



## *Blackout poetry: Re-envisioning writing strategy in English learning*

### *Poesía apagón: reinventar la estrategia de escritura en el aprendizaje del inglés*

### *Poesia de blackout: repensando a estratégia de escrita na aprendizagem de inglês*

Lina Yolanda Morales-Rodas <sup>I</sup>  
[lina.morales@esepoch.edu.ec](mailto:lina.morales@esepoch.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7779-9039>

Gina Maricruz Cerda-Solís <sup>III</sup>  
[gmcerda@espe.edu.ec](mailto:gmcerda@espe.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7806-7123>

Jessica Valentina-Galimberti <sup>II</sup>  
[jessica.galimberti@esepoch.edu.ec](mailto:jessica.galimberti@esepoch.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2835-5340>

Erik Javier Riera-Guachichullca <sup>IV</sup>  
[erik.riera@espe.edu.ec](mailto:erik.riera@espe.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6035-9929>

**Correspondencia:** [lina.morales@esepoch.edu.ec](mailto:lina.morales@esepoch.edu.ec)

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- I. Magister en Lingüística y Didáctica de la Enseñanza de Idiomas Extranjeros, Licenciada en Ciencias de la Educación Mención Inglés, Profesora de Idiomas Inglés, Docente en la Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, Sede Morona Santiago, Ecuador.
- II. Magister en Lenguas y Literaturas Europeas y Extra Europeas, Licenciada en Lenguas y Literaturas Extranjeras, especialidad Idioma Inglés y Español, Profesora de Idiomas Inglés, Docente en la Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, Sede Morona Santiago, Ecuador.
- III. Magister en Lingüística y Didáctica de la Enseñanza de Idiomas Extranjeros, Diplomado en Enseñanza de Inglés como Segunda Lengua, Diplomado Internacional en Competencias Docentes, Diplomado en Neurociencia Cognitiva. Docente en la Universidad de las Fuerzas Armadas, Extensión Latacunga, Ecuador.
- IV. Bachiller en Ciencias, Estudiantes de Sexto Semestre de la Carrera de Ingeniería Ambiental de la Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, Sede Morona Santiago, Ecuador.

## Resumen

La presente investigación, "Blackout poetry: Re-envisioning writing strategy in English learning", se la realizó en la Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo Sede Macas, con el propósito de analizar la incidencia que tiene la aplicación de la técnica de Aula Invertida en la producción escrita en inglés. Esta es una investigación de tipo cuantitativo y cualitativo basada en un método mixto incrustado, en la que la población está conformada por diferentes niveles del A1 hasta el B2. En la primera fase de la investigación se aplicó una encuesta, para luego implementar la técnica de Blackout Poetry durante cuatro semanas. Para verificar la propuesta de la investigación se aplicó una encuesta final sobre todo el proceso del proyecto semestral de donde se recopilaron datos sobre los resultados observados. La información obtenida fue tabulada y analizada determinado cuáles fueron las expectativas y resultados del proyecto, las técnicas que más se pudo desarrollar en la destreza de escritura por parte de los estudiantes y la efectividad de utilizar blackout poetry como técnica de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

**Palabras claves:** Blackout poetry; Estrategia de escritura; Aprendizaje del Inglés.

## Abstract

The research, "Blackout poetry: Re-envisioning writing strategy in English learning," carried out at Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, campus Macas, aimed to analyze the incidence of the application of the

Blackout Poetry technique in English writing production in English. The population of this quantitative/qualitative study, based on a combined embedded method, was formed by different levels from A1 to B2. In the first phase of the research, a pre-survey was applied, then the Blackout Poetry technique was implemented for four weeks. Finally, a post-survey on the whole semestral project which data was collected to verify the proposition of the research. The information obtained was tabulated and analyzed, determining the highest expectations and results of the project, the techniques that students could improve most related to writing skills and the effectiveness of using the blackout poetry as a teaching-learning technique.

**Keywords:** Blackout poetry; Writing Strategy; English learning.

## Resumo

A presente pesquisa, “Blackout poesia: Re-visionando a estratégia da escrita na aprendizagem do Inglês”, foi realizada na Escola Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo Sede Macas, com o objetivo de analisar o impacto que a aplicação da técnica Inverted Classroom tem na produção escrita em inglês. Trata-se de uma pesquisa quantitativa e qualitativa com base em um método incorporado misto, em que a população é composta por diferentes níveis de A1 a B2. Na primeira fase da pesquisa, foi aplicado um survey e, em seguida, a técnica da Poesia Blackout foi implementada por quatro semanas. Para verificar a proposta da pesquisa, foi aplicado um levantamento final em todo o processo do projeto semestral a partir do qual foram coletados os dados dos resultados observados. As informações obtidas foram tabuladas e analisadas, determinando quais eram as expectativas e resultados do projeto, as técnicas que mais poderiam ser desenvolvidas na escrita dos alunos e a eficácia do uso da poesia blackout como técnica de ensino-aprendizagem.

**Palavras-chave:** Poesia blackout; Estratégia de escrita; Aprendizagem de inglês.

## Introducción

The acquisition of a foreign language has become somewhat a complex process since language is the main instrument of communication among people from all over the world. It is well-known that learners confront many difficulties when they are learning a new language because everything appears to be new for them. However, in this modern world, it becomes essential to know how to be communicated effectively so that, it is imperative to learn how to use the language appropriately. According to Johnson, “skills involve creativity, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and comprehension as well as the use of strategies to locate relevant information, evaluate and communicate.” (Johnson, 2014). Regarding this, learning a language implies a procedure to develop both receptive and productive skills to come up with a good communication in humans’ interactions.

In writing texts, the writer produces utterances which are graphic representations of the message to be conveyed. As stated by Westwood, “writing could be extremely demanding and possibly, it is the most difficult of all skills and its development involves effective coordination of many cognitive, linguistic and psycho-motor processes” (Westwood, 2018). Carrying out a written production implies having linguistic knowledge and competences alongside great cognitive

capability to process thoughts, to develop critical thinking, creativity, and reasoning; so that, its development is fundamental for thought and language. Writing is one of the vehicles used in communication. It may perhaps be a laborious and stressful process for teachers and students; however, the employment of new strategies will make learners feel this is a funny, rewarding, reflective, and a motivating process.

While many people outside of English classrooms are still unfamiliar with this visual form of found poetry, for some time now English teachers have championed blackout poetry, both inside the classroom and on social media. It is evident that blackout poetry has been getting more and more known especially in newspapers and it is because it consists in a simple and creative way of making art and process the writing learning, especially for those students who are learning English as a second language.

Sometimes people focus just on the words, and sometimes blackout poetry is also a form of visual art. This paper aims to identify new and innovative ways of teaching writing to ELS students so that the process will not be so tough and hard for them. As we know writing is the most precise and demanding skill a student must face and it is a long and insidious process based on exercises which are valuable because they help students think critically about course material while encouraging them to grasp, organize, and integrate prior knowledge with new concepts. Furthermore, good communication skills are valuable assets both in and out of the classroom.

The present research paper provides scaffolding for both teachers and students to develop sensitivity to different texts; the purpose is to help them become more thoughtful and strategic writers. Blackout poetry provides tools for any age students to re-envision writing, which is considered as a critical skill in personal, educational, and professional domains, yet its role in L2 (second language) education in Ecuador is unclear and several recent studies have identified presentational writing as the most difficult modality to teach and the one that students struggle with the most.

### **The role of motivation in the writing process**

Motivation has an unquestionable role in students 'writing production. For Julia Lo and Fiona Hyland, "motivation is an essential element of successful language acquisition; however, it is influenced by external factors like culture and context background, and internal factors like their intrinsic interest and attitudes towards the writing activities and its relevance" (Lo & Hyland ,

2007). As stated by the authors, there is no doubt that one of the big challenges teachers face in their class is that many students have a negative predisposition to write because struggling with writing activities make them feel apprehensive, nervous and stressed, and it would be what influences negatively in their intrinsic motivation; hence, increasing intrinsic motivation in learning English as a Second Language as Julia Lo and Fiona Hyland mention in their article, implies “a sense of self-worth” and “self-determination” as essential aspects to give learners “ample opportunities for social interaction and self-expression” as well as Richards said (1993) and mentioned by Lo and Hyland “personal causation,” “interest,” and “enjoyment” as indispensable features of motivation. (Lo & Hyland , 2007). It is important that teachers generate new opportunities and experiences to express students’ interests by giving them spaces of communication, just as a powerful way of boosting their motivation, creativeness, and engagement. Connecting learners with their writing process depends on the application of new strategies. In this sense, Blackout poetry appears as a technique to reconceiving and redeploying the writing strategy to enrich and re-engage learners’ process.

## **Blackout Poetry**

### *Origins*

Although blackout poetry is recognized as the brainchild of cartoonist, web designer and author Austin Kleon, the use of blackout technique appears in 1966 when Tom Phillips, an artist, decided to walk into an English shop and purchase the first book he found; he used it to draw and paint off the pages turning them in art pieces with leaving words floating in them. Since that moment, Phillips started his lifelong project called *A Humument* which latest forty years to be completed (King, 2012). Phillips’ idea became to him in 1965, after he read an interview in *The Paris Review* in the 1990s, when William Burroughs, an American writer, spoke about his cut-up poems technique. The cutting technique is about taking a piece of writing and cut it out into small pieces for later reconfigure them to make a new text and it was carried from Brion Gysin, a painter who developed the concept when he was preparing a canvas. He cut through newspapers strips and he realized that the words work together so he decided to use them to make poetry; nevertheless, Tristan Tzara was who went on stage in Paris, got a hat and a newspaper, cut the newspaper into pieces, put them in his hat to read them as a poem thirty years before, in the 1960s. As Miller

mentioned in his research, Kleon, in a TEDxKC talk from 2012, outlines the evolving blackout poetry back 250 years, when Caleb Whiteford published a “broadsheet of found poetry” he had collected from the first printed newspapers, making him the first person who use this technique. Kleon applied it to solve a serious case of writer’s block by employing discarded copies of “The New York Times”, the results were excellent, so this research led him to publish his book “Newspaper Blackout”, in 2010.

For Kleon, “Every new idea is just a remix or a mash-up of one or two previous ideas,” so that, his blackout poetry comes from a “genealogy of ideas.” to become an artistic evolution. (Miller, 2017).

### **Definition**

Continuously, teachers are looking for manners to give students reasons to love writing in English language as well as, techniques to connect their emotions, creativeness, feelings, critical thinking, and knowledge to writing activities, in a simple, engaging, and fascinating way; thus, Blackout Poetry technique is analyzed and define from the point of view of different authors.

According to Miller, “Blackout poetry refers to any poem in which the author covers a majority of a source text in favor of leaving a handful of words exposed to form a poem.” (Miller, 2017). Blackout Poetry is created by covering sections of the unneeded text, newspapers, magazines, old books with a permanent marker, decorations, paint, collage, crayons, pens or pencils or other materials to obscure the text with the purpose of leaving just a few words legible and readable to form a new version.

On the other hand, John Carroll became a blackout poet, he started using this technique after he read Kleon’s book Newspaper Blackout. After a long period of time, he realized that creating new poems he was “blacking out” his depression. For the author “The daily, meditative process of searching a page for meaning gave him the opportunity to reflect”, and “making blackout poetry opened the door to feeling hopeful again.” Carroll defines Blackout poetry like a “simply act of removing or "blacking out" an existing text to create a new piece of work.” Moreover, the author considers this technique as funny and rewarding.” (Carroll, 2018) So, based on his experiences using the technique, he decided to create a “community of hope” through Instagram with more than 66,000 followers. He published his first book “Hidden Message of Hope” in 2016.

Michael Nyers who is a poet, mixed media artist, author, from Youngstown, Ohio, goes further in his definition. For him, Blackout Poetry is “a mixture of poetry and art made by taking any form of printed text and blacking out the unwanted words to create a poem or statement.” Like the authors mentioned before, this technique involves a black sharpie marker, but it has evolved into traditional and untraditional art modes of therapy, to promote mindfulness and creativity, it helps general well-being and mental health. (Nyers, 2021)

Barrie Davenport says about Blackout Poetry that it is “something you can do to de-stress and restore your energy”. For the author, it is a type of “appropriation art” It means that you create something new in something that someone else created before. It is picking out words that show up and you can use in your poem. (Davenport, 2020)

JM Farkas, member of the National Council of Teachers of English, qualifies Blackout Poetry like “the element of surprise and creative disruption” in a creative writing class. As stated by the writer, students in his class seem less intimidated by the process of blacking out the texts and creating a new writing; as well as he believes that this technique provides students the opportunity to “make the words say whatever they want.” (Farkas, 2019). Blackout Poetry constitutes a challenge for students and allows them to encounter close readings and arouse new language.

Lastly, Melissa Ladenheim from University of Maine presented the results of her research applied called “Engaging Honors Students through Newspaper Blackout Poetry”. She concludes that Blackout Poetry is not only blackout words with a permanent marker, but it also engaged students in her class activities. This technique provided them a different way of seeing the words on the texts and thus what those words communicate and the importance they have in those contexts. The author verified that Blackout Poetry is a “process of revelation and uncovering of meaning” which leads to students ‘critical thinking. Since the Pedagogically view, Blackout Poetry motivated learners to construct their knowledge and understanding; also, it gave students the opportunity to read a variety of texts to discover meanings in a thoughtful way, and at the end they became lovers of writing poetry. (Ladenheim, 2014)

Most of the time teachers are in search of strategies to encourage students ‘to learn English language, to improve their communicative competences significantly, with these authors considerations, Blackout Poetry is set as a re-envision of the writing strategy to be applied in English learning process in a creative, meaningful, and motivating way.

### ***Making a Blackout Poem***

It can be thought that the development of Blackout Poetry in an English class implies a complicated process; however, it is not. The first step to follow is going through old books, magazines, or newspapers to use together with a permanent marker, a pen or a pencil or acrylic paint. Choose a text, scan the page and circle the words which are going to be part of your poem. They can be meaningful words or phrases, although prepositions, articles, conjunctions, or even individual letters to make up a new word, you need in your new creation. Cross out, black out or color the surrounding words that are not going to be part of your piece of work. A uniform background helps to read the text easily. The length of Blackout Poetry depends on the length of the text you chose and the number of words you select for the poem.

Likewise, you can create pictures, shapes, any design around the words; also, you can use straight lines or dots to connect the ideas and they depend on the affects you would like to create; for instance, landscapes, faces, bodies with wavy or dotted lines. Colorful or black and white geometric patterns can be set as the background of a poem, or simply a completely fill spaces between the words of your text.

### **Method**

This study aims to explore and consider blackout poetry as a new and innovative strategy to re- envision writing in English learning for ESL students and for this reason it has been focused on a quantitative-qualitative point of view; especially because of the worldwide health crisis.

An analysis and collection of information was held in a qualitative way based on the theoretical aspect of the topic, which helped to understand better the technique and apply it in the writing process to teach to all level students in Espoch Sede Morona Santiago.

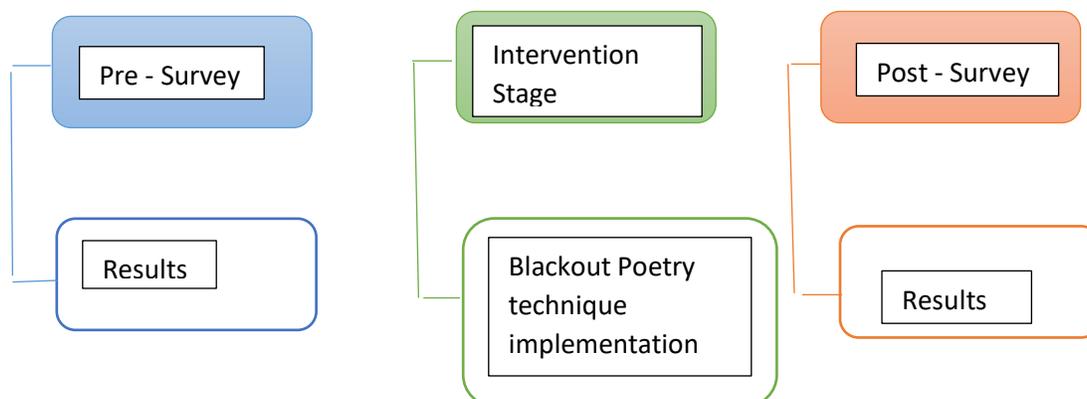
The quantitative approach let determine the impact that the implementation of backout poetry had during the ESL student's intervention in the writing learning process with reference to all English levels (elementary-upper intermediate) at the Espoch Morona Santiago. The pre-post inquiries state unexpected results of the investigation, which was bibliographical and considered as a field research. All information was compiled both printed and digital literature. On the other hand, data was collected from the pre-post inquiries aimed at students before and after the intervention stage.

This study applied at Espoch Morona Santiago is almost experimental as the population composed by 132 individuals, was not selected randomly. Students between 17 and more than 28 years old, both male and female genders, belonging to the Espoch Sede Morona Santiago careers: Accounting & Auditing, Environmental Engineering, Zootechnics and Mining Engineering.

All levels of English were considered, and English teachers worked with them directly, guiding them in the process. First, teachers received the drafts and corrected them each mid-course. At the end of the semester, teachers voted and selected the best poems to publish on the official website of the university and could participate to the online contest. Public in general could vote and were rewarded the first, second and third place with a digital certificate.

During the first investigation stage, an inquiry was applied to determine the previous knowledge students had about the topic. During the second stage of the process, English teachers applied the technique to teach writing learning process and finally a new inquiry was applied to get the results after the intervention stage.

**Graphic 1:** Research Stages



Source: Bibliographical Work

Developed by: the authors

This paper suggests the usage of blackout poetry as an innovative and re-envisioning writing technique in ESL English learners during about 4 weeks, to convey a longitudinal aspect to the research.

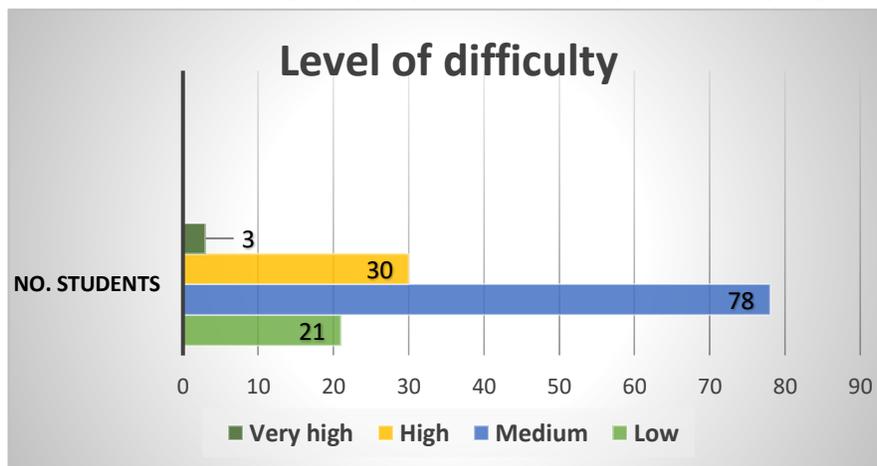
The researchers approached with a combined embedded method, obtaining the qualitative data throughout the quantitative data, which derived from the analysis of the pre-post surveys.

## Results

### 1. Which level of difficult did you have in doing the blackout poetry activity?

Through the tabulation and schematization of the data collected from the survey, it was possible to know that 78 of the students who applied the blackout poetry technique answered that the level of difficult in doing the activity was medium and 30 admitted that was high level difficult.

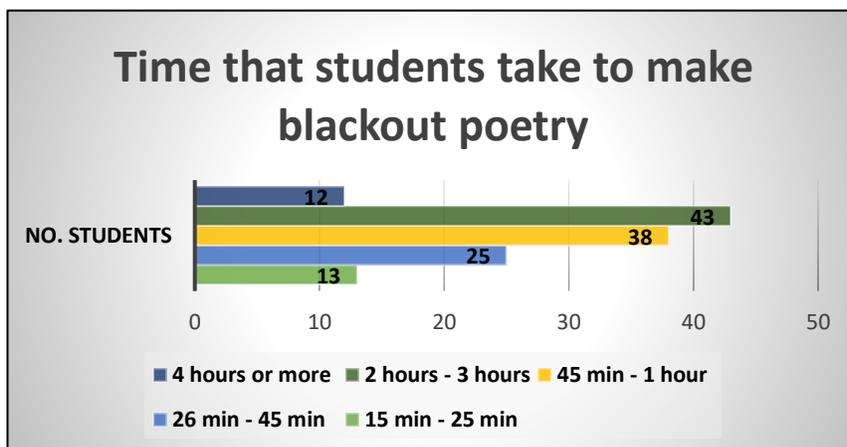
**Figure 1:** Did you enjoy participating in a short film as part of learning English?



### 2. How long did it take you to make the blackout poetry activity?

Figure no. 2 shows that 43 students said it took them 2 to 3 hours to accomplish the blackout poetry activity and 38 students said it took them 45 minutes to 1 hour.

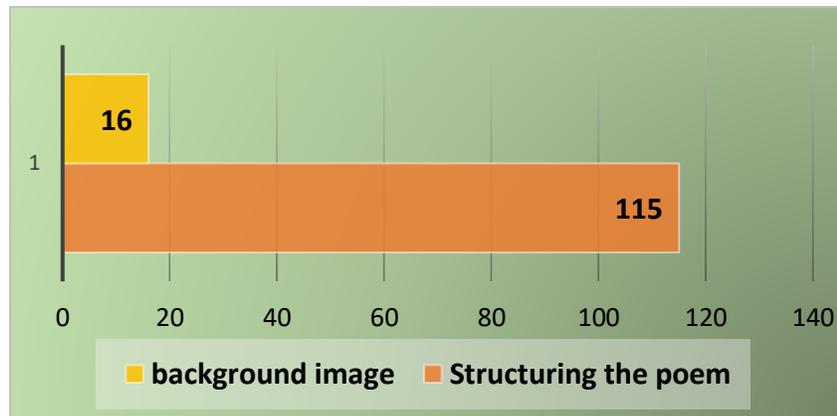
**Figure 2:** How long did it take the students to make the blackout poetry activity?



**3. According to your experience, did it take you more time to structure the poem or to create the background image to complete the work?**

When answering this question, 115 of the 132 students who were part of the research answered that it took them more time to structure the poem.

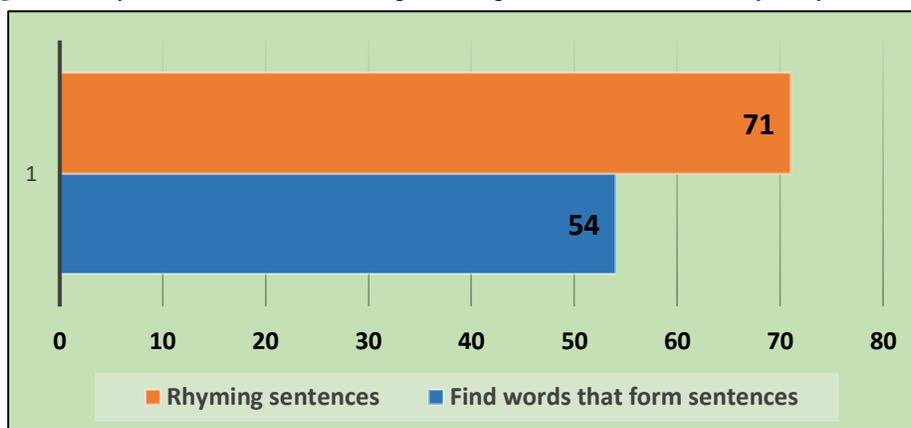
**Figure 3:** According to your experience, did it take you more time to structure the poem or to create the background image to complete the work?



**4. If you chose to structure the poem in question 3, what difficulty did you encounter?**

Seventy-one students, corresponding to 57% of those who in the previous question answered that what took the most time was to structure the poem, said that the most challenging part of the process was to rhyme the sentences.

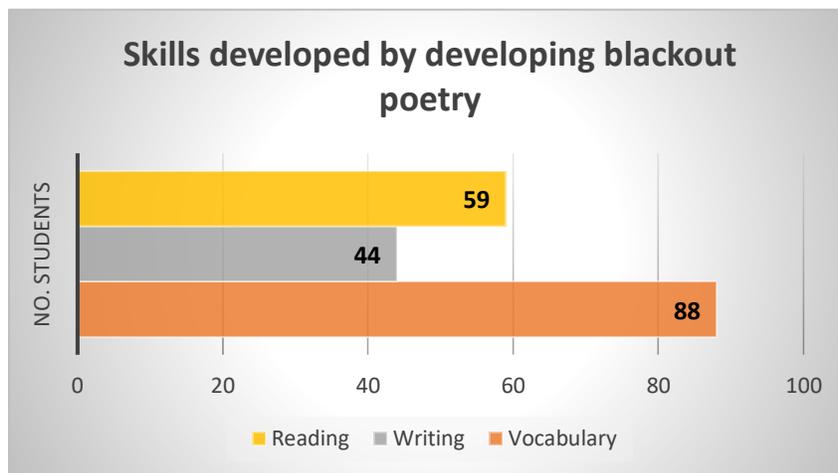
**Figure 4:** If you chose to structure the poem in question 3, what difficulty did you encounter?



**5. In your opinion, which skills did you improve in performing blackout poetry?**

According to the students' experience, the skill that improved using the blackout poetry technique was Vocabulary, which obtained 35%, followed by Reading and Grammar, which got 24%.

**Figure 5:** In your opinion, which skills did you improve in performing blackout poetry?



**6. List three advantages of doing blackout poetry as an end-of-semester project**

As shown in Table 1, 55 students who took part in the research indicated that the advantage of applying the blackout poetry technique was that they learned new words and that it was an exciting way to do it. Lo & Hyland say that many students have a negative predisposition to write because struggling with writing activities makes them feel apprehensive, nervous, and stressed. Blackout poetry offers the opportunity to learn writing in a fun and dynamic way.

**Table 1:** Advantages of participating in blackout poetry

ADVANTAGES	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	FREQUENCY
Learned new words – Interesting way to learn vocabulary	55	22,54%
Improve reading comprehension	35	14,34%
Learn how to write creatively	25	10,25%
Improve sentence structure	20	8,20%
Improve grammar	17	6,97%
Improve writing	13	5,33%

Learn how to rhyme words	13	5,33%
Fun and dynamic way to learn English	12	4,92%
It's a new, and excellent activity to learn English	7	2,87%
To use your imagination	7	2,87%
Improve mental skills	7	2,87%
English comprehension	6	2,46%
Applying the learned grammar	6	2,46%
Improved the way of expressing oneself	5	2,05%
Learn how to structure a poem	4	1,64%
Improve the ability to analyze a piece of writing	4	1,64%
No advantages	2	0,82%
Understanding and fluency in pronunciation	2	0,82%
Improve listening	1	0,41%
Improve speaking	1	0,41%
Improving the lexicon	1	0,41%
Learning digital design	1	0,41%
<b>TOTAL STUDENT'S OPINIONS</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: the authors (2020)

**7. List three disadvantages of doing blackout poetry as an end-of-semester project**  
 Most students had difficulty rhyming the words; for 23.8%, it took them a long time to do the activity, but for 14.29%, there were no disadvantages in applying this technique.

**Table 2:** Disadvantages of participating in blackout poetry

DISADVANTAGES	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	FREQUENCY
Difficult to find rhyming words	31	29,5%
It takes a long time to do it	25	23,8%
No disadvantages	15	14,29%
Difficulty in structuring English sentences.	9	8,57
It would be better to have free topics than a single book to apply the technique.	7	6,67
A lot of creativity is needed.	6	5,71%
It takes a long time to find an image that matches the poem.	5	4,76%

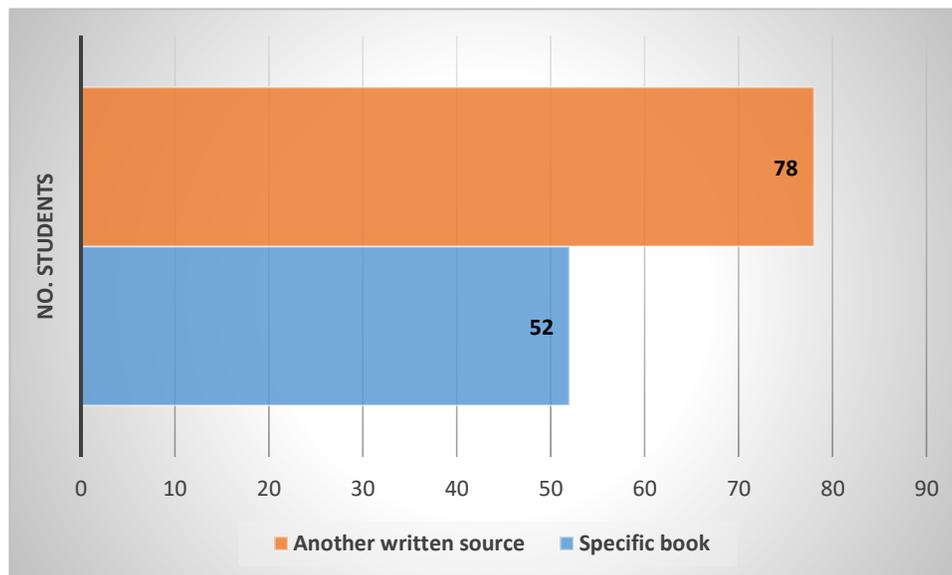
Lack of knowledge of English vocabulary	4	3,80%
There are some readings with which the technique is challenging to apply.	2	1,90%
Lack of knowledge of how to structure poems	1	1%
<b>TOTAL STUDENT'S OPINIONS</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: the authors (2020)

**8. In your opinion, do you think it would be better to develop blackout poetry from a specific book being read in class or from any written source?**

Among the disadvantages that the students had when developing the blackout poetry activity was that it would have been better to have the freedom to choose the written source to write the poem. Therefore, it is observed that 78 of the 132 students answered that it would be better to have another written source different from a specific book, which is what this study was based on.

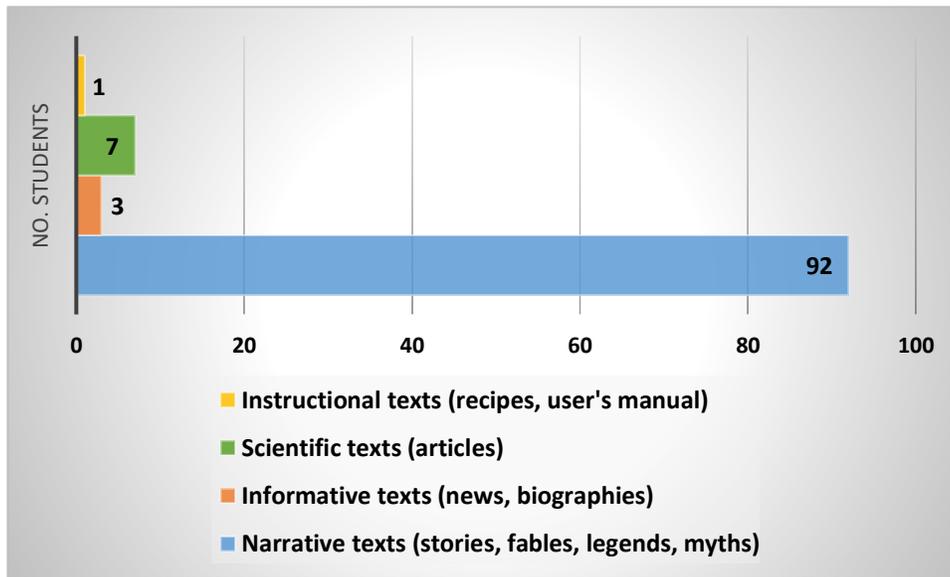
**Figure 6:** In your opinion, do you think it would be better to develop blackout poetry from a specific book being read in class or from any written source?



**9. If you checked another source in the previous question, which one would you choose as the best option?**

Most of the students, 92 of them, felt that they would like to use narrative texts such as stories, fables, legends, and myths to write poems in English using the blackout poetry technique.

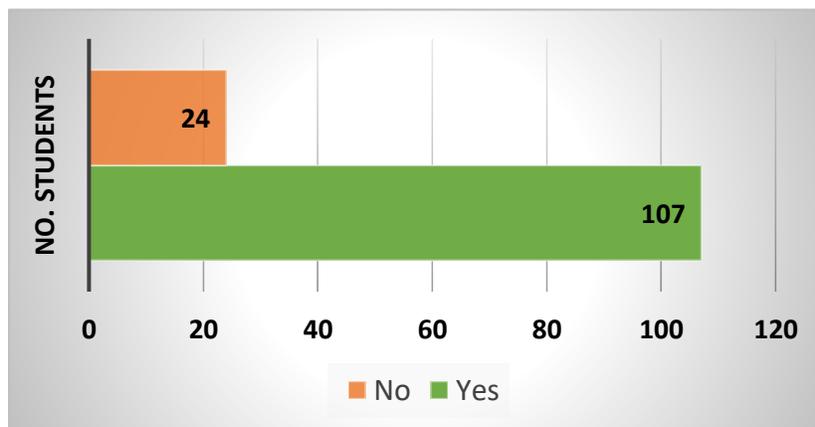
**Figure 7:** If you checked another source in the previous question, which one would you choose as the best option?



**10. According to your experience, should blackout poetry be continued as an end-of-semester project?**

After the research, 107 students would like to continue doing the blackout poetry activity to improve their English skills.

**Figure 8:** According to your experience, should blackout poetry be continued as an end-of-semester project?



Some of the reasons why students would like to continue doing blackout poetry activities are:

- This activity helps us improve our mentality and even enter a little bit into what comprises the lyric in another language.
- It is a methodology that allows organizing ideas by reading and using specific words.

- This activity is beneficial for reading comprehension.
- Blackout poetry stimulates students' ability to analyze and create sentences and poems. It is an excellent means of learning.
- This activity helps us a lot in our learning and development of grammar, vocabulary, and imagination.
- Blackout poetry is a better way to enrich our vocabulary and an excellent way to work on any tense verb structure.
- Blackout poetry is a positive alternative for the student to develop their knowledge acquired in class, based on the words already written to form poems, which helps improve each topic's level.

### **Discussion**

No studies have been found in which Blackout poetry has been used as a technique for English language teaching.

Publications were found in which blackout poetry was used as a technique to encourage students' enjoyment of reading. Therefore, we will start with the study conducted by Melissa Ladenheim. Melissa Ladenheim researched with students, many of whom had a curriculum of misbehavior. She used the technique of blackout poetry to keep them engaged by creating poetry from a literary text. Ladenheim found that the students almost immediately became interested in developing their work and expressing their emotions. She indicates that blackout poetry reveals and discovers meaning that leads to students' critical thinking. Through this activity, the students read a variety of texts thoughtfully and, in the end, became lovers of writing and poetry.

The research conducted with students of the four levels of English at the Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, as in the study above, resulted in students wanting to continue with this activity because they saw that they improved their reading comprehension and vocabulary in a fun and creative way.

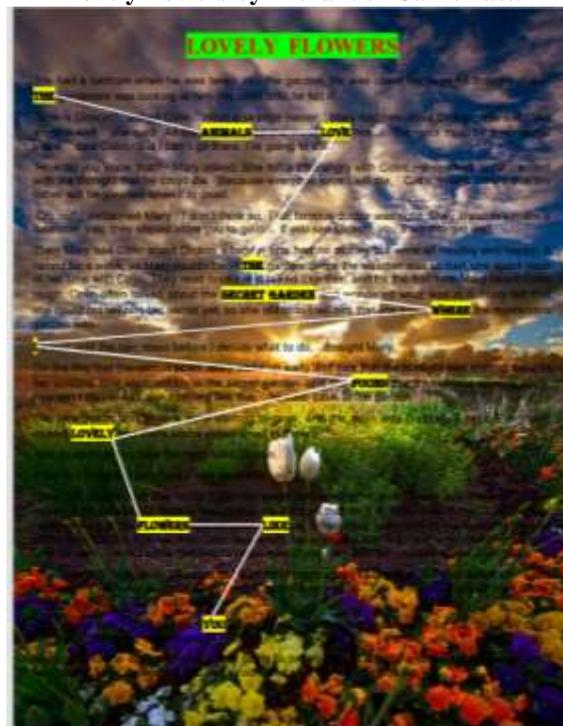
### **Conclusion**

It is concluded that the blackout poetry technique is an assessment option where students maintain interest, and it is a different activity from the traditional way of assessment. Structuring poems in English can have a positive impact on students to improve their language skills.

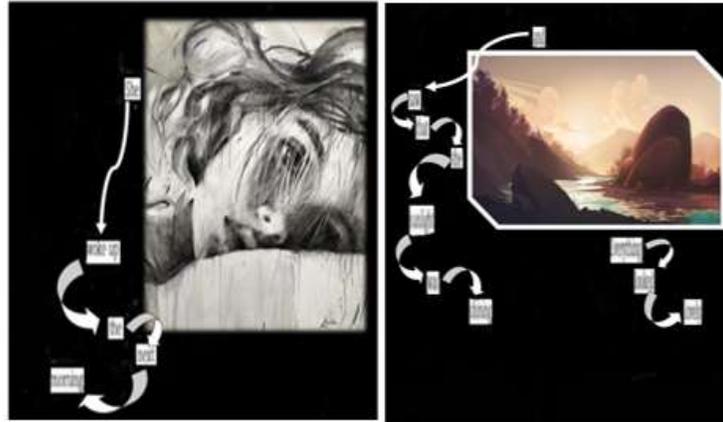
Based on the results, it is crucial to conclude that this technique allows students to improve their reading comprehension, increase their vocabulary and be more creative, in a fun way. However, it is recommended that the implications of this strategy be investigated through different measures such as rubrics to determine the level of reading comprehension and vocabulary, including words of specific topics other than everyday life.

This activity allowed all the polytechnic community members to get to know the work and creative works of poetry that the students of the four levels of English. The best results received recognition for their excellent work, so below, we present the best poems made with this technique.

**Lovely flowers by Alexander Cambizaca**



Poem by Rigoberto Yanchatipán



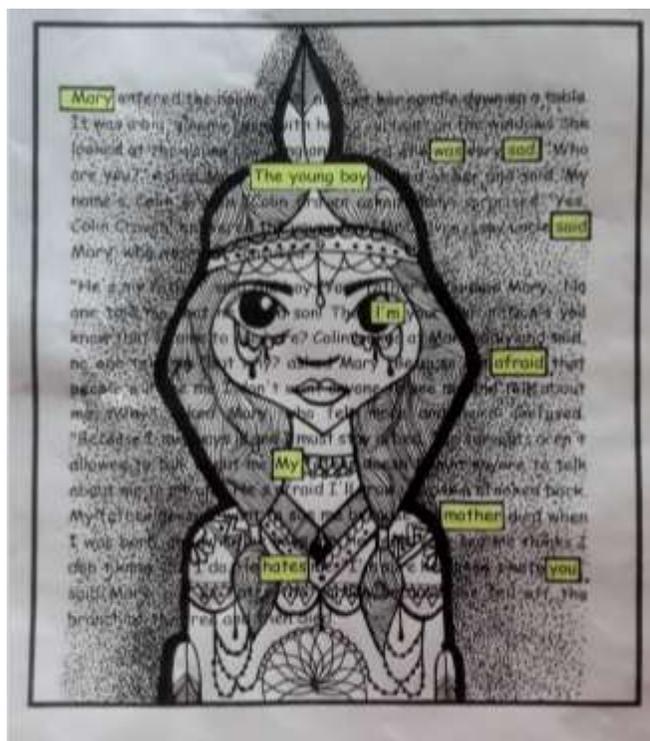
Poem by Jennifer Karakrás



Poem by Paola Chacha



Poem by Tania Wampiu



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