

How to Develop Children's Literary Creativity? – a Practical Example

Abstract

Children's verbal expression is an element of their active learning. Its significance in children's education and development was duly appreciated by C. Freinet, a French educator and propagator of the idea of subjective learning. The article refers to some aspects of such learning where neither the teacher nor the pupils stay passive. It also presents selected methods of work with a literary text, among these – plays with words, initiated by individual pupils or pupils as a group.

Key words: *individual and group work; verbal expression; subjective student actions; active learning*

Teachers often search for ways of developing children's language skills. However, using traditional methods of work they follow the curriculum, whose goals and tasks related to language education rarely draw on children's real interests. In their teaching practice those teachers do not address the children's drive to express themselves, their needs and experience. Only a small number of teachers do not hesitate to devote one or a couple of classes for a free play with words. These are teachers who make use of unconventional methods of work. Among them there are often teachers who prefer the partnership style of work with pupils, who ask themselves such questions as those asked in *Autodiagnoza pracy nauczyciela (self-diagnosis of the Teacher's Work)*, the educational programme for I–III grades by Maria Lorek:

- *Do I talk with children about their writing and do we make changes together?*
- *Do I show the children's work to the public? (class magazine, booklet for the youngest, etc.)*¹

¹ M. Lorek: *Elementariusz. Kształcenie zintegrowane. Program pracy w klasach I–III*. Katowice 1999. Ed. Maria Lorek, p. 95–97 (Integrated education. Curriculum for I–III grades).

Verbal expression, just as art, music or dancing is one of many ways of creative representation of reality by youngsters. It is connected with the fact that children use language for daily communication, exercising the phatic² function of language. However, before children begin to communicate with their environment, they engage in verbal plays, following the most interesting sounds, which can result in rhymes and chants of the following sort, created by 9-year-old Michał³:

In the street

<i>Green light – walk</i>	<i>Please close the door</i>
<i>knock-knock-knock</i>	<i>brr-ry</i>
<i>clap-clap-clap</i>	<i>eeho-eeho-eeho</i>
<i>rush-rush-rush</i>	<i>Don't come in with ice cream</i>
<i>clack-clack-clack</i>	<i>clap-tap</i>

Why is it so important that children play with words? What can we do to encourage them to do so? Children from a very early age express the current state of their emotions through rhyming, making up puzzles, singing, telling stories or creating a little drama. They often do it when they are on their own, when they talk to their dolls and teddy bears. Sometimes they share it with those who are ready to lend their ears to them like their mums, grandmas and grandpas, they perform little plays where they express a broad repertoire of feelings. In the school years these art forms continue to be popular with kids because they want to be noticed by the teacher and other people around them. And it is this very fact that should be taken advantage of in educational practice.

Celestine Freinet was a great advocate of such ideas in education. When he took up his first position as a teacher, having no experience or any substantial pedagogical knowledge, he noticed that children have a natural drive for learning about the world and expressing their emotions connected with it. He also noticed that kids have unusual sensitivity to the surrounding reality, which they express in various ways. It was particularly evident after interesting trips and outings, as they sang, drew, painted or showed their experience through body movements. They also talked spontaneously about it and wrote stories or poems. It was that sponta-

² B. Dymara: *O języku i formie marzeń*. In: *Dziecko w świecie marzeń*. (ed.) B.Dymara. Kraków 1996, Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls”, p. 103. (About language and the shape of dreams. in: Child in the world of dreams).

³ B. Dymara: *Wiersze naszych dzieci*. Kraków .Oficyna Wydawnicza ”Impuls”, p. 305. (Our children’s poems).

neous expression of their experience that Freinet made use of to teach them creative writing. The children would read their stories, poems or tales in front of other children (those who could not read well would simply tell the story to their group). The best text in the pupils' opinion, following the author's agreement, was written on the board and then corrected by the whole group. Afterwards the children would copy the corrected text in their best handwriting into their notebooks. The text would also be sent to pen friends or printed in the class magazine, while the author was granted the honourable title of a skilled writer or poet⁴. So much positive feedback not only from the teacher but also from the whole group encouraged the children to engage in creative writing.

The same things happen today in pre-schools and schools, which are run in the spirit of Freinet's pedagogy. It happens in other groups of children where the teachers make the pupils work on appropriate creative tasks, joining in their work. Let us have a look at two poems written by a 9-year-old Łukasz and a 9-year-old Maciek. The poems were very popular with all the children and they decided to have them in the class magazine "To i Owo"⁵

Seasons of the year

I like summer, cause it's hot
I like winter, cause it snows
I like autumn, cause it rains
Do you like these things as well?

(Łukasz)

If I ever met the Old Man of the Woods
I would ask him for clean air
In Poland for more woods
and that the ozone hole wouldn't grow.

(Maciek)

How is it possible that children write such long and interesting texts? Surely it takes the atmosphere of acceptance, acceptance for all of their work. It requires time for presentation of the information gathered by them, the skills mastered as

⁴ Cf. C. Freinet: *O szkołę ludową. Pisma wybrane*. (eds. A.Lewin, H.Semenowicz). Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1976, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich. Wydawnictwo PAN.

⁵ The magazine "To i Owo" was published by grade II of Primary School No 4 in Żory in 1991/1992. The children changed the name of the magazine every year.

well as the texts written. It is only then that children will bring to class the effects of their creative pursuits, when each of their texts is either displayed on the class board, in the chronicle or a letter to a pen friend or at least filed in a special text folder. Perhaps it would be a good idea to read all the texts out for the group once in a while, order them and keep them in special albums. The albums can later be lent out for reading together with parents. Why not organize the work in such a way as Freinet did and start the week with reading a light text to lead into the topic of the week. Another idea would be to round off a week of classes with writing personal opinions and feelings connected with the topic, as it often was the case in Freinet's classes. In order not to discourage those children who are not all that good at writing we could suggest writing a book collectively.

One pre-school teacher did exactly this when she asked her group of 6-year-olds to play a game in which each child was supposed to add one sentence to the story. Anticipating interesting results of such "plays with words"⁶ she recorded the story and finally wrote it down. Here is what she ended up with:

Rosaline and her dreams

Once upon a time there was a little girl called Rosaline. She was a good girl. One day she wanted to help her mother with the washing up, dusting, cleaning, washing the windows and the floors. But Rosaline's Mum would not let her do the housework. So she went out and sat on the stairs. She looked up and there in front of her there was a fairy. She said to Rosaline: "What would you like? I will fulfill all of your dreams." "I want my Mummy to let me help her with the housework – she said, and I want lots of sweets, Lego bricks, and lots of soft toys." All right, I will make these dreams come true, but remember my child, if you tell your Mum about it, all the magic will be gone." Rosaline went to her room, she went in and what did she see? lots of toys. Her Mum came into her room and was surprised. "Where have you got all these toys from, Rosaline?" "I can't tell you, Mummy". "Rosaline, is this some kind of magic or something?" "No" lied Rosaline. "Rosaline, you didn't use to have so many toys." Rosaline remained silent. Her Mum felt offended and angry and went back to her cooking. Suddenly Rosaline heard a cry. "Ouch, Rosaline, help me!" "Mum, have you hurt yourself?" "Oh, my child, I spilled soup and burnt my hand." Rosaline was really worried and she called for an ambulance. The emergency service came quickly, put a dressing on Mummy's hand and, unfortunately, took her to hospital. Rosaline cried and cried. Then the fairy came. "What happened, Rosaline?" "My Mum went to hospital because she'd burnt her hand with soup and I am alone now. Will you help

⁶ The authors of this text are a group of 6-year-olds from the group led by Bożena Kupczak, a teacher from Kindergarten No 23 in Bielsko-Biała in the year 2001/2002.

me, Fairy?” “Of course” the fairy said. They finished cooking the dinner together but the Fairy had to go back to her duties. Rosaline was alone once again. She decided to make a surprise for her Mummy. She cleaned up the house, washed the dishes and set two plates on the table. Then she went out to the porch and waited for her Mummy to come back. Suddenly a taxi pulled up in front of her house and Mum got out of the taxi. Rosaline was very happy, she hugged her Mum and told her “I’m sorry”. “What are you sorry about, Rosaline”? “Because I lied to you.” “When did you lie to me?” “When you asked me about the toys.” “So where have you got them from?” “From the fairy”. Then they could both feel a cold wind on their faces and were quite frightened. “What happened?” Rosaline knew what it was because she’d revealed the secret. All her toys disappeared. She understood that she could not have all her dreams fulfilled. It was good enough that Mummy was back and that nothing really bad had happened to her.

When we read texts like the ones presented above, it becomes evident that it is worthwhile to organize the time in pre-schools and schools so as to let children see that their writing is valued. They feel it when their texts are read out to their peers. The shortage of time to meet all the curriculum requirements should not prevent teachers from engaging in this kind of activities. Working on a text selected by the class and doing a number of various exercises with it, on speaking, reading, writing (working on lexis, style, grammar or spelling) they achieve the goals set out in the curriculum. There is a need to break free from the often wrongly conceived obligation to realize the curriculum, which should be referred to only as a suggestion made by textbook authors.

In this article I referred to Celestine Freinet’s pedagogical concepts. His ideas foster children’s active involvement in educational activities and their creativity. Moreover, they do not let teachers remain passive and send them on a constant search for new solutions. Freinet’s ideas create an opportunity for all participants of the didactic process to stray a little from the highly formalized traditional teaching and move towards more subjective activity. Spontaneous writing of literary texts is a great example of how children can experience reality and how they can creatively express their knowledge about the world and about themselves.

(Translated by: Andrzej Pasterny)

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