

# 5 Exploring literary texts to develop students' creative writing skills: proposed activities for Spanish as a foreign language

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## Abstract

Literary texts offer a rich environment for language learning that teachers can exploit to develop not only students' linguistic (pragmatic, discursive) and cultural skills, but also communication and creative skills. In our study, we have used literature with different writing activities that involved the use of students' imagination and creativity. In order to develop these skills, which require students' communicative competence as well as their imagination, we need for them to be able to create the meaningful contexts that lie within fictional stories. The assumption is that, as students become familiar with the characters in the novels, they will be able to recreate situations that make sense for those very stories, generating a shared world in which they could immerse themselves. In that shared world, they would be able to participate in possible dialogues and build stories that could have taken place, thus developing their creative and communicative skills. In this paper, we show how the literature-based learning activities that we have designed following this hypothesis have helped students empathise with characters in novels and imagine fictional worlds. Such new fictional worlds have in turn empowered students to communicate in Spanish in an authentic way, that is, in a way that is similar to that of the characters in the novels.

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## 1. Introduction

Literary texts are considered to be ‘controlled inputs’, capable of offering an appropriate level for the learner (Jouini, 2008). Much like newspapers and magazines, literary texts are authentic documents, for although they have not been designed for language teaching purposes, they allow an interactive process of communication between authors, students, and teachers as mediators. However, fictional works of literature tend to go beyond newspapers and magazines when it comes to combining oral and written language. This combination of discourses makes literature an ideal resource from which students can envisage and create situations in which they can act authentically (Sanz Pastor, 2006). That is to say, on the one hand, when recreating situations, students will be manoeuvring in a communicative environment in which they will be able to share ideas, emotions, and information. On the other hand, by acting authentically, their verbal communication process for problem solving, negotiation of meanings and exchange of reactions will respond to a specific objective and will follow normal communication mechanisms (Fernández, 2001). Additionally, the relative length of novels gives students the necessary time to become familiar with the stories, characters, and plot development of the text, which will be required for the development of the students’ creative skills.

## 2. Use of literature in language learning: developing stories

In order to exploit literature for creative purposes, we have been exploring how best to assist students to build fictional contexts and recreate situations. Fictional reality in literature depends largely on the imagination of the reader since, as Rítlyová (2014) states, even just reading a text without additional tasks

can be considered creative because, by doing so, readers develop their fantasy. However, not all students have the same degree of imagination, but encouraging students' empathy towards the characters is an effective way to open and nurture their imagination. Students get into the characters' shoes and live through their adventures; by doing this, they become creative and construct meaningful and conceivable contexts (Martín de León & García Hermoso, 2016). These contexts created by the students will help them predict possible reactions of fictional characters to a given narrative, encouraging students not only to build and improve reading skills (Jouini, 2008) but also to develop creative writing skills.

### 3. Activities

The following three cases illustrate three projects relating to our teaching practice. In each case, students identify with characters and predict their possible behaviours (Table 1).

Table 1. Three cases

	Targeted students	Materials	Methodology	Creative Task
Case 1	Higher education students of Spanish as a second language (CEFR B2/C1)	Extracts from Don Quixote and El Mundo de Custodio I	Parallel texts methodology	Writing dialogues
Case 2	Primary school students (in Spain), language and literature (1º ESO)	El Mundo de Custodio I and II	Parallel texts methodology Gamification	Completing a chapter
Case 3	Higher education students of Spanish as a second language (CEFR B2/C1)	A choice between Mario Vargas Llosa and Isabel Allende's novels	Scaffolding methodology	Interviewing a character

#### 3.1. Case 1

In our first project, we used the *parallel texts methodology*, consisting of working hand in hand with two literary texts whose main characters share a number of behavioural or personality traits (Martín de León & García Hermoso, 2016).

This methodology allowed students to develop strategies to build meaningful contexts needed to work with idiomatic expressions and to detect and develop sarcasm. In Case 1, students had to write potential dialogues for an extract of one of the texts given. The students completed the task successfully and the dialogues they created fitted well with the characters' language and personalities. Examples of lines produced by two different groups of students in response to the same script are available in the [supplementary materials](#) (Annex 1).

### 3.2. Case 2

For our second project, we used the same methodology as in Case 1, but also included *gamification*, based on the inclusion of elements that are characteristic of games in the classroom (Foncubierta & Rodríguez, 2014). To help students recognise the characters' speech and to immerse themselves in the cultural context of the novel *El Mundo de Custodio I*, we prepared a board game that students played in class<sup>3</sup>. To evaluate the success of this activity, we asked them to write the ending of an incomplete chapter in the sequel *El Mundo de Custodio II*, which they had not yet read. The students were able to successfully complete the chapter, using their creativity and conveying the personalities of the main characters in their dialogues. Examples of texts produced by a group of students are available in the [supplementary materials](#) (Annex 2).

### 3.3. Case 3

For this project, we applied *scaffolding methodology*, which works by guiding and supporting students to reach their potential level through learning materials that promote the progressive use of communication skills (Martín de León & García Hermoso, 2020). In this particular case, the support given to students consisted of activities carried out in the classroom: listening to radio programmes and reading newspaper articles, which included interviews with authors Isabel Allende and Mario Vargas Llosa. We also offered students the chance to carry out a fictional interview with Celestina, the main character of

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3. <http://elmundodecustodio.com/materiales-para-profesores-de-lengua-y-literatura-de-educacion-primaria-y-secundaria/>

Fernando de Rojas' work first published in 1499 (Duque, Martín de León, & García Hermoso, 2019).

Whereas in Cases 1 and 2 students had to step into the novel so they could recreate scenes and dialogues, with this third project they had to bring the fictional character out of the novel and interview them in order to empathise with their emotions. Examples of texts produced by a group of students are available in the [supplementary materials](#) (Annex 3).

## 4. Methods

We have carried out pedagogical research to test how empathising with characters – as in Case 3 – helped students. Students had also been asked to interview a fictional character from a novel by either Isabel Allende or Mario Vargas Llosa.

We asked all 14 students who took part in the creative writing activity to participate in our study and complete a questionnaire, which consisted of six questions intended to assess the participants' opinions regarding the usefulness of the activity they completed. Nine participants answered the questionnaire.

## 5. Results and discussion

The responses to the questionnaires ([Figure 1](#)) confirm that all participants felt the interviews carried out in Case 3 had helped them understand the personality, the behaviour, and the fictional world of the characters they interviewed. In principle, participants did not believe that interviewing their characters had helped them to better understand their language. However, in answering the last question ([Figure 3](#)) they highlighted specific linguistic gains from this activity.

It is interesting to see that, when asked if they could create an alternative ending or a new chapter where they could include the information gathered from their

interviews (Figure 2), most of the students preferred the option of writing a new chapter. A possible reason for this could be that this type of activity collected information that comes from the point of view of a single character in the novel. In this sense, the responses of the characters would help students dig into certain aspects of their lives.

Figure 1. Aspects of my character that I have been able to know thanks to this activity

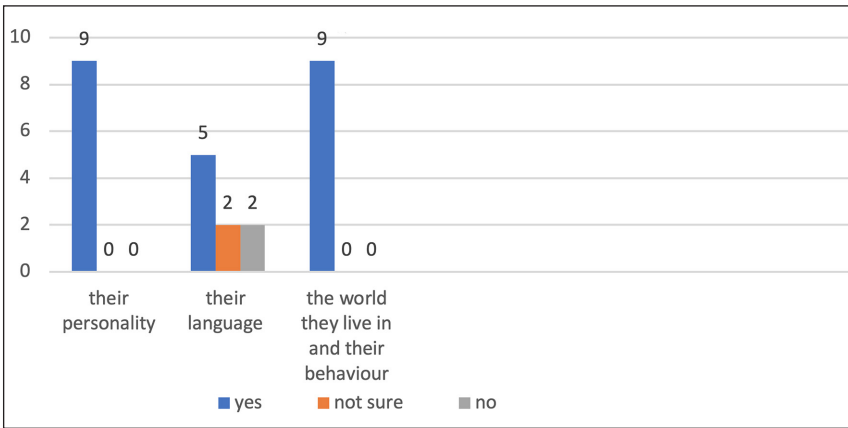
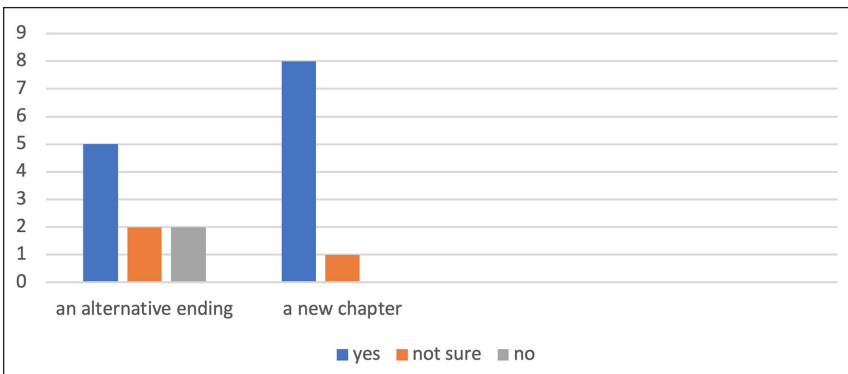


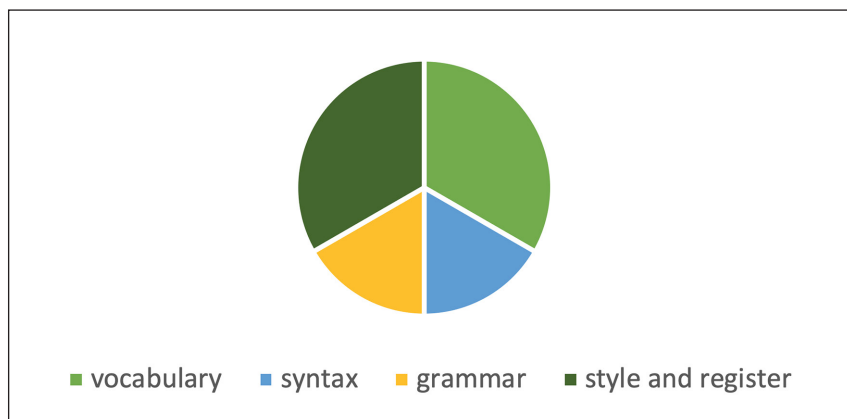
Figure 2. Creative activity that I would feel confident doing after having completed the interview



Although one of nine participants indicated they were not sure if they would feel confident creating a new chapter, none of them indicated they could not engage in this task. Additionally, we were pleased to see that more than half of our participants felt they could create an alternative ending, given that the skills required to offer a new ending go beyond what has been achieved by empathising with the character and the contextualisation. It was encouraging to see that some students felt confident they had the tools to recreate the world of the character and engage in such a task at this stage.

As far as perception of linguistic gains is concerned, eight of nine students responded that the activity had had a positive impact on their linguistic skills, especially in terms of vocabulary, style, and register (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Contribution of this activity to students' language learning



## 6. Conclusion

Our goal when working with literature was to help our students empathise with novel characters and become familiar with their fictional worlds. We hypothesised that once students knew the characters, they would have the tools to act and communicate in an authentic fashion, as described in the

introduction, given that they would have become familiar with the context in which to do so.

Successful completion of the creative activity in each of the three cases presented in this paper has demonstrated students' ability to recreate the world of their characters and act in an authentic way.

With Case 3, we wanted to find out to what extent the activities we had prepared for them had contributed to achieving our goal. That is, if the activities we offered our students in our teaching practice provided them a space where they could build empathy towards the characters, and contributed positively to the development of their imagination when using creative writing skills. The results we have observed clearly confirm that the activity proposed has successfully achieved our goals.

In subsequent studies, it would be interesting to work with one single character of one novel to have the opportunity to compare the interviews of different students for the same character and to account for the different perspectives in which the students perceive the character.

## 7. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/16xt1fr9vv584j14kq52txhzbdsnioh4>

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