

## **Reading Children's and Adolescent Literature in Two University Second Semester Spanish Courses: An Exploratory Classroom Study**

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The goal of this study was to document beliefs and perceptions of second-semester university students concerning the impact of reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish on their language learning. To accomplish this, the study utilized questionnaires, journals and focus-group interviews in order to understand students' experiences reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish from their perspective. In addition to measuring the impact of reading children's literature on students' language learning, the study evaluated students' perceptions of the effect of reading children's and adolescent literature on the development of their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge of Spanish and on their understanding of Latino culture as well. The participants were students enrolled in two Spanish 102 courses for which the researcher was the instructor at a major university in the American Southwest. In addition to the regular course curriculum, students in both classes read *Me llamo María Isabel* [My Name Is María Isabel] (Ada, 1993) and two short stories from *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* [Baseball in April and Other Short Stories] (Soto, 1990). Analysis of the questionnaires demonstrated that students in both courses believed their communicative abilities in Spanish, particularly their reading ability, increased throughout the study as a result of reading the children's books. In their journal entries and the focus-group interviews, students indicated that reading children's books in Spanish provided them with opportunities to see the Spanish language applied in new contexts, specifically the vocabulary words and grammatical concepts they were learning via the course textbook. By reading both books, students were able to appreciate several aspects of Latino culture, including difficulties Hispanics encounter when emigrating to the United States, the importance of family relationships and one's name to one's identity, and similarities between Latino culture and American culture.

The last three decades have been witness to a rise in the interest of the use of children's and adolescent literature in the foreign language classroom (i.e. Bernhardt and Berkemeyer, 1988; Christensen, 1990; Moffit, 1998; Malloy, 1999; Maxim, 2006). Although the interest in the use of this literature in foreign language classrooms has been increasing, the majority of the publications in this area have either focused solely on how to pedagogically use such literature in the language classrooms (i.e. Christensen, 1990; Moffit, 1998; Rings, 2002) or have been limited to the use of such literature at either the high-school level (Bernhardt and Berkemeyer, 1988) or the intermediate-level university language classroom and above (i.e. Morewedge, 1987; Metcalf, 1998; Schulz, 1998). Additionally, the few publications on using

children's and adolescent literature in foreign language classrooms which are in fact research studies (i.e. Bernhardt and Berkemeyer, 1988) have not included students' or teachers' voices and opinions concerning the perceived impact of such literature on students' language development and cultural awareness. Consequently, little research has been conducted to measure the impact of reading children's literature in beginning-level Spanish language classrooms. The goal of this exploratory study, therefore, was to investigate second-semester Spanish students' perceptions of the impact of reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish on their overall language learning.

This article begins by exploring benefits of including children's and adolescent literature into the foreign/second language curriculum. It then describes an exploratory classroom study in which students in two of the researcher's Spanish 102 classes read two children's books in Spanish as part of the course curriculum, discusses the results of the study, and explores new avenues for research with children's and adolescent literature in foreign/second languages.

### **Why use children's literature?**

A number of scholars have examined the use of children's and adolescent literature in the language classroom principally from two perspectives: the use of children's and adolescent literature as a source of authentic materials, and the use of children's and adolescent literature as preparation for future literary study.

#### **CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AS AUTHENTIC MATERIAL**

Several scholars believe that teachers should use children's and adolescent literature in their classrooms in order to expose students to authentic materials, defined by Rogers and Medley (1988) as "...language samples...that reflect a naturalness of form, and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers (468)." Rogers and Medley indicate that authentic materials include language products (i.e. brochures, radio programs, magazines) produced by native speakers of a target culture for consumption by native speakers of the target language and argue that such language products should represent the target language and culture as accurately as possible.

Christensen (1990) advocates for the use of teenage adventure novels in high school and college-level foreign language classrooms in order to expose students to authentic materials. He believes that an important factor which motivates teenagers of all languages and cultures to read adventure novels is that they have readers use their imagination as they read the story and that "imagination is a key element in stimulating...student[s'] interest in pursuing more actively the acquisition of the language and the target culture (533)." Christensen applies these ideas to the Spanish language classroom through the

use of a series of teenage detective novels in Spanish entitled *Las aventuras de Héctor* [*The Adventures of Héctor*]. The main characters in this series are a group of six teenagers, four boys and two girls. The group of six teenagers gets caught up in many adventures typical of adolescents while helping their local police inspector by gathering information about criminals operating in their neighborhood. By reading this series students in Spanish are exposed to a multitude of elements which are culturally bound, which can help students understand the uniqueness of Spanish culture on its own terms. Other times, the series includes elements universally applicable to all cultures, which can help students see similarities and connections between elements of Spanish culture and elements of American culture. Bernhardt and Berkemeyer (1988) concur on the use of authentic texts in the foreign language classroom, arguing that although teachers should be sensitive to students' responses to various text genres, they should use authentic texts with their students at all levels and not be afraid that students will not be able to understand such texts.

#### CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AS PREPARATION FOR FUTURE LITERARY STUDY

Several scholars support the inclusion of children's and adolescent literature in the foreign language curriculum in order to prepare students for future literary study. According to Moffit (1998), young adult literature in German ("Jugendliteratur") can fill several goals: development of personal values, cultural exploration, language development, literary analysis, and reading enjoyment (116). Moffit argues for the study of young adult literature in language classrooms since it provides students with an excellent introduction to the study of literature (116) as a solid preparation for future literary study at the advanced level. She indicates that teachers who use young adult literature in foreign language classrooms should proceed using a three-step process: (1) a pre-reading phase in which teachers prepare students thematically, linguistically and culturally for reading the text using advance organizers and students' background knowledge; (2) a reading phase in which students read the text accompanied by class discussions and comprehension checks of students' understanding of the text; and (3) a post-reading phase in which students critically evaluate the text and also apply it to other areas as well as to their own lives (118-119). Moffit describes how she proceeds through this three-step process using *Oya*, a young adult book which tells the story of Oya, a Turkish adolescent girl who is born and lives in Germany and who subsequently moves to Turkey at the age of sixteen with her family according to her father's wishes. The book documents the difficulties Oya faces as she transitions from a Western-oriented culture to more of an Eastern-oriented one.

Maxim (2006) notes the discrepancy between the goals of lower-division language instruction at the college level where the focus is on language and the goals of upper-division language instruction which tends to focus on content (19). The result of this dichotomy is that when students

complete the lower-division courses in a given language they are unprepared to meet the goals and expectations professors have at the upper-division level: “for those lower-level learners who wish to continue at the upper level, they are unfairly expected to be able to make the transition without having any prior exposure to extended discourse and textual thinking commonly found in advanced-level classes (20).” One solution to this problem, according to Maxim, would be to use authentic texts with students in lower-division courses, in this case, a German romance novel entitled *Mit dem Sturm kam die Liebe* [*With the Storm Came Love*]. The author conducted a research study using this novel in two first-semester German classes and compared the proficiency of the students reading the novel at the end of the semester to five first-semester German classes who did not read the novel. Maxim documents a five-stage process she used when teaching this novel: (1) a pre-reading stage in which the instructors for the two classes introduced the novel to the students and discussed the notion of reading comprehension; (2) a first stage in which students focused on the characters and major events in a given segment of the novel; (3) a second stage in which students concentrated on relevant details in the text segment and the language the text used to convey these details; (4) a third stage in which students wrote one-paragraph summaries of the text segment in German using the language used in the text as support; and (5) a fourth stage in which students assessed the implications of the novel and its significance and relevance to their lives. At the end of the semester, the author found that those students who read the novel performed just as well on departmental exams as those students who did not read the novel, thereby indicating that “spending time in the beginning collegiate FL classroom developing textual thinking does not have to come at the expense of the development of interpersonal communicative abilities... (29).” Maxim maintains that such a textually-oriented pedagogy does not have to replace a course’s curriculum but can in fact supplement it, as was done in this study. She explains that if language departments are interested in creating an articulated content curriculum which spans all language levels, integrating authentic texts and textual thinking into the lower-level curriculum is an essential step in this process.

### Research Questions

This exploratory study aimed to answer the following questions:

- (1) How does reading children’s and adolescent literature in Spanish influence second-semester university students’ perceptions concerning their language learning?
- (2) How does reading children’s and adolescent literature in Spanish influence second-semester university students’ perceptions concerning their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge?
- (3) How does reading children’s and adolescent literature in Spanish influence second-semester university students’ perceptions concerning their knowledge of Latino culture?

## Research Context

The study was conducted with two sections of second-semester Spanish (Spanish 102) for which the researcher was the instructor at a southwestern research university from September 2008 to December 2008. Approximately fifty students participated in the study, twenty-five per class. As part of the study, students read one children's book and one adolescent book in Spanish in addition to other course requirements. Students in both sections read *Me llamo María Isabel* (*My Name Is María Isabel*) and two short stories from an adolescent book in Spanish, *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* (*Baseball in April and Other Short Stories*), namely, "Béisbol en abril" ("Baseball in April") and "El Karate Kid" ("The Karate Kid"). These books were chosen for their linguistic accessibility for beginning-level students in Spanish and because of the relevance and applicability of the topics addressed in them to students' lives.

Students read the children's books during class time since it was felt that they would have difficulty reading them at home on their own. Students predominantly read the children's books in groups so that group members could help each other understand the storyline of the books. The researcher did not intervene much while groups were reading the books in order to provide students with a natural and authentic reading experience. They completed the surveys and the journal entries at home, while the questionnaires and the focus-group interviews were completed in class.

At the beginning of the semester, students' consent to participate in the study was obtained via their signature on informed consent forms. These forms were collected and stored with the researcher's supervisor so that the researcher would not know which students in both classes had (not) consented to participate in the study. The researcher did not have access to students' consent forms until final grades had been submitted.

## Synopses of Children's Books

### *ME LLAMO MARÍA ISABEL [MY NAME IS MARÍA ISABEL]*

The main character of the book, María Isabel, is a nine-year-old girl from Puerto Rico who recently moved and is now growing up in New York City. During her first day at her new school, the teacher changes María Isabel's name to Mary since there are already two girls named María in the class. Thus begins María Isabel's journey of discovering the importance of her name, her family traditions, and ultimately her identity. *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.

### *BÉISBOL EN ABRIL Y OTROS CUENTOS [BASEBALL IN APRIL AND OTHER STORIES]*

This book consists of eleven short stories in which characters describe their childhood experiences growing up Latino in California, i.e. trying out for Little League teams, taking karate lessons, trying to get the attention of the opposite sex. The stories use small events of daily life to elucidate themes common to all adolescents such as love and friendship, youth and growing up, and success and failure.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected for the study through questionnaires, surveys, journal entries, and focus-group interviews. The data collection methods were incorporated into normal class activities.

### **QUESTIONNAIRES**

Three questionnaires were administered during the study. The purpose of the questionnaires was to measure students' perceptions of the language abilities in Spanish at various points during the semester. The questionnaires consisted of a series of twenty sets of three statements each. For each set of statements, students indicated which of the three statements they felt best described their language ability in reading, writing, listening and speaking in Spanish at a given point in time (see Appendix). For each set of statements, the first statement corresponds approximately to the Novice Mid proficiency level, the second statement roughly corresponds to the Novice High proficiency level, and the third statement approximately corresponds to the Intermediate Low proficiency level. The questionnaire was designed to be consistent with these proficiency levels since the researcher believes that they would likely represent the range of students' proficiency levels in both classes. The same questionnaire was administered three times: at the beginning of the semester before students read the children's books, in the middle of the semester after students read *Me llamo María Isabel*, and at the end of the semester after students read the two short stories from *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

### **JOURNAL ENTRIES**

Students completed four journal entries as part of the study. Students wrote their journal entries in English. In their journal entries they described their thoughts, feelings and perceptions concerning the chapter(s) they had read in the children's books up to that point and the usefulness of the classroom activities while they read the children's books in class. See Appendices B through E for questions students responded to in their journal entries.

### **SURVEYS**

Two surveys were administered as part of the study. The surveys afforded students the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences reading *Me llamo María Isabel* and *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*, respectively. See Appendices F and G for the two surveys used in the study.

Survey #1 asked students to document their positive and negative experiences while reading *Me llamo María Isabel* as well as any vocabulary words, grammatical concepts and/or cultural information they learned from reading the book. This survey was administered in the middle of the semester after students finished reading the book.

Survey #2 asked students to document their positive and negative experiences while reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* as well as any vocabulary words, grammatical concepts and/or cultural information they learned from reading the book. This survey was administered at the end of the semester after students finished reading the book.

### FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEWS

Two sets of focus group interviews were conducted as part of the study once at the beginning of the semester before students read the children's books, and again at the end of the semester after students read both children's books. The purpose of the focus-group interviews was to give students an opportunity to reflect and expand on their responses in their journal entries and surveys while listening as other students shared their responses. Each of the two classes was divided into two groups of thirteen students each, creating four focus groups. Eight focus-group interviews were thus conducted in total. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was videotaped, and field notes were taken during each interview. The first focus-group interview was conducted at the beginning of the semester before students read the children's books. It documented students' previous educational experiences in learning Spanish. The second focus-group interview was conducted at the end of the semester after students had read both children's books. It focused on students' reactions to reading the children's books. The questions used for each focus-group interview can be found in Appendix H and I respectively.

### Data Analysis

### QUESTIONNAIRES

For each questionnaire, the number of responses for each item was tallied, and percentages were then calculated for the number of tallies for each item for each class separately.

### SURVEYS AND JOURNAL ENTRIES

The researcher made notes of general trends and themes occurring in students' responses for each survey and journal entry separately.

#### FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEWS

The researcher viewed the eight focus-group interviews and expanded on his initial field notes while watching each interview.

#### Findings

*(1) How does reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish influence second-semester university students' perceptions concerning their language learning?*

Analysis of students' responses on the questionnaires revealed some significant findings concerning the evolution of students' perceptions of their language abilities in Spanish over the course of the semester. The tables below indicate students' responses on each questionnaire separately by class. Percentages which are boldfaced indicate the highest response rate to statements of that category.

Table #1: Responses to Questionnaire #1 by Class #1

Questions	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low
#1 - #4 (Listening)	40.9%	<b>49.5%</b>	9.6%
#5 - #8 (Reading)	<b>42.3%</b>	38.9%	9.1%
#9 - #14 (Speaking - Interpersonal)	<b>62.5%</b>	26.6%	10.3%
#15 - #17 (Speaking - Presentational)	<b>51.3%</b>	42.3%	0.6%
#18 - #20 (Writing)	<b>47.4%</b>	43.6%	0.9%

N = 26

Table #2: Responses to Questionnaire #2 by Class #1

Questions	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low
#9 - #14 (Speaking - Interpersonal)	<b>45.1%</b>	41.3%	13.5%
#1 - #4 (Listening)	33.8%	<b>69.4%</b>	16.7%
#5 - #8 (Reading)	29.9%	<b>52.8%</b>	17.4%
#9 - #14 (Speaking - Interpersonal)	35.4%	<b>52.8%</b>	25.0%
#15 - #17 (Speaking - Presentational)	25.7%	<b>50.7%</b>	22.2%
#18 - #20 (Writing)			



N = 24

Table #3: Responses to Questionnaire #3 by Class #1

Questions	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low
#1 - #4 (Listening)	40.9%	<b>47.7%</b>	11.4%
#5 - #8 (Reading)	38.6%	<b>44.3%</b>	17.1%
#9 - #14 (Speaking - Interpersonal)	<b>43.6%</b>	31.8%	17.1%
#15 - #17 (Speaking - Presentational)	30.3%	<b>53.8%</b>	15.9%
#18 - #20 (Writing)	36.4%	<b>47.7%</b>	31.8%

N = 22

Table #4: Responses to Questionnaire #1 by Class #2

Questions	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low
#1 - #4 (Listening)	29.2%	<b>51.6%</b>	0.1%
#5 - #8 (Reading)	28.8%	<b>45.9%</b>	25.1%
#9 - #14 (Speaking - Interpersonal)	<b>43.1%</b>	27.1%	20.8%
#15 - #17 (Speaking - Presentational)	<b>45.1%</b>	41.0%	13.9%
#18 - #20 (Writing)	<b>45.1%</b>	43.8%	11.1%

N = 24

Table #5: Responses to Questionnaire #2 by Class #2

Questions	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low
#1 - #4 (Listening)	22.2%	<b>51.6%</b>	27.2%
#5 - #8 (Reading)	35.3%	<b>38.6%</b>	26.1%

#9 - #14 (Speaking - Interpersonal)	<b>50.0%</b>	34.8%	15.2%
#15 - #17 (Speaking - Presentational)	39.9%	<b>42.8%</b>	17.4%
#18 - #20 (Writing)	21.7%	<b>50.0%</b>	26.8%

N = 23

Table #6: Responses to Questionnaire #3 by Class #2

Questions	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low
#1 - #4 (Listening)	26.9%	<b>51.3%</b>	21.9%
#5 - #8 (Reading)	16.9%	<b>50.6%</b>	32.5%
#9 - #14 (Speaking - Interpersonal)	37.1%	<b>41.3%</b>	21.7%
#15 - #17 (Speaking - Presentational)	25.8%	<b>39.2%</b>	35.0%
#18 - #20 (Writing)	20.0%	<b>48.3%</b>	31.7%

N = 20

Comparison of students' responses between questionnaires and between classes revealed consequential findings.

For Questionnaire #1 the majority of students in both classes felt their listening ability in Spanish was at the Novice High level and their reading skills, their interpersonal speaking skills and their writing skills were at the Novice Mid level. Most students in Class #1 believed their presentational speaking ability to be at the Novice Mid level, while most students in Class #2 believed their presentational speaking level to be at the Novice High level.

For Questionnaire #2, most students in both classes reported that their presentational speaking skills and their writing skills increased to the Novice High level. Many students in Class #1 believed that their reading ability had increased to the Novice High Level, while for Class #2, most students believed that their reading skills stayed at the Novice High level. The majority of students in both classes indicated that their interpersonal speaking skills stayed at the same level (Novice Mid).

For Questionnaire #3, the majority of students in Class #1 felt that their language abilities stayed at the same proficiency level as for Questionnaire #2 and that their ability level in reading and listening dropped significantly. For Class #2, however, the majority of students believed that their interpersonal

speaking skills had improved from the Novice Mid level to the Novice High level.

From the beginning of the semester, the majority of students in Class #2 believed their language abilities were at a higher proficiency level compared with students in Class #1; this increase remained constant throughout the semester. Through anecdotal evidence and from analysis of students' final grades, students' perceptions in both classes were largely accurate. Many students in Class #1 believed that their reading ability had increased from the Novice Mid level to the Novice High level, while the majority of students in Class #2 believed that their reading ability was still at the Novice High level. Since students in Class #1 felt that their proficiency level was initially at the Novice Mid level, perhaps they felt their reading abilities had increased because of reading *Me llamo María Isabel*. However, since students in Class #2 believed that their proficiency level in reading was already at the Novice High level, they may have felt that reading *Me llamo María Isabel* didn't increase their reading abilities in any significant way. On Questionnaire #3, the majority of students in Class #1 believed that they could still read at the Novice High level, although the percentage of students who believed this decreased. Since students in Class #1 reported on their surveys and journal entries that *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* was significantly harder for them to read than *Me llamo María Isabel*, students may have become frustrated by their lack of success in reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* and hence equivocated this lack of success with their inability to read. In Class #2, however, the majority of students believed that their reading ability remained at the Novice High level with a significantly larger percentage of students believing so. Perhaps, in contrast to student in Class #1, students in Class #2 may have achieved more success in reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* and felt that reading the book was a significant but doable challenge for them.

These results were echoed in students' surveys, journal entries and focus-group interviews.

*(2) How does reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish influence second-semester university students' perceptions concerning their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge?*

The majority of students in both classes indicated that they believed their knowledge of vocabulary increased through reading the children's books. Many students felt that although the vocabulary in the books was often new to them and was slightly more complicated than the vocabulary words they learned in class, the words were not difficult to learn because they were centered on everyday activities. A number of students were able to recognize words they had studied in class in the children's books relating to food, weather, seasons, school, and sports. They believed that reading the books helped them apply these words to new contexts and see them in "real life". Students also learned new vocabulary words relating to various cultural concepts explored in each book. In *Me llamo María Isabel*, students learned

vocabulary words relating to Christmas and Hanukkah, and in “El Karate Kid”, a short story found in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*, students learned several words in Japanese relating to karate, namely, *dojo* and *katas*. Some students believed that the difficulty level of the vocabulary words were at an appropriate level for children’s books, while other students believed that the words were typically more advanced than those typically found in children’s books. A number of students recognized that many words in English and Spanish share many similarities. Many students believed the vocabulary words in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* were more advanced than those presented in *Me llamo María Isabel*; although both books are considered appropriate for children ages 9-12, the vocabulary words, grammatical structures, and themes in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* are more complex than those found in *Me llamo María Isabel*.

Most students in both classes believed their knowledge of grammar increased as well by reading the children’s books. As with vocabulary, many students were able to recognize verb tenses in the books they had studied in class: the present tense, the *pretérito*, the *imperfecto*, command forms, the present progressive, the future, the conditional, and the present subjunctive. They were able to see these verb tenses used in authentic situations in new contexts. Students were also simultaneously able to recognize several verb tenses in the books that they had not studied in class, for example, the past subjunctive. Several students noted that many of the verbs used in *Me llamo María Isabel* were action verbs relating to behaviors performed by either María Isabel, her teacher and her classmates. A number of students believed that the grammar presented in the children’s books was more advanced than the grammar typically found in children’s books. As with vocabulary, many students believed the grammatical constructions presented in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* were more advanced than those presented in *Me llamo María Isabel*. They felt that sentence constructions in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* were longer and more complex than those found in *Me llamo María Isabel*.

*(3) How does reading children’s and adolescent literature in Spanish influence second-semester university students’ perceptions concerning their knowledge of Latino culture?*

The majority of students in both classes believed their knowledge of Latino culture increased through reading the children’s books. Through the books, students were able to identify similarities between American culture and Latino culture, understand vital differences between both cultures, and appreciate unique values of Latino culture. Through *Me llamo María Isabel* students discovered that names are important in Latino culture since names are often continued from one generation to the next and since Latinos typically have four names including the maiden name of the mother. Students observed that culture, heritage, ethnic background and family traditions are important values in Latino culture and that Latinos take pride in these cultural elements. They were able to see different holidays celebrated by various cultures,

namely Christmas and Hanukkah. Several students indicated that the character of María Isabel appeared life-like and that through her they were able to get a glimpse of what family life is like for a typical Latino family. Many students pointed out that they identified with María Isabel and her struggles to adapt to a new culture while simultaneously maintaining the traditions of her native culture; several students argued that because María Isabel was not immediately understood and accepted by her teacher and her classmates, they saw how immigrants to the United States need to be understood and accepted for who they are and not be “Americanized”. A number of students, however, indicated that they had some difficulty in identifying with María Isabel because their background was different from hers.

Through reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*, students pointed out a number of similarities between Latino culture and American culture. For example, in “Béisbol en abril”, students noted that baseball is an important sport for Latinos just as it is for Americans. Since a number of students played baseball when they were younger, they could visualize the world through the eyes of Michael and Jesse, two brothers who are the protagonists of the story. In “El Karate Kid”, students were able to identify with a number of elements of American culture which are shared by both Americans and Latinos (i.e. karate, *Double Dare*, Cracker Jacks). Because many students had seen the movie “The Karate Kid”, they were better able to sympathize with Gilbert, the main character, and his adventures in the story. Several students mentioned that because Latino culture was portrayed as being similar to American culture in these stories, the main characters almost appeared to them as if they were American.

### **What were students’ positive experiences reading the books?**

The majority of students in both classes felt that reading the children’s books was a beneficial and constructive activity. They indicated that reading *Me llamo María Isabel* was a worthwhile activity that helped them improve their language skills. Many students believed that reading the books was beneficial in that they were learning Spanish in an authentic way just as they had learned English as children. A number of students pointed out that although the book was challenging for them, they were able to understand the basic plot of the book using the vocabulary words and grammatical concepts they had previously studied. Most students enjoyed reading the chapters in the book with other students in class because they were able to ask their partners questions if they were having trouble understanding what was happening in the chapters or if there were vocabulary words that other students might know. Students felt that the comprehension questions were helpful for them because the questions gave them an outline of the basic events of the chapters and guided them in understanding the story. Several students indicated that going over the comprehension questions together in class helped them to verify what they did understand and to fill in gaps where they either misunderstood or did not understand what was happening. A significant number of students believed

their pronunciation, speaking and listening skills had improved over the semester because of reading aloud to each other; several students reported that reading aloud together as a group increased the group's ability to work at the same pace. Many students initially thought that reading a children's book in Spanish would be relatively easy, but once they started reading *Me llamo María Isabel*, they found it an intense and challenging book; some students felt that this was a positive experience because it helped them stretch and expand their skills in Spanish, while other students felt overwhelmed and frustrated by the book. Several students mentioned that they enjoyed reading *Me llamo María Isabel* because they were given the opportunity to see and use Spanish in new contexts other than the course textbook. A number of students were able to understand certain parts of the book because the ideas expressed in the book were not too complicated (they didn't need to "read between the lines"). As they continued reading the book, for many students, the chapters seemed to become easier to read and understand. Several students noted that they felt a sense of accomplishment in being able to read a children's book in Spanish despite their lower level of proficiency and that this was the first book they had ever read in Spanish. For several students, the pictures in *Me llamo María Isabel* helped them to understand parts of the story they were unable to comprehend through the text.

### **What difficulties did students encounter when reading the books?**

A number of students mentioned that two of the major difficulties they had when reading the books were new vocabulary words and new grammatical concepts, particularly the preterit and the imperfect tenses, since these were two verb tenses many students had not previously studied. Some students became confused, intimidated and frustrated by reading the books and hence lost focus and interest in reading them because they felt they were unable to understand much of the stories. Several students mentioned that reading *Me llamo María Isabel* was a slow process and that one must be patient to be able to understand the book. Students overwhelmingly believed that *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* was much too difficult for them to read. There are several possible explanations for this. The short stories in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* are twice as long as the chapters in *Me llamo María Isabel*. The vocabulary words and the grammatical structures are significantly more complex than those in *Me llamo María Isabel*. Many students read *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* as a chapter book and did not understand that the book was organized into independent short stories. In addition to the language level of the book, many students felt that the short stories in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* were far too long and hence difficult to read. Each short story was approximately fifteen pages long, while a typical chapter in *Me llamo María Isabel* was approximately five pages in length. A number of students indicated that the groups they were working in were not always on task. Occasionally, group members would not concentrate on reading the books and instead concentrate on other activities; this often happened because particular students

in the group either were not interested in reading the books or would have difficulty understanding the books and would hence “give up”. They noted that they sometimes had difficulty understanding the storyline of the books because of other group members’ mispronunciation of words when reading aloud. Additionally, most students felt that although reading the children’s books was a beneficial experience, they were not able to adequately learn the grammar points and the culture concepts presented in the course textbook because reading the books required too much class time, and consequently they felt unprepared to take the course exams.

### **What activities might have improved students’ experiences with the books?**

Many students offered suggestions for activities that might have helped them better understand *Me llamo María Isabel*. They felt that going over new vocabulary words they would encounter in each chapter before they read the chapter, reading each chapter one paragraph/page at a time and discussing or translating what was occurring in the paragraph/page, doing summaries of the major events of each chapter, and acting out scenes from the book would have been beneficial activities for them. A number of students mentioned that beginning with *Me llamo María Isabel* was somewhat difficult for them. They believed that starting out with picture books in Spanish that utilized characters, themes and plots they were already familiar with would be good preparation for *Me llamo María Isabel*. Interestingly, students generally did not believe that reading a picture book in Spanish would be insulting to them because they were aware of the fact that their reading level in Spanish was about at a native speaker child’s level.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this study revealed significant findings, it is also limited in several ways. Firstly, the study involved approximately fifty students enrolled two sections of Spanish 102 at the university level; consequently, generalizability of the findings to other Spanish 102 students, students at other proficiency levels, students studying other languages, and students at other instructional levels cannot be assumed and must be verified through future research. Secondly, since the researcher was simultaneously the instructor for the two Spanish 102 sections included in the study, some bias may exist in students’ responses to the data collection instruments as well as the researcher’s understanding of the data. Lastly, the study’s findings are based on students’ perceptions and beliefs about their language abilities and their experiences which may not accurately measure or reflect students’ actual reading gains.

### **Conclusion**

The data collected during the study indicated that students generally believed that reading children's books in Spanish had a positive impact on their reading skills and their overall language learning. Students felt that reading the books was a challenging but rewarding experience because they learned new vocabulary words and new grammatical structures. They indicated that they preferred to read the book in pairs/groups so that their partners could help them when they ran into difficulties. They also liked answering comprehension questions because the questions gave them a guide to understand the books and test to what extent they were able to understand the main events in the chapters. Students indicated that several activities would have helped them to better understand the main events in the children's books, including going over new vocabulary words for each chapter, reading each chapter one paragraph/page at a time, doing summaries of the major events of each chapter, acting out scenes from each chapter, and reading picture books in Spanish before reading the children's books.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research studies could investigate the use of children's and adolescent literature in the foreign/second language classroom from a variety of perspectives. Researchers could utilize a reading inventory in a pretest-posttest format to measure gains in students' reading abilities after having read children's books. They could replicate this study with students at lower instructional levels, higher proficiency levels, and/or other languages to see if the results obtained in this study hold for students in these groups. Other studies could examine the long-term effects of students reading children's and adolescent literature at the elementary level on their reading abilities at higher levels in comparison with students who have not read such literature at the elementary level.

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**Appendices**

**APPENDIX A (QUESTIONNAIRE)**

For each set of statements below, determine which one best applies to you, and circle the number of the statement that best fits you.

**A1. Interpretive Communication (Listening)**

1a. I can understand when someone speaks very slowly and carefully to me about familiar topics, but I may need to have the information repeated and have time to think.

1b. I can understand what is said clearly, slowly, and directly to me in simple everyday conversation with persons accustomed to non-native speakers.

1c. I can follow clear everyday conversation, though I sometimes have to ask for repetition.

2a. I can understand words, phrases, and expressions related to familiar topics.

2b. I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.

2c. I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters.

3a. I can understand carefully phrased questions related to personal and family information as well as likes and dislikes.

3b. I can generally identify the main topic in short recorded passages dealing with predictable everyday matters provided the passages are spoken slowly and clearly.

3c. I can understand the general idea of what is being said in short conversations dealing with familiar topics when the speech is slow and clear.

4a. I can understand and follow simple classroom instructions and directions.

4b. I can generally understand the essential information of a conversation around me when people speak slowly and clearly about familiar topics.

4c. I can understand longer conversations and narratives on unfamiliar topics.

**A2. Interpretive Communication (Reading)**

5a. I can understand familiar words, phrases, and simple sentences in authentic written materials, rereading as required.

5b. I can understand a simple personal letter or email in which the writer tells or asks me about aspects of everyday life on familiar topics.

5c. I can understand familiar words, phrases, and sentences in authentic written materials with minimal re-reading.

6a. I can understand basic questions on standardized forms well enough to give the most important information about myself (name, date of birth, nationality).

6b. I can understand short narratives about everyday things dealing with topics that are familiar to me if the text is written in simple language.

6c. I can understand the main points and some details in simple authentic written materials about familiar topics.

7a. I can understand short simple written messages such as greeting cards, holiday wishes, etc.

7b. I can understand simple authentic written materials and identify the main idea(s) such as ads, menus, etc.

7c. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes on somewhat familiar topics.

8a. I can distinguish between questions, statements and exclamations.

8b. I can follow short simple written directions and instructions.

8c. I can skim authentic written materials to find relevant, basic facts such as prices, locations, times, etc.

**B. Interpersonal Communication (Speaking)**

9a. I can introduce myself and others and use basic culturally-appropriate greetings.

9b. I can make simple transactions in real-life situations such as stores, restaurants, post offices or banks, sometimes hesitantly or in incomplete sentences.

9c. I can often start, maintain, and end a simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest, but I have difficulty expressing exactly what I want to say.

10a. I can ask memorized questions and answer simple questions, on very familiar topics such as leisure activities, family, food, school, and weather using memorized phrases.

10b. I can ask for and give directions referring to a map or plan.

10c. I can ask for and follow simple directions and instructions.

11a. I can handle numbers, quantities, cost, time and dates in simple situations.

11b. I can make social arrangements that include date, time, and place.

11c. I can express and react to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference.

12a. I can make myself understood in a simple way, and understand the other person provided s/he talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

12b. I can interact with others using simple language in real-life situations.

12c. I can create simple sentences and deal with uncomplicated situations.

13a. I can in simple fashion ask somebody to repeat what he or she says or ask him or her to speak more slowly.

13b. I can ask people questions about where they live, people they know, things they have, etc. and answer such questions addressed to me, provided questions are articulated slowly and clearly.

13c. I have a sufficient vocabulary to engage in conversation in complete sentences on most topics pertinent to my everyday life such as family, household tasks, hobbies, interests, and work.

14a. I can ask and answer in simple terms questions about likes and dislikes.

14b. I can exchange information about what I like and dislike.

14c. I can deal with some situations likely to arise when traveling to an area where the language is spoken.

### **C1. Presentational Communication (Speaking)**

15a. I can give personal information about myself (address, telephone number, nationality, age, family, etc.)

15b. I can give a basic description of myself, my family, other people using simple sentences and phrases.

15c. I can describe myself, my family, and other people using several simple sentences.

16a. I can talk about simple things I like and dislike.

16b. I can give a basic description of my hobbies and interests using basic sentences.

16c. I can describe my interests, activities, and personal experiences using several simple sentences.

17a. I can describe myself simply.

17b. I can give a basic description of my activities and personal experiences using simple sentences and phrases.

17c. I can talk about my needs, wants, and preferences.

**C2. Presentational Communication (Writing)**

18a. I can fill in a standardized form with my personal details (i.e. name, age, address, telephone number).

18b. I can write lists, short messages, postcards, and simple notes.

18c. I can write a series of simple sentences about myself and aspects of everyday life (i.e. family, school, leisure activities).

19a. I can write about myself using learned phrases and memorized expressions.

19b. I can write using memorized phrases to discuss aspects of my everyday life (i.e. family, school, and leisure activities).

19c. I can write simple questions about aspects of everyday life (i.e. family, school, leisure activities, basic needs)

20a. I can write lists based on familiar material.

20b. I can write simple sentences describing myself and others.

20c. I can write about unfamiliar topics using familiar phrases.

[adapted from  
<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Language/linguafolio/checklist.pdf>]

APPENDIX B (DIRECTIONS FOR JOURNAL ENTRY #1)

Journal #1 is due tomorrow in class. The journal entry should be between three-quarters and a full page in length IN ENGLISH. It can be either handwritten or typed. In the journal entry I would like you to write about your experiences with the book "Me llamo María Isabel" so far. You might consider answering some and/or all of the following questions in your entry:

- What are your general impressions of the book "Me llamo María Isabel"?
- What are your general impressions of reading "Me llamo María Isabel"?
- What positive experiences have you had while reading "Me llamo María Isabel"?
- What negative experiences have you had reading the book?
- What successes have you had reading "Me llamo María Isabel"? What problems have you encountered when reading the book?
- In what way(s) is (are) "Me llamo María Isabel" easy for you to read? Why?
- In what way(s) is (are) "Me llamo María Isabel" difficult for you to read? Why?
- Have the activities we've done in class while reading "Me llamo María Isabel" been helpful for you? Why (not)? What activities would you like to do when reading the book?

Feel free to address other topics not covered by the questions above that you feel is relevant.

#### APPENDIX C (DIRECTIONS FOR JOURNAL ENTRY #2)

For Journal #2, I would like you to write about a page or so in English discussing today's group activity reading "Me llamo Maria Isabel" ("Say Something"). Please comment on:

- a) how your group completed the activity,
- b) if you think reading aloud was useful for you and for the group or not and why or why not,
- c) what you discussed in your group after reading aloud each page,
- d) if you think discussing with your group after reading aloud each page was useful for you and for the group or not and why or why not, and
- e) if you think the activity was useful for you or not and why or why not, and if you would like to do this activity again in the future.

#### APPENDIX D (DIRECTIONS FOR JOURNAL ENTRY #3)

Journal #3 is due Monday in class. Your journal entry should be three-quarters to a full page in length, TYPED, double-spaced, and IN ENGLISH. In your journal entry I would like you to write about your recent experiences with the book "Me llamo María Isabel". You might consider answering some and/or all of the following questions in your journal entry:

- What positive experiences have you recently had reading "Me llamo María Isabel"?

What negative experiences have you recently had reading the book?

- What successes have you recently had reading "Me llamo María Isabel"?

What problems have you recently encountered when reading the book?

- In what way(s) has "Me llamo María Isabel" been easy for you to read? In what way(s) has "Me llamo María Isabel" been difficult for you to read?

- Are the activities we're doing in class reading "Me llamo María Isabel" helpful for you? Why (not)? Which in-class activity (activities) have you enjoyed the most? Why? Which in-class activity (activities) have you enjoyed the least? Why?

Feel free to address other topics not covered by the questions above that you feel are relevant.



APPENDIX E (DIRECTIONS FOR JOURNAL ENTRY #4)

Journal #4 is due on Monday in class. Your journal entry should be three-quarters to a full page in length and IN ENGLISH. In the journal entry I would like you to write about your experiences with the book "Beisbol en abril" so far. You might consider answering some and/or all of the following questions in your journal entry:

- What are your general impressions of the book "Beisbol en abril"?
- What are your general impressions of reading "Beisbol en abril"?
- What positive experiences have you had while reading "Beisbol en abril"? What negative experiences have you had reading the book?
- What successes have you had reading "Beisbol en abril"? What problems have you encountered when reading the book?
- In what way(s) is (are) "Beisbol en abril" easy for you to read? Why? In what way(s) is (are) "Beisbol en abril" difficult for you to read? Why?
- Have the activities we've done in class while reading "Beisbol en abril" been helpful for you? Why (not)? What activities would you like to do when reading the book?

Feel free to address other topics not covered by the questions above that you feel is relevant.

Appendix F (Survey #1)

1. What were your experiences (both positive and negative) reading *Me llamo María Isabel*?

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2. What aspects of language did you notice in reading *Me llamo María Isabel* (grammar, vocabulary, etc.)?

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3. What connections to culture did you make in reading *Me llamo María Isabel*?

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APPENDIX G (SURVEY #2)

1. What were your experiences (both positive and negative) reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*?

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2. What aspects of language did you notice in reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* (grammar, vocabulary, etc.)?

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3. What connections to culture did you make in reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*?

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APPENDIX H (QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEWS #1)

A. Previous Language Learning Experiences

1. For how many years have you previously studied Spanish?
2. At what level(s) have you previously studied Spanish?
3. What were your previous experiences learning Spanish?
4. What percentage of class time did your previous instructor(s) typically speak English? What percentage of class time did your previous instructor(s) typically speak Spanish?
5. What type(s) of teaching methods were used (communicative, grammar-translation, etc.)?
6. What type(s) of language learning materials were used (textbooks, worksheets, audiotapes/CDs, videotapes/DVDs, books in Spanish, etc.)?
7. What type(s) of cultural activities did you engage in (cooking Hispanic food, making Hispanic artifacts, etc.)?

B. Experiences with Reading

1. What type(s) of texts do you typically read in English?
2. What type(s) of texts do you typically read in Spanish?
3. What type(s) of reading strategies do you use when you read texts in English (skimming, scanning, etc.)?
4. What type(s) of reading strategies do you use when you read texts in Spanish (reading aloud, using a dictionary, etc.)?
5. How do you think reading in English is similar to reading in Spanish? How do you think reading in English is different from reading in Spanish?

APPENDIX I (QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEWS #2)

1. What were your experiences reading the children's books we read?
2. Which book did you prefer reading? Why?
3. How has reading the children's books influenced your language skills in Spanish?
4. What aspects of language did you notice in reading the children's books (grammar, vocabulary, etc.)?
5. What connections to culture did you make in reading the children's books?
6. How would you rate the level of difficulty of the children's books we read?
7. Do you think reading children's books is appropriate for beginning-level language students? Why (not)?
8. Do you feel prepared to read more advanced texts in Spanish in the future? Why (not)?
9. How has reading the children's books helped you achieve the goals of the course? How has reading the children's books helped you achieve your personal goals for the course?