
Eighth-Grade Griots: Turning Middle School Students into Storytellers

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Introduction

It is a challenge to teach a beginning student of language. Teachers are charged with the task of designing activities that are at once pedagogically sound, grade- and level-appropriate, and also interesting. When dealing with the limited proficiency of beginning students, it can be difficult to find material that meets all of these requirements. While no one method can be said to be the perfect solution to this problem, utilizing stories from the target culture as a thematic center for lessons or units of study can provide teachers with a means of integrating “language, culture and content” (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2003, p. xiv) in the beginning language curriculum.

In traditional West African culture, *griots*, professional storytellers, travel from town to town, telling stories. They are the living embodiment of a long and rich oral tradition that includes folktales, historical information, and cultural practices. In their sharing of this information, they share history and culture in a direct and entertaining way. As the stories in this curriculum unit come from oral traditions from three Spanish-speaking countries, evoking the spirit of the *griots* seems a fitting parallel. In this unit, the students’ role was, in effect, to disseminate these stories in their own unique way, as a means of sharing language, culture, and content with their classmates.

Folktales for Language Learning

In the existing body of literature on stories, there is much information about the use of stories for elementary school children (Barton & Booth, 1990; Egan, 1986; Eisenberg, 1997; Khare, 1992; Kiefer, 1995; Meringoff, 1982; Peng & Levin, 1978; and Stein, 1986), and even some studies about adults’ use of stories (Goh, 1996; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996). However, there is a need for more information on the use of stories with adolescents. This study seeks to add to the literature information about the potential stories have for middle school students.

It is hoped that this study will add more specific documentation about the actual language use that students can achieve when working with both visual and written texts. A further goal is not to advocate for the use of stories as the sole base for a foreign language curriculum, but as a much-needed supplement to the traditional

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textbook. While teachers are able to purchase any number of pre-packaged curriculum units in a dizzying array of formats — CD-ROM, video, DVD, audiotapes, print materials, computer software — many of these materials are not suited for beginning students due to the students' limited proficiency and the materials' linguistic difficulty level. Since teachers know their students' abilities better than any publisher, in the classroom it is almost always preferable to use teacher-created materials that are tailored to the students' needs and the context of each school. For this reason, it is hoped that teachers become inspired and tap into their own potential for creating materials themselves which are at once culturally rich and relevant to their own individual classroom situations.

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The Study

A thematic unit was designed consisting of folktales from Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico, which I had collected in these three countries. The stories were used with one second-year class of thirty eighth-grade students of Spanish. The stories were presented to the students in a variety of media formats: picture books, audiotapes, videotapes, a hypermedia program, and a webpage. As an overarching theme, students were told that these stories were entries in a storytelling contest and that they (the students) had been chosen as preliminary judges. In their role as judges, students were asked to access the stories and to make reports back to the chief panel of judges. Their reports were to consist of a story summary and an evaluation of the merit of each story's content and illustrations.

After being involved for over a month in reading and listening to other people's stories, the students were given the chance to create their own in Spanish. They were invited to submit their original stories in any format they wished, but most students created picture book stories (with text and drawn or computer-generated images).

Of the thirty students who participated in this study, the work of six students is analyzed in the present article. The six were chosen to represent a range of proficiency levels. Two could be described as functioning at a low proficiency level, two as middle proficiency level students, and two as high proficiency level students (these designations were based on a combination of previous testing and grades in Spanish class). In the group of six students, there were two boys and four girls. In order to maintain anonymity, the students' names have been changed; they will be referred to as:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| (1) low proficiency: | Jason and Nina |
| (2) middle proficiency: | Veronica and Tony |
| (3) high proficiency: | Mia and Catherine |

The study of this curriculum unit was designed to evaluate exactly which elements of story structure students would replicate in their original story productions. It also

examined the language structures present in student stories, including vocabulary, past tense verb forms, and oral features (such as repetition and quoted speech). Finally, both the students and the teacher were interviewed about their feelings after participating in the story unit study.

Story structure elements such as setting, initiating event, internal response, attempt/outcome, and reaction — well known to students in their native language — provide sufficient context for the students and serve as a scaffold, or starting place, from which to produce language. Since students are familiar with the structure from their first language, it was anticipated that by being exposed to it in Spanish, they would be able to comprehend vocabulary to which they had not been formally introduced. This contextualized support would enable students to successfully create stories on a proficiency level somewhat higher than those that the eighth-grade curriculum actually offered. It was further speculated that these elements of story and language structure would carry through to original stories that students would write after reading and listening to a series of folktales in Spanish. It was hoped that this group of teenaged language learners would be transformed by the stories into storytellers in their own right — *griots*, as in the West African tradition — known for their skill at spinning yarns and capturing the imagination of all those who listen to them.

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Students as Storytellers

Story Structure

Students’ stories varied in length and complexity, but all contained most of the elements of story structure. Table 1 shows the presence of the various elements of story structure in the students’ stories. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to label elements of story structure according to the model laid out by Stein and Glenn (1977): setting (where the story takes place and the characters), initiating event (the statement and elaboration of a problem), internal response (some contemplation and/or action on the initiating event), attempt/outcome (some action and/or resolution with regard to the initiating event), and reaction (a coda or afterthought).

Table 1

Story Structure in Original Stories

In analyzing the completeness of the original student stories, it is interesting to note that all three groups of students produced fairly complete stories containing all story structure elements. The high proficiency students’ language tended to be more complex than that in the middle and low proficiency students’ stories.

Student/Proficiency level X = present — = not present	Setting	Initiating Event	Internal Response	Attempt/ Outcome	Reaction
Catherine (high proficiency)	X	X	X	X	X
Mia (high proficiency)	X	X	X	X	X
Tony (middle proficiency)	X	X	X	X	X
Veronica (middle proficiency)	X	X	X	X	X
Jason (low proficiency)	X	X	X	X	—
Laura (low proficiency)	X	X	X	—	X

High Proficiency Students

The students in the high proficiency category submitted stories that were very much in keeping with traditional folktales. Both stories analyzed are cautionary tales that deal with man's ignorance and the wisdom and power of nature. Both Catherine and Mia's stories contain all the elements of story structure.

Following are tables that present Catherine's (Table 2) and Mia's (Table 3) stories categorized into story structure elements. It should be noted that each Spanish story text is reproduced just as it was written by the student.

Table 2

Catherine's story — untitled

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
setting	<i>La ciudad de Brosco esta en una colina vecina. El hombre viejo vive solo en la ciudad. Todos trabajan y no hablan al hombre viejo.</i>	The city of Brosco is on an old hill. The old man lives alone in the city. Everyone works and [they] don't speak to the old man.
initiating event	<i>Un dia el hombre dice a todos "La colina va explotar! La colina va explotar!"</i>	One day the man says to everyone, "The hill is going to explode! The hill is going to explode!"
internal response	<i>Todos reirse de algo porque el hombre viejo siempre dice cosas necias. El hombre continuamente avisan todos "La colina va explotar! La colina va explotar!"</i>	Everyone [to] laugh about something because the old man always says silly things. The man continually warn everyone "The hill is going to explode! The hill is going to explode!"

Table 2 (Continued)

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
attempt/ outcome	<i>De repente la tierra tremblan. Todos las casas en Brosco tremblan. Entonces escuchan rudio alto. La cumbre de la colina rompe. Una nube de polvo y humo y gases salen de colina. Todos gritan. El cielo se hace oscuro y una nube de polvo y humo y gases cubre la ciudad. Los guijarras pequenos cubre a todos de Brosco.</i>	All of a sudden the earth tremble. All the houses in Brosco tremble. Then they listen a loud noise. The top of the hill breaks. A cloud of dust and smoke and gasses come out of the hill. Everyone screams. The sky becomes dark and a cloud of dust and smoke and gasses covers the city. The small pebbles covers everyone from Brosco.
reaction	<i>Todas estar cogen debajo de las cenizas. Las cenizas forman otra colina. Cuando el viento silba por las colinas; escucha la voz del hombre viejo, “La colina va explotar! La colina va explotar!”</i>	Everyone to be catch under the ashes. The ashes form another hill. When the wind whistles through the hills; one hears the voice of the old man, “The hill is going to explode! The hill is going to explode!”

Table 3**Mia’s story — El hombre codicioso (The Greedy Man)**

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
setting	<i>(cuentos de Estados Unidos) Hay una isla. Se conoce per su piedra preciosa. Muchas personas regresan de la isla con piedra preciosa. El señor vive en la tierra firme. El señor poseedor de piedra preciosa tiende. El señor es codicioso.</i>	(stories from United States) There is an island. It is known for its precious stone. Many people return from the island with precious stone. The man lives on the mainland. The man owner of precious stone store. The man is greedy.
initiating event	<i>El señor quiere todo los piedras preciosas.</i>	The man wants all the precious stones.
internal response	<i>El señor dice, “¡Yo tengo todas las piedras preciosas!” El señor fue a la isla aun laudo de bote.</i>	The man says, “I have all the precious stones!” The man went to the island [further? still? by?] boat.
attempt/ outcome	<i>El señor nunca regrese.</i>	The man never return.
reaction	<i>Los personas viaja a la isla y vieron el estatuto de piedras preciosas.</i>	The people travels to the island and saw a statue of precious stones.

Both stories contain all of the elements of story structure. Catherine’s story contains more details to support each element of story structure than Mia’s quick and to-the-point style.

Middle Proficiency Students

The stories from the middle proficiency students, while containing more grammatical and lexical errors, contained all story structure elements and were quite detailed. Tables 4 and 5 are the stories from the middle proficiency students, with each element labeled.

Table 4

Tony’s story — El muchacho mal y una fiesta (The Bad Boy and a Party)

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
setting	<i>Había una vez un muchacho y muchos amigos. El muchacho tiene no hermanos, pero tiene muchos amigos.</i>	Once upon a time there was a boy and many friends. The boy doesn’t have no brothers, but he has lots of friends.
initiating event	<i>La madre y el padre se iban de viaje. La madre y el padre decir a muchacho “¡No tienes una fiesta!”</i>	The mother and the father were going on vacation. The mother and father to say to the boy, “Don’t have a party!”
internal response	<i>Pero el muchacho es muy mal. El muchacho hable con amigos y deci amigos una fiesta en su casa. Su casa es muy grande y es cerca la playa. En fiesta de muchacho, muchos amigos beben vino, escuchar musica y bailan. Tambien, madre y padre telefonan la casa, pero muchacho no hablar. Madre y padre son muy inquietos. Ellos salen rapido.</i>	But the boy is very bad. The boy speak with friends and says friends a party in his house. His house is very big and it is nearby the beach. At boy’s party, many friends drink wine, to listen to music and dance. Also, mother and father call home, but the boy doesn’t to talk. Mother and father are very worried. They leave quickly.
attempt/ outcome	<i>Madre y padre van la casa y ven cinco coches en entrada de coches. Madre y padre son muy inflamados. Un amigo Ron, ve madre y padre. Ron es muy grande. Ron deci amigos “¡Madre y Padre es en casa!” Amigos van la playa y Ron recoleccion los amigos y tira la playa. Madre y Padre ven Ron y muchacho Julio, cuatro amigos y muchos vino. Julio hablar “¡Hola Mamma!” Mamma y Pappa no responden.</i>	Mother and father go home and see five cars in car entrance. Mother and father are very angry. A friend Ron, sees mother and father. Ron is very big. Ron say friends “Mother and Father is at home!” Friends go the beach and Ron collection the friends and [throws them on? aims for?] the beach. Mother and father see Ron and boy Julio, four friends and many wine. Julio talk, “Hi Mom!” Mom and Dad don’t answer.

Table 4 (Continued)

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
reaction	<i>Julio, Ron y amigos son desgracia. Ron va su casa, y Julio dorme. Tambien, ¡treinta amigos en la playa!</i>	Julio, Ron and friends are disgrace. Ron goes his home, and Julio sleep. Also, thirty friends on the beach!

Table 5**Veronica's story — Mal encanta (Lovesick)**

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
setting	<i>Hay un hombre. Su nombre es Miguel. El es feo y sucio.</i>	There is a man. His name is Miguel. He is ugly and dirty.
initiating event	<i>Miguel esta encanta con una muchacha. Su nombre es Selena.</i>	Miguel is enchants [in love?] with a girl. Her name is Selena.
internal response	<i>Selena rechaza su encanta. Ella luego vuelta enferma y recibe la flor de Miguel.</i>	Selena rejects his [love]. She then return sick and receives the flower from Miguel.
attempt/ outcome	<i>¡Selena arroja los flores por la ventana! Ellos golpean en su cabeza.</i>	Selena throws the flowers through the window. They hit in his head.
reaction	<i>Miguel grito como un bebe.</i>	Miguel cried like a baby.

Both middle proficiency students' stories are fairly lengthy and detailed. Tony's story is ten pages long and full of details. He makes good use of suspense by building up the story of the party until the parents come home to break things up. He uses humor in the reaction by showing the reader that the friends who had been part of the "illegal" party were still waiting on the beach while the boys had gone home and had gone to sleep. Veronica's story, while short, also contains some humor. At the end she tells the reader that the main character "cried like a baby." Despite a number of errors in both stories, they remain comprehensible.

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Low Proficiency Students

The low proficiency students produced stories that were, for the most part, complete. Tables 6 and 7 display the story structure elements present in the two stories by low proficiency students.

Table 6**Jason’s story — El perro malo (The Bad Dog)**

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
setting	<i>Un día el perro encima de la pabellon. El perro es malo.</i>	One day the dog on top of the pavilion [summer house?]. The dog is bad.
initiating event	<i>El perro desaparcer el pescado y golpe guapo muchacho.</i>	The dog to disappear [drop? hide?] the fish and hit handsome boy.
internal response	<i>El perro correr va a la casa de perro.</i>	The dog to run goes to the dog-house.
attempt/ outcome	<i>Cuando el perro fue la casa, el perro fue dormir.</i>	When the dog went the house, the dog went to sleep.
reaction	—	—

Table 7**Laura’s story — El niño y el conejito (The Boy and the Rabbit)**

Elements	Story text (Spanish)	Story text (English)
setting	<i>En la ciudad de Buenos Aires, un niño Jon, le encantaba conejos.</i>	In the city of Buenos Aires, a boy Jon love rabbits.
initiating event	<i>Un día el niño ve un blanco conejo. Jon el conejo a su casa.</i>	One day the boy sees a rabbit white. Jon the rabbit to his house.
internal response	<i>Pon conejo triste. El conejo perdio el familia.</i>	The rabbit get sad. The rabbit lost the family.
attempt/ outcome	<i>El niño la encantaba el conejo conoce es tiene el conejo empuje. El niño triste el conejo a veces replica Hola! (?)</i>	The boy loved the rabbit knows he is he has the rabbit push [The boy is delighted that the rabbit knows??]. The sad boy the rabbit sometimes replies [replicates? reproduces?][.?] Hi!
reaction	<i>El niño es alegre! El conejo es alegre con su familia. Ellos son alegre!</i>	The boy is happy! The rabbit is happy with his family. They are happy!

“The two high proficiency students did not misuse any vocabulary...”

There are some incoherent elements in both low proficiency students’ stories. At one point in Jason’s story, there is difficulty in connecting some of the story elements. He also left out the reaction in his story. Meanwhile, Laura, due to language that is largely incomprehensible, did not succeed in providing an attempt/outcome. Despite some problems, however, the stories contain most of the elements of story structure necessary to tell a complete story.

Language Structure

Three elements of language structure present in the students’ original stories were examined. These elements are unfamiliar vocabulary, past tense verb forms, and oral features (repetition and quoted speech).

Unfamiliar Vocabulary

Since the students created these stories at home, they made use of their access to a dictionary. Their stories thus contain examples of the misuse of words taken from a dictionary or the glossary in their textbook. The two high proficiency students did not misuse any vocabulary in their original stories and so are not represented here. Table 8 lists examples of misused vocabulary from the original stories of the middle and low proficiency students. The first word represents the student’s error, while the phrase in parenthesis is the meaning he or she most likely intended.

Table 8

Unfamiliar vocabulary in the original story

Student/proficiency	Errors
Tony (middle proficiency)	<i>recoleccion</i> (gather together)
Veronica (middle proficiency)	<i>está encanta</i> (to be in love); <i>vuelta enferma</i> (to get sick)
Jason (low proficiency)	<i>desparcer</i> (to drop)
Laura (low proficiency)	<i>empuje</i> (???)

The errors in vocabulary usage in the original stories fall under the category of the misuse of verbs. For example, in Tony’s story, there is a scene in which the main characters are trying to gather together their friends to hide them from their parents. Tony writes: *Amigos van la playa y Ron recoleccion los amigos y tira la playa* (Friends go to the beach and Ron collection the friends and throws [them on] the beach). While *recolectar* can be used to express the idea “to collect,” it cannot be used for people, only for objects. Since the verb *recolectar* is not one with which Tony is likely familiar, it is fair to say that he looked this word up in the dictionary and that he did not know about the limited meaning of this verb.

Veronica uses the word *encanta* incorrectly throughout her story — even in the title. *Encanta* (he/she loves) is the third person singular form of the verb *encantar* (to

delight) and is used in conjunction with the indirect object pronouns to mean the action of loving. However, Veronica uses *encanta* as a noun. Despite this fact, the meaning of Veronica’s story is clear, especially when looking at the accompanying visual imagery.

Jason and Laura both misuse verbs in much the same way as did Tony. Jason uses *desparcer* (to disperse, to disappear) for *dejar caer* (to let fall, to drop). Laura finds *empuje* (literally, push) and uses it in a sentence where it is difficult to know what she intends.

These students, like many beginning foreign language students, use the dictionary to translate their stories from English into the foreign language. While most teachers encourage students to start thinking in the foreign language as soon as possible, it is often difficult to do so, and translation remains their sole means of communicating thoughts. Judging by the errors made by the students across proficiency levels, a few classes in proper dictionary use might help them make better use of this tool, at least until they feel more comfortable thinking in the foreign language.

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Past Tense Verb Forms

Despite the fact that these students had not yet been formally introduced to the past tense in Spanish, the majority of the stories in the curriculum unit contain past tense verbs — preterit or imperfect. It is thus interesting to examine to what degree past tenses appeared in their original stories. What follows in Table 9 are the data from the students’ original stories regarding the presence of past tense verbs.

Table 9

Past tense forms in the original story

Name	Preterit	Imperfect
Tony (middle proficiency)	—	<i>Había, iban</i> (there were, they went)
Jason (low proficiency)	<i>fui</i> (I went) <i>perdió</i> (he/she lost)	<i>encantaba</i> (he/she loved)

None of the high proficiency students used either of the two past tenses in their original stories. It is possible that their concern for accuracy in working on this creative project kept them from experimenting with these new tenses.

Tony’s story begins with a formulaic opening that incorporates the imperfect tense — *Había una vez* (Once upon a time). He uses the imperfect again when stating that the main character’s parents are going on vacation: *La madre y el padre se iban de viaje*

(The mother and the father were going on vacation). While the use of the imperfect in the opening line can be attributed to a formula that Tony used verbatim, this second use of the imperfect does not seem to come from any of the curriculum unit stories or from a preconstructed formula. It is possible that he heard the structure used in past activities in class and somehow retained it and was able to incorporate it into his original story.

Jason uses one example of the preterit twice in his short story: *Cuando el perro fui la casa. El perro fui dormir* (When the dog [!] went home. The dog [!] went to sleep). Even though he makes a subject error (he uses the first person singular — *fui* — instead of third person singular — *fue*), it is a good attempt at the use of this new tense in his original writing.

Laura successfully uses both past tenses in her original story. The preterit appears in the internal response of her story: *El conejo perdió la familia* (The rabbit lost the family). She repeats the word *encantaba* (he loved) twice in the course of the story. It is interesting to note that one middle proficiency student and both low proficiency students experimented with the past tense in their original stories. The high proficiency students, however, used only the more familiar present tense in their stories. Again, it is possible that the high proficiency students were more concerned with precision than with using these new tenses and thus avoided the use of the past tense in the hopes of getting a better grade. Since in the school where this study took place, teachers take points off for each individual error rather than grading student work holistically, it is a fair assumption that students understand that accuracy is more valued than experimentation.

Oral Features

In the students’ creative stories, where there was no original from which to cull oral elements, it was interesting to observe if the students recycled any oral features. Table 10 displays the presence of repetition and quoted speech in the students’ own stories.

Table 10

Oral features in the original stories

Student/proficiency	Repetition	Quoted speech
Catherine (high proficiency)	X	X
Mia (high proficiency)	X	X
Tony (middle proficiency)	—	X
Veronica (middle proficiency)	—	—
Jason (low proficiency)	—	—
Laura (low proficiency)	—	X

High proficiency students — inclusion of repetition. The high proficiency students were the only ones to include repetition in their original stories. Catherine made extensive use of repetition in her story about an old man and his warnings. The phrase *La colina va explotar!* (The hill is going to explode! [literally, to exploit]) is repeated six times during the story.

Mia also makes use of repetition in her story, but to far less an extent than Catherine did. She repeats one phrase, *todas las piedras preciosas* (all the precious stones) in two consecutive sentences, possibly to highlight the movement from desire to accomplished fact:

El señor quiere todas las piedras preciosas. El señor dice, “¡Yo tengo todas las piedras preciosas!” (The man wants all the precious stones. The man says, “I have all the precious stones!”). While the repetition is brief, it provides a nice rhythm to her story.

High proficiency students — inclusion of quoted speech. Both high proficiency students included some quoted speech in their original stories. The quoted speech in Catherine’s story was mentioned in the discussion of repetition (*¡La colina va explotar!*). In fact, this was the only quoted speech present in her story and, as such, it becomes a particularly dynamic way of telling this cautionary tale. The tale itself is an allegory that seems to be praising the wisdom of elders. It is similar to “The Boy Who Cried Wolf,” in which a boy, after lying too many times to his neighbors, is not believed when he finally tells the truth. In Catherine’s untitled story, the townspeople are distrustful of an old man’s warnings because he has been known to say silly things (*cosas necias*) in the past. Catherine highlights the oral nature of the man’s warnings by presenting them in quoted speech and by using narration throughout the rest of the story.

Mia’s story, *El hombre codicioso* (The greedy man), contains only one instance of quoted speech. It is the only time during the story in which the main character speaks. His line is enclosed within exclamation marks and is the expression of the man’s desire to have all the precious stones. *¡Yo tengo todas las piedras preciosas!* (I have all the precious stones!). Although Mia mistakenly left out a portion of the phrase “have to have” (it should read *tengo que tener todas las piedras preciosas*), the sentence is comprehensible, given the context of the previous sentence.

Middle/Low proficiency students — inclusion of repetition. As mentioned previously, none of the middle/low proficiency students included repetition in any of their stories. It is possible that they were focusing more on moving their stories forward and perhaps did not want to waste space on repeated phrases.

Middle/Low proficiency students — inclusion of quoted speech. One of the middle proficiency and one of the low proficiency students included quoted speech in their original stories. Tony’s story, *El muchacho mal y una fiesta* (The bad boy and a party) contains several examples of quoted speech. It is interesting to note that all three examples are, in some way, related to the parents (e.g., the parents are speaking, a boy is speaking about the parents, or the main character is speaking directly to the parents).

The first example of speech appears on the second page of Tony’s story. It comes in the form of an imperative command from the parents to the main character, their

son Julio: ¡No tienes una fiesta! (Don't have a party!). Since at Tony's level of Spanish, students do not yet know how to form the imperatives, Tony uses the second person singular *tienes* (you have) as if making a declarative statement. The meaning is understood, however, in the context of the story.

Later in the story, Ron, Julio's friend, sees the parents arrive home early from their trip and warns the party-goers: ¡Madre y Padre es en casa! (Mother and father is home!). Here Tony makes a very common error for Spanish students. He confuses the verbs *ser* and *estar*, both which mean "to be." *Ser* is used to describe a permanent state of being and *estar*, in this case, is used to convey physical location. He also uses the singular form of the verb — perhaps mistakenly referring back only to the subject closest to the verb, *padre* — instead of the plural.

Despite some errors, the quoted speech in Tony's story sets the stage for the tension in the outcome. When Julio's parents arrive home to discover their son with several friends and a lot of wine (*mucho vino*), Julio greets his mother: ¡Hola Mamma! (Hi Mom!). Julio's parents do not respond to the greeting. To add to the comic nature of the scene, this instance of quoted speech is repeated in the accompanying illustration in a cartoon bubble.

Tony's ethnocultural heritage comes through in his use of quoted speech. He mistakenly doubles the "m" in *mamma*, as in Italian, a language which is occasionally spoken in Tony's home. Indeed, many Italian-American students seemed to make use of their knowledge of Italian, however limited, to comprehend the stories in the curriculum unit.

Laura's short story about a boy and a rabbit (*El niño y el conejito*), includes one instance of quoted speech: *El conejo a veces replica "¡Hola!"* (The rabbit sometimes replies "Hi!"). Since Laura's original story broke down at one point (there were segments which were incomprehensible, especially to a native speaker of Spanish), it is difficult to tell what she wanted to convey with this quoted speech. It seems to be the turning point in the story at which point the rabbit is reunited with its family.

It is obvious that Laura used a dictionary to help her in constructing this sentence. It is likely that Laura was looking for the word "replied" and found the verb *replicar*, but other possibilities can be imagined. While the students in this study were encouraged to avoid overuse of the dictionary, it was difficult to control such use, since the original story was written as homework.

Conclusions

The stories that students read and listened to in this curriculum unit contained many elements of story structure that are common to stories in all languages. It seems that the nature of story structure helped scaffold language for students and

“...nature of story structure helped scaffold language for students and enabled them to both comprehend the stories in the unit and later to write their own tales.”

enabled them to both comprehend the stories in the unit and later to write their own tales. While some students used chunks of language taken from the stories in order to build their own stories, others internalized the forms and were more creative in this endeavor. Elements that were present in the oral stories in the unit, such as repetition, quoted speech, and past tense verbs, came through in student writings.

Folktales from the target culture gave students a familiar context through which to expand their understanding of new vocabulary, syntax, and grammar in the target language. They provided students with a comfortable medium for exploring new cultures and ideas. They turned these eighth-grade students of second-year Spanish into adolescent troubadours, or eighth-grade *griots*.

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