Developing Cognitive Processes in Teenagers through the Reading of Short Stories[*]

Desarrollo de procesos cognitivos en adolescentes a través de la lectura de historias cortas

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This research-innovation project aims at developing cognitive processes explicitly through the reading of short stories. It is based on reading strategies and Bloom's cognitive domain (1981) which was applied in the English classes we had with sixth graders at IPARM (Instituto Pedagógico Arturo Ramírez Montufar) School at Universidad Nacional de Colombia, in Bogotá. The six categories (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) of Bloom's cognitive domain were worked with reading activities. In order to develop our students' cognitive processes and their English language learning skills, it was first necessary to involve them in reading for pleasure. The findings are the result of triangulated data collected through teachers' journals, direct observation, and students' artifacts and show the evidence of the significant improvement students have made in their English language learning skills and cognitive processes.

Key words: Cognitive processes, reading strategies, Bloom's taxonomy, English language learning skills

Este proyecto de investigación e innovación buscó desarrollar los procesos cognitivos de manera explícita a través de la lectura de historias cortas. Se basa en las estrategias de lectura y el dominio cognitivo de Bloom (1981) aplicados en clases de inglés con estudiantes de sexto grado del colegio IPARM de la Universidad Nacional, Sede Bogotá. Las seis categorías del dominio cognitivo de Bloom (conocimiento, comprensión, aplicación, análisis, síntesis y evaluación) se trabajaron usando actividades de lectura. Para iniciar el trabajo de desarrollo de procesos cognitivos y de habilidades de aprendizaje de inglés, fue necesario comenzar a leer por placer. Los hallazgos –luego de la triangulación de datos a través del diario de las profesoras, la observación y los trabajos elaborados por los estudiantes– evidencian un mejoramiento significativo en el desarrollo de procesos cognitivos y, en general, en las habilidades de aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Procesos cognitivos, estrategias de lectura, taxonomía de Bloom, habilidades de aprendizaje de inglés

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Introduction

Children's difficulties have caught our attention because during our experience as teachers we have noticed that students usually to show a low English level in their communicative production and comprehension.

This paper reports our experience as helpers and facilitators of a group of sixth graders who was developing cognitive processes and English language skills simultaneously. We hope that it invites you to reflect upon your teaching practice and challenges you to design classes that correspond with your students' interests, needs and context.

The research questions addressed in the qualitative research we conducted with sixth graders were as follows:

How can teenagers' cognitive processes be developed in the English class?

How can reading strategies help to develop the cognitive processes in teenagers?

The following sections include a brief review of the relevant literature, methodology, findings and conclusions.

Review of Literature

Learning a language is much easier by exposing learners to a variety of meaningful experiences in which they use language as well as express and share thoughts to create and re-create knowledge. In this respect, we consider three main aspects for our project: first of all, the cognitive aspect that is related to adolescents' characteristics; second, reading activities; and finally, Bloom's taxonomy with its six categories (Bloom, 1981).

Piaget proposes three stages, mentioned by Brewster (1991): 'the sensori-motor' (birth to 18 moths approximately), 'concrete operational' (18 months to 11 years approximately), and 'formal operations' (11 years onwards). In this report we consider the last two stages, 'concrete operational' (18 months to 11 years approximately) and 'formal operations' (11 years onwards). The 'concrete operational' is subdivided into two further periods: 'the pre-operational', which lasts until around the age of seven, during which the 'concrete operations' are being prepared for; and 'the operational' period, during which they are established and consolidated. The 'operational' period and the 'formal operations' are taken into account in this project since all our students belong to this age range where they 'begin' to reason logically and organize thoughts coherently.

In addition to adolescents' cognitive development, it is important to keep in mind some aspects related to cognitive processes; those are the processes involved in building knowledge.

> Although the thought process has been recognized as complex, there was no uniformly accepted way of describing the complexity until Benjamin Bloom succeeded in classifying the thought process into six very dynamic levels. These levels increase in complexity, from knowledge as the baseline level, through comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, to evaluation as the highest level. This classification is referred to as the "Cognitive Domain of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives" (Nkanginieme, 1997, p.1).

There are other domains, "Affective" and "Psycho-motor". The first one embraces the emotional feelings associated with thought

1. Knowledge	– to acquire, recall, identify, recognize (knowledge; of specifics, of dealing with specifics) (knowledge of universals and abstractions)
2. Comprehension	– translation, interpretation, extrapolation
3. Application	– to apply, relate, transfer, use
4. Analysis	– to discriminate, distinguish, organize
5. Synthesis	– to constitute, combine, specify, propose
6. Evaluation	– to validate, argue, appraise, reconsider

Table 1. The cognitive domain taxonomy. Classification and illustrative examples (Nkanginieme, 1997, p. 2).

processes, and the second one refers to the correctness of skill performance; but for our purpose, we will focus only on the cognitive domain. Table 1 outlines each level of cognition along with operative words illustrating the type of thought activity the level describes, as found in Nkanginieme (1997, p. 1-2).

Bloom (1981) classifies the cognitive process into six levels of increasing complexity. It goes from knowledge as the basic level, through comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis, to evaluation at the highest level. The importance of this classification lies in how it helped us to encourage meta-cognition in our students' learning processes. It means that the most "sub-conscious" thoughts can be brought to "consciousness" and thus they become more teachable.

The Reading Process

Reading and writing can be seen as important mechanisms in cognitive changes, and in the building and transmission of knowledge. Reading and writing cannot be considered as natural in children's development. They are cultural products that are learned not only through interacting with others, but also through formal teaching and learning processes.

Nowadays, there is an agreement in considering reading and writing as cognitive skills that include complex strategies with lots of psychological processes integrated. Thus, this project will be focused on reading as the baseline for working on different language skills and for developing cognitive processes based on Bloom's categories.

Reading is defined as the process between decoding written / graphical series and understanding of meaning. Writing can be defined as processes of communication that generates feelings, knowledge and structural thinking. These processes depend on the coordination of our information systems (visual, aural, motor, linguistic, and conceptual, among others), that are

developed since our childhood and our thinking (Domínguez, 1988).

In our project, therefore, we took into account the idea of having reading as a cognitive process that refers not only to decoding but also understanding a text. Understanding is defined as having *knowledge about a subject, situation, or about how something works* (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2004). In this project, understanding is understood as having knowledge and comprehension of a text, mainly through one of the strategies proposed to develop reading comprehension: the use of questions words like Who? Why? What? Understanding is thus fostered through a type of question that, according to González, "creates a propitious environment to develop the skills of comprehension and communication".[1]

Methodology

This study was conducted at the IPARM School, Instituto Pedagógico Arturo Ramírez Montufar in Bogotá, Colombia, from July to November 2006. It is descriptive in nature and is concerned with exploring, understanding and analysing sixth graders' English learning (Burns, 1999; Markeee, 1997). The project is an innovation and research project because it involves cognitive processes in ELT, a topic that has not been researched in our school site. Students' improvement was expected to be in terms of their level of analysis and

interpretation of situations presented in short stories read in English.

Participants

The participants in this study were a group of sixth graders and the two teachers who were researchers–observers. There were 36 sixth graders, with 70% of the students having obtained their parents' permission to participate in the project. Sixth graders customarily received three hours of English instruction per week.

There were 8 students with a high level of English. On the one hand, that situation really helped in group work since it enriched the kind of work done by the group but, on the other hand, there were obvious reading comprehension difficulties in the low-achievers. This was manifested not only when dealing with unknown words and expressions (literal reading), but also when trying to understand a text (comprehensive reading) (Grellet, 1981). Consequently, it was necessary to work on reading comprehension and English learning at the same time. In order to achieve this, it was intended to motivate, to have different type of exercises, and also to work on different skills.

Students participating in this study were eleven to twelve years old. They were able to write simple sentences and short paragraphs. They behaved well and, in general, had good study habits. They were very motivated and interested in learning English. They were very enthusiastic and participative.

Pedagogical Procedure

During the project we implemented reading comprehension strategies to

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develop cognitive processes in teenagers. First, it was necessary to motivate students to read for pleasure by exposing them to English reading in order to build their cognitive processes and, also as a way to learn different aspects of the language. To do it, students chose a book called '*Ghastly Ghosts*' (see picture 1), a compilation of different ghost stories.
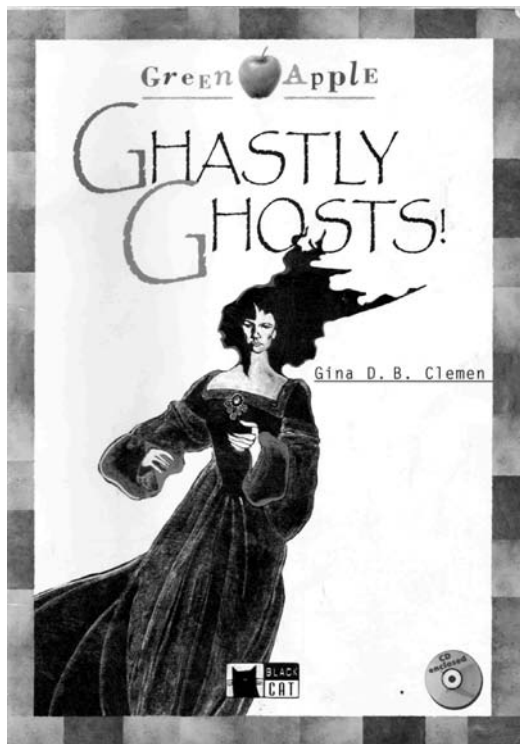
Picture 1. Ghastly Ghosts' cover, by Clemen (2002).

To start the project, we decided to work on six classes of one hour and a half. In each class, some workshops were developed (See sample in Appendix 1). Workshops included a planning phase, an implementation phase and an evaluation phase.

In each class, we intended to have some silent and oral reading moments (Topping, 1989), either in groups or individually. Then, there were periods of open questions

to elicit the general sense of the text, and to have students' opinions about what the author's intention was. After that, there were some activities to identify unknown vocabulary, expressions and words. It helped us in improving students' understanding of the text so they could show understanding through actions like drawing, miming and acting out, among others. Besides, games helped us to work more in the interpretation of the text and the contexts found in the reading.

Data Collection

The data collection, as such, took place during the third term of the year –from July to October, 2006. We decided to collect data by using three basic techniques: observation, journal, and students' artifacts. We also used some photos and videos to support observation.

At first, we started looking at the data sources individually. Then, we compared and analyzed the information keeping in mind that "The analysis must try to give sense to the data by explaining what is happening in the real context of the classroom, and it should attempt to identify some patterns and categories… Doing analysis is, in fact, making interpretations" (Jiménez et al., 1995, p. 19).

We wrote a journal during each class. Most of the time one of us taught the lesson and the other observed it. There were some classes both of us taught, taking turns to explain or supervise the activities done.

The observer took notes and the teacher of the class wrote a journal. At the end of the lesson, we shared the information gathered in the journal, as can be seen in

Chart 1. We also discussed a bit more the situations presented in the class, the activities done and some other aspects related to the teaching-learning processes. Observation and writing journals helped us to collect information about students' attitudes and reactions towards the activities proposed and, they also helped us in evaluating students' participation and progress. In addition, these ways of collecting data gave us the opportunity to reflect on and rethink our teaching practice and the effectiveness of the lessons plans we designed.

Students' artifacts were mainly compared with those which students had before or had at the beginning of the project. Some of the artifacts used were posters, drawings, short stories, homework, etc. Students' artifacts were very useful to check their improvement and reactions; first, in terms of their motivation and participation in the class and, then, in their response to the activities proposed to develop different levels of cognitive processes, as can be seen in Pictures 3 to 6. We think it is important to clarify that collaborative work was a tool in the class to check students' progress as both low achievers and advanced students were able to participate actively in class. The following chart shows the analysis of an artifact done in class.

Other ways to gathered information were video recordings and photographs. Video recordings were not done in all the classes. We recorded only activities related to reading strategies (Topping, 1989) such as making predictions about the story, doing word webs (see Picture 2), reading silently while listening, and acting out the story, among others. Photographs were used to capture some important moments like cooperative work (see Picture 3), and students' productions as it seen in Pictures 4 and 5.

JOURNAL # 1
DATE August 17th, 2006
ACTMTY: "WE ARE A NEW BAND"

| JOURNAL	COMMENTS
The teacher arrives to the classroom all the students said "Hello Teacher", she says good morning go to her desk. She organizes the children to work in pairs and she did two questions to us in order that we think and take note in our notebooks. — Which bands or pop singers do you enjoy? — Which singers or kind of music do you enjoy? Then we share our answers in class and many children said many groups and singer that we like. Then we open the book on page 20 and observe the	The children sixth degree are very dynamic and affective. At the beginning of the classes always it is necessary to organize them because they aren't in their places. On having initiated the class, explained to them that we are going to work in pairs, this activity must be realized with your partner at side in order to don't cause disorder. The children worked in pairs and questions and comments were doing white I walk around the classroom to observe their interests. Among the groups that they named are: Los de Adentro, Enanitos Verdesm Maná, Pescado Vivo,

Chart 1. Journal sample.

Students	Reading activity	Interpretation
Karavaev Shohyahon, Dhayana Romero, Alejandra Botia, and Emmanuel Bermudez 9-10-06	Create a poster about Glamis Castle as part of some pre-reading activities, in groups.	In this case all students in the group are in basic level, some of them as Shohyahon and Emmanuel presented problems of behaviour and work group, in the poster we can observe that instead their difficulties they try to write the story together and when we read it we can understand the general idea, whereas they spent time trying to organize and write the information, they finally reconstruct the text with historical aspects and important dates.

Students made recognition of important information found and made relations to write the text.

In this activity students moved from knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis to synthesis. |

**Chart 2.** Analysis of an artifact.
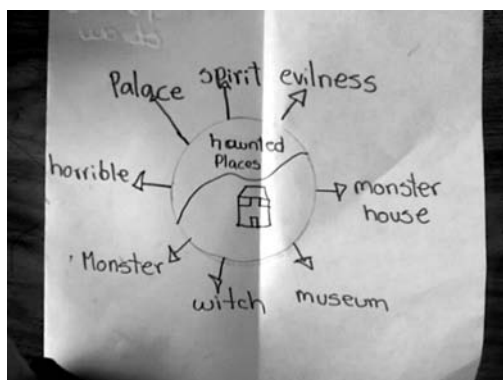
Picture 2. Word web developed by students as a pre-reading exercise, activity, September 21st, 2006.

Picture 4. Students' productions: Posters presented about the 'Glamis Castle', as a pre-reading activity, October 12th, 2006.

Picture 3. Cooperative work activity. Students designing a poster about the 'Glamis Castle', done as a pre-reading activity, October 12th, 2006.
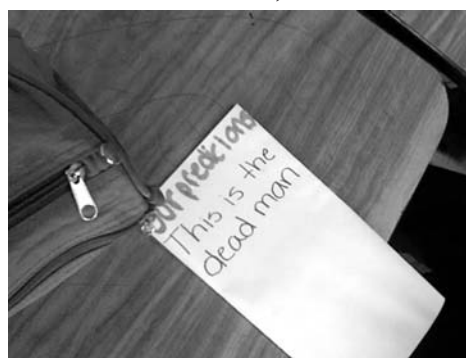
Picture 5. Students' artifacts: Posters presented about 'Glamis Castle', as a pre-reading activity, October 12th, 2006.

After having more information gathered, we started to compare and analyze the type of information obtained (see Table 2).

Pattern	Instrument 1: Journals and observation	Instrument 2: Artifacts	Instrument 3: Video
Students' reaction	In the journal 7 (October 2th) *students were very excited and motivated about the visual aids* we presented to introduce the topic. *The attitude of the students is better* than at the beginning of the project. *They are enthusiastic and very interested in the class and in reading.*	When the instruction was given, using a big example of a similar brochure, *students were very attentive*. Then, when the teachers gave them the paper the *students created a personalized version. They decorated and coloured the brochure as they liked.*	When the teachers pasted the visual aids on the board, *students became very expectant.* A student said '*Mire, mire!! ¿Qué es eso?*'. Another one said '*Oe, quién será ese?...*'
Students' improvement	The pre-reading activity of designing a brochure let the *students organize their ideas, write short sentences and also* bring their background information.	In a low achiever's brochure, although *the sentences written were simple, the student could write three complete and well written sentences.*	Low achievers and advanced *students participated actively in the socialization of their brochures* by raising their hands, looking for the Spanish words in the dictionaries, asking their classmates and the teachers.
Reading activities	*Students are asked to design a brochure based on teachers' model.* The brochure must be divided into three sections: 1. Our predictions, 2. Word Web, and 3. List of related words.	*Each brochure was shared with the whole class* by completing a word web on the board, which helped all the classmates in learning the new language.	When the teachers asked the students *to share the information,* they give not only haunted places words but also *related words* to haunted places like adjectives, verbs.

**Table 2.** Format used to compare and analyse the instruments.

Findings

The triangulation of teachers' journals, direct observation, and students' artifacts as research resources provided us with valuable information that allowed us to identify the following categories and subcategories that emerged: *Cognitive processes, reading and action!, Making English together!, and Better is always possible!*

Cognitive Processes, Reading and Action!

This research feature refers to English reading activities which suggest that
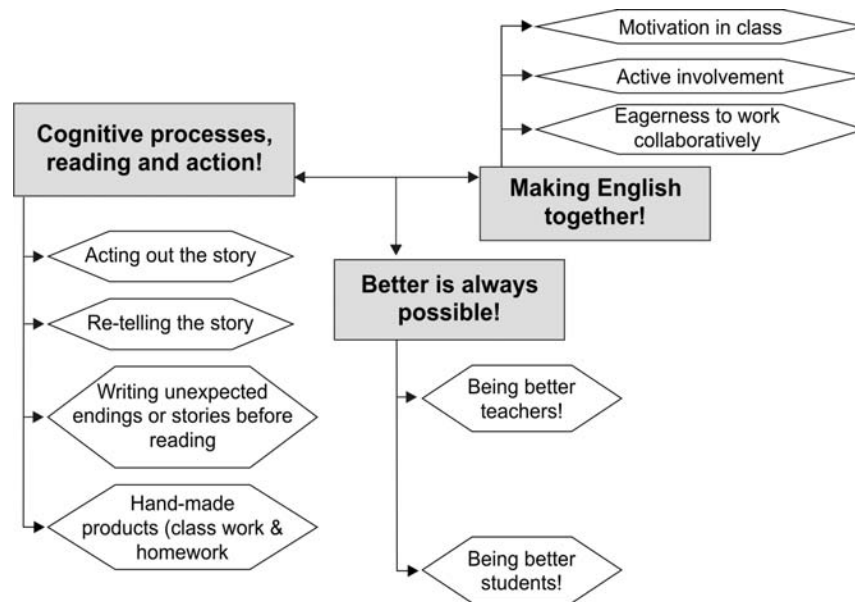
Graph 1. Research categories found.

students are able to respond to higher thinking level activities. An example of this can be seen in the October 5th class in which students had to act out their own interpretation of the story in groups of seven. Most of the groups included additional information that really helped the class to understand the performance and also to evaluate it. There were different options students used to adapt the story 'The Horror of Berkeley Square'.

The following chart illustrates the journal analysis, taking Bloom's taxonomy as a starting point.

Making English Together!

This research feature is referred to students' reactions towards English reading activities and class. We have found two classes that can be considered as examples of this feature. One was on September 21st, in which students had to make predictions,

create a word web about haunted places and make a list of vocabulary in pairs. Then, they were asked to share the information with the class. In this case, we could observe a higher commitment in doing the activity as they had to work in pairs and then with the class. All of them seemed to be very interested and motivated in the topic. Some of them looked up new words in the dictionary; some others just tried to remember previous vocabulary and some even used words in Spanish. All the students worked cooperatively to create a good class work. They also participated actively in the class. Evidence can be found in the pictures below.

Pictures taken on September 21st, 2006 based on the story 'The Horror of Berkeley Square.'

Another example of the research feature referring to the students' reactions was an activity done on October 9th, in which students had to make a poster based on the information each student found at home.

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Topic	Reading activities	Interpretation
This lesson is intended to check students' comprehension according to Bloom's taxonomy in the story "The Horror Of Berkeley Square", based on the presentation they were asked to do Date: 5-10-06	– Act out the story of 'Berkeley Square'. – Pay attention to the sequence of the stories represented, the characters and the organization of each group. – Fill an evaluation chart for the representations of the groups.	In this activity we could observe that students worked most on *the analysis and synthesis levels including the evaluation level.* Students *compared the representations and noticed* differences in organization, representation, information of the story, responsibility, etc. Based on these considerations they gave a score to each group. They showed good feelings and attitudes towards the reading proposed. With those feelings *they showed improvement in some of their cognitive processes, comprehension, synthesis and analysis.*

Chart 3. Sample of journal analysis.
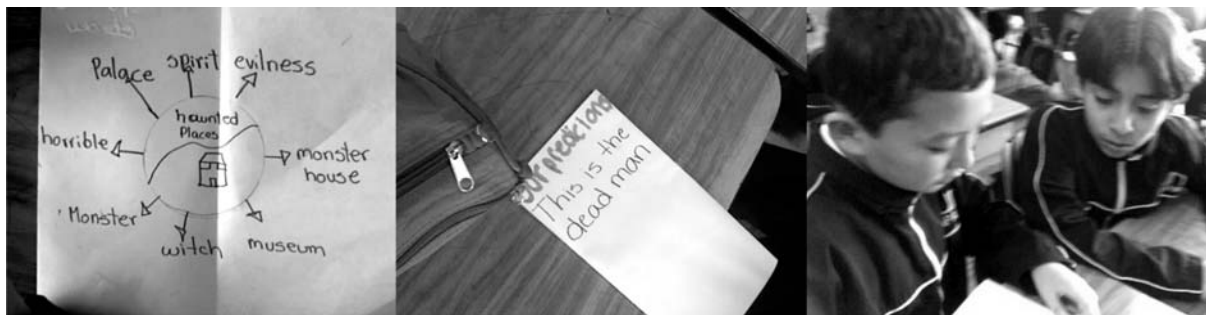
Pictures taken on October 9th, 2006, based on the students' research of 'The Glamis Castle.'

It was a pre-reading activity. Students were more conscious of the reading activity developed in class. In the pictures below, students' motivation, involvement and cooperative work are clearly seen.

In that class, students also presented the poster to the class. Although there were no specific requirements for the presentation, all the group members decided to participate by presenting or reading.

Better is Always Possible!

This research feature refers to students' and teachers' improvement in the English class. Students showed a better performance in solving more complex reading activities,

evidence of understanding a text and increased language learning and more fluent participation in written and oral activities.

In the following charts, there are class descriptions that show how students were moving more freely from knowledge to synthesis, according to their classwork.

Teachers became facilitators in language learning through reading in their classes, as they were giving and receiving information to build daily lessons. We used more appropriate learning strategies in class such as creating sample materials, keeping in mind students' interests and levels, among others. We also developed classes integrating skills as shown in the previous pictures, samples and charts, where you can find class descriptions and

Topic	Reading activities	Interpretation
Introducing a story based on a known topic 'A ghost', using pictures and extra vocabulary. 1-09-06	— Describe some pictures about ghosts. — Write general ideas about the pictures shown. — Read the text "What is a ghost?" — Answer comprehension questions.	We can see that in all points of the process of observation, students move from one level to another in increasing degree of complexity but at the same time they go back and forward. Here without previous and appropriate knowledge about ghost and vocabulary, it could be difficult for the students to proceed logically to the next level of cognition. Having *knowledge as the base of the class work activities,* at this point, can always be used to facilitate a higher level of cognition.

Chart 4. Sample of class activity.

Topic	Reading activities	Interpretation
This lesson is intended to check students' comprehension according to Bloom's taxonomy in the story "The Horror of Berkeley Square", based on the presentation they were asked to do 5-10-06	— Act out the story of Berkeley Square, in groups. — Pay attention to the sequence of the stories represented, the characters and the organization of each group. — Fill in an evaluation chart for the presentations of the groups.	In this activity we can observe *that students worked most on the analysis and synthesis levels including the evaluation level.* Students compared the presentations and noticed differences in organization, performance, information of the story, responsibility, etc. Based on these considerations they gave a score to each group. They showed good feelings associated with understanding the activity and the use of the language.

Chart 5. Sample of class activity.

reading activities that include acting out the story, predicting, retelling a story, making writing attempts, interpreting images, attending and taking part in acts of reading.

Conclusions

The development of cognitive processes in teenagers is possible when there is a syllabus that allows the teacher to develop different types of thinking activities in which students can build up creativity, use their background information, and work cooperatively. This is also possible if they are engaged in activities in which they can rethink their English language learning, integrating efficiently their cognitive processes and the development of the four skills.

In this project, we decided to employ reading strategies that can be worked with Bloom's taxonomy and its cognitive domain. Reading strategies (Topping, 1989) have been one of the sources to develop thinking operations. In others words, through reading students learn not only the language, as such, but also contextualized situations that help them build relationships among different aspects related to real life, their experiences, their previous knowledge,

and others. Reading strategies have helped students in learning more easily and meaningfully as they are always prepared to face a text.

This project has not only influenced our sixth graders, it has also impacted other students from different grades and English levels at school. Parents are even more involved in their children's English learning process.

Students also had the chance to improve their learning process through different activities. They realized that they had abilities and background information to communicate their ideas in English. Besides that, students noticed that communicating in English could be done not only with words but also by using their whole body to convey meaning.

Reading is a great excuse to develop high level processes of thinking skills by applying Bloom's cognitive domain (1981), since in the process of reading, one can work explicitly all these categories by using different reading strategies that allow students to move from knowledge to evaluation categories.

As teachers, we can say that developing cognitive processes explicitly has let us realize the richness our students have to offer. Reading at early ages is not as difficult as we used to think. It has been a useful tool to develop not only cognitive processes and skills, but also higher motivation and a better environment in the English class.

Pedagogical Impact

All the members of the community have been impacted by this project. First, not only our sixth grade students were influenced, but other students from different grades and English levels were affected by the implementation of this project. On the one hand, low achievers have shown a bigger progress in their English level and realized that they were able to face and succeed in English activities without failing. On the other hand, advanced students reinforced their oral and written skills and, also, their group work abilities. As a result, students from different levels were able to work cooperatively without having their English level act as a barrier in their communication.

Second, this project has opened a home-school connection because there was better communication among parents, their children and the teachers. Parents were more involved in their children's English learning. Parents showed more interest in their children's learning as they saw the great change most of them revealed in their motivation and in their English language command. Parents were always eager to participate and help in the activities proposed, and they were always informed and ready to give suggestions and comments to improve the process.

Finally, this project impacted administrators and colleagues. Administrators were always open to help us with materials and other resources. Our colleagues showed a great interest in the project implementation in all the grades for next year. It is because they saw students' positive change and progress in learning as well as in motivation and attitude towards the English class.

Recommendations

The development of cognitive processes needs to be carefully planned, and special

materials are not necessary. One can adapt different types of topics not only from English culture, but also from our culture or other fields of knowledge like social science, literature, among others. The readings and the reading strategies to be used should be selected according to students' interests and cognitive development. In addition, it is also necessary to integrate all the skills when the lesson is planned.

A way to involve our students more is by using materials designed by the teachers. Those materials should be colourful, attractive and extensively used. They have to be helped by other sources like Internet, visual aids, listening and others related to the topic proposed. Therefore, the short stories used are not only the tool but the media to have students work cooperatively on a topic they like, hence, developing high level thinking processes. Finally, it is necessary to socialize the project in the school site to give colleagues the chance to learn how to use and take advantage of Bloom's taxonomy (1981) so they can be part of the project in the near future.

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Appendix 1: Lesson Plan Example

Objective: This lesson is intended to stimulate the students' interest and comprehension in reading by using a ghost story

Warm Up: Students are told they are going to work in pairs. They are shown a picture of Lord Lyttleton and Berkeley Square, a haunted place in the story. We are going to read in class and on a separate piece of paper, write the title of the story 'The Horror of Berkeley Square'. Students are asked to predict what they think the story will be about in pairs. They should write simple sentences about their predictions. Before we start, the teacher asks some students to retell the instructions to check understanding of them.

After 10 minutes, some students will be asked to tell the class about their findings.

Steps

1. Based on students' findings, the teachers make a list of different words related to the picture. With those words, each group should design a word web including different words related to haunted places. (10')
2. Before providing students with copies of the story, "The Horror of Berkeley Square", students will be asked to listen to the story carefully. They should try to remember as many words as they can about the story. The teacher will ask them about those words to see if it is possible to reconstruct the story together establishing relationships. (10')
3. Then, students are given the printed version of the story to do silent reading while listening. Second, they are asked for unknown vocabulary, if any, to be written on the board to check meaning. Third, students and teacher will try to retell the story to see students' comprehension either in English or in Spanish. Finally, with the whole group all of us will compare the two versions (prediction vs. written story). (25')

To check students' reading comprehension, they are asked to act out the story in groups of 7. They will be asked to prepare what they need for their next class presentation (assigning roles, deciding on clothing, writing the names of places, among other responsibilities). They will be shown the picture of the evil presence on page 17 to give them an idea of the creature.