

TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF LITERARY DEVICES IN GRADED READERS: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF ENGLISH AND SPANISH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of extensive reading in second language acquisition has long been acknowledged as foundational within the field of language education. Decades of research have consistently emphasized its centrality, highlighting the importance of engaging with large quantities of comprehensible and motivating texts to support the development of language fluency, vocabulary, and learner autonomy (Bamford, 1984; Day, 1998; Krashen, 1989, 2004; Nation, 2009). In particular, the practice of extensive reading, which is most often facilitated through the use of graded readers, has been shown to foster reading fluency, general comprehension and confidence, while also allowing learners to encounter linguistic patterns and vocabulary with meaningful contexts (Albay, 2017). Further empirical studies (Elley, 1991; Horst, 2005; Iwahori, 2008; Tsang, 1996) have demonstrated their broad impact, including positive outcomes in reading speed, vocabulary development, motivation and even cross-modal language skills such as writing and listening.

Central to this approach, hence, are graded readers, which are specially adapted texts designed to align with specific stages of language proficiency. These materials simplify content through controlled vocabulary, reduced syntactic complexity and often linear plot structures, thus reducing cognitive loads and allowing for more focused language development (Allen, 2009; Hardy, 2013; Rodrigo, 2016). Moreover, while their degree of structural simplification may vary depending on the methodology or publisher (Claridge, 2012), all graded readers share

the core aim of creating a scaffolded and accessible path towards authentic and more complex reading experiences.

However, teachers' opinions depict a concerning reduction in students' sustained engagement with reading. Many learners now perceive reading not as a source of enjoyment or intellectual enrichment, but as a demanding task, especially at higher proficiency levels, where literary texts become increasingly prominent in curricula (Chaves Tesser, 2000; Hardy, 2013). Rodrigo (2016) states that this gap in preparation often results in learners abandoning advanced language courses, unable to bridge the divide between elementary materials and more sophisticated literary content. Therefore, in this research paper it is proposed that early and sustained exposure to literary elements, even in simplified forms with graded readers, could play a crucial role in addressing this challenge.

Consequently, this study builds upon the extensive body of research supporting graded readers and extensive reading (Cheetham et al., 2016; Claridge, 2012a; Kara, 2019; McQuillan, 2016; P. Nation & Wang Ming-tzu, 1999; Surmanov.S, 2024; Wodinsky & Nation, 1988) while focusing on a close and detailed examination of the ways in which literary sophistication, defined as the nuanced and layered understanding of narrative elements, stylistic features and thematic depth, is progressively constructed, introduced and scaffolded for learners at varying stages of proficiency. Specifically, the research explores this process in the context of both English and Spanish graded readers, analyzing how these texts evolve in complexity and depth as learners advance from beginner to more advanced levels. The intention is to illuminate the pedagogical mechanisms through which learners are gradually exposed to richer, more sophisticated literary content, even while they are still in the process of mastering fundamental linguistic structures.

2. OBJECTIVES

The specific objective of this research is to conduct a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the ways in which a variety of literary devices are employed, stylistically developed and strategically distributed across a spectrum of graded difficulty levels within graded readers that

are written in both the English and Spanish languages. This objective entails a detailed investigation into the pedagogical patterns and literary techniques utilized in these texts, with particular attention paid to the extent and manner in which such devices are integrated as learners advance in proficiency. In order to achieve this, two carefully complied corpora have been assembled and prepared for examination. The first corpus, composed of English-language texts, comprises a curated selection of approximately sixty representative titles drawn from the well-established *Oxford Bookworms* series, recognized for its structured levelling and educational utility. This corpus is composed of around 800,000 words and is divided into six levels (Levels 1 to 6), of which approximately, the first and second comprise an A2 level, the third and fourth a B1, and the fifth and sixth a B2. The second corpus, of around 66,000 words, is focused on Spanish-language texts, includes more than thirty thoughtfully chosen titles curated by the *Instituto Cervantes*, an authoritative institution in the promotion and teaching of the Spanish language, and it is divided into three levels: *Nivel 1*, as an A2 level, *Nivel 2* as a B1, and *Nivel 3* as a B2.

All texts included in both corpora have been systematically selected based on their approximate alignment with the A2, B1, and B2 proficiency levels, as delineated by the widely recognized Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This alignment ensured a consistent and meaningful basis for comparative analysis across levels and languages. The main aim of this research is to examine, with depth and precision, whether and how the use of specific literary techniques, particularly those such as hyperbole, similes and personifications, evolve over the progression from lower to higher proficiency levels. In doing so, the study seeks to determine whether these devices become not only more frequent but also increasingly complex, layered and nuanced in their application as learners move through successive stages of language acquisition.

Moreover, a further objective of this research is to explore the ways in which these same literary devices are adapted, framed and presented within the pedagogical contexts of each language. By undertaking a cross-linguistic comparison, this study aims to provide a dual

perspective that highlights both the common and distinct features in the literary scaffolding offered by English and Spanish Graded Readers. This comparative angle is intended to enrich our understanding of how literary elements are pedagogically mediated in each linguistic and cultural context, ultimately contributing to broader insights into the role of literature in second language education across different languages and educational frameworks.

3. METHODOLOGY

This investigation adopts a corpus-based analytical framework designed to systematically examine the linguistic and stylistic features present in selected graded readers. Central to this methodology is the use of *Lancsbox*, a specialized and sophisticated linguistic analysis software tool, developed for the exploration of patterns in textual data. This tool is employed to identify, classify and analyze the presence frequency, distribution and textual characteristics of specific literary devices within the complied corpora of English and Spanish texts. The approach allows for a detailed and replicable examination of how literary elements are embedded within language learners' reading materials across multiple proficiency levels.

The methodological design of the study is centered around the targeted tracing and close analysis of particular forms of figurative language and stylistic expression, with a primary focus on three key literary techniques: similes, hyperboles, and personification. These devices were selected due to their pedagogical relevance and their prevalence in literary texts, as well as their potential to reflect increasing levels of linguistic and interpretative complexity. The analysis involves a combination of quantitative methods such as frequency counts across the corpus, and qualitative approaches, including the contextual examination of how these devices are used within the narratives to convey meaning, tone and characterization.

In order to provide a well-rounded and comprehensive understanding, the research design includes both intra-language comparisons, examining the progression and variation within the English corpus and

separately, within the Spanish corpus, as well as inter-language comparisons, which will analyze and contrast the findings between the two languages. This comparative dimension is intended to reveal both convergent and divergent pedagogical strategies in the way literary sophistication is scaffolded and adapted in Graded Readers. Ultimately, this methodology enables the study to shed light on the broader implications of how literary style is taught and gradually introduced through simplified texts in second language education.

4. RESULTS

Regarding the results, the analysis of the selected corpora reveals a clear developmental trajectory in the use and complexity of literary devices, specifically similes, personification and hyperbole across the different CEFR level. Both the English and Spanish graded readers exhibit gradual shifts in literary style and figurative expression, although distinct patterns and differences do emerge between the two languages.

4.1. SIMILES

At the lower-level proficiency levels, meaning Levels 1 and 2, of approximately an A2 level in the English corpus, similes were virtually absent in a literary sense. While linguistic markers typically associated with similes, such as *like* and *as* appeared frequently, they were mainly used in functional or idiomatic constructions such as filler words or constructions such as *look like*, or *as well as* rather than in figurative or descriptive contexts. This scarcity of literary similes aligns with the overall stylistic simplicity of these early texts, which prioritize direct communication and basic comprehension over imaginative language. Figurative complexity is largely avoided at this stage to accommodate learners' limited vocabulary and grammatical command.

By Levels 3 and 4, approximately a B1 level, authentic literary similes begin to make an appearance, even though they are still not too frequent and with a limited stylistic aspect. Examples such as *She was crying like a baby* and *He ran as fast as a cheetah*, illustrate a move towards an increase in figurative expression through the use of widely familiar

comparisons. These similes, while formulaic, serve an important introductory role by gently introducing learners to literary devices in a way that requires minimal interpretative effort.

At Levels 5 and 6, corresponding approximately to a B2 level, the corpus reveals a noticeable increase in both the frequency and sophistication of similes. Phrases such as *The wind lashed the trees like a whip*, or *She was as silent as the grave* and *I felt like walking on air* demonstrate greater vividness and imagery. These similes often extend beyond simple, conventional comparisons to evoke mood, enhance narrative tone and contribute to stylistic richness, which are key features of a more literary register. The presence of such expressions suggests a deliberate effort to expose learners to more original forms of figurative language as they reach higher proficiency levels.

In the Spanish corpus, the pattern is broadly similar but slightly more conservative. At *Nivel 1*, corresponding approximately to an A2, the literary similes are virtually non-existent. The connector *como* is overwhelmingly used in grammatical or occupational constructions such as *trabajaba como médico*, and *cual* is almost entirely absent. Figurative uses are avoided in favor of clear, unambiguous language, reflecting a pedagogical emphasis on functional clarity at this level.

At *Nivel 2*, corresponding broadly to a B1 level, a slight increase in literary similes is observable, though still limited in scope. Instances such as *Corrió como el viento* and *Brillaba como el sol* indicate the emergence of simple, often culturally embedded comparisons. These expressions, while poetic in origin, are frequently encountered in common language use and may not register as literary inventions to native speakers, yet they represent an initial step towards figurative awareness for language learners.

Continuing with *Nivel 3*, which is around a B2 level, in it, the frequency and stylistic quality of similes increase notably. Expressions such as *Gritaba como un loco* and *Tenía los ojos como dos luceros* introduce more vivid, emotionally charged and metaphorically rich content, the use of *como* remains the dominant syntactic structure for simile formation, while *cual* remains largely unproductive, reflecting

contemporary usage patterns in accessible literary Spanish. At this level, similes begin to serve more than just descriptive functions, as they contribute to narrative mood and emotional empath.

4.2. PERSONIFICATION

Continuing with personification, in both languages, personification was found to be a relatively infrequent device at lower levels but gained prominence as proficiency increased.

In the English texts, Levels 1 and 2 presented virtually no instances of personification. The narratives remain grounded in literal, straightforward descriptions aimed at ensuring basic comprehension. However, at Levels 3 and 4, which equal to a B1 level, subtle instances of personification begin to appear. For example, the sentence *The moon watched him walk away* suggests the beginning of metaphorical thinking and the symbolic animation of natural elements. These instances remain isolated and understated but mark an important shift towards literary expression.

Moreover, at Levels 5 and 6, equating to a B2 level, personification becomes more stylistically embedded and expressive. A representative example such as *Her soul found a home with God*, demonstrates a more abstract, emotionally resonant use of language. Such examples indicate a maturation of literary techniques, using personification not only for descriptive enrichment but also to evoke introspective and spiritual themes. Overall, a clear progression in the sophistication and thematic depth of personification is evident in the English corpus.

In the Spanish Graded Readers, personification is also largely absent at the *Nivel 1* and *Nivel 2* corresponding to the A2 and B1 levels respectively, and notable examples do not arise until *Nivel 3*, a B2 level, where expressions such as *Con sus ojos guasones* being to introduce a more refined approach at humanizing or providing emotional attributes to body parts or abstract concepts. Although such instances are still relatively rare compared to English, they suggest a growing comfort with indirect description and metaphorical language. However, even at higher levels, personification in the Spanish corpus appeared less frequently and remained greatly more restrained.

4.3. HYPERBOLE

Finally, the last literary device analyzed in this cross-linguistic corpus-based research project was the hyperbole. This analysis revealed a different pattern from similes and personification, with a slightly earlier and more consistent appearance across mid and higher levels in both languages.

In English, examples of hyperbole begin to surface around Level 3, a B1 level, and become more frequent and elaborate in subsequent levels. At Level 4, also a B1, an instance such as *The world will forget about you completely* exemplifies emotionally charged exaggeration, used to intensify narratives through the use of boosters. By Level 6, corresponding to a B2 level, more evocative expressions such as *A horror at the huge emptiness of space* demonstrate the use of hyperbole not only for emotional impact but also for atmospheric and thematic expansion. In addition, these exaggerations often carried humorous or dramatic undertones, which contributed to tone and characterization in increasingly sophisticated ways.

Lastly, in the Spanish corpus, hyperbole is rarely present at the *Nivel 1* and *Nivel 2*, comprising the A2 and B1 levels respectively, though an interesting pattern emerges in the frequent use of the adjective *enorme* as a marker for hyperbole. At *Nivel 3*, a B2 level, an example such as *[...] todo lo alcanzaba con su enorme entusiasmo vital* reflects a stronger presence of intensified descriptors, though still grounded more in a literal amplification than in a more profoundly idiomatic aspect. Compared to English, Spanish hyperbole in the corpus analyzed revealed more literal examples rather than literary, suggesting a cultural or pedagogical preference for clarity against a more nuanced expression.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis undertaken and this study has revealed a clearly structured, pedagogically intentional progression and the deployment of literary devices across the A2 to the B2 proficiency levels in both English and Spanish graded readers. This developmental trajectory underscores the manner in which literary and stylistic complexity is not arbitrarily included, but rather carefully scaffolded within language learning materials, in alignment with the learner's expanding linguistic competence. The way

these devices are introduced, both in terms of timing and stylistic variation, offers valuable insights into the instructional priorities and didactic assumptions that take on the design of second language learning reading materials. Specifically, the findings highlight how second language reading instruction, when mediated through graded texts, functions not only as a vehicle for vocabulary and grammar acquisition, but also as a site for cultivating the interpretative and stylistic awareness required for eventual engagement with authentic and adapted literary texts.

Among the range of literary features considered, similes stood out as the most prominently and consistently used figure of speech across both language corpora. In English Graded Readers, similes emerged in a wider array of forms and with greater rhetorical sophistication, beginning at the B1 level, suggesting that learners are introduced to stylistic language earlier in their reading development. These similes served more than a decorative or illustrative purpose, as they often operated on a deeper discursive level, enhancing their imagery, tone and the overall narrative style of the text. By the time learners reached the B2 level, similes in English texts had become notably more creative and nuanced, often embedded within more complex syntactic structures and carrying greater interpretative weight. In contrast, the Spanish corpus revealed a delayed and more restrained pattern of simile use. Similes in Spanish texts were typically introduced at later proficiency stages, and their construction remained highly formulaic, with the overwhelming majority relying on the connector *como*, and little to no use of alternative expressions such as *cuál*. Moreover, the absence of syntactic and rhetorical variation in Spanish similes suggests a more cautious approach to figurative language, possibly driven by pedagogical aims to maintain clarity and reduce interpretative demands at earlier stages of learning. The discrepancy between the two languages in this respect may reflect both structural tendencies inherent to English and Spanish, as well as different curricular philosophies regarding the appropriate timing and complexity of literary exposure.

This pattern was mirrored in the use of other literary devices, most notably personifications and hyperbole, which exhibited similarly divergent trajectories between the English and Spanish materials. In English

graded readers, these devices began to appear earlier in the proficiency sequence and were used with increasing rhetorical force and stylistic elaboration as proficiency levels rose. By the B2 stage, learners were regularly exposed to figurative constructions that played a meaningful role in shaping character development, setting tone, and conveying emotional nuance. The presence of such devices, whether subtle or overt, indicated a deliberate pedagogical decision to incorporate interpretatively rich content that extends learners' capacity to read not only for surface meaning but also for underlying narrative function and aesthetic effect. In Spanish texts, however, both personification and hyperbole tended to be introduced later and were employed more conservatively. These devices, when they did appear, were often simplified or stripped of their potential to carry layered or metaphorical meanings. Rather than enhancing narrative depth, they tended to serve straightforward illustrative functions, and their overall impact on tone or characterization was relatively muted. This stylistic restraint in the Spanish materials may be attributable to a range of intersecting factors, including cultural preferences for narrative clarity, editorial norms in educational publishing, and different pedagogical assumptions about the cognitive demands of figurative language for early-stage learners.

In addition to the differences in the presence and complexity of literary devices, a further noteworthy pattern emerged in the form of numerous false positives across both corpora, particularly in texts aimed at lower proficiency levels, which makes impossible the clear portrayal of frequencies, as careful reading of each instance had to take place to determine whether the terms acted as literary devices or not, as the corpus analyzing tool does not allow for their specific selection. Hence, terms that are commonly associated with similes such as *like*, *as* and *como*, appeared frequently, but in ways that did not constitute literary or figurative use. Rather, these words functioned in purely grammatical or literal roles, forming part of basic syntactic constructions, suggesting that these linguistic forms are first introduced to learners in their most literal and structurally fundamental functions, providing a scaffold for grammatical competence before being recontextualized as vehicles for stylistic or figurative expressions. Hence, the high frequency of these

literal uses at lower levels supports the idea that literary language is not introduced arbitrarily or prematurely in learner materials, but that instead, it follows a carefully phased instructional model in which the foundations of syntactic and semantic comprehension are laid before more complex, interpretatively demanding elements are layered into the reading experience. This developmental sequencing points to a coherent pedagogy in which learners are gradually prepared to understand and appreciate the multifunctionality of certain linguistic forms, therefore reinforcing the interpretative sophistication needed for engagement with authentic literary discourse.

When viewed collectively, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how literary features are embedded and scaled across learning materials in a way that is both strategic and selective. English graded readers, by consistently incorporating literary devices at earlier stages and in more rhetorically dynamic ways appear to operate within a pedagogical framework that values stylistic richness and interpretive engagement as integral components of language acquisition. Learners are encouraged to encounter and interact with expressive language from earlier points in their reading development, which may in turn facilitate the cultivation of interpretative agility and stylistic sensitivity, which are skills that are essential for reading unadapted literary texts with confidence and comprehension. The more extensive and imaginative use of similes, personification and hyperbole in English text reflects a commitment to supporting not only grammatical and lexical development but also the broader aesthetic and cultural dimensions of language learning.

Conversely, the Spanish materials analyzed in this study revealed a more cautious and perhaps more structurally focused instructional model. The delayed and restricted inclusion of literary devices suggests an emphasis on ensuring grammatical accuracy and basic comprehension before introducing more stylistically demanding content. While this approach may indeed help to minimize learner confusion and reduce cognitive overload, it may also limit opportunities for learners to engage with the expressive range and rhetorical nuance of the Spanish language. As a result, learners may progress in terms of linguistic accuracy and literal comprehension but remain underexposed to the types

of interpretative challenges that literary texts routinely present. This divergence raises important questions about the role of literature in second language instruction and about how best to balance the competing goals of accessibility, fluency, and literary competence.

Taken as a whole, these observations point to the broader implications of how and when literary elements are introduced into the English and Spanish as a Foreign Language curricula respectively via graded readers. If the ultimate goal of language instruction is to produce learners who are not merely functionally proficient but also capable of navigating the stylistic, rhetorical and cultural dimensions of language, then, the integration of literary devices cannot be viewed as an optional enrichment, but must instead be treated as a core component of language learning. The earlier and more consistent inclusion of such features in English materials appears to support this aim more directly. In contrast, the more incremental and conservative approach evident in the Spanish texts may require reevaluation if the intention is to develop fully literate and stylistically competent second language readers. These findings, therefore, highlight the need for further research into how literary competence can be more effectively scaffolded in language learning and how materials in different languages can be aligned more closely in terms of the depth and timing of stylistic exposure they provide to learners across proficiency levels.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the present study affirms the pedagogical significance of integrating literary exposure into second language education, particularly through the use of graded readers. While these texts are commonly celebrated for their ability to adapt linguistic content to match learner's proficiency levels and thus supporting gradual language development, they also fulfill a secondary, though equally important function as instruments of literary enrichment. Beyond offering accessible linguistic input, graded readers facilitate a structured encounter with literary discourse by gradually introducing and layering stylistic features that enrich the reading experience. This progressive incorporation of literary devices enables

learners to engage with the cultural, aesthetic, and interpretative dimensions of language, ultimately broadening their communicative competence in ways that extend beyond grammar and vocabulary alone.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates as well that both English and Spanish graded readers exhibit discernible progression in literary complexity from the A2 to the B2 proficiency levels. However, the pace, depth, and breadth of that progression differ significantly between the two language contexts. English graded readers introduce figurative and stylistic elements, such as similes, personification and hyperbole, earlier in their learning trajectory and with greater frequency and variation. This earlier and more diverse exposure to literary features fosters increased learner engagement with expressive language, thereby equipping them with a richer foundation for interpreting authentic literary texts. In contrast, Spanish graded readers tend to delay the introduction of such devices and often present them in a more simplified or attenuated form. Possibly, this more cautious approach may result in reduced opportunities for learners to encounter and practice the expressive potential of the target language, particularly at lower and intermediate proficiency levels.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant, as they suggest that learners of English, by the time they reach the B2 level, are generally better prepared to handle the stylistic, figurative, and interpretative challenges characteristics of unadapted literary texts. However, Spanish learners while making demonstrable progress in terms of linguistic accuracy and general reading comprehension, could benefit from more intentional and earlier integration of literary features into their reading materials. Such integration would not only enhance their stylistic awareness but also support a more balanced and comprehensive approach to second language reading instruction.

Finally, these observations highlight the importance of incorporating literary development alongside grammatical and lexical instruction in the design of second language curriculum. Especially, if the goal of second language instruction is to cultivate learners who are not merely functionally proficient, but also capable of engaging critically and interpretatively with authentic materials, then literary competence must be scaffolded systematically and explicitly. Hence, in educational

environments where extensive reading is often undervalued or inconsistently implemented, Graded Readers offer a promising path for reintroducing literary depth in an accessible and pedagogically sound manner. By guiding learners through a carefully structured literary progression, as educators we could foster not only linguistic proficiency, but also the interpretative agility and cultural literacy necessary for full engagement with the target language in its most nuanced forms.

8. REFERENCES

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