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Literacy Teaching & Learning in a Nicaraguan Primary School

KRISTIN ARNOLD

Introduction

Nicaragua, the second poorest country in Latin America, has a population of approximately 5.8 million people that includes nearly 1.7 million school-age children and youth. According to UNESCO, Nicaragua has the highest dropout rate in Latin America with 52% of children leaving school without completing their primary education. As a result, 22% of Nicaragua's population is illiterate. To gain a better understanding of the primary educational system in Nicaragua, I traveled to the fifth-largest city in Nicaragua with two other researchers and two mentors to observe primary school education in the country, concentrating on the nature of literacy instruction in a Nicaraguan primary school. This qualitative and naturalistic study examined the teaching and learning of literacy in a public Nicaraguan primary school setting. Multiple data collection methods were employed, including three weeks of participant observations, field notes, semi-structured teacher interviews, and the collection of school and teacher artifacts. These research methods were used to examine the scope and sequence of literacy instruction in Nicaragua, the nature of liter-

acy instruction and learning in a Nicaraguan primary school, and the strategies and methods teachers in Nicaragua used for literacy instruction.

Methodology

Research Setting and Participants

This qualitative, naturalistic study was conducted in a public Nicaraguan primary school in the fifth-largest city in Nicaragua. At this school, there were fourteen classrooms ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade with thirty to forty students per teacher (Figure 1). The fourteen classrooms, the school's office, library, and small computer lab comprised the perimeter of the school and surrounded a cement courtyard which was located in the center of the school. The classrooms had tiled floors and were minimally decorated (Figure 2). The school had two sessions per day, the first session beginning at seven o'clock in the morning and ending at noon, and the second session beginning at twelve thirty and ending at five thirty at night. Fewer students attended the afternoon session than the morning session. Both sessions had different teachers and a different vice principal, but the principal remained for the entirety of the day. Most of the teachers at this school received training at a Normal School for at least two years but had not received a university degree.

Data Collection

For three weeks, I observed Monday through Friday in classrooms ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade. While observing each day, I collected data for this study, including classroom observations, field notes, semi-structured teacher and administrator interviews, and a collection of artifacts. The semi-structured interviews, conducted in Spanish, were completed mid-way



Fig. 1. The Nicaraguan primary school at which we observed.



Fig. 2. A typical classroom.

through the observations. Sample translated interview questions include the following:

- How did you prepare to become a teacher?
- Do you believe that you have sufficient resources to teach literacy effectively? Why or why not?
- (For 1st grade only) Do you like using the *componedor* (a classroom tool used for the instruction of phonics)? Do you believe that it is an effective teaching tool?
- What teaching methods and strategies do you use for teaching language and literature?
- What comprehensive strategies do you use for teaching language and literature?

Additional interviews followed-up on or resolved any unanswered questions. These research methods were used to examine the nature of literacy instruction and learning in a Nicaraguan primary school, what strategies and methods teachers in Nicaragua used for literacy instruction, and the scope and sequence of literacy instruction in Nicaragua.

As a participant observer during these three weeks, I observed the teachers and students as they engaged with each other in the classroom. While observing the teachers and students, I took detailed field notes about the lessons, information written on the whiteboard, student and teacher movements, the overall environment of the classroom, and the aesthetics of the classroom. After each of my observations, I reread my notes, added any additional information, revised my notes for accuracy, and began evaluating them. Each evening, my fellow researchers, mentors, and I would meet to

discuss our observations as a group and begin identifying themes that we were observing. In addition, I analyzed the semi-structured interviews and field notes regarding my questions concerning the facets of literacy instruction in Nicaraguan primary schools. I used content analysis and the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to analyze the data and look for themes or patterns to emerge from the data.

Results & Discussion

Curriculum

After being a participant observer for three weeks in a public, Nicaraguan primary school, I have a better understanding of the nature of literacy instruction and learning in Nicaraguan primary schools, including the scope and sequence of literacy instruction in Nicaragua and the strategies and methods used by teachers in Nicaragua for literacy instruction. In Nicaragua, the schools follow a curriculum and the teachers have a day-to-day plan of teaching literacy, but the curriculum is not readily available. It cannot be viewed by parents, and teachers and administrators only have access to curriculum plans once a month. Each month, the schools hold government-ordered workshops called TEPCEs, *Talleres de Evaluación, Programación, y Capacitación Educativa* (Evaluation, Programming, and Educational Training Workshops). During these workshops, the teachers and administrators reflect upon the successes of the previous month and discuss the scope and sequence of lessons to be followed in the upcoming month.

Although the literacy curriculum could not be accessed, a protocol for literacy teaching for first and second-grade classrooms in Nicaragua could be found. This is called “*El Método FAS*,” which is the Synthetic Analytical Phonic Method for reading and writing

instruction. The Synthetic Analytical Phonic method is a teaching resource that is said to guarantee the acquisition of reading and writing, while promoting a habit of reading for the students, the comprehension of diverse types of text, and oral and written expression, therefore integrating the four principals of communication. Advantages of this program for students in Nicaraguan primary schools include the contribution by students in a more active way in literacy lessons, facilitation of learning by all students, an increased emphasis on the discovery of visual and auditory skills, an increased ability to reproduce sounds, and the use of mental processes of synthesis and analysis by students. This method also includes the simultaneous learning of script and cursive writing, which was observed in the first-grade classroom (Nicaragua Educa, 2014). The Synthetic Analytical Phonic Method requires intensive training for first and second-grade teachers, and based on the interviews, the teachers see it as an effective method for teaching literacy to first and second-grade students.

Along with the Evaluation, Programming, and Educational Training workshops and the Synthetic Analytical Phonic method, schools and teachers are also provided with suggested teaching methods from Nicaragua's Ministry of Education. The literacy methods provided include those surrounding the learning of the alphabet, phonics, syllables, and "normal" words, which are what the Ministry of Education in Nicaragua calls simple words that require little thought to define and can be accompanied by an image. They provide processes for teaching each of these aspects of literacy, and they also list advantages and disadvantages to each method. For example, for teaching the alphabet, suggested methods include teaching the alphabet in order, referring to each

letter as its name and not its sound, then combining letters, and lastly adding accents. These methods emphasize the mechanical aspects of reading before adding expression in the form of accents. The Ministry of Education's website includes suggested methodologies for the teaching of fluency as well. It gives a sequence of steps required in the teaching of fluency, which begins with teaching vowel emphasis while reading aloud and ends with the teaching of adding expression into reading. The methodology for fluency, however, is combined with that of phonics, and fluency instruction alone is not emphasized nearly as much as phonics instruction in the primary grades (*Métodos para el aprendizaje de la lectoescritura*, 2015).

Literacy Instruction

In this particular school, the nature of literacy teaching is very direct. There are scheduled, routine times for literacy instruction and for all other subjects. Weekly schedules of each class are posted in the administration office and in each class (Figure 3). Subjects generally occur at the same time each day. For example, the first-grade classes are taught *Lengua y Literatura* (Language and Literature) immediately when they arrive in the morning. Each class has two forty-five minute sections of language and literature lessons per day, which equals seven and a half hours of instruction per week. This is the same for all levels in this primary school. Having scheduled times for subjects is an effective practice in any school because it helps students to know what is expected of them at what time. Moreover, having scheduled times for subjects grows into a routine for the students. Routines have many benefits for children, including improved cooperation, elimination of unnecessary anxiety, and the development of self-discipline,

HORARIO DE CLASES 1° A

| HORA | LUNES | MARTES | MIÉRCOLES | JUEVES | VIERNES |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7:15 - 8:00 | Lengua y Literatura | Lengua y Literatura | Lengua y Literatura | Lengua y Literatura | Lengua y Literatura |
| 8:00 - 8:45 | Lengua y Literatura | Educación Física | Lengua y Literatura | Lengua y Literatura | Educación Física |
| 8:45 - 9:00 | Ejercitación | Ejercitación | Ejercitación | Ejercitación | Ejercitación |
| 9:00 - 9:30 | Merienda | Merienda | Merienda | Merienda | Merienda |
| 9:30 - 9:45 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9:45 - 10:30 | Actividad Lúdica | Lengua y Literatura | Matemática | Actividad Lúdica | Lengua y Literatura |

Fig. 3. The weekly schedule of a first-grade class.

responsibility, and independence (Shalaway, 1999). In all classrooms of this primary school, literacy lessons were teacher-centered. In a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher talks while all students are expected to listen. The focus of all students remains on the teacher as she stands at the front of the class or circulates throughout the classroom. Lessons are often lecture-based and students work independently at their desks. Students typically only spoke when called upon to answer a question or to read from the text. The only time students work with one another is to share resources such as the *Lengua y Literatura* textbook.

During the literature lessons, the classes read stories from their language and literature books, often multiple times and in several different ways, relying on rote

learning strategies. For instance, a fifth-grade class in this school read a story from their language and literature book, “*Noches de diciembre*” (“December Nights”). First, the students read the story individually. Then, the teacher read the story to the class. After that, the teacher called upon one student to stand and read the story for a third time aloud to the class. The teacher emphasized the importance of reading and rereading by saying, “to read well is to understand the text well, to understand the words well.” The language lessons also included rote memorization in the sense that the students in the intermediate levels would oftentimes have to define key terms from the text (or other literacy vocabulary terms), using a dictionary, and copy the definitions into their notebooks. Their work with and use of the terms tended to end there.

Writing Instruction

Another recurring theme was the inclusion of handwriting instruction in literacy lessons and the exclusion of writing instruction. Writing instruction typically includes the planning and writing of ideas and topics at grade-appropriate levels; however, writing instruction in these Nicaraguan classrooms did not include the creation of writing that conveyed ideas, content, and meaning to the audience but rather focused on the mechanics of handwriting. In the primary levels, students practiced handwriting and were even beginning to write in cursive. First-grade classrooms utilized writing workbooks for the students to practice cursive. Although there was formal handwriting instruction, there was no formal writing instruction. Students were constantly writing in their notebooks. Students copied what the teacher wrote on the board. They copied stories and questions into their notebooks and they performed writing exercises, but they were not formally taught how to write or construct sentences or paragraphs containing their own ideas. An example of this was seen in a fourth-grade classroom. The teacher began teaching a lesson about anecdotes and provided a definition. The class then read an anecdote about a magician and answered questions about the text. After the lesson, the students were assigned homework, which included writing their own anecdote about something that happened to them in the past. The teacher did not discuss the required format for the anecdote, nor did she mention any guidelines of the length and structure of the anecdote. Although the teacher taught the students what an anecdote was and provided the students with an example, she did not teach the students how to write an anecdote on their own.

Phonics Instruction

Although writing instruction was not a high priority, other areas of literacy were heavily emphasized. In the primary grades, phonics instruction was a primary focus. Phonics instruction includes the teaching of the relationship between letters and sounds and how to use them in reading and spelling (Tompkins, 2014). In Nicaragua, reading is taught with a heavy emphasis on phonics and decoding, which is the use of word identification strategies using known knowledge of letters and sounds to pronounce and determine the meaning of known and unknown words (Tompkins, 2014). Phonics lessons are taken very seriously and include a variety of literacy components. The lessons include songs, visuals, and even manipulatives. A manipulative that was seen in first-grade classrooms is called the *componedor*, which is part of the Synthetic Analytical Phonic Method used for first-grade students in the instruction of literacy. The *componedor* is a large manipulative which is used by the entire class as a resource for decoding (Figure 5). All students have their own miniature *componedor* to follow along with, which is made by their parents. In a lesson in the first-grade classroom, the *componedor* was used to observe words with the letters “s” and “c” (which can have the same sound in this dialect of Spanish) to show when and where each letter is used. When asked, the teachers shared that they felt that the *componedor* is an effective tool to aid in literacy instruction; however, one of the first-grade teachers only thought that the large version was effective, saying, “I would like to only use the large *componedor*. The cards for the student *componedor* are easily lost.” The *componedor* was a frequently used tool in the first and second-grade classrooms for phonics instruction.



Fig. 4. The *componedor*: a device used for the teaching of word decoding in the first-grade classroom. The blue strips are slots for placing letter cards for forming words.

Lessons in decoding occurred daily in the first-grade classes. One day in one class, the students were practicing the letter groups “pla,” “ple,” “pli,” “plo,” and “plu.” The teacher began the lesson by first reviewing the sounds without the “l” (pa, pe, pi, po, pu) and the class gave examples of words which contained those sounds, like “papa” and “puma.” They then continued the lesson with letter groupings that included the “l,” and the students used their books to see examples of words with those letter patterns and matched them to pictures of those words that were also on the page of their book (Figure 4). They even formed these words as a class using the *componedor* as a tool. Word decoding is seen as an important facet of literacy teaching and learning for primary level students in Nicaragua.

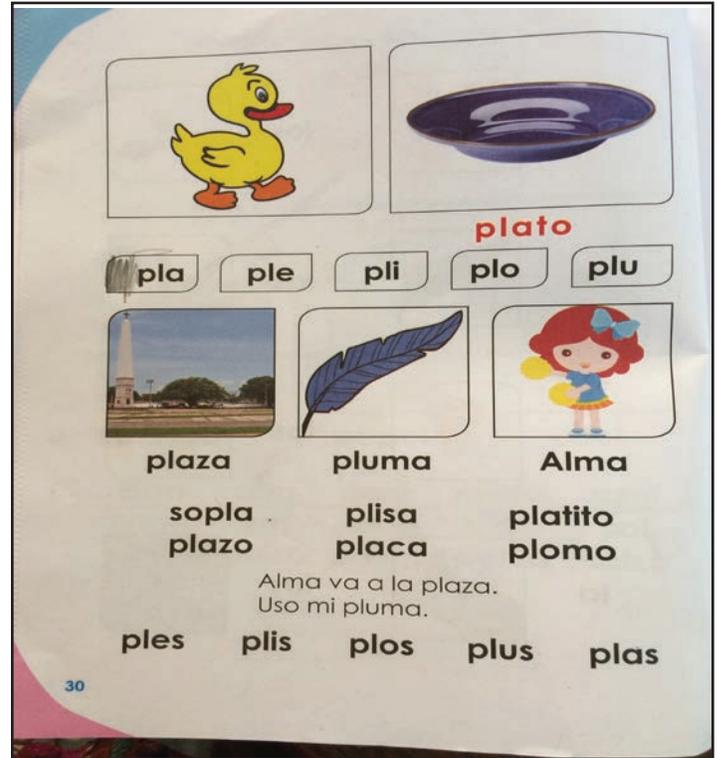


Fig. 5. A page from the *Lengua y Literatura* (Language and Literature) book, used when teaching word decoding.

Comprehension

While the primary grades heavily emphasized phonics, the intermediate grades emphasized a guided and literal style of comprehension. The intermediate levels read several stories in their language and literature books. After the students read a story, they typically had to answer questions about the text. These questions were often literal questions. Literal questions are questions whose answers can be found directly from the text. Inferential questions, or questions that require the student to make conclusions about the text based on the information that is given, were limited. For example, in the third-grade class, the students read a story called “*El arroyo que dormía*” (The Stream that Slept). This story was about a stream that had dried out. The questions

from the book that followed were all literal questions and did not require much critical or inferential thinking. The questions included: “Who are the characters of the story?” “What happened to the river?” and “What advice did the cloud give to the stream?” These questions were answered with information taken directly from the text. Another example of this was seen in the fifth-grade classroom. After reading “December Nights,” the questions that were asked were of the same nature: “What is the description of the main character?” “What is the street like that he walks on?” “What characteristics of the man can you identify?” These questions, similar to the questions given to the third-grade students, were straightforward and yielded quick and simple answers. Although comprehension and reading lessons were often taught via direct instruction, many times they included opportunities for students to make connections to themselves and the world. After reading the story about the dried-up stream in the third-grade classroom, the teacher took the lesson a step further by asking the students if they could compare the dried up river in the story to a place in their city. In fact, the students were eager to answer this question because there was a location within a ten-minute drive of their school where there was a river that had dried up. The teacher also asked the students about the importance of conserving the environment, based on the information given in the story and its importance in real life. The students had several ideas, and the teacher listened to the opinions of about half the class. When connections were made to the world around them, students were eager to participate. Their feelings were toward a subject that affected their own lives, making the subject more tangible which then made the story more important to the students.

In the fifth-grade class, after reading “December Nights,” the teacher asked the students to compare the climate of the place described in the text to the climate in their city. Not only did the teachers include world connections in their lessons, but they also taught by modeling connections to the self. After reading “December Nights,” students were assigned homework, which included writing the prosopography, or the description of characteristics, of his/her mother, father, or other family members. Also, in the fourth-grade class, students were assigned to write an anecdote about something that had happened to them in the past. Homework often involved asking parents for ideas as well. Connections made to the self and to the world help create a better understanding of what is being taught.

Resources

The strategies and methods of literacy teaching in a Nicaraguan primary school were very direct, and the strategies used were often limited by the resources available to the school. The strategies employed in this school were often very straightforward. Literacy lessons at all levels included teachers explicitly telling students to read a story, copy the text, copy the questions, and answer the questions. These were habitual tasks in the classrooms. The tasks asked of the students were not varied, possibly due to the lack of a range of resources for literacy instruction. This school only had access to seven computers, all of which were located in a computer lab that was only used for the upper grades. Computers were not seen in any classroom or even in the administration office. Teachers copied text, images, and other materials by hand onto the whiteboard because they did not have the technology to project images onto the whiteboard. Whiteboards were a frequently used

tool in all classrooms. Language and literature books were used throughout all literacy lessons, but there were not enough for each student to use his/her own. A fifth-grade teacher at the school said, “We do not have sufficient resources for teaching literacy...The new language and literature books have not even arrived yet and it is the middle of the school year.” These books were used for every facet of the literacy lesson, and as important as they were, the newest version was not available to the students. The language and literature books contained stories, questions, and exercises. The only stories read by the classes were from this textbook. No outside reading materials, like trade books such as picture books, chapter books, or articles, were utilized in literacy instruction due to the lack of resources. The only other tool used during literacy lessons was the individual notebooks of the students. Stories, questions, exercises, and homework were all copied into the students’ notebooks.

Although a lack of resources for literacy instruction can be a hindrance, the school made the most of the resources they had and used different strategies instead. Because the teachers were not able to use worksheets as aids in instruction, they often drew visual exercises on the board. When the first-grade class was learning the “pla,” “ple,” “pli,” “plo,” and “plu” sounds, the teacher drew pictures of objects that included those letter combinations and had the students write their own sentences about the pictures. Also, when the first graders were learning the difference between “s” and “c,” the teacher drew pictures of objects containing one of those letters in one column and wrote corresponding words in a column beside the pictures for the students to match together. The downside of this strategy, how-

ever, was that it took more time to draw the exercises on the board than it actually took for the students to complete the exercise.

Another strategy employed by teachers, especially those of the primary levels, was the use of song. The teachers of the primary levels used song as a way to introduce a subject. When the first-grade class was learning about the letter “s,” the teacher began the lesson by singing a song about a *sapo* (toad). Not only do the use of visuals and songs aid in the teaching of literacy, but they also create well-rounded lessons that adhere to the learning styles of a variety of students. Overall, the strategies and methods utilized in literacy instruction were often limited to the resources available to this Nicaraguan primary school.

Conclusion

By traveling to Nicaragua and observing in a public primary school, I have gained a better understanding of the Nicaraguan education system, specifically the nature of literacy instruction and learning. In Nicaragua, the scope and sequence of primary education is not easily accessible and curriculum is typically only discussed by teachers and administrators in monthly workshops. The nature of literacy teaching and learning included very direct teaching strategies, such as rote learning in reading lessons and limited writing instruction with insufficient resources for every student. The strategies and methods of literacy teaching were very direct as well, and the strategies used were often limited by the resources available to the school. Most reading and writing lessons were taught directly from a language and literature book, and all exercises and notes were copied into each student’s notebook. Although there

was a lack of resources available to teachers and students, the schools made the most of what they did have.

By traveling to Nicaragua and investigating the nature of literacy teaching and learning in Nicaraguan primary schools, we can assess the current strengths and areas of growth for these public primary schools. When strengths and areas of growth are identified, best practices in teaching and learning can be further supported. Nicaragua's government can provide support, as can international partnerships. Resources can be donated to these schools, and countries such as the United States can assist in the teaching of best practices of education.

Traveling to another country to explore its educational system does more than just educate a person. It leads to a better understanding of its people and children. It provides for an opportunity for relationships and partnerships to be made in order to support best practices in education. It leads to a new perspective. This experience has led to a greater understanding of literacy teaching and learning in Nicaragua.

Not only were we able to explore the educational system in Nicaragua, but we also learned about the life and culture of the country as we engaged with the children at this primary school. Conversing with teachers and students of a developing country led to a sense of connectedness. As a future educator myself, I want to see my students succeed just as much as the teachers and administrators of the primary schools of Nicaragua. Commonalities such as these create the foundation for future partnerships between educators who want the best for their students. Our cultures, languages, and educational systems may differ, but once a connection is

made, much can be learned from one another.

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About the Author

Kristin Arnold is a graduating senior majoring in Elementary Education with a second major in Spanish. Her research for this project was conducted while abroad in Nicaragua in the summer of 2015 under the mentorship of Dr. Jennifer Manak (Elementary Education) and Dr. Ryan LaBrozzi (Global Languages and Literatures). This trip was made possible with funding from the Undergraduate Research Abroad Grant. This research was presented at the 2015 Summer Research Symposium at Bridgewater State University. As Kristin completes her final semester at BSU, she continues to conduct research combining her two passions: elementary education and Spanish.