

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

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Abstract

Although as teachers we would prefer that our students read a literary text and “get it” on their own, allowing them to engage in spirited discussions about the characters, the plot or the author’s message, we too often find that we are reduced to lecturing about the work because students are not able to comprehend it. We can, however, lead our students to gain their own insights through instruction in good reading strategies coupled with a careful choice of texts. We need not use long texts, for there exists a wealth of micro-stories, the shortest of short stories, which offer a rich basis for teaching reading skills. A tiny fable by Augusto Monterroso provides a model for teachers to design lessons that help guide students to that moment of comprehension that can instill in the novice reader a real appreciation of literature.

Introduction

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

Have you ever listened to a joke that you didn’t “get?” If so, then you know that even after someone explains the punch line to you, and even though you now “get” it, the joke has lost much of its irony and entertainment value because someone had to go into a lengthy clarification, leaving it flat and humorless. Kimberly A. Nance (1994, p. 23) used this analogy in referring to our students’ experiences with second language reading, as they go through much the same kind of disappointment when they read a work of literature in Spanish for which they are not quite linguistically or

culturally prepared. She notes that although we may set out to include students in a discussion of the significance of a literary work, we often find that students are incapable of participating. Nance aptly describes what many of us have experienced: students listen passively as teachers explain plots and analyze works, taking notes only to repeat these notes on a later exam.

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

Authentic versus Simplified Texts: A Solution

Current standards for foreign language learning impose more cognitive demands upon readers than has traditionally been the case (Arens and Swaffar, 2000), requiring that we cultivate in readers the ability to analyze literary texts with greater sophistication than in the past. However, some researchers believe that literary texts should not be used to teach reading skills, given their intended audience of sophisticated adult native speakers who have spent a lifetime acquiring cultural and linguistic experience. They believe instead that undergraduate foreign language students do not have the level of competence necessary to enjoy literature (Lee, 1986; Friedman, 1992). At the same time, they complain that the kinds of texts used in most beginning and intermediate classes do not prepare students for reading literature (Lee, 1986). Kern (2000) argues that introducing literary texts from the beginning of language instruction “can help to break down lines of division and assure intellectual stimulation” (p. 8). He maintains

that the idea of teaching language should include “the stories that are told in that language (which serve as exemplars of social interaction within the particular culture)” (p. 6). There are arguments for extended reading (Maxim, 2002, p. 21),¹ as well as the assertion that short texts lack the cognitive or cultural complexity that the national standards require our students to master (Arens and Swaffar, 2000). Nonetheless, when we examine extremely short works, we see that they can be very comprehensive and often contain as much substance for literary analysis as longer texts, making them ideal for our purposes. Moreover, Friedman (1992) champions the use of short, “rich” texts to exemplify “a variety of forms, movements, schemes, figures, and conventions” (p. 19). For example, the shortest story known to the Spanish-speaking world, a one-liner by Augusto Monterroso of Guatemala,² can serve to teach students about allegory. Indeed, according to one critic, this tiny story, “*El dinosaurio*,” contains all of the elements of the short story in its seven words (Brasca, 2000). Another writer calls Monterroso’s stories “finely honed, highly ironic, sophisticated pieces which are both very good literature and excellent pedagogical devices” (Steele, 2001). In addition, inspired by Monterroso’s works, the popular Spanish news magazine *El País Semanal* published a series of *minicuentos* by contemporary authors each week during the summer of 2000, naming Monterroso the creator of the most beautiful stories ever written, having “minted” the “genre of brevity” (“*Microrrelatos*,” 2000, p. 98).

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

Authentic texts are written by native speakers for an audience of native speakers, and may encompass advertisements, movie listings, road signs, restaurant

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

Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991) assert that what makes literary texts difficult for students is the unfamiliar cultural content and context, compared to the relatively familiar cultural content found in “trivial” works such as “Harlequin romances and thrillers” (p. 214) or other popular culture texts, as well as in expository texts such as business letters and newspaper articles. The content of such texts is predictable, allowing the reader to absorb familiar concepts easily. In addition to the obstacles presented by the cultural content in literary texts, Swaffar and Byrnes (1991) remind us that “literary texts frequently challenge readers with discomfiting perspectives and linguistic techniques that deviate from standard usage” (p. 213). Narrative point of view and metaphoric language can present tremendous hurdles to students beginning to read literature; the ability to infer meaning is required of readers of literature to a greater extent than for most

other kinds of texts. Aebersold and Field (1997) add that the difficulties encountered in reading literary texts, including “difficult language, complex cultural issues, and the subtle conventions of various genres of fiction [...] may leave students more frustrated than enlightened” (p. 157).

While lamenting that authentic materials can “rob” students of the simpler texts that would allow them to become proficient, (p. 56), Day and Bamford (1998) propose techniques for writing “language learner literature” (p. 63) to address the dilemma of choosing between the difficulty of authentic texts and the bland, unappealing nature of simplified texts. But it is difficult to see how their “language learner literature” would be exempt from much of the same criticism aimed at other “simplified texts,” or how these works would prepare students for “real-world” texts. As Nutall (1996) explains, “However good a simplification is, something is always lost” (p. 178).

Hadley (2001) cites scholars who advocate using authentic texts in the beginning stages of language learning if they are not very long, if prereading activities are used, and the need for activities and tasks for a given text that are consistent with what the student can do, whatever their level. The same text can be used for different levels: a beginning-level student can be asked to identify places, characters, events, dates, etc., while an advanced-level student can be asked to discern motivations, make inferences, etc., in the same text.

We have all experienced our students’ negative reactions when they are asked to tackle long assignments. Shorter literary texts are less threatening, less intimidating to them; they view their tasks as being less tedious and more within their reach if there is less material to “wade through.”

Minicuentos present a natural solution to the dilemma presented by the difficulty of authentic literary texts and the problematic nature of modified texts. Minicuentos are authentic, they are literature, yet they are extremely short, thereby inciting less fear in readers and reducing some of the complexity presented by other genres. Minicuentos present unique opportunities for inference and interpretation, given their extreme brevity. Eppele (2000) points out that one of the characteristics of many minicuentos is the implicit nature of their plots, calling on readers to be able to provide interpretations. Moreover, since minicuentos put into play various mechanisms of semantic comprehension, a system of cultural references permeates the text and readers must recognize the markers, infiltrate them, and dismantle them (Eppele, 2000, p. 3). According to Martínez Morales (2000), the brevity of “El

dinosaurio” accentuates the indetermination and ambiguity of the story narrated and its possible meanings: few texts, he declares, can boast as can “El dinosaurio” of its strange ability to be two places at one time (p. 2). Rojas Hernández (2000) notes that Monterroso’s works can be considered in their entirety as intertexts, since they contain many allusions to other literary works. Given their qualities, then, minicuentos present an optimum and logical medium for beginning to teach students how to read literature.

A Model for Using Minicuentos to Teach Literary Reading Skills

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

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

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

“El dinosaurio”: Prereading/Preparation Stage

Tesser and Long (2000), the researchers whose students read various kinds of texts with little difficulty until they were told it was “literature,” engaged in some practical activities to demonstrate to the students just what kinds of strategies they already use. For example, underscore the idea of the importance of their background knowledge, they asked students just how they knew where to sit in the classroom, why they did not sit in the teacher’s seat, and why they did not run out screaming “fire!”

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when they heard the bell ring. Moreover, when their students admitted to not looking up every word they did not understand in their syllabus, and even skipping words they did not know in personal ads, the researchers emphasized that their background knowledge is what made it possible for them to understand and to make intelligent guesses.

As we teach literature, then, we must be sure to provide activities that allow students to bring to mind what they know of the issues, places, even vocabulary, in the texts we have assigned. Similarly, we must find ways to provide information that they do not have and which is necessary for a full understanding of the text. The teaching module provided here for "El dinosaurio" contains several activities designed to activate background knowledge and to supply details necessary for a better understanding of the story. All of these activities can be done with intermediate students, using vocabulary and structures with which they are familiar. First, to help students begin to think about the possibility of a political allegory, students read or listen to a brief statement about the author's involvement in the dissent against Guatemala's exploitation by the United Fruit Company of the United States. Equally important, listening to information about the title of the collection in which the story appears (*La oveja negra y demás fábulas* [*The black sheep and other fables*]) will set students to thinking about the idea of fables and should lead them to anticipate the allegorical nature of the story.

To emphasize the features and purpose of fables, the model provides an activity in which students in groups dramatize a familiar fable, after which they summarize some aspects of fables. Students then list characteristics of dinosaurs and recall dinosaur movies they have seen to bring to mind the differing emotions one may feel during an imagined encounter with dinosaurs. Students further discuss the kind of dream one might have after seeing a dinosaur movie, and how they might feel after waking up from that dream. One of the defining traits of literature is its appeal to the reader's emotions, and this minicuento can elicit a range of emotions, depending upon the scenario one is imagining as one reads it.

Providing students with vocabulary they will need to read or discuss a work can be vital in making sure their background information is sufficient for comprehension. "El dinosaurio" is so short there is very little vocabulary practice required, but we should also keep in mind that students must understand the concepts of "fable" and "allegory" in order to appreciate the story. It is important to remember, also, that

we do not need to give students long lists of words to practice, since we particularly want them to learn to use context and background knowledge to guess meaning, recognize cognates and grammatical function, and skip some words not crucial to understanding. The model presents a few vocabulary words, definitions in Spanish, and an activity for contextualized practice before other prereading activities. In addition, it is sometimes necessary to provide an activity to help students recall grammatical concepts that may play a part in a text. In "El dinosaurio" there are only two verbs, but recognizing the implications of each verb's tense is key to an understanding of the story. A brief review of preterit and imperfect uses will be advantageous at this point; both tenses are used as well in the vocabulary exercise provided in the model.

Barnett (1989) advocates using prereading activities to develop predicting skills, another of the strategies successful readers employ. Phillips (1984) compares these activities to "readiness" activities in elementary school, and suggests asking students to compare some real-life situations such as receiving a telegram (expect bad news), getting a menu in a restaurant (expect a list of dishes from which to choose), or picking up an Agatha Christie book (expect a mystery story) (p. 289). For "El dinosaurio," students are asked to predict what they think will happen based on the title and the prereading discussions and tasks they have performed involving the concepts of dinosaurs, dreams, and fables. Predicting involves using schemata activated during the prereading phase to articulate possible scenarios to be encountered while reading. Obviously, not all predictions will be accurate, and students will adjust their predictions as they read, as good readers do when reading in their first language.

Pictures can be used to promote skill in predicting. Lee (1986) cautions, however, that the pictures teachers choose for this purpose should provide a context for the beginning of a text and should be easy to understand. Obviously, care must be taken in the use of pictures or drawings, since inappropriate ones can confuse the reader or give an erroneous idea of the content. The illustration of the singing disco dinosaur provided in Transparency 2 for "El dinosaurio" would not lead us into a realistic discussion of the story, but might provide comic relief and light-hearted predictions and interpretations. Perhaps the illustration in Transparency 1 of the two aggressive dinosaurs would be the most likely to stimulate conjectures and ideas that would lead to an allegorical interpretation of the story on a political level, with one dinosaur threatening a weaker one. On the other hand, the chance to teach

students that literature may be interpreted in different ways, and especially that minicuentos lend themselves particularly well to ambiguous readings can be exploited using different illustrations, prompting students to form a range of possible speculations for the story. Upon seeing Transparency 2, for example, a student may formulate a personal rather than political scenario, such as: "This story might be about a disco dinosaur singing, and maybe it doesn't sing very well, just like my mother." In this case, during the reading and postreading stages, students will have interpretations that will differ greatly from the ones prompted by other illustrations.

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

Good readers use skimming techniques (reading quickly, superficially) to get the gist of a reading, to identify topic sentences and main ideas, and to notice structure, characters, and point of view; they also use scanning techniques (running eyes over text to pick out certain items) to get details and specific information (Phillips, 1984; Barnett, 1989). We can promote these skills in many ways. For example, we may ask students to determine the main idea of a text or a section of it, giving them a time limit to prevent them from agonizing over individual words (Phillips, 1984). Scanning for cognates helps students identify actions, descrip-

tions, and ideas, and will assist them in predicting content. We may also give students other details to pick out while scanning, such as names or ages of characters, places, or things that appeared or disappeared. While “El dinosaurio” is extremely short, there are still ways to use it to help students develop these skills. The model instructs teachers to reveal the words of the story at this point: “Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí” [‘When he/she/it/you awoke, the dinosaur was still there’]. After instructing students to read the entire text briefly without stopping to contemplate individual words the teacher should lead students in identifying the general idea (someone woke up; there is a dinosaur). Then students may be asked to identify the verbs in the story (awoke; was), what action(s) they perceive (someone awoke), and to identify the character(s). The question of how many characters there are is an interesting one for this story, since we can not be sure who the subject of the first verb is. It could be the dinosaur, in which case there is only one character, or it could be a second, unidentified, character; it could even be “you,” the reader. The possibilities should be pointed out now, even though at this point in the lesson one would not take the time to shed much light upon the issue.

Reading/Interpretive/Decoding Stage

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

and students are asked to make a conjecture about where that might be. Students are further charged to notice the use of the definite rather than indefinite article to refer to “the dinosaur” and to speculate upon the meaning implied—perhaps this is a dinosaur well known to the being that awoke; surely it is a specific, known dinosaur. Finally, we may ask students to identify emotions the story may trigger in the reader—fear, tedium, frustration, even joy may be cited by students at this point.

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

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

Postreading and Synthesis Phase

“Comprehension questions leading to a blow by blow retelling of a story or article may provide good oral practice, but they do little to verify true comprehension, and they inherently inform learners that foreign language texts are not very meaningful” (Barnett, 1989, p. 135). We have often bemoaned the unsatisfactory results we get when assigning such questions to our students. The traditional comprehension

questions following a reading usually treat all ideas in the text as equal in importance and interest, whereas in real life, readers do not assign equal value to all aspects of a text. Consequently, this kind of exercise stifles interest and does not create a realistic purpose for reading. If we use such comprehension questions, they would better serve our purposes during prereading activities to aid in anticipating content, as we have done with “El dinosaurio.” Fortunately, during the postreading phase we can encourage students to synthesize what they have read in more helpful ways. In the case of “El dinosaurio,” after proposing what the dinosaur may represent (the United Fruit Company? the United States? a dictator? someone’s mother? an employer? a teacher?) and what the entity waking up represents (Guatemala? laborers? citizens? a child? an employee? a student?), students may have small group discussions or write brief essays to explain the different messages presented by the story when seen from the different personal, social or political perspectives. Students might also describe the effect the language play has or explain why they think the author included this story in his collection of “fables.”

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

Let us remember Tesser and Long's (2000) students, who did not automatically apply the reading strategies they had been practicing until they were tricked into reading a short story they thought was an article from a popular magazine; they then read and discussed it with little frustration. This example suggests that although we may think we are training students to use good reading strategies, they do not automatically transfer those skills to the reading of literature. We must use literary texts to teach them the strategies and provide them the practice they need. The teaching module provided here attempts to address these issues and can be used as a model for designing plans for other short stories.³ The stories we choose and the activities we provide our students can leave a lasting imprint upon them and instill in them a real appreciation for literature.

Acknowledgments

The illustration used in Transparency 1 for "El dinosaurio" is used with permission from J. B. Sibbick. The illustration in Transparency 2 is used with permission from Microsoft Clip Gallery 5.0.

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Notes

- 1 Maxim (2002) argues for extensive reading of authentic literature at the beginning level of German, but his use of a popular novel written in English for North American readers and translated into German negates his purpose. Although his study does show that extensive reading can be helpful in developing reading skills in general as well as grammatical and communicative competence (p. 31), Maxim stretches the concept of "authenticity" in his claim that "[d]espite its non-German origin, the novel [used in the study] is still considered authentic because its intended audience was native German speakers" (p. 24). He admits that the novel his students read "contains a culturally familiar context and formulaic, predictable content that is especially accessible to American university students who are familiar with soap operas, romance films, and TV movies-of-the-week" (p. 24). The same study using an authentic German novel would not likely have produced the same results in his beginning classes, so a convincing argument for using long literary texts for the purpose of teaching literary reading skills has not yet been made.
- 2 Stories containing one word, or even none, exist, but Martínez Morales (2000) calls these "festivas charadas lit-

erarias" ["festive literary charades"] because to be considered a story, he says, a certain narrativity is required, or at least one action should be narrated that might suggest the possibility of others; if not, he says he could take the covers off a dictionary, even leave the vocabulary without the definitions and give it the title of Universal Dictionary of Stories and copyright it. He lists the following examples of blank-page or one-word stories: Guillermo Samperio, "El fantasma," Cuaderno imaginario. México: Diana, 1990. p. 82; Sergio Golwartz, "Dios," Infundios ejemplares. México: FCE, 1969. p. 91; Augusto Monterroso, "Partir de cero," La letra e. México: Era, 1991. p. 148.

- 3 To access similar lesson plans in Spanish for this and other minicuentos, visit the following web site: <http://www.longwood.edu/aatsp_va/Microcuentos.html>.

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Appendix: Teaching Module for "El dinosaurio"

"The Dinosaur"
Augusto Monterroso

Level: Intermediate (third semester college or second or third year secondary)

National Standards	Objectives
Communication 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 Cultures 2.2	Upon completing the lesson, students will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> list some of the characteristics of Augusto Monterroso's works
Communication 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 Cultures 2.1 Connections 3.2 Comparisons 4.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> explain orally and in writing how the story "The dinosaur" is an allegory and a fable, proposing a personal, social or political interpretation of the story
Communication 1.3 Cultures 2.1 Connections 3.1 Comparisons 4.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> create a fable that illustrates a current social or political issue of personal interest to the student

Procedures:

I. Prereading:

- A. Information about the author, Augusto Monterroso, and about the story "El dinosaurio" "The Dinosaur" (supplying background knowledge): Explain to the students who Augusto Monterroso is, mentioning his political commitment; for example:

Augusto Monterroso was born in Guatemala but he has lived for many years in Mexico. He says he will not return to Guatemala until there is democracy and peace in his country. He has a keen interest in the political and social problems in his country, among them the dominating and exploitative presence of a U.S. corporation, the United Fruit Company. His microstories are ironic and sophisticated works with a touch of political commentary and humor.

Introduce the story to the students:

The story you are about to read has the distinction of being the shortest story in the world; it only contains seven words (in Spanish-eight in English). It is the first story in a collection Monterroso calls *The Black Sheep and Other Fables*.

(Now the teacher may show Transparency 1 with the illustration of the dinosaurs, but with the text of the story still covered. Keep in mind that according to the illustration that is used, very diverse reactions to the following questions will be produced. Two possibilities are offered here.)

B. Brief orientation activities (activating background knowledge students have):

1. Ask the students if they recognize any of the following stories by Aesop: "The Lion and the Mouse," "The City Mouse and the Country Mouse," "The Tortoise and the Hare," "The Ant and the Grasshopper," "The Crow and the Raven," "The Fox and the Crow," "The Fox and the Grapes," or "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing." Ask them what these kinds of stories are called [fables]. Write a list of animals on the board, have students pronounce them, and if necessary make use of pantomimes to identify the animals.
2. Divide the class into small groups (around six) and help the groups choose one of the fables with which they are familiar; each group will prepare a brief dramatization of its fable, with each character/animal represented by two or three of the students in the group. For example, three students of one group will prepare the dialog of the country mouse while the other three students in the group plan the dialog of the city mouse. They should use vocabulary and structures they already know, making use of circumlocution and gestures when necessary. Students should not write out a complete dialog, but rather prepare possible remarks for their character, in list form, without necessarily tying it at this

point to what the other character(s) in their group might be preparing. During this preparatory phase, circulate among the groups to help them, especially to remember that at the end of their dramatization there should be a lesson or moral. After some five minutes of preparation, the groups should choose actors from among their members to perform the fable for the class. Each skit should take two or three minutes.

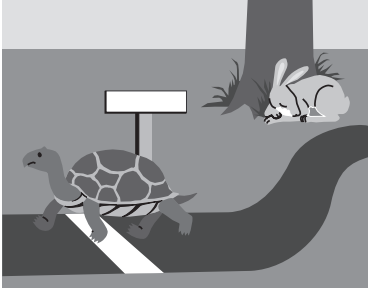
- To help students further articulate the characteristics of fables, direct a brief discussion in which the students answer the following:
 - Who are many of the characters in a fable?
 - How do fables end, in general?
 - Explain why fables are allegories: Are they really stories about animals? Or do they have another, more universal, significance?

C. Vocabulary review and practice (supplying background knowledge; practicing contextual guessing of unknown vocabulary; using new vocabulary in context):

- Show students the following words on a transparency or on the board. Pronounce them for students to repeat, and explain their meaning in Spanish, making use of gestures when necessary.
 - allegory (composition that relates one thing but represents or means a different thing; representation of abstract ideas by means of concrete figures)
 - fable (literary composition, often in verse, that provides a moral lesson at the end)
 - moral (lesson at the end of a fable)
 - to awaken (to stop sleeping; to interrupt sleep)
 - still (word that indicates that something is continuing now from a previous time)
 - dream (events imagined during the time one is sleeping)

2. Vocabulary in context: Project the following activity on a transparency. Ask students to use words from the list to complete the passage correctly.

allegory	fable	moral	to
awaken	still	dream	



A(n) ____ (1) ____ like “The Tortoise and the Hare” is also a(n) ____ (2) ____ because although it tells what the animals do, it really represents something else: that determination is more important than speed. In other words, the ____ (3) ____ of this story teaches us that if we work consistently, we can win the race. The Hare went to sleep during the race and had a ____ (4) ____ in which she got to the finish line first, but she was ____ (5) ____ sleeping when the Tortoise was approaching the finish; the Hare ____ (6) ____ at last, to see the Tortoise win the race.

3. In pairs, the students will discuss the concept of dinosaurs, answering the following questions; the purpose of this activity is to have students enumerate the characteristics of dinosaurs to begin to understand and articulate the emotions and feelings related to possible contact with a dinosaur.

- What is a dinosaur? Describe the principal characteristics of a dinosaur. [large, cruel, ferocious, predatory, they eat other animals or vegetation, ...]
- How would you feel if you met up with a dinosaur? [afraid ...]
- Name a movie that has dinosaurs in it; it can be a children’s movie, horror movie, documentary, comedy. (“The Land Before Time,” “Jurassic Park”)
- What are some of the emotions you felt during that movie?

Each pair will choose a different type of movie to then talk about with the group.

4. In pairs or groups, students will discuss the concept of dreams:

- What happens when you sleep? Do you dream?
- What do you dream about?
- Describe a possible dream you might have after seeing a movie about dinosaurs.

- How would you feel after waking up from that dream?

D. Grammar review (activating background knowledge): This is a good time to review the preterit and the imperfect tenses and their uses with the class. The verb “to awaken” could be used among those reviewed, and the word “still” among the concepts associated with the imperfect.

E. Prediction (using background knowledge to predict): Have students think about the ideas discussed so far:

Think about:

- the title of the story
- the information you have about the author and his interests
- what you know about fables
- what you know about dinosaurs
- what you know about dreams

What do you think will happen in the story?

F. Identification of the general idea (skimming) and looking for certain details (scanning): Now uncover the rest of the transparency to reveal the story.

1. Ask students to look at the text of the story and to identify the general idea (someone woke up; there is a dinosaur).

2. Ask them:

- What verbs appear in the story? (awoke; was)
- What action occurs? (someone woke up; a dinosaur was there)
- How many characters are there in the story? (one or two)
- Describe them.

II. Reading:

A. Reading of the story: Ask students to read the story again.

B. Analysis; drawing inferences: Ask students to notice the ambiguities in the language the author has created:

- Who (or what) wakes up? Discuss the possibilities.
- When does this being wake up? Discuss the possibilities.
- When did the dinosaur get there? (The verb “estaba” is in the imperfect tense.)
- Where is the dinosaur? “There” [‘allí’] and not “there” [‘allá’]? Where might “allí” be?
- It is “the dinosaur” and not “a dinosaur.” What might this mean?

- What mental or emotional state does the story trigger in the reader?
 - How has your prediction of what would happen changed now that you have read the story carefully?
- C. Visualization of ideas: Ask students to draw an illustration of the moment described in the story, or alternatively, of the events that precede or happen after the narrative time of the story.
- D. Different readings: Different illustrations may be used to show the different scenarios that can be imagined reading this story. For example, with Transparency 2 of the singing dinosaur, the following scenario can be narrated, using the questions from part B above again:

One night, dinosaur Mariano Dinomontes went to a disco, because he wanted to dance and listen to music. But when he arrived, King Dinosaur was singing, and he sang very badly, screeching horribly. Mariano got really bored and he went to sleep for a while. When he awoke, . . .

Ask students if this image produces a different emotional effect on the reader.

III. Postreading:

- A. Interpretation: Explain to students that this story is an allegory and permits a variety of interpretations, as we have seen with the help of different illustrations and activities. The following questions can be used to stimulate a class or group discussion or for individual essays:
- What might the dinosaur represent if one reads the story on a personal level (a parent, a boss, a teacher, a friend...?)
 - And on a social or political level? (Think about the author and his country.) (United Fruit Company, the United States, a dictator...?)
 - In each case, what might the entity that wakes up represent? (Guatemala, laborers, citizens, a child, an employee, a student...?)
 - What is the message of the story in each case, in your opinion?
 - What effect does the play on words so evident in the text have on your reading of the story? (ambiguity; the interpretation is left to the reader)
 - Why do you think the author included this story in his collection of "fables"?
- B. Creative writing: Individually or in pairs, students will write a one-line (or one paragraph) ending to the

story; they may choose a political, social or personal perspective.

- C. Letters to the editor: Individually or in pairs, students will write letters to the editor of a newspaper expressing their opinions in support or against the message of the story and proposing solutions to the "dinosaur" issue. The letters should be one page in length.
- D. The Trial of the Dinosaur or the Oprah Show: For these dramatizations, divide the class into several groups (as many as needed to assign a character to each group). For the trial, there should be a group to represent the dinosaur, another for "The Entity Who Wakes Up," and two groups of lawyers. There should be between three and five students per group. If the class is large, there can also be a group for the jury, and even one for the judge, but these are not necessary. For the Oprah Show, the same groups will be needed with the exception of the lawyers, judge, and jury, and with the addition of a group for Oprah and one for Augusto Monterroso himself. If necessary, a surprise character such as the Secretary General of the United Nations may be added. A discussion topic will be needed for the show, such as "The Effort to Bring Dinosaurs to Extinction." The teacher should prepare role sheets ahead of time describing the character and the task each group will have. The following is an example of a role sheet for the dinosaur in the Trial of the Dinosaur:

The Trial of the Dinosaur

Role A: The Dinosaur

You are the dinosaur. You don't understand why you have been brought to trial, because you have done nothing more than exercise your rightful power in exploiting the products and laborers in Guatemala, which should be happy to have you giving employment to so many. On top of all that, you have made great profits for your company. Prepare to defend yourself against the accusations of those who have just awakened.

After some ten minutes to prepare their roles in their groups, each group should elect an actor. The actor will perform the group's role in the dramatization, but the group must stay alert to be able to help the actor; the actor will be able to consult his/her group at any time during the role-play.

- E. Synthesis: Creative writing activity: In preparation for this activity, divide

the class into groups to discuss some of the social or political issues that are of interest to them currently. It may be necessary to help some groups identify topics of importance and interest to young people, or to preview the group discussions with a brainstorming session using the blackboard to list people and events related to today's issues. After group discussion of the matters of concern to students, individuals will create a "fable" consisting of between five and ten lines to showcase their concern in an allegorical manner, using animals as characters.

Transparency 1. "El dinosaurio"

The Dinosaur
by
Augusto Monterroso

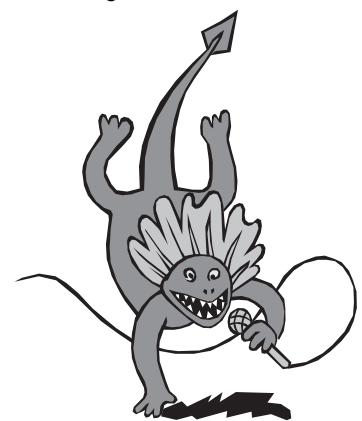


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When it/he/she/you awoke,
the dinosaur was still there.

Transparency 2. "El dinosaurio"

The Dinosaur
by
Augusto Monterroso



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When it/he/she/you awoke,
the dinosaur was still there.