anxiety. (Saito et al., 1999; Krashen, 1983).

2.4 Phonic instruction and phonemic awareness

Both in their first and second languages phoneme recognition is a key predictor of early reading skills as well as fluent reading acquisition and writing skills (Hulme et al., 2002). On the other hand, phonemic awareness, or the ability to decode letter symbols into sounds and identify sounds and their written forms, are essential for fluent reading. Regularly teaching pronunciation is crucial for language education, as understanding the sound system of the language is important for improving comprehension of spoken language (Carruthers, 1987).

However, teaching pronunciation to students can be challenging due to differences between their native phonological code and the English code; as well as the lack of correspondence between the written and spoken codes.

Nevertheless, improving pronunciation can enhance both communication skills and understanding of written and oral texts, and mental associations between written words and spoken sounds can facilitate this process. To improve spelling, 'students need training in phonics and systematic, explicit instruction has been shown to have a significant impact on orthographic performance (Seymur, 1992; Seimur et al., 1992; Cañado, 2003).

In order tio help Spanish native speakers read and pronounce English effectively, it is important to identify and address potential difficulties they may encounter. Early phonetic instruction and training in supra-segmental features such as rhythm, stress, and intonation can help prevent errors from becoming ingrained and enable students to achieve an intelligible pronunciation that is understandable to native speakers. Teachers play a key role in modelling correct pronunciation and supra-segmental features for their students, with the aim of ensuring that their speech is clear and understandable, even if it carries a foreign accent. (Tench, 1992; Kenworthy, 1992; Brewster et al., 2002).

Spanish speakers may encounter difficulties when learning to speak and pronounce English effectively, such as with certain vowel and consonant sounds or consonant clusters that do not exist in their native language. English has a different stress and rhythm than Spanish, as it is a stressed-time language with clear distinctions between stressed and unstressed syllables and words. Intonation is also important in English, as it conveys meaning, emphasis, feelings, and emotions through changes in pitch. It is essential for students to be aware of basic patterns of intonation in English, as it is more «musical» than Spanish (Madrid & McLaren, 2004, p. 303). While teaching students to pronounce words accurately, it is important to set appropriate goals, rather than aiming for a native-like pronunciation. Focusing on clear and intelligible pronunciation can improve students' reading and speaking skills and increase their motivation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 School and group context

The research study was conducted with a group of 17 fourth-year students, aged 9-10 years old. Conducted in a monolingual primary school located in

a rural area in Castilla la Mancha, Spain. The school has a total enrollment of 140 students, who receive three hours of English language instruction per week according to Spanish legislation. Population is diverse, including a high number of students from immigrant families and a significant proportion of students from low and medium-income families who receive free meals.

All the students have had some exposure to English since they were 3 years old, and four of them have been diagnosed with attention disorders. The study compared the results of traditional teaching methods for vocabulary learning and spelling to those obtained through the use of short stories, direct spelling training, and intensive phonics training[1].

3.2 Method

This study focuses on using short stories (fictional or traditional) as children's literature in the classroom, with a focus on illustrated books as a scaffolding resource to aid understanding. The available resources and titles in the market offer a wide range of options to meet students' needs and align with the curriculum. Children's literature is believed to initiate children into literature (Meek, 1982).

3.2.1 Phonemic awareness

The research study incorporated the use of phonics, specifically using synthetic phonics materials, in order to improve students' spelling and vocabulary learning. A total amount of 13.5 hours phonics training over a period of nine weeks, with daily sessions lasting 30 minutes. Mainly focused on teaching students the sounds, songs, and movements associated with each sound. Phonics training included the use of songs and actions to associate sounds with specific movements. Sounds were practiced in groups over a period of three days, and students then practiced simple blending using images and letters to match words. Word-writing dictation was also practiced.

---

[1]   Since there is only one group of students per level in this school, they are the only group in fourth year for this study. It was not possible to have a control group.

After mastering initial and final blending, students in the research study moved on to practicing initial consonant blending and final word blending, using sounds, movements, and dictation. Followed by a challenging matching activity in which students had to match initial sounds, images, and words, as these words often included irregular patterns that tested their understanding of the sounds. During word dictation and blending practice, students used lists of words provided by a synthetic phonics method, including tricky words that are difficult to read through blending and listening for sounds. These words included alternative spellings, such as «like» and «my,» and were practiced every other day after the 8th week of training.

In order to practice sentence dictation, the research study used «sentence sticking» activities from the synthetic phonics method, as well as modified activities where students had to fill in missing words in a sentence and match it with the correct picture. Students found initial and final consonant blending apart from irregular or alternative spellings particularly challenging.

3.2.2 Materials selection

Reading is an important skill for language learning that involves various cognitive processes that help readers understand and engage with texts. When selecting reading materials for language learning, it is important to consider the students' cognitive development, the variety of topics covered, and the potential to enhance motivation and self-esteem. Ellis and Brewster (2002) also recommend considering linguistic, psychological, cognitive, social, and cultural elements, as these can help develop vocabulary, thinking strategies, social values, and cultural understanding in students. Aspects such as vocabulary and structures, literary devices, and the content of the story, as well as psychological factors such as illustrations and layout should be considered as well within the selection process. Bearing in mind factors such as the age and language proficiency of the students can be also beneficial for the students.

3.2.3 Traditional activities to teach vocabulary

Two sessions were designed in order to teach vocabulary using traditional activities, following the suggestions provided in a textbook. Students worked

in pairs or as a whole group, and the seating arrangement was kept in a horseshoe configuration without being modified. The length of the sessions varied, lasting between 60 or 45 minutes, as a result this affected the number of activities planned.

- *Session 1:* the first activity started with a chant in which students listened to the vocabulary and repeated the words out loud as a whole group. Followed by a listening comprehension task in which students had to listen to a recording and recognize the different elements related to the vocabulary by saying the numbers that appeared in the pictures, also done as a whole group. The third was a game using flashcards as a practice stage, in which students matched words and flashcards and played «What is missing?» as a whole group. The last activity was a practice in the activity book, in which students worked in pairs to match images and words and fill in gaps in sentences using the vocabulary given.

- *Session 2:* firstly, students participated in a brainstorming and flashcard matching activity to review previously learned vocabulary. In the practice stage, they listened to a quiz and completed a fill-in-the-gaps activity in their workbooks as a drilling exercise. The final activity of the lesson involved producing a small writing using the vocabulary from the lesson. This session lasted for 45 minutes.

3.2.4 *Activities for the use of short stories*

The activities for reading and writing in this research study were designed using a bottom-up approach, which emphasizes the importance of starting with the most specific levels of language (such as letters and words) before constructing the overall meaning of the text. This approach suggests that readers process individual letters and words before constructing the meaning of phrases, clauses, and sentences (Paran, 1997, pp. 2-3).

Literature can improve listening and reading skills in the classroom. Careful activity planning can guide students through pre-, while-, and post-stages of listening and reading activities. Therefore, providing background knowledge and engage students through questions and hypotheses should be the point of departure. Followed by extracting meaning

through context as they enjoy the activity. To finally use the language of the text for a different purpose through various activities.

Careful design of the activities and strategies to be used, will undoubtedly help students to develop reading sub-skills such as predicting, skimming, scanning and inferring meaning from context as we work on receptive skills. As per receptive skills we understand listening and reading. In the pre-reading stage, it is important to engage students' interest and provide them with background knowledge as we prepare them for the reading.

In order to help students develop listening and reading skills, various activities were designed to focus on predicting, skimming, scanning, and inferring meaning from context. These activities included pre-reading stages to provide background knowledge and stimulate student interest, while-reading stages to develop sub-skills, and post-reading stages to internalize language through various activities. Vocabulary was introduced before reading to increase confidence, and activities progressed from word recognition to reading comprehension. The final task involved creating new writing with the learned structures.

In order to encourage cooperative learning and promote student autonomy, changes to the seating arrangement were made, grouping students in a way that balanced ability levels and encouraged collaboration and peer evaluation. Scaffolding was also provided through the use of multiple mediators such as physical aids, linguistic support, and non-linguistic cues. Additionally, tasks were designed to progressively move from lower-order thinking skills to higher-order thinking skills, in which the main aim was to support student learning and promote the development of higher-order thinking skills.

3.2.5 *From theory to practice*

A lesson plan for a reading intervention using a short story was divided into four sessions, incorporating activities that promoted all four linguistic skills and progressed from lower to higher cognitive demand. Various groupings were used to engage and motivate students as they progressed from word level to text level comprehension.

- *Session 1:* during the first reading session, three stages were addressed through various activities. One pre-reading activity involved activating prior knowledge through the recollection of

words related to feelings. Another pre-reading activity involved observing the book cover and making predictions about the story through the asking of questions related to the visuals. These activities aimed to arouse student curiosity and facilitate engagement with the material.

A third activity was implemented during the reading stage and involved providing students with main words related to feelings using colourless pictures. Students worked in groups to match the pictures with the corresponding feelings as the story was being read aloud. The aim of this activity was to enhance reading and listening skills, as well as to improve multitasking abilities by providing both oral and written information. The activity also reinforced the connection between written and spoken language.

The fourth activity was a post-reading activity in which students worked in pairs to complete activities in their booklets in order to develop cooperative working skills and reinforce vocabulary learning, while also practicing spelling.

• *Session 2:* during the second session, three activities were planned. The first activity was a pre-reading activity that involved recalling words and colours related to emotions in order to activate prior knowledge and work on the remembering stage of the learning process.

The second activity was a while-reading activity that involved reading the story to the students and asking them questions about the sequence and meaning of words within the story, encouraging them to use context to facilitate understanding and make connections to their prior knowledge. This activity aimed to help students understand the meaning of words and work at the understanding level of the learning process. At this stage, students worked with manipulative materials to match characters with different parts of the text as the story was being read. This activity aimed to improve listening skills, multitasking abilities, reading speed, and understanding of written and oral messages, as well as to strengthen the ability to remember, organize, and connect new information with previously learned material.

During the third activity of the second session, students were given manipulative materials and worked in groups to match new words from the book with their definitions and meanings in Spanish. Each group was given a set of words to match and were provided with a panel to check their answers after completing their chart. The completed charts were then displayed for the other groups to use to complete their own «dictionaries». The aim of this activity was to reinforce vocabulary learning and engage in guided reading at the word level, requiring students to identify definitions, observe the context of the story, and make predictions based on their prior knowledge and the context of the story. This activity focused on applying learning strategies and required students to solve problems through the use of their prior knowledge and the context of the story. Students worked in pairs on activities 4 and 5 in their booklets, which included creating a dictionary with new words and completing a crossword, in order to reinforce vocabulary learning and spelling, and encourage peer work and peer assessment.

• *Session 3:* during the third session, four activities were planned. The first activity was a warm-up and while-reading activity in which students matched the different parts of the story with the pictures and sequenced the events. This activity aimed to activate students' schemata and help them remember and apply their knowledge to sequence the events in the story.

During the second activity of the third session, students worked in pairs on a fill-in-the-gaps activity in their booklets with the aim of exploring the text in greater depth and internalizing the events, words, and meanings. Students worked in groups on a post-reading activity involving the exploration and analysis of information from the text through the creation of a spider web diagram. This activity aimed to engage higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and required students to analyze and diagram information.

The last activity was a post-reading in which students classified different feelings as positive or negative and provided evidence from the text to support their classification. This activity required students to evaluate the information obtained from a written text at a higher level of cognition.

- *Session 4:* during the fourth session, students engaged in a post-reading activity at a higher level of cognition. As a group, they discussed the problem the monster in the story had and made hypotheses about the plot. They also connected the monster's feelings to their own experiences and designed a new monster individually, describing a different feeling using the structures from the story. This activity required students to engage in higher-order thinking skills by creating their own design and writing their own piece of text.

  Students created their own monsters based on personal experiences and worked on their writing skills by planning and writing a personal piece of guided writing. These activities aimed to provide opportunities for interaction with the text by relating the story to students' own lives and giving them a meaningful context for communication in which they felt free to share their experiences and took risks in expressing themselves and exploring new uses of language. The goal was to offer a context in which writing had a purpose of expressing something related to students' own experiences and a real need for communication.

4. MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 Data collection

In order to identify the improvement in spelling after implementing phonemic instruction and using short stories, pre- and post-tests were administered in both spelling and vocabulary recognition in order to identify the improvement in spelling after implementing phonemic instruction and using short stories. By comparing traditional teaching methods and the use of short stories combined with phonemic instruction.

4.1.1 *Pre-test and post-test in vocabulary and spelling without using short-stories*

Starting by a pre-test for previous vocabulary knowledge, a list of eight English words was presented; requiring students to write the corresponding meanings in Spanish before receiving any instruction. Following a

vocabulary presentation stage and drilling activities focused on vocabulary recognition, the same test was administered again. The results of the pre- and post-tests were compared, with misspelled words and incorrect meanings both being treated as incorrect responses.

4.1.2 *Pre-test and post test in vocabulary and spelling using short-stories and phonemic instruction*

The second part of this study involved administering a pre-test for spelling and vocabulary recognition before introducing short stories and phonemic instruction in the classroom. A list of ten words related to the story were dictated for students to write on a grid, those words carefully selected to align with the sounds that would be trained on using the synthetic phonics method. After completing phonics training and working with the short story, students were tested again on spelling using the same list of words dictated by the teacher. The results of the pre- and post-tests were then analysed and compared.

Both pre and post-test were used to assess students' vocabulary acquisition. Before any intervention, students were given a grid with ten words and asked to write their meanings in Spanish. After the intervention, the same group of words was tested again in a post-test. For both tests students were given a limited time in order to complete them. The spelling tests were administered through dictation, while the tests assessing meaning association were completed through direct answers. Covering in both cases the same content. Misspelled words and incorrect answers related to meaning were considered incorrect responses and treated as such in the analysis of the results.

4.1.3 *Reading habits, environment and motivation*

A questionnaire was used to gather information about the reading habits of the students, including their habits in Spanish and English and the influence of their environment, specifically focusing on family reading habits and the availability of materials at school and at home. A Google forms questionnaire was used and the main objective was to investigate the students' motivation towards reading in English and the frequency of short story use by other teachers. This information was gathered through

direct questioning in the classroom. Normally student's choice is limited by teachers materials selection. I asked students about their favourite and least favourite activities and the reasons for their preferences at the end of each session as I wanted to understand how the different tasks suggested affected students in terms of motivation and self-esteem. This information was gathered and recorded in my session diary.

4.1.4 The use of short stories in the EFL classroom by other teacher-colleagues

I was also interested in gathering information from primary school teacher colleagues at non-bilingual schools on their use of short stories and the reasoning behind their choices. To do this, I asked them to complete a questionnaire using Google Forms, which focused on the benefits of including short stories in their programs. I also wanted to know if they were using short stories, what benefits they would highlight, and if they were not using them, what the reasons behind this decision were. I relied on the responsibility and honesty of the participants in regards to ethical considerations.

The research results, obtained from a small group of students in a rural area, cannot be generalised but can be applied to this particular school and others with similar characteristics. The results of the questionnaire completed by teacher colleagues at non-bilingual schools provide insight into the situation in this area and in these types of schools.

4.2 Main findings

4.2.1 Students' reading habits

The environment was defined as including the reading habits of the students' parents and access to reading materials. The results showed that 35.3 % of the students reported that their parents always read at home, 41.2 % reported that their parents sometimes read at home, and 23.5 % reported that their parents never read at home. Additionally, 29.4 % of the students reported having a lot of books to read at home, 52.9 % reported having some books, and 17.6 % reported not having any literature at home.

Students were asked about their reading habits at home in their free time in order to understand the relationship between their environment (e.g.,

reading parents and access to reading materials) and their reading habits. This was done with the belief that belonging to a reading family and having access to reading materials can foster a desire to read, whereas the opposite can be a hindrance. The results showed that 17.6 % of the students reported reading a lot, 64.7 % reported reading sometimes, and 17.6 % reported never reading at home. More than half of the students reported that English books are too difficult and, as a result, they never read in English. 35.3 % of the students considered English books difficult but still read them sometimes, indicating an interest in reading but potentially using materials beyond their language proficiency level.

Most students within this study when encountering new or difficult words in a second language, they tend to focus on those words rather than the overall meaning of the text. This is something they are able to overcome when reading in their first language, as they can continue reading even if they do not understand all the words. As a result, they may be able to understand the overall meaning of the text but feel frustrated when encountering new words. It is therefore essential to teach these strategies in the classroom to help students overcome this frustration. One strategy that can be effective is extensive reading, as it provides exposure to a wide range of vocabulary and syntax that can facilitate comprehension. According to Krashen (2013, p. 17), «background knowledge is a tremendous facilitator of comprehension», and extensive reading can provide a strong foundation for further reading.

The main difficulty students face during silent reading is unknown vocabulary, while the main difficulties during reading aloud are pronunciation and unknown vocabulary. It seems clear to infer that reading promotion in English should focus on teaching students about the main sounds and proper pronunciation. This will help students feel more confident when reading out loud apart from improving their language and speaking skills.

Although the environment can impact reading habits in a first language, there are also internal factors related to vocabulary knowledge and the phonemic system in a second language that can influence reading habits those are connected to anxiety and motivation levels towards language learning and reading, as students may not feel confident enough. Reading requires

practice and is directly connected to vocabulary learning and acquisition. The more students read, the better they become at reading, both aloud and silently. Reading also helps with spelling and decoding sounds into words and letters. As students read more, their spelling improves.

Reading in a second language can be a spiral process, improving as students read more. This can positively impact motivation and confidence, leading to a more positive attitude towards learning and lower anxiety levels. As long as students feel capable of reading in a second language, they may be more motivated to push beyond their limits. As a result, teachers should allocate time for reading aloud in their lessons. It is important to select appropriate materials for students, but also to allow them to choose materials that are personally interesting or more accessible for them in terms of reading and comprehension.

4.2.2 *Phonemic awareness and vocabulary learning*

1. **Results obtained before and after using traditional teaching methods.**

As the analysis showed there is an average improvement of 38.24 % in students' spelling mistakes after the intervention. Most errors were due to differences between the English and Spanish phonemic systems. Most of the mistakes were related to transfer from the students' first language (L1) to their second language (L2). Common mistakes included misunderstanding the sound of digraphs or bad consonant sounding. The largest improvement observed was a 58.82 % however, some students continued to make mistakes due to the transfer of sounds between languages.

An analysis of the differences between students' answers in the pre-test and post-test showed good progress, considering that these students had not previously received formal phonemic instruction and their results were based on memory and routine. Most students were able to understand most words, but had difficulty finding the sound-spelling correspondence in English, often relying on their knowledge of the phonemic system of their native language. It is important to note that some of the students in the study were already speakers of a second language at home, as they spoke Polish or Romanian and received instruction in written language in both Spanish and English.

The results showed an average improvement of 56.6 % in vocabulary learning after a traditional teaching intervention. A detailed analysis revealed that students had an easier time learning words with Latin roots, as they could rely on their knowledge of these words in their first language. Nevertheless, some of the words needed a bit more practice since after extensive practice at word level most students still have some difficulties with the meaning of these words, most specifically in those, which have little relation to their interests and needs.

The results from this research show that traditional teaching methods can be effective in improving students' spelling and vocabulary learning, but there is still room for improvement. Implementing an intensive phonemic instruction and using short stories in the classroom can also be beneficial in improving these skills, especially in terms of helping students overcome challenges related to transferring their knowledge of their first language to the second language. It is important to carefully select materials and provide students with strategies to help them navigate unknown vocabulary and pronunciation, and to encourage regular reading practice to improve overall language proficiency. Promoting reading skills in a second language through a long-term «free reading program» in school can be beneficial for all students, especially for those who are less inclined to read in English. Providing access to appropriate materials based on students' proficiency levels and promoting reading in the classroom can lead to benefits in reading in the second language both in school and at home. Research has shown that free reading is particularly effective in promoting English as a foreign language (Krashen, 2007).

It is clear that students' interests and habits play a role in their ability to learn vocabulary, and that traditional teaching methods can improve their skills in spelling and vocabulary learning. However, it is also evident that some words are more difficult to learn, particularly those that do not have clear correspondences with their first language. Implementing intensive phonemic instruction and the use of short stories may further improve students' language skills, and it is important to consider the use of materials that are suited to students' proficiency level and interests. Additionally, incorporating opportunities for practice and routine can help students to automate the decoding process and establish stronger connections between sounds and written forms.

2. Results obtained before and after using intensive phonics instruction and the use of short stories.

The results of the study showed that the implementation of intensive phonics instruction and the use of short stories in the classroom had a positive impact on the students' spelling abilities, with an average improvement of 49.41 %. However, it was also noted that some students still relied on their first language reading and writing skills, leading to mistakes in their spelling performances. Further analysis will focus on the most difficult words for the students and the influence of phonemic instruction on their post-test results.

However, some students still struggled with certain sounds and digraphs, particularly when they were relying on their first language for spelling. The use of synthetic phonics method and short stories seemed to be effective in improving the students' spelling abilities, but further practice and instruction may be needed to fully overcome these challenges.

In terms of the effectiveness of phonemic instruction and the use of short stories in improving spelling and vocabulary acquisition in English language learners showed an average improvement of 49.41 % in spelling and 56.6 % in vocabulary. The students performed better on words with Latin roots and struggled more with those that had little relation to their interests and needs. Intensive phonemic instruction was found to be beneficial for all students, although their individual capacities and interests also played a role in their improvement. The combination of phonemic instruction, systematic spelling instruction, and the use of short stories was seen as an effective method for improving writing skills in terms of spelling.

In general, the results obtained in this analysis show a positive impact on the students' vocabulary acquisition, as they were able to make connections between their prior knowledge and the new words they were learning, and they significantly improved their understanding and use of these words. Additionally, the results indicate that some words were easier for the students to learn than others, possibly due to the prior familiarity with the concept, or the presence of similar words in their mother tongue. Overall, these results suggest that the combination of short stories and phonemic instruction can be effective strategies for improving vocabulary acquisition in a second language.

Individual student performances improved, with most students giving correct answers in the second attempt after receiving the intervention. The combination of phonemic instruction, systematic spelling instruction, and the use of short stories appeared to be effective in helping students improve their writing skills in terms of spelling and vocabulary acquisition.

All in all, the use of phonemic instruction and short stories in the classroom had a positive impact on students' spelling and vocabulary acquisition, with average improvements of 11.17 % and 14.7 %, respectively. It was found that vocabulary acquisition improved more significantly through the use of short stories, while spelling progress was boosted through the use of both short stories and phonemic instruction. Despite those results, mastering the ability to decode sounds into symbols (phonemic awareness) was a slower process that required more training and practice. Overall, the use of short stories and phonemic instruction was beneficial for language acquisition.

3. Other teachers' practices in non-bilingual schools.

Under the light of the results obtained from the survey 39.1 % of the teachers use short stories in their classrooms, while 21.7 % hardly ever use them, being used occasionally but not regularly by 34.8 % of them. Some of the teachers reported a lack of training and materials as the main barriers to using them. Other answers drew attention to the absence of training, materials, as well as the lack of time for implementation and preparation. The findings suggest that providing training and addressing these issues could lead to more widespread use of short stories in primary school English language education.

5. Conclusions

In the light of the results obtained using short stories in combination with phonemic awareness was beneficial for students, improving their spelling and reading skills; increasing their vocabulary acquisition and appeared to

be effective in improving students' language skills. In other words, the results suggest that the use of short stories and phonemic awareness can be beneficial for students' language learning.

It was observed how both interventions had a positive effect, with an average improvement of 49.41 % in spelling and 71.32 % in vocabulary acquisition. The use of short stories in particular had a greater impact on vocabulary acquisition compared to spelling. The study also found that some teachers in non-bilingual schools do not use short stories regularly in their classrooms due to lack of training and materials, as well as time constraints. It was suggested that training programs and resources should be provided to encourage the regular use of short stories in English as a foreign language classroom. Additionally, it was noted that more practice may be needed to fully improve students' spelling skills, and that an extended program combining reading and spelling instruction could be beneficial.

Despite the fact that most students have access to plenty of reading materials and their parents are good examples of readers, they do not consider themselves frequent readers in their first language. However, they read more than their parents in their first language. As a result, that leads us to believe that external factors are not determinant to their reading habits but they influence them at a certain level. As it can be seen they read a bit more than their parents, and have plenty of access to reading materials, as the school runs an intensive reading program in Spanish. However, internal factors such as lack of confidence when reading and pronouncing words as well as the lack of vocabulary prevent them from reading in English.

At the same time, their own perception about their capacities when reading in a second language plays an important role in their reading habits. As a consequence, they read less in the L2 and are unable to transfer basic reading skills they have in their L1 to the second language. For this reason, extensive reading programs in the second language are essential in schools in order to help our students to become fluent readers in the target language.

All in all, this study suggests that the use of short stories in the classroom, combined with phonemic instruction, can be considered as a valuable tool in the English language classroom for many reasons afore mentioned. The results obtained lead to certain optimism and could be used as a trigger

for those teachers who are not yet ready for the implementation of short stories in their classrooms. As this investigation shows, not many teachers are using them on a regular basis for many reasons including the lack of time for implementation, lack of training or the effort in terms of preparation time.

It would be desirable that these results could be considered for future investigations about the benefits phonemic awareness offers when developing reading skills in combination with consistent reading programs in the second language. This could be considered as a possible line of work and how intensive reading programs extended in time result as beneficial for the students learning a foreign language. Both elements combined favour language acquisition and increase the students' motivation towards language learning. It was remarkable how those students who had previously struggled with the subject showed improvement within their post-tests. I believe that a longer study would provide more accurate results on the effectiveness of phonemic awareness instruction, especially for students who have not received any phonemic instruction before.

As a researcher, I had to work with the same group of students in the absence of another group of similar age at the school. This may have affected the results of my research, as it was not possible to use the same sample for comparison. Different variables may have influenced the outcomes of the study as a result.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Adams, M. J. (1994). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print.* MIT Press.

Anderson, N. J. (2005). Getting a head start in literacy: The importance of phonemic awareness. *Classroom Connections*, *1*(2), 15-18.

Brewster, J., & Ellis, G. (2002). *Tell it again! The new story telling handbook for primary teachers.* Pearson.

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches.* Pearson.

Carruthers, R. (1987). Teaching Pronunciation. En M. H. Long & J. C. Richards, *Methodology in TESOL. A book of readings.* Newbury House Publishers.

Hulme, C., Hatcher, P. J., Nation, K., Brown, A., Adams, J., & Stuart, G. (2002). Phoneme awareness is a better predictor of early reading skill than onset-rime awareness. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, (82), 2-28.

Paran, A. (1997). *Bottom-up and top-down processing*. Center for Applied Language Studies, City University of Reading.

Seymour, P. H. K. (1992). Cognitive theories of spelling and implications for education. En C. M. Sterling, & C. Robson (Ed.), *Psychology, spelling and education* (pp.50-70). Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Snow, C., Burns, M., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. National Academy Press.

Turker, F. (1991). Using «literature» in language teaching. *Hacettepe Üniversitesi EAltim Fakültesi Dergisi*, (6), 299-305.

Wright, A. (2009). *Storytelling with children*. Oxford University Press.