

The Tale and Creative Writing Techniques: Developing Critical Literacy

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Abstract: The current paper seeks to present Creative Writing techniques that were implemented to students attending grades 3-6 of a Greek rural primary school. These techniques were based on the book of Gianni Rodari “Grammar of fantasy” and their aim is to cultivate critical literacy. This attempt was made within a cultural program that had as its topic the “European and folk tale”. Thus, the tale was used as the main material and the backbone upon which the whole program was supported as it was closer to the children’s experiences and because of its widely- acknowledged pedagogical character. The outcome of the program seems to be encouraging, since the students showed particular interest in the whole sum of the activities and lived up to the expectations of the objectives that were set to a satisfying degree. Therefore, the techniques presented are suggested as an alternative instructional approach towards the development of a critical literacy and it is regarded as beneficial for them to be used even in the first grades of primary school with the purpose of creating mature and critical, reflective citizens.

Key words: critical literacy, creative writing, fairytale

1. Introduction

In today’s modern information-society, the triggers are numerous and their transmission rapid. For this reason, the school is expected to play the role of the “protective shield” through the promotion of *critical thinking* in the learners gradually, starting from the very first grades of the educational system. The goal is to avoid the turning of today’s students, and as a result of future society’s students, into passive consumers. This objective seems to be particularly obvious in the Greek cross-thematic curriculum framework for compulsory education (DEPPS, 2011), which orientates itself towards a critical language awareness or in other words in critical literacy. More specifically, the basic goal for each student is:

“To develop the basis for a critical language awareness, so as to be able to evaluate objectively the messages (...) To become aware of: (a) having the capacity to describe, modify the external reality but also to create the reality through his discourse, as far as he handles the linguistic means appropriately and of (b) this capacity is a result of the knowledge of and the conscious usage of the linguistic system” (DEPPS, 2011, p. 17).

During the last years, it seems that there is a research interest in the outcomes that creative writing in relation to critical literacy. Creative writing has to do with the de-contextualization of the output text from the students and the encouragement of utilizing fantasy. Therefore, the cornerstone of the current paper is the book of Gianni

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Rodari “Grammar of fantasy: An Introduction to the Art of Inventing Stories”. Rodari worked as a teacher during a hard time for Italy (WWII). In his teaching context, he used tales and stories from everyday life of the Italian people using techniques of the Surrealist realm with the purpose of unlocking children’s fantasy, liberating them from the strict school environment, so as to de-criminalize their mistakes and to develop abilities in linguistic output. According to him “creative is a mind that always works, that always asks, that discovers problems where others find satisfying answers, that possessed a critical autonomous and independent stance and refuses the commonplace, that engages from the start with the things and the notions, without being obstructed by conformisms” (Rodari, 2003).

The current paper focuses on the recommendation of specific techniques of creative writing — with the help of European and folk tales- that have the purpose of the cultivation of critical literacy. These techniques were implemented in 15 students of the 3rd to 6th grades of a rural Greek school who participated in a cultural program. The social-educational level in this school is low and the children’s contact with processed discourse and technical texts is very limited. Subsequently, the texts that would be used as the cornerstone of the program, for the application of the creative writing techniques had to be approachable to the children. For this reason, the framework that was selected for the application of these creative writing techniques was the tale because of its pedagogic character and the familiarity of the children with it (Malafantis, 2002; Doulami & Antoniou, 2011).

In the next chapters the theoretical context of critical literacy, creative writing as well as the interrelation between them is described. Afterwards, the creative writing techniques that were implemented are presented and what follows in the conclusion is a discussion on the experiences that the teachers had from the whole process.

2. Critical Literacy

The basis for the establishment of critical literacy in education is attributed to Paulo Freire, who worked as a professor of history and philosophy, while later he became head of the department of Culture in the University of Recife. With his students, he conducted action research in the teaching of literacy in both rural and urban areas around Recife. With his work he tried to influence and change the way of thinking not only in Brazil but also in the rest of the “developing world”. Freire tried to create a pedagogy oriented to the learner. The pedagogy that he applied was based on the dialogue and critical thinking. He believed that the educational action and research should co-exist within a united body and that the student should be actively involved in this process. In addition, teacher and student have to find themselves in a dialectical relationship. The aim of the educational system for Freire is the boosting of critical thinking of the students, so as to be able to handle the various information that they receive and not to turn into passive consumer beings. The re-structuring of the instructional material from the teacher is thought to be a necessary condition of this process, so as for the learning process to be easier for the students (Freire, 2005). In the same direction moved in the next years the pedagogical realms that set as their main aim the dialectical relationship of the children and the development of their critical thinking.

Critical literacy is defined as the process that is the one that aims at the deciphering, encoding and re-encoding of the world. It is a “critical reading” of reality, since through words we can re-shape the world (Mendoza, 2010). David Wray (2006) compares critical analysis with a chameleon that changes its form according to the context and is known in different places of the world as *critical language awareness*, *critical social literacy* and *critically-aware literacy*. However, whenever we are to meet the various terms, the fundamental axes are common: (a) the approaches of critical literacy think words and texts as being directly related to cultural and social

practices through which and in which they have been constructed (b) teachers that set critical literacy as their objective, encourage their students to investigate and doubt the relationships between language and social practices as well as to reshaping the world through producing texts (Wray, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

The orientation, then, towards critical literacy, wants a child to function with critical thinking towards the shapes and practices of literacy that he/she encounters around him/her, to approach the ideological side of the usage of language and to be capable of shaping and reshaping his stances as an active citizen that is critically thoughtful (Kotopoulos et al., 2013).

3. Creative Writing and Critical Literacy

While in the Greek cross-thematic curriculum framework for compulsory education (DEPPS, 2011) *critical literacy (critical language awareness)* is set as a basic goal (p. 17), it seems that the turn of the instructional process towards this orientation hasn't been yet completed. Nevertheless, there are multiple actions that aim at the active participation of the students in their learning process and the development of their critical thinking. Such actions are offered by the various programs of *creative writing* that refer to Greek cross-thematic curriculum framework for compulsory education without the necessary theoretical background and specialized knowledge on the part of the teachers. As Kotopoulos (2014) points out, creative writing is defined as the process in which the students accomplish the active reception of the literary genres and are led, in a playful way, towards the writing of texts, the comparison, the critical examining as well as adaptation. This very process in other words, contains the critical reading of texts. Kiosses (2013) adds that the term *creative writing* contains the inspiration, the fantasy, the logic and the technical skill of writing a text. This evidence are combined within this specific cultural context and are brought out through the actions performed.

Creative writing does not only refer to literary texts but also to various different text genres such as: riddles, student jokes, journalist speech, advertisement etc. It permits the structuring of the material that is going to be used in relation to the level and the interests of the students. In this way the following are achieved: (a) de-schooling of the texts, in other words, disengaging them from the strict traditional context, (b) de-commentary, in other words the disengagement of the text from the traditional commentary. Furthermore, basic skills that are being cultivated through the lifespan of the creative writing activities are: (a) reading, (b) the writing/composition of the various text genres, (c) the critical analysis of the text being produced, provided that creative writing means critical reading and re-writing it under the structuring of a text (Kiosses, 2013).

From the above mentioned, it's being understood that the activities of creative writing have common-shared fundamental axes with critical literacy: (a) the structuring of the instructional material according to the learners' needs, (b) the activation of the learners through de-contextualizing their activities from the strict, traditional school environment, (c) the dialectical relationship formed between the students and the language, through their familiarization with many text genres, through recognizing the aim and the motives of the author as well as through the re-composition of the text while different purposes have been set. Because of this interrelation, it is obvious that creative writing and its practices co-assist in the cultivation of critical literacy. It was, according to these axes as well as through having tales and the work of Rodari as the main core, that the techniques suggested in the next chapter were designed.

4. The Program's Implementation

4.1 Purpose

The main purpose of the program is the attempt to have the children be accustomed to techniques of creative writing, with the outer goal being the cultivation of critical literacy in them.

4.2 Sub-goals of the Program

The student at the end of the program to be capable of:

- Developing imaginary scenarios.
- Continuing and restructuring a story.
- Converting the end of the story depending on the goal that they set.
- Making use of the mistake creating a new story.
- Finding the moral of the story and comprehending the motives of the author.
- Becoming, gradually, critical readers.

4.3 Creative Writing Techniques

To achieve the above-mentioned goals, nine techniques were designed (based on the book by Rodari "Grammar of fantasy") that fall into two categories. The first category (first level of creative writing activities) focuses more on the context of the tales, in which meaning-processing has been made inside the classroom. The second category of activities (second level) goes beyond the level of processing and the conversion of a tale, are more emancipating for the children, since they are given the opportunity to work with fictional characters and to improvise while having them as a basis, creating in this way their own tales.

The following techniques were applied in the form of worksheets in students attending 3rd to 6th of a rural primary school in Greece. The program was implemented from February to May of 2018, during flexible zone hours. The suggested time of engaging with each activity are three to four hours depending on the cognitive level of the students of a classroom. The worksheets were gathered to a relevant file of instructional activities so as to be able to be deployed by teachers. These techniques are suggested as an alternative instructional approach for the development of critical literacy, through the activities of creative writing. More specifically:

4.4 Level One Activities

- 1) *Tale-salad*: Combining the heroes of known tales we make a new story. Example: "One day Puss in Boots decided to go shopping. On his way he met Snow-white and Little Red Riding Hood that were having an orange juice at a café..." Every group has to choose a story from known tales and create a new story. In the end, every group presents its story.
- 2) *Five words from a tale and one more that breaks the story*: Every group chooses a story upon which the members agree. The group finds words that lead to this story. The other groups find four words that lead to this story. The rest of the groups suggest one word that breaks the story for example: stepmother, ash, court shoe, prince, genie. Every group has to write a new story while making use of the new evidence.
- 3) *What happens next?* Example: In the tale "The kid and the little fish" what did the little fisherman do next since he didn't manage to catch any fish? The groups make up a new ending for the story aiming at a moral of their own.
- 4) *Tales from backwards*. In the folk tale "The blind and the hunter" the morality of the heroes' changes:

the blind becomes cunning and the hunter becomes wise. Every group writes its own continuation of the story.

- 5) *Changing the background:* During the narration of a folk tale (that each group has undertaken to find and announce to the class within the cultural program's framework), teachers ask from the children to describe the scenery in which a certain scene unfolds. Afterwards, we assign to each group to describe on paper another possible scenery for the specific scene. Example: one group is assigned to convert the scenery into a frightening one, the other into a romantic one, the other into a funny one and so on.
- 6) *What would happen if?* We change the end of the tale. Example: What would have happened if Cinderella's court shoe had broken on the stairs? Every group sets her own goal for the continuation as well as the ending of the story (nice ending, sad ending, funny ending etc.). This technique can be also transferred to the lives of the children through questions like: "What would happen if you woke up one morning and you found yourself upon a cloud?" Every group undertakes to write their own fictional script.

4.5 Level Two Activities

- 1) *Phrases in sequence:* We give to the children one phrase written on a white sheet of paper. For example: "Once upon a time there was a black cat...." Every child of every group adds when his/her turn comes a phrase. Every group announces the tale that was created.

Differently: We make flashcards with the following questions: (a) Who was it?, (b) Where was he/her? (c) What did he/she do? (d) What did he/she say? (e) What did the people say? (f) How did the story end? The front man of the group responds to the first questions and he folds the paper so as for nobody to read the answer. The second one responds to the 2nd question, folds the paper and so on until the questions are finished. After the questions have been answered, the groups read the fairytale that has arisen from the answers. Usually, the story that arises is funny.

- 1) *Binomials:* Two children of every group choose randomly two nouns from the dictionary. Those two words will be the protagonists of the tale. For example: dog-basket. We ask from the groups to make a short narration based on those two words with the purpose of a funny script.
- 2) *Shaping characters:* Every group chooses two funny names and it shapes two characters that do funny goofs. With these two characters as a basis they make up a funny tale that can be, with the help of — digital or not-means, converted into a comic.

5. Discussion

At the end of the program the results seemed encouraging since the children reacted with satisfaction towards the whole attempt. The students came in contact with many tales, de-contextualized from the conventional perception of the processing of a text inside the classroom. Particular emphasis was given to the re-contextualization and the re-structuring of writing a tale through an experiencing way, including the game and deploying stories that appeal to children. Consequently, the students appeared to be positive towards participating in the producing of written output activities, since the whole process reminded more of a game and rather than a commonplace practice.

Furthermore it should be noted that the students worked in groups. This fact seemed to function effectively in activating the children, as it appeared from the participation of the weakest students in the texts that were created,

which can be characterized as original and imaginative.

From the produced students' texts in every type of activity, it was observed that the suggested techniques helped in the amelioration of reading but also in the familiarization with the production and the re-composition of written text. Moreover, it seemed to reinforce the feeling of confidence since the students' mistakes were used in a creative way, aiming at improvisation and the imprint of the individual and group expression within a broader frame.

Summing up, the outcomes from the total of the activities indicated that: (a) at the first level, the processing and the restructuring of the tales was eased, since the children were familiar with most of the tales and could easily step into their restructuring stage, (b) at the second level, more time was needed towards achieving the objectives that were set, since the liberating activities require higher cognitive effort and critical thinking skills.

Nevertheless, the groups of the students managed to live up to the process, creating interesting and structured texts.

Consequently, the gradual development of critical thinking has to start from the young ages, deploying simple creative writing techniques so as for the students to be able to be ready, as they grow older, to face bigger challenges.

This study has a number of limitations since: (a) few children were participated into the tale-cultural program and (b) the results were only restricted to the observation and the notes of the authors during their intervention. However, it can nevertheless constitute a basis for further research and study upon the subject. Our intention is to provide specific ways of assessment for students' critical literacy development via empirical studies in order our initial observations to be able to be generalized. We are already working on this topic for second year of implementation with more students and specific criteria for children's pre and post evaluation.

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