

We agree to disagree: embracing ambiguity and developing tolerance through micro-fiction

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1. Introduction

For some years now, advanced students taking English IV as part of their Teacher- and Translator-Training programmes at Facultad de Lenguas (UNCo) have been exposed to short-short stories in English. The present paper characterises microfiction and refers to the linguistic, socio-cultural and affective challenges that it poses to EFL learners. We later turn to issues related to tolerance of ambiguity and its relationship to learning a foreign language. On the basis of an experience carried out in 2010, we describe a new study exploring English IV 2012 learners' reactions to a set of short-short stories through diary entries. Learners' contributions to their journals are analysed in search of evidence related to a number of categories of analysis. It is in terms of these criteria that the data are later presented and linked to the development of tolerance of ambiguity and tolerance of others in our context. The results reveal that, even if it was beneficial for the course as a whole, there was a lot of individual variation across participants in the study. Further avenues of research are put forward to investigate learners' long-term development of tolerance of ambiguity and its correlation to learning efficiency.

2. Framework

2.1. A characterisation of microfiction

Microfiction stories belong to a special genre characterised by such brevity that readers easily find themselves engaged in them. Due to their short length, "there would be no enforced pause in the reader's concentration, no break in the field of vision. They would be apprehended "all at once"." (Thomas, 1992: 12) Their conciseness results in highly charged meanings conveyed mainly through what is not explicitly stated but (which) can be retrieved by resorting to different inferential processes. As Andrés-Suárez has stated it, "uncovering what is silenced, suggested or presupposed" all of which

“has more weight than what is actually stated” (Andrés-Suárez 2010 in Mopty 2011) is a challenge every reader should embark on when faced with this genre.

The conciseness of short-short stories demands that readers apply several reading strategies to make sense and eventually reach deeper levels of understanding of the issues dealt with in them. It is precisely due to their short length that microfiction stories “call for a rapid response to textual stimuli” requiring readers to provide “a more accurate understanding of meanings.” The shock provoked in readers forces them to reshape their readings as they encounter new hints in the story. “Its brevity demands the accelerated construction of hypotheses.” (Martínez Carranza de Delucchi y Pendzick de Di Marco 2005: 288) This myriad of expectations, created by the story, leads readers along a short path where they will be faced with a sudden resolution, which will force them to reread it. “In retracing their steps, certain clues are highlighted, which in the first reading were inadvertently assumed to point to a linear interpretation of facts. Readers are required to supply the missing data of different types and make sense of them. Thus, the interaction between anticipation and retrospection is intensified. [...] This genre grants the recipient the opportunity to intensely experience the complexity, diversity and interaction of the reading process.” ¹(Martínez Carranza de Deluchi *et. al*, 2005)

However, size is not their one and only defining feature. Thomas 1992 claims that “like all fiction that matters, their success depends not on their length but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance- the extent to which the reader is able to recognize in them the real stuff of real life”(p.12). This quote highlights the intimate connections readers can establish with the stories since the topics they tackle call for their involvement. Microfiction’s two main characteristics – that of brevity and that of revolving around real life matters – compel readers to become engaged in disentangling the mysteries in them.

¹ This and any other translation from Spanish into English have been provided by the authors. Any shortcoming is entirely our own responsibility.

A by-product of reading microfiction is that, when faced with the challenge of interpreting these works, each reader may come up with a different account of the theme and situation the story presents. In fact, it is exactly this feature of there not being a unique or correct interpretation of the accounts that makes of these stories an excellent recourse to be used in an EFL classroom.

If this is the case for native readers of short short stories, for advanced learners of English as a foreign language exposed to microfiction, each story represents even more of a linguistic, socio-cultural and affective challenge which involves them as active readers who need to bring to the story their own understanding of the text.

2.1.1. Linguistic features

Because of microfiction's characteristic brevity, each lexical item in stories is highly charged with meaning and ideas are expressed with the minimum number of words. For this reason, the mysteries condensed in individual words entail a linguistic effort on the part of the reader who has to decipher them, resorting to the little evidence available. To make matters worse, FL readers of microfiction are denied the chance of creating meaning from any redundant yet meaning-making surrounding text. Readers' capacity to make sense of these stories is stretched to the limit and, many a time, the misunderstanding of an expression may yield a wrong or a superficial interpretation of the issue at stake. Grammar and the special relationships denoted by certain structures also pose a challenge language learners need to face in order to grasp how the story unfolds and then derive yet other meanings from what is not explicitly told.

In conclusion, the linguistic rendering of the combined characteristics of microfiction presents EFL learners in our context with a daunting prospect, since they are to draw meaning from sometimes unknown words, or known words used with connotations which are different from their usual ones.

2.1.2. Socio-cultural features

Microfiction represents not only a linguistic challenge but also a cultural one, in the sense that learners are invited to explore different social and cultural realities. "More than in any other text type, literary sources embody a wealth of cultural information. Plots and themes may be universal and timeless, but settings, characters, and dialogue tend to be rooted in the time and culture shared or created by the author." (Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009: 247). In microfiction, these elements appear to be reduced to their minimum exponent in that the length of the text does not allow for a complete description of, for example, the setting. Readers plunge into the universe of the story without being properly introduced to the characters and the culture in which they live. Thus, they have to work out the details embedded in linguistic cues. Moreover, the topics dealt with in microfiction are representative of whole socio-cultural environments which have been condensed in the language used, the reduced number of words and the situation itself. The combination of these elements provides a fertile ground for the inferential processes required for readers to make the most of these stories in terms of their analysis, depth of comprehension and variety of interpretations.

Some experts "approach literature as a window into culture" (Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009:247). From this perspective, every literary text constitutes an opportunity for readers to become acquainted with a whole universe of experiences that is socio-culturally characterised. As Collie and Slater (1987) noted, literary sources provide "a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions, what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors" (p. 4)" (in Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009: 247). Once confronted with these worlds, learners are to compare others' realities to their own and acknowledge their existence and the differences between those and theirs.

Delving into other cultural worlds and experiencing protagonists' innermost feelings may provide our students with a panoramic view that

enables them to value cultural diversity. Exploring unknown universes and characters' multiple realities should help learners broaden their understanding of what mankind encompasses and of the extremes to which humans can go, without passing judgement over others' behaviour. Analysing sociocultural aspects with learners, such as poverty, hunting and the preserving of food in the countryside, the importance of tattoos in a futuristic society, as well as drug addiction, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, and parenting among others, and how they are dealt with in contemporary short- short stories can lead to enriching classroom discussions.

2.1.3. Affective features: ambiguity

The fact that microfiction stories deal with real life matters makes readers get involved with them either because they feel identified with the topics or because they have taken a stance as to the issue at stake. The relationship established between what is being read and the reader necessarily stirs emotions which affect the bond every reader develops with the story. This emotional engagement creates an appropriate environment in EFL lessons which is perfect to generate class debates.

Because microfiction can be defined as a world of ambiguity and endless possibilities, it allows for an infinite wealth of interpretations among students, which, in turn, promotes each learner's participation. However, this very ambiguity is not embraced in the same fashion by all learners and their reaction towards it is varied when learners are first confronted with this genre. Since learning to deal with it has many implications for both language learners and classrooms, this will be analysed in the section that follows.

2.2. Tolerance of ambiguity in Foreign Language Learning

"Language learning for real communicative use, especially in situations which demand structural and lexical precision, is an extremely demanding whole-person engagement. It requires the learner to cope with information gaps, unexpected language situations, new cultural norms, and substantial uncertainty." (Ehrman, 1999:74) Therefore, being able to tolerate ambiguity is

vital to succeed in the learning of a foreign language whose objective is to develop real communicative strategies. In fact, "the capacity to tolerate ambiguities and uncertainties is [...] essential to the understanding of the other. The capacity to **entertain an alternate hypothesis is a mark of the successful blend of cognitive and affective templates** that can lead to new discoveries." (Guiora, 1981:171) These quotes combine aspects of each of the multiple features described in section 2.1 above with respect to microfiction as a linguistic, socio-cultural and affective challenge for EFL. These concepts show us the need to gain a better understanding of the complex nature of helping learners in their development of some tolerance of ambiguity.

Ehrman (1999) claims that "Ego boundaries relate to the amount of fluidity in mental categories, especially those that relate to one's identity, one's relation with other people and other ways of perceiving the world" (p. 70), which seems to be intricately related to our approach to "the other" and to their culture, opinions and views.

Ego boundaries resemble those between countries and, according to their width or thickness, they might affect the relationship between 'us' and 'the others'. In some cases, "too much stability of identity and compartmentalization can result in very constricted lives with little adaptive flexibility, including dealing with new language and cultures" (*op. cit.* p.70). Thick ego-boundaries as these might hinder relating to others and to our environment and turn into barriers for our language learning process.

On the contrary, "thin ego-boundaries can also be associated with great sensitivity and creativity" (Levin, 1990; Hartmann, 1991 in Ehrman, 1999:70). Students with thin boundaries tend to "have everything available at once so they can get a sense of how everything relates [...] and enjoy unexpected learning events." (Ehrman, 1999:72)

Because of its intrinsic ambiguity, microfiction may become a trigger for the development of affective aspects like accepting ambiguity, which is essential for successful learning (Ehrman, 1999; Arnold and Brown, 1999) and which is claimed to lead to autonomy (Erten and Zehir Topkaya, 2009). Due to

the multiple interpretations that might derive from a single story, working with microfiction in the foreign language class will also be conducive to a more tolerant attitude towards dissent.

Throughout discussion sessions of short stories in the foreign language, we have witnessed learners defending their views against others', failing to acknowledge the fact that the main characteristics of this genre are its ambiguity and open-endedness. It is our belief that, while genuinely using the L2 in an attempt to reach consensus and through the development of tolerance of ambiguity, learners should gradually come to terms with an alternative: to agree to disagree. They might thus be encouraged to exercise their tolerance of such uncertainties and embrace more than one possible interpretation.

3. Experience

In this section we will describe the experiences carried out in 2010 and during this current year. The former will be presented as a springboard for the latter and the 2012 study will be described in terms of the participants involved, its objectives, the procedures followed, data collection measures and some categories put forward to analyse the data.

3.1. Participants

Fifty three learners taking the English IV course during 2012 were invited to participate in the experience. These learners are advanced English Teacher-trainees and Translator-trainees, only three of which are male. Their ages range from 20 to 27.

3.2. Objectives

Most of the objectives of this specific experience are framed within those of the course in the sense that learners are expected to genuinely use the foreign language to interact with their peers as they develop their oral skills. In particular this experience seeks,

- To help learners perceive the foreign language as a window on to different cultures and realities in our current world.
- To help learners develop and/or make a wider use of higher order reading strategies that will enable them to reach understanding independently of word-meaning, resorting to other cues in the texts.
- To provide opportunities for learners to express their thoughts and opinions in the oral and written modes on a number of topics, with the adequate degree of accuracy and fluency, and the appropriateness suitable to the context in which they are speaking and/or writing
- To explore learners' reaction to microfiction with respect to its brevity and conciseness and the different interpretations this genre might foster
- To help learners develop some degree of tolerance of ambiguity towards microfiction
- To encourage them to extend this tolerance to other areas of language learning

3.3. Procedure

In 2010, learners were asked to work in groups and select a short short story either from the net (*Smokelong Quarterly*²) or from different anthologies of Flash Fiction, Sudden fiction and Microfiction. Students analysed their own story and posed questions to generate the discussion of the main themes in the texts. In different sessions, each small group guided a debate based on their peers' opinions regarding key issues in the stories selected. By taking on different roles (as monitors, material designers and facilitators), they were encouraged to deal with and help others manage the sense of anxiety stemming not only from the open endings typical of the genre but from the elusiveness as regards themes. Learners' search for a unique interpretation collided with the vagueness in stories. Participants' comments on these issues were gathered from their in-class informal discussions once the sessions were over and towards the end of the year. No formal data collection procedure was used throughout the 2010 experience. After this preliminary study, we set out

² <http://smokelong.com/>

this year to record learners' reaction to this genre, its characteristics and the emotions it stirs.

Since our aim this year was to explore how participants respond to the inherent complexities and ambiguities in short-short stories, we included a series of lessons for learners to face this type of text and analyse several samples. In March, learners were introduced to the genre through a session on the story "Everything" by C.B. Anderson, guided by the teachers. This first lesson served as a model of the type of work learners would be expected to carry out in groups.

At a later stage, learners were grouped and invited to choose one of a set of stories which had been selected by the teachers according to their relevance to the topic "Strange Behaviour", dealt with in that particular unit from the syllabus (see Appendix A for a list of the samples of microfiction explored and analysed by the different groups). This was one of the modifications introduced with respect to the experience carried out in 2010.

Like then, this year, each group was asked to

- a. read the story carefully and ensure that all meanings were understood,
- b. detect the main issue and the conflicts present in the story and
- c. prepare a set of questions that would help their peers discuss issues in the short-short story, hypothesise on matters not overtly expressed, allow them to empathise with the characters while exploring their feelings and examine possible connections between the title and the content of the story.

These questions were revised by the teachers and, on a given date each group presented the story and the questions to their peers. The rest of the students had been informed in advance about the short story they would deal with, so they could read it beforehand. In small groups in class, they analysed the questions they had been assigned. After a 20-to-30-minute discussion, learners engaged in a whole-class debate, led by the group in charge of that story, in which students exchanged their views.

If necessary, the teachers posed questions that challenged some interpretations with the aim of opening up the debate to other alternatives that had not been contemplated. Every time a session on a story concluded,

students were instructed to complete an entry in their online microfiction journals, which are described in the following section.

3.4. Data-collection

In order to collect data on learners' reflections on each of the stories, they were encouraged to fill in, in their online journals, a paragraph following the instructions transcribed below.

In this journal, you will have the chance to write personal comments about your feelings while reading microfiction.

Every time we read a short short story, you should write a diary entry below considering the following:

What reaction did the story stir in you? Expand.

Have you felt identified with any of the characters? Why?_____

Box 1: Prompt given on PEDCO for journal entries

The aim of this instruction was to get learners to write freely about their reactions towards reading microfiction as a genre and towards each of the selected stories. Through this general question we expected to guide participants in their analysis of the characteristics of these stories. Participants were intended to avoid any reference to the gist of the story or even to the themes developed, which is why they were steered away from more typical EFL learning tasks and towards a less controlled account of their experience while reading short-short stories. The more specific question "What reaction did the story stir in you? Expand" sought to invite learners to reflect on the "jolt" (Martínez Carranza de Deluchi *et al*, 2005: 289) that microfiction is set to provoke. We anticipated learners might delve into an analysis of the mixed emotions caused by the clash between expectations created by the story and the way the "conflict" was resolved.

The second question “Have you felt identified with any of the characters? Why?” was meant to encourage learners to empathise with the characters and thus relate to their inner selves. By leading learners to dig into their feelings towards the stories and towards reading microfiction, we expected to find, in their answers to this question, evidence for their attitudes towards the ambiguity in short-short stories.

Learners’ entries, including one for the initial session guided by the teachers, were uploaded onto their own profiles on the university online platform (PEDCO) and were later downloaded by the teachers for their analysis. Not all learners completed an entry for all the stories worked on in class; some wrote about their reactions to the story even if they were absent during its class discussion.

The analysis of the journals, which is described in the next section, was meant to detect signs of doubts and questions, alternative interpretations, uncertainty and the acceptance of ambiguity. Learners were expected to gradually grow more aware of the issues that should not be taken for granted in the stories, and their journals were expected to evince, as time passed and more instances of microfiction were discussed in class, growing evidence of these doubts or questions. To this purpose, a set of categories of analysis was established, each of which will be discussed below.

3.5. Categories of analysis

Each of the categories presented is used as evidence of different levels of the open-mindedness with which each participant approached the stories. This characteristic will be considered as an indicator of the degree to which learners are tolerant of the ambiguity inherent in this genre.

Because what were analysed were journals, the analysis only focused on some categories or parameters, taking into account the fact that participants were not required to write about any details of the stories themselves, as observed in the prompt above. The subjective nature of this type of data collection procedure also allowed for a more subjective approach to the task and, therefore, for more personal contributions. A different, more detailed and

objective type of analysis might impose constraints on the richness of the information, and as a result, offer a more fragmented perspective of the data and of participants' views. The categories put forward are arbitrary and may overlap, providing evidence for perhaps more than one indicator of the abstract notion of tolerance of ambiguity.

Learners were told, in advance, that these journal entries would be analysed for research purposes. However, they were assured that there would be no grading involved and that they were free to express feelings, ideas and opinions on the stories dealt with.

Journal entries were analysed linguistically, particularly focusing on the following features, which have been conceived of as indicators of the variable "degree of tolerance of ambiguity":

- a. Modals indicating degrees of certainty
- b. Adjectives or adverbs
- c. Repetition of wording/phrases used in class by the teacher
- d. Liking vs. not liking the story
- e. Linguistic evidence of a contrast between first and successive readings
- f. Sentence structure: questions

Evidence of these linguistic aspects would throw light on their attitude to issues like the topic, the plot, their interpretation and the process of reading this genre. From their diary entries, we would also obtain information on their approach to the task itself, as well as to what they interpreted the session was supposed to be about and what they assumed they were to do in the journal entries. Through this analysis we also expected to find evidence of, for instance, a judgmental attitude of what characters did or didn't do and what they should have done.

3.5.1. Modals indicating degrees of certainty

Learners' diaries will be explored in search of instances of modal verbs and other similar expressions which indicate attitude towards information and

towards people. We particularly intend to focus on those instances which denote degrees of un/certainty with regard to certain events. Lack of this type of modality in their production might reflect learners' conception of these events as absolute truths or unquestionable facts. This, in turn, might indicate that learners are more/less ready to handle the possibility of ambiguity.

The use of certain modals will evince learners' attitudes towards other people, for example, characters in the stories. Instances of modals indicating suggestions and "the importance of doing something" (*Collins COBUILD English Grammar*, 1990: 236) will also be taken into account as indicators of learners' relative role with respect to others. Participants' position as readers expressing an opinion of the moral weight of, for example, characters' actions could show the degree to which they are (or not) tolerant of others, their behaviour and their personality.

3.5.2. Adjectives or adverbs

In the analysis of the journals we will record any occurrences of adjectives, such as *confused*, *puzzled*, and *surprised*, denoting participants' reactions to the characteristics of microfiction in general. Through this category, we will also investigate the effects that the themes, and the way in which each author deals with them in each story, have on participants. We will not only concentrate on adjectives connected with feelings and emotions, but on post-modifying expressions and related nouns signalling how the stories affected their frame of mind. For example, we will attempt to determine whether the story has caused them to start thinking of other alternatives, or if it has shocked them when discovering an unexpected twist.

3.5.3. Repetition of wording/phrases used in class by the teacher

Learners' entries will be analysed in search of expressions used by the teachers themselves during the whole class discussion/s. Evidence of this verbatim repetition might indicate, on the one hand, that learners wanted to show they had picked up specific vocabulary that they thought sounded just

right or expressed exactly what they wanted to say. On the other hand, it may reflect their uncritical and comfortable attitude towards the tasks of seeking understanding and writing their journals. If they use the same words as the teacher/s, it may be hard to tell what they themselves really believe since there is no elaboration on their part of what was discussed in class. In adopting someone else's wording, they might be reproducing the ideologies behind it in an uncritical fashion. Thus, they may miss the chance to interpret the events in their own terms and to share their interpretation and make it their own by providing their verbalisation of their ideas.

3.5.4. The like-not like dichotomy and reasons for their choice

Learners' preferences in their journals will be analysed as indicators of the criteria they used to evaluate the short short stories. Reasons why they did not like the story based on grounds like complexity or emotional distance/remoteness might indicate that they were not actually open to the characteristics of the genre and that it may be hard/er for them to embrace the challenges, both linguistic and affective, that the stories pose for them.

Likewise, favouring it because they have gone through similar situations might also shed light on some type of shallow analysis that might not allow them to relate to a situation they might not have undergone. This, in turn, will be connected to learners' degree of open-mindedness with respect to others' realities and socio-cultural universes. If one does not like a story because there is nothing in it one can feel identified with, then there is no room for analysis of a situation that goes beyond the world one is familiar with. If the stories are meant to help them perceive and acknowledge different cultures and related aspects, and their reaction is one of dislike of the unknown, this can easily be linked to a lack of the main ingredient /skill /premise /component we are seeking to develop in them: awareness of others.

Failing to recognise what those other realities might be like might be a consequence of a thick ego boundary (Ehrman, 1999:71), which might therefore account for a kind of resistance to the unknown.

3.5.5. Linguistic evidence of a contrast between first and successive readings

Evidence of possible contrasts between first and successive readings (and after discussion sessions) and of some type of reformulation of hypotheses will point to participants' heightened understanding of the characteristics of the genre, for example the non lineal development of plots in stories.

Acknowledging that more clues and data can be found within the text to solve the puzzle as the reading process becomes more elaborate will eventually lead students to different interpretations and will only become visible after they go over the story more than once. This criterion is related to the characterisation of microfiction drawn in section 2.1 with respect to the path we are guided along while reading these tales (Martínez Carranza de Delucchi *et al*, 2005:288-9).

3.5.6. Sentence structure: questions

Sentence structure, especially in the case of questions, is particularly relevant to the way learners present the information on which they have reflected. The journal entries will be analysed in search of questions introducing genuine queries learners may have considered, especially after conscientious reading of the short short story. Affirmative sentences (with no modality of certainty/uncertainty) correlate with a less flexible interpretation of the stories, while questions can be taken as evidence of a more critical attitude to original assumptions on the part of the reader, and even as a denial of what they have, after a first reading, interpreted.

The abovementioned linguistic analysis will be complemented by two other categories of analysis which may not necessarily point to a heightened

tolerance of ambiguity, but which may shed light on other aspects we consider relevant to learners' readiness to accept ambiguity. These two factors are described below.

3.5.7. Meta-Analysis of microfiction

A further criterion we will take as an indicator of ambiguity is explicit reference to the characteristics of the genre. Learners may refer to previous knowledge acquired during their literature courses or they may overtly mention a process of realisation of what they have discovered in the process of reading and analysing the selected tales. Mention of characteristics such as their condensed brevity, the inherent ambiguity of settings and contexts of situation, as well as the lack of details, will especially be sought in the data as indicators of an increased level of awareness of what is typical of the genre. If it is presented as something that is not unexpected considering the type of text that is being analysed, this might be interpreted as evidence of a certain amount of tolerance towards the uncertainty that stems from the combination of these linguistic traits of short short stories. In fact, Ehrman (1999) claims that thin ego-boundary people "enjoy unexpected learning events." (p.72)

3.5.8. Relationships with other texts: intertextuality

Evidence of connections established between the themes dealt with in the story and other types of text denotes a cognitive process involving both the analysis of the text explored and other samples of literature or fiction learners have encountered in their lives. Drawing from these sources of background knowledge to elaborate on the topics of the short short stories is taken as an indicator of higher order mental processes, even if not merely linguistic. This, in turn, is presented in the literature as a sign of "thin ego boundaries" (Ehrman, 1999:71) in those who "accept almost all aspects of their experiences in the world". These people need to "have everything available at once so they can get a sense of how everything relates" (Ehrman, 1999: 72), which provides evidence of the criterion set to determine whether those

learners writing journal entries have exhibited traits of thin or thick ego boundaries.

Most of the criteria outlined above, whether linguistic, meta-analytical or intertextual, have been linked to degrees of thickness/thinness of ego boundaries and to attitudes towards ambiguity and tolerance of others. In the following sections we will describe the results obtained through the journals in terms, first, of learners' reactions to "Everything", which was the first story whose discussion was guided by the teachers as a first approach to the genre. Later, we will turn to the analysis of the entries for all other stories and for participants in general, within the structure provided by the criteria delineated in this section. A word of caution needs to be issued here for absence of evidence for any of the criteria above need not imply that a participant has a thin/thick ego boundary. Lack of evidence is simply a result of the unstructured data collection procedure employed and this is the reason why the results will not be approached quantitatively but rather in a descriptive fashion.

4. Results and discussion

In this section we analyse excerpts of participants' journals which might indicate degrees of tolerance towards the ambiguity in microfiction. Given that work on the first short short story was guided by teachers and since during this initial session learners were introduced to the type of reading process they would be required to engage in, a separate section is included dealing with this.

4.1. "Everything"

The fact that in one of the stories a young kid was made sick while skinning a deer with his father shocked many of our students, who mistook the experience as a form of abuse. Unaware of certain cultural practices commonplace in the countryside, learners assigned a negative connotation to the event and were unable to perceive it as an ordinary experience in the life

of a child living in a rural area, whose father was passing on the knowledge and skills of the trade³.

- As far as *Everything* is concerned, **I didn't like the story the first time** I read it. I found the father's actions rather cruel for a little kid. When I read it for a second time, my perspective changed. I understood why he let his son see such a moment. S26⁴
- Everything by CB Anderson: At first I didn't like this story because I found it quite difficult to read and follow as **this was my first time reading a story as short as this one**. Then after **discussing it in class** I sort of liked it. S35
- The first time I read **Everything**, I felt somehow sick and rather disgusted given that I have a very vivid imagination and, as I read it, I imagined every single situation. However, I am aware of the fact that **one of microfiction's aims is to involve the reader in the situation as an active participant** and it certainly achieved its goal in my case.
- "Everything" is a quite interesting story because it **hides many different issues that can be a matter of discussion**. Besides, it made me **reconsider my own perspectives** and **I was opened to new interpretations**. S4
- This was the first short story we all read in class and I remember being really fascinated by it. I like the way in which **each paragraph presents a moment of a man's life and how the last one is unexpectedly connected to the beginning**. This is why I consider this story so **well written**, for there **are details or phrases that express the whole story's** message but are only noticed or linked after finish reading it. (S41)

³ All the quotes that are included from this section onwards will be transcribed as originally written by participants. We acknowledge the number of mistakes in them, but have decided against signaling each of them in order to respect the communicative nature of the task and the type of analysis these data were submitted to. Including "sic" every time a mistake appeared would have resulted in a very intrusive factor.

⁴ We have coded each excerpt according to a number assigned to each participant in order to preserve students' identity. Wherever necessary, the name of the short short story has been included.

All the examples above show very positive results of this introductory experience of reading microfiction, as all students reflect on the enriching class discussion through which they were able to reexamine initial interpretations and accept and handle the novelty of this genre. We can find, in these excerpts, explicit reference to the discussion process and its thought-provoking outcomes. What is also note-worthy is participants' discovery or awareness of the textual characteristics that define this genre and the positive effect these have had on them.

In the following quotation a different outlook on the reading experience is presented.

- First and foremost, this short story had some revolting scenes. Gratefully, I have never had to do something like killing an animal or "peeling" its skin. This scene together with the scene when the boy (a father now) grabs a mouse were repulsive. (S1)

In this particular case, participant 1 cannot detach herself from what actually shocked him/her, and the emotional impact is such that the scope of analysis is limited to this aspect and cannot be extended to other features of the story. Although similar in nature and feelings evoked, the following extract sheds a different type of light on the process undergone by this other learner:

- As regards "Everything", I was very shocked when I first read it because of the description on how the skin of the deer was removed. I'm a sensitive person so while I was reading that part I felt very revolting. **However**, at the end **I could understand the whole idea** and also that **the description was a kind of metaphor** which was necessary for the reader to know how the boy felt at that moment. (S45)

As can be observed, although equally shocked at first, what she calls "revolting" is re-analysed as necessary for the writer to convey meanings. A similar case is presented by S43, who does not perceive this situation as unnatural or shocking since her own childhood experiences contain similar memories.

- At the very beginning my reaction was to say poor boy. Then, I started remembering myself **helping my father to hang tight lambs' hoofs to cut their throats to later on eat them**. That situation wasn't revolting for me, **it was normal!** I think, it all depends on people's sensitivity and the way you are explained why you do that.

4.2. The other stories

4.2.1. Modals indicating degrees of certainty

A clear example of what modality can convey in learners' entries can be found below:

- **It seems that** his brother had the tendency of consuming drugs and practising extreme sports, so this man was used to this kind situations or watching his brother in such a state. **We may believe** that this man usually had premonitions about his brother and something bad happening to him, this is why he is not surprised by the call. **We may also think** that perhaps these brothers were actually twins and one brother had premonitions about the other on account of the strong bond between them. S4

This participant is careful when presenting his/her own interpretation of events in the story. (S)he introduces some of the sentences with expressions like "it seems" and the modal verb "may", even if some other predicates are stated as facts ("he is not surprised by the call"). Similarly, in the quotations below, we can notice how the participants are unassertive as to what is a fact in the story, and instead highlight what "my interpretation" is, and are cautious to introduce their comments through "I believe it is".

- **My interpretation** about this story is that it deals with issues such as past and what people usually choose to remember from it. Also, **I believe it is** about a woman who experienced difficult situation in her past which now disturb her mind. S27

- *Miracle*: "When I first read the story **I got the impression that** the accident was a joke so as to see the narrator's reaction towards the scene." S26

These softening expressions may be taken as indicators of these participants' uncertainties. Presenting their interpretations as merely a possibility and not a fact shows that they can cope with the ambiguity of not being sure if this is the case.

- **I think she did** become famous, I want to believe it; **she may have been** a great dancer, but always coming back to her father. As the little girl grew up, she **must have understood** that her father was not a model parent, but quite the opposite in fact. Did she leave him? I do not think so. **Maybe** she realized what an awful parent he was, but he was her father anyway, so she felt tied to him. **She may have given him** part of the money she earned. S2

In the quotation above this participant not only is careful about the factuality of the events she describes, but she also evinces an inferential process whereby she arrives at possible interpretations of the story.

Contrarily, the excerpt below indicates a different stance towards the events in "Regrets". In this case, what this participant interprets from the story is presented in her entry as a fact in itself, even though she is ascribing personal meaning to the chain of events. This deductive process also present in the extract above is desirable for it reveals some elaboration of the material in the story. However, writing about these deductions as if they were facts, without recourse to modality, rules out any other alternative and leaves no room for others' opinions.

- An issue I think it'd be worth mentioning is that, although **she believed that** her apologizing constantly for other people's mistakes **would let her heal** the wounds of all the people she'd hurt, **it was not true**.

Hiding herself behind insincere apologies was not **what she was supposed to do** to make amends for everything she'd done wrongly. S7

Some participants seem to know for a fact what the story is about and what exactly readers were expected to understand, and will not even question their own interpretations as personal or subjective. This can be perceived in the absence of any type of modality and in the directness of predicates, as illustrated below.

- This story **is about** a pair of twins. One of them **had** an accident whereas the other brother **had** a dream about that episode. **He saw** his brother running next to his car downhill and trying to stop the car. He was probably high on something, under the effects of alcohol or drugs. The young twin **always considered** his brother like a superhero and what came afterwards was not funny for him. S13

The story this learner refers to is open as to the identity and type of relationship between the two main characters. One might be led to believe that, because of the connection between them, they could be twins, but we are not told if this is so, and if they are two brothers or even a brother and a sister. We even ignore which one is older. However, in this entry, all these options and possible alternatives are not contemplated.

4.2.2. Adjectives or adverbs

In the excerpts below, a positive effect can be perceived through learners' choice of adjectives characterising the stories.

- Bare Anna is a **fascinating story** since it deals **with different topics** such as the influence of people's cultural background, breaking promises and the importance of rituals. Besides this, the writer of this story **lets readers draw different inferences** about Anna's feelings as it seems that she is not totally sure of tattooing her baby. S37
- Tuesday: This story was very **interesting** because we had to **deduce what may have happened to the older girl**, the relationship she had

with her dad and what had happened to her mother. The story made me think about the current situation with adolescents nowadays as there are many cases of overdoses. (S51)

The adjectives *fascinating* and *interesting* and the reasons put forward for these appreciations reflect how open learners are to the reading process although it might involve entertaining competing interpretations, uncertainty and open endings. These features of microfiction are not considered obstacles for participants to derive some pleasure from the reading experience.

In contrast, in the three examples below, a different attitude to these same features taints learners' impressions of the stories.

- The Off-season: This story was quite **confusing** as it has an open ending and we don't get to know whether they continued being together or split up. For me, knowing that was an important detail as their relationship was really **odd and unpredictable**. S40
- "Important things" is a **really strange** story. I got **confused** while I was reading it. It is interesting the topics that are introduced in it but **the idea is not rounded up**. S45
- After analyzing it, I thought that it was **too bizarre for my taste**. I didn't like the fact that the girl's sister was so accustomed to seeing her sister in that state that she didn't do anything to help. **It was too harsh** for me. S19

These participants seem unable to go beyond some unusual traits in short short stories so their analysis is interrupted and they cannot get over the shock these unexpected twists cause in them. Some other learners, however, are initially shocked but recover and accept the resulting options as likely to happen. Such is the case illustrated below:

- I was really **shocked** when I read this story. **The idea of tattooing a baby before born never appeared in my mind till I read the story.**

That's a **strange** behaviour!!! And in the story it was something **normal**... S44

4.2.3. Repetition of wording/phrases used in class by the teacher

The following quotations exemplify how participants used similar expressions to write in their journals about the same short story, particularly, "Selective Memory". Moreover, the teacher recalls having used those specific expressions in class while discussing general issues in the story.

- the short short stories were juicy (**as the teacher always says** haha) and really interesting. S30
- (Selective memory) **make peace with** her past. In spite of having **held a grudge** for so many years, she was able to forgive him in order **to travel light**. S1
- (Selective memory) to do away with the bad ones so as to **travel light**. She did not want to keep **holding a grudge against** her husband any more because those angry memories were **polluting** her. She wanted to **make peace** and finally forgave him. S4
- (Selective memory) As **the teacher** said, she was trying to **settle business** before dying so as to **"travel light"**. S10

These learners' verbatim repetitions of teachers' wording might lead us to believe that they are reluctant to question the authority of an informed interpretation by someone they believe is knowledgeable. If, however, we take into account that these same learners have evinced a critical and open-minded stance towards different stories in the journals, venturing alternative interpretations after overcoming an initial moment of shock, their repetitions of words could be more linked to their condition as foreign language learners and the process they undergo when trying to acquire new expressions.

4.2.4. "like" vs. "not like" (or synonyms)

Some participants define their dislike towards the stories basing their decision on not having a clear-cut idea of certain aspects of the stories, feeling confused or puzzled if they cannot have control over all the details in them.

- "I **did not like** it so much since I **got very confused**. Even though I read it many times, **it was still impossible for me to realize whether the brother had died or not...**" S24.
- Important things: I **didn't like** this story at all, maybe because **there were many things I didn't understand**. Furthermore, we were not able to discuss all the questions related to the story because we didn't have much time in the class. All the same, **I felt quite confused** after reading the story and **the fact that it wasn't clear who the narrator was worsen the situation**. S25

These learners' comments provide evidence that their not being able to understand all the events in the stories has had a great influence on their assessment of them, to such an extent that they end up not liking them, which clearly indicates their intolerance of ambiguity. Even though the participant in the excerpt below seems to be able to entertain different interpretations, not having deciphered "a" message prevents him/her from liking it.

- Miracle: This story had **many possible interpretations**, but when I read it for the first time I **felt really confused. I just couldn't understand anything. I still don't know** if the man in the story died or if he was just playing a joke. Then, **what I interpreted was** that he was just joking but that, without knowing, he would die afterwards. **Anyway, I couldn't figure out the message of the story, so I didn't like it much**. S31

Something similar takes place in the case below:

- Regrets: This was the story I presented and **did not like it at all**. Although the **message it gives is true**, I found the story **boring and not appealing. We are not given enough information** about the girl's life and the **reason for her to be sorry is completely**

unknown. What is worse, **I did not feel like imagining what could have happened to her.**

This last quote adds one more issue to the abovementioned reasons for disliking the stories: the fact that he/she is not willing to make an effort to provide his/her own views about what might have been the case. This type of apathy towards the active role this genre requires of readers constitutes a great obstacle with respect to one of the objectives set to help learners in this course: to genuinely use the foreign language to interact with their peers as they develop their oral skills.

On the other hand, other learners take these same features of microfiction as the very reason why they enjoy the stories, especially because several hypotheses can be drawn:

- Miracle: What a twisted story! I had many difficulties in understanding the story because it can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Anyway, **I like challenges so I enjoyed it.** S33

Even though this participant characterises the story as *twisted* and therefore *difficult to understand* due to its many possible interpretations, he/she acknowledges this as an exciting challenge. Yet, he/she fails to see how positive it is to be able to provide different interpretations for one same event, which is precisely what the learners in the following quotes *do* value:

- Oblivious: As regards this story, I can say that **it wasn't easy to read**, and **the only things that caught my attention are the different points of view that my classmates shared about the relationship between the mother and the son.** Also, I found it interesting the mixed feelings the son has as a result of his mother's strange behaviour. S25
- Miracle: **I like it because I had to deduce many things** that didn't appear in the text and it can have more than one interpretation. (S51)
- When I read "Miracle", I felt **a positive feeling towards the story.** From my interpretation, the narrator's character was alive at the end,

and that that was the miracle; being alive after an accident. Yet, **after hearing my classmates' point of view, my vision of the story was quite chaotic. There were so many interesting interpretations that I was unable to stick to only one!** (S42)

Being able to characterise something as 'chaotic' and yet like it is evidence of how tolerant of ambiguity this learner is. It is interesting to note that this participant was quite content with his/her first grasp of meanings; however, after the class discussion, his/her neat and tidy interpretation fell to pieces. Acknowledging the fact that it was impossible for him/her to select one analysis is considered a positive outcome /result generated by this genre.

In a similar vein but presenting their views from another perspective, some participants have not enjoyed a particular story since, they claim, no inferences have to be made:

- Selective Memory: I could say that this was one of the stories that **I liked the least**. Maybe the plot was interesting, but in my opinion **there were not much inferences and hypothesis that could be made, most of the information was provided in the text**. I didn't like the fact that **there was not much analysis that can be made**, compared to other stories that we have discussed. S29
- As regards "Selective Memories", I **didn't like it** since, in the story, **we were told everything** about what happened in it. We were even told how we have to interpret both sides of the man. **I prefer to read stories that have like an "open" ending so that I have to use my imagination and each reader can understand whatever he/she wants and it won't be wrong**. (S45)
- Selective memory: I **didn't like this story because you can take all the information from the text**. S51

Others have enjoyed certain stories because they have opened up other universes that allow them to get to know, accept and value other realities as possible scenarios, which they would not have been able to consider had it not been for the short short stories.

- Bare Ana: I liked this story because it is **different from the others in the sense that it is set in the future**. I enjoyed the discussion about tattooing and the different points of views my classmates hold as regards the importance and meaning of tattooing a child. As a result, I **started thinking about how I would react if** I were in Ana's position and I came up to the conclusion that it would be very difficult for me to accept the idea of a baby having a prenatal tat on his/her body. S25

Some participants have highlighted one of the features of this genre – dealing with real life matters – as the very reason why they have liked a story, either because they can establish connections with their own lives or because they can express their own views on the matter.

- "Oblivious": **I like this story because of its resemblance to real life**. I enjoyed reading it because I believe **this story reflects smartly the issues present in an ordinary family**. After reading it, what I did not like was that the boy was left emotionally scarred by the way his mother treated him. (S39)
- So far, the short-short story that I liked the most is Tuesday. I think **it is a catchy story since it deals with an everyday life issue**. That affected me in a particular way because I know people who had gone through similar situations. Besides, it was more than interesting to get to know what my classmates thought about this topic. (S45)

Many, on the other hand, just stated that they did not feel identified with any of the characters or the situations in the story to express a negative appraisal of it:

- I can't identify myself with any of the characters as I have never been in any similar position. (S40)

Failing to go beyond their own personal experiences, which may have allowed them to reflect upon other realities, seems to be a sign of their restricted scope of analysis. Limiting their perceptions to whether they feel

identified with a situation or not evinces a shallow interpretation of what this genre entails.

4.2.5. Linguistic evidence of a contrast between first and successive readings

Participants in this experience recurrently referred to a significant contrast between their first reading and what they interpreted initially and the changing views originated in successive readings and class discussion. Explicit reference to this restructuring process of their first impressions and interpretations is taken as a sign of an open-minded attitude to new information. Below is an example that not only illustrates the modifications undergone by this learner, but that also highlights the importance of sharing the experience with others to make it significant and enriching.

- “First of all, I want to make it clear that I together with other classmates were in charge of leading the discussion of this microfiction. However, I must admit that, **at first, I was not at all keen on this story because** it meant nothing for me, but **then it became more and more interesting, when explanations, different points of view, and opinions emerged from the discussion.** I’m pointing out this, since I personally think **that the story becomes meaningless when reading it alone, I mean, without bearing in mind other people’s interpretations.**” S24

Throughout almost all learners’ journals this was the most frequent indicator of their disposition to reconsider a priori conceptions and the resulting views generated by this group re-reading and debating process. This contrast was perceived across learners and across different journal entries. There is overwhelming evidence of learners’ positive attitudes towards the changing views on the different stories dealt with. Although only a few other examples are included below, the data found to support this claim consists of around thirty different comments.

- Miracle: At first, I didn't like the story and I couldn't decide what the story was about. **But later, when the story was discussed in the classroom I ended up finding it really interesting** since all the groups provide **different interpretations which were fully-justified**. At that moment I liked the fact that even all of us shared our interpretations **we were not able to reach an agreement**. S25
- Well it is the one I liked the most. When I read this **for the first time** I couldn't catch what it was about. **Then I could understand!** S27
- When I read it **for the first time** I wasn't able to understanding it completely, so **it took me more than one reading to get the idea of the story**. S28
- As this was the first short-story that we had to read and analyse, it was a bit difficult at first because we hadn't dealt with this type of stories in class before. When I first read it, I didn't like it because I wasn't able to understand it completely, thus I didn't grasp the topics involved. **After reading it twice and analysing it in class, I really liked** the issues that the author intended to reflect. S29

What becomes obvious in the repetition above is that many of these comments serve as indicators of more than one criterion. In many cases, participants needed the sharing of interpretations in class to be able to state that after that, they liked the story (the criterion in section 4.2.4. above). Although these remarks are taken as evidence of a positive attitude to ambiguity, one must not overlook the fact that it is only after class discussion (for many of these learners, at least) that they can admit other alternatives. This questioning attitude of facts and events in the story is a result of group work and does not come naturally to many participants. Nevertheless, we can find in them the predisposition to, through classwork, embrace other possible interpretations, which can be taken as evidence of a growing tolerance of distinct points of view, which the literature ascribes to thin ego-boundary people.

- As regards "Tuesday" by Lindsay Hunter, I must say that the very first time I read it I didn't get the idea. That was why I had to read it twice so as to draw some conclusions about it. What I like the most of this short short story is its complexity. I really love guessing facts about the short story's characters, for instance whether the secondary character was a either a sister or a brother (I thought from the very beginning she was a sister!). Apart from that, the underlying issues that are dealt within the story are quite tough. S30
- *Miracle*: I very much enjoyed this one only after the in-class-analysis. When I first read it I honestly didn't get it, but during the group debate we came up with some gripping ideas that gave the story an interesting turn. At the end we started discussing some topics that were dealt within the story but that were not part of the text itself, which I think is the aim of that kind of short stories. S34

Yet, we might want to be cautious to interpret reference to this contrast as necessarily indicating learners' tolerance of the ambiguity in microfiction. In some cases, the same participants who mention these alterations in their perceptions write, either in the same journal entry for the same story or in their entry for a different one, a remark that might give hints of a rather close-minded stance toward the story.

For example, in the story *Important Things*, some learners never considered the gender of the parent-narrator telling the story. Confronted with the question (which in one of the groups was posed by one of their peers), there were many who believed it was a woman while others argued it was a man. Once this possibility could no longer be ignored, it became hard for participants to accept this uncertainty and not be able to define it one way or another. Learners' search for a unique interpretation collided with the vagueness in stories. This phenomenon was observed in a number of circumstances and for quite a few of the stories.

4.2.6. Sentence structure: questions

In a few cases in the entries we spotted instances of questions and even negations of what learners took to be preconceptions or assumptions they or someone else could have entertained. Below are a number of examples that reflect participants' critical stance towards situations, facts and events taken at face value in the stories.

- "The story concerned many issues related to the father and the sister's behaviour towards the young girl that **I did not understand**, for example: **why did her father throw her out? Why did he leave her alone? Why did not he seek other alternatives, or look for help so as to save her daughter from those terrible situations she was going through? Did her sister know that she was going to commit suicide, if so, why did not she stop or help her instead of watching her dying?** After the lesson, I **kept on asking myself and thinking about these difficult questions** the whole day, however, I was unable to find an appropriate answer for all of them." S24.

This participant in particular evinces the highest possible degree of tolerance of ambiguity and she explicitly indicates so through the number of queries she assesses to account for what goes on in the story. She even states that unable to "find an appropriate answer" she continued to ponder the alternatives. Handling this level of uncertainty clearly points her as a thin ego-boundary person with all the makings of someone who will be able to derive pleasure from micro-fiction and apply this tolerance of ambiguity to other spheres in life.

Similarly, though to a lesser degree, the following entries by three other participants reveal alternative interpretations these learners are considering expressed in the shape mainly of questions or even "or-clauses" introducing the other options.

- **Then I thought that maybe** the children were adopted. **Who knows?** But I think **it mustn't** be something good because the mother tries to avoid the issue... S6

- **Did she leave him? I do not think** so. **Maybe** she realized what an awful parent he was, but he was her father anyway, so she felt tied to him. She may have given him part of the money she earned. And when she ended up in hospital, she felt like she had been and would forever be tied to him. **Did she impose restrains on herself?**S2
- (Important things) **Or perhaps there is no secret** and the kids that are teenagers now want to know what their parent had promised to tell them when they were grown-ups and she just cannot remember, **or it was something** related to sex they already know about

Overall, our findings with respect to this criterion have been more limited in number. Very few learners actually seem to have allowed themselves to doubt and question others' beliefs, interpretations, or their own initial way of thinking.

4.2.7. References to inter-textuality

A handful of participants also have gone further in their reflections and have made reference to other text-types they have encountered in their lives in connection to themes dealt with or emotions evoked in the stories. Such is the case of the following excerpt where a learner links "Tuesday" to another short story in terms of the disgusting images portrayed.

- While reading it, **I remembered another story** that we had to read two or three years ago (maybe English II??). It was titled *Misery*, and although I liked that one, it had some scenes that were pretty disgusting, as well as those I imagined while reading *Tuesday*. S34

Likewise, S35 relates what the adult character in "Everything" experiences to the feelings present in a song discussed on an online forum for the course English IV, while the next two refer to a movie watched at home and to a work of literature probably analysed in one of the courses in the teacher-training programme.

- I can say that in a way he has **mutual feelings with the lady from the song "The one that got away"**. They **both** feel sorry but it is too late. S35 "Everything"
- (Bare Anna) As regards the issue of identity, I believe that in a certain way, what you look like, your body and physical appearance, does define who you are. **A month ago I watched a movie where the main character**, let's say Elena, hits her head when she falls over a bridge. S1
- Personally, I believe that- **as Lady Macbeth said- what's done is done**. The previous quote may also be related to *Selective Memory* because this story deals with past experiences and learning to cope with them. As I said before, there might be occasions when people have to confront sad memories and reconcile themselves with them. However, I do believe that healing wounds is not an easy task. S22

In the cases above, learners have extended their reflective process to background knowledge they count on from different sources. Resorting to this strategy, i.e. relating new information to known or given information, reveals their readiness to, in the first place, detect an issue, then search in their experience for similar cases, and finally come up with a connection, all of which is evidence of higher order processing skills at play. Thin ego-boundary people "get a sense of how everything relates" (Ehrman 1999:72) and this is precisely what their contributions to the journals indicate.

4.2.8. Meta-analysis of microfiction

Some learners seem to be familiar with the intrinsic characteristics of microfiction from their courses on Literature, and explicitly refer to some of these features. This, in turn, has allowed them to entertain more than one hypothesis or interpretation with respect to the events in the story.

- microfiction is worthwhile reading because it is **a new concise and clear type of writing which succeeds in capturing your attention**. Although these stories are **too short, they are always complex and elaborate, and they usually have a twisting and unclear end**. For

this reason, a same short short story can have **a great number of different interpretations.** S10

- Miracle. Honestly, the first time I read it, I didn't like it at all, but once we started working with it and going deep into the story to grasp its meaning, I loved it. After we finished reading it, **we came up with a myriad of interpretations and all of them were so different from each other that the discussion of the text ended up being really interesting.** S7
- Miracle: This story surprised me. I read it once and I thought **something was missing: details, facts or some information about the characters.** It seemed to be **too short and impossible to be explained.** S9
- "Oblivious" was the most fantastic short story that I have read since it makes me experience different feelings, such as loath, love, etc. It just called my attention, and **it is what I really love about short short stories, the way in which the author, just with few words, drives you crazy, since you are not able to draw a conclusion, not even a clear end.**
- If you read the story just once, you won't be able to grasp the complete meaning of it. Sometimes it is believed that the shorter the story, the better, but with micro-fiction this is not so. I've noticed that **the shorter the story, the more difficult to understand it because it is the reader who has to provide the meaning of it.**S21

Either consciously or not, all these participants have enumerated most of the traits of microfiction, mentioning its conciseness, the absence of fully-fleshed descriptions, its length and the wealth of interpretations each story triggers. One participant even describes the reading process outlined in the theoretical framework introduced in the first section of this article as if he had actually read the theory. Another learner makes reference to the true-to-life nature of most short-short stories and to what is required of the reader when he faces an instance of this genre. Awareness of these characteristics should

contribute to learners' not seeking a unique, correct interpretation of the story, and, hopefully, to their embracing other views and possibilities. However, this knowledge might be of a conscious, explicit nature, and yet not affect the way microfiction readers react to some of the puzzling traits of the genre. Evidence of a meta-analysis of microfiction could be taken as an indicator of participants' readiness to tolerate ambiguity but it needs to be accompanied by comments signalling some of the other criteria set to analyse the journals.

In the following excerpts, a more reduced scope of analysis is presented, since these participants reflect on some qualities of particular stories, maybe unaware that these are specific features of the genre itself.

- "An extremely appealing story that **deals with topics of real life** such as, change of behaviour when a person is sober or drunk, change of attitude towards life when someone receives the news of a likely imminent death, domestic violence and memories that can be either good or bad." S24
- This short story was the one I worked with. In my opinion, it was **the shortest one**, but at the same time, **the most problematic** as well, since **there were many different interpretations about it and we weren't able to agree on just one**. However, I liked the story. It clearly showed me **how many different effects can be caused on the reader through a story as short as that one**. In my case, depending on from which point of view I was standing, I felt different things, such as sadness (when I interpreted that the brother had actually died) or a strong aversion towards the brother, or towards people who enjoy playing constant practical jokes at others. S28
- For me, the situation and the main character were depicted in a really interesting way, **since we as readers were forced to analyse those descriptions in order to understand them**. For instance, the story **didn't explicitly said** that the girl was pregnant, but after a bit of analysis we were able to infer that from the elaborate description of the author. S28

- I think this story was interesting because, although the plot is dark and gloomy, it was very rich and interesting to analyse. There were many issues within the tale and, **because of the way it was told, there were many inferences and hypothesis that could be made.** S29

Independently of the criteria, a few participants have analysed cultural aspects in the stories, which reveals they acknowledge differences between their and other cultures. Their reactions might be of shock or of acceptance. If the latter is the case, participants will evince tolerance to 'otherness', which refers to all the issues that are not related to 'me' as a subject. Recognising differences and not reacting negatively after this discovery is a sign of a very positive trait in learners' personalities that allows them to interact with the world in a more open-minded fashion. Below are two extracts by two different learners who reflect upon this cultural aspect of short- short stories.

- Besides, from what I get from the story, these tattoos are **similar to specific "rituals" we also have in our culture and nobody asks whether we like it or not;** having our name chosen in advance, our religion, among other. I really liked this short short story! S30
- While reading the story, **I tried to picture the importance of tattoos in that society.** I realised that they were so important that they have to do with defining who you are. I imagined all people tattooed so I realised that not having one was a reason to be discriminated against. Sadly, I understood that **there will always be reasons for not accepting other as they are.** In this text, having a tattoo is shown as normal as being called for your name. For not having tattoos, Ana is described as a freak. If we do the parallelism between tattoos and names, I have to say that there is an artist who decided not to have a name but a symbol. Not surprisingly, people think that he is not normal. **Why do we need to label everything? Why do we always look for differences?** S38

5. Conclusion

The excerpts included in the previous sections in terms of the criteria established seem to lend support to the fact that some learners appear to have been able to process microfiction with an open mind. Depending on the story, and the themes it dealt with, some participants have been ready to challenge their beliefs and initial assumptions, offering evidence of thin ego boundaries in their approach to the inherent uncertainty of this genre. A few participants have derived pleasure from the puzzle-solving involved in deciphering stories' mysteries.

Some other learners at this stage seem reluctant to accept ambiguity, evincing in their journals a statement of facts in the shape of a lineal plot, devoid of modality, where even a judgemental attitude can be perceived towards the way in which characters seem to behave. Unable to empathise with others, they seem to pass judgment on others' decisions and actions, and fail to actually acknowledge characters' reality as the *status quo*. Although a critical standpoint is always desirable, criticising others' actions and stating how differently they would have proceeded does not reflect an empathetic stance. In these cases, participants' ego boundaries seem thicker and they are thus less permeable to others' experiences since they do not admit them as possible in their own universes. Distancing themselves from situations in the story can indicate not being able to place themselves in other people's shoes. They might leave no room for doubts and questions and, therefore, deny the existence, or even the remote possibility, of other alternatives. These options refer not only to accepting others' actions and decisions but also to other interpretations of events and other participants' reactions to the story.

All in all, some learners seem to be readier to play with alternate worlds and perceptions and will only need further instances of analysing microfiction to continue developing this critical and challenging standpoint.

Others, however, might need more guided interaction with stories and peers to be able to consider the likelihood of uncertainty in fiction and in life as well. Only once this is achieved will they be ready to tolerate the ambiguity of the genre and, through it, embrace other possibilities of interpretation, other

realities and experiences and be more open to other people's opinions. Since English IV is a yearly course and we are only half way through it, the results presented in this paper are preliminary and point to which course of action should be taken for this objective to be reached.

Besides, we have analysed participants' journals under the assumption that these have been written conscientiously and carefully reflecting their beliefs. However, one must be careful to accept the possibility that learners may be more open-minded than their journals might seem to indicate. They might have been led to believe through the prompt provided that what was expected of them were their visceral reactions and rather than reflect on what the experience with microfiction contributed to in their lives, they simply allowed their first impressions and gut feelings to flow.

We believe, however, from the little knowledge we have of some of our learners (gained not from the journals but from classroom interaction) that the data in the journals evince some of their personality traits. It would be interesting to pursue a further line of research by exploring the relationships there are among learners' personality type (as measured by authorised tests and in relation to tolerance of ambiguity and of others), general foreign language proficiency level and even the way they process teacher feedback. Such research might help teachers detect thick ego-boundary learners and work with them so that they can broaden their outlook on life and the world, and realise their full potential as effective language learners. Microfiction could become the bridge through which learners can be led to walk towards a more positive, flexible and open-minded view on different aspects of life.

Another avenue of research with the data obtained so far would be to select a random, smaller sample of participants and follow their journal entries and their making sense of stories throughout time, i.e. follow the timeline used for the presentation of each of the stories. Working with fewer learners would allow us, as researchers, to analyse their perceptions in depth in terms of all or many of the criteria stipulated above across time. This type of study would offer further evidence of an effect of working with microfiction on the development of tolerance of ambiguity

To conclude, this experience was beneficial for the course as a whole: students made use of the target language at all times and practised their oral skills, they explored new socio-cultural universes and they are involved in the process of developing higher degrees of tolerance of ambiguity and of diversity of opinion, which are essential in the learning of a foreign language.

Dealing with uncertainty can teach us, teachers and learners of an FL, about the richness that lies within flash-fiction and the wealth of opportunities for further learning such an experience offers. In time, learners will hopefully come to terms with the fact that each of their peers can make sense of the different works of micro-fiction in their own way. Accepting and respecting others' points of view and admitting that they may not see eye to eye should eventually result in more tolerance.

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Appendix A: List of selected stories

		Links / Date
1. Everything	C.B. Anderson	Anderson, C.B. 2006. "Everything" in <i>Smokelong Quarterly, Issue 14, September 15 2006</i> at http://smokelong.com/flash/4015.asp
2. Selective Memory	Mary McCluskey	McCluskey, M. 2007. "Selective Memory" in <i>Smokelong Quarterly, Issue 17, June 15 2007</i> at http://smokelong.com/flash/5417.asp
3. The Off Season	Jami Attenberg	Attenberg, J. 2007- "The Off Season" in <i>Smokelong Quarterly, Issue 19, December 15 2007</i> at http://www.smokelong.com/flash/6862.asp
4. Oblivious	Gary Cadwallader	Cadwallader, G. 2007. "Oblivious" in <i>Smokelong Quarterly, Issue 17, June 15 2007</i> at http://smokelong.com/flash/5604.asp
5. Regrets	Bridget Pelkie	Pelkie, B. 2010. "Regrets" in <i>Smokelong Quarterly, Issue 28, July 25 2010</i> at http://www.smokelong.com/flash/bridgetpelkie28q.asp
6. Bare Anna		Shapard, R. <i>Motel and other stories</i> . 2005. Ridgway: Predator Press.
7. Tuesday	Robbie Shapard	Hunter, L. 2008. "Tuesday" in <i>Smokelong Quarterly, Issue 21, June 15 2008</i> at http://www.smokelong.com/flash/7888.asp
8. Miracle	Lindsay Hunter	Simpson, C. 2006. "Miracle" in <i>Smokelong Quarterly, Issue 13, June 15 2006</i> at http://www.smokelong.com/flash/3838.asp

<p>9. Important Things</p>	<p>Chad Simpson</p>	<p>In Shapard, R. & J. Thomas, 1986. <i>Sudden Fiction. American Short-Short Stories</i>. Layton: Peregrin Smith Books.</p>
<p>10. The Restraints</p>	<p>Barbara L. Greenberg Robert Hill Long</p>	<p>In Thomas, J., D. Thomas and T. Hazuka. 1992. <i>Flash Fiction Very Short Stories</i>. New York: W.W. Norton & Company</p>