Short Cuts: A Model for Using the Shortest of Short Stories to Teach Second Language Reading Skills

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Mini-skirts, compact cars, instantaneous communications, quantum physics and micro-chips: magnificently tiny things have brought us huge rewards during the twentieth century. Let us add short literature to this list. While the nineteenth century gave us extravagant novels like Fortunata y Jacinta, War and Peace, and David Copperfield, the twentieth century nurtured “persistent cultivator[s] of the fragmentary” (García-Posada, 2001) such as Jorge Luis Borges, Marco Denevi, Julio Cortázar and Augusto Monterroso. Indeed, one of the dominant characteristics of twentieth-century literature is its portrayal of the fragmentation and dissolution of social and individual identities (García-Posada, 2001). This manifestation of post-modern literature has given us mini short stories, called minicuentos, microcuentos or microrrelatos in Spanish, which we can use as effective vehicles for the development of reading and literary interpretation skills.

Have you ever listened to a joke that you didn’t “get”? If so, then you know that even after someone explains the punch line to you, and even though you now “get” it, the joke has lost much of its irony and entertainment value because someone had to go into a lengthy clarification, leaving it flat and humorless. Kimberly A. Nance (1994, p. 23) used this analogy in referring to our students’ experiences with second language reading, as they go through much the same kind of disappointment when they read a work of literature in Spanish for which they are not quite linguistically or culturally prepared. She notes that although we may set out to include students in a discussion of the significance of a literary work, we often find that students are incapable of participating. Nance aptly describes what many of us have experienced: students listen passively as teachers explain plots and analyze works, taking notes only to repeat these notes on a later exam.

We would really rather provide our students with the skills necessary to understand on their own. This ability is certainly the key to the enjoyment of reading, but we face many obstacles in teaching students to discern the messages embedded in literary works. In the past, it was customary to assign a text and expect students to read it, understand it, interpret and analyze it, either independently or with some guidance, usually in the form of post-reading “comprehension questions.” However, we often obtained very unsatisfying results with this approach. The last twenty years have provided us with a wealth of research exploring how second language reading skills should be developed and how the teaching of reading strategies can transform our students into successful readers who interact on their own with literary texts. Despite these advances, however, we have not significantly changed the way we teach literature (Bernhardt, 1995; Tesser and Long, 2000; Gascoigne, 2002).

**AUTHENTIC VERSUS SIMPLIFIED TEXTS: A SOLUTION**

The standards for foreign language learning impose more cognitive demands upon readers than has traditionally been the case (Arens and Swaffar, 2000), requiring that we cultivate readers with the ability to analyze literary texts with greater sophistication than in the past. However, some researchers believe that literary texts should not be used to teach reading skills, given their intended audience of sophisticated adult native speakers who have spent a lifetime acquiring cultural and linguistic experience; they believe undergraduate foreign language students do not have the level of competence necessary to enjoy literature (Lee, 1986; Friedman, 1992). At the same time, they complain that the kinds of texts used in most beginning and intermediate classes do not prepare students for reading literature (Lee, 1986). Kern (2000) argues that introducing literary texts from the beginning of language instruction “can help to break down lines of division and assure intellectual stimulation” (p. 8). He maintains that the idea of teaching language should include “the stories that are told in that language (which serve as exemplars of social interaction within the particular culture)” (p. 6). Despite arguments for extended reading (Maxim, 2002, p. 21), as well as the assertion that short texts lack the cognitive or cultural complexity that the national standards require our students to master (Arens and Swaffar, 2000), when we examine extremely short works, we see that they can be very comprehensive and often contain as much substance for literary analysis as longer texts, making them ideal for our purposes. Moreover, Friedman (1992)
champions the use of short, “rich” texts to exemplify “a variety of forms, movements, schemes, figures, and conventions” (p. 19). For example, the shortest story known to the Spanish-speaking world, a one-liner by Augusto Monterroso of Guatemala, can serve to teach students about allegory. Indeed, according to one critic, this tiny story, “El dinosaurio,” contains all of the elements of the short story in its seven words (Brasca, 2000). Another writer calls Monterroso’s stories “finely honed, highly ironic, sophisticated pieces which are both very good literature and excellent pedagogical devices” (Steele, 2001). In addition, inspired by Monterroso’s works, the popular Spanish newsmagazine El País Semanal published a series of minicuentos by contemporary authors each week during the summer of 2000, naming Monterroso the creator of the most beautiful stories ever written, having “minted” the “genre of brevity” (“Microrrelatos,” 2000, p. 98).

Friedman (1992, p. 19) contends that students need to read a text for themselves, rather than hear about it from a teacher, despite frustrations, and that since reading will become easier with each text, short works are ideal and will promote the transition to longer texts in the future. The very shortness of minicuentos removes the fear many students have of literature and thus can contribute to student acquisition of skills and strategies for comprehending and analyzing literary texts, if teachers create meaningful activities specific to each story. Our students can be taught to understand and enjoy literature, and authentic literary texts may prove to be the most appropriate means to guide them to this ability.

Authentic texts are written by native speakers for an audience of native speakers, and may encompass advertisements, movie listings, road signs, restaurant menus, as well as newspaper and magazine articles, and literary texts. In an effort to help our students understand literature (as well as non-literary readings), teachers have tended to use materials edited for student comprehension; this editing may consist of added glosses, simplified language, or abridgement. Through this editing process, however, the “idiosyncratic, colorful authorial cues that characterize a genre and sort or label its textual message system for the reader” may be eliminated (Swaffar, 1985, p. 17), along with redundancy in the language, making modified texts more difficult to understand. It makes sense, then, that many studies (Arens & Swaffar, 2000; Young, 1993, 1999; Swaffar, Arens & Byrnes, 1991) have shown that student comprehension of authentic texts is greater than that of edited or simplified texts, in part because authors create authentic texts to convey meaning and not to teach language. Furthermore, the language of authentic texts is intended to aid comprehension, and the breadth of subjects treated in them provides something for everyone. Nevertheless, some charge that authentic materials are too difficult for intermediate students, and may even undo progress students have made in reading and in confidence (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 55; Nutall, 1996, p. 177; Rivers, 1981, p. 260). Many students consider literary texts in general to fall into that realm of “difficult” reading. Tesser and Long (2000) found, and many of us can confirm, that while students may read magazine articles and other fairly complex texts without much anxiety, when faced with a text presented as “literature,” students tend to ignore all of the strategies they have previously used, look up every word in a dictionary, and achieve little comprehension of the text.

Swaffar, Arens and Byrnes (1991) assert that what makes literary texts difficult for students is the unfamiliar cultural content and context, compared to the relatively familiar cultural content to be found in “trivial” works such as “Harlequin romances and thrillers” (p. 214) or other popular culture texts, as well as expository texts such as business letters and newspaper articles. The content of such texts is predictable, allowing the reader to absorb familiar concepts easily. In addition to the obstacles presented by the cultural content in literary texts, Swaffar and Byrnes (1991) remind us that “literary texts frequently challenge readers with discomfiting perspectives and linguistic techniques that deviate from standard usage” (p. 213). Narrative point of view and metaphorical language can present tremendous hurdles to students beginning to read literature; the ability to infer meaning is required of readers of literature to a greater extent than for most other kinds of texts. Aehlersold and Field (1997) add that the difficulties encountered in reading literary texts, including “difficult language, complex cultural issues, and the subtle conventions of various genres of fiction[,] may leave students more frustrated than enlightened” (p. 157).

While lamenting that authentic materials can “rob” students of the simpler texts that would allow them to become proficient, (p. 56), Day and Bamford (1998) propose techniques for writing “language learner literature” (p. 63) to address the dilemma of choosing between the difficulty of authentic texts and the bland, unappealing nature of simplified texts. But it is difficult to see how their “language learner literature” would be exempt from much of the same criticism aimed at other “simplified texts,” or how these works would prepare students for “real-world” texts. As Nutall (1996) explains, “However good a simplification is, something is always lost” (p. 178).
Hadley (2001) cites scholars who advocate using authentic texts in the beginning stages of language learning if they are not very long and if prereading activities are used and the tasks are aimed toward the students’ abilities. We have all experienced our students’ negative reactions when they are asked to tackle long assignments. Shorter literary texts are less threatening, less intimidating to them; they view their tasks as being less tedious and more within their reach if there is less material to “wade through.” *Minicuentos* present a natural solution to the dilemma presented by the difficulty of authentic literary texts and the problematic nature of modified texts. *Minicuentos* are authentic, they are literature, yet they are extremely short, thereby inciting less fear in readers and reducing some of the complexity presented by other genres. *Minicuentos* present unique opportunities for inference and interpretation, given their extreme brevity. Eppe (2000) points out that one of the characteristics of many *minicuentos* is the implicit nature of their plots, calling on readers to be able to provide interpretations. Moreover, since *minicuentos* put into play various mechanisms of semantic comprehension, a system of cultural references permeates the text and readers must recognize the markers, infiltrate them and dismantle them (Eppe, 2000, p. 3). According to Martínez Morales (2000), it is the brevity of “El dinosaurio” that accentuates the indetermination and ambiguity of the story narrated and its possible meanings: few texts, he declares, can boast as can “El dinosaurio” of its strange ability to be two places at one time (p. 2). Rojas Hernández (2000) notes that Monterroso’s works can be considered in their entirety as intertexts, since they contain many allusions to other literary works. Given their qualities, then, *minicuentos* present an optimum and logical medium for beginning to teach students how to read literature.

**A Model for Using Minicuentos to Teach Literary Reading Skills**

Monterroso’s “El dinosaurio” can serve as a point of departure for creating lesson plans to teach literary reading skills to intermediate-level (third semester college or second or third year secondary) students. The model (see Appendix) takes into consideration Hosenfeld’s (1976) list of strategies which skilled readers employ, including using context clues to guess meaning instead of consulting a dictionary or glossary; skipping words; recognizing cognates; noticing grammatical function to deduce meaning; circling back in the text to recall context and to adjust predictions and guesses; and drawing on background knowledge (see also Barnette, 1988; Lee, 1986; Phillips, 1984; Young, 1989). In addition, the model incorporates the multi-stage reading processes developed by Phillips (1984), Harper (1988) and Barnett (1989), consisting of the following stages:

- prereading and preparation stage
- reading stage, or interpretive and decoding stage
- postreading and synthesis stage

The teaching and reinforcement of the strategies successful readers use may take place during the prereading phase as well as during the reading or interpretative phase. The model presented here incorporates a task-based approach (Skehan, 1998) as well, emphasizing meaning and real-world activities.

**“El dinosaurio”: Prereading/Preparation Stage**

Tesser and Long (2000), the researchers whose students read various kinds of texts with little difficulty until they were told it was “literature,” engaged in some practical activities to demonstrate to the students just what kinds of strategies they already use. For example, to bring home the idea of the importance of their background knowledge, they asked students just how they knew where to sit in the classroom, why they did not sit in the teacher’s seat, and why they did not run out screaming “fire!” when they heard the bell ring. Moreover, when their students admitted to not looking up every word they did not understand in their syllabus, and even skipping words they did not know in personal ads, the researchers emphasized that their background knowledge is what made it possible for them to understand and to make intelligent guesses.

As we teach literature, then, we must be sure to provide activities that allow students to bring to mind what they know of the issues, places, even vocabulary, in the texts we have assigned; similarly, we must find ways to provide information that they do not have and which is necessary for a full understanding of the text. The teaching module provided here for “El dinosaurio” contains several activities designed to activate background knowledge and to supply details necessary for a better understanding of the story. All of these activities can be done with intermediate students, using vocabulary and structures with which they are familiar. First, to help students begin to think about the possibility of a political allegory, students read or listen to a brief statement about the author’s involvement in the dissent against Guatemala’s exploitation by the United Fruit Company of the United States. Equally important, listening to information about the title of the collection in which the story appears (La oveja negra y demás fábulas ’The black sheep and other fables’) will set students to thinking about the idea of fables and should lead them to anticipate the allegorical nature of the story.
To emphasize the features and purpose of fables, the model provides an activity in which students dramatize a familiar one in groups, after which they summarize briefly some aspects of fables. Students then list characteristics of dinosaurs and recall dinosaur movies they have seen to bring to mind the differing emotions one may feel during an imagined encounter with dinosaurs. Students further discuss the kind of dream one might have after seeing a dinosaur movie, and how they might feel after waking up from that dream. One of the defining traits of literature is its appeal to the reader’s emotions, and this minicuento can elicit a range of emotions, depending upon the scenario one is imagining as one reads it.

Providing students with vocabulary they will need to read or discuss a work can be vital in making sure their background information is sufficient for comprehension. “El dinosaurio” is so short there is very little vocabulary practice required, but we should also keep in mind that students must understand the concepts of “fable” and “allegory” in order to appreciate the story. It is important to remember, also, that we do not need to give students long lists of words to practice, since we particularly want them to learn to use context and background knowledge to guess meaning, recognize cognates and grammatical function, and skip some words not crucial to understanding. The model presents a few vocabulary words, definitions in Spanish, and an activity for contextualized practice before other prereading activities. In addition, it is sometimes necessary to provide an activity to help students recall grammatical concepts that may play a part in a text. In “El dinosaurio” there are only two verbs, but recognizing the implications of each verb’s tense is key to an understanding of the story. A brief review of preterite and imperfect uses will be advantageous at this point; both tenses are used as well in the story. In “El dinosaurio” students are asked to predict what they think will happen based on the title and the prereading discussions and tasks they have performed involving the concepts of dinosaurs, dreams and fables. Predicting involves using schemata activated during the prereading phase to articulate possible scenarios to be encountered while reading.

Obviously, not all predictions will be accurate, and students will adjust their predictions as they read, as good readers do when reading in their first language. Pictures can be used to promote skill in predicting. Lee (1986) cautions, however, that the pictures teachers choose for this purpose should provide a context for the beginning of a text and should be easy to understand. Obviously, care must be taken in the use of pictures or drawings, since inappropriate ones can confuse the reader or give an erroneous idea of the content. The illustration of the singing disco dinosaur provided in Transparency 2 for “El dinosaurio” would not lead us into a realistic discussion of the story, but might provide comic relief and light-hearted predictions and interpretations. Perhaps the illustration in Transparency 1 of the two aggressive dinosaurs would be the most likely to stimulate conjectures and ideas that would lead to an allegorical interpretation of the story on a political level, with one dinosaur threatening a weaker one. On the other hand, the chance to teach students that literature may be interpreted in different ways, and especially that minicuentos lend themselves particularly well to ambiguous readings can be exploited using different illustrations, prompting students to form a range of possible speculations for the story. Upon seeing Transparency 2, for example, a student may formulate a personal rather than political scenario, such as: “This story might be about a disco dinosaur singing, and maybe it doesn’t sing very well, just like my mother.” In this case, during the reading and postreading stages, students will have interpretations that will differ greatly from the ones prompted by other illustrations.

In real life, we have a purpose when we read. We read the newspaper to find out what is happening around the world. We read TV Guide to see what we may want to watch. We read literature for varying reasons, among them to spend enjoyable moments, but also to learn how humans interact in various circumstances. While having a clear purpose for reading reflects what everyone does in real life, it gives students a better idea of how to approach a text and it has been shown that readers are more likely to recall items related to a purpose (Knutson, 1998). The prereading discussions and group tasks outlined in the module for “El dinosaurio,” for example, give students several directions for reading the story. Students will think about the kinds of situations in which one might encounter a dinosaur (during an archaeological dig, or in a setting such as that of “The Land Before Time” or “Jurassic Park”) and the emotions connected with each scenario; they get an indication that the story will be a fable or an allegory.
in which case the dinosaur may represent something else, and it may have a political or social connotation; and they perceive that the tale may have something to do with waking up from a dream and the emotions connected with that dream. The prereading tasks will give them a reason to read as well as a desire to satisfy their curiosity and to discover how this minuscule story can contain all of these components.

Good readers use skimming techniques (reading quickly, superficially) to get the gist of a reading, to identify topic sentences and main ideas, and to notice structure, characters and point of view; they also use scanning techniques (running eyes over text to pick out certain items) to get details and specific information (Phillips, 1984; Barnett, 1989). We can promote these skills in many ways; for example, we may ask students to determine the main idea of a text or a section of it, giving them a time limit to prevent them from agonizing over individual words (Phillips, 1984). Scanning for cognates helps students identify actions, descriptions and ideas, and will assist them in predicting content. We may also give students other details to pick out while scanning, such as names or ages of characters, places, or things that appeared or disappeared. While “El dinosaurio” is extremely short, there are still ways to use it to help students develop these skills. The model instructs teachers to reveal the words of the story at this point: “Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí” ‘When he/she/it/you awoke, the dinosaur was still there.’ After instructing students to read the entire text briefly without stopping to contemplate individual words the teacher should lead students in identifying the general idea (someone woke up; there is a dinosaur). Then students may be asked to identify the verbs in the story (awoke; was), what action(s) they perceive (someone arose), and to identify the character(s). The question of how many characters there are is an interesting one for this story, since we can not be sure who the subject of the first verb is. It could be the dinosaur, in which case there is only one character, or it could be a second, unidentified, character; it could even be “you,” the reader. The possibilities should be pointed out now, even though at this point in the lesson one would not take the time to shed much light upon the issue.

Reading/Interpretive/Decoding Stage

For intermediate students, the decoding stage (Phillips, 1984) is an important step in comprehension. This stage may involve identifying parts of speech and using syntax to determine meaning (Phillips, 1984), although readers can avoid some of the word-for-word scrutiny if they practice understanding large chunks. Knutson (1998) suggests that students list elements in the text as they read, such as characters, events, places, or interesting ideas. Other ways to enhance comprehension at this stage may include true-false or multiple choice identifications to indicate events, characters, or places. For “El dinosaurio,” the teaching module leads students to notice the ambiguities in the language created by the author by discussing who or what awoke and when, as well as when the dinosaur might have arrived, pointing out that the verb form _estaba_, or “was,” is in the imperfect tense, signifying that the dinosaur’s being there was ongoing with no implied beginning or end, and further that “was” is complemented by the word “still,” which would indicate that the dinosaur was already there before whoever woke up got there in the first place, and that the dinosaur was still there after he/she/it/you awoke.

We may ask students to identify the implied—perhaps this is a dinosaur well known to the being that awoke; surely it is a specific, known dinosaur. Finally, we may ask students to identify the dinosaur was still there after he/she/it/you awoke. Students are directed to notice the choice of word for “there;” the more specific _allí_ rather than the more vague _allá_ (“over there”) is used, and students are asked to make a conjecture about where that might be. Students are further charged to notice the use of the definite rather than indefinite article to refer to “the dinosaur” and to speculate upon the meaning implied—perhaps this is a dinosaur well known to the being that awoke; surely it is a specific, known dinosaur. Finally, we may ask students to identify the dinosaur was still there after he/she/it/you awoke. Students are further charged to notice the use of the definite rather than indefinite article to refer to “the dinosaur” and to speculate upon the meaning implied—perhaps this is a dinosaur well known to the being that awoke; surely it is a specific, known dinosaur. Finally, we may ask students to identify the dinosaur was still there after he/she/it/you awoke.

An alternative illustration (Transparency 2, for example) may be used to ask students to reconsider their concept of what happens in the story and the emotions evoked by it. For example, a student may explain that in the version depicted in Transparency 2, someone was so bored by the disco dinosaur’s singing that he/she fell asleep. When that person woke up, the dinosaur was still there singing, and the character really wished he would stop because the noise was giving him a headache. Another version might involve a character who could not get a song out of his head that he had heard by Disco Dino on the radio; he went to sleep and when he woke up, Disco Dino was still in his head with that horrible song. What was this character supposed to do? He was desperate and quickly going insane. Students will cite very different emotions evoked by these scenarios than by the ones envisioned using Transparency 1.

Students themselves can create visual representations of elements of a text to further comprehension (Nance, 1994). Students can, for example, draw cartoon-style accounts charting the events of a story, or make diagrams depicting the progression of a character’s state of mind. For “El dinosaurio,” students may draw their concept of the moment depicted in the story, or illustrate possible...
events leading up to it, as well as illustrate what they think happens after the moment described. Helping students to visualize elements of a story is an important step in leading them to grasp meaning. At this point, students may also be asked to explain how their predictions of what the story would be about have changed.

**Postreading and Synthesis Phase**

“Comprehension questions leading to a blow by blow retelling of a story or article may provide good oral practice, but they do little to verify true comprehension, and they inherently inform learners that foreign language texts are not very meaningful” (Barnett, 1989, p. 135). We have often bemoaned the unsatisfactory results we get when assigning such questions to our students. The traditional comprehension questions following a reading usually treat all ideas in the text as equal in importance and interest, whereas in real life, readers do not assign equal value to all aspects of a text. Consequently, this kind of exercise stifles interest and does not create a realistic purpose for reading. If we use such comprehension questions, they would better serve our purposes during prereading activities to aid in anticipating content, as we have done with “El dinosaurio.” Fortunately, during the postreading phase we can encourage students to synthesize what they have read in more helpful ways. In the case of “El dinosaurio,” after proposing what the dinosaur may represent (the United Fruit Company? the United States? a dictator? someone’s mother? an employee? a teacher?) and what the entity waking up represents (Guatemala? laborers? citizens? a child? an employee? a student?), students may have small group discussions or write brief essays to explain the different messages presented by the story when seen from the different personal, social or political perspectives. Students might also describe the effect the language play has or explain why they think the author included this story in his collection of “fables.”

Harper (1988, p. 407) suggests using activities involving value judgments, thereby helping students to relate the work to their own lives. Activities to help students evaluate the purpose or ideology of the author and articulate a personal reaction to the work encourage them to contemplate the significance of the work for themselves or for humankind. In this vein, students might write alternative endings to a text or, as in the case of “El dinosaurio,” add a one-line ending, or compose letters or newspaper opinion pieces supporting or opposing the ideology of the work. To do so, students must think carefully about what they think the story means. They might also conduct a trial or lawsuit to remove the dinosaur or to convict him of a specific crime, complete with lawyers, a judge and jury. Students may also conduct an episode of the “Oprah” or other talk show, with guests Monterroso, The Dinosaur and a Mystery Person Who is Awake. Suggestions are provided in the module for ensuring participation of all students in these activities, as well as for allowing for very different activities according to students’ interpretation of the ideology of the story (difference between the settings in Transparency 1 versus Transparency 2, for example). In addition, students may write their own allegorical “fable” to make a commentary on a social or political issue of importance to them. In short, the activities we assign should be meaningful to our students and should involve some attempt to connect the literary work to their lives.

Let us remember Tesser and Long’s (2000) students, who did not automatically apply the reading strategies they had been practicing until they were tricked into reading a short story they thought was an article from a popular magazine; they then read and discussed it with little frustration. This example suggests that although we may think we are training students to use good reading strategies, they do not automatically transfer those skills to the reading of literature; we must use literary texts to teach them the strategies and provide them the practice they need. The teaching module provided here attempts to address these issues and can be used as a model for designing plans for other short stories. The stories we choose and the activities we provide our students can leave a lasting imprint upon them and instill in them a real appreciation for literature.

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**Acknowledgments**

The illustration used in Transparency 1 for “El dinosaurio” is used with permission from J. B. Sibbick. The illustration in Transparency 2 is used with permission from Microsoft Clip Gallery 5.0. The illustration used in the vocabulary exercise is used with permission from DLTK’s Printable Crafts for Kids.

I thank the anonymous reviewers very much for their insightful suggestions.

**Notes**

Maxim (2002) argues for extensive reading of authentic literature at the beginning level of German, but his use of a popular novel written in English for North American readers and translated into German negates his purpose. Although the study does show that extensive reading can be helpful in developing reading skills in general as well as
grammatical and communicative competence (p. 31). Maxim stretches the concept of “authenticity” in his claim that “[d]espite its non-German origin, the novel [used in the study] is still considered authentic because its intended audience was native German speakers” (p. 24). He admits that the novel his students read “contains a culturally familiar context and formulaic, predictable content that is especially accessible to American university students who are familiar with soap operas, romance films, and TV movies-of-the-week” (p. 24). The same study using an authentic German novel would not likely have produced the same results in his beginning classes, so the argument for using long literary texts for the purpose of teaching literary reading skills has not been made.

3Stories containing one word, or even none, exist, but Martínez Morales (2000) calls these “festivas charadas literarias” ‘festive literary charades’ because to be considered a story, he says, a certain narrativity is required, or at least one action should be narrated that might suggest the possibility of others; if not, he says he could take the covers off and leave the dictionary without the definitions and give it the title of Universal Dictionary of Stories and copyright it. He lists the following examples of blank-page or one-word stories: Guillermo Samperio, “El fantasma,” Cuaderno imaginario. México: Diana, 1990. p. 82. Sergio Golwartz, “Dios,” Infundios ejemplares. México: FCE, 1969. p. 91. Augusto Monterroso, “Partir de cero,” La letra e, México: Era, 1991. p. 148.

3To access similar lesson plans for other minicuentos, visit the following web site: http://www.longwood.edu/aatsp_va/Microcuentos.html

Works Cited


Appendix: Teaching Module for “El dinosaurio”

«El dinosaurio»
Augusto Monterroso

Nivel: Intermedio (tercer semestre de universidad o segundo o tercer año de secundario)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estándares Nacionales:</th>
<th>Objetivos:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comunicación 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 Culturas 2.2</td>
<td>• enumerar algunas características de la obra de Augusto Monterroso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comunicación 1.1, 1.2. 1.3 Culturas 2.1 Conexiones 3.2 Comparaciones 4.2</td>
<td>• explicar oralmente y por escrito cómo el cuento «El dinosaurio» es una alegoría y una “fábula”, proponiendo una interpretación personal, social o política del cuento</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comunicación 1.3 Culturas 2.1 Conexiones 3.1 Comparaciones 4.2</td>
<td>• crear una “fábula” que ilustre una cuestión social o política actual de interés personal</td>
</tr>
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Procedimiento:

I. Prelectura:

A. Información sobre el autor, Augusto Monterroso, y sobre el cuento «El dinosaurio» (supplying background knowledge): Explique a los estudiantes quién es Augusto Monterroso, diciéndoles algo sobre su actitud de compromiso político; por ejemplo:

Augusto Monterroso nació en Guatemala pero ha vivido durante muchos años en México. Dice que no volverá a Guatemala hasta que haya democracia y paz en su país. Se ha interesado por los problemas políticos y sociales de su país, entre ellos la presencia dominante y explotadora de la empresa estadounidense United Fruit Company. Sus microcuentos son obras irónicas y sofisticadas con un toque de compromiso político y humor.

Explíquelas algo sobre el cuento:

El cuento que vais a leer tiene fama de ser el cuento más breve del mundo; contiene sólo siete palabras. Es el primer cuento en la colección La oveja negra y demás fábulas de Monterroso.

(Ahora se puede poner la Transparencia 1 con el dibujo de los dinosaurios, pero con el texto del cuento cubierto. Tenga en cuenta que según el dibujo que se use, se conseguirá muy diversas reacciones a las preguntas siguientes; aquí se ofrecen dos posibilidades.)

B. Actividades breves de orientación (activating background knowledge students have):
1. Pregúntele a los alumnos si reconocen algunos de los siguientes cuentos de Esopo: «El león y el ratón»; «El ratón campestre y el cortesano»; «La liebre y la tortuga»; «La zorra y el cuervo gritón»; «La zorra y las uvas»; «La hormiga y el escarabajo»; «El lobo con piel de oveja». Pregúntele cómo se llaman estos cuentos (fábulas). Escriba una lista de animales en la pizarra para pronunciar, y si es necesario, haga pantomimas para identificarlos (águila, cuervo, lobo, hormiga, escarabajo, zorra, león, liebre, tortuga, ratón).

2. Divida la clase en grupos de seis y ayude a los grupos a escoger una de las fábulas que conocen; cada grupo preparará una breve dramatización de su fábula, con cada personaje/animal representado por dos o tres de los alumnos del grupo. Por ejemplo, en un grupo tres alumnos prepararán el diálogo del ratón campestre mientras que los otros tres alumnos del grupo elaborarán el diálogo del ratón cortesano. Deben usar vocabulario y estructuras que ya conocen, haciendo uso del circunloquio y de gestos y ademanes cuando sea necesario. No deben escribir un diálogo completo, sino preparar los posibles comentarios de su propio personaje/animal, en forma de apuntes, sin hacer caso a lo que el otro/los otros personaje(s) de su grupo esté(n) preparando. Durante esta fase preparatoria, circule entre los grupos para ayudarles, especialmente a recordar que al final de su dramatización debe haber una lección o moraleja. Después de cinco minutos de preparación, los grupos deben escoger actores de entre sus miembros para representar su fábula para la clase. Cada representación debe ocupar dos o tres minutos.

3. Para ayudar a los alumnos a articular las características de fábulas, dirija una discusión breve en que los alumnos puedan contestar las preguntas siguientes:
- ¿Quiénes son los personajes de una fábula?
- ¿Cómo terminan las fábulas, en general?
- Explicad por qué son alegorías las fábulas: ¿son realmente cuentos sobre animales? ¿O tienen otra significación más universal?

**C. Estudio y práctica de vocabulario** (supplying background knowledge; practicing contextual guessing of unknown vocabulary; using new vocabulary in context):
1. Muéstrelas a los alumnos las palabras siguientes o en una transparencia o en la pizarra. Pronúncielas para que las repitan, y explíquelas su significado en español, haciendo uso de ademanes cuando sea necesario.
   - Alegoría (composición que cuenta algo pero que representa o significa otra cosa diferente; representación de ideas abstractas por medio de figuras concretas)
   - Fábula (composición literaria, muchas veces en verso, que da una enseñanza o lección moral)
   - Moraleja (lección moral al final de una fábula)
   - Despertar (dejar de dormir; interrumpir el sueño)
   - Todavía (palabra que indica que algo sigue ahora desde un tiempo anterior)
   - Sueño (sucesos imaginados durante el tiempo que uno duerme)

2. Vocabulario en contexto: Proyecte la siguiente práctica en una transparencia. Pida a los alumnos que apunten las palabras de la lista que completen el pasaje correctamente.
Una ____ (1) ____ como «La liebre y la tortuga» es también una ____ (2) ____ porque aunque cuenta lo que los dos animales hacen, realmente representa otra cosa: que la constancia es una característica más importante que la rapidez. En otras palabras, la ____ (3) ____ de este cuento nos enseña que si trabajamos consistentemente, podemos ganar la carrera. La liebre se durmió durante la carrera y tuvo un ____ (4) ____ en que ella llegó primero al final, pero ____ (5) ____ dormía cuando la tortuga se acercaba al final; la liebre ____ (6) ____ por fin, para ver a la tortuga llegar la primera.

3. En parejas, los alumnos discutirán el concepto del dinosaurio, haciéndose las siguientes preguntas; el propósito de esta actividad es enumerar las características de los dinosaurios para luego darse cuenta de las emociones y sentimientos relacionados en un posible contacto con un dinosaurio.

- ¿Qué es un dinosaurio? Describe las características principales de un dinosaurio.
  (grande, cruel, feroz, predador...)
- ¿Cómo te sentirías si te encontraras con un dinosaurio? (tendría miedo...)
- Nombra una película en que aparecieron dinosaurios; puede ser una película infantil, de horror, documental, comedia («La tierra antes del tiempo», «Parque Jurásico»)
- ¿Cuáles son algunas de las emociones que sentiste durante esa película? Cada pareja podría escoger un tipo distinto de película, para luego comentar al grupo.

4. En parejas o grupos, los alumnos discutirán el concepto del sueño:
   - ¿Qué ocurre cuando duermes? ¿Sueñas?
   - ¿Qué sueñas?
   - Describe un sueño posible después de ver una película sobre dinosaurios.
   - ¿Cómo te sentirías después de despertarte del sueño?

D. Revisión de gramática (activating background knowledge): Este es un momento propicio para repasar brevemente el pretérito perfecto absoluto y el pretérito imperfecto (preterite and imperfect) y sus usos. Se podría usar el verbo despertar entre los verbos que se repasen, y la palabra todavía entre los conceptos asociados con el pretérito imperfecto.

E. Predicción (using background knowledge to predict): Para facilitar una predicción de lo que puede ocurrir en el cuento, pida a los alumnos que piensen en las ideas que hemos discutido hasta el momento:

Pensad en
- el título de este cuento
- la información que tenéis sobre el autor y sus intereses
- lo que sabéis de las fábulas
- lo que sabéis de los dinosaurios
- lo que sabéis de los sueños

¿Qué pensáis que puede ocurrir en el cuento?

F. Identificación de la idea general (skimming) y escrutinio (scanning): Ahora se puede descubrir el resto de la transparencia y el cuento.

1. Pídales a los alumnos que miren el texto del cuento y que identifiquen la idea general (alguien despierta; hay un dinosaurio).

2. Pregúnteles:
   - ¿Qué verbos aparecen en el cuento? (despertó; estaba)
   - ¿Qué acción ocurre? (alguien despertó; un dinosaurio ya estaba allí)
   - ¿Cuántos personajes hay en el cuento? (uno o dos)
   - Describidlo(s).

II. Lectura:

A. Lectura del cuento. Pídales a los alumnos que lean el cuento una vez más.

B. Análisis e inferencias: Pídales que se fijen en las ambigüedades del lenguaje que ha creado el autor:
   - ¿Quién (o qué) se despierta? Discute las posibilidades.
   - ¿Cuándo se despierta? Discute las posibilidades.
   - ¿Cuándo llegó allí el dinosaurio? (el tiempo verbal “estaba” es el pretérito imperfecto)
   - ¿Dónde está el dinosaurio? ¿“Allí”? ¿No “allá”? ¿Dónde está “allí”?
   - Es “el dinosaurio” y no “un dinosaurio”. ¿Qué significa esto?
- ¿Qué estado mental o emotivo provoca el cuento en el lector?
- ¿Cómo ha cambiado la predicción que hiciste antes de leer el cuento?

C. Visualización de ideas: Pídale a los alumnos que hagan un dibujo del momento descrito en el cuento, o alternativamente, un dibujo de los sucesos que preceden u ocurren después del tiempo narrativo del cuento.

D. Lecturas diferentes: Se podría poner otra transparencia para ilustrar los distintos escenarios que se pueden imaginar a partir de este cuento. Por ejemplo, con la Transparencia 2 del dinosaurio cantante, se podría narrar el siguiente escenario, y después usar las preguntas de la parte B de nuevo:

Una noche, el dinosaurio Mariano Dinomontes fue a una discoteca, porque quería escuchar música y bailar. Pero cuando llegó, estaba cantando el Rey de los Dinosaurios que cantaba muy mal, chillando horriblemente. Mariano se aburrió mucho, y se durmió por un rato. Cuando despertó, . . .

Ahora pregúntele a los alumnos si esta imagen provoca un efecto emotivo diferente en el lector del cuento.

III. Post-lectura:

A. Interpretación: Explíquelos a los alumnos que este cuento es una alegoría y permite una variedad de interpretaciones, como hemos visto con la ayuda de diferentes ilustraciones y actividades. Las siguientes preguntas se podrán usar para fomentar una discusión oral entre todos o en grupos, o para ensayos individuales:

- ¿Qué puede representar el dinosaurio si se lee el cuento desde un nivel personal? (¿un padre; un jefe en el empleo; un profesor; un compañero...?)
- ¿Y desde un nivel social o político? (Pensad en el autor y su país.) (¿United Fruit Company, los Estados Unidos, un dictador...?)
- En cada caso, ¿qué puede representar la entidad que se despierta? (¿Guatemala, obreros, ciudadanos, un niño, un empleado, un alumno...?)
- ¿Qué mensaje tiene el cuento en cada caso, en tu opinión?
- Hemos hablado del juego con el lenguaje tan evidente en el texto. ¿Qué efecto tiene este juego en tu interpretación del cuento? (ambigüedad; le deja la interpretación al lector)
- ¿Por qué crees que el autor incluye este cuento en su colección de “fábulas”?

B. Actividad de escritura creativa: En parejas o individualmente, los alumnos podrán añadir un desenlace de una línea (o de un párrafo) al cuento; podrán escoger la perspectiva política, social, o personal que quieran.

C. Cartas al editor: En parejas o individualmente, los alumnos podrán escribir cartas al editor de un periódico expresando sus opiniones en apoyo o en contra del mensaje del cuento y proponiendo soluciones a la cuestión del “dinosaurio”. Las cartas deben tener una página de extensión.
D. El Juicio del Dinosaurio / o el Show de Oprah: Para estas dramatizaciones se divide la clase en varios grupos (los necesarios para tener un grupo para cada personaje). Para el juicio, debe haber un grupo para representar el dinosaurio, otro para “La entidad que despierta”, y dos grupos de abogados. Debe haber entre tres y cinco alumnos en cada grupo. Si la clase es grande, también puede haber un grupo que será el jurado y otro para el juez. Para el Show de Oprah, debe haber los mismos grupos con la excepción de los abogados y el jurado, y con la adición de Oprah y posiblemente un personaje “sorpresa” como el Secretario General de las Naciones Unidas o Augusto Monterroso mismo. Además, será necesario crear un tema de discusión para el show, tal como “La campaña para llevar los dinosaurios a la extinción”. El profesor o la profesora debe preparar hojas describiendo el personaje y la tarea para cada grupo. La siguiente es un ejemplo de una hoja para el papel del dinosaurio en El Juicio del Dinosaurio:

### El Juicio del Dinosaurio

#### Papel A: El dinosaurio

Eres el dinosaurio en El Juicio del Dinosaurio. No comprendes por qué te han llevado al juicio, porque no has hecho más que ejercer tu poder en explotar los productos y la mano de obra en Guatemala, país que debe agradecerte el empleo de tanta gente. Además has logrado grandes ganancias para tu compañía. Prepárate para defenderte contra las acusaciones de Los que Acaban de Despertarse.

Después de tener unos diez minutos en sus grupos para preparar sus papeles en el juicio o el show, cada grupo debe elegir a un actor. El actor representará a su grupo en la dramatización, pero el grupo debe estar muy atento para poder ayudar al actor; el actor tendrá derecho a volver al grupo para pedir ayuda en cualquier momento.

E. Actividad de síntesis: En preparación para esta actividad, los alumnos podrán discutir en grupos algunas cuestiones sociales o políticas actuales que les interesen. El profesor o la profesora debe ayudarles a identificar algunos temas actuales de interés e importancia para los jóvenes, o alternativamente debe dirigir una “lluvia de ideas” usando la pizarra para apuntar personas y eventos que se relacionan con los temas de hoy. Después de las discusiones en grupos de las ideas que les parecen más importantes, los alumnos escribirán individualmente una “fábula” de entre cinco y diez líneas que comente una de estas cuestiones de manera alegórica, con animales como personajes.
Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí.
El Dinosaurio

por

Augusto Monterroso

Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí.