Integrating Community-Based Inquiry and Students´ Sense of Belonging to Develop English Writing Skills

Jeffrey Rodolfo Uñate P[1], Deyssi Acosta Rubiano[2]

[1]Secretaría de Educación Fusagasugá, Cundinamarca, Colombia Dirección: Calle 5 # 23-70 Barrio Mandalay, Fusagasugá. Teléfono (57-1) 8748097 dasselgard@gmail.com

[2]Facultad de ciencias de la Educación, Universidad del Tolima, Ibagué Altos de Santa Helena, sede Central. dacosta@ut.edu.co

Abstract: This study reports an action research on the effects of using community-based inquiry as a strategy to develop writing skills with 35 ninth-grade public school students. Data were collected through the application of a teacher´s diary, a writing diagnostic test, and four questionnaires, which were analyzed in the light of mixed methods. The findings revealed that the students retrieved existing information dealing to isolated vocabulary to creatively connect them with their writing process, they worked on building positive relationships through the guided and peer writing correction exercises, and by the engaging experience with the community inquiry, the participants of this research study supported their narrative sequencing, and knowledge of grammar. In conclusion, the study showed that the use of Community-Based Inquiry in combination with a sense of belonging, feedback, and correction produced meaningful effects on the development of learners' writing skills.

Keywords: Writing, Cohesion, Community-Based Inquiry, Sense of Belonging, Feedback.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, teachers and students experience challenges in writing as a productive skill. Writing is a crucial skill since, in modern times, a person who can write and communicate in English has a great advantage in the corporate world and personal success [1]. Moreover, writing as a school practice has been taken under the lens of conventional pedagogical practices as being limited to grammar and structural rules in which a final product is gauged with the purpose to assign a final score. So, writing for most of students is taken as an obtrude and non-motivated practice with the purpose to write about what it is demanded. In this sense, this research article, considering the community as a powerful source of education, focuses on determining the effects of using Community-Based Inquiry and the students´ sense of belonging in the development of writing skills. The community around the school is a valuable source of knowledge that teachers and students need to explore and work with to signify school practices [2]. The core question of the research study was: What were the effects of using Community Based Inquiry and the students´ sense of belonging to develop ninth graders´ English writing skills?

To begin with, a writing diagnostic test was administered to determine key writing strengths and weaknesses. The results evidenced that participants had considerable gaps, needs, and deficits in their English writing skills. In this situation, it was considered that the use of the community context could offer diverse social concerns that the students could explore, inquire and value their local knowledge to develop their writing skills. As Glavanis points out "higher education must connect subject matter with the places where students live and the issues that affect us all" [3]. Therefore, in a 13-week intervention, students engaged in activities like identifying community assets and problems, conducting interviews, and sharing their findings. The process helped students improve their writing skills and appreciate their role in the community.

2. METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This study follows the principles of action research which aimed to simultaneously investigate and improve the ninth grader´s writing practices through the use of community-based pedagogies, combined with the use of a mixed approach. Action Research is defined as "an iterative process in which researchers and practitioners act together in the context of an identified problem to discover and effect positive change within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" [4]. Subsequently, "Action Research is most simply a "practitioner-based" form of research. In other

words, it is done by teachers in their own classrooms with the goal of improving pedagogy and student learning". [5].

On the other hand, and in order to protect the dignity, rights and welfare of the participants, a code of ethics was followed. It involves a consent form with the approval of participants, parents, and stakeholders involved. Also, the research staff was enough aware of and responsible about the ethical principles such as confidentiality, protection, risk minimization and policies demands when working with children.

2.1. Setting and Participants

This study involved 35 ninth-grade students aged 13-17 at a public urban school in Fusagasugá Colombia. The students belong to a low social stratum. The 40% of the participants were girls, and the 60% of the students were boys. The municipality is located in the southwest of department of Cundinamarca. It is surrounded by a diversity of flora and for so, it is named "the Garden city of America".

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through the use of a survey and three questionnaires for students, students´ artefacts, teacher´s journals, rubrics and photos. All the information collected nurtured the process and helped to understand the students´ writing problem and looked for its corresponding solution.

2.2. Pedagogical implementation

This study was performed throughout 13 weeks, with a total amount of 39 hours working with the participants. The model of Action Research cycle used in the study was the one proposed by Kemmis and McTaggard [6]. The steps were incorporated during the realization of the pedagogical intervention and its different moments as shown in figure 1.
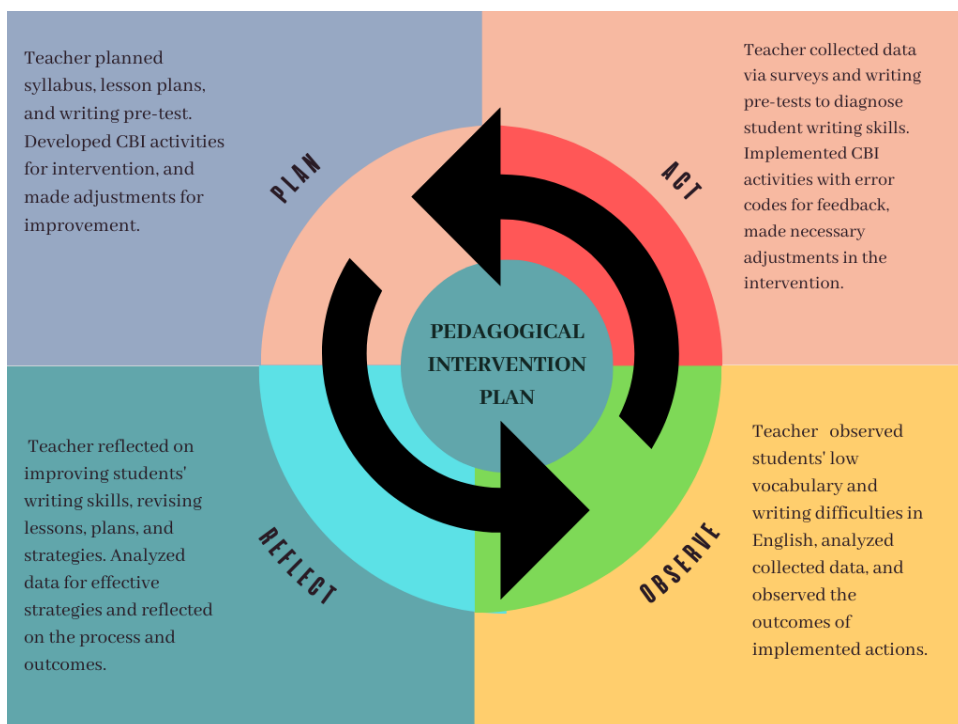

Figure 1. Pedagogical Intervention plan (Adapted from ref. [6]).

It was observed that students had a limited vocabulary range and low writing proficiency. A pre-writing test and a survey were conducted before introducing the community-based inquiry methodology. Groups were formed to perform inquiry tasks on community issues. The next step was to explain to the students the correction symbols that would be used to give them feedback. As Harmer points out, "the first thing we need to do, when training students to edit their own work, is to enable them to notice mistakes" [7]. One later week, the students mapped their community. They took photos of places that they considered interesting to explore. With those photos, groups identified and categorized assets. In the next encounter, students wrote reports on community problems, explored city assets, observed and selected particular assets to inquire about, and filled out a second survey. Also, as part of the pedagogical intervention, students interviewed residents about city assets, and then, shared their findings through billboards and Edmodo platform. Feedback was given throughout the writing process, and surveys three and four were conducted to collect data. The final encounter included a diagnostic paragraph to evaluate writing skills and progress.

2.3. Data analysis

The research followed a sequential mixed design. First, the data from a survey for participants (see appendix A) as a quantitative tool was took and analyzed. Then, the four participants´ questionnaires, photographs, and a teacher´s diary, as qualitative data was collected and analyzed by means of Grounded theory using the software Atlas-Ti version 7. As Corbin and Strauss explain, "grounded theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions" [8]. Furthermore, a systematic observation method was used to rate elements of writing performance such as vocabulary level, frequency of mistakes, and occurrence rate. The data collected through the survey was organized in two parts: personal information such as age, genre, level and habits of writing in English. The second part includes questions using a likert scale in which the participants had to select the answer that best represented them. With likert scales the participants ranked quality from high to low or best to worst, always to never. The analysis was focused interval data, which were represented by tendencies, rates, and percentages about their writing skill, and vocabulary they know before the pedagogical implementation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Improvement of Writing Skill through Vocabulary learning

Vocabulary is a vital component in learning a foreign language. As Thornbury explains, "you will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words" [9]. As a result of the actions of this research, the participants included more and new vocabulary throughout the development of their inquiry projects.

For analysis purposes, word types used in their compositions were assessed. "Word types refer to different word forms observed in a corpus; token refers to the total number of words in a corpus" [10]. Also, as a part of the analysis, and to verify students' progress in vocabulary, the number of total words (tokens) was counted using an online program. The program generated a report of tokens and types found in each corpus, which was then imported to an Excel program for the analysis and generate figures 2 and 3. This helped to determine the evolution of new vocabulary learning.
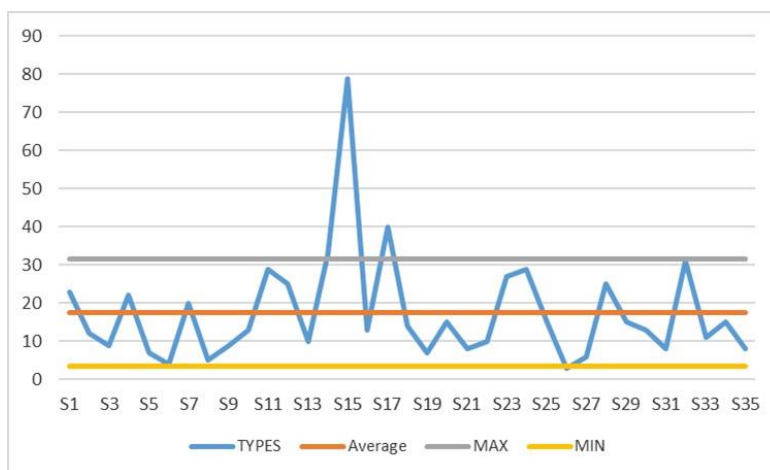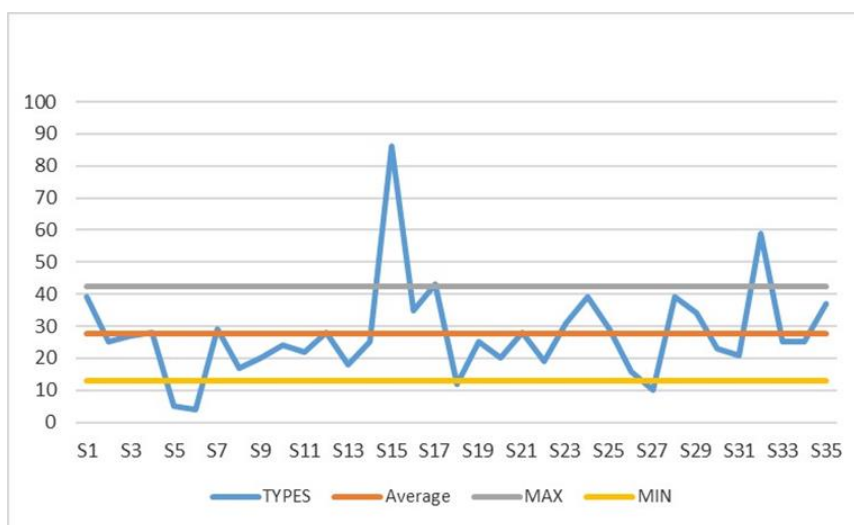
Figure 2. Total types in composition 1

Figure 3. Total types in composition 2

Figure 2 indicates an average of 17.51 types in the writing diagnostic pre-test, while Figure 3 displays an average of 27.63 types in the final writing test. The data indicates an improvement in the lexical knowledge of students from low to medium levels, including students with very low levels. The minimum observation value in the pre-writing test was 3.54 types, while in the last writing test, the smallest observation value was 12.97 types. In addition, it was calculated the standard deviation which supports the reliability of the average. Therefore, the standard deviation indicates the number of types both above and below the average that the students wrote in their compositions. The results for composition 1 showed a dispersion measure of 13, 97, while composition 2 had a measure of 14, 65. This indicates that in the pre-writing test, most of the students wrote between 3, 54 and 31, 49 types. However, in composition 2, the range improved with students writing between 12, 97, and 42, 28 types. Consequently, these results demonstrate that students learned new words.

On the other hand, the qualitative analysis shows that the students perceived improvement in their level of vocabulary, which had a positive effect on their capacity to write, produce and understand texts without depending on translators or English dictionaries. Excerpt 10, 11 and 12 evidenced the improvement. "I´m able to learn new words" (Survey 5. Week 13) excerpt 11 "My vocabulary was tied only to basic level sentences, now I can write things at an intermediate level" (Survey 5. Week 13), and excerpt 12 "To learn and use more words" (Survey 5. Week 13). Besides, figure 4 reveals meaningful progress in the use of new vocabulary that two of the participants in this study made during this pedagogical intervention.
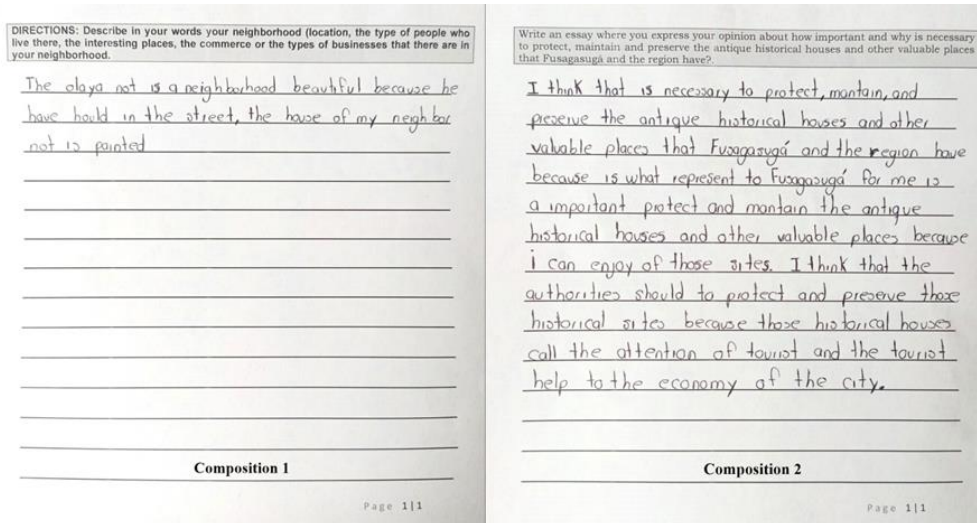
Figure 4. Example 1. Subject A. Written Composition 1 and 2

Students were explained that they could produce better-elaborated writing if they followed a process of planning, drafting, revising, and correcting their texts and use a peer correction. So, the class observations showed that students became aware of those steps. Regarding this point Harmer states "the stages a writer goes through in order to produce something in its final written form" [7], and this allowed them to improve their writing skills. These excerpts illustrate how students perceived their development of the writing process. Excerpt 13 "To write down a draft and to prepare the writing give me a sense of confidence, so I have improved while writing a more complex English text" (Survey 4 Week 12). Also, excerpt 14 "To make a draft and then correct and make a final version" (Survey 3 Week 9). It was possible to observe that students learned to incorporate a writing process before having a final version of their texts.

3.2. Development of Self-Confidence to Write in English

At first, many students hesitated to write because of their low level of vocabulary, and some difficulties of coherence and cohesion. In this respect, Al-Hebaish explains "lack of self-confidence is thought to be the most dangerous barrier for effective communication" [11]. Students were encouraged to take risks and overcome fear to write in English, resulting in raised self-confidence and advances in writing skills, as revealed in their own reflections. Excerpt 15 "This methodology helped me to get over the fear and insecurity to write in English" (Survey 4. Week 12), while excerpt 16 "I knew to organize my ideas, and that was one of those things that I would have never believed to be able to do." (Survey 5. Week 13). In this case, the participant expresses that he/she boosted his/her self-confidence to write some text in English in a clearer and more understandable way. Additionally, the student recognizes that advance as an important achievement, and their willingness to write without hesitation in the last writing test. Organization and coherence are necessary to construct adequate and understandable texts. There is a sentence-structure error when "some aspect of the grammatical structure of a sentence is incorrect" [12]. In addition, the diagnostic test revealed students' difficulties with sentence structure and syntax, leading to unclear writing. However, the intervention enhanced their awareness of these issues, resulting in improved clarity. The excerpts support this positive impact. Excerpt 18. "I have learned new words and try to organize them Subject + Verb + Complement (Survey 3 Week 9). Here, the participant explains that he/she not only learned new vocabulary but also learned how to organize correctly the sentences. Excerpt 19. "We learn how to arrange text in S + V + C. (Survey 3. Week 9). As reflected in these excerpts, many students affirmed that they developed an awareness of sentence structure and the correct order of the sentences. This knowledge allowed them to write clearer and more understandable texts in English.

Students improved their narrative, descriptive, and reporting skills after implementing basic cohesion devices and connectors, according to their own reports. That improvement was naturally modest but also it was meaningful. Besides, in excerpt 20, the participant stated: "Now, I´m able to write longer paragraphs using different connectors".

This means that this student considers a great achievement his/her capacity to write longer paragraphs due to a better use of connectors. Excerpt 21: "I´m able to write coherent phrases since before I did not know how to write them, I can do it" (Survey 1). In this case, the participant got a cohesion improvement. In fact, the student compares their progress respect to the poor writing at the beginning of the intervention. Finally, the student considers that he/she developed a writing skill to connect ideas coherently.

3.3. Development of community inquiry skills

Participants highlighted their engagement in an inquiry process that enabled them to explore their community and identify various issues. They developed skills as community inquirers through interviews, capturing photos, writing reports, and analyzing results. This experience fostered a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and language learning. These are some students' reflections on their inquiry activity. Excerpt 38 "It also made me interested in investigation, inquiry, and exploration of unknown and historical places (Survey 1). Excerpt 39 "I find it very interesting to inquire about my community and my city because I have learned to recognize the great value in our own local cultural" (Survey 1). Here, the participant thinks that the inquiry process was an activity that allowed him/her to recognize their valuable cultural assets as well as the opportunity be in touch with people to get information.

3.4. A Sense of Belonging by the Recognition of their community´s cultural, historical, and tourist assets

The students discovered valuable unknown local assets and recognized their importance making it visible into the school community, as shown in figures 5, and 6.

Figure 5. Presentations of Inquiry Projects to School Community

The participants showcased their well-being, the valuing culture, having a sense of agency through their presentations.
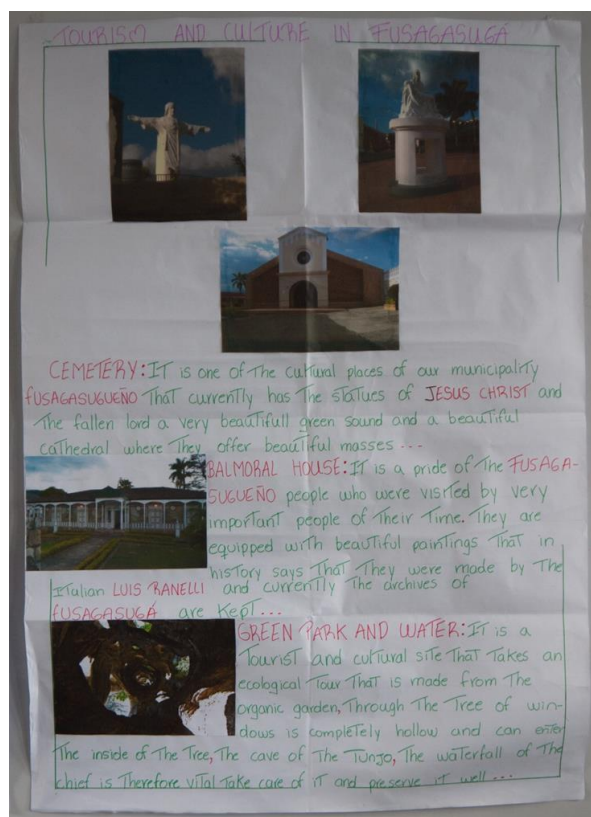
Figure 6. Presentations of Touristic, Cultural and Ecological Places of Fusagasugá

Students´ inquiry projects turned local places into meaningful learning spaces, using Community Based Inquiry to raise awareness of community resources, sharing their findings with other school members. In consequence, the students were able to "see the community as a source of knowledge, a source that can provide interaction, opportunities to reflect, and take purposeful action when necessary" [13]. Also, the students shared their interviews, findings, descriptions, and reflections on their inquiry projects via videos posted on the Edmodo platform done by themselves. When posting their writing products on Edmodo, it allowed each one of the participants and the teacher to see their community inquiry and writings, to correct their mistakes and received suggestions to improve their writing process.

CONCLUSIONS

Community-Based Inquiry positively impacted 9th graders' writing skills in English class, since the community provided resources and funds of knowledge for them to write and being conscious about the process of writing as well as to give value to the resources the community provided. Throughout Action Research the process of observing, acting and evaluating helped the participants to be conscious, change and improve their writing practices. AR allowed them to learn and use the vocabulary collaboratively in real life contexts, and to give value to their own cultural and social funds of knowledge and connectedness to their own cultural and community. In addition, students improved their knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, and narrative sequencing, which led to increased self-confidence in writing English.

The Community-Based Inquiry approach enhanced students' writing skills and inquiry and teamwork abilities. Students gained self-esteem and self-control, overcoming grammar difficulties to communicate effectively. Besides, they enjoyed the novel approach and demonstrated motivation and interest. The pedagogical implications were positive, with students developing a sense of belonging and exhibiting discipline, leading to significant progress in their writing skills and the discovery of valuable assets. The Community-Based Inquiry approach can provide a valuable opportunity to create a reflective space in classrooms and encourage students to explore community problems that interest them. This method allows students to incorporate their cultural background and assets,

thereby promoting their learning. Proper implementation, supervision, and guidance from teachers can also enhance students' communicative skills. By participating in a project that explored the history, culture, and economy of their city, students discovered and described many forgotten or ignored places, which helped to awaken their sense of belonging and appreciation for their community's resources. The students also interviewed locals about topics such as tourism and appreciation of local attractions.

REFERENCES

[1] J. Peter and G. Singaravelu, Problems in Writing in English among High School Learners. Aegaeum Journal, 8(9), 1502-1515. 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Govindarajan-Singaravelu/publication/351048985_Problems_in_Writing_in_English_among_High_School_Learners/links/60811e828ea909241e16e201/Problems-in-Writing-in-English-among-High-School-Learners.pdf

[2] J. Sharkey and A. Clavijo-Olarte, Promoting the value of local knowledge in ESL EFL teacher education through community-based field assignments. Projetos e praticas na formação de professores de língua inglesa, 39-58. 2012, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Betania-Medrado/publication/338698256_PROJETOS_E_PRATICAS_NA_FORMACAO_DE_PROFESSORES_DE_LINGUA_INGLESA/links/5e25bdf492851c89c9b48e58/PROJETOS-E-PRATICAS-NA-FORMACAO-DE-PROFESSORES-DE-LINGUA-INGLESA.pdf#page=43

[3] P. Glavanis, The Pedagogy of Community-Based Learning: Do students learn? New Chalk Talk, 8(2). 2008, https://documents.aucegypt.edu/docs/llt_clt_ChalkTalk/Volume%208%20Issue%202.pdf

[4] L. Lingard and A. Mathieu, Levinson, W. Qualitative research: Grounded theory, mixed methods, and action research. BMJ Clinical Research ed, 459-461. 2008, doi:10.1136/bmj.39602.690162.47

[5] PD. Kalmbach and K. Carr, Becoming a Teacher through Action Research. Process, Context, and Self-Study (Second Edition ed.). New York -London: Routledge. 2010.

[6] S. Kemmis and R. McTaggart, the action research planner (3rd ed., substantially revised), Geelong: Deakin University Press. 1988.

[7] J. Harmer, How to Teach Writing. England: Harlow: Longman. 2004.

[8] J. Corbin and A. Strauss, Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria. Qualitative Sociology, 13(1), 3-21. 1990.

[9] S. Thornbury, How to Teach Vocabulary. England: Pearson Education Limited. 2002.

[10] M. Brysbaert, M. Stevens, P. Mandera, and E. Keuleers, How Many Words Do We Know? Practical Estimates of Vocabulary Size Dependent on Word Definition, the Degree of Language Input and the Participant´s Age. Frontiers in Psycology, 7, 1-11. 2016, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01116

[11] S. Al-Hebaish, The Correlation between General Self-Confidence and Academic Achievement in the Oral Presentation Course. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2(1), 60-65. 2012, doi:10.4304/tpls.2.1.60-65

[12] J. Lane and E. Lange, Writing Clearly: An Editing Guide. The United States of America: Heinle & Heinle Publisher. 1993.

[13] S. P. Lastra, N. C. Durán, and D. Acosta, Community based pedagogy as an eye–opening for pre-service teachers' initial connections with the school curriculum. Colomb. Appl. Linguistic, 20(2), 209-229. 2018, doi:10.14483/22487085.13047