



The Writing Skills of Basic School Children

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ABSTRACT: This study is a comparative analysis of writing skills from three different school levels: students in the middle of their primary school education (3rd graders, age 8-9), students finishing their primary school education (6th graders, age 11-12), students finishing their secondary school education (9th graders, age 14-16). We look for disparities in the development of children's written language at three specific moments of their training: at the end of the second, third and fourth school period, according to the Reform to Integrate Basic Education (Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica – RIEB). With this purpose, we evaluated 307 students' texts using the Review Guide included in *La cocina de la escritura* [1]. This guide recommends assessing ten aspects in written productions: focus, information, structure, paragraphs, sentences, words, punctuation, level of formality, rhetorical devices and presentation. These elements helped us to evaluate works made by children from Mexican schools, in order to visualize the improvement of their writing skills as they pass through their basic education studies.

KEYWORDS: Literacy, Skills, Writing, Basic education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literacy has become one of the fundamental concerns for basic education. Since the creation of the Public Education Department (Secretaría Educación Pública, SEP), in 1921, there have been systematized numerous efforts and programs to teach children, young and adults how to read and write. So, despite the fact that each educational reform presents a different approach, literacy learning has always been a priority. Thus, many projects have been carried out to promote reading, several publishing houses have been sponsoring the distribution of free books to public schools, as well as different methods for teaching how to read and write have been developed.

Currently, the Mexican educational system is in transitional period. According to the educational authorities' calendar, starting the 2021-

2022 school year, the New Mexican School Reform is going to be implemented. This project overrides the Educational Mexican Reform of 2012, which introduced constitutional and legislative changes upon the admission, promotion and evaluation of public schools' teachers, that are currently been revised and reformulated. The curricular changes of this last Reform were just about to be executed when they were canceled as the current Government took the office in December 2018. In the 2018-2019 school year, the kindergarten education, the first and second grades of primary education and the first grade of secondary education have updated their curricula and official textbooks; however, with the termination of the last Educational Reform, all other grades still follow the curricula and textbooks of the Reform to Integrate Basic Education (Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica – RIEB).

For this work we consider the RIEB's approach, since most of Basic Education school grades use its curricula and textbooks. According to this educational Reform, the curriculum map for Basic Education is divided in four periods: the first, at the end of the 3rd grade of preschool; the second, at the end of the 3rd grade of primary school; the third, at the end of the 6th grade of primary school; and the fourth, at the end of the 3rd year of the secondary school. Our study focuses on the writing of students who are about to conclude the second, third and fourth period of Basic Education; we exclude the first period because students who have completed it are not supposed to handle formal text writing structures.

This study tries to establish continuities and differences in the management of their communication skills to observe the student's progress. Our paper is a follow-up of previous studies, where we have evaluated the students' skills for writing in different school grades and educational levels. We have based our assessment on Cassany's [1] Review Guide, in order to analyze narrative productions of students from different school grades to establish their writing development over the course of nine years of formal education.



II. THEORETICAL- METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The current educational approach seeks to develop skills for life through the mobilization of different kind of learnings, i.e., students must be able to use and adapt their knowledge and attitudes to different situations [2]. Basic school's curricula establish a communicative linguistic orientation that propounds the teaching of reading and writing by practicing. From this perspective, the development of linguistic abilities allows pupils to produce oral and written messages in diverse contexts, so they can achieve effective communication [3, p. 312].

Agreement 717 explains the importance of improving students' literacy when establishing educational priorities and when indicating the expected normality for elementary schools. According to this document, the first educational priority is improving pupils' linguistics and mathematics skills, since reading, writing and arithmetic are considered essential tools to acquire future knowledge. Moreover, one of the eight features for the expected normality in elementary schools establishes that all students must consolidate their reading, writing and mathematics skills, in accordance with their educational level and their learning pace [4]. This educational perspective considers writing, along with reading and mathematical thinking, as a device to assure children's key life learnings.

Developing literacy in students is a crucial concern, because this are necessary learnings for social and academic life. For this reason, we have decided to make a comparative study to observe the advance of students from different levels regarding language skills. This research does not evaluate the teaching of reading and writing, but students' written productions in order to assess their communicative abilities' development.

Cassany [1, p. 13] asserts that *writing* is not to do a neat script but being able to express yourself consistently and correctly, so that other people would understand you. This statement concurs with the current curricular approach, which establishes that students must use their mother tongue to communicate, by speaking or writing, clearly and fluently [2, p. 39]. The importance given to literacy for children's instruction does not constitute an exclusive perspective of Mexican's public education, even UNESCO's Agenda E 2030 proposes, as one of the seventeen sustainable development goals, that schools must prioritize skills in reading, writing and arithmetic [5].

RIEB's guidelines indicate that all actions done in the classrooms must have a purpose for strengthening student's learning. This requires a whole process of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Subsequently, basic education institutions participate in several internal and external evaluations throughout the school year to assess the performance of students and the results of educational programs. In 2007, after the Excale test exposed poor results in linguistic skills, the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación, INEE) conducted various investigations to determine the level of basic education students in terms of their literacy abilities.

Rojas-Drummond *et al.* [6] observed that 43% of third graders, 63% of sixth graders and 56% of ninth graders present low development of language skills, below the expected minimum. Due to the significant increase in the percentage of students with writing difficulties between third and sixth grade, we assess their skills by evaluating a literary story created by them. Afterwards, we work with three third grade groups of secondary school, to assess students' abilities using creative stories as well. Thus, we elaborate a comparative study of written skills of children who have completed three school periods, corresponding to primary and secondary school.

We have focused our research on writing, because children present difficulties preparing essays or even short narrations. Guzmán Tinajero & Rojas-Drummond [7] assert that there are two interrelated actions in the creation of a text: conceiving an idea and setting up a way to express it. This dichotomy founds a constant tension between substance (topic) and form (rhetoric). In order to avoid confusion for participating students, we decided to ask children to produce original (in terms of their topic) and familiar (in terms of their form) texts. Thus, narrative works of creative nature were evaluated to establish the student's progress as they advance in their studies.

We work with three groups from an elementary school; and for the secondary school, we choose a nearby institution in order to establish comparisons of students who attend the same school (in the primary school's case) or the same educational community (in the secondary school's case). We select public schools from a middle-class neighborhood in Guadalajara, Mexico, that have all the services and present a very low level of marginalization.

Material for this research was compiled in June 2018, during three classes with the chosen



groups. The first two sessions were aimed at getting to know the students, create a favorable environment for participating and establish some parameters. The last session was to produce a brief story; it is important to note that no writing strategies were provided, since we did not intend to make an educational intervention proposal but a diagnosis of the educational situation.

There were 307 participants for this study: three groups of third graders, giving a total of 94 students between 8 and 9 years old; three groups of sixth graders, with a total of 90 students between 11 and 12 years old; and three groups of ninth graders (3rd grade of secondary school), representing a total of 123 teenagers between 14 and 16 years old. This research selected groups of three different educational levels to find information about children's advances at three stages of their academic and linguistic development.

III. DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Cassany [1] recognizes that there are no recipes neither for writing a text nor for assessing its precision. However, it proposes a Review Guide that suggests evaluating ten aspects, which we take as a reference in this work. Next, we present the achieved results by comparing the writing skills of third and sixth graders from a public primary school and ninth graders from a secondary school (third year of this school level). We display some examples to illustrate each element. These examples are in Spanish language, since we worked with Mexican children; also, we present a translation

with similar mistakes, so non-Spanish speaking readers can appreciate the phenomena that we are pointing out.

1. Writing approach

Evaluating the writing approach consist of checking if texts correspond to the situation for which they were written. This component assesses if a text fulfills its communicative purpose; if it presents a thesis or a specific motivation, as well as if this topic is developed and if conclusions are displayed. Due to the nature of the participants' texts, this aspect was considered from a formal perspective, that is, we evaluate if the writing is coherent and according to the writing structure of a story. Since they were asked to elaborate a creative writing, we did not have elements to observe the thesis and the argumentation that supports a logical conclusion.

Tucson [8] has observed that some student use pragmatically inaccurate phrases that reveal interference from oral language. This situation can be observed in the students' work through the use of syntactic and phonetic constructions that correspond to oral speech. This influence of oral language in the students' writings is clear due to the presence of three phenomena: 1) changes when writing words imitating their pronunciation; 2) narrative constructions that are similar to oral storytelling; 3) mixture of voices, either between several characters or between the narrator and some character. Table 1 show how this transposition of codes is frequently featured.

| Phenomenon | Explanation | 9th graders | 6th graders | 3rd graders |
|--|---|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Changes when writing words | Words are written according to their pronunciation, causing omission of letters and non-existent contractions. Example: "asta qui", "seveía" ("untilhere", "Isaw") | 20% | 48% | 94% |
| Constructions that imitate oral storytelling | Several signs (like interjections) are included in the story to give a certain "intonation" to the phrase. Example: "eeeeeeeh se ba" ("eeeeeeeh it goes) | Not observed | Not observed | 15% |
| Mixture of voices | As oral speech does not use transition elements to change from one speaker to another, students also mix different character in writing without using any punctuation marks or any other elements to indicate the change of voices. Example: "yega muy feliz cantando una canción La, La, La, La, La, La, La, La". (he arrives very happily singing a song La, La, La, La, La, La, La, La). | 12% | 20% | 33% |

Table 1. Orality traits in written texts



2. Ideas and information

Texts must show that a process of selection and discrimination of data has been conducted [1]. Information should be displayed and ordered according to its communicative purpose. Two elements allowed us to observe this aspect:

a) The writing processes. Creating a story requires a methodical process that is achieved as students develop their linguistic skills. Primary school children have not yet systematized their process, for this reason they improvised their texts when writing, despite previous exercises for building characters and for drafting a story. The notes from past classes were taken into account very little by sixth graders and even less by the third graders. On the other hand, students from secondary school keep a more organized process, although 26% of students still made significant changes at the time of their final tasks.

b) The organization of information. Secondary school students did not show any trouble to present a story with a logical sequence. Third graders and sixth graders follow a certain order and sequence in their stories but there were some inconsistencies. 15% of sixth graders' narratives have a forced ending; nevertheless, there is a certain cohesion between characters and actions. This does not happen with all third graders' writing, since more than a quarter of the texts has strong coherence errors, especially due to changes in space, time, characters and even narrator. Thus, we have premises that are not developed and outcomes that do not correspond to the initial overture. A student even included sentences that were not related at all to the story that he created. "*Migel seasusto corrió muco callo en una cascada y murió no me corte con un cuchillo*" (Miguel *wasscared* he ran *alot fel* into a waterfall and died I didn't cut myself with a knife).

3. Structure

Structure aims to arrange and distribute data and events in the text according to a specific style, because each genre has its own proper structure: tales, essays, theater, novels. Mendoza [9, p. 59] explains that a fictional narrative's internal structure includes six components: introduction, initial situation and direction, tangle (conflict), first actions, consequent actions, and outcome. This study took as a reference these elements to elaborate a simple format with only four basic aspects: title, beginning, development and closing. Although the title is not properly a component of the story, it was considered since it is a necessary feature of any tale. The beginning includes the story's introduction, as well as the initial situation and direction. The

development encompasses the approach to the conflict, and the first and subsequent actions. Finally, the closing presents the outcome. This format was provided to the students not only so that they could know what elements were being considered, but also to encourage at least one-page writings.

Before implementing the exercises with the students, the impact of having format was considered. It was decided to make a design as simple as possible to avoid influencing the texts; thus, we gave the students a sheet with a table with three sections and a space for the title. When revising the products, we could verify that the format had little impact on the organization, as some students had difficulty locating which ideas corresponded to each section. 18% of secondary school students mix the information of different sections; the percentage of 6th graders who also had problems trying to structure their stories rose to 33%. In the mentioned cases, the beginning was extended to the actions, or the development handled situations related to the outcome. For third graders, this task was even more complex, as 78% of them show a clear confusion to discriminate the topic of one section from the other.

This mixture of information in different sections can be explained by two circumstances: little systematization of the writing process and poor organization in their work. In the first two sessions, students identified the components of a story, so that there would be no difficulties using the established format. Although this exercise could not guarantee that all students were familiar with narrative's structure, the noticeable discrepancy between student's texts and what was requested was not only due to the lack of knowledge of the elements that should be included in each section. In most cases, especially in elementary school children's writings, it can be observed that participants wrote down what could fit in one space and, when it was filled, they moved to the other. This situation caused disorganization, because what was narrated did not correspond to the section where it had been located.

Some elementary school students' products omitted components from the fictional narrative's internal structure mentioned by Mendoza [9]. For example, two third graders' story present a conflict that is resolved without specifying the actions that led to that particular outcome. But, despite students' problems in structuring their texts, all works –third graders', sixth graders and secondary school students– contained the basic three parts to be evaluated (beginning, development and closing). On the contrary, 23% of sixth graders and 7% of third



graders forgot the title, despite having a space for this element in the format. Only secondary school students did not forget to put the title.

Many writings from all grades' students used fixed phrases for beginning and ending their stories: 65% of secondary school students, 75% of sixth graders and 72% of third graders. Although all participants placed these phrases correctly –based on what they had read or heard before–, sometimes these elements did not address the coherence or complexity of the texts. This was the case of 5% of secondary schoolers, 9% of sixth graders and 12% of third graders. For example, a third grader's tale began with the phrase "*habia una ves Rafael, que queria ir a la escuela.*" (*onse upon a time Rafael, who wanted to go to school.*); another third grader's narration, after saying that the protagonist had crashed his car, added: "*y bivieron felices para siempre y fin*" (and they lived *hapily* ever after and the end).

Third graders tasks also presented three phenomena related to the story's structure and order. 18% of the students had problems to display or follow a sequence of ideas. For example, a story stated that "*el fantasma en (entró) al hotel y entro a una casa*" (the ghost *wen* (went) into the hotel and into a house"); then, what happened in the hotel is mentioned, but the house no longer appears. In addition, 10% of the kids made unnecessary repetitions of ideas that did not add anything to their stories or their narrative style. On the other hand, 12% of them resorted to well-known tales, either to adopt the same characters, or to tell some variant of that story. Thus, despite the exercises and instructions to develop their own narrations, there were children who preferred to use elements that were familiar to them.

4. Paragraphs

The organization of a text must consider the separation of ideas into different paragraphs. When evaluating a paragraph, Cassany [1] proposes, above all, to examine if it has a thematic unit; in other words, if each paragraph has a main idea that is developed through the lines that make it up. Also, the number of lines and the sentences included should be checked to ensure some balance.

Most basic school students present problems to divide their writings in paragraphs. They usually write texts of only one paragraph. This constitutes a main issue to address. At first, we thought that the format we gave them would help them organize their stories. Nevertheless, this was not the case, because many students wrote what they could fit in each frame, regardless of whether the

narration corresponded to the beginning, the climax or the end. Thus, despite the fact that the text was divided, it was not organized into paragraphs, because these parts did not have a thematic unit; some texts even ended a section with an unfinished sentence, which was continued in the next.

The length of the paragraphs did not keep a constant proportion in some works. The number of lines and phrases is very different in 18% of the secondary school students' stories, in 12% of the sixth graders' narratives and in 15% of the third graders' tales. However, we do not consider this situation as a major conflict, since the division of the text was more a necessity of the format than a writing habit. In most of these cases, the last frame was too long or too short, depending on whether they were going to finish the story or still had a lot to add.

5. Phrases

The Review Guide [1] advises to pay attention to the length of phrases to avoid writing very short or very long sentences, despite admitting that sentences of different lengths can give more dynamism to the text. Cassany [1] also suggests that texts in Spanish should obviate negations, subordinations and passive voice as much as possible. Our universe of research reveals that students use similar patterns for oral and written expression, due to their elementary level of conceptualization about writing. This influence of spoken constructions while writing is a major problem for all participants, especially third graders. The lack of formal linguistic elements hinders the reading of their works, even when their texts are short and contained only simple sentences that follow the basic syntax of Spanish (subject - verb - complements). Besides, as it has already been mentioned, it is common for children to use set phrases or expressions to start or end their story, regardless of their coherence with the rest of the anecdote.

Cassany [1] specifies that stylistic tics and excessive use of enumerations or bullets should be avoided. This last aspect could not be evaluated in this study, due to the nature of the written productions. The narrative character of the stories did not lead to listings. Regarding the first aspect, the management of conjunction and nouns in the stories revealed some particular issues, like the most frequent oversight in the students' writings is the constant repetitions of words in phrases. An example of this is the exclusive use of the conjunction *and* to establish links between two sentences. This circumstance was observed in a



quarter of the stories of the secondary school students, in a third of the sixth graders and in 85% of the third graders. In addition, we must also emphasize that we could not find any synonyms in the revised texts, but participants used the same words over and over, especially the same nouns.

6. Words

To evaluate this aspect, we focus on two characteristics: spelling and word choice. When assessing the first element, we observed that conventional use of spelling rules is an important

problem for primary and secondary school students, since all texts contained at least three or more misspelling. This phenomenon is not only due to a lack of knowledge of the norm, since sometimes participants spelled a word correctly in one sentence and then misspelled it in the next. Some students even misspelled the same word by making different mistakes in one paragraph. These non-systematic single-word spellings demonstrated that children and adolescents pay little attention to writing. Table 2 presents the most common spelling errors.

| Phenomenon | Explanation | 9th graders | 6th graders | 3rd graders |
|-----------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Missing letters | -Deletion of letters, especially final consonants, the <i>u</i> use to soften the sound of the <i>g</i> (for <i>gue</i> and <i>gui</i>) and the <i>h</i> (mute in Spanish). | 39% | 37% | 86% |
| Letter switching | -Indistinct use of letters with identical phonemes in Spanish (<i>b-v</i> , <i>s-z-c</i> , <i>g-j</i> , <i>y-i</i> , <i>y-ll</i>) or with a similar graphical symbol (<i>r-rr</i> , <i>d-b</i>). | 58% | 69% | 89% |
| Sound changes | -Consonantization of diphthongs, such as “ <i>gueso</i> ” / <i>gweso</i> / instead of “ <i>hueso</i> ” / <i>weso</i> / (bone). -Exchange of letters with similar sounds ñ / <i>n</i> / - <i>ll</i> / <i>y</i> /, <i>m-n</i> . | 8% | 15% | 24% |
| Omission of accent marks | In Spanish, we use accent marks in certain words according to specific spelling rules. However, all revised texts contained words that did not have required accent marks. A large number of students used them correctly for interrogatives words and for the imperfect suffix <i>-ía</i> . On the other hand, most participants forgot to put them on conjugated verbs in past tense of third person singular. | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Omission of umlauts | Although not all students included words that required the use of umlauts, it was observed that they were omitted where necessary. | No texts that required umlauts | 50% (of texts that required umlauts) | 100% (of texts that required umlauts) |
| No capitalization | Most students omit at least one capital letter. Though they properly capitalize when writing proper names, especially of people and places. To a lesser extent, they also put capital letters at the beginning of paragraphs and after a period. | 65% | 66% | 92% |
| Dividing words by syllables | In Spanish, when a word does not fit in the line, it is split by a hyphen, but respecting the integrity of the syllable. However, students generally wrote as far as they could in one line and then they move on to the next without attending to the syllabic division. | 92% | 90% | 100% |
| Separation of words | Students incorrectly separate letters and turn one word into two; or, conversely, put two or three words together. | 22% | 31% | 73% |

Table 2. Common spelling errors



Besides spelling, we found four writing habits, which have some influence on the proper use of certain words:

-Unconventional abbreviations. Social networks – such as chats, WhatsApp, Facebook– have had an impact on everyday writing. Children and teenagers have acquired certain communication habits from texting that they repeat in other contexts. 12% of secondary school students, 15% of sixth graders and 7% of third graders showed some influence of social media’s written communication. An example of this phenomenon is the unconventional abbreviation, such as an initial instead of a person’s full name or the letter *k* to replace the word *que* (*what* or *that*).

-Emoticons. Another element that students have taken from texting and chatting is the use of drawings or emoticons to complement their texts. That was the case of 15% of secondary school students, 18% of sixth graders and 6% of third graders.

-Lack of knowledge of language’s particularities. This was a common situation, especially for elementary school children who have not yet learned all the grammar rules. Because of this, some students conjugated irregular verbs incorrectly or used words with wrong meanings.

-Influence of oral language. Some students imitated colloquial speech when spelling a word. For this reason, there was a constant switching of the vowels *e-i*, like *pasiar* - *pasear* (*ride*), *copear* - *copiar* (*copy*), *mensajió* – *mensajeó* (*texted*). Orality’s impact in writing could also be observed in the incorrect contraction of words, especially monosyllables, such as *derrepente* – *de repente* (*suddenly*) or *ala* – *a la* (*to the*). In contrast, to a much lesser extent, few texts showed the omission of mandatory contractions.

-Little attention. As stated above, some omissions, alterations or errors in common words were due to carelessness and no further revision. In many cases, this was triggered by the interest in finishing ahead of their peers.

7. Punctuation

Proper use of punctuation marks is essential to develop a readable text. However, all students omit necessary marks in their texts. In fact, one-third of secondary school students, half of sixth graders and two-thirds of third graders did not include any punctuation and their narratives simply flowed as the participants conceived them and wrote them. For this reason, the absence of punctuation marks is linked to other observed phenomena such as the lack of separation of sentences and paragraphs. In addition, this omission also results in

the mixing of narration and dialogue without transition markers. For example, a student wrote “se le *acerco* a el muchacho y le *pregunto* su nombre *i* era Ismael mucho gusto soy *ana*” (she *approached* the boy and *askd* his name *an* it was Ismael nice to meet you I’m *ana*).

Despite the notorious lack of punctuation, the marks included in the narratives were correctly placed. Errors in its use were found in only four writings of the sixth graders and five of the secondary school students. This circumstance may be due more to the imitation of other writings than to the appropriation of grammatical rules, since the systematic use of the standard in any text could not be verified.

The following phenomena were observed in the works that included punctuation marks:

-Comma and period were the most used marks by the participants. Students, especially secondary school students, used periods with some frequency, usually to end paragraphs. Commas were mostly placed in enumerations.

-No student, at any level, used the semicolon.

-Besides commas and periods, secondary school students and sixth graders also included other punctuation marks, such as hyphens or question and exclamation marks. Although in Spanish there are marks to open and close a question (and an exclamation), 14% of secondary school students and 33% of sixth graders only used the closing marks, which represents an influence of English language and media. Only five third graders’ texts included hyphens.

-Quotation marks and parentheses were used very little by sixth graders; nevertheless, a quarter of secondary school students used them.

8. Level of formality

Formality refers to a correlation between the text and the communicative situation. This alludes to a coherence between the message, the communicative intention and the way in which the communication is received. For this aspect, it is necessary to assess whether the vocabulary and syntactic constructions are appropriate or whether stilted expressions, very complex sentences or incorrect expressions were used. We must consider context, interlocutors and type of message to verify the adequacy of the discourse.

Revised texts revealed that basic education students use everyday words and simple structures in their writings. While university students tend to include high vocabulary and long, complex sentences in their papers [10], primary and secondary school students prefer the use of concrete



nouns and colloquial language. Some stories even featured discourses with a strong degree of familiarity. 16% of secondary school students, 12% of sixth graders and 15% of third graders used slang words, such as *compas* (*compadres* meaning friends), *buena onda* (cool) or *face* (facebook). These percentages would rise to 54% for ninth graders, 47% for sixth graders and 72% for third graders, if we take into account works that include written words that mimics oral language or that contain grammatical errors.

Although the requested text did not require a high level of formality, the inclusion of forms taken from oral language, as well as the usage of colloquial lexicon, are signs of the lack of a systematic habit of writing in different contexts and circumstances. Our study reveals that participants did not make distinctions between oral and written language's codes, nor did they create different linguistic practices according to the discourse and the communicative situation.

9. Rhetorical devices

Cassany [1] proposes to be careful when using rhetorical devices. This author especially suggests watching that their quantity, position and balance are consistent with the communicative intention, so that rhetorical devices can constitute a complement to the narrative and help the writer to build an own personal style. Otherwise, a device abuse can affect the text's theme and focus, until it becomes an unreadable product.

Before working with the groups, the possibility of using other literary genres was evaluated. We chose the narrative because we considered that children, from a very early age, have been told fairy tales and have seen stories recreated on television or staged. Also, pupils have more experience reading and writing prose than verse or theatrical performances. So, we decided to ask basic education students to create a fictional story with human characters without further instructions on a narrative methodology.

Because fairy tales are well-known to children, we were able to observe the use of set phrases to begin and end their stories, as we had already mentioned. The most common constructions to open a narrative were "había una vez" and "érase una vez" (once upon a time) or just "era" (there was...). To finalize their texts children used "vivieron felices" (they lived happily), "vivieron felices para siempre" (they lived happily ever after) and "fin" (the end). It was noticeable that, despite the creative and literary nature of the requested

stories, the students did not appeal to any other systematic use of rhetorical devices.

Happy endings were another frequent element in most writings. This can be explained by the influence of stories that children are used to reading, hearing or watching. Regardless of the theme or sequence of actions, pupil's stories usually had a happy ending for the protagonists. These simple closures were used by 81% of the secondary school students, 82% of the sixth graders, and 75% of the third graders. The other students preferred open or tragic endings for their main characters.

10. Presentation

The last aspect that Cassany's [1] Review Guide evaluates is the text's final presentation, which includes the assessment of margins, the organization of tables and diagrams, the inclusion of graphics and the search for different typographic styles to expose ideas more clearly. Although it is a merely formal element, it makes the text easier to understand and exposes the student's disposition towards the exercise of writing.

The revised texts were done on a fixed format and in the classroom with a limited time; for these reasons, many elements of this factor cannot be evaluated. However, we could observe that 58% of the secondary school students, 62% of the sixth graders, and 38% of the third graders turned in their works with erasures, overwritten words and concealer stains. Even though the students did not have time to make a preliminary draft, participants had already done some exercises to develop some characters and ideas for the narrative. Nonetheless, most of the students did not use their previous notes to write their stories.

Since several participants started their writings from scratch, some of them requested more than one blank format. It was evident that sixth and ninth graders turned in their works with more erasures than younger children. This was due to the fact that older students often correct some fragment of their texts after writing it; while, on the other hand, third graders usually write their ideas and did not modify anything afterwards. Although a stained sheet impaired the presentation, there are some other habits that enhance it: different typographic styles, such as capitalization for titles; various ink colors; the design of margins; as well as the representation of some characters through drawings: Sixth and ninth graders used these strategies to improve their story presentations at significantly high rates: 45% and 54% respectively. Third graders rarely included these elements; we could only find them in 8% of their works.



IV. CONCLUSIONS

Results revealed that all participants (third, sixth and ninth graders) present similar difficulties despite the years of study that separate them. Single paragraph texts and the omission of required punctuation marks are common errors that seems to have a very little improvement despite the school level of the participants. This continuity reveals a limited development of pupils' writing skills. Organization of ideas, conventional spelling and influence of oral language are elements that show some progress with the more advanced students; however, they remain significant obstacles to the readability of the text.

During this investigation, we realized that creative writing is not a frequent exercise in the school routine. Despite the fact that pupils do several tasks in their classes, most of the time they follow defined parameters, or they just make copies of other texts, so there are not many academic spaces that helps them to enhance their abilities to construct a narrative. Another situation that also hinders the development of their writing skills is that school activities often do not include tasks to revise and reconstruct their texts. As a consequence of the class routines and the quantity of curricular topics to work on school time, students usually have to finish their tasks in only one hour. Additionally, children receive little feedback on their written works, and corrections are usually limited to spelling or presentation. This emphasis on the presentation explains the difference between the results of the third and the ninth graders, regarding this last aspect of Cassany's Review Guide [1]. However, it raises questions about why there are no significant advances in spelling, despite the fact that this element is also highly valued in teachers' revisions.

In contrast to what happened in most of the Review Guide's aspects, the more advanced students did show a better development of their writing skills in the information section. The consistency of the plot and the internal organization of the stories are significantly better structured in the ninth graders' works. Third graders have troubles expressing their thoughts coherently and have more difficulty relating the actions in their stories to the premises; for this reason, they leave a lot of loose ideas. This phenomenon is also explained by the age of the children, since the most evident progress occurs between the third and sixth grades; from the sixth to the ninth grade, progress is not as noticeable.

With the implementation of the New Mexican School's Reform and the return to face-to-face classes after the covid pandemic, it is time to reflect on the best course of action to improve the writing skills of the elementary school students. The communicative approach of the basic education curriculum makes it necessary to review how pupils apply the linguistic knowledge acquired, in order to develop learning strategies according to their needs.

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