Exploring story mapping techniques: Perspectives on enhancing English writing skills

Explorando técnicas de mapeo de historias: Perspectivas en el incremento de las destrezas de escritura en Inglés

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a global context, writing proficiency among students has been a concern due to its multiple challenges. In Ecuador, The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) emphasizes the importance of writing skills in the National Curriculum for English as a Foreign Language. However, writing is a difficult skill for students learning a new language. According to recent research, "writing requires a combination of skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, and planning, which are more challenging for students learning a second language" (Hyland 2018, pp. 30-35). Since every language has its own set of unique rules and conventions, learners have to acquire these skills through practice and instruction. Even so, the Ministry of Education expects students to achieve an A2.2 level in English by the end of superior basic education (Ministerio de Educación, [MINEDUC], 2016).

Unfortunately, the researcher, based on the realization of previous teaching practicum, found that English writing skills were not in accordance with the proposals established by the National curriculum. This is supported by previous studies indicating that writing can be especially challenging because learners often face challenges in writing skills in classes, especially when they have limited vocabulary and difficulties in English sentence structure. Kayaalp et al. (2022), indicated that "students with a limited vocabulary and difficulties in English sentence structure can face difficulties in communication, reading comprehension, and academic success" (p. 325). Overall, these problems can harm students' ability to learn and succeed.

This study contributed to the improvement of scientific knowledge, especially teaching techniques. First, it showed the teacher the benefits of using story mapping techniques to improve their students' writing skills. Secondly, it provided students with an overview of the impact of story mapping techniques on the English language learning process. Finally, it allowed superior basic students to experiment in various ways by providing the necessary techniques to improve English writing skills in a dynamic and engaging way.

In spite of previous research highlighting the importance of story mapping techniques in academic writing as a foreign language, there was still scope for further research. Based on this antecedent, the main objective of this research was to explore the students' perceptions about the use of story mapping techniques on the improvement of English writing skills among higher basic education students.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Story mapping techniques

A story map is any visual representation of the story plot. It is a map that lays out the story events so that you can see them in order (Johnson, 2008, p. 131). In addition, story maps facilitate comprehension and memory of stories, students need to know about the general structure of stories. From the explanations above, it can be concluded that the story map is a graphic visual representation of stories' major elements such as main characters, supporting characters, setting that include time, place, atmosphere, problem and resolution which will help the students to comprehend the whole story and make them easier to illustrate how the ideas of the stories are related one another. And it can be used as an outline and to develop students' ideas of their writing (Devi et al. 2020, p. 229).

Elements of story

Chase (2022) argues that the elements of the story mapping techniques may vary according to the purpose and context of the mapping, but generally include:

Setting. Where and when is the story happening? Setting represents both the physical location but also the time (past, present, future) and the social and cultural conditions in which the characters exist. The setting can be used to create atmosphere and mood, as well as to influence character behavior and plot development.

Characters. A person or animal or really anything personified. There can be one main character or many, and they may have a backstory that has shaped and molded them. Secondary characters may also play a role, though not always. Characters can be described in terms of their physical appearance, personality, background, and

motivations. They can also be dynamic (changing) or static (unchanging) throughout the story.

Plot. The plot consists of the events that happen in the story. In a plot you typically find an introduction, rising action, a climax, the falling action, and a resolution. Plot is often represented as an arc. The plot is the backbone of the story and provides structure and direction for the narrative. It should be engaging and make the reader want to continue reading.

Conflict. Every story must have a conflict, that is, a challenge or problem around which the plot is based. Without conflict, the story will have no purpose or trajectory. Conflict can take many forms, such as person vs. person, person vs. nature, person vs. society, and person vs. self. The conflict should be well-developed and add tension and drama to the story.

Resolution. The resolution of a story refers to the conclusion of its plot. Also known as a denouement, it is a literary term that describes the final plot points that occur after the climax and falling action. The resolution can be a scene or series of scenes that link a narrative arc near the end of the story.

Visual story structure

Visual story structure in story mapping is a tool used for visually organizing and breaking down the essential components of a story. It provides a clear understanding of the narrative elements, such as plot, setting, characters, and theme. Story mapping is frequently used as a strategic tool in the educational field to improve students' comprehension and analysis of storytelling. By creating a visual representation of story structure using diagrams, charts, or storyboards, complexity reduction and visual realignment can be achieved. This simplification creates a foundation from which students can understand and develop their narratives and stories (Kid Sense Child Development, 2011).

For these reasons, the visual representation of story mapping assists students in identifying and comprehending the different components of a story. It aids in understanding how the narrative is constructed, distinguishes the main points of the plot from the subplot, and illustrates how these points are linked. It is a thorough

process of breaking down the central concept or plot into smaller components and tracing how these smaller elements integrate and interrelate with one another.

Story mapping models

Implementing different story mapping models is advantageous in planning and outlining diverse stories or projects. According to Wilber (2019), "these models assist students in organizing their ideas and thoughts logically and coherently by providing a clear visual structure" (para. 1). Moreover, they can aid in the development of critical thinking skills, particularly in deciding which parts of the story should be included and how they should be interconnected.

Reading Rockets (2013), several story mapping models can be beneficial for students, including:

Character map. It is a visual representation of the relationships between different characters in the story. It can show how each character is related to others and how they interact throughout the story.

Figure 1

Character map

Note. Retrieved from (TemplateLab, 2019)

Simple story mapping. It is a well-established method for outlining a narrative in a concise and coherent manner. It entails dividing a story into three sections: the beginning, middle, and end. The introduction establishes the story and introduces the characters, setting, and conflict. The middle section expands on the conflict and introduces complications and obstacles for the characters to overcome. The

conclusion resolves the conflict and concludes the story. A basic story map can be a valuable tool for writers to plan and organize their narratives effectively. By breaking a story down into these three fundamental parts, a writer can ensure that their story has a clear structure and direction.

Figure 2

Simple story map (beginning–middle–end)

Note. Retrieved from (TemplateLab, 2019).

Complex story mapping. It enhances the basic structure of simple story mapping by incorporating more detailed elements such as characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution. In this type of story map, each element is broken down into further detail to create a comprehensive framework for the story. The characters are not only identified but also described in terms of their personality, motives, and relationships. The setting is not only a location but also described in terms of the time period, cultural context, and mood it creates. The plot is not only a sequence of events but also described in terms of its structure, pacing, and use of literary devices. The conflict is not only a problem but also described in terms of its complexity, relevance, and impact on the characters. The resolution is not only a solution but also described in terms of its effectiveness, implications, and emotional resonance.

An advanced story map can be an effective tool for writers seeking to create a detailed and cohesive narrative.

Figure 3

Complex story map (characters, setting, plot, conflict and resolution)
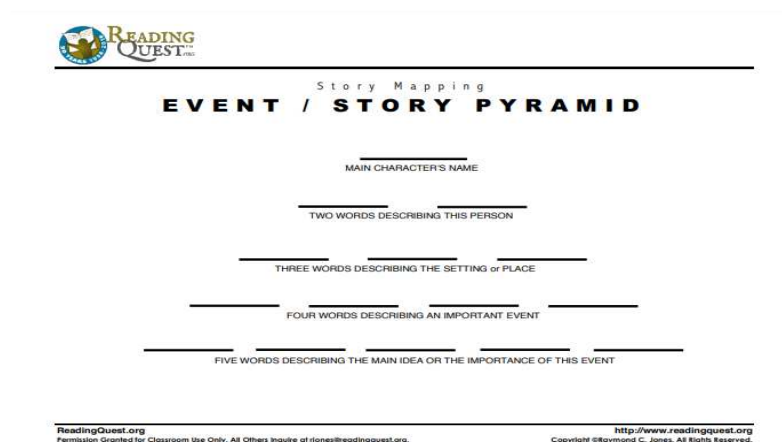
Note. Retrieved from (TemplateLab, 2019)

Story pyramid. The event pyramid can also be implemented in story mapping to organize and prioritize events within a narrative. Each level of the event pyramid can be applied to different elements of the story. By utilizing the event pyramid in story mapping, a writer can ensure that all facets of the story are taken into account and given appropriate priority, resulting in a more coherent and captivating narrative.

Figure 4

Event / story pyramid

Note. Retrieved from (TemplateLab, 2019)

Literary genres

Ismail (2013) highlights that genre, in English writing skills, refers to "a category or type of writing that has specific conventions, rules, and expectations for structure, style, and content" (pp. 8-12). Each genre has its unique characteristics that differentiate it from others and aid readers in comprehending the intended purpose and audience of the writing.

There is a relationship between genre in writing skills and story mapping, because story mapping can be a useful technique for writers to understand and develop the structure of their stories within a specific genre. Story mapping is a method that employs graphic organizers or planning sheets to assist writers in planning and organizing the elements of their stories, including characters, setting, plot, and theme, among others. By utilizing story mapping, writers can have a better grasp of the standards and expectations of their chosen genre and ensure that their stories include the necessary elements to be effective within that genre. Additionally, Usman et al. (2020) explain that "story mapping can assist writers in identifying gaps or inconsistencies in their stories and making revisions to create a more compelling and coherent narrative" (pp. 512-514). Therefore, story mapping can prove to be a valuable tool for writers looking to enhance their English writing skills within a specific genre.

Writing skills

Writing is a valuable skill to express points of view in a way that is clear and understandable to both target audiences and listeners. Sharna (2019) supports that "the ability to write meaningful sentences, lines, and paragraphs that a reader can easily comprehend is known as excellent writing skills. It is essential to be able to communicate ideas in an organized and coherent way through written words. It requires constant practice, patience and dedication to master the basic principles of grammar, sentence and paragraph structure, and to develop your own style that fits the genre and the audience you are addressing.

Planning and outlining

Planning and outlining are crucial steps in the writing process that assist writers in organizing their thoughts and ideas before commencing writing. Planning entails considering the writing's purpose, identifying the target audience, generating ideas, and collecting supporting information. On the other hand, outlining involves creating a coherent and logical structure for the writing itself, usually consisting of headings, subheadings, and brief notes for each section. An outline ensures that all relevant information is included, and the writing progresses smoothly (University of Maryland Global Campus, 2023). These steps provide a clear framework for the writing process, resulting in a more productive, efficient, and high-quality text that is engaging, effective, and easy to read.

Furthermore, Borsellino (2021) emphasizes that "planning and outlining are crucial in creating an excellent story map." Students can enhance the quality of their stories by creating a clear outline that enables them to develop characters and describe settings in detail, bringing their stories to life. Planning ahead allows students to create a roadmap for the story, helping them maintain focus and advance the story in a logical and coherent fashion.

Transition words

Clarke (2016) defines "transitions as words or phrases that signal the connection between primary and secondary ideas". When used appropriately, transition words can enhance the readability and comprehensibility of a piece of writing, guiding the reader through the author's main points and arguments. They also promote a sense

of coherence and unity within individual paragraphs and throughout longer pieces of writing. Possel (2023) similarly asserts that transition words are indispensable in English, as they can connect ideas and introduce changes, contrasts, contradictions, emphases, agreements, purposes, outcomes, conclusions, and more.

Punctuation and capitalization

Punctuation and capitalization are critical components of written English that contribute to conveying clarity, meaning, and tone. The appropriate use of punctuation marks, including commas, semicolons, and periods, can make the difference between a well-constructed sentence and a confusing one. Capitalization, on the other hand, is used to indicate proper nouns, titles, and emphasis (Ellis, 2023).

In story mapping, capitalization is employed to indicate the beginning of a sentence or a proper noun, such as character or location names. Consistency in capitalization throughout the story map also helps the reader in easily identifying key components of the map and comprehending the connections between them. Punctuation is equally important in story mapping techniques to reveal the structure of sentences and, consequently, aid in their interpretation. For example, periods, commas, and semicolons are utilized to establish sentence boundaries and initiate the next sentence. When used improperly or omitted, punctuation can significantly alter the meaning of the sentence and, in turn, the reading experience.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research study used a mixed design approach methodology, that is, quantitative and qualitative data. In this sense, it was quantitative since numerical and statistical data were collected to measure and analyze the perceptions about the use of story mapping techniques through the survey technique. Whereas, the qualitative data, descriptions and comments were gathered from the observation technique, in order to complement the quantitative findings. In addition, the researcher used field notes as part of the research process. This allowed the researcher to document contextual information about the students' progress in English writing skills.

The population of this study was superior basic education students at a public institution in Catamayo canton. In the same way, the researcher selected the participants in the tenth grade of superior basic education by convenience sampling. According to Emerson (2015), this method helps researchers work with a group of specific participants. In this method, sampling is simply based on who is available or who volunteers to participate in the study. The sampling chosen was a group of 27 students in the tenth year of public institution during the 2023-2024 school year. Of the whole group, 12 were males and 15 were females whose age average was between twelve and fourteen years old. The target group had an A2.1 level of proficiency in the English language. Considering the age of the students a consent form was signed by the target representatives. Importantly, the research uses a code to identify each participant to protect the ethical principle of privacy.

This study was conducted by using the action research cycle model, which contributed to solving a problem by part of it. As researcher and future teacher of the English language subject this model was suitable because this study was sequenced in the following stages suggested by Forbes (2014) which were adapted by the researcher in this study:

Exploring. - The researcher began to explore ideas and at the same time, identified a problem in the English writing skills of the target research group and developed a literature review in databases about the problem and possible solutions, so it was possible to develop a more detailed analysis.

Investigating. - The researcher also considered some story mapping techniques such as simple story mapping, complex story mapping, story pyramid and character map templates that were applied in each intervention session. For this reason, the researcher applied stories such as the three little pigs and the beauty sleeping that helped to teach with innovative methodology.

Processing. - In the processing phase, the researcher analyzed the information gathered, evaluated ideas, and synthesized the findings. This phase required careful evaluation of the perceptions of story mapping techniques in improving English

writing skills, and the researcher analyzed the findings to determine the best techniques that improve students' English writing skills.

Creating. - At this stage, the results of the intervention plan were reviewed. To better understand these results, two types of information were analyzed: quantitative and qualitative. These two forms of information were used to arrive at conclusions and recommendations. These conclusions and recommendations helped answer specific questions while providing ideas for future research. In this study, a technique called story mapping was used to improve English writing skills.

4. RESULTS

Questionnaire results

A questionnaire instrument was applied to explore the students' perceptions about the use of story mapping techniques on the improvement of English writing skills among superior basic education students. Additionally, an observation field notes instrument was used as support to describe students' perceptions about story mapping techniques. The results are presented in the following figures.

Figure 5

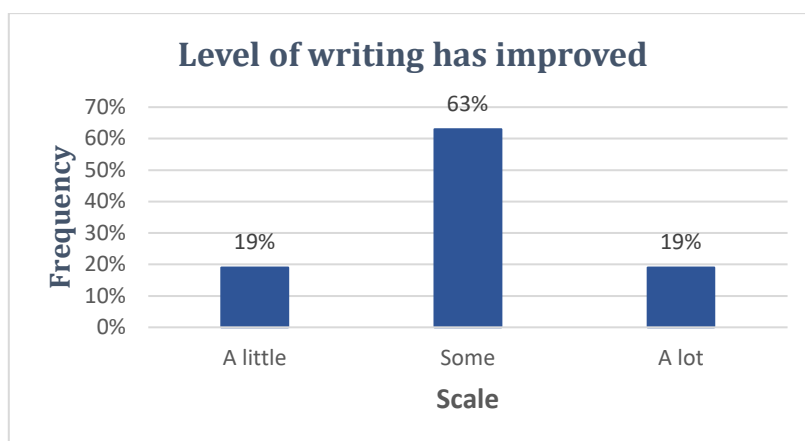*How did you consider story mapping techniques in English classes?*
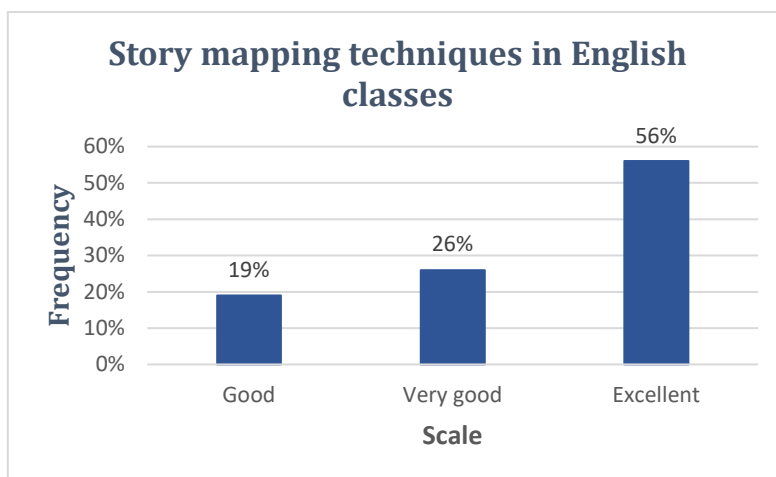
As shown in Figure 5, 56% of students rating the technique as "excellent" and another 26% as "very good," highlighting a strong appreciation for story mapping within the learning process. This feedback highlights the effectiveness of story

mapping in facilitating English learning, suggesting that it not only met but exceeded students' expectations in numerous cases.

56% of students who found story mapping techniques "excellent" indicated that these methods contributed to their learning experience. On the other hand, the 26% of students who rated the technique as "very good" also demonstrate considerable approval. The students found story mapping techniques to be very beneficial. This can be verified through the researcher's field notes because there was active participation in the class.

Figure 6

Do you consider that your writing skills have improved with the story mapping techniques?

As it can be seen in Figure 6, 63% of the students consider that their writing skills have improved thanks to the implementation of story mapping techniques. This suggests a positive impact of these techniques on the development of writing skills. In addition, 19% of the students experienced a slight improvement, which points to an overall benefit of story mapping techniques on students. The results are supported by the researcher's field notes, which provide validity to the students' responses. Therefore, story mapping is an effective tool, to some extent, for improving students' writing skills.

Figure 7

Do you consider that story mapping techniques are effective for learning English?

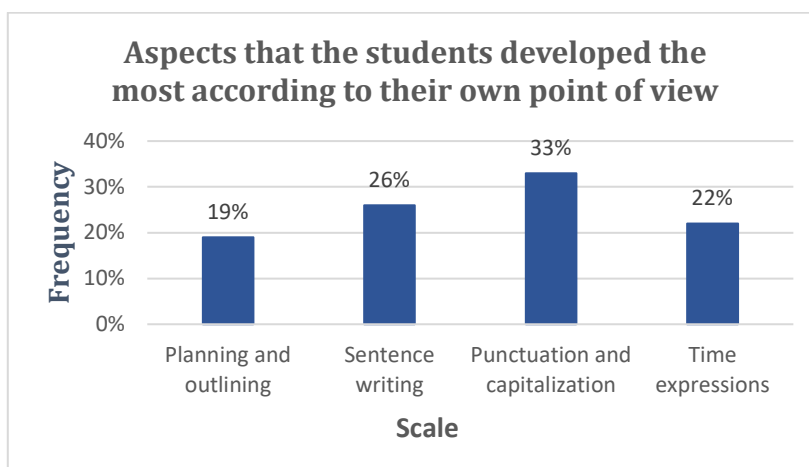**Story mapping techniques is effective for learning English**
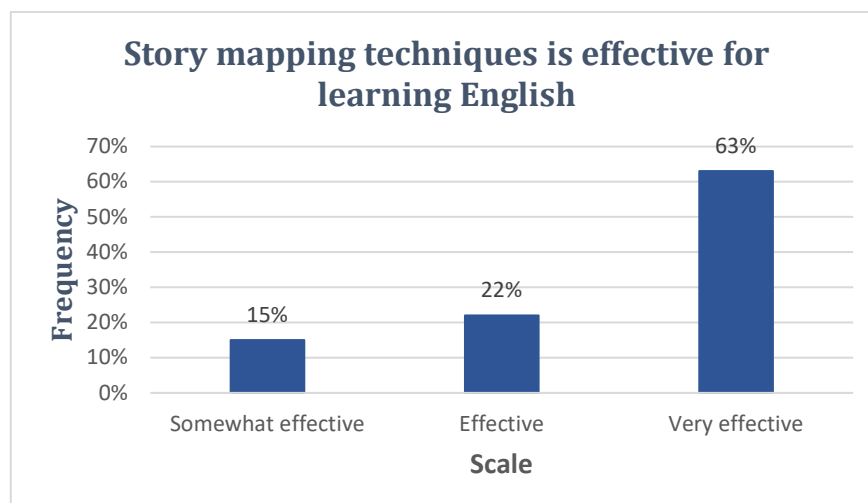
The present bar graph illustrates that 63% of the students indicated that story mapping techniques were "very effective" in learning English and underscores the value of the techniques. Thus, it suggests that a majority of the participants have found story mapping to be a powerful technique for improving their writing skills, facilitating comprehension and retention of the material learned. In addition, 15% of the students considered these techniques as "somewhat effective" because the impact was not as strong for this group, although the usefulness of story mapping in language learning is acknowledged.

The researcher's field notes provide valuable details and qualitative context to support these percentages, offering a more complete overview of the learning process. These notes include specific observations about how students applied story mapping techniques in their study of English, including challenges and successes experienced. This qualitative support is crucial to understanding not only the perceived effectiveness of story mapping, but also how and why it manifested itself in this way among students.
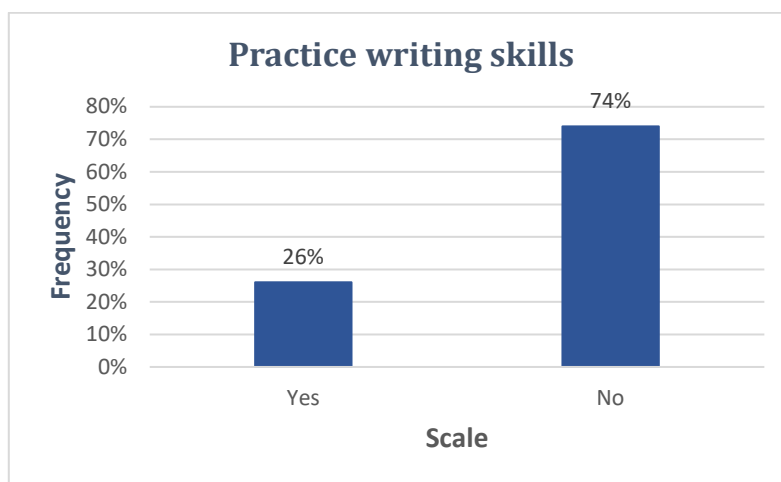
Figure 8

What aspects do you consider had the greatest influence when using the story mapping techniques in learning English?

The results displayed in figure 8 show that 33% of the students identified 'punctuation and capitalization' as the most influential aspect. Story mapping techniques were effective in highlighting the importance of these grammatical rules, which are crucial for clear and accurate writing in English. On the other hand, 25% of the students who chose 'sentence writing' indicated that the story mapping techniques also facilitated a better understanding of how to construct sentences correctly, supporting the development of writing skills. This result is relevant to the researcher's field notes because it demonstrates that students were able to construct simple sentences using the instructional material. Likewise, students improved in their writing because they paid attention to how to start and finish a sentence.

Figure 9

Would you like to continue practicing your writing skills with the story mapping techniques?


This figure 9 demonstrates that 74% of the respondents answered "yes", indicating that the students drew their attention to improving their writing skills. This positive response suggests that these students have probably perceived improvements in their writing skills, attributing part of their progress to the use of story mapping techniques.

On the other hand, the 26% of students who responded "no" indicate that there are still students who do not find story mapping as beneficial or possibly prefer other learning methods. This diversity in student preferences points to the importance of offering different techniques for different learning styles and needs.

In addition, the researcher's field notes include observations on student engagement and improvements when using story mapping, specific challenges some students faced, or even suggestions for improving the story mapping experience. The qualitative data in these notes provide a deeper understanding of the reasons behind student preferences.

Figure 10

Would you like to practice story mapping techniques with material taken from the story such as: The three little pigs, sleeping beauty and/or Romeo and Juliet
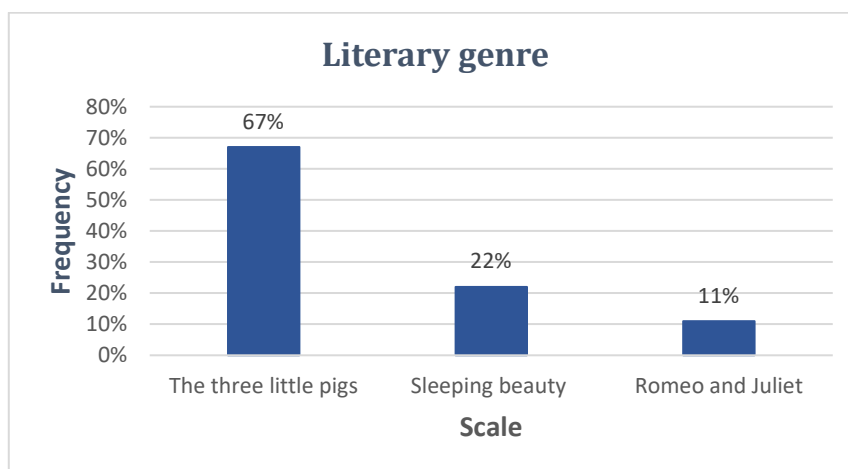

As shown in Figure 10, the majority choice of "The Three Little Pigs" by 67% of the students preferred the use of familiar and simple stories to practice story mapping techniques. This preference was because of the simple narrative structure, which is an accessible and engaging option for perfecting writing. On the other hand, the choice of "Sleeping Beauty" by 22% of the students showed interest in exploring familiar stories. This means the importance of story choice and how it influences student learning.

Additionally, the researcher's field notes revealed that students felt more comfortable and engaged with the characters and plot of "The Three Little Pigs" or that certain themes in "Sleeping Beauty" were especially intriguing to them for the story mapping template exercises.

Figure 11

What did you think of the story mapping technique in class?

How they found the story mapping techniques
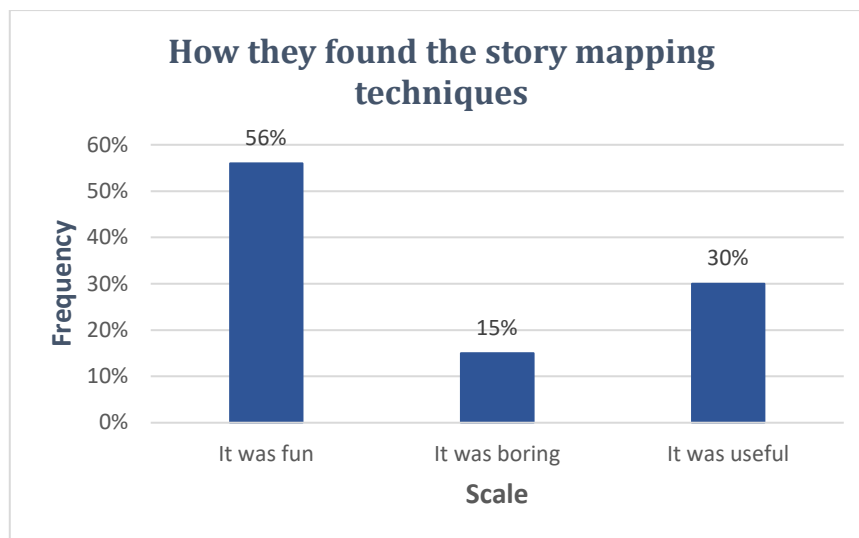
The bar graph in Figure 11 indicated that 67% of students found the techniques "fun" and 22% considered them "useful." The high percentage of students who found the activity fun suggested that the story mapping techniques successfully engaged them, making the learning process more enjoyable.

On the other hand, 22% of the students recognized the usefulness of the technique. These students appreciated how story mapping techniques helped them organize their thoughts, understand story structures, and improve their writing skills, which indicates the effectiveness of the technique in achieving the proposed objectives. The researcher's field notes revealed observations about the students' enthusiasm during the activities and their approach to writing.

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to answer the main research question: What are students' perceptions of the use of story mapping techniques in improving English writing skills among superior basic education students? In response, the data gathered from field notes and questionnaires applied at the end of the process it is valid to say that story mapping techniques had a high acceptance by students. As shown in Figure 5, students felt that the story mapping techniques exceeded their expectations because they contributed to their learning experience. According to Sundari et al. (2019) "students can draw pictures to represent the sequence or write

the keywords using the story mapping templates" (p. 53). This means that the teacher can create a story mapping template appropriate for the type of story assigned.

Likewise, in Figure 8, students identified "punctuation and capitalization" as the most influential aspect. This can be verified with the researcher's field notes because it shows that the students were able to construct simple sentences using the story mapping templates. Similarly, Wilber (2019) in his research work discovered that "these models assist students in organizing their ideas and thoughts logically and coherently by providing a clear visual structure" (para. 1). Moreover, they can aid in the development of critical thinking skills, particularly in deciding which parts of the story should be included and how they should be interconnected. Thus, during the process the students were active and motivated, fostering them to work harder.

Incorporating story mapping techniques in the classroom increased student engagement and motivation, because students connected more with the stories and analyzed them in greater depth. This is in agreement with what Sundari et al. (2019) states that "using story mapping techniques in education is significant as they assist learners in knowing and evaluating the structure of a narrative, leading to enhancements in their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills" (p. 50). In that sense, Figure 9 shows that students prefer to continue improving writing skills with story mapping techniques because they are easy to use. As a matter of fact, there were positive perceptions by part of the students on story mapping techniques, used on the development of English writing skills.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Students' perceptions regarding the efficacy of story mapping techniques on English writing skills were positive, underscoring the enjoyment they experienced during the English learning process. The integration of story mapping templates not only promoted creativity but also heightened engagement among students. Throughout the implementation of these techniques, students were not only intrigued by the challenges presented, but also found relevance and significance in the writing process as they worked towards fulfilling their writing tasks.

In the same way, the students' preference for fairy tales allowed them to feel more emotionally connected to the study material. This emotional resonance empowered students, fostering motivation and creativity throughout the English learning process. By immersing themselves in familiar stories, students were able to engage more deeply with the characters, thus enriching their experience and facilitating greater proficiency in English writing skills.

Finally, the application of templates such as characters, simple, complex, and pyramids as story mapping techniques through stories was significant because students improved both writing skills and motivation in the English language learning. In that sense, it was evidenced during the learning process, students were eager to participate, were active in class and they were capable of achieving the English writing tasks and activities, thus having a dynamic role in the classroom.

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