

Reflective Inquiry on Visual Storytelling in a PYP Spanish Classroom

Ms. Greeshma Mahesh

Secondary Spanish Teacher, Language Acquisition, Sreenidhi International School

Abstract

Visual storytelling tools, such as picture books and storyboards, are integral to early language acquisition. By integrating images with text, these tools engage multiple cognitive channels, making the learning process memorable and meaningful. A clear gap was observed in a Grade 1–2 Spanish class: learners could memorise isolated words (e.g., colours, animals) for a quiz, but struggled to use them in context or form simple sentences. Two visual-narrative strategies were chosen to address this issue: first, using the picture book *1 Zany Zoo* (in its Spanish version, *1 Zoo Loco*, a lively story by Degman and Jack, 2010) (Appendix 7) to build vocabulary; and second, guiding learners to create their storyboards (Appendix 5) to practice Spanish greetings and simple dialogues. These approaches aimed to situate vocabulary in engaging contexts, prompting authentic use of the language.

Improving this aspect of practice was seen as not only pedagogically sound but also ethically necessary. Without these strategies, learners might not overcome the disconnect between knowing a word and using it in meaningful communication. As an educator and leader of learning, it was felt that investigating whether visual storytelling could bridge this gap was important in a way that honours the natural learning processes of children.

Theoretically, there is strong support for blending visual and verbal learning. This practical motivation aligns with a robust theoretical foundation for combining visual and verbal elements in literacy development. Cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf emphasises that human brains are not pre-wired to read; rather, new neural circuits are created to connect vision and language during the learning process. In early childhood, picture books serve as a “bridge” between visual stimuli and text, helping to build neural pathways for literacy (Wolf, 2007). Wolf’s research describes how young children often rely on images to make sense of words, reciting stories by using the pictures as cues. This is akin to the logographic stage of reading, where words are recognised by their overall appearance and contextual clues. Such visual context scaffolds the child’s emerging literacy by providing meaning to the text. Neuroscience studies further show that richly illustrated narratives activate and strengthen the brain’s networks for memory and creativity. In other words, picture books do not just teach words; they help “wire” the young brain for language and thought (Appendix 7). Moreover, visuals can engage children’s emotions: Wolf and Gottwald (2016) note that culturally diverse picture books promote empathy and global awareness in young readers. Children not only acquire language skills but also connect to stories on a deeper emotional level, making those stories (and the new words in them) more memorable. The insights gathered imply that integrating visual storytelling into Spanish classes can promote not only vocabulary expansion but also a more meaningful emotional engagement with the language. This notion of meaningful engagement aligns with theories of second language acquisition that stress the importance of learning environments

that are rich in context and low in stress. Language acquisition studies highlight the critical role of offering comprehensible input in a relaxed setting. According to Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis, language learners achieve the best results when they are exposed to content that is rich in meaning and mostly comprehensible, in a setting that minimises anxiety (Krashen, 1985). A playful storybook or an engaging storyboard provides precisely this: Spanish input embedded in a fun narrative, supported by pictures, and free from high-pressure testing. Such conditions help lower the “affective filter”—the mental barrier anxiety can create (Krashen, 1985)—allowing learners to be more receptive to absorbing the new language. To summarise, pairing new Spanish words and phrases with images and a storyline, the learners are provided with background that makes the language both comprehensible and enjoyable, per the principles of providing meaningful input for language learning.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, Allan Paivio's Dual Coding Theory offers insight into how visual storytelling can enhance memory retention. This theory suggests that the brain encodes information in two distinct forms: verbal and non-verbal. When information is processed in both these ways, it becomes easier to recall (Paivio, 1971). For instance, when a child reads or hears a sentence while simultaneously viewing a related image, two types of mental representations are formed: one that is verbal and another that is visual. These dual representations provide multiple avenues for memory retrieval. This idea is consistent with the “picture superiority effect,” which indicates that people generally have a better memory for images than for words alone. In language learning, picture books can serve as effective mnemonic aids, as the illustrations capture attention and help solidify new vocabulary in the learner's memory. This was evident in the classroom during story sessions. As the Spanish story *1 Zoo Loco* was read aloud, describing monkeys, elephants, and other animals causing chaos, learners followed along with wide eyes on the vibrant illustrations (Appendix 7). This dual exposure—spoken Spanish paired with engaging visuals—sparked laughter, curiosity, and even spontaneous language use. Several learners began mimicking the Spanish animal names and action phrases from the story, pointing to the pictures and excitedly describing the scenes in their own words. In doing so, they naturally acquired vocabulary in context, far beyond what rote memorisation could achieve. The activity vividly demonstrated Paivio's theory in action:

visual and verbal stimuli together enriched the learning experience, providing learners with multiple cues to grasp and remember new words.

While these theories highlight how learners absorb language through visuals, another essential benefit is how such tools can inspire productive language use. The literature suggests that visual storytelling can encourage children to produce language, not just absorb it. Jerome Bruner's Modes of Representation theory (Bruner, 1966) describes how children progress from an inactive stage of learning (learning by doing) to an iconic stage (learning through images) and finally to a symbolic stage (learning through language). Storybooks and storyboards leverage the iconic mode to facilitate the symbolic. For example, sequential images in a storyboard provide a logical structure that helps young learners organise their thoughts into a narrative and, subsequently, into sentences (Appendix 5). By engaging with a series of pictures, children can trace a story visually and then articulate it verbally. This process of translating images into words prompts learners to construct sentences that connect events (using sequencing words like “first, then, finally”) and to apply vocabulary and syntax appropriate to each scene.

Prior studies have noted significant benefits from such approaches. Lim (2010), who explored the use of picture books with young English-as-a-second-language learners, found notable improvements in children's oral language and narrative comprehension when illustrated books were used as core learning tools. Classrooms “flooded” with picture stories saw progress in learners' vocabulary and story recall than

those relying solely on text or drills. Neuman and Celano (2022) similarly highlight that when children interact with picture books, their literacy development is bolstered, as the illustrations provide extra avenues for comprehending words and concepts. These findings reinforced the idea that picture books and similar visual supports can lead to richer language output from learners. They also highlighted a challenge faced in teaching: traditional beginner instruction (e.g., flashcards and word lists) might build some initial vocabulary, but it often fails to foster deeper usage of language. Learners may remember isolated Spanish words yet struggle to use them in context or to form coherent sentences. This realisation set the stage for classroom intervention, motivating the implementation of theoretical insights into practice.

Before implementing the new activities, consideration was given to the specific context of the professional practice and the ethical considerations involved. The intervention was implemented at an international school in Hyderabad, India, within a Grade 1–2 Spanish class that is part of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IB PYP, 2025). This class included 24 young learners, all aged 6 to 7, who were just beginning their journey in learning Spanish (Appendix 6). The PYP framework advocates for inquiry-driven, multi-sensory education, establishing a secure and welcoming environment that nurtures an innovative language project. In the role of the Spanish facilitator and leader of learning, I was charged with creating captivating educational experiences that aligned with both language objectives and the broader PYP learner profile, which prioritises traits such as risk-taking, open-mindedness, reflection, and effective communication.

This initiative was informally discussed with the school leadership team, and parents and students were briefed on the primary educational themes for the term. All learners in the class participated in the picture book and storyboard activities, ensuring inclusivity and equity. To respect learner privacy in documentation, names were anonymised in observation notes, and any collected learner work focused on overall class trends rather than singling out individuals. There was a strong ethical responsibility to improve practice for learners' benefit. Without pursuing this change, disengaged rote learning would harm students' education. The project aimed to empower learners with authentic language skills learned joyfully, driven by the duty to serve their best interests.

Two interventions were implemented based on theory and ethics, with reflection guided by Gibbs' cycle (1988) of description, analysis, and future action. The first intervention used a Spanish picture book for shared storytelling, while the second had learners create storyboards to practice language contextually. Both interventions will be analysed using classroom evidence and theoretical foundations.

Picture Book Storytelling Intervention (Weeks 1–2): The intervention began in the first week with the introduction of the picture book, *1 Zoo Loco*, into the Spanish class (Appendix 7). Originally titled *1 Zany Zoo* in English, this book offers a lively and entertaining tale where animals stir up trouble within a zoo. It contains repetitive phrases and numerous chances for learners to engage. The selection of this book was inspired by its colourful illustrations and engaging, simple Spanish phrases, which are seen as ideal for young learners. During the Spanish Storytime, the children gathered on the carpet as the story was read aloud, with illustrations shown for everyone to view. As an educator, I used animated voice intonations and gestures to bring the narrative to life. The learners were encouraged to participate. They were asked to repeat fun words, predict what might happen next, and point out recognisable objects in the pictures. The learners showed great enthusiasm. The lively Spanish narrative, paired with the bright and colourful pictures, effectively captured their interest. They laughed at the monkey grabbing bananas and were amazed by the lion trying on sunglasses. Several learners began to call out the Spanish names of the animals as they appeared. For example, when the elephant appeared on the page, some learners would

shout “¡Elefante!” even before the teacher had a chance to say it. When the monkey munched on bananas, a chorus of giggles erupted, along with the exclamation “¡mono!” (monkey). The context of the story allowed learners to quickly understand the meanings of words by associating the visuals with the Spanish terms.

Throughout a span of two weeks, the same narrative was read repeatedly, and with each session, the learners grew more confident with the vocabulary. By the time they reached the second or third reading session, many students started to chant key phrases together, especially relishing the repeated line “¡Mira!” (“Look!”), which they enthusiastically shouted whenever the teacher paused. This collective and playful reading experience changed the dynamic of the Spanish classes. Instead of conventional vocabulary drills with flashcards, the vocabulary was absorbed through captivating storytelling.

Throughout these sessions, an observation journal was maintained (Appendix 9). During the first session, several key insights were gained, showcasing the method's effectiveness while also identifying areas for refinement. For example, when the teacher pointed to a monkey picture and said “mono,” at least five learners enthusiastically repeated the word and even mimicked monkey actions, reflecting strong engagement and understanding. However, when a more abstract phrase like “todavía hambriento” (“still hungry”) was introduced, the learners seemed puzzled. Without a picture to accompany the term “hungry,” their understanding was compromised, leading to puzzled looks and some murmurs of confusion. This observation highlighted a limitation: while visuals effectively supported vocabulary acquisition, abstract terms or concepts not directly represented in the illustrations required additional support. I made a note to pre-teach or gesture such terms in future readings to ensure better understanding. Another noteworthy observation was the participation of a typically shy learner (referred to as Asha, a pseudonym), who, during the session, quietly whispered some Spanish words. When the elephant appeared in the story, Asha, who generally spoke little in class, softly said “elefante” to herself while smiling at the picture. This small but significant action indicated increased confidence and involvement, likely due to the supportive, low-pressure context provided by the story. After the story session, a brief Q&A was conducted (in English) to discuss the tale, and several learners spontaneously incorporated Spanish words into their responses. For instance, one child excitedly recalled, “The oso (bear) was sleeping!” mixing the Spanish word oso for bear into an English sentence. This code-mixing suggested that the Spanish words had integrated into the children’s recall of the story. Observations documented in the journal highlighted the significant role of visual elements and storytelling in encouraging language use. Instead of perceiving Spanish as a separate academic subject, learners encountered it as an integral part of a captivating and enjoyable narrative, greatly enriching their educational insights. To evaluate the picture book intervention's impact, a comparative analysis of learners' Spanish vocabulary knowledge before and after the two-week storytelling session was conducted. A 10-item picture-cued vocabulary quiz was given at Week 1's start and Week 2's end, following repeated reading of 1 Zoo Loco. Results showed significant improvement. Initially, learners recalled a few Spanish words. After the storytelling period, the class average doubled, with children naming more animals and items in Spanish.



Figure 1: Vocabulary test scores (out of 10)

As Figure 1 shows, using the picture book was effective in addressing the initial issue of poor vocabulary retention. By the end of Week 2, children were identifying and saying Spanish words that they previously didn't know. The data and my observations together make a compelling case: the learners learned new words more enthusiastically and durably when those words lived in a story they enjoyed. They were not simply memorising translations; they were experiencing the words in context – seeing a monkey steal a banana while hearing “el mono come plátanos,” and later excitedly retelling that scene themselves. This kind of context-embedded learning is exactly what theorists like Bruner advocate. Bruner (1966) discusses how children progress from action to imagery to language, and in our activities, the enactive and iconic modes were entwined – the kids acted out and visualised the story, which then naturally led into the symbolic mode (using Spanish words) without a sharp divide.

Another important outcome of the storytelling was increased engagement and confidence. The excitement during Storytime was palpable. Learners actively participated, predicting plot developments, laughing at characters, and asking questions. For example, one child eagerly asked, “¿Cómo se dice ‘giraffe’?” (“How do you say giraffe?”) upon seeing a giraffe in the story (Appendix 8), demonstrating intrinsic motivation. This engagement fostered positive emotional connections to the language, reducing the fear of making mistakes. Wolf and Gottwald (2016) highlight that picture books can promote literacy and empathy, which was evident in my class. The shared joy of the story created a supportive environment for learning Spanish.

Asha, a quiet student, showed remarkable change. Initially hesitant, she confidently exclaimed “¡Elefante!” upon seeing an elephant in the book. This moment showed how Spanish transformed from theory to active experience for her. The strategy supported both vocabulary learning and positive learner identity for their education. Inspired by the picture book's success, I advanced to the subsequent intervention: storyboards created by the students themselves (Weeks 3–4). The objective was for students to actively apply the language in context. In Week 3, I introduced the storyboard activity by illustrating it on the classroom whiteboard. I crafted a simple four-panel storyboard depicting a friendly dialogue between two characters at a playground. Each panel showcased basic Spanish greetings and conversations, illustrating how to build a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

Following the demonstration, I informed the learners that they would be working in small groups to create their four-panel storyboards. I presented the task: “Create a brief story using Spanish greetings we've

learned. Make a four-panel comic strip with Spanish words and greetings." We brainstormed as a class, with learners suggesting scenarios like meeting classmates or a friend (Appendix 3) or a football match (Appendix 1). I encouraged creativity, emphasising Spanish over artistic skill. I provided a word bank with phrases like "Hola," "¿Cómo estás?" and "Me llamo..." and assured them that not all phrases needed to be used, and spelling mistakes were acceptable. This support kept the task within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), enabling success with guidance.

Once the activity began, the classroom buzzed with focused energy. The learners broke into small groups, tackling the task with enthusiasm (Appendix 6). Drawing and collaboration lowered their inhibitions about using Spanish, turning the room into a mix of art studio and language lab. Some groups started by sketching stick figures and setting the scene, while others created a funny dialogue first and then drew to illustrate it. I circulated, offering help when needed. One group role-played a meeting at school, practising "Me llamo" (Appendix 2) while another group drew an alien character saying "Hola" to a teacher (Appendix 4). When a student inquired about how to say "No" in Spanish, I promptly explained. This interaction encouraged students to engage with each other, asking for the spelling of words like "gracias." This collaborative learning environment mirrored Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), where children learn by observing and imitating others. As one group created a good Spanish line, others overheard and adopted it, such as when Group A heard "¿Cómo estás?" from Group B and decided to use it too. This peer learning, rooted in social interaction, aligned with our PYP program's emphasis on cooperation and took the pressure off me as I facilitated rather than lectured. The storyboard's visual elements allowed every child to contribute to the group effort. Those who enjoyed drawing took charge of creating the panels, while others focused on dialogue or writing Spanish phrases. Even learners unsure of a phrase could first sketch the idea and then ask me or a peer, "How do I say this in Spanish?" The pictures acted as a scaffold for the language. In Week 4, the groups presented their storyboards. The results were impressive. Every group successfully produced a short narrative. They were eager to showcase their creativity.

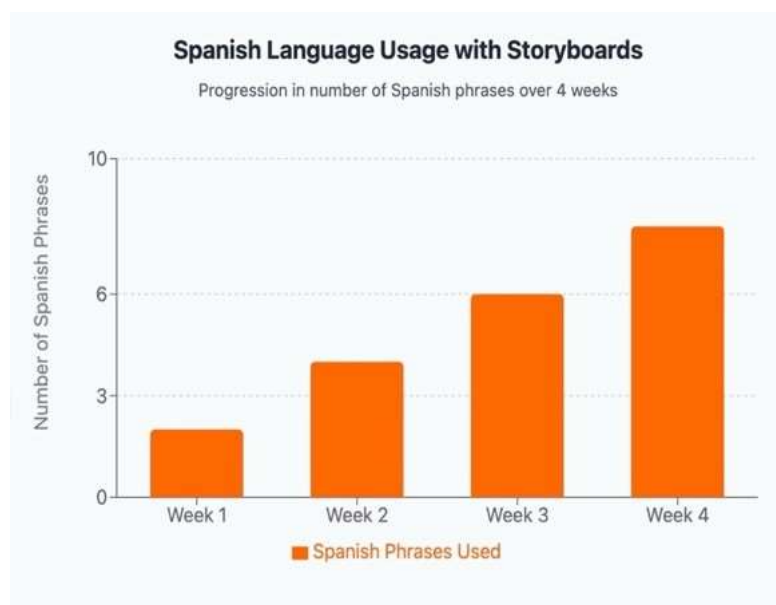


Figure 2: Students progressed from basic greetings to slightly more conversational exchanges. By week 4, learners incorporated questions like ¿Qué tal? responses, gratitude expression (Appendix 4); proper Spanish accents were increasingly used correctly. Storyboard activity facilitated both written and

spoken Spanish language development.

After the groups presented their storyboards, I also informally observed their final oral skills. By Week 4, it was evident that most of the class had made noticeable progress in speaking Spanish spontaneously. For example, two learners, one said “Hola, buenos días” with a wave, the other responded “Buenos días. ¿Cómo te llamas?” (What is your name?), while the other two said, Me llamo __. ¿Y tú?”, “Mucho gusto” (Nice to meet you), and so on, ending with a cheerful “¡Adiós!” from each. They needed no prompting from me. The classroom demonstration by the end of the project was exceptional. They correctly used greetings, asked and answered names, used mucho gusto appropriately, and closed the conversation.

To quantify the improvement in spontaneous language use, I maintained an informal Spanish usage tracking checklist throughout the four weeks (Appendix 10). I marked instances when a learner used a Spanish word in the classroom. In Week 1, only 6 of 24 learners used any Spanish spontaneously, typically just one or two words like “gracias.” By Week 2, about half the class (12 learners) occasionally used basic salutations such as “¿Como estás?” or named objects in Spanish. By Week 3, with the storyboard project in full swing, 18 learners (75%) were using spontaneous Spanish. Their pride in their story dialogues translated into real-life usage — for example, a child greeted me with “Buenos días” on arrival, and others responded to “¿Cómo estás?” with “¡Muy bien!” even outside structured activities. One especially enthusiastic learner even said, Hasta luego (See you later). In Week 4, 22 of 24 learners (92%) spontaneously used Spanish at least once, many doing so multiple times. They impressively said, ¿Que tal? (What’s up?), Vamos aprender Español (Let’s learn Spanish). This steady growth offered strong, observable evidence of increasing confidence and internalisation of basic Spanish. This steady, consistent growth in spontaneous Spanish usage was evident across all four weeks. In Week 1, only 15% of learners (3 out of 20) used Spanish independently. By Week 4, that number had climbed to 80% (16 out of 20), with these students regularly incorporating Spanish into their interactions. The upward trend highlights the sustained effectiveness of the intervention strategies used. Each week built upon the last, indicating a cumulative learning effect as learners gained confidence, internalised structures, and began to apply their language skills more spontaneously.



Figure 3: Growth in independent Spanish word usage over four weeks. This bar graph, derived from my observational checklist data, shows a very low count in Week 1 and a steady increase each subsequent week, reaching a high count by Week 4. The trajectory suggests that as the interventions progressed, learners became increasingly comfortable and willing to use Spanish in authentic ways. This evidence triangulates with the qualitative observations of rising

confidence and competence, and it provides a concrete measure of the intervention's impact. The checklist and Figure 3 together serve as clear evidence that the strategies implemented had a measurable positive effect on learner engagement with the Spanish language. As the project reached its end, the class had seamlessly integrated Spanish into their everyday classroom conversations, achieving exactly what I had envisioned.

During this journey, I consistently engaged in reflective practice, deliberately connecting my classroom experiences with various educational theories (Appendix 9). This metacognitive approach—thinking about why things were unfolding the way they were—transformed my reflection from surface-level observations to deeper analysis. Rather than simply noting that “the kids did better” or “they enjoyed it,” I examined each outcome through theoretical frameworks we had studied. For example, when I observed learners recalling vocabulary more effectively through images, I connected this to Paivio's dual coding theory, which helped explain the durability of their memory. When students began using Spanish spontaneously in relaxed contexts, I thought of Krashen's input and affective filter hypotheses—the enjoyable environment was likely reducing anxiety and facilitating language acquisition. As learners collaborated and imitated peers, Bandura's social learning theory immediately felt relevant. And when they created novel sentences like “Estoy triste,” I considered how children's innate linguistic capacity allows them to generate new utterances when provided with the right foundational structures.

Engaging in this kind of theory-informed reflection, which addresses the aim of linking theory to practice, allowed me to participate in an ongoing dialogue between literature and lived classroom experience. Each success or challenge became an opportunity to ask “why?” and to search for theoretical insight or explanations. This made my reflective process more critical, grounded, and analytical. I had moved beyond merely experimenting with activities in the hope of achieving outcomes; I was now crafting, observing, and interpreting with an academic perspective. This shift made me feel like I was evolving into a teacher-researcher—an individual who not only instructs but also consistently questions, examines, and develops in their practice. This initiative has been a transformative journey for my personal and professional development. Engaging in a continuous cycle of planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting—closely following the stages of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle—has greatly enhanced my confidence and abilities as an educator. At first, I was apprehensive about moving away from the comfort of traditional teaching methods like task sheets and vocabulary quizzes. The idea of incorporating learner-created storyboards, which are open-ended and unpredictable, was intimidating. However, observing the positive effects of this approach has significantly increased my confidence in taking well-considered, theory-driven risks in my teaching methods. Through my experiences, I have discovered that when educational innovation is driven by pedagogical understanding and thoughtful inquiry, it can lead to significant learning achievements. This realisation has motivated me to take on the role of a change agent, not just in my classroom but also in the wider educational landscape. I now naturally adopt a reflective approach: I design interventions, carefully monitor student reactions, evaluate the results, and adjust my strategies as needed. Embracing this method has enhanced my adaptability, strengthened my resilience in overcoming challenges, and increased my willingness to experiment. Moreover, this research helped me grow into the multifaceted role of an educator. I was simultaneously a facilitator - guiding and learning, an observer - collecting evidence, an evaluator - analysing progress, and a motivator - encouraging students—all within a single lesson cycle. Managing these roles proved to be both challenging and highly rewarding, as it allowed me to gain a more complete understanding of my students and my teaching approach. This experience ultimately provided a robust foundation for my ongoing journey as a reflective and adaptable educator.

This exploration greatly contributed to my growth as a teacher-leader. Education leadership extends beyond positions; it encompasses demonstrating and disseminating effective practices that motivate peers and enhance student learning. I informally shared this initiative with our curriculum coordinator and the French language facilitator. Encouragingly, the French facilitator later implemented a similar storytelling technique in her class, observing significant improvements in student engagement and language retention. Additionally, I showcased examples of student-created storyboards to the curriculum coordinator. By introducing practical, evidence-based innovations, I stimulated interest and dialogue among my colleagues, significantly enriching our professional learning community. I plan to document this project in our school newsletter to further disseminate the method, with the goal of not only inspiring fellow educators but also informing parents about the advantages of story-based, learner-focused language instruction. This reflective inquiry has affirmed that visual storytelling strategies can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and sentence formation in early language learning. More importantly, it humanised the learning experience in my classroom. My learners were not simply memorising Spanish words; they were living the language through stories and creative expression. By connecting words to images, narratives, and personal emotions, they demonstrated stronger retention and a greater willingness to use the language in meaningful contexts.

The alignment of classroom data, including observation records, student assignments, and usage tracking charts, with established language acquisition theories made a strong case for the effectiveness of this method. Theories like Paivio's dual coding, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and Bandura's social learning theory provided a solid framework for interpreting the reasons behind learners' successful engagement. Nonetheless, this experience also underscored the importance of flexibility. While most students thrived, a few remained hesitant, reminding me that individual differences, such as shyness or processing difficulties, necessitate additional strategies and tailored support.

Nonetheless, the core principle stands that when educators weave together visual and verbal modes of learning, they activate the full range of children's cognitive, emotional, and social capacities. Learners not only remember more but also use language more confidently and authentically. Looking ahead, I am committed to sustaining and expanding this storytelling approach. I plan to embed narrative elements into everyday classroom objects—perhaps through posters, mini-storyboards, or even comic strips printed on learners' folders or pencil cases. These small innovations will serve as daily prompts for spontaneous language use, keeping the spirit of playful, meaningful communication alive. Whether on a wall, in a book, or as part of a game, story-based materials will continue to be at the heart of my teaching.

This experience has reinforced a fundamental truth: children learn best when they learn joyfully, contextually, and personally meaningful way. Visual storytelling turned abstract vocabulary into vivid characters and rote phrases into living dialogue. My learners ended this task not just with stronger language skills, but with stories they owned and a renewed identity as Spanish speakers and storytellers. Meanwhile, I emerged as a more reflective, connected, and inspired educator. I plan to continue this journey of inquiry—learning with and from my learners, sharing insights with colleagues, and approaching each new teaching challenge as an opportunity for creative and evidence-based growth. Ultimately, this project reminded me that good teaching is never static—it evolves with practice, reflection, and purpose. In helping my learners grow, I have grown alongside them. And for me, that is among the most rewarding outcomes an educator can achieve.

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