

Spring 2018

Improving Reading Comprehension And Oral Proficiency Through The Use Of Literature Circles

Glorimar Rodriguez
Hamline University

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IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION AND ORAL PROFICIENCY
THROUGH THE USE OF LITERATURE CIRCLES

By:

Glorimar N. Rodriguez Guiliani

A capstone in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
English as a Second Language

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2018

Capstone Project Facilitator: Elizabeth Will
Content Advisor: Lisa A. Robb
Peer Reviewer: Litzia Román
Peer Reviewer: Herminio J. Rodriguez

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter provides background information on the history of English education on the island of Puerto Rico since before the acquisition of the island by the United States. It continues to discuss the large number of Puerto Rican citizens who are not proficient in the English language, even with continued years of instruction in schools, universities and colleges, and exposure to English on a daily basis. The issue of the decline of the Spanish language at the hands of English instruction is also discussed, with political and education entities claiming the teaching of both languages simultaneously is creating deficiencies in proficiency in both languages. The chapter prepares the reader with the information that will answer the question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?* Culminating the chapter is the section for the motivation of study, where I discuss the circumstances and problems that have moved me to implement the use of literature circles to improve my students' proficiency in communication. The motivation for study is followed by research guiding questions and the overview of the following chapters.

Researcher's Background and Personal Interest

I have been working in the education field for more than ten years with formal and not so formal experiences. I have taught many different levels from elementary grades to college level courses. Initially, I wanted to teach at the college level, teaching more English-specific courses rather than teaching at the high school level, but fate took me in a different direction. Having a bachelor's degree in English Literature has allowed me to teach at the high school level where students are more mature than middle school students. My teaching focus has been mainly the upper grade levels, tenth to twelfth grade, teaching literature analysis, creative writing and public speaking. This year has been the first year I am teaching the ninth grade English literature course in the school where I work. I knew teaching this level was going to bring some challenges since not all students have the tools or knowledge to do in-depth literature analysis.

The majority of the ninth-grade students at the school where I teach speak English to some degree and communicate and participate actively in class. Some students struggle with keeping up with the class, the whole 50 minutes of it, completely in English. There are students who understand me entirely and participate in English, while there are some who understand me but want to answer back in Spanish. Then there are other students who ask, "Can I ask/answer in Spanish?", to which the reply most of the time is, "No.". To those students who have a limited vocabulary in English, I allow them to ask questions or make comments in Spanish, which I then translate into English and they need to repeat. This is not an occurrence seen only in ninth grade; I have seen this happen with the entering tenth graders who claim to have low understanding of English. From what I see the number is on the rise.

I am aware of the difficulties students face regarding language communication outside of the classroom. Puerto Rico's peculiarity regarding the learning and use of English at times makes it difficult for students to translate what they have learned in the classroom to their daily lives. However, students in Puerto Rico are already exposed to the English language and are Americanized in some way, so English is not entirely foreign to them. Moreover, it should be possible for students to find a haven where they can practice communication with peers.

Given this reality, how can I as a teacher provide opportunities for my students to come into contact with others in the classroom? How can students take an active role in their learning while being active in the classroom? What activity can be done in the classroom that would allow students to learn vocabulary, develop comprehension and critical thinking skills, while actively communicating in the classroom? As I completed my practicum for my Master's degree, my practicum supervisor instructed me to develop a reading comprehension activity that put students in the center of the classroom, allowing them to be actively engaged in discussions.

With this activity, I was instructed that students' prior knowledge would be activated, and participation ensued. I discussed with my students Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*. I was told to put this story in perspective with my students' lives. I should elicit questions that would translate into my students' and my cultural and historical context. This story is about keeping traditions, so I began there. I wrote on the whiteboard the phrase The Lottery and asked students to come up with answers and responses. Students did: from buying a ticket to see if you would earn the jackpot, to a very real response "something my grandma plays". Puerto Rico has this lottery game, *Lotería Tradicional* or

los billetes, a carton of 25 cutout stubs with five numbers on them. The numbers in the stubs are played and the winning numbers are announced online or on Puerto Rico's newspapers. Older people are the ones who play it most and tickets are sold everywhere, especially by *billeteros*, people who stand or sit in front of banks and downtown in every city waiting for people to make their purchases, but the sales are not limited to this technique. This is not a big jackpot but is considered to be a good opportunity to win money.

This topic quickly led students to go forth with their discussions and from there the topic of tradition came up, brought up by several students. We continued to discuss traditions celebrated on the island and especially in Ponce. Students mentioned the *carnaval*, celebrated every February, where a girl is chosen as the queen of the *carnaval*, and streets are closed for a parade that includes music, dances and drums. Students also mentioned *las Justas* which is a weekend celebration of university athletes and their triumphs. From here on discussion was easy because students felt deceived by the title of the short story, since it was nothing like what they had in mind. Closing activities were engaging, from oral critiques to written responses to the text. Having this discussion and activities led me with the itch to continue to develop activities and choose selections that would get my students to communicate and participate more.

After completing my practicum, I continued to research activities that could be done in the classroom to keep students engaged and active during lessons. I stumbled across several articles and one caught my attention; it was about literature circles and translanguaging in the classroom. This article provided insights on literature circles and showed results of student success and active participation in the lesson. After reading the

article and several more, I decided that it was time to change the way in which students interact and receive language in the classroom. From this, the research question emerged, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?* This initiated the expedition of class improvement and opportunities for communication for my students.

The Americanization Attempt

Puerto Rico is a colorful, warm, Spanish-speaking Caribbean island, acquired by the United States almost 120 years ago. The relationship between the mainland and the island has been rocky for several years with the island's economy, political status and education being topics of great focus. Before Americans arrived on the island, the education provided by Spain to the elites offered instruction in English and other foreign languages, such as Latin and French, as well as courses in theology, history and science. Thanks to this education, the elites of the island were familiar with the language of their new colonizers (Martes-Rivera, 2015).

After acquiring the island from Spain, the United States' government established public schools where English would be the sole language of education. The education system was used as the means to Americanize and "assimilate" Puerto Ricans to the American reality and aimed to make English the dominant language of the island (Maldonado-Valentín, 2016; Vélez, 2000). Public schools were established to provide all Puerto Rican citizens with education in English, similar to that provided in the United States. Before the United States' arrival to the island, education was reserved only for Puerto Rico's elite (Angrist, Chin & Godoy, 2008).

The first American rulers of the island believed that the only way Puerto Ricans could relate to, learn about, and assimilate the American culture was through the instruction and learning of the English language in schools (Fayer, Castro, Diaz, & Plata, 1998; Morris, 1996). This education and learning would have been a step in the direction to include the commonwealth of Puerto Rico into the Union. Puerto Ricans, especially nationalists and pro-independence supporters, saw and still see the teaching of English on the island as a threat to the Spanish language and the cultural identity of Puerto Ricans (U.S. English Foundation, 2011). The divergence between the history and background of Puerto Rican and United States cultures, as well as the current colonial status, brings about the language issue on the island (Ramos, 2004). Puerto Rico, though, has not been completely assimilated to the United States after more than a century of English language instruction (Rodriguez-Arroyo, 2013). Its citizens have not obtained proficiency in a language that has been taught for almost 120 years.

As Americans colonizers arrived in Puerto Rico and established military-run public schools (Caban, 2002), the reception of English as a medium of instruction was seen with apprehension, as some circles in the island preferred English as the language of instruction, while others preferred Spanish, the language of the island, as the language of instruction (Angrist, Chin & Godoy, 2008; DuBord 2004; Maldonado-Valentín, 2016; Martes-Rivera, 2015). As the years passed and after several language policies established by the Department of Education, Spanish and English currently co-exist as official languages of the island with Spanish being the main language of instruction (Mazak & Herbas-Donoso, 2014) and English being taught as a required subject (Martes-Rivera, 2015; Reyes Tosta, 2013).

Puerto Rican Americanization

There is no doubt that Puerto Rican society is Americanized. American influences are part of the citizens' daily lives. People shop at American stores, eat American food and are surrounded by the English language through media, television, feature movies, mainstream music and advertisements, as well as fashion and literature. A large quantity of the populace has family members who either live in the United States or have lived in some part of the United States and migrated back to Puerto Rico (Duany, 2003). As a result of the exposure through education or outside sources, Puerto Rican Spanish contains a lot of borrowed words and anglicisms which Puerto Ricans use in their daily lives (Fayer et al., 1998; Nickels, 2005). There is no denying that Puerto Ricans are surrounded by the English language on a daily basis (Nash & Fayer, 1996). They have appropriated uses of English within their lexicon which can be seen in their daily linguistics repertoires (Cortés, Ramírez, Rivera, Viada, & Fayer, 2005; Sostre Rodriguez, 2008).

Some researchers and linguists have argued that the teaching of both English and Spanish is creating deficiencies in proficiency within speakers in the island (Sostre Rodriguez, 2008). Having both languages working together has, in some way, tarnished the Spanish language due to borrowing and lexical inflections that come from English (Kerkhof, 2001). Dominguez-Rosado (2015) and Maldonado (2000) also argued that this blending of two strong languages is creating high school students with a limited knowledge of English. Although all students in Puerto Rico are taught English from elementary to high school, there was a decline in the acquisition of English language skills by public school students during the late 1990's and early 2000's, with a slow

increase of English proficiency up until the year 2013 (Disdier Flores, 2015). According to Reyes Tosta (2013), the government of Puerto Rico has admitted the failure of the educational system to develop competent and capable students not only in English but in native Spanish.

What stands out about the language issue in Puerto Rico is that English is taught in schools and thought of as a second language, but do students have opportunities to communicate and produce conversations with others? Puerto Rico does not offer its students many opportunities to produce or practice the language they learn orally with others as the majority of the population is Spanish speaking and Spanish is the language of interaction and exchange. Opportunities to make use of the spoken language arise with cliques where the common language spoken is English or when a person has specific interactions with someone who speaks English, maybe because of migration to the United States or through social media interactions. Thus, is English in Puerto Rico a second or foreign language? The peculiar state of the English language on the island is what I believe is causing the deficiency in proficiency in students.

Assimilation Through Exposure and Education

Although Spanish is the official language of instruction and the main language of communication of the island, English is present in schools, and is taught as a subject for a period of 50-60 minutes a day. In the private school sector, some schools offer other courses in English, such as science, history and math and are known for being more English-oriented (DeJesus, 2008). There are other schools which offer an all-English curriculum with their students being fully-immersed in English. These schools are favored by parents who want their students to obtain a more superior, English-centered

education (Carroll, 2016). Aside from the primary and secondary education of English, colleges and universities of Puerto Rico require students to take nine credits of English classes, whether basic English, intermediate English or advanced English, usually within the first three trimesters (Carroll, 2016). Intermediate and advanced placement is determined by a proficiency test students take or results on the PEAU (Prueba de Evaluación y Admisión Universitaria) tests, also known as the College Board. Still, with all of this exposure to English, adults and professionals speak and perform in English poorly, if they do so at all (Kerkhof, 2001).

Aside from the formal presence of English on the island, the population is also exposed to English through outside, informal sources such as music, provided fully in English in radio stations, movies, which come subtitled in Spanish, cable television programs, advertisements, social media and home-designed signs (Fayer, 2000; Nickels, 2005; Pousada, 2006). Needless to say, people on the island have, at one point or another, come into contact with the English language. In spite of this, most high school graduates are not able to read, speak or write English well (Kerkhof, 2001; Rodriguez-Arroyo, 2013).

While the population of the island faces contact with the English language formally or informally, the results of studies such as (Mazak & Herbas-Donoso, 2014 and U.S. Census data (2016), show that most high school graduates are not proficient in English. Students in Puerto Rico's schools are taught and are exposed to English in the classroom from kindergarten until they graduate high school in twelfth grade but have varying degrees in proficiency (Mazak & Herbas-Donoso, 2014). If formal education in the English language has been present in students' lives since infancy and if as they grow

they are exposed to the English language through external outlets, why are the proficiency levels so low? Is education in schools provided in a way that allows students to communicate and make use of the language, as opposed to being fed the language and have it stagnant in the brain? Are teachers allowing students to be receptors or activators of language? Is the target vocabulary taught put into context and practice? Is the reading and class discussion content applied into students' interests and daily lives?

Motivation for Study

For the past two years the students who arrive to my tenth grade English class have less proficiency and comprehension abilities in the classroom compared to past groups and classes, and classes have become more challenging and difficult to deliver. Add to this a new group, ninth grade, where the oral, written, analytical and comprehension proficiency of students is a grade or two below level. Language proficiency in all areas is below grade level. When I receive students in ninth and tenth grade who have been students of the school since kindergarten or early elementary school, and who ask me what is the meaning of *window* or *thief*, something is wrong.

Aside from having students who have been in this same school since kindergarten or first grade asking the meaning of basic English words, I have students who have told me that they do not see the need to learn English since they will not use it in life, since it is a language that is not spoken in Puerto Rico and they have no plans to move from the island. I have also heard from students that they feel like the material being taught is not relevant to them, that they do not identify with the content of the class, and that they do not feel interested in learning what is taught in class. Students constantly ask, "Why do I

need this? How is this necessary for my future?” This is alarming because for me English is very important as it plays and has played a major role in my life.

I always had exposure to English because my older brother lived in Tampa, Florida and whenever we spoke or he visited we would have interactions in English. I also had a lot of input through American music, movies and cable television. Also, my dad worked in a company where he would travel to Ireland and the United States, among other places; I saw, through him, the importance of knowing English for employment purposes.

When I arrived in fifth grade to a new school, I received two periods of English class every day and was taught by a teacher who was a retired American Army official. In fact, he was my English teacher from fifth grade through eighth grade which contributed to my proficiency and learning of English. I like to attribute my drive and knowledge of English from the many journals I had to write in English class, the many songs we listened to and the many speeches and oral activities performed in class. English was my favorite subject and it opened up my curiosity not only to continuing learning and practicing the language in class, but at home and in social contexts with friends. When I was in eighth grade I traveled with my grandmother to Florida and I was the one who communicated with flight attendants, cashiers, salespeople, waiters and translated from my grandmother whenever we went somewhere with non-Spanish speaking employees. I also made English speaking friends during that summer. I attribute my interest in learning English to new friendships and adventures from an early age.

My parents also supported my learning and speaking in English. During high school, English became my “first” language, as I chose to do most of my communication

in English rather than Spanish. When I graduated from high school, as a graduation present, I went to Chicago on vacation and the fact that I proficiently spoke English allowed me to become accepted into college there, get jobs and easily make friends. The fact that I knew English allowed me to have experiences that maybe a lot of English learners or monolinguals at the tender age of 17 do not have. I have been accepted at different colleges and universities at the undergraduate and graduate levels and have had many job experiences because of my intellect, but also because of being bilingual.

As an educator, it is of great concern to see the English scores in the standardized tests in my school declining. It is also disconcerting to see the number of high school students I receive in my classroom whose level of English is lower than the groups before. From these observations, the questions arise as to why my students, after spending almost nine years being taught, learning, interacting and taking mandatory English classes are not achieving proficiency in the language.

Guiding Questions

As a current high school teacher and a former technical/vocational teacher in Ponce, Puerto Rico, I have seen the gaps in proficiency and comprehension in my students widening. I have received students in my classroom who seem to be untouched by the English language instruction received, even when they learned English the year before and the year before that. I have received students in my classroom who struggle to ask a simple request in English. My teaching experience working with Puerto Rican high school students led me to wonder, how can English education be improved? How can I provide opportunities for my students to put into practice what they have learned in the

classroom, what I teach them? How can I provide students the opportunity to be active learners in the classroom, taking on some of the tasks performed during the class?

These and some more questions came up in the quest for completing my Master's degree and completing my Capstone. After reading and briefly experiencing the literature circle process in the classroom I believed that literature circles would be an effective way to get my students to practice communication in the classroom, thus improving fluency. Carroll and Sambolin's (2016) research inspired me to look into literature circles as a way to promote collaborative learning and communication in my classroom and answer the question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?*

Summary

Chapter One of this project provided information about the background of English on Puerto Rico, the exposure to English experienced on the island, the limits to English communication among students outside the classroom and the reasons why such a sensitive situation has made me want to implement literature circles in the classroom to promote communication in the target language. The chapter also discussed the motivation for the study and provides a brief overview of why I chose literature circles as the topic of my culminating work for my master's degree.

Overview of the Chapters

The literature review, in the next chapter, presents research on the benefits of using literature circles in the classroom and how to set up effective literature circles. Chapter Three provides the description of the project, design framework and lesson outcomes of the literature circles. Chapter Four discusses my reflections on the project.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

I have come to learn and understand that the students that live in Puerto Rico need to be provided with an environment where they can communicate actively in the target language at school. Because of Puerto Rico's language situation, English is not officially or commonly spoken on the island, thus, students do not get much practice talking in the target language outside the English classroom. In order to give students the practice they need, the teacher needs to step away from the spotlight and act as a facilitator for language and communication, providing content and information, but allowing students to bring topics, ideas and their own conversation into the classroom (Kim, 2004). This is why I have chosen to explore the question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?*

Chapter Overview

Literature circles in the language classroom provide communicative opportunities for students while also developing and improving reading comprehension. Literature circles are a tool designed to help students develop meaningful conversations about texts with participants being assigned specific roles to stimulate participation (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

I will use findings from research to discuss Constructivism and Schema Theory which state that learning is an active process enhanced by adding previous knowledge to new content. Also, research behind literature circles is included which provides background knowledge into what literature circles are and the opportunities they bring into the classroom for students. Roles within literature circles are discussed and explained in this section. The research also seeks to explain how to use literature circles in the English classroom to promote active talk time while offering information on the benefits of literature circles to communication in the target language and ideas as to how to implement them.

Beginning to Mend the “Problem”

In Chapter One the position of English in Puerto Rico and its sensitive situation regarding communication among citizens in the language was discussed. There is no doubt Puerto Ricans are Americanized. They are influenced by the American food industry, fashion, movie and music industries, textbooks and novels, and the lifestyle, which is often modeled from television or from family members that come to Puerto Rico from the mainland or from Puerto Ricans travelling to the mainland (Cortés et al., 2005). Thus, there is no doubt English has become a part of Puerto Rican citizens' way of life. English is also seen as a symbol of progress, social status and education (De Jesus, 2008; Schweers & Hudders, 2000), as well as necessary for practical needs such as looking for or getting a job (Shenk, 2012). On the island, English is necessary for those actively seeking employment and for college-bound students (Blau & Dayton, 1997; Carroll, 2016), yet according to 2010 U.S. Census data, about 79.5% of Puerto Ricans spoke English “less than very well” or do not deem themselves as bilingual (Carroll, 2015).

On the island, Puerto Rican students do not have the social means and opportunities to interact with other people with whatever English they learn in the classroom. The social context provided in Puerto Rico lacks opportunities for active oral communication. Maldonado-Valentin (2016) points out that Puerto Ricans are basically monolingual throughout their day, except for the period(s) in school or college when they use the language or the occasional time they find someone to speak with in the target language, which in some areas is uncommon. It is because of the island's peculiar situation that teachers need to provide opportunities in the classroom for the students to communicate in English and develop the critical skills needed to use the language in and outside of the classroom.

Pousada (2005) defines the English teacher in Puerto Rico as the only model for language for students. The situation with the language on the island hinders students' ability to genuinely interact with others due to limited contact with the language outside of the classroom. Since there is not much place for exposure and practice for the English language, learning and interaction stays behind and is reserved only for the classroom (Blau & Dayton, 1997). This lack of natural interaction outside of the classroom causes the students to not pay real attention or show genuine interest in the class, since they feel they will not use what is being taught in the classroom in a social context outside of the classroom.

The English classroom in Puerto Rico needs to change. Students should be provided opportunities to actively communicate amongst themselves, with the teacher as a model and facilitator. More genuine communication activities should be provided for the students where they can not only communicate individually, but with classmates in

the target language. Furthermore, literature circles provide an opportunity for open communication and development of critical and necessary skills. They provide ways for students to have authentic conversations in English with peers of the same age with whom students are familiar.

Constructivism and Schema Theory

Jean Piaget's Constructivism is a theory of learning in which the individual constructs learning by integrating new knowledge with previous knowledge while actively engaging in processes of learning (Marone, 2016; Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Applefield, Huber and Moallem (2000) stated that Constructivism is a methodological view of learning that emphasizes construction of knowledge rather than transmission of knowledge by the teacher and passive reception by students. Thus, Constructivism turns learning into an active activity, where students construct and develop language and knowledge while putting concepts into practice. It removes the teacher from being the active transmitter of content and knowledge allowing the teacher to become the content facilitator, and turning students into active engagers in the classroom, thus leaving the traditional, passive learning behind (Mvududu & Thiel-Burgess, 2012). Moreover, Constructivism allows students to use previous knowledge to construct or create new learning in the classroom rather than just acquiring content from the teacher (Marone, 2016)

One effective way to build, create and transmit language is through the spoken word. As students talk and interact with each other in the classroom, students will encounter better chances and opportunities to interact and come into direct contact with other students in the target language (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Interactions with other

students also improve reading and writing competence is through interactions with others. The constructivist approach allows to students to engage with other students in meaningful ways, opening the doors to improvement in different achievement areas (Mvududu & Thiel-Burgess, 2012).

Vygotsky's Social Constructivism extended the importance of social interaction in the classroom on learning (Marone, 2016). Social Constructivism places more emphasis on learning through social interaction and value is placed on cultural background (Marone, 2016). As such, students need to actively engage with each other in the classroom in order to develop more communicative skills and proficiency among themselves (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Social Constructivism places importance on social interactions to promote and improve learning. Students are at the center of the discussion and thought process, actively engaging with one another (Applefield, Huber & Moallem, 2000).

It is through the active learning process that students construct meaning through conversation and their own knowledge and experiences. Learning takes place at a level just above the one the student currently has since collaboration with others, especially those more experienced and knowledgeable helps develop higher order thinking (Zhang, 2007). These ideas and emphases are a perfect fit in regard to literature circles since interaction and meaning construction are what literature circles aim to achieve in students.

Schema is another learning theory in which students' prior knowledge is activated, created and used by learners (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). According to Tracey and Morrow, in Schema Theory people organize everything into knowledge structures,

also known as schemata. Knowledge and content are compartmentalized and stored in the brain ready to be used at any given time (Liu, 2015). This facilitates the ability to process newly-acquired knowledge (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). In order for students to create new meaning, they need to tap into past experiences and content that will help in the current lesson or undertaken task. Therefore, students' existing knowledge will positively influence what is being learned (Applefield, Huber & Moallem, 2000; Liu, 2015). Existing knowledge or schemata is activated by students as teachers effectively engage students in class content. While teachers facilitate information for students, students are accessing schemata while tying up old content with new. By accessing previously acquired content, the student feels knowledgeable, allowing students to engage in oral communication.

According to Che (2014) Schema Theory states that a reader's comprehension of a text consists of three schemas. Language schema refers to the capabilities the reader possesses to understand the language of the text measured with background knowledge on a big or small scale (Che, 2014). Another schema Che (2014) presented is content schema, which shows a reader's familiarity with themes found in the text as well as the background knowledge of the text. Che (2014) concluded that if readers lack content schema, they will have trouble reading, thus rendering them incapable of forming hypotheses. Che (2014) also presented another set of schemas, formal schemas, which demonstrate the readers' ability to identify the style and structure of the text. Che (2014) added that language, content and formal schemas are intertwined and determine the readers' comprehension ability. If one of the schemas is lacking or if the student is unable

to link the schemas when reading, the reader can subsequently misunderstand the text (Che, 2014).

Since readers have different schemas, teachers should use different types of texts and prompts in order to get through to all students and help them have access to different schemas. Literature circles are an excellent way to access schema because depending on the text chosen and used by the teacher, students can access stored information that allows them to engage with the text.

Literature circles provide students with opportunities to engage with texts while bringing their own ideas and comprehension into the classroom (Simpson, 2014). They are student-centered and help students build their own knowledge and understanding of the text through previous life experiences. Literature circles are centered on the ideas Constructivism and Schema Theory build themselves upon (Educational Broadcast Corporation, 2004). They provide an opportunity for learning and knowledge to be dynamic and allows for active collaboration among peers (Elhess & Egbert, 2015). When placing literature circles alongside Constructivism, there is no doubt they are an excellent way to engage students and get them talking while building necessary skills.

What are Literature Circles?

Literature circles are a technique to get students to actively communicate in the English classroom, make meaning and collaborate. Literature circles provide opportunities for authentic conversations among peers, while using students' linguistic inventory and giving their own meaning and context to the text (Carroll & Sambolín, 2016). Literature circles are student-led and place students in the center of the conversation while allowing the teacher to take a backseat supervising and overseeing

activities, as students take control of the discussion, expressing their opinions and ideas about what they understood from the text (Elhess & Egbert, 2015). Usually, students are placed in groups of four or five to make the literature circles. Students may be assigned roles to carry out the intended outcome of the lesson.

Literature circles can be one of the most effective tools for teaching and learning a second language. Teachers who establish literature circles in their classroom encourage language acquisition by choosing selections and materials that can be relevant to students while promoting dialogue among students and encouraging critical thinking skills and discussions (Carroll & Sambolín, 2016). They offer students opportunities to communicate what they perceive from a text without being restricted to specific, “correct” answers. Moreover, they provide quality talk which is essential to second language communication and learning (Kim, 2014). Some literature circles allow students to choose the book they want to read and discuss, empowering active and confident students. Literature circles also allow those students who struggle with participation and communication to take on a more active role. Along with contributing to participation and communication, literature circles also give students ownership of their group and individual learning while participating in various roles and discussions within the circles (Wilfong, 2009). At the center of literature circles is collaboration which promotes conversation among lower proficiency students since they are communicating among a specific group of students and not out loud in front of the whole class (Whittingham, 2013).

In addition to providing an environment conducive to oral communication among students, literature circles allow teachers to bridge learner gaps by connecting students’

background to the activities being completed (Carroll & Sambolín, 2016). By connecting students' prior knowledge and artifacts, teachers validate students' cognitive capabilities, activating schema, while allowing the student to feel included as part of the discussion or class (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Whittingham (2013) also supported the importance of the teacher's role within literature circles since teachers reinforce student knowledge while walking around the classroom supporting students. For second language learners, quality talk time in the classroom and inclusion of ideas are of great value in their language development and should be supported further by teachers (Kim, 2004).

Why Use Literature Circles in the Classroom

Literature circles support student language improvement through the activities performed by students in literature circles. These activities improve analysis, summarizing and student reflection (Karatay, 2017). Literature circle activities support reading comprehension, while promoting oral communication among students, and reinforcing and improving writing and vocabulary skills. Thus, literature circles positively effect student learning and language development (Elhess & Egbert, 2015).

Literature circles support reading comprehension through visualization, connection, questioning, inferencing and analysis (Elhess & Egbert, 2015). By working as a group and completing the roles assigned, students draw information from the text, highlighting and paying attention to important details while providing thought-provoking responses to support their ideas. Students also make critical analysis about the text, important events, and underlying themes, while responding to the how and why of events while making connections, all the while encouraging student-generated inquiry (Levy, 2011).

Literature circles stimulate participation and active oral communication. In addition to improving reading comprehension skills, literature circles motivate and develop the confidence in students to talk within their groups (Elhess & Ebgert, 2015). Since students are not highlighted by the teacher in front of peers, the student feels more comfortable and at ease to communicate with classmates within that limited environment. As it was mentioned above, oral language is better acquired by exposure, use and practice. Literature circles provide students with opportunities for social interactions with peers which help improve oral proficiency and student participation through active oral communication (Elhess & Ebgert, 2015). Literature circles also provide opportunities to share and negotiate student experiences (Levy, 2011).

Literature circle groups promote and reinforce writing skills. Through the completion of prescribed roles students are reinforcing writing skills with the help of classmates. By looking for new words, summarizing, identifying important passages within the text and thinking, developing and writing reading questions students are practicing and improving writing skills. If the teacher, after reading and discussion is done, supplies students with creative writing, comprehension, and critical thinking activities (Elhess & Ebgert, 2015), the students will also work on reinforcing writing skills.

Literature circle groups develop and increases students' vocabulary repertoire. One of the roles within literature circles is the role of word wizard, vocabulary wizard or vocabulary enricher. In this role, the student in charge looks up new or unfamiliar words within the text and shares them with students (Barone & Barone, 2016; Burns, 1998; Elhess & Ebgert, 2015). During the discussions, students discuss the words and apply

them in context with the book being read, providing a deeper insight into the meaning of the word not only in isolation, but in the context of what is being read (Barone & Barone, 2016). Graham-Marr (2015) praised literature circles and their roles as well as their ability to provide students with the opportunity to use vocabulary learned and contributing to comprehension while stimulating authentic oral communication.

Research on literature circles in the classroom provided an insight into the many benefits literature circles have for students and why they should be implemented in the classroom to promote communication, comprehension and critical thinking skills. Literature circles support active learning in the classroom, something that is necessary in the second language classroom. From research I have found that literature circles allow students to connect their knowledge to the content presented in the class, making class more enjoyable and approachable for students. By implementing and incorporating specific tasks to reading and interaction, literature circles contribute to improved proficiency in students.

Implementing Literature Circles

There are many steps to take when implementing literature circles in the classroom. Selecting a book or books that are relevant and interesting to students is the starting point for incorporating literature circles. This can be done by the teacher or students (Daniels & Steineke, 2004; Karatay, 2017). After books have been selected, the teacher explains literature circles to the students, what they are, their purpose in the class and the expected outcomes (DaLie, 2001). After, the teacher explains the specific roles used during the literature circles, modeling roles for student understanding. The teacher provides handouts to students which will assess student work in literature circles.

Once the background and introduction activity has been completed, the next thing a teacher does is begin reading the first chapter of the selected book aloud to the class (Shelton-Strong, 2012). This activity can be modified by reading a short story to introduce the roles and concepts. With this read-aloud the teacher models what students will be doing during the literature circles activity, undertaking the different roles to show students the purpose of each role (Shelton-Strong, 2012). Guided reading and discussion led by the teacher allows students to have a better understanding of the task, laying down the groundwork and foundation of the role needed to be performed (Shelton-Strong, 2012). The teacher will then assign activities for groups to complete in the classroom or at home. As students work together, the teacher will walk around in the monitoring student progress (Heydon, 2003). Evaluation is done through student self-assessments and evaluation and teacher observations (DaLie, 2001).

Student Roles Within Literature Circles

Literature circles provide students with opportunities to look at the text from different perspectives while playing an important role in the circle. Roles vary depending on the educator implementing literature circles in the classroom. There are a variety of roles that a teacher can assign to students and these can be fixed or rotated among students. Roles can rotate on different discussions or lessons, so all students can participate and perform different activities within the group (Elhess & Egbert, 2015). It is recommended that teachers have all students take the same role to become familiar with and practice that role. This ensures students' understanding and mastery of the role within the literature circle. Even while it is recommended that roles be permanent, some teachers

alternate roles as discussions continue to provide students with experience in other roles. (Frey & Fisher, 2013; Shelton-Strong, 2012).

There are many roles to be assigned in literature circles. Some teachers use some roles, such as the illustrator, while other teachers decide to forgo this role. The traditional roles, discussion director and summarizer, are always found in literature circles. The vocabulary enricher or word wizard, is most commonly used with nonfiction texts (Wilfong, 2009). Other literature circle roles such as webmaster or investigator, are used in content-specific literature circles, such as those conducted with online support (Bromley, Faughnan, Ham, Miller, Armstrong, Crandall, Garrison & Marrone, 2014; Wilfong, 2009) The most commonly used roles for literature circles and their descriptions are:

1. Discussion Director: develops at least five questions from the text and shares the questions with the group for discussion.
2. Literary Luminaries: stimulates thinking by identifying interesting and important passages from the text.
3. Summarizers: recalls what happened in the text, identifies themes, symbols and issues and prepares a summary for the group.
4. Vocabulary Enricher or Wizard: identifies new or difficult words within the text. (Bromley et al., 2014; Carroll & Sambolin, 2016; Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Shelton-Strong, 2012)

These roles allow students to fulfill the purpose of literature circles which is to collaborate, communicate, comprehend, construct language and analyze actively. Such roles serve different functions but the most important is they deepen students' level of

understanding while making connections to the content (Whittingham, 2013). As Carroll and Sambolin (2016) showed in their research literature circle roles provide advantages for students who are hesitant to communicate; these roles provide opportunities for students to share ideas with other students. Roles also help to focus students' attention to the text to identify what is significant within the text and what is important to contribute within the discussion (Heydon, 2003). Thus, literature circles aim to improve and promote fluency and comprehension while engaging students in active communication.

Summary

Chapter Two provided the literature review and research that will answer the question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?*

Literature circles fall well into the Constructivist theory of education since they provide an environment for students' active learning. Literature circles also activate students' schema, or prior knowledge, helping to build upon the new content being learned.

Literature circles are dynamic and offer a variety of roles for students to engage in while acquiring or improving comprehension, oral proficiency and critical thinking skills.

Therefore, literature circles are an educational resource that motivates and improves active learning in the classroom, something that is essential to success in learning a second language.

Chapter Three will describe the framework for the project, the participants and the setting. It will describe the design and implementation of the curriculum. An expected implementation timeline will also be discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to find the answer to the question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?* This chapter explains the framework through which the curriculum is written and developed. The setting and audience are identified, and a description and discussion of the lessons in the curriculum are provided. An approximate timeline for project implementation is also described.

In an effort to provide students with the opportunity to communicate actively and authentically in the classroom I endeavored to include literature circles as a means to achieve communication in students. Literature circles allow students to work individually in their own specific roles while collaborating with others, making them a great tool to achieve the intended goal and answer the research question.

Intended Audience and Setting

The curriculum unit included in this project is intended for ninth grade Puerto Rican English learners from a private school in Ponce, Puerto Rico. The class is divided into two groups: group A with a total of 25 students, and group B with a total of 27 students. Both groups had the curriculum implemented as a way to get the student talking time increased. Students from both groups come from many different educational, social

and economic backgrounds and different levels of English proficiency. Some students are gifted students while others have special learning needs. The school has a good reputation regarding academic achievement and teaching of English, compared to other schools in the city.

Furthermore, science, history and math are courses taught mostly in English at the high school level, so students have some exposure to English during those courses. English class meets Monday through Friday for fifty minutes a day on the last two periods before school lets out, and after lunch. The course is literature-based, focused on reading and text interpretation, although written and oral activities are completed, and grammar is also implemented. The course has two additional novels for home reading during the year, which are independently read by the students and discussed in the classroom along with the teacher. Content knowledge is mainly measured through comprehension tests, which hold the most weight for the grading criteria established by the school, although written assignments such as essays and journal entries are used as methods of evaluations, as well as oral presentations or speeches.

Rationale

For the purpose of this study I developed a curriculum that focused on having students be more active in class, where their previous knowledge is requested, and schemata activated. Teacher talking time is reduced and limited to mini-lessons and specific circumstances. Student talking time, on the other hand, is the focus of the class since the final outcome is to get students communicating and exchanging ideas in the target language. Collaboration is key since communication is necessary for collaboration. Here, more experienced students help the less proficient who do not feel comfortable

communicating orally in the classroom. Conversation is at the center of the unit, with students actively reading, commenting and interacting with classmates while supporting each other. Writing is also reinforced, although it is not the main focus of the unit. The curriculum unit also aims to release some responsibility from the teacher and places learning control in the students' hands. The teacher acts as a facilitator, walking around the classroom, overseeing student interactions in the target language, minimizing the use of the first language in discussions.

The goal of the curriculum unit is to provide students with a constructivist learning environment where they will practice English with their peers. The long-time goal is to develop and incorporate literature circle units more frequently during the school year. Another purpose of the curriculum unit is to eventually have it incorporated in all grade levels, so that teachers can provide students with environments where they will communicate actively with others in the target language, while applying new knowledge to previously known knowledge.

Project Framework

Chapter Two provided information about literature circles from the constructivist theory viewpoint while placing importance on schema to support learning and oral communication. The chapter aimed to support the concept that literature circles provide a space for active learning and comprehension in the classroom, supporting the constructivist theory to learning. My curriculum aims to tie literature circles within the classroom to support and promote active learning where the students are center stage and controlling the discussion. Can literature circles improve reading comprehension while improving summarizing, inferring, analyzing, among other skills? Can literature circles

support active oral participation among students from different proficiency levels? If the answer to these questions is yes, then my curriculum will support active participation and learning in class while also seeing improvement in reading comprehension.

This project will be aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have been implemented in the school, while applying the Puerto Rico Department of Education Curriculum Framework (2016). Puerto Rico's Curriculum Framework is also CCSS aligned creating a symbiotic relationship with the two. The curriculum unit will focus on the Speaking and Listening (SL) standards of the Common Core, while still paying attention to the Reading, Writing and Language standards. As stated in Chapter Two, the study and lessons were created with the Social Constructivism and Schema Theory to learning in mind, placing the importance of learning in active and genuine communication among the students while activating prior knowledge to contribute to the discussion of the material (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

Design

The curriculum unit is designed with lesson templates adapted from Parrish (2004) and Daniels and Steineke (2004), as well as other resources referenced in the literature review. I modified lessons I have developed through the years and referred to Allen and McDougal (2012) as reference for some of the ideas for lessons and activities.

The unit will span eight weeks and will be divided into eight lessons. Lessons run for periods of fifty minutes but during some lessons or days, arrangements will be made so that the class could meet for two consecutive periods of fifty minutes, allowing the class to meet for a total of a hundred and ten minutes. This will allow the lesson to be

longer, which will allow students to have more time to complete assignments and interact and collaborate with their groups.

In most of the lessons students will be divided into groups and students will choose their roles. The teacher will make sure there is parity among the students, where less proficient students are paired with proficient students in order to get help and benefit more from the activity. By making sure there is parity among the students, the teacher will make sure that less prominent students are supported by those most proficient ones, who will serve as coaches or tutors for the less proficient (Applefield, Huber & Moallem, 2000). Vygotsky's research states that children learn through their interactions with others (Applefield, Huber & Moallem, 2000; Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Applefield, Huber and Moallem (2000) refer to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development as support for the aforementioned argument that while less proficient students are working and being supported by their peers, they are entering their zone of proximal development, which is the level in which a child can be successful with appropriate support, in this case, a more experienced classmate (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

Implementation

The first lesson, which will run on two days and will meet for 110 minutes each day, will provide students with information about literature circles. Literature circle norms will be developed by the students and roles will be introduced and explained. During these two days, modeling will be done by the teacher and then practiced by students, so they understand and comprehend the idea of how literature circles and their roles work. From week two to week eight, students will work with their groups, reading the book at home and discussing it in the classroom, each working on their assigned role

and completing worksheets or creating them. The teacher will debrief students on their daily work for the last five to ten minutes of each class. These debriefing or wrap-up activities can be oral or written submissions. Students will also fill out self-assessment sheets where they will reflect on their work and progress of the day.

Student conferences will be done in groups and individually to show student's or groups' reading comprehension. These conferences will serve as a way to evaluate progress and comprehension. On lesson four, literature circles will shift their focus from the roles worksheets to more learner-centered tasks, where students will create or develop their own worksheets, give presentations and record a video presentation. Leaving behind the roles will provide students with a more authentic environment, leaving behind the restrictive activities roles can provide students (Shelton-Strong, 2012). During the last lesson of the curriculum unit students will also complete more written activities.

Timeline

The curriculum is intended to be implemented during the spring semester of the school year. The fall semester is for the teacher to get to know the students and begin to address student population needs. During the first semester of the school year the teacher will evaluate students' language proficiency, reading comprehension, vocabulary repertoire and writing skills and from those evaluations, needs assessments will be developed to implement into the curriculum unit the next spring. I will mold the curriculum unit to meet the groups' needs. All developed materials will be revised in case adjustments need to be made to fulfill the students' needs. On the second semester, once the teacher is familiar with students and vice versa, the curriculum unit will be implemented. The estimated timeframe for the implementation of the unit is from

February to April. This will help assure students are prepared to get into the interactions and collaboration.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the curriculum unit, the setting and intended audience, as well as the framework and rationale. An overview of the lessons was discussed as was the goal of the curriculum unit. Chapter Four will discuss what was learned from the project, along with limitations. I will review some of the literature that pertains to the project and discuss the possibility of implementing the curriculum unit on a bigger scale, in other grades.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Introduction

Throughout this capstone paper and project, I have explored and learned valuable information, which answered the question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?* After looking through information and researching many sources, I responded to this question by developing a curriculum unit that uses literature circles not only for reading comprehension but also to promote oral communication among students in the target language.

In this chapter, I reflect on the major learnings of creating the curriculum unit. I will begin my discussion by stating the purpose of the project and what I gained as a researcher, writer and student. I will then reflect and refer back to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which supports the research question and helped guide me in developing my curriculum unit. Challenges, along with the implications and limitations of the unit are discussed. I will discuss how the project's results will be communicated, and how future implementation of this strategy will benefit students of the school. Finally, I will discuss how colleagues and professionals can benefit from the project. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on the creation and development of the project.

Major Learnings

The purpose of my project was to develop a curriculum unit for students that provided them with the opportunity to take charge of their own learning by working collaboratively and communicating actively with peers while making connections to the assigned reading. Through this curriculum unit, students would put into practice English Language Arts concepts and terminology learned throughout the year as well as communicate with others and support others. Developing this curriculum unit was a challenge because I was working on developing a unit that shifts a lot from traditional teacher-led education used by the school. I experienced the difficulty of developing and tailoring a curriculum for a population that comes into contact with English daily but really does not communicate with it orally.

From the development and completion of my project, I evidenced that learning can be student-centered and that the teacher can serve mainly as content facilitator. In order to get an understanding of how the curriculum unit would work, I began implementation of the literature circles for the discussion of *The Outsiders* novel. A pilot implementation of the unit was done, and lessons were tested out with the group. Through the beginning steps of the introduction and implementation of literature circles, roles, and worksheets, I needed to be at the center of the discussion because it was a new concept and idea for the students. As the Discussion Director role was discussed, students seemed puzzled, but after modeling, they developed the questions for the first chapter which was the one we were collaboratively working on. As the second activity from the first lesson came, which was the demonstration of the Literary Luminary, Word Wizard and Summarizer roles through a fishbowl model, I chose student models who

demonstrated how the roles worked and this helped with making the transition from teacher-led instruction to student led learning. Before I began implementing these roles, I knew that getting literature circles to work would require for me to be center-stage. After completing the modeling, where I was center-stage, through the use of mini-lessons, I stimulated and elicited communication through open-ended questions and prompts relevant to the content of the discussion.

Developing this project helped me see my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, but also helped me see how the instruction or teaching techniques used in the school where I teach need to improve. The teaching methods and focus is very teacher-led, save for those projects assigned where students would work by themselves. Classes are teacher-centered and lecture-based, and in most classes there is not much opportunity for interaction among students. As a teacher, I am seeing my students' sovereignty in learning. Yes, they need guidance, but they also need to learn and discover content for themselves. The majority of my students have the capability to speak in English, yet out of laziness or shyness, refuse to. Working on these literature circles I have seen them go the extra mile to communicate in English with me and other students and group members and other classmates keep them accountable when speaking in Spanish.

Developing this curriculum has also helped me as a writer and researcher. I have always had good writing skills, but I have seen improvement. I am more aware of APA format, specifically paraphrasing, which is always a challenge because when I quote it is because I do not find better words to express what the author stated. I have to say that as a teacher, writing the capstone and project has been more than a challenge because I expect too much from myself. As I expect students to review the writing process and

write coherent pieces, I ask myself for more and this, on a lot of occasions, hindered my progress throughout the writing process. Still, this was an enriching activity which has helped me develop and grow as a teacher, writer and researcher.

As I researched and developed this curriculum unit, I not only had my students and classes in mind, I looked at the possibility of integrating this concept in other grades, and in other subjects. This curriculum unit would not only benefit me and the English department, but other subject areas where classes are taught in English at the school. The curriculum unit aims to get students in the center of the discussion and class, which would allow students to have ownership of their own learning. After completing this curriculum unit, I intend to continue making classes more active among the students, but this will take time, as their actions as students need to be modified to do activity outside of class in order to come prepared to school for discussions.

Review of the Literature

Elhess and Egbert's (2015) research on literature circles to support language development, along with other research, provided an idea of how the curriculum unit for my capstone project would be built and developed. As is the case in Puerto Rico, where students do not have many opportunities to practice the skills learned in the classroom authentically on social contexts, Carroll and Sambolín's (2016) research on literature circles in a Puerto Rican university context provided the idea to research literature circles as a way to promote and improve oral communication among students. I learned a lot from the research I read, and still continue to do so. The insight gathered from these sources is invaluable and helped in the development of the curriculum unit.

As I thought about developing my curriculum unit, one that would put students in the center of the class and in charge of their learning, questions and comprehension content, I turned to Tracey and Morrow (2012) who defined literature circles as a tool designed to help students develop meaningful conversations about texts, while being assigned specific roles. This seemed like a great idea in theory and I wanted to put it into practice. Providing an opportunity for my students to communicate and interact with others in the target language is imperative and literature circles seem to be able to help accomplish that. At the center of literature circles is communication, and the Constructivist Theory to learning is at the center of student interaction and active learning. Constructivist Theory states that learning is constructed by students and that the teacher is a mere facilitator who serves as support for students while they construct their new meanings (Applefield, Huber & Moallem, 2000). Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess (2012) supported this claim by stating that the constructivist approach opens the doors to improvement in different achievement areas. Since literature circles are communication and interaction based, they can be applied to curriculum unit and classroom.

Literature circles promote oral communication, improve comprehension and promote collaboration, allowing experienced students to express themselves and novice or inexperienced students to feel comfortable engaging with their classmates as they are in a controlled environment receiving support for peers (Carroll & Sambolín, 2016; Whittingham, 2013; Wilfong, 2009). Literature circles stimulate participation in the target language, promote and reinforce writing skills and improve or develop vocabulary (Barone & Barone, 2016; Burns, 1998; Elhess & Egbert, 2015); Levy, 2011). These

aforementioned reasons give literature circles the benefit of being included in the language classroom for student improvement and betterment.

There are several steps a teacher should make in order to implement literature circles in the classroom to promote communication, participation and comprehension. For one, a book should be selected. Some teachers prefer students read different selections to discuss among themselves and then with the class, but for the purpose of my research and curriculum unit, I chose one book for the class to read and interact with. Then literature circle roles need to be explained and assigned. Activities, worksheets and journals should be developed and teacher conferences with students, either within groups or individually should be completed in order to ensure comprehension and keep communication lines open between students and teachers. By developing student-centered materials, evidence of comprehension and improvement can be assessed.

Project Limitations

The biggest limitation for this project is trying it out in its entirety. As the project was developed, the lessons were being put into practice, but not all lessons or aspects of the project could be verified and tried out, for lack of time. Another limitation might be full application of the curriculum unit and acceptance of the tasks and activities by the school administration. Getting students to fully communicate within their groups might present a challenge, although I am currently not experiencing that with students. Since the curriculum unit focuses on a novel, a challenge might be that not all students read the novel and go online to search for answers, defeating the purpose of comprehension.

Project Implications and Future Research

One of the biggest implications of my research and curriculum unit is that English learners need to be provided opportunities to communicate in the target language with others. My project answers my research question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?* By being properly applied, with the allotted timeframe, it can help students towards the path of improving their oral proficiency and communicative abilities in English.

If the project is adopted and implemented by the school and teachers use it in the classroom, it can dramatically increase student reading comprehension, but most importantly, oral communication and participation. This format can be expanded to all levels of school, beginning probably with third grade.

I am looking forward to the outcome of this curriculum unit next school year. I want to test the curriculum unit thoroughly and efficiently before having this be implemented in the school. Right now, I am running a pilot program with my students, testing some of the activities and objectives out and seeing their response, which has up to now, been positive. It is my hope that this curriculum unit will test well and be implemented in other grades as a means to improve oral proficiency, communication and collaborative work.

My research will not stop here. As I am planning to implement this next school year, I will be working during the summer and up to when the unit is implemented to improve and perfect, to the best of my abilities, the content of the curriculum unit. I will

work with the many resources I have at my disposal to continue to find support to develop a tool that will benefit my students' oral proficiency.

More research should be done that could echo Carroll and Sambolín's (2016) findings and that would change the classroom environment for students and provide teachers with tools to make class more oral driven and collaborative. The role English plays in the classroom and the way teachers deliver the content should be researched further as I think education is very much teacher-led in most schools in Puerto Rico and student participation is minimal. Taking this curriculum unit to a new classroom with a new teacher or to a different school to further research could present a problem because an individual, foreign to the school or classroom setting, would be evaluating classes and their content. Teacher cooperation and student participation would need to be guaranteed in order to assess the success of implementing literature circles.

Communicating Results

This project will be presented to the school's director and subject coordinator for knowledge and reference and approval for implementation, as it differs greatly from the teaching methods used in the school. They will also be invited to the classroom to observe and evaluate the dynamics of the lessons and the work students are completing. The results, student worksheets and activities, will be reviewed, evaluated and checked for progress by the teacher. Student conferences will be performed and student responses will be recorded on paper for evidence. Summaries of observations will also be provided to the school administration to show proof of work. Once responses and activities are transcribed and tabulated, they will be shown to the director and program coordinator for future implementation in other grades by other teachers. The research and findings, if

approved, would be introduced and explained to English teachers for possible modifications and implementation. A department meeting would be called where I presentation would be completed where I would explain the process and rationale. Applying the literature circle concepts in all grades would offer language and participation continuity while also providing students with opportunities to valuably use language in the classroom. It will also provide opportunities for authentic communication which will only get stronger as grade levels increase. This project would also be uploaded online to several websites, such as ResearchGate or Academia.edu which are accessed by educators.

Benefits to the Profession

The way in which my project would benefit the profession is that it would provide teachers with a guide that would allow them to engage their students in the classroom. This project would allow teachers with an opportunity to have students participate in class and step away from the limelight in the classroom. It would allow them to do less in the classroom, allowing for their students to do the heavy lifting when it comes to discussions and participation. I have a fellow co-worker who reviewed my research curriculum unit and was interested in modifying it for her classes. It is my goal and desire to implement this on other levels, which, as stated above, would greatly benefit the students.

Educators who come into contact with my research and curriculum unit would benefit from a guide that would allow them to have students communicate in the target language. This curriculum is designed with Puerto Rican students in mind, and is developed for language classes, but other courses could benefit from it. As students are

always changing and like sharing with others, this curriculum unit would give students the opportunity to share and communicate. As a language teacher, that is the main focus.

Summary

In this chapter I have reflected and discussed the process of finding answers to the question, *How can literature circles be used to improve fluency and reading comprehension while allowing students to actively communicate in the target language?* In order to answer this question, I created a curriculum unit based on the discussion of a novel through the use of literature circles. The unit would be collaboratively discussed by the students, as opposed to other novel discussions where I provided the information and students had a minor role in discussions.

As I developed the curriculum unit I went back to the literature used for Chapter Two, which was also referenced and reviewed in this chapter. I looked back at literature circles and the benefits they would provide for students. Being conscious of the times we live in, I discussed a possible project limitation while implementing the unit, that students might not read the material themselves but will only research information on the novel online. This would pose a limitation in implementing the curriculum because it would defeat the purpose of reading comprehension and authentic discussion.

In this chapter I also discussed the implementation of the curriculum unit in other grades by other teachers, as I believe the unit, if modified, could work for different groups. The unit could be modified depending on the teaching contexts or units and would provide students with the opportunities to communicate in English, practicing the skills and vocabulary learned in the classroom.

Developing this curriculum unit was certainly a challenge, as I am not used to writing and developing lessons. I have never used literature circles before and modifying the content of classes previously taught was definitely a trial by fire. This has definitely been an experience, with a lot of ups and downs, but with a focus in mind: my students' education. It is my hope that this curriculum unit will not only benefit my students, but those of the whole school.

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