



THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT OF COMIC BOOKS CREATIVE WRITING IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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RESUMO – A elaboração de quadrinhos em inglês como segunda língua pode ser uma ferramenta muito útil para ajudar os alunos a desenvolver suas habilidades linguísticas, textuais e artísticas. No entanto, a escrita criativa quadrinista em inglês não vem sendo amplamente pesquisada no Brasil. Na verdade, não vem recebendo a devida atenção da academia (McCLOUD, 1993; WRIGHT, 2001; LIU, 2004; BAKER, 2011; YILDIRIM, 2013). Por estas razões, os principais objetivos desta pesquisa foram o de investigar se as aulas de escrita criativa quadrinista podem ajudar os alunos a desenvolver suas respectivas escritas (VYGOTSKY, 2004; 2007). Os dados foram coletados em um curso extracurricular na Universidade de São Paulo. Seus desenvolvimentos foram verificados em três momentos distintos. No primeiro momento, o pesquisador percebeu que seus conceitos sobre quadrinhos foram ampliados. No segundo momento, os alunos elaboraram textos de escrita criativa mais complexos. No último momento, eles conseguiram usar a língua inglesa mais proficientemente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Comic books; Escrita Criativa; Teoria sociocultural

ABSTRACT – The elaboration of comic books in English as a second language (ESL) classes may be a very useful tool to help students develop their linguistic, textual and artistic skills. However, the comic books creative writing in English has not been extensively researched in Brazil. In fact, it has not received proper attention from the academia (McCLOUD, 1993; WRIGHT, 2001; LIU, 2004; BAKER, 2011; YILDIRIM, 2013). For these reasons, the main objectives of this research were to investigate if comic books creative writing classes may help students develop (VYGOTSKY, 2004; 2007) their writing. The data were collected in an extracurricular course in the University of São Paulo. Their development was verified in three distinctive moments. In the first moment, the researcher noticed that their concepts about comic books were all broadened. In the second moment, students elaborated more complex creative writing texts. In the last moment, they could use the English language more proficiently.



KEYWORDS – Comic books; Creative Writing; Sociocultural theory.

Introduction

English is an important means of communication, which is largely used as a second language (SL) by various countries, including Brazil. In fact, English has played a relevant role as an international language since the World War II. Nowadays, its use has been broadened and “(...) our society has embraced linguistic multiplicity as a natural course of social development in a multicultural civilization” (BROWN, 2014, p. 9). In such context, the tools (Radio, TV, Internet, etc.) we opt for learning a second language is crucial for us to achieve our linguistic goals and become proficient speakers.

According Vygotsky (2004, 2007), Lantolf & Thorne (2007) and Lantolf & Poehner (2014), tools are types of reflections to make knowledge more adequately distributed and effective in our contemporary societies. For Lantolf & Thorne (2007), the tools the SL teachers choose to apply in their classroom make significant difference in their students' development (VYGOTSKY, 2004, 2007). However, one fundamental question is quite frequent: Which tools should SL teachers choose to teach?

Many scholars (McCLOUD, 1993; WRIGHT, 2001; LIU, 2004; BAKER, 2011; YILDIRIM, 2013) strongly believe that comic books can help SL teachers develop their respective students' linguistic skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). Indeed, Wright (2001) advocates that SL students may directly benefit in using comic telling to improve their oral presentations. In the same vein, Liu (2004) promulgates that as a form of art, comic books can be a very pleasant tool which may instigate students' interests and make the SL classes more attractive. The power of attractiveness derived from the comic books is also attested by Baker (2011) and Yildirim (2013).

Research questions

The problems that will be discussed in this research are:



1. How do comic books help English as a second language students develop their writing?
2. Are comic books effective as a medium of teaching English?

The objectives of this research

The objectives of this research can be indicated as follows:

1. To find out whether there is any significant development in students' writing in English by using comic books.
2. To identify the effectiveness of using comic books creative writing to develop students' writing in English.

Concepts of comic books

Comic books are a form of art, which means that they do not present a fixed and static conceptualization. As stated by Scott McCloud (1993), comic books are "(...) juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 12). He even adds that comic books are a series of static images in fixed sequence. In this sequence, written texts are frequently applied to develop short plots. For Wright (2001), comic books can be fundamentally conceptualized as a collection of stories with pictures in them, sometimes presenting titles as well as themes, usually published in newspapers.

According to Baker (2011), comic books are

[...] thin paper booklets bound with staples. A graphic novel is a fiction or non-fiction piece of literature published in comic book form, in which words and pictures both play a vital role in narrating the story (although some graphic novels are wordless). (p. 51)

For Liu (2004), comic books are

a series of pictures inside boxes that tell a story. Among visual genres, comic strips catch many researchers' attention because they are



communicative, popular, accessible, and readable, and they combine aesthetic perception with intellectual pursuit. (p. 103)

On the other hand, Yildirim (2013, p. 10) conceptualizes comic books more simply as “(...) several continued stories”. However, these stories are not long as novels, or even short stories. In actuality, they are quite brief full of completed actions. Still for Yildirim (2013), comic books and even graphic novels present diverse types of themes such as humor, love, betrayal and vengeance. They are not only aimed at children. These themes are usually portrayed pictorially and sometimes encompass written texts, but it is not the norm.

Based on these scholars, we may state that comic books present basically visual and written scripts. By and large, these scripts must be organically intertwined, i.e., the visual and the written parts of a comic book must be applied harmoniously to tell a certain story properly. Nevertheless, comic books are no longer only found in newspapers (WRIGHT, 2001). We may easily find diverse types of comic books in several distinctive media today. There are even specialized websites where a lay person or even budding comic books writers can access to create their own stories. These websites include refined types of tools for characterization, spatialization, temporalization, visualization and full-fledged photos, images as well as pictures.

The Vygotskian sociocultural theory

In this part of the article, I will elaborate on the most important tenets of the Vygotskian sociocultural theory as it informs the Fanfictional Creative Writing course in English I designed and taught for this research. I opted for this theory, because it helped me broaden students' concepts about creativity, comic books and creative writing courses. Vygotsky's theoretical framework provides a rich, particular and pragmatic contribution to the theories of human psychology. His research about 1) Creativity and 2) The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has depicted substantially the transformative development of individuals and societies. Hence, these two tenets will be briefly described as follows:

Creativity



For Vygotsky (2004, 2007), creativity is a process that entails children's play, imagination and fantasy. Creativity is an important concept for us better understanding creative writing and how can creative writing teachers help their students develop it. Hence, according to Vygotsky (2004), the first step for developing creativity is during the early play. In this stage, children start investigating and playing with the world around them. Nevertheless, their play does not remain the same, inflexible.

The more the children play, the more they change their playing. Therefore, children's play is a process which changes constantly throughout their childhood. According to Sharpe (2004), "A child's play very often is just an echo of what he saw and heard adults do" (p. 11). However, he highlighted that this is not "(...) simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired". The children then fuse these elements to create their own reality, the "(...) one that conforms their own needs and desires" (SHARPE, 2004, p. 12).

As play is a process, imagination is also a process. Still according to Sharpe (2004), to better understand imagination, we must try to understand its relationship with reality: "The first type of association between imagination and reality stems from the fact that everything the imagination creates is always based on elements taken from reality, from a person's previous experience" (SHARPE, 2004, p. 13). Therefore, everything we create, we create based on something that already exists. Nothing is created from nothing: "It would be a miracle indeed if imagination could create something out of nothing or if it had other sources than past experience for its creations" (SHARPE, 2004, p. 13). For him, the only exception to it is religion, because their defenders claim that imagination is originated from supernatural forces.

Nevertheless, some people are more imaginative than others. This occurs, because for Sharpe (2004, p.15), "(...) imagination depends directly on the richness and variety of a person's previous experience because this experience provides the material from which the products of fantasy are constructed". In other words, the most varied a person's experience, the better will be his imagination. The second type of association between imagination and reality stems from a constant process of transformation: "(...) products of the imagination



also consist of transformed and reworked elements of reality and a large store of experience is required to create these images out of these elements” (SHARPE, 2004, p. 16). The way I comprehend fanfictions may not be the same way my students comprehend.

Creativity is also composed by two activities: the reproductive and the creative. According to Vygotsky (2007) the reproductive activity is “(...) very closely linked to memory; essentially it consists of a person’s reproducing or repeating previously developed and mastered behavioral patterns or resurrecting traces of earlier impressions” (p. 6). Although we tend to simply reproduce what other people have already invented, we can also adapt these inventions to the changes of our society.

This is the creative activity (VYGOTSKY, 2007). Therefore, the reproductive activity is usually oriented to the past while the creative activity is oriented to the future. For Motteram (2012) and Motteram, Slaouti & Onat-Stelma (2013), many creative productions are actualized today in the computer. For this reason, they are called technical cultural artefacts.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Many creative writing researchers (BLYTHE. SWEET, 2008; HEALEY, 2009, OBERHOLZER, 2014) have attested that most teachers do not feel confident enough in teaching creative writing. In fact, many of these teachers are not able to identify if their students developed their creative writing or not. Healey (2009) even warned the academia that if the teachers cannot prove that their students have concluded their courses better than when they started, then there is no reason for having creative writing classes in the universities. I believe that this has happened, because there is not much research about the teaching of creative writing in the universities. In addition, there is even less research about the students’ creative writing development in these courses.

For these reasons, Vygotsky (2004, 2007)’s concept of development may help teachers and researchers better understand how students can develop their creative writing in a creative writing course. Several sociocultural theorists (SHAYER, 2008; WERTSCH, 2010; JOHN-STEINER. CONNERY. MARJANOVIC-SHANE, 2015) have acknowledged



that Vygotsky had investigated the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), because he was dissatisfied with two recurrent tendencies present in educational psychology in his time. 1) The assessment of a child's intellectual abilities and 2) the evaluation of the instructional practices.

In relation to the first tendency, Wertsch (2010) claimed that Vygotsky believes that established techniques of testing was too restrictive and biased. Therefore, they could not measure the children's potential ability, only indicate the actual level of their development. For Vygotsky (2004, 2007), it was more important for the current psychology to deal with children's future growth (what they can become) rather than solely unveil what these children already know.

Additionally, Wertsch (2010) also claimed that Vygotsky devises the concept of ZPD to investigate the children's potential capacities and to question the *status quo* of the educational psychology. Wertsch (2010) hence defined ZPD as

[...] the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 46)

Another important characteristic Vygotsky indicates is that learning may create ZPD. Shayer (2010) also attested that by saying that "(...) through learning, students may become aware of a varied set of internal developmental processes" (p. 35). These processes may possibilitate the operations for developing the students' learning insofar as the children can interact with their peers, their surroundings and, most important, more experienced people. Still according to Shayer (2010), the moment "(...) these processes are internalized, they consequently become part of the children's independent developmental achievement" (p. 38). However, he highlighted that there are different two types of instructions: 1) the good and 2) the bad.

If students have contact with bad instruction, the chances of creating ZPD may decrease, hindering their development. For this reason, Shayer (2010) advocated that "(...) good instruction should proceed ahead of development and should awaken and rouse to life



an entire set of functions, which are in the stage of maturation and lie in the ZPD". (p. 39) Furthermore, he noticed that the teacher plays a crucial role to his students' learning development. The teacher should thus be able to identify his students' ZPD and then organize his teaching to help his students accomplish their potential capacities.

Nevertheless, this process is not always easy. In earnest, Shayer (2010) highlighted that learning can become a very tortuous road if the teacher is not properly prepared to guide his students along the way. Therefore, for him, the very first crucial step for any successful course is to have well-educated teachers in its organization and teaching. By well-educated, Shayer (2010) meant teachers who know exactly what, why and how they will teach a certain content.

If teachers are well-educated, they can more easily promote ZPD and then reorganize their teaching to provide their students with a safe space for learning. For Blythe and Sweet (2008), students can only develop themselves in a creative writing course, if they are opportunized with a safe space where they can share their writings and learn with their peers, along with more experienced people (usually teachers and professional writers).

The participating students

The students who participated in the extracurricular course of Fanfictional Creative Writing in English were mainly University of São Paulo (USP) undergraduate students. In total, there were 12 of them, all female and from the course of English of the Department of Modern Languages (DML). Their level of proficiency in English ranged from the intermediate to the advanced.

The research resources

This research entailed three different resources for the teacher-researcher to collect and investigate data. They were: 1) students' initial creative writing texts, 2) teacher-student oral feedback sessions and 3) students' final creative writing texts. Students' initial creative writing texts were used by the teacher-researcher to identify their initial knowledge about comic books while the final ones were used to identify students' comic books creative writing



development. The teacher-student oral feedback was applied to expand the teacher-researcher's knowledge about his students' comic books creative writing development.

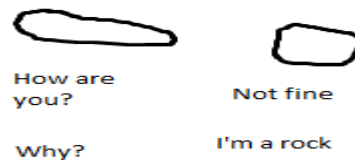
The undergraduate students' development of creative writing in English as a second language

In this part of the article, I will investigate the students' initial and final comic books creative writing texts. Although 12 students did take part in the extracurricular Fanfictional Creative Writing course in English, only five of them completed all the tasks required from the teacher-researcher. After the investigation, I will compare their respective initial and final productions as well as analyze if there was considerable linguistic and textual development (VYGOTSKY, 2004, 2007).

In the first class of the Fanfictional Creative Writing course, the participating students were invited to create a comic books creative writing production. The instructions of this first task entailed solely three clear directives: 1) all the students' creative writing stories should be fictional, 2) they should all use the computer to elaborate on their fictional stories, and 3) the computers should also be used to help them compose images to illustrate their respective creative writing texts. The five most initial relevant creative writing texts are displayed as follows:



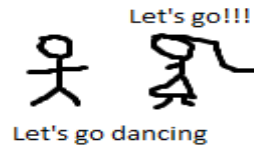
Student A's initial creative writing



Student B's initial creative writing



Student C's initial creative writing



Student D's initial creative writing



Student E's initial creative writing

As we can notice, all the students' creative writing productions were elaborated on the computer program WordPad. According to Microsoft, the WordPad is a basic word processor. It has substituted the Microsoft Write and it is present in mainly all versions of Microsoft Windows, since Windows 95. One of its distinctive features possibilities its users to write and draw on the same page. In the first oral teacher-student feedback session, the researcher could identify that this feature was the main reason why the students opted for creating their texts on the WordPad.

Based on students' initial creative writing productions, we can apprehend that their fictional stories were limited and few comic books characteristics were applied in their creative writing process. For instance, the speech balloons appeared only in the student's A production. They are one of the main characteristics related to the comic book literary genre (LIU, 2004). Instead of using speech balloons, student B chose to place her written script near the images to display the plot while student C preferred to draw lines to express her main character's thoughts.



Interestingly to notice, only student E applied color in her creative writing text. All the other students opted for black, making no distinctions among their characters' personality. In the first oral feedback, all the students commented that they had great difficulty in drawing, and most of them forgot to vary the colors of their drawings. As perceived, the only exception was student E. She used the *red*, because she tried to “[...] create a fictional story between 2 hearts”. To differentiate their behaviors, she decided to color them distinctively. Therefore, the “ill-humored heart” was painted in black and the “well-humored” heart in red.

By and large, all the students expressed dissatisfaction with their respective drawings. This may have caused their loss of interest in developing more elaborated plots. Their loss of interest was apprehended in two different moments of the course. The first moment is related to their initial creative writing texts, since their stories were too short and had few conflicts. The second moment is related to their own comments collected during the first oral feedback. They all said they were not good at drawing, which unmotivated their “imagination” (student A, B and E) or “creativity” to flourish (student C and D).

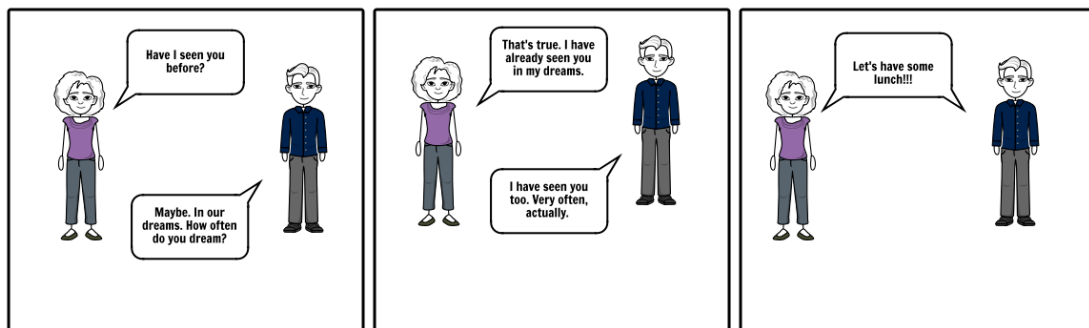
As students were facing many difficulties in creating their stories, the teacher decided to intervene and provided them with more appropriate tools. For Wertsch (2010, p. 48) advocates that teachers should promote ZPD as they are the “(...) adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”. Still for Wertsch (2010), there are many ways of promoting ZPD. One of these ways refers to bringing specific tools which can help students concretize their tasks as well as be applied in other contexts, specially outside the classroom.

For basically these reasons, the teacher opted for presenting their students with 2 technical cultural artefacts (MOTTERAM, 2012; MOTTERAM, SLAOUTI & ONAT-STELMA, 2013). These artifacts are the following webpages: 1) storyboard-creator (<https://www.storyboardthat.com/storyboard-creator>) and 2) the canvas comic strips (<https://www.canva.com/create/comic-strips/>). According to the teacher, these pages were used, because they were free, practical and flexible.

As they are free, all the students could access these pages, without many restrictions. As they are practical, neither student had difficulty in navigating through them, nor managing



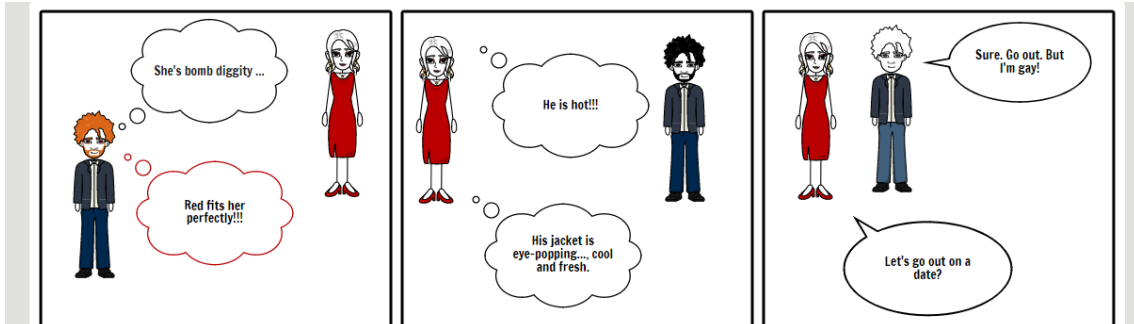
their respective technical and artistic features. As they are flexible, the students could visit them whenever and wherever they wanted. Based on the final oral teacher-student feedback session, all the students commented that due to these webpages, they all felt more motivated to create their stories. The five most final relevant creative writing texts are displayed as follows:



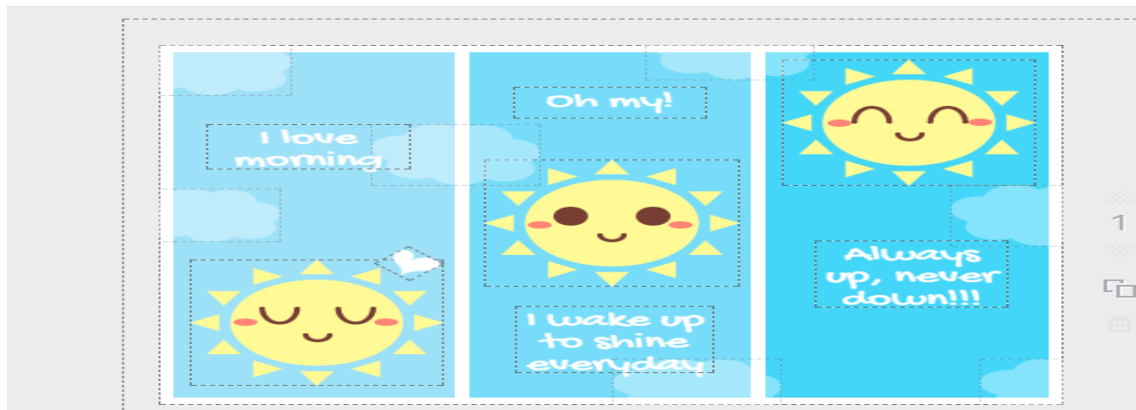
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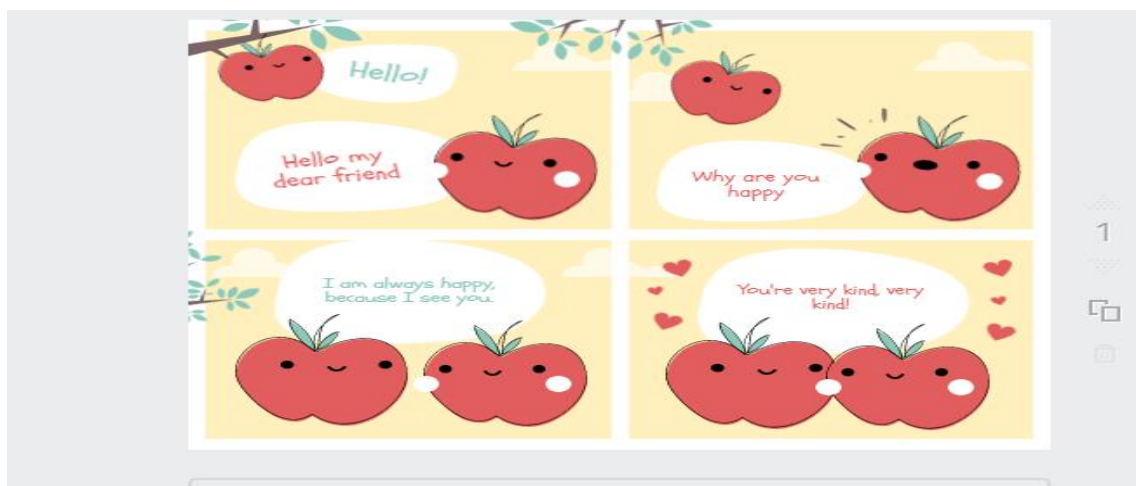
Student A's final creative writing



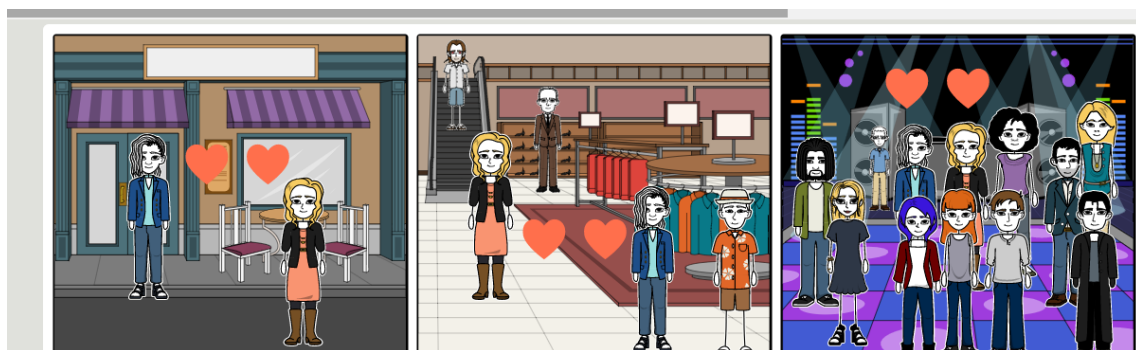
Student B's final creative writing



Student C's final creative writing



Student D's final creative writing



Student E's final creative writing



As we can notice, all the students' creative writing final texts showed development (VYGOTSKY, 2004, 2007). This happened, because the teacher could promote ZPD (VYGOTSKY, 2004, 2007; WERTSCH, 2010) insofar as he applied technical cultural artifacts (MOTTERAM, 2012) to instigate and make his students reflect upon their own creative writing. At first, students used WordPad to create their comic books texts. This program was not appropriate to develop comic books texts.

Students' WordPad usage made them feel dissatisfied and flustered with their own creative capacities. Their dissatisfaction and frustration were identified in their first oral feedback session. Student A said: "I used the WordPad, because I didn't know what to do" and student D: "I don't know much about creative writing, nor comic books, or how to do it". According to Motteram (2012) the use of inappropriate technical cultural artifacts in the classroom may influence negatively "(...) any students' development" (p. 179). Based on these factors, we can state that the program WordPad was not the best creative resource (MOTTERAM, 2012; MOTTERAM, SLAOUTI, ONAT-STELMA, 2013).

After the teacher's application of more appropriate technical cultural artifacts (MOTTERAM, 2012; MOTTERAM, SLAOUTI & ONAT-STELMA, 2013), the participating students felt more motivated to elaborate better on their creative writing texts. Consequently, more visually attractive (BAKER, 2011; YILDIRIM, 2013) and complex pieces of writing (WRIGHT, 2001; LIU, 2004; YILDIRIM, 2013) were produced. These characteristics were identified in three distinctive creative writing components: 1) narrative conflict, 2) characterization and 3) speech balloons.

In relation to the narrative conflict, all final students' creative writing texts exhibited more complex plotting. Initially, student A just wrote good morning in her creative writing production. In fact, no considerable plot was presented to the reader. However, her final production showed a more elaborated dialogue between two people who were trying to ask each out on a date. Going out on a date was also student D's first creative writing production. Its plot was also limited and unattractive.



In comparison to student A, student D wrote a dialogue. However, her dialogue was very straightforward showing no conflict at all. Her final production was much more elaborated. Instead of using human characters, she opted for fruits. And instead of using just one dialogue, she used four different ones to question happiness. Therefore, a more elaborated text with conflicting questioning.

All students felt more motivated to deepen their characterizations. Although their first creative writing productions exhibited characters, their characterization fell flat. We believe this may have occurred, because of their inappropriate choice of technical cultural artifacts (MOTTERAM, 2012; MOTTERAM. SLAOUTI. ONAT-STELMA, 2013). With the teacher's proper guidance (SHAYER, 2010; WERTSCH, 2010), the participating students could develop more extensively their creativity (VYGOTSKY, 2004, 2007).

For instance, student B applied in her final text assorted colors to express her characters' rapid changes in mood. Her male protagonist changes his hair color two times (brownish into black, and then black into white). According to her final oral feedback, she said: "I tried to demonstrate anxiety at first, then insecurity and finally, peace". Assorted colorations were present in all the participating students' final creative writing productions. Initially, only student E colored her plot.

The last writing developing component identified was their use of speech balloons (LIU, 2004; YILDIRIM, 2013). Although none of the students used speech balloons effectively in their initial creative writing productions, they tried to represent them through drawing traces or putting the dialogue lines near each character. In their final productions, the speech balloons applied not only were factual speech balloons, but they also helped to construct the narrative. Student A used them to represent simultaneous conversations, student B to represent thoughts while student E opted for red hearts to express her characters' innermost emotions.

Conclusions

All the participating students showed comic books creative writing development (VYGOTSKY, 2004, 2007). This happened, because the teacher promoted ZPD effectively



(VYGOTSKY, 2004, 2007; WERTSCH, 2010). The students' creative as well as writing developments were identified in three distinctive creative writing components: 1) narrative conflict, 2) characterization and 3) speech balloons. In direct comparison to the students' initial writing productions, their final ones exhibited a more visually attractive (BAKER, 2011; YILDIRIM, 2013) and complex pieces of writing (WRIGHT, 2001; LIU, 2004; YILDIRIM, 2013).

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