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10.1515/lloe-2017-0006

Evaluating CD ROMs for Pre-Primary English Courses in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Silvia Pokrivcakova

Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Czech Republic
pokrivcakova@utb.cz

Abstract

Living in the digital age means that modern information and communications technologies (ICT) have penetrated into every aspect of human lives, including education. Despite the fact that ICT are widely used in educational setting, many educators (and parents) have nevertheless remained concerned about how to adapt them into children's education meaningfully and effectively. The use of ICT in education in general, and in preschool institutions in particular, has become an important research issue. The study focuses on evaluating multimedia CD-ROMs published in two countries with the intention to be used in pre-school institutions for the introduction of English as a foreign language to the youngest learners (children 3 – 6 years). The results point to the fact that majority of the CD ROMs offered activities which were marked as “**robotic**”, “**glib**”, “**static**”, and “**empty**” (built upon simple and usually mechanically repeated instructions), never reached beyond mechanical memorisation of English vocabulary in any entertaining way. The author calls for designing cognitively challenging materials which could support development of higher cognitive or affective functions of very young learners.

Keywords

pre-school education, ICT, English language acquisition, evaluation of educational CD ROMs

ICT and very young learners

Young children are enveloped by modern ICT technologies, both at home and in preschool, making it possible to claim that “even the youngest children live in a media-saturated world and magnitude of their technological experiences differs substantially from that of previous generation” (Wartella, et al., 2005). This must be naturally reflected in the ways very young learners are educated (Christina, 2003; Guo, 2007; Leung, 2003; Li, 2006; Nikolopoulou, Gialamas, & Batsouta, 2010;

Plowman & Stephen, 2005; Plowman, McPake, & Stephen, 2008; Prensky, 2001; Xia, Toki, & Pange, 2014).

In the knowledge-based societies, ICT plays major role in almost every aspect of modern life. This puts an important role for educational institutions on all levels of education and schooling - to develop knowledge and skills to be able to live a successful life “with and among computers” (United Nations, 2005; UNICEF, 2013; OECD, 2006; Guo et al., 2006).

Many countries have realized the importance of ICT in education, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia, both members of the European Union. Along with many EU initiatives (European Commission, 2006), both Ministries of education initiated programmes to encourage ICT integration into education on all of its levels. Under the financial support of the EU, several programs were implemented aiming at the development of ICT infrastructure (educational hardware, software and services) and teacher training. In both countries a project called Internet to Schools has been started as well other projects (e.g. *Elektronická školička* in the Czech Republic, *Infovek & Digiškola* in Slovakia). Pre-school education (ISCED 0) has not been left out of these tendencies. A large number of schools has been equipped with computers, printers, scanners, multimedia stations, and has got access to the internet.

In both countries, the ability of pre-school learners to use various information and communicative tools, including ICT, has been incorporated into the final requirements defined in basic pedagogical documents (MŠMT ČR, 2007, 2008, 2018; MŠVVŠ SR, 2008). The incorporation of ICT into pre-school education has also been an object of interest for many researchers and teacher trainers in both countries (Cimermanová, 2011; Dostál, 2009; Farkasová, 2015; Hajduková, 2011; Kalaš, 2010, 2011; Pekárová, 2009; Pokrivčáková et al. 2011; Straková, 2015 and others).

Possible benefits of ICT in education

Potential benefits of using ICT in the educational settings at all educational levels from preschool to higher education are well documented (United Nations, 2005). Many research findings showed that teaching and learning through ICT can positively influence children’s cognitive functions, academic performance and learning outcomes (Cimermanová, 2011; Kalaš, 2010, 2011; Lovari & Charalambous, 2006; UNICEF, 2013). Others proved that computer assisted learning can have a significant effect on children’s emotional, linguistic and literacy skills (Brastitsis, 2012; Fesakis, Sofroniou, & Mavroudi, 2011; Gao, 2011; Haugland, 1992; Wu & Li, 2008). Moreover, using ICT from the very early age at schools is an effective way to develop digitally-proficient and successful individuals for modern information society.

In general, it might be concluded that that using ICT was seen as a way of:

- creating new educational environments,
- providing new teaching methods,
- changing the traditional teacher-student relationship

- and, finally, improving the quality of education.

Burgerová (2003) enumerates the benefits of using ICT in education as follows:

- interactivity,
- multimediality,
- hypertextuality,
- globality,
- virtuality,
- and mobility.

Risks of using ICT in education

It should be added that these benefits remain only expectations and empty wishes if ICT is not applied systematically, effectively and in accordance with basic pedagogical and psychological principles of educational processes. If educators fail in these responsibilities, ICT in their hands (and hands of their learners) fails to be “cognitive tools that can engage students in learning”. It then becomes a tool for entertainment or a distractor. In this particular context, pedagogical theory uses two terms: “edutainment” (when entertainment prevails over education; for more see McKenzie, 2000; Okan, 2003; Resnick, 2004; Veltman, 2004) or “technotainment” (when technology is used for entertainment purposes only and education is suppressed; for more see McKenzie, 2000; Veltman, 2004).

Olson and Clough’s (2001, cited in the form acc. to Kazanci & Okan, 2009) also warn that:

- Technology should not determine the content or the activity, but teachers should shape the technology in order to meet their or the students’ needs.
- The technology used in the classroom should be goal-oriented, not just for the sake of the technology.
- The reasons for using technology should be strong, if the only reason is to have fun, other options should be considered.
- Advantages and disadvantages of technology should be considered before the decision to use it.

Some authors pointed out also to other risks or negative effects of using ICT in pre-school classes (Funk er al., 2003; Pokrivčáková, 2011; Straker et al., 2006), such as overusing technologies in situations when it is not necessary; reducing opportunities for real personal interactions with other children; tendency to mechanical “step-by-step” thinking over the critical thinking and evaluation skills.

ICT in language learning (CALL)

Integrating ICT into language learning and teaching is a long-lasting and complex process which led to the establishment of a relatively independent approach to teaching foreign languages - computer assisted language learning (CALL; for more see Bax, 2003; Ducate & Arnold, 2006; Dudeney & Hockly, 2012; Hubbard, 2009; Warschauer, 1996, 2004). ICT has become invaluable assistant in all aspects of language education - both in teaching all language system (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar) and developing communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), for more see individual chapters in Pokrivčáková et al., 2015). However, research studies in applying CALL at nursery schools and pre-primary education are scarce.

4. Research

4.1 Research objective

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the didactic effectiveness of instructional softwares for very young learners of English (pre-school beginners) which originated and have been available in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia (they all include a considerable portion of verbal materials in either Czech or Slovak languages).

4.2 Research sample and respondents

Research sample consisted of 9 CD ROMs available at a book market. All of them were created as learning materials intended to introduce English as a foreign language to learners from 3 to 6 years (or older) – either at home or at nursery schools. All 9 CD ROMs were bilingual with activities in English and instructions and explanations in children's mother language (Czech or Slovak). 5 CD ROMs were English/Czech, 3 were English/Slovak and one provided an opportunity to choose between the Czech or Slovak versions when first downloading to the computer.

The list of evaluated CD ROMs with descriptions (translated from their covers):

Moje první slovíčka (My first words, publisher: SILCOM Multimedia)

This CD is intended for the smallest children – beginners. The teaching part is in the form of classic picture dictionary in which the learner can choose from several forms of the presentation of new words (alphabetically or topically). The playful part contains various activities and games (mostly substitution or matching activities).

Začínáme s angličtinou: Moje první slova (We start with English: My first words; publisher: Terasoft)

This is a multimedia interactive programme intended for teaching English as a foreign language. It is intended for children of pre-school age. Each word is illustrated. The publisher claims that the vocabulary used in the programme was selected based on their occurrence in most frequently used textbooks in Slovakia. It is divided into 23 topics which are close to children (e.g. family, house, food, time,

a town, days of the week, animals, colours, school, etc.). The producer promises effortless and entertaining learning through funny illustrations which help effective remembering. The programme enables learners to choose from one teaching and two testing modes.

Interaktivní angličtina pro předškoláky a malé školáky (Interactive English for pre-school and elementary school learners; author: Pařízková Štěpánka)

This new CD is intended for teaching English, especially to pre-school children, or as a teaching complement at the first level of elementary schools. Using modern form of interactive computer-based teaching, children will learn 172 basic words from basic thematic areas: colours, toys, home, food, animals, plants, etc. The main intention was to introduce the language in a way which would be adequate to the abilities of children common at the age of approx. five years. It is enough just to listen to them and play, which are main attributes of teaching at that age. The use is very comfortable, there is no need to install or save anything into the computer.

Angličtina pro děti: Let's play (English for Children: Let's Play; authors: Irena Zatloukalová, Ondřej Jirásek, Kateřina Kroftová)

The book is intended for pre-school children, to facilitate, already at this young age, their first contact with English and teach basic vocabulary and phrases. The DVD and the book make up one whole. The child will watch a story about beings from space on DVD. Little heroes communicate with them in English. Eight lessons in which the child will learn basic vocabulary, numbers, colours, simple grammatical forms.

* the child will watch an animated tale on DVD, watching an educational video the child pronounces names of the pictures seen on the screen, opens a book, colours drawings and pronounces their names, the exercises in the book help the child to save the name deeper into the memory. The child can go through the coloured story again, memorise the new words and, at the same time, colour the pictures, sing songs or recite.

Zábavná angličtina pro děti: Králík Bunny a jeho dobrodružství (Funny English for Children: Bunny and his Adventures, authors: Christopher Barickman, Andrea Jandějsková)

The authors claim that Learning English is fun. If learning becomes play, then it is easy! On DVD children may watch the adventures of Pink Bunny and his friend Andrea. Pink Bunny speaks only in English and Andrea has a role of an interpreter: she communicates with the Bunny in English and then translates into Czech. The aim of the book, full of activities, is to review the vocabulary the child comes across in the story. Everything is again happening in a playful way – through colouring and puzzle solving.

Chytré dítě - English - Angličtina pro nejmenší děti - CD ROM (Smart Children – English for the Youngest Ones, publisher: Petr Blumentritt - BLUG) is intended for children from 3 years of age as well as for the older children who begin to learn English. The book's advantage is in its new method of teaching. It is not based on translating words, but on children's intuitive mental activity, the same as when they learn their mother tongue. The children fix words by means of pictures and sounds. They can learn themselves by playing, without parents or teachers.

Angličtina pre deti - CD-ROM (English for Children; publisher: LANGMaster) is an extraordinarily interactive program for the teaching of English, intended for children from 5 to 9 years of age and covering first two years of teaching. It contains almost 700 basic words and expressions, 25 English poems and a set of interactive exercises. The IBM ViaVoice speech recognition system provides a unique opportunity to do exercises orally and thus to train correct English pronunciation.

Pohádky bratří Grimmů - audiokniha+CD-ROM+DVD (Brothers Grimm's Fairy Tales – Audiobook + CD-ROM + DVD; publisher: EDDICA)

Pohádky bratří Grimmů – the set "LISTEN and LEARN" helps children to acquire the basics of English in a modern way, through tales. Learning English in a natural way through associations (sound, text and pictures). The listening book is based on the popular concept of mirror books. Its aim is to improve the ability to understand a continually spoken text. The English text is fully equipped with sound and its playback can be adapted in a very simple way to correspond to the level of your current ability to understand (individual setting of the length of pause between sentences, number of repetitions of the sentence, ...).

The nicest tales – CD ROM (publisher: EDDICA)

a series of multimedia programmes. The programme contains a sound tale in the form of an audiobook (spoken in English and Czech/Slovak), colouring books using motifs from tales, the sound Czech/Slovak-English Pexeso and Merlin school of English.

Respondents

The CD ROMs were evaluated by two groups of experts (in-service teachers of English at nursery schools with a teaching experience longer than 10 years) who were well acquainted with the educational context at nursery schools in which the programmes are intended to be used. Each group consisted of 6 teachers. They were selected from the larger groups of volunteers who answered the call for participation in the research via teachers' associations and universities (in total 168 applications have been registered).

The first group included teachers from nursery schools in the Czech Republic, the second one teachers from Slovak nursery schools. The group members did not know each other before the research, which was one of the selection criteria. Other selection criteria were: age, sex, region, length of teaching practice, and training in the use of educational ICT.

4.3 Methodology

To get the research data, a combination of three methods was used:

1. heuristic evaluations (Nielsen, 1992; Squires & Preece, 1999);
2. expert reviews (Korhonen, 2010);
3. focus groups.

Heuristic evaluations (Nielsen, 1992; Squires & Preece, 1999)

The basic principle of heuristic evaluation is that the group of experts “work their way through the system, using their expertise to role-play the behaviour of a typical user” (Squires & Preece, 1999, p. 472). Therefore, as the first step of the research, 12 experts - teachers were asked to use all 9 CD ROMs as if in a role of a child user. They were asked to use all the activities and to use all the applications. Each expert tested each of the sample softwares individually (March – September 2017).

Expert reviews

Then the experts evaluated the CD ROMs from the sample in the form of expert reviews. Based on their teaching expertise and personal experience with CD ROMs, they were asked to evaluate the balance between education and entertainment and fill in their assessments into the McKenzie’s Assessment Chart (Appendix No. 1). They were also asked to record their personal experience, notes, and comments in a written form for the purposes of a later discussion in the focus group (September 2017).

Focus groups

In the last phase of the research study the experts were divided into two focus groups who met to discuss their opinions and assessments in November 2017. The Czech group met at the Tomas Bata University in Zlin, the Slovak group at the University of Trnava. Each meeting lasted 90 minutes and the author of this study acted as a moderator in both of these meetings.

Williams & Katz define focus group (FG) as „a small gathering of individuals who have a common interest or characteristic, assembled by a moderator, who uses the group and its interactions as a way to gain information about a particular issue” (2001, p. 2).

The method was chosen because it enables the researcher to get participants to (Breen, 2006):

- share and compare their experience with each other,

- develop and generate ideas,
- explore issues of shared importance.

Each meeting has the same structure:

1. welcome and opening (rules of a discussion in focus groups)
2. discussion on individual points from McKenzie's Assessment Chart
3. filling in the chart again to create a single report for the group
4. closing the meeting

During each session, the moderator directed the direction of the discussion and motivated respondents to express their opinions openly. Examples of prompt questions:

Does the software provide unique multimedia learning environment? Does the software enable users to achieve the right outcome? Does the software include any useless elements distracting users, e.g. meaningless flashes, animations, etc.?

Focus groups members provided the moderator with their notes and the moderator made her own notes as well. These, together with two final charts (FG 1 and FG 2), were the main source materials for later analysis.

4.3.1 Selecting an evaluation instrument

To provide the experts in focus groups with some united review form to evaluate the selected sample of educational CD ROMs, the researcher could choose from several already designed and tested evaluation tools (Barker & King, 1993; Leacock & Nesbit, 2007; Papanastasiou & Angeli, 2008; Park & Hannafin, 1993; Reeves, 1992). The following criteria were observed: easy to use, suitable for evaluation by experts (not learners or regular users), and economic (providing enough relevant data through a simple procedure and in a short time).

The instruments for evaluating teaching materials come in various forms (scales, grids, user's questionnaires, etc.) and structures. One of the most complex evolution instruments was designed by El Mhouti, Nasseh, & Erradi (2013) which cover four areas: pedagogical quality aspect, didactic quality aspect, technical quality aspect, and academic quality aspect (see Fig. 1).

Each section (academic quality, pedagogical quality, didactic quality and technical quality) must be associated with a set of additional criteria, and each criterion is then associated with one or more questions to verify the suitability of the product examined with each reference criterion. "The criteria are intended to encourage evaluators to think critically about the resource and evaluate some of its more detailed aspects" (p. 29). The instrument, despite being an excellent tool, was not suitable for our purposes due to its complexity and its focus on details.

Another example of an excellent evaluation instrument (or better a set of evaluation criteria) has been provided by Norwegian Centre for Education (online)

named Quality Criteria for Digital Learning Resources. It leads researchers and teachers in analysing and evaluating digital learning materials in three areas:

- user dimension: the interface between user and resource;
- the distinctiveness of the digital resource: the possibilities and limitations of the digital resource;
- subject and education dimension: the educational and evaluation potential (p. 2).

The instrument has a form of 8 grids each of which contains of up to 5 open questions (see Fig. 2 – 5).

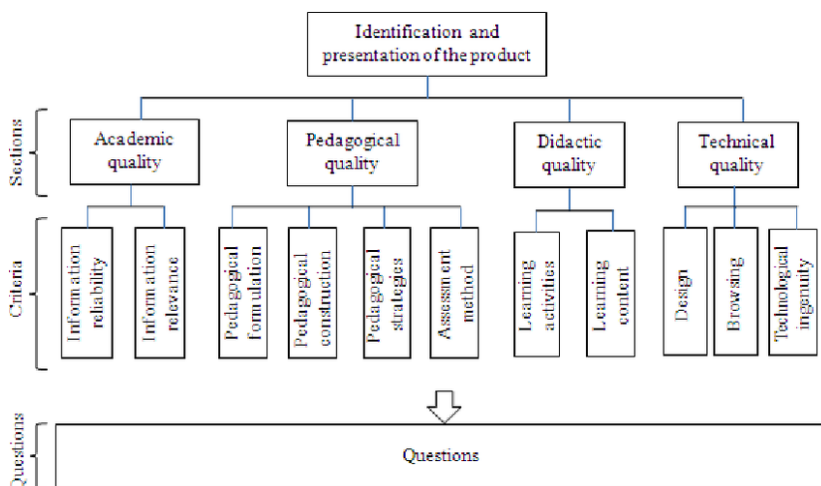


Fig. 1 The structure of the evaluation instrument for educational CD ROMs by El Mhouti, Nasseh, & Erradi (2013, p. 29)

Does the digital learning resource create interest?

Description	In-depth questions
The resource <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • should help activate and motivate the pupils • must be relevant to the subject being taught 	a) What type of functionality helps create interest, and how does the design and layout contribute to this? b) How are images, graphics, video, sound, and so forth exploited to create interest? c) What choices have been made to ensure that the resource will promote learning and not merely activity and entertainment?

Fig. 2 The example of an evaluation grid for the area User orientation (ibid., p. 4).

How does the digital learning resource utilize the inherent possibilities of digital media?

Description	In-depth questions
Resources should <ul style="list-style-type: none"> include various media forms such as text, images, video, animation, simulations, etc. select and incorporate the media forms on an educational basis 	a) In what ways can the user use a variety of media forms in the resource? b) How does interactivity (if such exists) help capture the pupils' interest in the subject? c) How is it ensured that the presented information is up to date?

Fig. 3 The example of an evaluation grid for the area “The distinctiveness of the digital resource” (*ibid.*, p. 5).

How does the digital learning resource enable new educational possibilities that are lacking in traditional learning resources?

Description	In-depth questions
The resource should <ul style="list-style-type: none"> facilitate a varied teaching and learning practice through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the use of various media forms the use of communication resources solid access to updated information 	a) Does the resource enable communication between pupils, between teacher and pupil, and between others? b) How does the resource challenge the pupils in regard to the subject matter? c) To what degree are links provided to alternative sources and updated information? d) How are the specific capabilities of various media forms used in the learning work? e) To what degree is the resource innovative, and how can it help teach the subject matter?

Fig. 4 The example of an evaluation grid for the area “The distinctiveness of the digital resource” (*ibid.*, p. 5)

How is the digital learning resource relevant for the curriculum?

Description	In-depth questions
The resource should <ul style="list-style-type: none"> be relevant for the current curriculum indicate how various goals in the curriculum are to be achieved 	a) How is the learning resource relevant for the curriculum and the competence objectives? b) Is the learning resource suitable for achieving the goals that have been defined? c) Is the resource intended for a certain age or target group? How is it designed so as to reach any such target groups?

Fig. 5 The example of an evaluation grid for the area “Subject and education dimension” (*ibid.*, p. 7)

CD-ROM title	Purpose	Activities	ESL Strengths	ESL Weaknesses
<i>The Magic Letter Factory</i>	Explore letters, sounds, word formation, and sentences	Songs, videos, make words, sentences	Variety of activities suited for many learning styles	Very little vocabulary, navigation is difficult, low interaction
<i>Millie and Bailey Preschool</i>	Learn math and reading	Make stories, learn alphabet, practice numbers	Large vocabulary building activities, high interaction	User manual does not recommend how to use with ESL student
<i>Chicka Chicka Boom Boom</i>	Learn letters	Sing-along, reading	Very musically oriented	Very little vocabulary, navigation is difficult
<i>A to Zap</i>	Recognize letters and identify words	A short activity for each letter of the alphabet	Manual explains how to be used with ESL students	Very little interaction
<i>First Phonics</i>	Teach letter-sound correspondence and build vocabulary	Matching exercises, listening activities	Many activities for students and student progress report,	Very little vocabulary building, navigation may be difficult with beginners

Fig. 6 Example of the analysis grid from Arendt (2000, p. 29)

The different (simpler) approach to the evaluation of CD ROMs, this time specifically for language learning, was manifested in the work by Arendt (2000) who cooperated with the group of evaluators - instructors who were using the evaluated softwares at the time of his study. First, Arendt analysed the form of the learning materials according to the following criteria: purpose, type of activities, and both the strengths and weaknesses of CD ROMs regarding methodology of teaching English as a second language (see Fig. 6).

Later during the research, he asked experts-teachers to evaluate the set of educational CD ROMs and focused on their opinions and attitudes (not objective measures of the CD ROMs) which is visible from the two last columns of the chart in Fig. 7.

CD-ROM title	Grade Level	Language ability	Instruction time	Use	Likes	Dislikes
<i>The Magic Letter Factory</i> (1 response)	Pre K-2	mid-beginner	15 minutes	Individually	Manual, variety, graphics	Student evaluation
<i>Millie and Bailey Preschool</i> (1 response)	Pre K-2	mid-beginner	30 minutes	Individually	Graphics, materials	evaluation
<i>Chicka Chicka Boom Boom</i> (2 responses)	PreK-1 and K-2	Low-beginner	15 minutes	Groups and Individually w/ instructor	Variety, skill areas	N/A
<i>A to Zap</i> (1 response)	PreK-1	Low-beginner	15 minutes	Individually, and groups	Sound, graphics, cost	Worksheets, microphone , evaluation
<i>First Phonics</i> (1 response)	Pre K-1	mid-beginner	15-30 minutes	Individually, groups, and individually w/ instructor	Variety, student report, sound, graphics	Teacher's manual
<i>Letter Sounds</i> (2 responses)	PreK-1	mid-beginner	15 minutes	Individually	Manual	graphics

Fig. 7 Example of the evaluation grid by Arendt (*ibid.*, p. 42)

After letting the group of experts (experienced in-service teachers) participating in this research to choose from the offer of 4 evaluation instruments (El Mhouthi et al., 2009; Norwegian Centre for Education, not dated; Arendt, 2000; and McKenzie, 2000), they opted for the last one as the most appropriate, user-friendly and economic. **McKenzie's Assessment Chart** was introduced by McKenzie (2000) and used in Kazanci & Okan's study (2009). Despite being originally used as a tool for distinguishing between *technotainment* activities (= using technology for technology's sake without any or with a very little educational value) and real, valuable educational activities, it can be used as a tool for determining and comparing didactic effectiveness of digital learning materials. The expert team needed to evaluate the selected CD ROMs according to the following criteria and decide whether the CD ROM has the said quality or not.

- **Pointless:** means that a software itself becomes the goals of the activity rather than the medium to education. Learners do not benefit from the advantages of multimedia environments. „It is believed that when someone, somehow transforms any information into a digital platform, the activity takes the form of a computer-based activity“ (Kazanci & Okan, Z. 2009, p. 33).
- **Nonstandard:** means that the educational content of the software is disconnected from the educational standards of the country where it is used.

- **Robotic:** The software is robotic if the activities included do not require higher thinking skills of learners. They just follow the instructions without any independent critical or creative thinking.
- **Glib:** means that the software provides only mechanical (deductive) learning, the activities included in the software do not require any exploring, discovering, or asking essential questions.
- **Static:** means that none of learners’ knowledge, skills or opinions has been changed, developed, modified in any way during the activity.
- **Disneyfied:** Cartoon characters naturally appeal to young learners. But their appearance in educational softwares must be functional. If the educational material is marked as “disneyfield”, it means that the attractive design seems to be more important than the quality of educational content; the activities are designed to be first-plan attractive without any connection to the development of learners’ knowledge or skills.
- **Flashy:** special effects like decorative animations and sounds are overused and distracting learners’ attention.
- **Empty:** Learners cannot learn from the activities anything new.

4.4 Research results

The final results based on the agreement of all expert teachers involved in the research evaluation are summarised in Tab. 1. Please note that the numbers in the first line do not correspond with the order of softwares in the sample description.

Tab. 1 Results of evaluation of educational software for teaching English at nursery schools (using McKenzie’s Assessment Chart, 2000).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total
Pointless		+	+	++	++	++	++		++	12
Nonstandard		++			+	+	+		++	7
Robotic	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	18
Glib	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	18
Static		++		++	++	++	++	++		12
Disneyfield	++			++		++			+	7
Flashy				++						2
Empty	++	++	++	++	++	++	+	++	++	17
Total score	4	5	4	7	6	7	6	4	5	

+ means that the trait was identified in the CD ROM by one focus group

++ means that the trait was identified in the CD ROM by both focus groups

The data showed that in each software the focus groups were able to identify at least half of “undesirable” traits. Some traits were identified only in few programmes, others in all programmes. In general, the high similarity in evaluations provided by

both focus groups (marked as ++) is obvious. According to Breen (2006, p. 472-473), the extent of agreement (or disagreement) is a good indicator of the reliability of the gained focus group data).

Final evaluation of the CD ROMs in focus groups (according to individual traits)

1. Pointless

The feature pointless was observed in two thirds of the evaluated materials. The research samples contained mostly simple matching activities or substitution activities that might be easily complete on paper without using any sophisticated technology.

An extreme example of such a “technological uselessness” was the activity called “Interactive colouring game” where the selected picture had to be printed out to be handed to a child and then coloured in a classical way (by colour pencils).

2. Nonstandard

Only half of the software packages examined in this study were designed to follow or to build upon the existing state educational standards either in the Czech Republic or Slovakia.

3. Robotic, glib and empty

All softwares in the sample were evaluated as “robotic” because the vast majority of activities were based on following the instructions given by the programme. Instructions were usually repetitive, mechanical and too simple = not challenging children’s thinking. There is a risk that learners remain cognitively passive and they do not develop any of higher cognitive or affective functions. As one member of the focus group mentioned, the “children are nothing more active than when watching the same TV programme all around with one finger active”.

From a methodological point of view, nearly all activities in all programmes were focused on fixing new vocabulary (with the visual or auidial support). None of them went beyond mechanical memorisation of words (e.g. match the word you can hear with a picture). What is even more confusing, English words were presented as isolated items without any appropriate verbal context. In some cases, “word-to-word” translations were used, which is the technique with very questionable effect on very young learners.

4. Static

Half of the evaluated softwares focused only on a limited scale of learner’s competences and skills (repetition of vocabulary, matching a picture with a meaning of the word and its correct pronunciation, moving an object over the screen, drawing or colouring pictures).

5. Disneyfied

All programmes contained at least some activities designed in the cartoon game format. All activities used various cartoon characters (mostly animals) as some guides and actors in the activities. What is good is that only in three cases the focus groups

evaluated the software graphics as Disneyfied. Commenting on them, the experts used words as “dysfunctional”, “infantile”, and “annoying”.

6. Flashy

According to the evaluations provided by the focus groups, only one of the evaluated CD ROMs contained meaningless special sound and visual effects (flashes and rings) which could distract learners’ attention appeared only in one of the evaluated softwares.

From other comments and observations by members of both focus groups:

1. Some members of focus groups appreciated the fact that despite “the tiny market”, there are publishers who are willing to publish original multimedia learning materials intended for children in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.
2. Several CD ROMs provided rich cultural materials in both learners’ mother and foreign languages (e.g. traditional national fairy tales and other literary forms in both languages).
3. Generally, all evaluated CD ROMs were praised for a quality aesthetic design.
4. Experts complained about the gap between the majority of evaluated CD ROMs and modern methodology of teaching foreign languages to very young learners (e.g. presence of vocabulary lists, “word-to-word” translation activities).
5. Members of focus groups stated that CD ROMs failed to provide users with a wide scale of activities for the development of various communicative skills. They all were focused mostly on developing vocabulary.
6. Truly interactive tasks (when children could make some choices, get an immediate response from the computer and proceed accordingly) could be observed only in one CD ROM.
7. In general, the CD ROMs were not technologically innovative or challenging for very young users.

Discussion and conclusions

The research results showed that all CD ROMs analysed in this study did not use the educational potential of ICT in the fullest. They failed to fulfil the expectations that new technologies would provide the learners with pedagogically attractive and cognitively challenging materials. Even though the programmes were evaluated as visually attractive, all of them offered mostly robotic, monotonous, and mechanical activities. The results thus corresponded with the findings by Kazanci & Okan (2009).

The results also showed that the analysed CD ROMs for the introduction of English to very young learners had more characteristics of electronic games than of educational software, which places them closer to the category of edutainment or *technotainment* (c.f. McKenzie, 2000; Okan, 2003; Resnick, 2004; Veltman, 2004).

It is the task and responsibility of researchers and teaching material evaluators to permanently point to both strengths and weaknesses in the quality of published materials, inform teachers and parents about requirements on multimedia learning sources, and instruct materials designers and teachers about the possible ways to effective improvements.

Acknowledgements

The paper presents the partial results of the project KEGA 055UKF-4/2016.

The author would like to express her deepest gratitude to the group of experienced nursery school teachers of pre-primary English from 12 nursery schools in the Czech Republic and Slovakia for their professional cooperation and insights.

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Contact

Silvia Pokrivcakova, prof., PaedDr., PhD.

Ústav školní pedagogiky

Fakulta humanitních studií

Univerzita Tomáše Bati

nám. T. G. Masaryka 1279

760 01 Zlín

Czech Republic

pokrivcakova@utb.cz

Appendix 1: McKenzie Assessment Chart

Trait	Traits of Technotainment	Y/N
Pointless	The activity involves the use of a tool such as a spreadsheet or presentation program without an authentic connection to the regular (social studies, science, etc.) curriculum for the grade level of the student. PowerPointing and spreadsheeting become goals rather than just means to ends.	
Nonstandard	The activity is disconnected from state standards and the new tests. No relationship or contribution made to the students' grasp of either content or skills.	
Robotic	The activity requires little original thought or higher level thinking. The student blindly follows directions and wins success by taking orders.	
Glib	The activity requires nothing more than skimming along the surface of the content without probing, exploring, asking essential questions or creating new insight.	
Static	The activity does nothing to advance the skill level or the skill repertoire of the student. Same old, same old!	
Disneyfied	The activity is sugar coated and packaged with arcade quality graphics as if learning must be turned into a game or cartoon before young people will find it rewarding.	
Flashy	Special effects, transitions, bells and whistles are prevalent. Students are encouraged to devote more than 25% of their time and effort to packaging and special effects rather than the thought, the content and the production of new ideas.	
Empty	The activity does little to advance student understanding of any issue, question or idea worth study.	

Appendix 2: Covers of evaluated CD ROMs





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10.1515/llce-2017-0007

Psychological Bases of the Foreign-Language Education of Seniors (Not Only) with Health Disability

Marianna Müller de Morais

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
radka.zimanova@ukf.sk

Lucia Rapsová

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
radka.zimanova@ukf.sk

Radka Zimanová

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
radka.zimanova@ukf.sk

Abstract

According to international documents, older people have a right to carry out and fully develop their abilities, skills and competences, as well as to have a dignified place and position in the society. Seniors with a certain kind of health disability have the same right as well. Due to this reason, it is indispensable and necessary to create suitable conditions for disabled seniors and to provide them a place for their personal development and self-fulfilment oriented on their fully valuable life in spite of their health disadvantage. The foreign-language education can be considered to be one of the possibilities of the self-fulfilment of seniors (not only) with health disability. Learning of a foreign language is an immanent part of education, however, it is necessary to keep certain specific features in the foreign-language education of this target group. This subject study is aimed on the analysis of psychological bases and chosen specific features of foreign-language education of seniors (not only) with health disability. It mentions chosen psycho-didactic aspects of the education of seniors (not only) with health disability. The study is an output of the authors from solving the research project of Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences n.1/0176/15 called *Paradigms in education of adults and seniors with disability in the residential care*.

Keywords

senior with health disability, foreign-language education, specific features of the education of seniors, specificities of the foreign-language education of seniors

Introduction

Nowadays, we live, though we are not aware of it, in a crucial period marked with significant demographic changes of population. When compared to the past, the living standard has been increased with a direct impact on the growing age of the population. In the past the composition of the population had a shape of a pyramid - with the growing age decreased the number of people, currently this shape has been narrowed and in the future it will probably have a form of a tree. Together with the increasing living standard, there improves also the development of the country, the average life expectancy and the number of seniors. As the number of retired people increases, the percentage of disabled and disadvantaged seniors is proportionally higher as well. Due to the consequences of their disability, these seniors are often placed in the residential institutions of social services or in other facilities for seniors.

The attitude of the current society to the old age and disabled seniors is quite negative. The old age and “illness” are generally understood as a decline of the man. In our region, there has been still preferred the stereotypical perception of older people as unproductive ones. Their experience and competences are losing their meaning, such people are not very beneficial for the society. The value system of this society, which emphasizes the keeping of all, mainly biologically conditioned competences of the young age (appearance, efficacy, performance), puts the old and disabled people in a very disadvantaged position. This tendency is also supported by the mass media which confirm in different ways the significant importance of the outer appearance, health, vividness and activity as the current norm. It means that everything what does not fit into this image, is considered to be non-beneficial. Therefore, ageing is not only an individual problem of every man, but is a social problem as well. The society should respect, with all dignity, seniors with all their specific features which are influenced by their age and health condition and provide them such conditions for their personal development which will subsequently improve the quality of their life. In our article, we would like to emphasize the importance of the personal progress of seniors (not only) with health disability which can be achieved by means of learning foreign languages and other developing programmes carried out in the residential institutions of social services, taking into consideration all the specific features and limitations based on the age and kind of disability.

Education of seniors (not only) with health disability and its psychological bases

The psychologists say that the man is as old as old he/she thinks. The old age is mainly the function of psychical and physical condition and not only the number of

years of life. The experience confirms the opinion that to judge the quality of life only with years is the same as to judge the value of the book with the number of its pages. In other words, with the life expectancy it is not possible to measure the quality of life nor the satisfaction of the man. The man can keep the freshness of the mind and body if he/she is able and motivated to learn, to acquire new knowledge, skills, experience and to develop his/her personality and therefore it is important to provide place and possibilities in this area. Many researches confirm that the education of seniors has its importance and meaning. Every senior is able to modify, form and cultivate his/her personality and therefore he/she is able to be educated and formed. Regarding this fact, there arises a question related to the education of disabled seniors living in the residential institutions of social services or in other facilities provided for seniors. These institutions are oriented mainly on the satisfying of physiological needs, the health and nursing care and so the personality and above mentioned needs of these seniors are put aside. Every man, and also the senior with disability, is a unique, individual and original being with certain psychical needs which should be satisfied in order to achieve a better quality of life.

Vágnerová (2000) characterizes these psychical needs more thoroughly and she includes in them: *the need of stimulation, the need of orientation and learning, the need of activity, the need of emotional certainty and safety, the need of self-fulfilment and open future*. Retired people have to cope with the fact that they will not perform their professional role anymore and they have to find another meaning of their life, different values from the performance and its social presentation. The adequate saturation of these individual psychical and social needs can significantly slow down the process of ageing or alleviate its consequences. The needs of seniors are very individual, everybody emphasizes and prefers other needs. However, all the needs form a complex which connects the physical, psychical and social unit of an older person and these are inseparable from each other. We should take into consideration the mentioned needs and they should be satisfied by education.

We agree with several authors (Jaroszewska, 2009, Határ, Jedličková, Müller de Morais, 2016) that learning of foreign languages can be considered to be one of the forms of self-fulfilment of seniors. Referring to Jaroszewska (2009), Határ (2016) describes several reasons why seniors learn a foreign language and he divides them in the following areas:

- a) *interpersonal relationships and the needs connected with them* (the need of a contact with people, the need of making friends, the need of participation in different activities where the senior feels younger, the pleasure of the possibility to speak at the forum, the possibility to exchange views among the peers, the desire to help others by learning of a foreign language, the need to be independent during the travelling abroad etc.),

- b) *fulfilling of dreams and the organization of free time* (learning of foreign languages as a way of organizing free time of seniors, the dream of knowing a foreign language which was not possible in the past, participating in a language course as a form of escaping from the loneliness and everyday problems, knowing of a foreign language as an evidence of the achieved success),
- c) *keeping and developing of cognitive abilities* (the desire to keep language skills acquired in the past, learning of a foreign language as a way of training of the memory, the effort to understand films etc.),
- d) *to develop previously acquired experience with a language* (the desire to refresh a foreign language the senior was in contact with in the past, learning of foreign languages as a family tradition etc.)
- e) *the interest in other cultures* (the pleasure of knowing other countries and nations, the possibility to participate in different cultural events which are connected with the given language, the desire to understand the lyrics of songs which are sung in a foreign language, the wish to read originals of books, etc.),
- f) *the interest in a language* (“to be fallen in love with a given foreign language, the pleasure of listening to its sound, etc.)

Based on the definition of the education of seniors by Muhlpachr (2009), we can perceive the foreign-language education of seniors as a process centred on the intentional education in the period of ageing and the functional educational impact on seniors. It is a purposeful process with its internal rules, exact specific targets, forms, methods and means which represent the tools for achieving of the determined aims.

The knowledge about the conception of education, its aims and the possible steps of achieving it represent for the participants of education a very motivating and desired reason for their own activity and participation in education.

Prusáková (2005) presents questions which have to be answered in order to make the education effective. We can also apply them to the foreign-language education of seniors: *What makes the orientation of education of seniors specific? What are the characteristic features of the educational situations of seniors like? What are the psychological and sociological aspects influencing the educational intentions?* These questions should lead to the analysing of the needs from the practice and also to the looking for possible solutions.

The phases of planning and carrying out the foreign-language education of seniors require the knowledge of the psychic of an older person. Čornaničová (2007) defines two areas of factors in the following way:

1. *From the aspect of specific features as bases of modelling the education of seniors:* it is necessary to perceive the education of seniors as a lifelong process, to take into consideration the possibilities of the given area and

subsystems of the educational system actuating there, to recognize the needs and interests of seniors and to create the educational offer based on them, the enable education to all seniors without discrimination, to provide opportunities for supporting the quality of life in the senior age by means of educational activities and to remove the traditional opinion of the society regarding the life in the senium, to support the active life of seniors and to use life experience of seniors for themselves and for the society as well.

2. *From the aspect of the proper process of education of seniors, there are frequent requirements of choosing methods, forms, means and factors for achieving the determined aim:* using of adequate forms of education of seniors, respecting of psychophysical changes in the process of ageing, individual approaching to the specific features of education of seniors, helping in better solving of personal problems by means of educational activities, to provide conditions for the creativity of seniors during the course of education, to provide not only the knowledge but also the psychical support for seniors, to support the active life of seniors with educational activities.

Disabled seniors form a specific group which requires a different approach in the educational process from the other educational groups in different age categories. It is very important to be aware of the psychological aspects typical of the education and instruction of seniors. In order to make the education of this target group effective, we have to respect and accept these particularities.

In the period of the old age there occur not only many physical changes but also psychical, personal and social changes which modify the ability to learn and they influence the course of education as well. The senium is characteristic with unequal change or decline of partial abilities and general structure. Changes arising from the ageing are observed in the area of those processes which are related to the recording, storing and using of information (Vágnerová, 2000). In the following table we mention particular developmental changes and the specific features of foreign-language education of seniors based on them.

Table 1 The outline of chosen developmental changes and from them resulting specific features of the foreign-language education of seniors

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES	SPECIFIC FEATURES OF EDUCATION
<i>Changes of the activating level - slowing down of the psychical activity, worsened concentration of attention, bigger tiredness, prolonging of the reaction time.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slower speed of presentation - respect a longer reaction time and period of processing the information. • Provide the time for thinking about answers. • Arrange a free course of education. • Provide a smaller amount of information during certain time units.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate instructions and tasks clearly. • Use the same concepts (less synonyms). • Repeat provided information more often. • Use analogical methods - similarity. • Strengthen the knowledge by means of illustrative methods (practical exercises, demonstration, experiential methods, and tools).
<p><i>Changes in the area of orientation in the surroundings - reduction of the sensual perception, changes in vision - long-sight (hyperopia), presbyopia, reduced adaptation to darkness</i></p>	<p>By educational materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use white paper (not the blue or green paper), • Do not use glossy paper, • Use a bigger font size, • Use a black or red font on the white background, • Use a simple structure of sentences • Use bigger graphic visualizations, • Use magnifying glass, • Check the glasses. <p>Create a safe environment for education (a risk of injury).</p>
<p><i>Changes in hearing – reduction in hearing, worsened perception of high tones, sounds, fast speech and speech of more people at the same time</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use short simple sentences. • Repeat information more often. • Speak clearly and slowly. • Speak more loudly but do not shout. • Speak face to face with the senior. • Minimalize disturbing moments, remove the noise. • Check the functionality and correct setting of the hearing device. • Find out which ear is better in hearing.
<p><i>Decline of memory competences - decay and slow down of all memory processes, reduction of the ability of short-term memory</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan shorter and more frequent educational units. • Include longer breaks. • Use word and illustrative methods of education more often.
<p><i>Changes in intellectual functions and difficulties in learning - decline of intellectual abilities, bigger</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use adequate forms and methods of education of seniors (in relation to the subject matter and character of the topic, age

<p>reduction of fluid intelligence, tendency to use knowledge and ways of thinking which were acquired in the past</p>	<p>particularities and health limitations of seniors).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect the preferred style of learning of seniors. • Teach seniors “how to learn”. • Provide to seniors enough opportunities to speak in a foreign language. • Use objects, pictures or drawings as a starting point and ask seniors to tell you what they see. • Do not correct their pronunciation and grammar during their speaking because it can lead to the reduction of their motivation to speak. • Give seniors a chance to speak what they are learning about. • Be interested in their difficulties in learning, ask what is easy and what is difficult for them. • By planning the conversation topics, make use of personal needs and interests of seniors, provide seniors a possibility to show their curiosity. • Use different methods of repeating and strengthening the knowledge. • Enable them to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in particular activities. • Provide a systematic positive feedback.
<p><i>Decline of ability to coordinate different cognitive functions and to use different information in analysing of the problem - reduced possibility to use more complicated strategies, a tendency to a simplified solving of the problem</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect hierarchy of learning of seniors. • Use life experience of seniors by learning. • Support experiential learning. • Apply active and creative activity, use problem methods of learning. • Activate the attention of seniors with applying adequate initial and continuous motivating methods. • Create a logic structure of topics (concept maps, supporting points, key words, graphs, schemes). • Facilitate the process of learning of seniors

	<p>with the application of manifold mnemotechnic aids.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include as many senses as possible in the process of learning.
<p><i>Changes in will and will processes, changes of features of personality, changes in emotional experience and social relationships - slower deciding, increase of the need of safety and stability, deepening of introversion, carefulness, punctiliousness, anxiety, tendency to impatience, higher concentration on oneself and close people in one's surroundings</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide enough opportunities for seniors to know and support each other. • Support creative atmosphere in the educational group, humour, jokes, laughter. • Include social activities in the educational group, support the feeling of belonging to the group. • Use learning in teams and support small group projects. • Apply adequate strategies and methods of emotionalization. • Teach the vocabulary of feelings so that seniors can express what they feel. • Enable to seniors to plan social activities, debates, exhibitions of their own projects, trips or excursions.

Source: adapted according to Zanutová and col. (2015), Vágnerová (2000), Langmeier, Krejčířová (2004)

Neurological changes are related to the psychological changes in the old age as well (i.e. changes in the nervous system). It was proved that the human brain loses 10 - 15% of its weight during the normal course of ageing. It can have an impact on the activity of the psychic because the cells of the central nervous system cannot be substituted. The relation between ageing and intellectual abilities is also connected with this topic. In general, people think that ageing brings the increase of general knowledge but in a longer period because it is necessary to think about the issues. The old age brings a bigger wisdom but a smaller quick-wittedness and ingenuity (Stuart-Hamilton, 1999, in: Veteška, 2016).

Regarding the creativity, numerous statistics point out that people achieve their top in all areas of creative activity between the age of 25 - 40 and then their productivity usually decreases. However, if we look at the performance of some famous people in their old age, these statistics can be misleading in this area (e.g. Goethe finished the second part of Faust at the age of 83, Sophocles wrote his King Oedipus at the age of 80, etc.). We agree with the opinion that there is no age border limiting the human creativity. The man remains creative during all his/her life, motivation, persistence and enthusiasm are more decisive here than the age (Langmeier, Krejčířová, 1998).

We would like to emphasize here that due to the impact of ageing, the performance slows down as well (older people understand and adapt to new situations worse) but there does not have to occur the worsening of the general capacity - older people need longer time for some activities but they are able to do them (Vágnerová, 2000).

In addition to the mentioned developmental changes of older people, the ability of disabled seniors to learn is also influenced by the degree and kind of disability which must be taken into consideration in the choice of the subject matter, principles, methods, forms and strategies. In order to be able to work with disabled seniors, it is very important and necessary to have adequate theoretical knowledge and also practical experience with the particular specific expressions and features resulting from the certain kinds of disability. The knowledge of the given problematic area will enable us to choose educational principles, methods, forms and aids correctly and to apply specific educational strategies which will facilitate and make the process of education more effective, they will help us to achieve the determined educational aims and, in this way, they will increase the quality of life of disabled individuals in the retired age. We describe more detailed specific features of the education of seniors related to the particular kinds of health disability in the works by Müller de Morais, Rapsová (2017a, b).

In order to achieve educational aims, Vašek (2003) thinks that it is important to keep the principles of work with individuals with special needs. It is necessary to respect these principles also by the subsequent application of the programme in the target group of seniors with health disability:

1. *The principle of prevention*, i.e. the type of activities which are aimed on the prevention of occurrence of defects by means of educational, therapeutic and social measures.
2. *The principle of complexity* oriented on the care for individuals with disability in all its parts and areas.
3. *The principle of uniformity* which is the basis of the coordinated care taking.
4. *The principle of dispensarization* which deals with the earliest possible controlling and observing of every individual with disability because it is substantial for the subsequent organizing of work with this individual and for achieving of the given educational-formative aims.
5. *The principle of the optimal environment*, i.e. at least the trial including of all disabled people into a higher category of educational-formative institutions in order to provide them the best impulses for their development.
6. *The principle of socialization* which is based on the orientation of the care on active and socially beneficial inclusion of all disabled individuals into social groups and into the society as well.
7. *The principle of re-education*, i.e. continuous developing of all affected, distorted or weakened organs and functions in the process of education.

8. *The principle of compensation* or developing and practice of substitutional activities where the re-education of the original function is not possible to a desired extent.
9. *The principle of rehabilitation*, i.e. the continuous multilateral influence on the personality of a disabled individual with the aim of his/her adaptation to live a relatively fulfilling life

Vašek (2011) adds other important rules to these generally valid principles:

1. *The principle of compensation* aimed on the usage and development of the compensation mechanisms of a disabled individual.
2. *The principle of orto-functionalization* centred on the creation and development of the correct functions of a disabled individual.
3. *The principle of hyper-emotionalization* aimed on the strengthening of “personal feelings” and emotional life of a disabled individual.
4. *The principle of de-tensionalization* which is based on the releasing of tensions, states of tension of a disabled individual.
5. *The principle of substitutionalization* aimed on the substitution of distorted sensory channels with others.
6. *The principle of synergitization* centred on the connection of impulses and reactions into higher units in order to have a bigger impact.
7. *The principle of creativization aimed on the supporting of creative thinking and creative activity.*

The effectiveness and success of educational-rehabilitative programmes influence more the psychosocial components than the existing disabilities or illnesses. In this target group, there is often present the apathy, resignation as well as decrease of performance conditioned by the organic changes of the brain which reduce and complicate the effectiveness of the educational-rehabilitative actuation. However, it is possible to overcome them. We can achieve it by means of determining of small and easily accessible aims what represents the basis of these activities by seniors with disability. The partial results form the most important motivation in the area of education, activation and rehabilitation of seniors (Vítková, 2006).

Chosen psycho-didactic aspects of the foreign-language education of seniors (not only) with disability

Though there are used teaching methods with the same name in the foreign-language education of adults and seniors as in the education of children and teenagers, they have different contents, application and usage when working with every target group depending on the age. There enter many variables besides the age and disability into the process of the foreign-language education of disabled seniors which influence not only its course but also the quality of the proper results of education (Határ, 2016).

Older students have a wide range of physical and psychic problems which can have an impact on their learning activity. They can be related to the general psychic and physical condition of a senior, his/her health condition as well as to the current life situation of a senior, his/her preferred strategy of copying with his/her own old age, motivation or the fear of failure, mistakes and feeling of being ridiculized by the others, etc. The teacher of a foreign language should identify these obstacles of effective learning of seniors and he/she should take adequate measures in the educational group in order to remove or alleviate them (Határ, Jedličková, Müller de Morais, 2017). Based on the theoretical and practical knowledge of the current problem area, it is significant to strengthen and support positive experience of seniors with learning a foreign language.

Anxiety is one of the cognitive factors that can have a negative influence on the process of the foreign-language education (more in detail: Král'ová, Škorvagová, Tirpáková & Markechová, 2017). It is possible to eliminate this anxiety with suitable cognitive and behavioral techniques. Similarly, we recommend to eliminate those barriers in learning a foreign language which are related to their previous experience and they are connected mainly with negative feelings.

Referring to Homolová (2007), Határ (2016) describes several specific features of the foreign-language education of seniors. We choose some of them here:

1. A senior starts his/her foreign language education with his/her own *inner motivation* and his/her own *learning style*.
2. A senior has a *more responsible attitude* to the given learning tasks.
3. A senior frequently enters into the foreign-language education with certain *hindrances to accept knowledge in a new way* (they can be related to certain stereotypes, habits, expectations and also to his/her previous experience). It imposes higher requirements on the choice of suitable teaching methods, organizational forms or didactic aims.
4. An important role in the process of the foreign-language education of seniors is played by the *age of a teacher* of a foreign language because it can influence the character of the reciprocal communication and the willingness of seniors to express their own opinion.
5. It is important to know and respect the fact whether the senior is a *communicative type of a learner* (active in spoken communication, he/she easily understands auditive recordings, he/she has a dominant auditive memory, a wide range of spoken production, there is a stereotype in answers, repeating and slow solving of analytical tasks in language materials) or the senior is a *non-communicative type of a learner* (not active in spoken communication, he/she has problems in understanding auditive recordings, the visual memory is more dominant, there is a smaller range of spoken production, variety of answers, little repetition and fast solving of analytical tasks in language materials)

Besides the above mentioned typology (a communicative and non-communicative type of a learner) we recommend to know and respect the learning style of a senior as a participant of a foreign-language education which expresses *“a set of methods in learning which are preferred by an individual in a certain period. This set is developed from the congenital basis but it is being changed and improved during the course of life.”* (Turek, 2010, p. 83-103). One part of this learning style is formed also by cognitive processes which represent its congenital basis. The learning style helps to the learner to achieve required results in learning of a certain type of a topic in a certain educational situation but it can also decrease his/her success in learning another type of a topic in a different educational situation where another learning style would be much more helpful. A learner is not usually aware of his/her learning style and he/she does not analyze it systematically. However, it is possible to get aware of one's own learning style and to change it when it is desired (Turek, 2010, p. 83-103). The teacher of a foreign language can help to a learning senior to achieve this aim within the foreign-language education.

There exist several typologies of a learning style, e.g. the classification of learning styles *according to the dominance of the cerebral hemispheres*: the right hemisphere is connected with the divergent, artistic learning style and the left hemisphere is specific for the rational, scientific learning style (Kohoutek 2006), *according to the attitude to learning*: superficial and deeper learning style (Marton, Säljö, 1976), *according to the sensual preferences (VARK)*: visual, auditive, verbal, kinesthetic learning style (Fleming, 2001), *according to the theory of experiential learning (ELT - Experiential Learning Theory) Kolba* (1984): an activist (a specific experience), a reflector (reflexive observation), a theoretician (abstract conceptualization) and a pragmatic (active experimenting), *according to the dominant types of intelligence by Gardner* (1983): linguistic, logical - mathematical, visual, physical - kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, natural learning style, etc. These learning styles are more closely described in works by Mareš (1998), Petlák (2012), Rovňanová (2015), Sarmány Schuller (1998), Škoda, Doulík (2011), Turek (2004, 2010), etc. Turek (2004) says that individuals should use in learning mainly those learning methods which are compatible with their learning styles. Referring to Fleming (2001) he emphasizes the fact that a learner will not achieve such learning results he/she is able to achieve if he/she does not learn mainly in such a learning style which is natural for him/her (and therefore it is preferred). Based also on the application of Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1999) in learning, Turek (2004) mentions that individuals learn in the most effective way if they use in learning such learning methods and teachers in teaching such teaching methods which are typical of those kinds of intelligence that are dominant by these learning individuals and therefore they are better developed than the others. For example, a learner with a dominant spatial (visual) intelligence can better understand the Civil War in Spain when studying the

painting Guernica by Picasso than by reading books about this war (Gardner, 1989, in: Turek, 2004).

The learning activity of an individual can change also during the course of a day. Hubáč (1983, in: Škorvagová, 2017a), referring to the curve of the physiological performance created under the influence of the 24-hour rhythm, mentions two maximal levels of performance: between 8 - 11 o'clock am and between 7 - 9 o'clock pm. There are periods of the minimal performance between 2 - 4 o'clock in the afternoon and between 1 - 4 o'clock at night. Kassay (1986, in: Škorvagová, 2016) describes the biophysiological profile of a day by means of a general daily performance curve which is similar to the letter M. The curve achieves its peak in the morning between 10.30 - 11.30 am. In the afternoon the performance is significantly decreased under the influence of reduced amount of blood going to cerebral tissues. The biggest decrease of performance can be seen between 2.30 - 3.30 pm. Then the curve rises again and it reaches its peak between 4.30 - 5.30 pm. The curve has the similar course also in the evening: first it decreases but after two hours it starts to rise again.

Knowing the biorhythms, the teacher of a foreign language can apply this obtained knowledge in the education with the aim to optimize the process of learning of seniors (not only) with disability. It is important to participate in the organization of the educational process in an optimal way and to prevent the early tiredness of learners and, at the same time, to prolong their learning performance.

When educating seniors, it is also necessary to take into consideration that together with ageing there increases the biological and psychic burdening of the body. In order to keep and regenerate the learning performance of seniors (not only) with disability we recommend to have more frequent breaks during the lesson. In this way we can achieve the recovery of the original state of performance of the learners. Too long and uninterrupted learning has an impact on the reduction of quality of the learning performance. Therefore the duration of the learning activity should not last longer than 20 - 30 minutes. After the learning activity we recommend to have a 5- or 10- minute break and then continue in learning. After one-hour-long learning activity it is suitable to make a longer break when it is possible to alleviate the burden and tiredness (see also: Škorvagová, 2017b).

Respecting the specific features of the foreign-language education in the target group of seniors (not only) with disability, knowing their level of motivation and interests, their individually preferred learning styles, biorhythms and other individual differences influences the interaction between the teacher of a foreign language and the learner. At the same time, this knowledge significantly helps to the teacher to create positive learning atmosphere, to improve the communication and to achieve the set educational aims in an effective way.

Among other variables which can influence the quality of the learning activity of seniors with disability belong also the individual approach to the process of learning

from the point of view of satisfying their personal needs, the level of interest in what they learn, the specific features of this knowing activity, the specificities of the will acting, the impact of the social environment, the readiness to learn, the health condition, the specific situation connected with the given type and degree of disability, etc.

The teacher of the foreign language is supposed to be sensitive, empathic, tactful and tolerant to his/her target group. At the same time, he/she should try to have a positive and balanced attitude to the seniors requiring special care and he /she should be willing to help them to achieve their personal aims and solve their problems and difficulties in learning.

Conclusion

The world is getting older very fast. In proportion to the total number of the world population, the number of people older than 60 will increase from 11% in the year 2006 to 22% until the year 2050. In that time, in the world population there will be more seniors than children for the first time in the history of mankind. The ageing of population and its social consequences significantly strengthen the current importance of the topic of ageing of the society as well as individual ageing (WHO, 2007, in: Veteška, 2016). The prolonging of years of healthy and active lifestyle and keeping of functional ability and capacity during all the life (i.e. also for people of very old age) leads to successful ageing (Dienstbier, 2009, in: Veteška, 2016). It can be achieved by providing general information (together with prevention) and systematic education of adults (including the education of seniors to healthy ageing) (Veteška, 2016).

There are fulfilled two basic aims in the process of education - the social aim oriented on the development of human sources and the individual aim focused on the development of the personality of the individual, his/her ability to adapt himself/herself to the changing life conditions (Porubská, Határ, 2009).

The basis of all educational activities for seniors is the fact that the individual is able to learn and be creative also in the period of ageing and the old age when learning has its specific features which are necessary to be kept because they are decisive regarding the effectiveness of education. In the senior age, there are not important the improvement of qualification and increase of social safety but preparation for ageing. We agree with the opinion that the preparation of seniors for the old age and their knowledge about the healthy way of life, could significantly influence the quality of their life in higher age in the future. Veteška (2016) mentions that there are organized courses of preparation for the ageing (e.g. in the USA since 1949, the first course in England was organized one year later). The main aim of these courses is to increase the quality of life of an individual and to contribute to the intergenerational cohesion. The educational activities help to ensure a successful transition and adaptation within later developmental stages and they contribute to maintain and improve the health.

Educational activities in the senior age provide the feeling of dignity, they contribute to the satisfaction and fulfilment of psychical and social needs, to the integration of the individual to the society, they help with easier coping with new tasks and activities and, first of all, they provide a better quality of life. In the educational process, seniors receive new pieces of information which subsequently enable them to be more balanced psychically because they get an overview about their everyday life and a possibility of choice to arrange their own satisfying old age. The educational activities in the post-productive age contribute not only to the autonomy, dignity and life self-realization, but they are significant also for the improving and keeping of the health (Veteška, 2016).

The results of several researches (Hrapková, 2011) confirm that older people who continue with their education and have a new life programme at their disposal, feel better and more vital physically and psychically. They suffer from less depressions and they find a new meaning and dimensions of their life.

Határ (2014) says that many older disabled people, who need help and care of other people due to their disability, often resign to find a new perspective of their lives. It is still the fact that psychical, social and biological factors influence the quality of life of every individual in the senior age. Therefore it is important to provide such conditions to seniors so that they can live the autumn of their life actively.

Acknowledgements

The paper presents the partial results of the project VEGA 1/0176/15 “*Paradigms in education of adults and seniors with disability in the residential care.*”

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Contacts

Müller de Morais Marianna doc. PaedDr. PhD.
Department of Education
Faculty of Education
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Dražovská 4, 949 01 Nitra
Slovakia
mmdmorais@ukf.sk

Rapsová Lucia, Mgr.
Faculty of Education
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Dražovská 4, 949 01 Nitra
Slovakia
lucia.rapsova@ukf.sk

Radka Zimanová, Mgr.
Faculty of Education
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Dražovská 4, 949 01 Nitra
Slovakia
radka.zimanova@ukf.sk



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10.1515/lce-2017-0008

Teaching Picture Storybooks via E-learning Platforms

Miloš Blahút

University of Presov, Slovakia
milos.blahut@unipo.sk

Abstract

The picture storybooks have gone through a major transformation since their modern versions appeared in the 1950s¹. Modern and postmodern picture story books “have a great potential with their flexibility, based on a great variety of picture-text interplay, a wide range of themes, richness of aims and functions” (Bobulová, et al., 2003, p. 88-89). In the online distance learning course, education will be carried out on the basis of interaction between the learner and material (stored and exchanged in Moodle Platform, for instance), and between other participants in the educational process, that is, the instructor and other learners. The advantage of teaching children’s literature, especially picture story books, via E-learning platforms, is twofold: firstly, readers take their time to go through the reading materials and work on their own; secondly, it gives them space and time to prepare for the task assigned by the instructor appropriately and effectively by paying close attention to all the details, which, due to shortage of time allocated in face-to-face education (classroom environment) would be impossible. This paper presents not only advantages of such learning, but also sample tasks learners may encounter while participating in the online distance learning.

Keywords

picture story book, inference, metafiction, distance learning

Introduction

Teaching picture story books in a classroom face to face can be quite demanding, since contemporary picture story books (and their equivalents, such as graphic novels or fused books) require readers’ attention, close reading strategies and often prior knowledge about those reading strategies and literary techniques and devices which are necessary for the reader to understand and enjoy the picture book. The aim of this paper is to investigate the benefits of online learning for the students working with picture

story books, which can be applied to a secondary or higher education. The online education can be carried out via a number of e-learning platforms. Our analysis and case studies will refer to the application of the use of picture story books in the subjects Children's literature, which is part of the university curriculum. Such course may be used in subjects offered at university level, which aim at improving reading, writing, and communication skills. In our environment we use Moodle in distance learning. Benková (2007) states that there are three overall objectives of blending learning: to increase learning impact, to increase students' satisfaction, and to reduce the total cost of education (p. 26). It is the aspect of distance learning which makes it possible for such positive enhancement of education and improvement of students' motivation for learning. Benková (2007) further claims that "there are some basic aspects that should be taken into account when applying blended learning: things that student can do alone, and things that benefit from interaction." (p. 27). It is important to bear in mind the possible shortcomings of online learning. As Straková (2014) observes, "the discomfort in the learning process in e-course may be due to students' tendency to confront other students or tutor in case they do not comprehend the task or materials" (p. 110). Moodle platform, for example, gives users space to interact by using chats rooms or communicate via emails. The course tutor should be prepared for such situations and gradually encourage the autonomy of the learner by creating comprehensive and clear materials and tasks and giving appropriate feedback. As most of the picture story books deal with sophisticated themes, often philosophical and scientific, the course instructor need to plan the course carefully. As Sepešiová (2016) emphasizes, "one of the most important things you need to do while planning is to identify your aims and objectives,, (p. 39).

We will deal with activities that are exclusively carried out by students themselves without any interaction with other students or instructors. The focus of the first activity is based upon the significant feature of picture story books, that is, its narrativity. It is a well-known and obvious fact that all wordless picture story books "tell stories" through pictures. Especially pre-school learners enjoy "reading" such visually rendered narratives by retelling story and delving into creative activity. Most importantly, interpreting and making inferences is an important part of meaning-making in the process of reading any narrative, be it verbal or visual. In case of such picture story books as Shaun Tan's *Lost Thing* or David Wiesner's *Flotsam* or *Tuesday*, readers interpret the fictional world from a plethora of perspectives and get a number of clues to make inferences about characters, events, social aspects, or themes, and literary devices, such as symbols and motifs. Such complex and demanding reading is made possible by the very nature of postmodern and often hypertextual narratives such as Macaulay's *Black and White* or Wiesner's *Flotsam*. In order to analyse the picture story book and assign the task for the readers, it is vital to take into account the details of two (sometimes even more) successive pictures. We will analyse the way suspense, and other plot devices are used in the picture story books to make stories dramatic, but also

trace the role of ambiguity and humour in the picture story books written and/or illustrated by Shaun Tan, David Wiesner, Jon Scieszka, and David Macaulay.

Theoretical background

Picture story books and wordless picture books are often grouped with other subgenres under the umbrella term picture book. The other types are concept books, toy books, alphabet books, and counting books. (Chen Chi-Fen, 2017). The very sub-genre picture story books is further divided according to age-range into easy-to-read picture story books, picture story books for older readers, and graphic novels. This paper deals with those picture story books that are suitable for older readers, and also wordless picture books, which are by the very nature (specific concepts, themes used) suitable for students at higher level. However, we would not consider wordless picture book different from picture story books, because it has been proven that also wordless picture books tell stories (Serafini, 2014); Chen Shanshan (2015) speaks about “image narration” (p. 678). Serafini (2014) further concludes that “Wordless picture books may be better defined by what they do contain—visually rendered narratives—rather than what they do not contain.” Jane Evans (2015) discusses the typology of picture books, taking into account the versatile types of picture books fusing various genres and media, and claims that some picture books can be classified according to their “aesthetic qualities, implied audience, subject matter, and/or style”. (p. 117). Evans gives such types of hybrid picture books a name – *fusion books*, the term which has not caught on yet in wide literary circles.

This paper analyses activities which can be used as part of the course on Children’s literature with the emphasis of the distance learning. We provide the activities with some of the most notable picture story books and wordless picture story books, whose authors won Caldecott medal (David Wiesner in 1992 for his *Tuesday*, and in 2007 for his *Flotsam*; David Mcaulay in 1991 for his *Black and White*), were honored by the American Library Association as an ALA Notable Book (Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith for their 1993 *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!*), or were awarded Academy Award for the animation of their picture book (Shaun Tan, 2011 adaptation of his 2000 picture book *The Lost Thing*). There are other reasons why such types of literature are suitable for juvenile readers and university students. As McNulty (2011) states, “experimental forms, the play with words and forms, self-referential irony, and the questioning of ultimate meaning are not limited to adult work” (p. 33). Such materials enlarge the enjoyment and create a tighter bond between the text and the recipient. Reading skills, and the knowledge that comes with it, are accessed and improved in a playful and often mysterious way. Fang (1996) argues that “reader has to use their own imagination and judgement to predict and interpret what is going to happen.” (p. 138). Moreover, as Knudsen-Lindauer (1988) demonstrates, “wordless picture books aid children in developing prereading skills: sequential thinking, the development of a sense of a story, inferential thinking, and predicting conclusions.” (p. 137; In: Serafini, 2014)

Making relevant interpretations and inferences

Using picture story books it is important to make inferences to simply understand what is going on in the narrative and go on reading and enjoying reading/watching. As we have stated earlier, there are many types of inferences to be found in the narrative, some of which are applied by the readers instinctively and self-consciously. Other types of inference (e.g. causal inference, emotion of reader) may often require readers' "careful inspection," as Macaulay reminds us in the paratextual information the beginning of his picture storybook *Black and White*. There are many textual clues, which readers need to follow in order to proceed and make the meaning, often just for themselves. Such hypertextual strategy engages readers in the fictional world and creates a bond between themselves and the author, often opening space for multiple readings and diverse interpretations and perspectives. Reading metafictional non-linear picture storybooks "prepare students for critical explorations of other texts they encounter." (Martinez, Roser, & Harmon, 2009, p. 297). The readers are presented with four separate stories, which they decided to read in traditional way – from left upper corner to right, each picture story in a successive order. The stories are chronological, linear, but at one point readers become puzzled when frames get broken. What readers encounter is a postmodern strategy by which the author/illustrator breaks the fourth wall by erasing the fictional boundaries and making the story worlds both merge and collapse. This literary technique has a profound consequence on the ultimate meaning of the narrative and meaning of partial elements on micro level (syntax, lexis, puns) and macro level of the story (themes, intertextual links, allusions, symbolism). Pattison (2017) argues that such technique is used to "add information, set up irony, create humour, or other purposes." Macaulay's metafictional picture book is to be read as a detective fiction, which is enhanced by one of the minor, but nonetheless important characters – a prisoner, who appears in most of the stories as an enigmatic persona, but also a clue to understanding events and themes, as well as a literary and syntactic/semantic device for maintaining coherent story. However, it is the pictures themselves break the fourth wall, which is clearly demonstrated by the collapse of the two story worlds (Picture 1). Readers are thus given guideline on how to make inference and interpret the story.

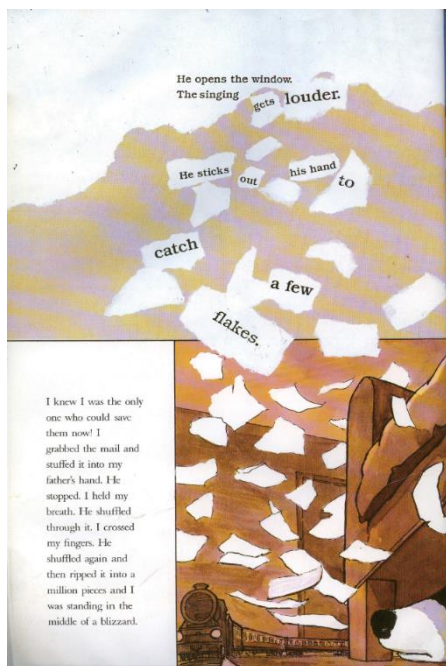


Figure 1 Ripping newspapers (Macaulay, 1990)

On the textual, and paratextual level, the picture story book serves to direct the readers to read the narrative in a particular, understand correct, way. The beginning of the picture story book contains what readers expect to find but frequently omit – that is the paratextual information such as the title, the name of the author, the publisher, and so on. This information is part of the diegetic world in which the reader takes an active role. The first page (Picture 2) contains the information – warning, which states that “careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended.”. The layout, text and images work together to invite the reader to successfully read and understand the story. Such playful arrangement of the basic components of narrative Macaulay draws readers’ attention to the narrative to challenge their expectations. The title *Black and White* is written in red boldface, the information about the publisher is not written in horizontal way but a jumbled mixture of words. The picture reveals the story that will have continuation on the next page – someone has escaped from the prison.

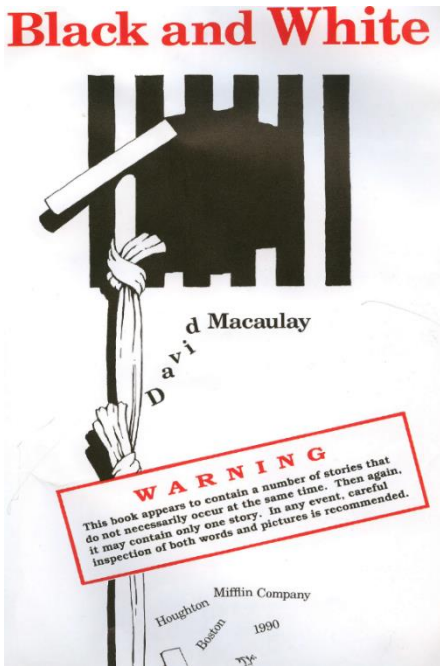


Figure 2 *Escape from prison* (Macaulay, 1990)

By means of this playful and self-reflexive narrative Macaulay transgresses the borders of traditional narrative (mostly realistic picture books) and challenges the readers to actively participate on and unveil the meaning of the story. The questions that this narrative invites are:

- a) How shall we read the story? From left to right? From back to forth?
- b) How does ambiguity help understand the meaning of the story? Is there just one meaning to the story?
- c) How do we interpret the notion of time? Is the time of the story different from the time of the discourse? How do these two separate notions of time work together?

In Wiesner's *Flotsam*, and *Tuesday*, the features of characters, especially their facial expressions, point at their emotional state, which creates dramatic irony throughout the entire narrative. By the process of inference, readers interpret the story in twofold way. One of the characters in the story (see the picture below) eats his dinner in the kitchen and appears surprised by the events happening outside (readers already know the frogs are invading the town, but none of the characters does). In order to accurately interpret

the feelings and events in the pictures, readers need to be alert and realise none of the characters (except for other animals) is able to see the frogs. Most of the readers in the previous classes in which this picture book was discussed and analysed misinterpreted the events and claimed that the man actually could see the frogs from his window. Such interpretation is unconvincing because it does not fit with the other incidents and the basic premise of the story, which is built upon the mystery and suspense. Readers working alone need such interpretive output beforehand to fulfil the tasks given by the instructor. The tasks may involve retelling the story or writing essay. By using internet, such stories may be accompanied by audio-visual formats, as there are video renditions of Wiesner's Tuesday (released as a 13-minute-long animation, which was a part of 2004 *Music and Animation Collection of Paul McCartney*) and Shaun Tan's picture book *The Lost Thing* (an Oscar winning 15-minute animated short film, directed by Shan Tan himself).

Dramatizing the events (long-shots and close-ups with repetition)

One of the foregrounding effects is repetition.ⁱⁱ In visual narrative we may observe the repetition of pictures or aspects of pictures with the same effect that is achieved in verbal narrative, that is, to create a dramatic effect. This is enhanced by the author's (and/or illustrator's) use of close-ups and long-shots (Picture 3) In the sequence of pictures readers' attention is diverted to the details of a little boy, who has had the film from the camera he finds on the beach developed. The images he sees create a suspense and mystery, and drive the plot further. The next photograph shows images from a surreal and fantastic world, which prompts readers to make inferences (albeit hasty and often false ones) about the meaning of the story.

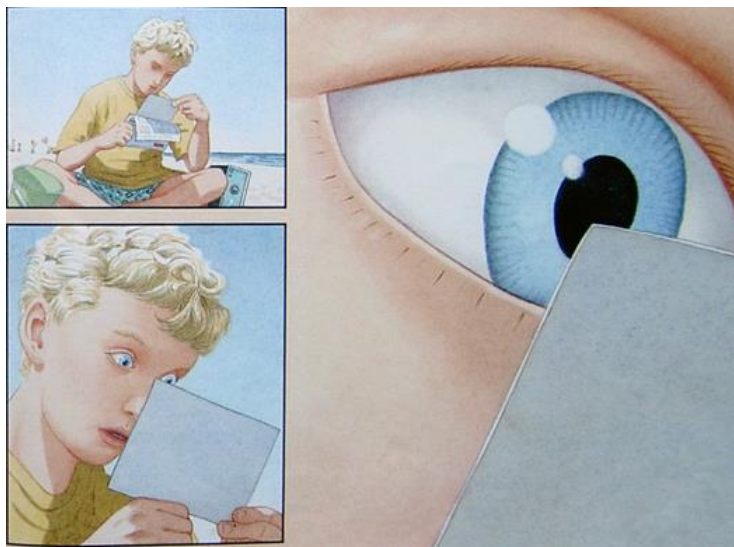


Figure 3 Discovering the truth (Wiesner, 2006)

Such activity engages readers in the story. The clues only direct the readers' attention to details which are to be linked together. The meaning-making activity therefore lies within the readers practice. By analysing the sample image, the instructors will lead the students to evaluate the following incident and setting from the fictional (fantastic) world, the world from the photograph, the story within the story. The meaning of the overall picture story book will be the reading (viewing) strategy of the reader and his/her application of close reading, i.e. his/her careful attention while creating the meaning. This sample task will help students answer the key question and help answer follow-up questions regarding characterization, underlying themes, or literary devices. The questions the students are asked to answer are:

- a) How do you interpret the boy's participation in the process of creating magic by continuing the process of taking pictures of himself?
- b) What is the notion of time in this narrative?
- c) What perspectives are given in the story? Why?
- d) Does scientific research of the boy objectify his findings?
- e) How would you react if you found such a camera?

In case of Shaun Tan's *Lost Thing*, the themes are the result of the atmosphere created by the setting, the main character's behaviour, and surreal illustrations. Seemingly realistic setting reveals a dystopian society, possibly Australian setting, in which fantastic things happen. These fantastic characters (Picture 4) are taken by everyone as trivial things around us. They are the mixtures of rubbish (unused things

that were once discarded) and parts of animals to give them anthropomorphic features. These things take on symbolic meaning as readers follow the character's journey, a mission to return the thing back where it belonged. What metaphorical implications the story has relies upon reader's attention to detail and creativity. Universal themes, such as friendship, environment, and mutual help abound in the narrative. Students are usually given open-ended tasks to provide their opinions on thematic issues.

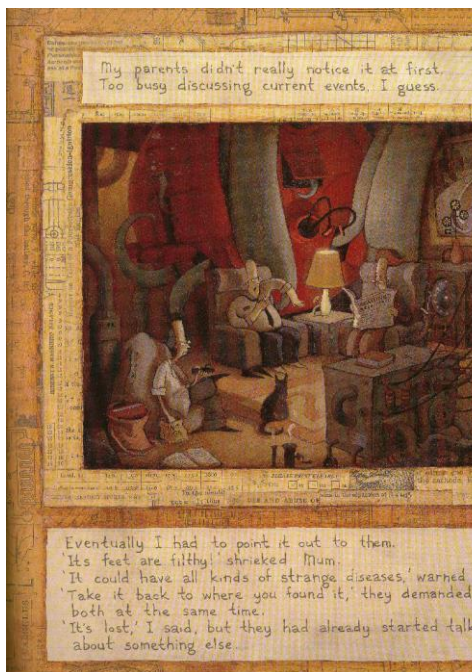


Figure 4 The lost thing is taken home. (Tan, 2000)

There are activities which involve cooperation with other students. In Moodle platform the students need to send their responses to the given questions and the instructor redistributes the responses to other students, who write their own reviews and comments. This strategy gives students space for their own feedback and provides more opportunities for their own self-analysis. The instructor monitors and ultimately evaluates the comments. As Cimermanová states, “course designer and tutor are responsible for planning interactions and their realization. The tutor should be a really good manager to make learning learner-centered and not teacher-centered or material-centered.” (2012, p. 150).

Intertextuality, humour, and gender issues

The last type of activities involves students' work with internet sources. The students work with the picture story book *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka and the original story. The idea behind this parody of traditional fairy tale is the reader's response, since the story expects the reader to be familiar with the pretext. The students identify the source of parody very quickly, but the story employs other linguistic and literary devices which are the source of humour but especially create a different perspective to characterisation, gender issues and stereotypes.

In the parodic rendition of traditional fairy tale, the readers are made to feel sympathy towards vicious wolf, and the innocent pigs turn out to be unhelpful. The whole story of a bad wolf is subverted, or, in the words of the narrator – the wolf himself, this is “the real story. I was framed.” A similar strategy is employed in self-reflective and parodic retelling of traditional fairy tales, such as “Jack and the Beanstalk,” Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling,” or Brothers Grimm’s “Rumpelstiltskin”ⁱⁱⁱ in Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s *The Stinky Cheese Man*. Jack, the narrator of the tale *The Stinky Cheese Man*, “engages readers in a multilayered skirmish complete with nonlinear, pasted-on word-pictures that set the fairy tale elements askew and require a high level of cognitive involvement from the reader.” (Dresang, 2008, p. 47). After reading the tales, the readers are exposed to a chain of intertextual chains of references and borrowings. The stories are not only playful in their content, but also inventive in their form. The readers learn about many possibilities of narrative, especially narrative layers, which are often transgressed by the self-conscious narrator. Just as in Macaulay’s *Black and White*, also in *Stinky Cheese and Man* the narrator appears in the back cover, where paratextual information is included (Picture 5) and draws attention to the text and imagery to expose its own artificiality.^{iv}

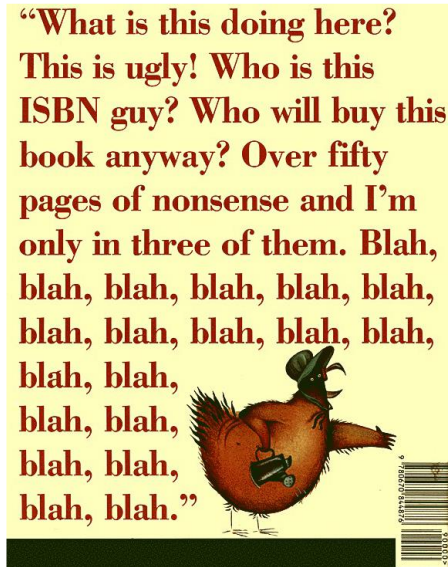


Figure 5 The narrator at the back of the book. (Scieszka, 1992)

Such picture story books are often created with the intention of engaging readers into the active process of meaning-making. The authors often subvert the generic norms and provide multiple readings. Students often need to search the pretexts in order to engage themselves into the reading; therefore, in our course they are given the task to read or listen to traditional fairy tales, and a lecture on youtube.com which deals with parody, intertextuality and postmodern retelling (for example, by Aimee Shattock).^v The theoretical background to the study of intertextuality is helpful in essay analysis. Alternatively, as a point of comparison, the students read one of Angela Carter’s short story from her collection of fairy tales titled *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide some of activities teachers or course designers may implement into their online distance, or blended learning. The course we have intended this course for is Children’s literature for university students, but is applicable for secondary education students, too. The learners of the course work with materials in various forms, such as lectures, literary texts, video lectures, and video animations. The topic of the course is teaching with picture story books and wordless picture books, both of which belong to a group of picture books. The decision to work with such challenging and sophisticated materials stems from their complex nature and topics aimed at higher education learners. We have found a number of benefits of online distance learning for

the students working with picture story books, such as more time used while preparing for and fulfilling the tasks, or effective independent work in which the learner needs to focus on the reading material on his/her own. Teaching picture story books is demanding but creates a lot of space for fun and learning, as the picture story books engage readers/learners into the process of reading and meaning-making. Especially postmodern picture story books and wordless picture books provide different perspectives, teach learners various strategies of reading, inferring information and understanding texts, and offer multiple interpretations on such topics as ecology, psychology, philosophy, or gender issues, to name but a few.

Acknowledgement

The paper publishes the partial results of the project E-learning as a means of international mobility support in higher education - KEGA 065PU-4/2016

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Contact

Miloš Blahút, PaedDr., PhD.
Institute of British and American Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Presov
17. novembra 1
08001 Presov
Slovakia
milos.blahut@nipo.sk

ⁱ The very first picture books appeared at the end of the 19th century in England, and H. B. Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) is regarded as the first picture book in Anglophone countries. The illustrated books and storybooks, whose purpose and format were considerably different from those which appeared later, had been in print since the 18th century

ⁱⁱ „foregrounding is a key concept in stylistics, which denotes highlights the poetic function of language, in particular its ability to deviate from the linguistic norm and to create textual patterns based on either parallelism, repetition or deviation from anorm.” (Burke and Evers, p. 41, 2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ „The tale Rumpelstiltskin was collected by the Brothers Grimm in the 1812 edition of *Children's and Household Tales*. This tale, just as many other traditional tales collected by Jacobs, Perrault, Lang or Campbell, must have had ancient origin, which has been attested by many scholars and folklorists. (Thacker and Webb, 2002; Bottigheimer, 1996; Lerer, 2008; and others)

^{iv} Such postmodern practice of drawing attention to the text by the self-reflexive narrator is termed as metafiction (cf. Waugh, 1984)

^v https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_b9I3WoEHBo



DE GRUYTER
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10.1515/llce-2017-0009

Working with Text as a Determinant of the Development of Creative and Critical Thinking

Denisa Gunišová

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
dgunisova @ukf.sk

Nina Kozárová

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
nina.kozarova@ukf.sk

Abstract

The paper deals with working with text as a determinant of the development of creative and critical thinking of students. In individual parts of the work, the authors focus on the theoretical basis of creative and critical thinking, and their application in educational practice. Out of several ways of working with the text developing critical thinking, the authors have chosen two ways and subjected them to a theoretical analysis. The aim of the contribution was to point out the importance of both linear and nonlinear structuring of the curriculum in educational practice as well as to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the given ways of working with text considering the development of students' creative and critical thinking.

Keywords

critical thinking, creative thinking, metacognitive, working with text

Creative and Critical Thinking

Although the present school should respond to the current needs of the current time, we still get in touch mainly with the so-called traditional teaching, the characteristic of which is the transfer of the curriculum in terminate form, which leads to the accumulation of information, but does not encourage pupils to develop their own thinking and to evaluate what they have heard, seen and what they have met with.

Such type of teaching directly suppresses creativity and critical thinking. Pupils play the role of passive participants when their job is not to disturb, to write notes from the

board mechanically, to learn the required text by heart and to be able to answer the questions without any argumentation and assessment. Many teachers do not lead pupils to examine their assumptions independently, to look for evidence, to analyze statements, and to discover contradictions. Many international measurements, such as PISA, in which Slovak children have reached relatively unfavorable results, point to the previously mentioned facts.

When we talk about creative thinking within pedagogical terminology, we mean the specific kind of thinking for which are typical: perseverance, responsibility, external and internal motivation, ability to connect knowledge from different disciplines, independence from authorities, independent thinking, critical assessment of information, searching for variant solutions, to discover the essence.

Therefore, the focus of today's school should not be a traditional transfer of knowledge, but such form of teaching that is based on activating methods – directed towards responsibility for learning and fulfilling duties, formulating hypotheses, creating ideas, solving problems ...

Operationalization of the notion of creativity is an extremely demanding process, because there are many paradigms that the area, theoretically or empirically covers. It could be argued that there are at least as many definitions of creativity as are the experts dealing with the issue.

In general, most scientists agree in the consensus that creativity is (according to Kaufman & Baer, 2004, p.4): "the ability to produce works that are new (i.e., original), of high quality and appropriate (i.e., useful).

We are of the opinion that, thanks to creativity, everyone can adapt to new conditions and circumstances, can find alternative solutions to the problems that arise, and creativity is extremely important in artistic and scientific works.

Creativity began to be investigated systematically after 1950 and J. P. Guilford's speech in the American Psychological Society can be considered for a milestone in this area. In this speech, the author criticized, in particular, the neglect of creativity by psychologists, while the main topics he covered were the possibilities to explore and develop the creative potential of children and explore different strategies of supporting and developing creative personalities.

We agree with V. Spousta (1997), who sees creativity within the framework of psychological and pedagogical understanding primarily as a tool for the self-realization of personality and fulfillment of the meaning of his life. In the intentions of this understanding, the development of creativity is considered to be one of the most up-to-date and most important questions of pedagogical theory.

Creativity should be demonstrated in all areas of educational practice, but the most important attribute in the development of creative thinking of pupils is a creative teacher.

Should a teacher lead pupils to creativity, he must be a creative personality himself. It means that he should be open to other people and their opinions, but at the same time

he should be demanding when observing problems and realizing ideas. As it is described by J. Maňák (1996), curiosity, autonomy, but also courage in thinking, liberation from conflicts and stress are expected from the creative personality, because creativity also requires freedom in the inner-mental world of human.

Solarova (1996) believes that if a teacher is creative at work, he does not only require his students to reproduce the acquired information, but he leads them to an independent and creative activity, critical thinking and selection of information.

We completely agree with this view since it is significant for pupils to search for the information on their own, to evaluate them and select whether it is important or unimportant. At present, we are constantly being confronted with a large amount of information. We listen as well as read some information from different sources, and we do it almost mechanically. We do not judge them critically.

Linhart (In Solárová, 1996) emphasizes that a creative teacher must always think about what to teach, how to teach, when to teach, how to control the learning outcomes and how to develop a student's personality during the learning process. We think that it is ideal when the teacher chooses the methods and forms in which the pupil is led to deal with the tasks that incite to activity and practice.

According to Hvozdk et al. (1994) a creative teaching is accompanied by the following rules:

- a teacher leads pupils to create solutions and alternatives;
- a teacher leads pupils to ask questions and search for answers;
- a teacher leads pupils to an evaluative thinking;
- a teacher works with tasks that are at the boundaries of the possibilities of each student.

In this contribution, creativity is defined as the uniqueness of the methodical creation of work with text, the preparation of the text by the teacher. The teacher can also make a less interesting text or a lesson more interesting and fascinating for pupils when using a creative approach and activity. In this case, the teacher must avoid the monotony and loss of pupils' interest by more frequent alternation and variety of teaching activation methods. It is important to create such environment for the pupil that he makes his own suggestions and insights and expresses his feelings when working with the text Germušková, M. (2015). We understand this as a part of the development of pupils' critical thinking.

Critical thinking is also undoubtedly an important issue in school education. In the school environment, pupils encounter a lot of texts that are not always mentioned in their textbooks, they also work with modern books, encyclopedias, but also with contributions on the Internet. Their quantity is huge and very accessible, but how about the quality of those texts?

It is important that learners consider and evaluate the relevance of the information in the era of technology and an easy access to all information. This is one of the arguments of the importance of critical thinking not only in school and the school

environment, but also in an ordinary life. Critical thinking should be the competence of every person.

Though ancient Greeks have started to tackle the issue of critical thinking, even today, it is not a matter of course in our education and in our opinion, since not enough attention is paid to critical thinking. In Slovakia, this term comes to attention at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. Experts cannot agree on its uniform and precise definition. From the foreign authors, Facione (1990), Ennis (1991), Paul (1992), Lau (2011) and Watson-Glaser (2012), dealt with the definition of critical thinking. The definition of critical thinking is not unified, but most authors who deal with the issue agree that the nature of thinking is a mental manipulation with words – aimed at words creation, decision-making, and problem-solving.

We understand critical thinking as a set of thought-based operations that begin with information and end by making a decision on the basis of acquired knowledge.

For most authors, critical thinking is associated with a cognitive and affective dimension. e.g. (Watson, Glaser, 2012, p. 6). Cognitive dimension manifests itself in contact with information and argumentation. We rely on Bloom's Taxonomy, where critical thinking is compared to analysis, synthesis, and assessment as a higher ability to think.

The second dimension affects perseverance, curiosity and fulfillment of one's needs. In our view, these two pages need to be complemented by behavioural dimension, for example, when using different approaches for structuring the curriculum - conceptual maps, diagrams. Behavioural dimension is the ability to mediate information using different types of schemes, maps, and tables.

Critical thinking begins when there is a problem that needs to be posed and taken a stand. The main difference between critical and non-critical thinking lies in the fact that non-critical thinking does not evaluate and assume.

A person who uses critical thinking in everyday life distinguishes not only between opinions and facts, but he thinks about information thoroughly to get as much of it as possible.

Teaching pupils to think critically is an extremely demanding process. It is therefore necessary that we lead future teachers to encourage pupils to present their own opinions and attitudes, to give the pupils enough space for analysing information, to gradually learn how to use convincing arguments.

It is important for critical thinking to lead pupils to reason with questions such as: Why do you think so? How does it fit into what you are talking about? What would happen if? ...

This means that critical thinking builds its foundation on understanding and leads to the quality and effectiveness of learning as well as personal development.

We share the opinion of M. Kosturková (2014), who argues that if the critical thinking is not developed at elementary school or secondary school, neither university students nor people in ordinary life and situations will be able to think critically. If future

teachers are not led to use critical thinking during their university studies, what the possibility is they will lead their own students to think critically? A. Petrasová (2009) also points out the unreliability of teachers for this role.

From the available definitions and theories we have defined the basic attributes that are necessary for a critically minded teacher:

- is open his students' questions, encourages them to communicate about the issues;
- asks questions himself too,
- asserts assertively and thus responds to pupils' arguments,
- is not satisfied with the affirmation, but looks for logical evidence,
- distinguishes between facts and opinions,
- does not form an opinion based on one source, but looks at issues from multiple aspects,
- expresses interest in knowing pupils' views,
- critical thinking is a long-term process of self-assessment for him;
- distinguishes between facts and opinions.

We present a clear table in which we differentiate approaches in the teacher's work on the basis of his support for pupils' critical and creative thinking:

Table 1 Creativity and critical thinking in the teacher's work

Creativity and critical thinking in the teacher's work	
A teacher supporting pupils' critical and creative thinking	A teacher not supporting pupils' critical and creative thinking
Offers pupils learning strategies	Prefers the established ways of learning
Focus on pupils' collaboration	Acts as an infallible authority
Creates a positive atmosphere on trust	Focuses the learning process on the acquisition of information
Requires and encourages pupils' activity	It suits him if pupils learn mechanically
- Leads pupils to search and select information	The teacher presents the facts and terminate knowledge himself
Appreciates pupils' original ideas and supports pupils in their assessment	Feedback is only provided to teachers
Leads pupils to organize their own knowledge	Pupils' knowledge is organized and handled by the teacher

Leads pupils to solve problems	One-sided communication is preferred.
Explores pupils' motivation	Requires obedience and silence during the lessons
Performs as an organizer and facilitator	Decides on the course of teaching on his own
Evaluates each pupil in terms of his progress, leads to self-assessment- -	When evaluating, compares students to each other
Takes into consideration pupils' interests	Ignores pupils' interests and motivation
Requires alternative solutions and uses divergent tasks	Focuses on convergent tasks
Assigns such tasks that promote the development of creativity and critical thinking	Does not support criticism, ideas, and pupils' queries

Learning text as a means of developing critical and creative thinking

Learning text is a text that is adjusted to educating, self-educating. The most common text in schools is a textbook. The textbook is an educational medium, a didactic tool that provides important information for learners in a formal type of education.

Each text has certain content and formal features that are more or less suited to communicate with pupils. When pupils start to read certain texts at school, they intuitively feel whether they are simple, easy to understand, or difficult, sometimes incomprehensible texts. Understanding a written text is one way of getting information, texts are organized by a particular structure.

We claim that many textbooks for pupils are written in too demanding form, and as a result of it pupils cannot select the main concepts or the relationships between them. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to assess and analyze the curriculum critically before each new class.

When linking critical thinking and working with text, pupils get “under the surface” of the content of what they are learning. At this point, the process of understanding and the evaluation overlap.

In the process of understanding, attention is paid to the reading of the text content the pupil is aware of its meaning and usefulness. This text is received and understood by the pupil. Understanding is, according to P. Gavora (2012), based on knowledge of the world, on the development of cognitive abilities and skills. Understanding the text can be influenced by unknown words in the text, too long compound sentences,

incohesiveness of the text, also the structure of the text affects the overall understanding Mihálechová, M. (2012).

If the pupil finds out he does not understand the text while reading, he can use several methods:

- Interrupts reading and thinks about what he has read so far,
- Reads the whole text once more,
- Starts reading the text that is new to him, he has not read it yet and he is looking for answers to his questions,
- Reads the text further and believes that after reading the entire text he will understand and get a picture of the issue.

In the assessment process, pupils distinguish new text, new information, and put them in a relationship with the existing experience and knowledge. The evaluation is done by the student reviewing the information and making his own opinion about the text. In this process, the pupil works with both quantity and quality, using mathematical and substantive criteria. The pupil evaluates on the basis of some criteria such as (correctness, coherence and continuity, truth, accuracy, but also the value of the source, the author of the text) (Gavora, P. 2012).

Texts and curricula intended for studying should meet the self-regulation function and thus guide the learner to direct and manage his own activities. A. Petrasová, M. Zahatňanská (2014) says that the goal is to provide pupils with better metacognitive abilities through the text. The pupil will gradually improve his ability to understand and memorize the text. This happens thanks to regulatory elements that are reasonably built into the own text.

In this process, however, the teacher must creatively and critically approach to selecting and structuring curriculum content, choosing appropriate methods of working with text, giving time and opportunity for pupils to think critically. It is important to create a non-threatening environment where learners express their opinions without any fear. Currently, the most popular method for developing critical thinking is the EUR method, the Socrates method, the INSERT method, the Cloze-test and association methods such as brainstorming and conceptual mapping. Several specific strategies and programs have been developed abroad, such as STELLA (focusing on History and Chemistry), SPELT (for Mathematics, languages and social sciences).

Methods supporting the development of critical thinking contribute to the development of autonomy and decision making, and the pupil should acquire the skills and habits he will use in lifelong learning. The most common forms of text structuring which teachers work with are linear and non-linear. The teacher adapts the individual methods to these forms by which he tries to develop pupils' critical thinking. We analyze the following two of the above mentioned methods:

The conceptual map - represents a nonlinear form of structuring the curriculum. It is an excellent way to visualize how a pupil understands his ideas, how he portrays a

network of terms between relationships. It facilitates students' understanding of the curriculum, transcoding into more acceptable form, reconstructing the curriculum and creating a network of knowledge. This method develops the critical thinking of the pupil, because he has to evaluate the main terms from a lot of texts, to define the hierarchy of these terms and then to think about the relations between them. Each pupil is different, perceives the text differently and thus will have different conceptual maps. That is why we claim that the conceptual mapping also develops creativity.

Cloze test - is said to be a very good method for detecting text comprehension. It is a linear structure and it is usable not only in the school environment but also in research as a research method. Although this method is known for over 60 years, it has been used in education and practice just a little. Its appearance is very simple. It includes a coherent text in which the words are omitted and they are replaced by a line. The pupil's task is to complete the correct term / concept. All blank spaces, where the pupil has to add the text, must have the same size. This is because otherwise the size would give him a clue for the question. The teacher makes a decision when creating the cloze test to either skip each n-th word, or skip the words according to some intentions (keywords, verbs ...) The filled word must fit into the sentence meaningfully and grammatically. The objectivity of the evaluation is ensured by evaluating the performance of the pupil by two or more teachers scoring his performance equally. It is essential for a pupil to understand the context, understand the subject, and recognize the meaning of words in order to complete a missing word. This test is not a mechanical reading, but a deduction from the text. (Gavora, P., Šrajerová, H. 2009).

We propose specific steps within the analysis the teacher should adopt in order to be able to get the maximum knowledge needed for his pupils.

Teacher's Critical Approach to Curriculum Analysis:

Coding (in this step is the resolution of essential information from insignificant, awareness of new and problematic parts of the curriculum.) We understand the coding as a representation of information according to predetermined codes. In today's world we have much more data and information than needed. Therefore, we have to select the information that is important. This step can also be encoded in the textbook in a symbolic way. It is a kind of record of information that is according to the teacher for pupils:

- Essential information EI
- Known information KI
- New information NI
- Problematic information PI (this is the discrepancy information that needs to be explained from different viewpoints, alternatively state more tasks to acquire the information)

Comparison and coherence (this is an analysis of how new information relates to previously acquired information.) In this step, it is not just an intercurricular analysis of

the curriculum but the creation of pupils' cognitive network. Search for possible links within the curriculum, the previous topics, everyday life, examples from practice, assuming of what students might have encountered.

It is also necessary to focus on the fact that pupils' knowledge should never be isolated but should form a coherent, logical unit.)

Combining (the given step includes collecting and selective coding, or comparing relevant information and combining it in a productive way.) More precisely, we mean the choice of appropriate methods and ways of working with the text that allow pupils to evaluate, reason, develop higher cognitive processes. During this step, the teacher thinks about methods that develop independent thinking, divergent thinking, pupils' responsibility for own learning, cooperation.

Conclusion

As it is described by A. Petrásová (2014), it is necessary to realize that it is not possible to apply uniform and universal contents and procedures in any learning situation and to all pupils in the same way. It is desirable to think about the content of the curriculum in the pupil's teaching, how it is mediated and what his developmental prerequisites are.

Acknowledgement

APVV project no. C-15-0368 called "Practice in the Centre of the Subject Field Didactics, Subject Field Didactics in the Centre of Practical Training".

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Contacts

Denisa Gunišová, PhD., PhDr.
Faculty of Education
Constantine the Philosopher
University in Nitra
Dražovská 4, 949 74 Nitra
Slovakia
dgunisova@ukf.sk

Nina Kozárová, PaedDr.
Faculty of Education
Constantine the Philosopher
University in Nitra
Dražovská 4, 949 74 Nitra
Slovakia
nina.kozarova@ukf.sk



10.1515/llce-2017-0010

Deconstruction, Walt Whitman, and the Purpose of Literary Education

Anton Pokrivčák

Uniwersytet Technologiczno-Humanistyczny im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego w Radomiu,
Poland
apokrivcak@gmail.com

Abstract

The article explores the purpose of literary theory, and, consequently, literary education at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It first discusses some of the ideas of Paul de Man for whom literary scholarship is challenged by the incompatibility between the nature of the object of literary theory and the methods used to analyse it. Then the author briefly traces some other ideas regarding the nature of literature and their reflection in establishing the purpose of literary education. A particular emphasis is paid to a re-evaluation of the universality of Walt Whitman's message, as expressed in his "Song of Myself," under the circumstances of contemporary ideological and cultural struggles.

Keywords

literary theory, education, deconstruction, teaching, universal, Walt Whitman

"Overfacile opinion notwithstanding," Paul de Man wrote in his highly controversial article entitled "The Resistance to Theory" in 1982, "teaching is not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved. The only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly, not personal; analogies between teaching and various aspects of show business or guidance counseling are more often than not excuses for having abdicated the task. Scholarship has, in principle, to be eminently teachable" (de Man, 2002, p. 4).

Paul de Man was one of the preeminent theorists of deconstruction, a highly complex, difficult to understand, sophisticated, if not even esoteric movement aspiring to unmask the so-called "logocentric illusion beyond the Western metaphysics".

However, he was not only a theorist, but a very successful teacher, admired by students who later became successful scholars/teachers themselves. In the mentioned article, he tried to reflect on the two aspects of the process facing each person involved in literary studies at a university level – teaching and scholarship. Not a difficult problem when one does natural sciences (mathematics, physics), or even social sciences, but a towering obstacle when doing literary studies, for in them one is constantly confronted by a constant feeling that what is taught is, in essence, ungraspable, making one to wonder, as Paul de Man did, whether such teaching is a scientific and cognitive process, or just an inter-subjective activity not worthy to bear the name of scholarship. If teaching is, de Man argued, a “cognitive process”, it should be scholarly. But in teaching literature, the object of teaching is a unique phenomenon resisting its own objectification and thus subverting the claims to truth initiated by the application of the scientific method. And if a method “cannot be made to suit the ‘truth’ of its object”, it “can only teach delusion” (p. 4). Therefore, “it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true” (p. 4). What is then this object, called literature, which we aspire to teach? Can we define it, theorise it as an object of scientific investigation? Can we teach it scientifically? Or is it really just delusion? Although Paul de Man, as a founding member of the relativistic deconstruction, was quite sceptical about much of this, his scepticism nevertheless provoked some fundamental questions concerning the nature and purpose of literary education.

In the past, literature was considered an essential manifestation of human knowledge which “tends to express the universal” (Aristotle), and is therefore much more important than history which would be concerned just with the particular. Moreover, great poets made poetry, usually taken broadly to stand for literature, or art in general, “to aspire to be a treasure-house of science” (Sidney). It was considered to be able to blend in the most intimate combination of “spirituality and sensuality, terrestrial and celestial, life and death” (Schlegel). Poetic imagination was also expected to fuse subject and object, a human being and the Creator, feeling and thought (Coleridge). “Poetic spirit of our human life” was the “creator and receiver both / Working but in alliance / with the works / Which it beholds” (Wordsworth), and poets “[were] the unacknowledged legislators of the world (Shelley).

The twentieth century largely abandoned such transcendental aesthetics and approached literature from a more technical point of view, taking it as one of the subjects worth studying at universities. If such study were to be scientific, its object was supposed to be objectifiable and susceptible to a proper methodology of research. In the Anglophone cultural milieu, the earliest signs of this approach could be seen in the gradual dissatisfaction with the Victorian modes of writing, noticed especially in T. S. Eliot’s critical and theoretical articles. But it was not only Eliot. There were also authors like I. A. Richards and his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (2001) and *Practical Criticism* (2009) as well as others.

Of course, in non-Anglophone literary theory one cannot forget to mention perhaps the real initiators of the scientific approach to literary studies, the Russian Formalists. Their revolutionary ideas were later followed by Czech and French structuralists as well as American New Critics. Then came many other approaches, all very serious in analysing the phenomenon called literature, usually performed by academics at respected universities. The increasing professionalization (if compared with the nineteenth century's role of literary critics as primarily public figures expressing their opinion about many matters of general cultural interest) coincided with trends towards literature's independence, and, at the same time, dependence on the linguistic nature of literary meaning.

In the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, however, literary studies lost its seriousness and produced much of what de Man had called "delusion". According to some, such scientifically clothed delusions caused a large-scale decrease in the popularity of literary education. In the 2009 article published in *The American Scholar* and entitled "The Decline of the English Department" William Chace, for example, claims that "During the last four decades, a well-publicized shift in what undergraduate students prefer to study has taken place in American higher education. The number of young men and women majoring in English has dropped dramatically; the same is true of philosophy, foreign languages, art history, and kindred fields, including history" (2009). Such situation, noticed in other countries as well, made it possible to agree with Suzanne S. Choo who also maintains that "literature education has now lost its place of prominence" (Choo, 2013, pp. 251-252). What Choo considers particularly worrying is the fact that literature education is becoming marginal in the most developed countries where it is supplanted by technological education. However, the impact of technology cannot be the cause of the decline. It would rather be the "failure of departments of English across the country to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in and of itself. What departments have done instead is dismember the curriculum, drift away from the notion that historical chronology is important, and substitute for the books themselves a scattered array of secondary considerations (identity studies, abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture). In so doing, they have distanced themselves from the young people interested in good books" (Chace, 2009).

The concept of the "good" is systematically taken up as one of the crucial purposes of reading and teaching literature in Choo's *Reading the World, the Globe, and the Cosmos: Approaches to Teaching Literature for the Twenty-first Century* (2013). She divided the purposes for teaching literature into nationalistic, world, global, and cosmopolitan ones, each of them emerging as a response to social and political phenomena over individual historical periods. While in the first period, the nationalistic one, the "good" was manifested in the use of literature by nation-states as a medium to educate "nationalistic citizen", the goal of literary education in the

second one was the “world citizen”. The other two stages, global and cosmopolitan, are the result of the intensification of the movement from the particularity of the nation-state to the ultimate universality of humanity as a kind, living on the planet and sharing its values.

It seems that in the present world, among the violent struggles of various cultural and religious extremes, there cannot be a better “good” than such a “universalistic” approach to literary education, irrespective of the fact that it would immediately provoke protests of the adherents of culture-based as well as multicultural approaches to art who, upon the mention of the word “universal,” would automatically associate it with “Eurocentric”, which is, of course, a misinterpretation and an abuse of the concept. The universal is the human, something which transcends narrow confines of particularities of a culture and addresses that which all cultures share - the ontological in the aesthetic phenomena (for more on the humanistic approach to literature see, for example, Pokrivčák – Pokrivčáková, 2006, or Pokrivčák – Pokrivčáková – Buda, 2016).

The ontological is not just an identification of the philosophical concept of being in the text from the point of view of its transcendental inclination, but also the forms through which this primarily transcendental, constitutive aspect of being affects the thematic and semantic level of the text. Černík in his monograph *K pojmu bytia* [On the Concept of Being] claims that „A person acquires his/her being not only through thought forms (categories), but through forms of experiencing as well; there is no doubt that one, for example, cares for being, has fear of being, will to being, fear of non-being, courage to be, etc. Moreover, one acquires being also through developed forms of *imagination*. Art can sometimes ‘indirectly through beauty’ express, sooner and better than philosophy or science, the essence” (Černík, 2000, p. 36, translated into English by A.P.). It is thus necessary to turn critical attention to those modes of the thematization of being which are directly associated with the individual human living and become a substantial element of a work’s meaning. Although the analysis of being in a literary work means more than just the identification of what “is” with regard to what “is not”, i.e. to nothingness, it is necessary to be constantly aware of its metaphysical extensions, since they are the last determining power of imagination, that is of art. Such relation of art and transcendence has also been emphasised by Steiner: “The meaning, the existential modes of art, music and literature are functional within the experience of our meeting with the other. All aesthetics, all critical and hermeneutic discourse, is an attempt to clarify the paradox and opaqueness of that meeting as well as its felicities” (1989, p. 138).

The other, otherness, is manifested in the meeting of human mode of being with the mode of “being” of things, in the meeting of the subjective with the objective reality, existence with essence, fiction with reality. Human being is thus the Cartesian *cogito*, while things stand against it, against us as those who are conscious of being. The sign nature of the literary work allows it to participate in both modes. On one

hand it is, undeniably, a thing, manifested in the materiality of its compositional elements, on the other one the materiality itself is just one of its two constitutive qualities. The second one is the manifestation of meaning in the consciousness of the author or recipient – the fact of its reception (Miko, 1989, p. 130). If it is claimed that the work does not exist without its making meaning in the consciousness or exists only in an imperfect and untrue form outside of it, we should not forget to emphasise also the other side of the coin, namely, that a work cannot exist without its material, expressive or formal part either. Any effort to overcome this formality and phenomenality of art is just an illusion.

Such illusion is typical especially for the so-called Eastern wisdom, or rather for the attempts of some Western theorists to appropriate the experiential wisdom of the Eastern systems – claiming to be able to penetrate to the conditioning field of semiosis, that is, to a field where there are not yet any signs, or form, since it is a field which is just a condition for everything that is present as well as that which is not present, and to transform them to the conceptual language of Western human sciences (Plesník, 2001). Even though it is possible to agree with Plesník that there are certain “communicational synapses” between the Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy, it has to be added, at the same time, that there are significant differences as well. While for the Western science and art the insight into “that in which semiosis takes place, and which itself is neither such or other, without any quality, form, difference” (Plesník, 2001, p. 71, translated into English by A.P.) is only an intuited, never achieved light in a twilight of our semiotic existence, Eastern wisdom acknowledges a real possibility of insight into this light through, according to Plesník, the so-called “homogenisation of consciousness”. The mentioned illusion of Eastern systems lies exactly in this “homogenisation of consciousness”. Whether in the West or East, consciousness is always a function of difference, of the Derridean “diferance,” which is “‘Older’ than Being itself” (quoted according to Derrida, 1997, p. xxi). The disappearance of difference is followed by the disappearance of consciousness. The intuitive states of the assumed homogenisation can thus be achieved (even in the case of Eastern sages) only on the basis of the previous, rational or irrational, experience of the “non-homogenised consciousness”. The fullness can be understood only as a contradiction of emptiness, darkness as opposed to light, happiness as opposed to unhappiness – otherwise it does not make any sense.

Despite the logical and sensual impossibility to identify the pure, non-differentiated consciousness, there are frequent attempts in art to express such pre-semiotic states. They occur especially in poetry – perhaps because out of all arts poetry seems to have the most immediate relation to the essential areas of every individual being. And any discussion of poetry as an attempt to express being in its totality would be incomplete without mentioning a classical American poet, Walt Whitman, the poet who approached it most directly and openly, though, it must also be added, with some grand successes as well as failures.

In spite of being considered a manifestation of American nationalism and democracy, Whitman's poetry, especially his most celebrated poem from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself" (Whitman, pp. 25-86), is also ontological, for it allows the poet to express what it means "to be" an American, as well as, and this is very important and frequently forgotten, also what it means to be human. The robustness and heterogeneity of imagination in "Song of Myself" which pushes him more to ideological contexts and makes him a national poet, a source of inspiration for the generations of American poets who drew on his democratic impulses (for example, Ginsberg's *Howl*, to name at least one of the most important poems of the twentieth century American poetry, shows clear indebtedness to Whitman), works perfectly well with "the system of doctrine suggested by the poem [which] is more Eastern than Western, [and which] includes notions like metempsychosis and karma" (Cowley, p. xii). The source of Whitman's mystic notions must have been "a mystical experience in the proper sense of the term" (p. xii). As Cowley further refers to one of Whitman's disciples, the experience may have taken place in 1853 or in 1854, and "it was essentially the same as the illuminations or ecstasies of earlier bards and prophets. Such ecstasies consist in a rapt feeling of union or identity with God (or the Soul, or Mankind, or the Cosmos), a sense of ineffable joy leading to the conviction that the seer has been released from the limitations of space and time and has been granted a direct vision of truths impossible to express" (pp. xii-xiii).

Therefore Cowley's suggestion that "Song of Myself" "is hardly at all concerned with American nationalism, political democracy, contemporary progress, or other social themes that are commonly associated with Whitman's work" (p. iv), must be refuted, for it is, of course, impossible to separate the discussion of the poet from these issues, at least because in Whitman's introduction to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* he directly confronts them, saying that "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (p. 5), that America "is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations" (p. 5), that the great variability of common America, with its "deathless attachment to freedom" (p. 6) is itself an embodiment of "unrhymed poetry" (p. 6). Neither one can oversee the origin of *Leaves of Grass* in the context of American attempts at "cultural independence from Europe", seeking for a great national poem, novel, and so on. Upon the publication of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman was even greeted by the great Emerson himself (see Emerson's Letter to Whitman).

But again, in spite of these clearly recognisable connections to his "Americanness", Whitman was, as suggested above, a poet of universal appeal, attempting to grasp all cultures, all minorities, all political or ideological contexts, in a grand move of respecting the contradictions: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then.... I contradict myself; / I am large.... I contain multitudes" (p. 85). His

subjectivity, his Americanness was also his universality, one not cancelling out, but complementing, the other: “In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less, / And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them” (p. 43). His existence is his being, differentiated as well as undifferentiated: “I exist as I am, that is enough” (p. 44), “I am the poet of the body, / And I am the poet of the soul” (p. 44), “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man” (p. 44), “I am integral with you.... I too am of one phase and of all phases” (p. 46), “One time as good as another time ... here or henceforward it is all the same to me” (p. 47). His creed is all creeds: “Sermons and creeds and theology.... but the human brain, and what is called reason, and what is called love, and what is called life? / I do not despise you priests; / My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern” (pp. 74-75).

To conclude, the delusions Paul de Man mentioned in his “The Resistance to Theory” cannot be met with when discussing the poetry of Walt Whitman. Although his first, and strongest, poetic expression dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, the messages it brought are still surprisingly modern even in postmodern times, perhaps maybe especially in the deluded postmodern times. And, of course, they are universal. What else is literature good for if not to teach us that we are all human beings and deserve undivided, universal respect?

Acknowledgements

The paper presents partial results of the project KEGA 055UKF-4/2016 funded by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

The part of this paper discussing ontological aesthetics is a rewritten version of my previous article published in *Americká imaginácia: pohľady na klasickú americkú literatúru*. UKF, 2005.

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Contact

Anton Pokrivčák, prof.
Wydział Filologiczno-Pedagogiczny
Uniwersytet Technologiczno-Humanistyczny im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego
w Radomiu
ul. Chrobrego 31, 26-600 Radom
Poland
apokrivcak@gmail.com