

# Supporting Language Acquisition through Children's and Adolescent Literature

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*Recent shifts in language education have concentrated on developing students' communicative abilities (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in foreign and second languages. Despite these trends, many language classrooms focus heavily on the development of students' knowledge of grammatical structures. Class activities are often intended to further students' grammatical knowledge instead of developing students' communicative abilities. In addition, students rarely have the opportunity to engage with authentic materials written by and for native speakers. This article describes a research study which was conducted in order to explore whether children's and adolescent literature in Spanish might contribute to the development of students' communicative abilities in Spanish. Sixty-eight students in three second-semester Spanish courses at the University of Arizona read two children's books in Spanish, *Me llamo María Isabel* (My Name Is María Isabel) and *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* (Baseball in April and Other Short Stories) as part of the course. The study investigated students' perceptions of their experiences reading the children's books and their beliefs concerning the relevance of the books to their acquisition of Spanish. Students documented their perceptions through journal entries, surveys, focus-group interviews and a composition. Students indicated that the children's books facilitated their learning of Spanish and helped them develop their communicative abilities in Spanish. My anecdotal observations of their experiences reading the children's books confirm their perceptions.*

## Introduction

For the past four decades, introductory and intermediate-level language courses at the university level have typically espoused the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) to develop students' communicative abilities in

the target language. The syllabi for these classes frequently affirm that the course goals focus on the development of students' communicative abilities in the language. Despite the supposed focus on expanding students' communicative abilities, courses are often designed to further students' grammatical knowledge. The small amount of class time available for augmenting student's communicative skills is focused largely on developing students' speaking skills at the expense of other communicative skills (reading, writing and listening), particularly reading. The readings students interact with are generally unnatural and inauthentic in that readings are often written by non-native speakers of the language for the purpose of teaching language. Additionally, these readings are usually of short length (one page or less).

As I noticed these curricular gaps, I began to think of ways to facilitate the development of students' communicative abilities while also immersing them in natural and authentic language at a level that matched their proficiency level. I thus decided to integrate child and adolescent literature in Spanish into the curriculum of the Spanish 102 (second-semester) course I had been teaching at a large Southwestern university for several semesters. The present research study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of their experiences reading children's literature in Spanish and the contribution of children's literature to their acquisition of Spanish.

The study investigated the following research question: What are elementary-level university Spanish students' perceptions of the influence of reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish on their language learning?

## **Literature Review**

Influenced by speech act theory, many language teachers longed for a language teaching method that would promote learners' natural and authentic communication with other speakers.<sup>1,2</sup> As a result, Communicative Language Teaching was a language teaching approach developed by British applied linguists and American language educators in the 1970s and 1980s. The basic tenets of the approach find their beginnings in the early 1970s in reaction to the Audio-Lingual Method, which

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1. Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

2. Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

promoted the memorization and repetition of large chunks of language via pattern drills. Language educators wanted to overcome a fundamental weakness of the Audio Lingual Method, namely that students using this method were unable to communicate in the target language beyond those phrases and expressions they had memorized. The work of these applied linguists and language educators culminated in a language teaching philosophy stressing functional concepts and language acts students could perform in the target language. This approach encourages the design of classroom activities encouraging students to communicate in the language in real-life situations for real-life purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) encourages learners to express their own meanings with other speakers in the target language. While the Grammar-Translation Method focused on learning grammar and the Audio-Lingual Method centered on memorizing chunks of language, the essence of CLT is expressing meaning. Another difference between previous language teaching methods and CLT is that previous methods were characterized as “methods” due to their prescriptive nature; these methods consisted of a set of rules which must be followed consistently. In contrast, CLT does not consist of prescriptive rules; instead, it is characterized as an “approach” because it “represents a philosophy of teaching that is based on communicative language use”.<sup>4</sup> This study utilized CLT as a curricular framework because I concluded that reading the children’s books could promote students’ communicative abilities in Spanish. I hoped that students would be engaged in authentic communication for real-world purposes (in this case, understanding the children’s books) and would develop their communicative abilities in Spanish when participating in activities in which they read, wrote, listened, and spoke in Spanish while reading the children’s books.

Several studies have shown an increase in students’ reading proficiency in the target language by reading children’s literature. For example, Elley investigated students’ reading gains while reading children’s literature in English using book

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3. Omaggio-Hadley, A. (2001). *Teaching language in context* (3rd ed.). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

4. Ibid

flood programs in Niue, Fiji and Singapore.<sup>5</sup> In Niue, a total of 114 eight-year-old children from six schools participated in the two-year study. In the first year, students learned English via an audio-lingual program (the Tate syllabus). In the second year, the same students learned English via the Fiafia program. In the Fiafia program, students engaged in shared reading activities, class discussions of books, and post-reading activities. After each year, students were evaluated using a reading comprehension test. Results from the reading test showed that students performed significantly better on the test after participating in the Fiafia program. Elley argues that one factor which may be contributing to these gains was the fact that children were exposed to “minimally controlled, comprehensible input.”<sup>6</sup>

Other studies have shown that students perceive that their language skills improve by reading children’s literature. For example, in Cho and Krashen’s study, several participants indicated that their listening comprehension had improved after reading from the Sweet Valley Kids series; according to one participant, Mi-ae, “reading helps me understand TV better.”<sup>7</sup> Participants also believed their speaking ability in English had improved as well. According to Alma, her younger brother noticed an improvement in her speaking since she began reading from the Sweet Valley Kids series: “After I read Sweet Valley Kids, I speak more correctly.”<sup>8</sup> The participants in Paz García’s study echoed these sentiments.<sup>9</sup> One student in particular indicated that “reading help[s] us to develop language skills.”<sup>10</sup>

## Methods

This study was conducted with students in three second-semester Spanish courses (Spanish 102) at the University of Arizona. Participants were drawn from two Spanish 102 courses in Fall 2008 and one second-semester Spanish course

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5. Elley, W. (1991). Acquiring literacy in a second language: The effect of book-based programs. *Language Learning*, 41(3), 375-411.

6. *Ibid.*, 383.

7. Cho, K., & Krashen, S. (1994). Acquisition of vocabulary from the Sweet Valley Kids series: Adult ESL acquisition. *Journal of Reading*, 37(8), 662-667.

8. *Ibid.*

9. García, M. (2004). Using children’s books in the college Spanish class. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, 8(1), 43-65.

10. *Ibid.*

(Spanish 102) in Spring 2009. The University of Arizona is a land-grant university in the southwestern United States with an enrollment of approximately 40,000 students per year. Seventy-eight students were enrolled in the three Spanish 102 courses; sixty-eight students consented to participate in the study. All participants in the study were college-age students enrolled in one of the three Spanish 102 classes for which I was the instructor.

The two children's books in Spanish which were selected for this research study were *Me llamo María Isabel [My Name Is María Isabel]* and *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos [Baseball in April and Other Stories]*.<sup>11,12</sup>

The main character in *Me llamo María Isabel* is a child from Puerto Rico growing up in the United States. Her first experience in an American school is the first day of classes when the teacher suggests changing her name to Mary since there are already two girls named María in the class, not recognizing the importance and significance of María's name since she was named for her two grandmothers, one of her grandfathers, and her uncle. *Me llamo María Isabel* traces María Isabel's experiences in school during the fall semester and explores issues of self-identity through the significance of one's name as well as one's heritage.

This book was selected for several reasons. First, the book was linguistically accessible to second-semester students since the book contains simple vocabulary related to schooling, and the majority of the verbs in the book are in the *pretérito* and the *imperfecto*, two verb tenses students studied during the course. Additionally, the book was a way for students to vicariously experience immigrating to a new country and to understand the situation of Latino immigrants into the United States. This is particularly relevant for students at the University of Arizona since Tucson includes a large Latino population and is geographically close to the border with Mexico. News outlets frequently portray Latino immigrants as undocumented illegal aliens who enter the United States fraudulently and who incite violence and murder in the United States. My hope was that the book could combat these stereotypes of Latino immigrants and present students with a more balanced view of Latino immigration.

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11. Ada, A. (1993). *Me llamo María Isabel*. New York: First Aladdin Paperbacks/Libros Colibrí.

12. Soto, G. (1990). *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*. Miami, FL: Santillana USA Publishing Co, Inc.

*Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* consists of eleven short stories in which the characters in the stories describe their childhood experiences growing up Latino in California, such as trying out for Little League teams, taking karate lessons, and trying to get the attention of the opposite sex. The stories use daily events to elucidate themes common to all adolescents such as love and friendship, youth and growing up, and success and failure.

Because of time constraints, students only read two stories from *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*. In the first story, “*Béisbol en abril*”, two brothers, Jesse and Michael, decide to try out for the local baseball team, Los Hobos. The brothers train hard, but neither they nor the team are very good. Towards the end of the season, they play a game against a much better team, the Red Caps. Los Hobos lose the game, nineteen runs to eleven runs. After their defeat, the local boys lose interest in playing baseball, particularly Michael, who quits the team after he begins dating his girlfriend.

In the second story, “*El Karate Kid*”, Gilbert, the main character, is frequently picked on in school because of his small size. Inspired by the film *The Karate Kid*, Gilbert decides he wants to enroll in a karate class to defend himself from his classmates. Gilbert finds out that the class is much more difficult than he had anticipated, and he also finds out that he is still unable to defend himself despite going to karate class. Gilbert soon grows tired of the karate class, and the karate school eventually closes down due to insufficient funds. Instead of watching *The Karate Kid*, Gilbert decides to read superhero comics because they are more real to him than the movie, and they do not hurt nearly as much as karate did.

“*Béisbol en abril*” and “*El Karate Kid*” were chosen from the book since both short stories contain Latino adolescent male characters which balance the Latino child female character of *María Isabel*. Combined, *Me llamo María Isabel* and *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* portray Latino male and female characters students would hopefully be able to identify with.

This study was designed as a qualitative action research study. Qualitative data collected during the study include journal entries, surveys, focus-group interviews and a composition.

First, students completed journal entries approximately every two weeks. Students wrote approximately one page in English for each journal entry. In their journal entries, students reflected on their experiences reading the children's books and explored their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the children's books. A sample of prompts for the journal entries can be found in Appendix 1.

Second, students completed two surveys during the research study. Survey #1 was administered after students read *Me llamo María Isabel*, and Survey #2 was administered after students read *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*. The purpose of the surveys was to provide students an opportunity to explore their thoughts, feelings, impressions and experiences reading each book after having finished reading the book. Additionally, students were asked on the surveys to document aspects of language (grammar and vocabulary) they noticed while reading each book. A copy of Survey #1 can be found in Appendix 2.

Third, students participated in a focus-group interview at the end of the semester after reading both children's books. Classes #1 and #2 were divided into two groups of approximately thirteen students each, creating four focus groups. Since Class #3 consisted of fewer students, the whole class was interviewed together. The goal of the focus-group interviews was to give students a chance to share their responses to the survey questions. Exposure to other classmates' responses then prompted students to explore their own responses on a deeper level. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was videotaped; significant quotes from the interviews were subsequently transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured in nature in order to document answers concerning the research questions while still allowing students the opportunity to express their views freely concerning their experiences with the children's books.<sup>13</sup> A sample of questions guiding the focus-group interviews can be found in Appendix 3.

Last, as part of the curriculum for Spanish 102, students write three compositions in Spanish during the course. For Composition #2, students write a description of the significance and the importance of their name. When writing Composition #2 during this study, in addition to the requirements for the composition, students were

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13. Glesne, G. (2010). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

asked to compare and contrast the story of their name to that of María Isabel. The goal of the additional requirement for the composition was to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on María Isabel's experiences with her own name in order to help them make connections between María Isabel's feelings about her names and their feelings about their own names.

The data for the study was analyzed using the following process. First, I read through the surveys, journal entries, focus-group interviews and compositions and made initial notes of things I found important or significant in these data sources. Rather than being guided by a specific guiding framework, the themes and categories emerged from the data themselves, also known as grounded theory.<sup>14</sup> I went through the data sources and found significant themes and wrote an initial analysis memo with a short title of the theme, a brief explanation of the theme, and several quotes taken from the data sources that exemplified these themes. I initially compiled a list of fifteen themes. In order to narrow this list into a manageable list of themes and see connections between themes, I then grouped similar themes into broader categories and re-read the data to triangulate these categories amongst all the qualitative data sources.

## **Findings**

Several important findings emerged from the analysis of the study's data. First, students indicated that, from their perception, the children's books helped them understand Spanish at a deeper level by seeing Spanish in new contexts. Second, students believed that reading the children's books contributed to the development of their reading skills in Spanish as well as other communicative skills (writing, listening and speaking). Last, students affirmed that the children's books supported and reinforced the vocabulary and grammatical structures they learned in the course textbook.

This section presents students' direct quotes concerning their experiences reading the children's books. Since students wrote their compositions in Spanish, the section presents direct quotes from their compositions in Spanish accompanied with

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14. Ibid.



English translations provided by myself; students' errors in Spanish are preserved in order to give students a more authentic voice in their comments. All students' names are pseudonyms.

### **Understanding Language in Context**

A number of students stated that they were able to learn new vocabulary words by seeing these words in the authentic and meaningful contexts of the children's books. Several students believed that they learned new vocabulary words because they were engaged in attempting to figure out the meanings of certain words through the context of the rest of the sentence.

Caden: There were many words I didn't know in the text, but...you could put words around that you knew to get a sense of what they were saying.

Lara: One thing I have liked from reading the book [*Me llamo María Isabel*] is learning how to grasp the idea of a passage by looking at the sentences and words around it and trying to get the main idea, which then helps me better understand what I originally did not.

These students indicated that they were able to learn new vocabulary words in Spanish by reading the children's books. According to them, reading the children's books allowed them to learn vocabulary naturally; instead of relying on English translations, they deciphered the meanings of new words based on context.

### **Engaging in Authentic Language Use**

Many students indicated that reading the children's books helped them develop their communicative skills in Spanish (namely, reading, listening and speaking) as well as their pronunciation of Spanish. Additionally, students felt that they were engaged in communicating in Spanish for the real-world purpose of comprehending the children's books.

Many students indicated that they perceived their reading ability in Spanish to increase through reading the children's books.

Tabatha: I liked reading *Me llamo María Isabel* because it...helped me with reading Spanish and understanding what I am reading in Spanish better.

Roger: [*Me llamo María Isabel*] has helped me with my understanding of both conversation and literary Spanish.

Jason: [Reading *Me llamo María Isabel*] has gotten me used to reading full-length paragraphs in Spanish.

Several students believed that reading the children's books increased not only their reading ability in Spanish but also their reading speed in Spanish. Other students believed that their reading skills in Spanish increased due to reading out loud to other classmates. And still other students commented that they believed listening to their group members read the books out loud contributed to their understanding of the books.

Adam: Because of reading *Me llamo María Isabel*, my Spanish reading speed increased greatly.

Jacob: I like to read the book [*Me llamo María Isabel*] out loud to my group because not only am I learning and comprehending more by reading, but it improves my reading skills.

Katherine: I enjoyed reading [*Me llamo María Isabel*] out loud because it was easier for me to comprehend.

These students established connections between the development of their listening skills in Spanish and their comprehension of the children's books. They believed that as their listening skills in Spanish improved, so did their understanding of the books.

Third, a number of students commented that they perceived their speaking abilities in Spanish to increase due to reading the children's books. According to these students, this was mainly due to reading aloud to their peers in small groups.

Evelyn: So far, reading [*Me llamo María Isabel*] is really helping me with comprehension, and has been an effective way to improve my Spanish speaking skills.

Isaac: The success I have had [while reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*] is an improved speaking ability, while reading aloud in groups...reading aloud has helped me in forming the wording...and helps me get a better feel for speaking aloud in Spanish.

Sam: [Reading *Me llamo María Isabel*] offers an excellent way to practice speaking basic Spanish.

According to these students, engaging in group and class discussions of the children's books increased their speaking abilities in Spanish because they were engaged in authentic communication for a real purpose – in this case, attempting to make sense of what they were reading. As with listening, students saw connections between the development of their speaking abilities in Spanish and their understanding of the children's books.

Fourth, several students noted that they believed reading the children's books out loud to their classmates improved their pronunciation of Spanish.

Evelyn: The group reads the chapter out loud. This makes me read out loud which improves my pronunciation and helps me speak Spanish with more confidence.

Caitlin: Reading out loud helped me out a lot...with pronunciation and feeling more comfortable with reading/speaking out loud.

Lara: I think reading aloud was very useful because we don't spend a lot of time reading or speaking Spanish out loud so it was good practice with pronunciation.

In summary, many students believed that reading the children's books contributed to the development of their communicative skills in Spanish. Specifically, students sensed that reading the children's books contributed to the development of their reading ability in Spanish. They concluded that reading the children's books also contributed to the development of their interpersonal communicative skills in Spanish (listening and speaking) due to reading the books aloud in groups. In addition to promoting their listening and speaking skills, several students also indicated

that reading the children's books aloud to their classmates facilitated the improvement of their pronunciation in Spanish. However, students indicated that two factors tended to impede the development of their communicative skills in Spanish. Firstly, many students believed that the perceived difficulty level of the children's books may have prevented the development of their communicative skills in Spanish. Secondly, a number of students noted that the development of their own language abilities in Spanish depended on the language abilities of their group members and, consequently, the input they were receiving in Spanish. Students at higher proficiency levels in Spanish could potentially provide other group members with more accurate input in Spanish, whereas students at lower proficiency levels in Spanish would likely provide other group members with less accurate or incomprehensible input in Spanish.

### **Making Connections between Explicit Language Instruction and Language in Context**

Krashen's Monitor Model proposes that learners acquire language when they are exposed to comprehensible input in the target language.<sup>15</sup> Rather than seeing language as discrete bits of information, this comprehensible input provides learners with contexts where they can see how the target language is used naturally. Adair-Hauck and Cumo-Johanssen concur, arguing that "grammatical structures by themselves are rather useless. Grammatical structures take on meaning only if they are situated in context and in connected discourse."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, students read the children's books in order to see vocabulary and grammatical features of Spanish in context by supporting and reinforcing the vocabulary and grammatical features students learned through the course textbook.

In all three classes, the children's books were used in conjunction with the course textbook.<sup>17</sup> Numerous students documented that they believed reading the

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15. Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practices in second language acquisition*. New York: Pergamon Press.

16. Adair-Hauck, Bonnie, and Cumo-Johanssen, Philomena. "Communication goal: Meaning making through a whole language approach". *Collaborations: Meeting new goals, new realities, Northeast Conference Reports*. Edited by June Phillips. Lincolnwood, IL: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, 1997, 37.

17. Nogales, Samaniego, and Others. *¡Dímelo tú!*. 6th edition. Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2008.

children's books had a positive impact on their language learning because they saw certain grammatical features of Spanish in the children's books that they had previously studied in the course textbook. The children's books reinforced what students learned in the course textbook and vice versa. Students' responses typically focused on two language features, namely grammatical points and vocabulary words. Students' responses also focused on cultural elements from the course textbook they noticed while reading the children's books.

First, several students indicated that their vocabulary level in Spanish increased because it recycled the vocabulary they were learning in the course textbook.

Eddie: The vocabulary I noticed while reading *Me llamo María Isabel* is a lot like the vocabulary we have learned in class.

Evelyn: [*Me llamo María Isabel*] is easy to read because of some of the similarities is vocabulary we have been learning in class.

Erika: I recognize some words [in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*] that I already know and also some key phrases that look familiar from this class.

These students indicated that, in their view, reading the children's books reinforced their learning of vocabulary in that reading the children's books supported the vocabulary they had already learned through the course textbook.

Secondly, a number of students believed that the children's books helped expand their understanding of Spanish grammar because it reinforced grammatical points they were studying in the course textbook. When asked about grammatical features they noticed while reading both children's books, many students were able to notice grammar points we had previously studied in the course textbook, including the present tense, the past tense (*pretérito* and *imperfecto*), the future tense, the conditional tense, the subjunctive mood, formal command forms, and the present progressive tense.

Hannah: Throughout [*Me llamo María Isabel*] I saw the different [verb] conjugations that we were learning about in class.

Mia: I was happy to understand the verb tenses in the book [*Béisbol en baril y otros cuentos*] that we had just learned. That gave me more practice in those tenses.

Sam: Learning [the] imperfect [has] helped immensely in understanding [*Me llamo María Isabel*] better.

These quotes demonstrate that reading the children's books bolstered the knowledge of Spanish they had previously gained through the course textbook. Reading the children's books allowed students to see these vocabulary and grammatical features in use in an authentic context, thus extending their knowledge of the Spanish language.

## **Discussion**

Several important findings emerged from analysis of the data obtained for the study. First, students indicated that they perceived the reading the children's books to support their acquisition of Spanish by seeing and using Spanish in a natural context. This finding confirms arguments made by scholars who suggest that literature should be incorporated into lower-level language courses since it "lends itself to opening up the language classroom beyond language practice".<sup>18</sup> In other words, students see Spanish in context and use Spanish for the communicative purpose of understanding the children's books.

Second, many students believed that reading the children's books contributed to their reading development in Spanish. Since students at the beginning and intermediate levels often do not read literary texts, and since many basal college textbooks in Spanish do not include literary selections, reading children's literature in the target language is one way of promoting the development of students' proficiency in reading by not only having access to literature but, more specifically, literature that provides these students with linguistic input that matches their proficiency level in Spanish. Additionally, students believed that reading the children's

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18. Shook, David. "Foreign language literature and the beginning learner-reader". *Foreign Language Annals*, 29.2 (1996): 206.

books also contributed to the development of other communicative skills in Spanish as well. This finding tends to suggest the interconnectedness of the four communicative skills and that perhaps reading is the foundational skills upon which the other communicative skills are based.

Third, numerous students considered that the children's books provided them with natural and authentic contexts for understanding Spanish and that reading the children's books was a natural way to learn Spanish. Since many textbooks present language as discrete points of information in a decontextualized fashion, this finding is important in that the books allowed students to see how the Spanish language is used within natural contexts. Scholars who subscribe to holistic views of language learning suggest that lessons should proceed from whole to part because students first need to see the "big picture", the context surrounding a text containing linguistic features of the language. They suggest that "students need the big picture first. They develop concepts by beginning with general ideas and then filling in the specific details."<sup>19</sup> In this study, the children's books gave students the "big picture", which was the context for understanding Spanish. Students were then exposed to grammatical features of Spanish in relation to this big picture, which promoted connections between these grammatical features and the meanings they express.

Lastly, students indicated that the children's books reinforced the vocabulary, grammar points and cultural information they learned in the course textbook. These comments suggest that using children's and adolescent literature may be an effective way to reinforce the linguistic input and grammatical knowledge students learn through other course materials, including the course textbook. Children's literature provides students with examples of how linguistic features of the target language are used to express meaning by seeing language "in action". This type of literature reinforces connections between linguistic features of the language and the meanings these features express. Children's literature also furnishes natural and authentic contexts within which specific features of the target language are used; as a result, students see particular situations in which these features can be used and how these features express meanings within these contexts.

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19. Freeman, Yvonne, & Freeman, Donald. *Whole language for second language learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992, 7.

## **Conclusion**

Findings from this study show that child and adolescent literature is an effective way to promote the development of students' communicative abilities in a foreign or second language. Children's books provide natural and authentic contexts for language learning and immerse lower-level students in linguistic input targeted specifically to their proficiency level. Additionally, children's books affirm and extend students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical features of the language they learn through the course textbook. Findings from this study suggest that children's and adolescent literature is one approach to overcoming this dilemma by exposing students to literary works that match their proficiency level.



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