

## **Oral storytelling and the contributions of theater in elementary school students**

Luis Yuniel Núñez Alfonso<sup>1\*</sup> <http://orcid.org/000-0003-3591-100X>

Maybécárdenas Crouble<sup>1</sup> <http://orcid.org/000-0003-4222-9703>

Oreivis González Arbona<sup>1</sup> <http://orcid.org/000-0002-8345-2381>

<sup>1</sup> Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas. Cuba.

\* Author for correspondence: [luisyunielnuez@nauta.cu](mailto:luisyunielnuez@nauta.cu)

### **ABSTRACTS**

Stimulating the creative thinking of elementary school students through art linked to oral storytelling is a current priority of the National Education System. The article presented here is the result of a qualitative research process in which methods and techniques with these characteristics were used and where theater appreciation-creation workshops were applied. The objective is to show how these can be used as a function of a creative pedagogical process that favors the development of skills, both communicative and in this artistic manifestation.

**Keywords:** Pedagogical process; Primary school; Theatrical workshops; Qualitative research; Skills development; Oral storytelling.

Recibido: 10/03/2022

Aceptado: 06/07/2022

## **Introduction**

Today's universe, invaded by the market, spectacle and light thinking, has decreed the death of the intellectual, son and forger of modernity. Cuba is not on the margin of these global transformations; and in the midst of numerous difficulties and

contradictions that affect all spheres of social life, it is engaged in an intense process of searching for changes and solutions to problems.

Education in Cuba works for the general education of students in order to stimulate their creative thinking from multiple ways that, materialized, constitute a determining factor in raising their cultural level. An important place in this sense is held by the process of communication and within it, oral storytelling, which is also responsible for the preservation of traditions of the people and the task of educating young people, transmitting from generation to generation all the wealth of knowledge of their ancestors through myths and legends.

Several authors have devoted themselves to communication as a process. Roméu (2007, p. 52), describes it as a multiple and dispersed science of recent incorporation in the scientific field, although it has a long history, dating back to the moment when man felt the need to communicate. Garzón (2011) pays significant attention to communication as a process open to interaction between interlocutors based on a common code, a level of understanding, a frame of reference, specific circumstances and a given context. In this sense and more specifically, when referring to oral storytelling as a communication process, he expresses the following:

Oral storytelling is an act of communication, where the human being, when narrating in a loud voice and with his whole body, with the audience (considered an interlocutor) and not for the audience, initiates a process of interaction in which he emits a message and receives a response, so it not only informs but also communicates, since it influences and is influenced immediately, at the very moment of narrating, so that the oral story grows with everyone and from everyone, among everyone. Garzón (2011, p 265).

Referring to this aspect, and as a policy of the Ministry of Education, in the Primary School Model, Rico (2008), and its Adaptations as part of the Third Improvement of Primary Education (Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, ICCP, 2016), the objectives for fifth grade state: to demonstrate skills in the use of the mother tongue, by listening and expressing oneself orally and in writing in a clear and coherent manner...To read correctly, fluently and expressively and to adequately interpret the ideas contained in the texts.

Fifth grade students are approximately 11 to 12 years old, and this is when adolescence begins, a difficult process for every human being. Intellectual development reaches

higher levels, since it has all the potential for the conscious assimilation of scientific concepts.

At this stage, the process of acceptance and personal models is not produced uncritically, but mediated by evaluation and judgment. The aforementioned allows us to know that the fifth grade student is capable of making judgments and evaluations about people, characters and situations, both at school, in the family and in society in general; it sees the positive and negative in behaviors, and sometimes acts in correspondence with the image it has formed of itself.

The insertion of art at these ages is important for what it contributes from the cognitive, artistic, aesthetic and psychological point of view, and also for what is achieved in the process of formation of moral values. In addition to this, it is undeniable the role played by art instructors in schools, as true promoters of the beautiful and the sublime, in the enrichment of the personality of the students, to the same extent that they interact with them.

The essential tool used are the workshops in their different modalities. The workshop in the elementary school is an element that generates culture and education, indispensable aspects in the teaching-learning process; it promotes motivations, knowledge, feelings, imagination and develops the sensitivity of the students, especially when there is a good organization of spaces with defined characteristics, proper for the programming designed and adequate to the formulated objectives pursued by the educator.

González (2013) proposes workshops to promote knowledge in pre-university students about the history of Cuban theater. Referred to the theater also, Rodríguez (2013), applies a system of playful activities for working with puppet theater with special school children with retarded psychic development, and Artiles (2013), also presents a system of activities that facilitate the promotion of peasant theater from elementary school. Galindo (2017), for his part, promotes the development of theatrical skills from activities dedicated to shadow work, while López (2017), conceives workshops for environmental training in students of technical and vocational education.

Despite the contribution they make in the different areas of knowledge and what they contribute in the order of knowledge and practice, they have not conceived how to take advantage of the potential that appreciation-creation workshops provide or can provide for the development of communication and within it, oral storytelling in fifth grade students in elementary school.

From the experience and the interchange sustained by the authors in the research process, it was possible to determine the existence of certain insufficiencies that cause the demotivation towards theatrical art on the part of the students, among them we can mention the scarce communicative abilities, insufficiencies regarding the clarity and coherence in the ideas in correspondence with the age they have and the use of simple and isolated sentences for which they need stimulation and support from the instructor or teacher. The programs of the subjects do not recognize the work of oral narration through the use of theater as an artistic manifestation and do not always dedicate topics dedicated to local heritage.

All this is related to educational and pedagogical factors since the treatment of the subject is not systematic in the school, from the curriculum itself that provides the teaching as well as the other activities that are carried out outside of it and that are also part of the process of formation and development of schoolchildren. In this sense, the system of activities of the school institution is not enough to take advantage of the different spaces that within its structure are conceived to favor the adequate development of the orality of the students.

The article presented here provides essential aspects regarding the communicational development of fifth grade students and within it, the oral storytelling, and in that order, to show how from the pedagogical sciences and supported by scientific research, it is possible to work according to the problems presented from the use of workshops of appreciation - creation of theater as an artistic manifestation, aspect that constitutes the essential objective of the same.

## **Development**

According to the literature consulted about the theater, it was born in Athens, Greece, between the 5th and 6th centuries B.C. The Athenians celebrated rites in honor of Dionysus, god of wine and vegetation. The Athenians celebrated rites in honor of Dionysus, god of wine and vegetation; in fact, the first theater built was dedicated to this god. These primitive ritual ceremonies eventually evolved into the theater, constituting one of the main cultural achievements of the Greeks. In Cuba, theater did not arrive with the Spanish conquerors, as many people tend to believe. As it happens in

all cultures in their most primitive stages of development, certain theatrical expressions can already be identified among the Cuban aborigines, belonging to the aruaco groups of the Antilles. These groups performed at tribal level the famous and no less mysterious areíto, consisting, as far as we know today, of a combination of music, dance and pantomime. The areíto had a magical-religious objective, and was intended to give men powers over nature and to invoke the protection of the gods. It is possible, although not definitively proven, that it included some form of representation of myths belonging to the cosmovision of this Antillean indigenous group.

One of the important elements within theater is oral storytelling. It is considered as the ancient art of telling, through words, the extensive repertoire of community stories that are remembered by memory or events such as tales, legends, myths and anecdotes with no other tools than the spoken word, that is why it is considered a means of communication. Oral storytellers are often referred to as tale tellers, or storytellers. To narrate, artistically, is to confer spontaneity to a series of events so that our audience receives the story full of life, always as something new, happened before our life with "the force and interest of everything that has been felt or lived."

The article is derived from the results of a Diploma Work of one of the authors as part of the culmination exercise of studies of the Bachelor's Degree in Education, Art Instructor, where the qualitative methodological path was essentially used, and in which participatory action research as a method prevails, from the criteria given by Rodriguez (2004).

For its development, the application of different methods and techniques of pedagogical research was taken into account, which contributed, among other elements, the background and evolution of theater, not only worldwide, but also its incidence in Cuba, the findings in the order of potentialities and needs of theater teaching in elementary school, the current state of oral storytelling as a problem to be solved in this teaching, which facilitated the development and implementation of a system of theater appreciation - creation workshops aimed at enhancing these skills in students.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with certain key informants who, due to their characteristics and performance, are involved in the work with the students. In this process, the use of other methods and techniques that give reliability to the research based on the evidence that remains cannot be ignored, in this case, photos and videos

were used. In the interpretation of the data obtained from the different sources with which we worked, it was necessary to use data triangulation.

The access to the field as a necessary structure in the qualitative research took place in the Fidel Arredondo Elementary School in the municipality of Sagua la Grande in the province of Villa Clara because it is the educational center where one of the researchers works. From the intentional selection of the center, we proceeded to a work of approaching it with the objective of establishing all the necessary organizational coordination in order to establish schedules for the development of the workshops, frequencies of execution, participants and the selection of the study unit.

The selection of the same was intentional and it was made up of 22 fifth grade students, 14 females and 8 males, all of them motivated for the development of the activities and with little knowledge about theater within the world of performing arts, as well as in the narrative field.

According to the Methodological Indications for the operation of provincial centers and Houses of Culture of the National Council of Houses of Culture, (2005). "The classes given by instructors are called workshops, but they are different from those used in classical schools in that they provide an interaction, a different feedback between the student and the teacher, because the student learns by doing".

The information obtained about theater and its characteristics allowed the planning of appreciation-creation workshops, aimed at the development of the oral storytelling of the students. For the implementation of these workshops, we worked in coordination with the school, the local cultural center and the parents of the students, since some of them took place outside the school context.

It is worth highlighting from a theoretical point of view that the workshop is a form of practical and creative organization of the learning process, an interactive space where knowledge is built and capacities and skills are developed in an open climate of trust and freedom that stimulates the individual and collective realization of the participants. It allows participants to contribute ideas, criteria and evaluations and to express their interests and spiritual needs through verbal and non-verbal languages. That is to say that knowledge does not arise only from the information and orientation provided by the facilitator (the instructor or specialist on the subject), but also from the active participation of the group members".

All workshops that are developed must necessarily be based on a program prepared in advance that allows an organization of the knowledge to be transmitted and shared with the participants, although the contents and frequencies must be adapted to the particularities of each workshop.

The topics, objectives, development and consolidation of knowledge are structural elements -essential- of the program that guarantees the organization and quality of the workshop, close to those elements visualized by the schoolchildren from their most familiar and close scenarios.

To develop a workshop requires not only technical and methodological mastery. The art instructor of the theater specialty must possess communicative skills that allow him to make himself easily understood and make possible the participation of all in a climate of trust, favoring the appreciation for the achievement of creation, in addition to making an adequate selection of those elements that produce experiences in the students and correspond to the objectives of the cycle.

The activity of theater workshops, well conceived, motivated and pedagogically supported in the school, constitutes a way to educate spiritually in human and patriotic values to all participants from the perspective of art pedagogy.

The information obtained from the application of the methods and techniques of the research allowed, then, to build and apply theatrical workshops for the development of oral storytelling in fifth grade students of the Fidel Arredondo elementary school. In this sense, it should be pointed out that these workshops were always developed after the end of the day's class session, each workshop lasted forty-five minutes and its extension lasted for a period of two months and with a weekly frequency.

As aspects that characterize the workshop proposal designed, it is possible to point out the presence of workshops with varied themes, especially dedicated to the local heritage, containing suggestive elements for children in fifth grade of elementary school, that lead to the permanent involvement of students in their realization, that have challenging orders which raise the motivation to participate in them, and that above all, are directed to the development of oral storytelling.

For the fulfillment of the objective and the solution of the declared scientific problem, a proposal of workshops was made that includes didactic games, pictures, puppets and cards, which as stated in previous paragraphs are characterized by suggestive themes and motivating activities that call the attention of the student and that can facilitate the

development of oral storytelling, a very affected element in the same, which correspond to the selected unit of study.

### **Workshops 1 and 2: "Approach to oral storytelling and its history".**

The essential idea of these first workshops is given in the achievement of the familiarization of the students towards oral storytelling as the ancient art of telling stories through words, essentially those referring to the community stories where they develop, as well as the history of this skill so important for the theater.

The objective of the same is based on contributing to the knowledge of the main elements that conform the oral storytelling through a video that facilitates the development of appreciative abilities in the workshop participants, to express them in the product of their activity (to narrate stories and tales in a simple way).

As part of the methodological approach, the workshops begin with a traditional game called The Hangman, where the students have to use their cognitive skills to discover different words related to communication as a process, as well as narration and oral storytelling. It is important for the researchers in these first moments to be able to identify what knowledge they have about the subject and at the same time to take into account the criteria of the students about the moments in their lives when they can use it and what importance they give it in the development of their daily teaching and extracurricular activities.

The art instructor will read them a story where the main characteristics that storytellers should have can be appreciated, taking advantage of this precious moment to emphasize the preparation that they should have so that the content reaches them in the most pleasant way possible and to be able to understand the message of what is being transmitted. In this first work, as it is of familiarization towards the thematic object of study or investigation, the art instructor is supported in the work with several cards hidden in diverse places of the classroom in which notes related to the communication and the oral storytelling must appear, all of which will allow to strengthen the acquired knowledge.

In a second moment, the students will be guided to narrate a simple story that they know, they can be from everyday life that they have heard from their relatives or simply taught in class by other teachers. Insist that these be related to local stories, this contributes at the same time to widen the visual field of the intangible heritage unknown or known to them. This contributes to the loss of stage fright, since they are developing

certain communicative skills of their age and grade and in which they still have difficulties.

At the end of these first appraisal-creation workshops, they are instructed to make a group appraisal reflecting the main achievements and the most pressing fears on which they should continue working in future workshops. This is an opportune moment for the researchers to collect and reflect in the field diary the pertinent notes that will serve as a basis for the adoption of subsequent measures.

### **Workshops 3 and 4: "My name is ..."**

The thematic content of this workshop consists of working on the emotions and feelings of the workshop participants through the treatment of stories that they know from the study in different subjects of the curriculum and that are also found in important literary works such as Martí Notebooks I for Elementary Education, and that follow up the development of the skills that they have been learning during the previous workshops.

The essential objective is to favor the development of emotions and feelings through ludic actions that favor the mastery of oral storytelling techniques in the workshop participants so that they can express themselves through the reproduction and narration of tales and stories.

In the methodological procedure, the art instructor will start from the analysis of what was done in the previous workshops and specifically when she/he narrated the stories and where she/he emphasized the qualities and characteristics that storytellers should have. The students must know the importance, in this sense, of a correct use of the voice, reflecting emotions and feelings in every moment that the narration of certain stories requires it. This is extremely important because, depending on the correct use of the voice so will be the traces left on those who listen.

The use of the text Martí Notebooks I, by Cintio Vitier, with stories by José Martí already known in other elementary school contexts, as well as some of the children's repertoire, is a propitious moment. To highlight here the use of the voice as an essential aspect that has been worked on during the execution of the workshops.

As a second moment of the workshops, it is important that the students apply the skills already learned and for this, they should narrate other stories already known and where the use of the voice can be clearly appreciated to demonstrate the feelings and emotions that they bring inside. Other playful actions can also be developed where the students can narrate simple stories by changing the tone of the voice based on the clapping of the art instructor.

At the end of the workshops, it is significant to listen to the criteria and opinions of the students based on questions or ideas that help them to evaluate their behavior in terms of skills and knowledge acquired, as well as the group relationships that are being formed as a direct impact on their behavior. It is a priority for each student to know and understand the degree of progress they are making and what they still need to achieve the objectives proposed in the research.

### **Workshops 5 and 6: "I imagine that..."**

The thematic content of these workshops is focused on the development of the imagination and fantasy of the students during storytelling in a creative way, supported by the suggestions provided by the Manual for the performance, which in turn follows up on the development of skills already acquired by them in previous workshops.

The objective of these workshops is to contribute to the development of the fantasy and creative imagination of the students through playful actions to increase their creative abilities, favoring storytelling by the students.

Within the methodological procedure, it is possible to start dividing the group into two subgroups and from the game *The hanged man*, already worked in the first workshops, to discover the words as fantasy and imagination to approach in a later way the meaning of both on the basis of the knowledge that the students have of them. We will also work on the relationship that they appreciate the meaning of these words with oral storytelling. The art instructor will explain the relationship they have with each other and with the object of study of the research.

After this, some exercises can be developed that are basic for the work of storytelling by students from working on the basis of creative imagination. They will be shown some pictures or photographs for several minutes, after which the students should enrich them by arguing the role of the character shown, where they have to justify the reason for their actions and enrich it with their little stories. Another important exercise for the treatment of creative imagination and fantasy is that one of the students starts a short story that, when reaching a certain point, another student continues it taking into account his personal experiences.

The second part of the workshops continues with the game **At the store of my neighborhood**, which consists of all the workshop participants formed in circles clapping the following phrase: **At the store of my neighborhood I arrived and bought...** The workshop participant who starts the round must make movements and actions that represent the object he/she bought without mentioning it, while the rest of

the participants try to guess it. When repeating the phrase again, the next workshop participant must represent with gestures the object he/she bought, and so on.

In the final part of the workshop it is still very important the individual and collective evaluation by the students of the development of skills achieved in the workshop and where they have had to put into practice those already worked in the previous ones and that the relationship between them facilitates the oral storytelling. Make a selection of those who have stood out the most and who already have more skills to narrate simple stories, both from the children's repertoire, as well as those local stories known to them.

### **Workshops 7 and 8: "My body moves".**

The thematic content of these final workshops is to give continuity to the skills already learned by the students for a good oral storytelling and in this way introduce the body movements needed to express the content of the work in an enjoyable and unique way. In this sense, it is an essential objective to exercise body and facial expression through playful actions in order to develop an excellent oral storytelling in the workshop participants from the product of the activity of the students.

**Methodological procedure:** The workshop will begin with the game The Mirror, in which one workshop participant will sit in front of the other, one will be the person and the other will be the mirror. The one who plays the mirror will repeat all the movements of his/her partner, as if he/she were a mirror. In this way, we begin to exercise the body movements necessary for the development of oral storytelling on the part of the students.

Once this game is over, other necessary ludic activities can be developed, such as working with two students, also facing each other, where one of them, through body movements, will emit a message that the other will try to decipher. Then the roles can be reversed, and so on until the last pair does it.

It is important, during the work with these activities, to take into account the skills already learned in previous workshops, such as fantasy, imagination, feelings and emotions when displaying body movements so that the messages that are to be conveyed when narrating certain stories or tales can be understood.

In a second moment, other exercises can be developed where body movements play an essential role, such as starting a march and at a sound from the instructor, stopping and reflecting a certain sculpture that other students will be able to identify, demonstrating what they have learned up to that moment. The art instructor will insist that the body

movements that are executed must always be in correspondence with the story that is to be told.

At the end of the workshops, an evaluation will be made of the level of satisfaction of the students during the workshop. The students should be able to identify their own abilities to tell stories and where there are still deficiencies that must be overcome in order to face other workshops in the future.

**Analysis of the results obtained with the application of the workshops and the methods and techniques of the research process.**

Once the execution of the workshops of appreciation - theater creation for the development of oral storytelling of the fifth grade students of the Fidel Arredondo elementary school was completed, as well as the application of final instruments, derived from the methods and techniques of the research process to the key informants for the collection of information, the following aspects could be determined:

- ✓ It has been possible to verify the activity of the theater as a means of generating knowledge in the students of the sample.
- ✓ A more comprehensive view of the elements that distinguish the place where their lives are reflected in the narration of stories and legends is encouraged during the development and implementation of the workshops.
- ✓ It is possible to link the subjects that make up the cycle such as Spanish Language and History of Cuba for the development of oral storytelling in students.
- ✓ The patrimonial culture of the place is promoted, demonstrated in the stories and legends that the students were able to narrate.
- ✓ The school-family relationship as a mediating element of development for the preservation of the local environment based on the knowledge of its history has not yet been fully achieved.
- ✓ A qualitative leap can be seen in the maturity achieved by the students in terms of motivation and the ability to express ideas through scenic representations.

Other results were achieved in the appreciation of better results in the morning meetings and other activities both in the school and in the community where the use of oral storytelling techniques is necessary, as well as better results in the theater festival at different levels, observing a better link between the school and the community,

including the family. A greater protagonism of the group, enhancing the ideo-aesthetic self-evaluation of their works, which contributed to the transformation, not only of the students, but also of the school institution and the community involved during the application of the same.

## **Conclusions**

Nowadays, the use of theatrical workshops of appreciation-creation in the teaching-learning process and specifically to enrich oral storytelling in fifth grade elementary school students is a necessity from the theoretical and methodological point of view because of what it represents in the development of communicative skills in these students.

The structure and content of the theatrical workshops aimed at the development of oral storytelling in fifth grade elementary school students corresponds to the objectives of the cycle and to the characteristics of the students to whom it is addressed.

The implementation of the theatrical workshops resulted in greater motivation of the students to narrate, greater knowledge about the existence of stories and legends of the locality, the development of communicative skills in the students, better interdisciplinary relations with the subjects of the grade, achieving also a close communication between the school, the family and the environment where they develop.