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Stimulation of Narration: from Examining Preconceptions to Education

Introduction

One of the main tasks of linguistic-communicative education in primary school is the gradual refinement of a pupil's intuitive understanding of what text is and what functions different kinds of texts perform in communication. This mission is in conformity with the need to develop pupils' functional literacy, thus to acquire skills for addressing instructional or life situations by means of textual information. It is obvious that a child's intuitive conceptualisation of text and its functions and features is present at the beginning of junior school age, both in the reception and production of text.

Text production and productive textual competence in junior school age

Production is generally regarded as the transmission of intended contents into utterance. Production processes of spoken message and written message are explained separately, however, when compared, it is clear that the mental activity of the producer first passes through the phase of conceptualization or *content specification,* in which one mentally selects the contents pertaining to the topic, communicative intention and communication situation. This is then followed by the phase of lexicalisation, or *semantic specification*, in which the producer assigns specific lexical units to mental content. Parallel with the above two processes, the *syntax*

specification phase is activated, in which the producer organises selected semantic units into language structure (more: Flower & Hayes, 1981; Levelt, 1989, Levelt, 1992; Scovel, 1998; Schwarzová, 2009).

For further explanation it is useful to draw attention to the two features of text production:

- production is *intentional* human activity – the producer enters into communication only if sufficiently motivated, i.e. if s/he intends to change something in objective reality through communication;
- production is *selective* human activity – the producer chooses what will be verbalized in the text, but also chooses how (by which means of communication and what arrangement) the communication plan will be achieved.

The complex skills and strategies of human beings which enable them to achieve a communication plan through speaking and writing are called *productive text competence*. Productive text competence is developed intentionally and unintentionally. A certain developmental level is a prerequisite for the successful usage of spoken and written language in instructional and life situations. The existing cognitive linguistics research on the composition of text in junior school age (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Kellogg, 2008), suggests that a key role in production is in:

a) pupils' knowledge of and experience with the *topic*,
b) pupils' knowledge and experience concerning the *text models*.

The role of school is to stimulate the productive text competence in several areas. An important component in the cognitive and metacognitive area of developing a pupil's productive text competences is:

- acquisition of basic awareness of text patterns in spoken and written language (narration, description, argumentation, information, forms of social contact);

- awareness of compositional characteristics of information, narration and description, and, exploration of the ways of using them in text (more Liptáková et al., 2011, p. 250–251).

Narration as a text model

The text model of *narration* is common in communication for preschool and junior school age children. It is one of the first models acquired by a child, not only at the level of understanding, but also at the level of production. Several qualitatively differing stages can be recognized in the narrative development (see Westby, 1984). It is therefore quite natural that storytelling is reflected in the primary school curriculum. Attention should be paid to acquiring the terminology and concepts related to narration; i.e. awareness of the compositional characteristics of narration and mastering the process of creating narrative text in school.

What do we know about children's narration? Empirical findings on a pupil's ability to produce a narrative text are essential for setting the optimum development of production in junior school age. For this developmental stage (the stage of true narratives; chains oriented at the character of the story, *focused chains*) certain characteristics are typical. The elements of a child's written production of narratives stated below are the result of our own research aimed at detecting qualities of narrative text from text-linguistic (coherence and cohesion) and psycholinguistic (the very process of creating text) aspects:

- range of narrative text is between 70 to 90 words,
- motifs of the stories are centred around the character,
- stories are usually without conflict, are graded according to the dramatic arc, events follow from each other only by temporal and logical relationships,
- deliberateness of the characters' acts is not present yet,
- stories oscillate between detailed and austere expression,

- from the aspects of the morphology of a story (so called story grammar; see McLaughlin, 2006) it is characterized by the presence of the initial event, the trial and consequence and, later, the components of the story are expanded by circumstances and internal response or internal intention and evaluative reactions of the characters,
- narratives are predominately syntactically monotonous with typical theme-rheme sequence of statements,
- central group of binding and attaching connectors includes conjunctions and coupling terms that, in the above sentence level, function as coupling particles: attaching *and*, consequential *and so* and adversative *however, but*,
- temporal relationships are expressed by the adverbs *then, and then, so* (in temporal meaning *then*),
- co-reference relations are expressed most often by literal lexical repetition or deliberate repetition (more: Klimovič, 2010b; Harčaríková & Klimovič, 2011).

How is narration taught in the textbooks of primary school? Our analysis of the current Slovak language textbooks for the 2nd , 3rd and 4th year of primary school written by Dienerová, Nosáľová, Hirschnerová (2009), Hirschnerová, Adame (2011a) and Hirschnerová, Adame (2011b), focused on the following aspects: creating a concept of narrative text model, the presence of narrative texts in the textbooks, interconnectedness of content and form of narrative texts with the tasks aimed at acquiring linguistic communicative and compositional skills, the methods of instruction, the activities of pupils and the type of tasks related to the reception and production of a narrative text. The following findings emerged from the analysis of the textbooks:

- narrative texts in textbooks occur in two basic positions – as motivational texts and as a part of linguistic and communicative--compositional exercises; the latter position occurs in the textbooks in much higher proportion while narrative texts are only

linguistic material without proper accentuation of the content of the text (the textbook encourages the learner to identify certain linguistic phenomenon, but does not work with the theme of the story, the theme stands as if outside the interest of the learner),

- due to the nature of the tasks that utilise narrative text, it is surprising that the inclusion of the instruction on how the story is built up comes relatively late,

- the textbooks do not provide guidance on how to work with the story events and characters,

- a cross-combination of the kinds of texts in compositional tasks (apologising and story, felicitation and story, letter and story, and, description and story) appears problematic; in Slovak pedagogy, the requirement has been promoted for several decades that a pupil should learn first the so called "pure compositional approach", narration without elements of description or reflection (cf. Betáková & Tarcalová, 1984, pp. 242–243) – such an approach facilitates the acquisition of narrative text models,

- in working with the narrative skills of pupils, receptive and reproductive exercises and tasks prevail, the number of production--oriented tasks is lower in each successive year, the textbooks only sporadically encourage the pupil to produce his/her own story,

- analysis of the types of production tasks includes the following instructions for the creation of a story (sorted by frequency, the most frequent instruction is first): tell a story from a picture (series of pictures), create a story from your own experience, invent a story and use the selected words in it, finish the story, invent a story on the topic, outline a story content from its title.

Based on the above confrontation of knowledge from cognitive linguistics, text linguistics and psycholinguistics of text production with the school reality manifested through the textbooks, the weak points in stimulating narration in primary school can be identified. It turns out that in the future the instructional resources will have to be focused more on activating higher cognitive processes in the acquisition of text models.

Reproductively oriented learning topics should be reduced. The integration of language, composition, reading and literature should be consistently implemented. The communicative use of acquired knowledge from language and composition should be connected with the efficient working with a literary and factual text. Thus, the scientifically substantiated conception of teaching Slovak language and literature through the integration of cognitive-communicative and experiential approaches should be applied (Liptáková et al., 2011). The current situation of acquainting pupils with text production is unsatisfactory in the basic teaching resources.

From examining preconceptions to stimulation of narration – overview of the methods used

Constructivist theories in didactic research re-route the attention of experts to the study of the content structures of children's knowledge. If a pupil in the learning process is to internalise new knowledge and skills into his/her own knowledge scheme (the assimilation-accommodation principle), s/he must necessarily rely on his/her previous knowledge. In this study, we use the term preconceptions as "inner intuitive forms of existence of an objective concept in the subjective world" (Doulík & Škoda, 2010, p. 9). By examining pupils' preconceptions, we want to better understand the "interpretive tools of the mental elaboration of relevant topics" (Pupala 2001, p. 214).

We will gradually introduce three methods conceived as part of broader research into developing the ability to create a narrative text in the second year of primary school. These are (1) the structured interview method, (2) a productive textual task for creating a story from a picture (picture of rabbit which looks in the mirror and sees the reflection of an elephant), and, (3) an intervention program to promote self-regulation in the process of constructing narrative text. The methods were applied in 42 pupils from an urban elementary school during two weeks. At the time of collecting data, the age of the samples ranged from seven years and

eight months, in the youngest participant, to eight years and 10 months in the oldest respondent. The mean age of the sample of 2nd year pupils was eight years and two months.

    a)   *Interview with pupils*. The structured interviews included five questions. In this study, given the limited space, we focus only on the first four questions:

1. What is a story?
2. How is a story created?
3. How do you create a story?
4. How do you know that the story is finished?

When interpreting the responses, we were aware of the fact that the purpose of non-numerical qualitative analysis is not to quantify the data, but to create semantic categories and explain their existence (cf. Šeďová, 2007). The aim of the analysis of the responses is to generate a framework of the pupil's conceptual and procedural knowledge of the narratives.

    b)   *Creating narrative text from a pictorial prompt*. The method was used to determine the current level of written narrative of the pupil according to the criteria of N. Stein. Written narratives differed in the studied sample in the degree of completeness (complexity) of the story. Based on the research of N. Stein (Stein & Albro, 1997, p. 9), it is possible to assess the narrative text by means of the following criteria arranged in ascending order:

- *time in the story* (temporal relations) – this is a basic requirement of the story, time is kept if it is directly stated in the text that the time goes by, the events follow from each other on the basis of time sequence; the criterion relates to the marked development of themes, namely entering into the middle of events (i.e. in medias res);
- *causality* (causal relations) – there is a clear relationship between cause and effect in text, for example an action of the character

leads to a different narrative event, or, an action of the character results from a change in the events;

- *orientation on goal* (goal-based) – a character in the text acts to achieve something; when reading, it is clear what the character intends in the story;
- *obstacle* – a figure acting to achieve his/her own goal must overcome some obstacle, succeed in something, resolve a problem or intricate plot;
- *point* (ending) - the text culminates and directly refers to an imaginative and surprising unravelling of the story, it is linked to the main character and his conduct, it may be expressed as the main idea or moral lesson.

The resulting text created by each pupil was assessed by two independent assessors. Based on the assessment criteria, it can be accurately determined in what aspect the quality of the individual stories of the children varied. The quality of the produced text also, to some extent, indicates the child's cognitive level in the area acquainted with the general characteristics of the narrative text.

c) *Intervention program*. The starting point of the intervention program was the conception of K. Harris and S. Graham on developing self-regulation in junior school aged writers (Self-Regulated Strategy Development; more in Harris – Graham, 1996). The goal of the program was to teach students to form a narrative text (developing from background knowledge through discussing, modelling, supporting, and the memorization of story-writing strategies to independent performance). The program consisted of 6 sessions (each lasting about 45 minutes) during a two-week period. The focus of the lessons:

- Lesson 1: basic knowledge of the story (based on the findings from the interviews, supplemented and corrected if necessary) and deducing the learning strategy by mnemotechnic aid;

- Lesson 2: setting individual targets for each pupil on the basis of the quality of the narrative text produced prior to the program; a debate about the use of strategy and deduction of the order of activities in creating text (didactic analogy of the phases of text making process using mnemotechnic aid);
- Lesson 3: modelling strategies and collective utilisation of mnemotechnic aids;
- Lesson 4: creating the story based on collectively applied strategies;
- Lesson 5: implementation of the strategies and feedback to the learner;
- Lesson 6: individual application of the strategies in the development of the story (after the sixth Lesson we included one more control task on the creation of narrative text from a picture).

From examining preconceptions to stimulation of narrations – analysis of findings

Individual findings on preconceptions of children and on the level of their ability to create story text are presented as a more detailed description of the findings. The selected pupils (Martin, Tomáš, Eva, Tamara and Emma) represent different quality benchmarks of narrative competence in the sample of Year 2 pupils of primary school.

a) *Interview with pupils.* Based on interviews with all the pupils in the sample, we have created a framework of conceptual and procedural knowledge of pupils. Conceptualisation of a story in the age group of 8-year-olds will appear clearer on the simplified scheme of the communication process. Explanation of the concept moves along the axis, author – text – recipient. The *author – text* relation produces the expression as *someone says, writes, invents or creates a story*. The *text – recipient* relation is represented in the expressions as *somebody reads a story to somebody*. Text in

the communication process scheme is represented by the response as *a story is some article, fairy tale or actual message.* The responses outside the scheme, and therefore the least apt, were as *a story is the words and phrases*. Those types signal that the story is, in the mind of 8-year-olds, both product and process, or, that the pupil has not acquired such concept of story that is close enough to the actual content of this notion. Pupils' responses to the question of how the story originates cover two of the three stages of producing a written message (Flower & Hayes, 1981) – planning (responses as *someone invents a story*, preparation for creating seems, however, a more appropriate term than planning) and generating (responses as *someone writes a story*). Since the generating phase means "translation" of ideas into linguistic units, the following answers can also be included in it *a story arises from the words and sentences*.

1. The question focused on the concept of story in the minds of the pupils: What is a story?
    Martin: *"Fairy tale."*
    Tomáš: *"Fairy tale."*
    Eva: *"A story is a fairy tale."*
    Tamara: *"Some article."*
    Emma: *"A story is, if there is something written, some sentences, it starts with a capital letter and the story reads in the book."*
    While the answers of the first three pupils indicate a clear natural inclination towards fairy tales as their mental representation of a story, in Tamara's case a story is some type of text (response type *a story is some type of text*). Emma has a different concept of story in her mind. She first suggested that a story contains sentences, then (probably under the influence of education) she mentioned sentence grammar, but finally she related the story to her personal experience, characterised by text – reader relation, and her response was classified under the type, *somebody reads a story to somebody*.

2. The question focused on the pupil's conceptualisation of creating a story text: How is a story created?

Martin: *"From a fairy tale, from the book."*

Tomáš: *"From a fairy tale? From the words? "*

Eva: *"Writer somehow writes it."*

Tamara: *"When a writer writes it."*

Emma: *"Some writer first invents it and then writes it on paper."*

Martin's and Tomáš's responses build on the previous statement about fairy tale as a representative of story text. Both responses indicate that the boys either have no idea about the origin of story, or cannot verbalise their ideas. The responses of Eva and Tamara show that their concept of creating a story is based on the idea of generating text (response type *someone writes a story*). Emma expanded her reply with the aspect of planning. In her statement, she combines the two phases of generating text. From this point of view it seems that her idea of creating a story is more complex in comparison with the other pupils.

3. The question focused on the awareness of intrinsic rules for creating a text (metacognition): How do you create a story?

Martin: *"I do not even know."*

Tomáš: *"By writing words."*

Eva: "I write it on paper."

Tamara: "When I write it on paper."

Emma: "For example, I invent a couple of sentences, then I write them and then translate it."

Martin cannot answer, perhaps because he lacks the metacognitive abilities to name the steps of shaping his own story. Eva and Tamara emphasize the very act of writing, but rather in terms of graphical coding of content. Emma realizes that writing has certain steps (first she thinks over the sentences then writes them), but from the answer it is not clear what she meant by *I then translate it.*

4. The question focused on the awareness of completeness of a story (metacognition): When do you know that the story is finished?

Martin: *"I do not know when, perhaps in an hour a story is done, I do not know."*

Tomáš: *"When I put a full stop at the end?"*

Eva: *"When I finish everything."*

Tamara: *"When I finish it in some way."*

Emma: *"When I think that there is enough pages and it all ends up well."*

Martin did not respond adequately, time is not an issue. Tomáš is aware of the formal rules of writing sentences, but his answer does not refer to a story. Eva and Tamara suggest the need to aim at some story ending. Emma realizes the requirement of some extent or length and is aware, following her experience with the fairy tales, of the need for a good ending.

b) *Creating narrative text from pictorial prompt*. When discussing the findings after applying this method, it would be best to introduce an authentic text by a particular pupil, but given the fact that the texts are written in the Slovak language, the literal translation into English is not feasible (if interested in the issue see the studies by Klimovič, 2013, with the full details of pupils' texts in Slovak). Therefore, in the discussion on the second method, we offer only the analysis of narratives according to the criteria of N. Stein. Martin, in his text, made incoherent statements about different things that he noticed when observing the picture, but without a hint of the story, without any time sequence, even without cor-relation between the details of the picture. Martin created a text that does not fulfil the most essential requirement for narrative text, i.e. time in the story (temporal relations). Such types of text are referred to by N. Stein as *a message without structure* (no structure). Based on Martin's text, it can be assumed that he has not formed in his mind a concept of a narrative text model, or at the time of creating the text, he neither activated the required text model in his mind nor organised his ideas around the central theme.

Tomáš's text also does not fulfil the criterion of time, but unlike Martin's text, it is focused on one topic. Tomas describes the prompting picture in the text. The description of the situation in the picture is however, not ordered; the observed phenomena are repeated several times in almost identical linguistic terms. Such types of text, with no apparent presence of temporal relations, are referred to by N. Stein as *descriptive sequence*.

Eva's text stands qualitatively higher then Martin's and Tomáš's texts. Eva managed to indicate temporal relationships in her story (using numerals in conjunction with a noun or by repetition of the verb sleep, thus indicating the duration of the plot). However, cause-effect relations or the causality of the protagonists cannot be retrieved from the text). This type of narrative is referred to by Stein as *a simple temporal sequence* (action sequence).

Unlike Eva, whose text did not evidence the category of causality, Tamara clearly applied temporal and causal relationships between the events (actions of the protagonists of the story in response to a story event is consistent with the intentionality of human actions - the protagonist is frightened when he does not see his own image in the mirror, but the image of someone else). The text, however, does not reveal what the main character wanted to achieve in the story and what motivated him to further actions as the story proceeds. The text is thus missing the character's orientation on target. Such types of narrative are, according to Stein, *reactive sequences*.

The text by Emma is qualitatively at the highest level. It has all the features of *episode* (goal-based episode). Episode is the central unit of story in which a certain story event is developed and the text demonstrates a clear target orientation of the characters. Emma's story possesses a point (the rabbit is ashamed for boastful acting and the point is, therefore, a moral lesson), but there is no obstacle.

The summary of findings from the qualitative analysis of the complexity of narratives is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Presence of N. Stein's criteria in the narratives
of 8-year old pupils**

Author of Text	TR	CR	G	O	E	Complexity of Narrative
Martin	no	(–)	(–)	(–)	(–)	no structure
Tomáš	no	(–)	(–)	(–)	(–)	descriptive sequence
Eva	yes	no	(–)	(–)	(–)	action sequence
Tamara	yes	yes	no	(–)	(–)	reactive sequence
Emma	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	episode

Legend: TR – temporal relations, CR – causal relations, G – goal-based, O – obstacle, E – ending, yes/no – presence/absence of observed criterion, sign (–) – criterion is not probed.

c) *Intervention program*. The stimulation which we used was based on the data from the first two methods. In the course of the 6 lessons, we worked with the pupils so that they realized which components were missing from their story and were able to implement those in their texts by the gradual grasping of the individual process of creating a narrative text. During the program, the self-regulation of the writers was ensured by the following elements:

- self-monitoring – each pupil set the goal of writing individually based on a sound knowledge of his/her abilities and previous performance;
- self-instructing – each pupil was supported by graphical support, single instructions in the stage of text formation had to be adapted to his/her way of thinking or achieved level;
- self-reinforcement – is a positive perception of one's own efficacy; support from the immediate environment and cooperation in a qualitatively similar working group brought a degree of writers' self-reinforcement;
- metacognition - represents awareness of the steps in the strategy, supported also by visual aids;

- self-assessment – the pupil was able to analyse his/her own text according to the criteria of complexity of the story, obviously without using the established terminology, however expressing it in the didactic language pertinent to the communicative-com positional and literary education.

The intervention program succeeded in developing the narrative skills of those pupils in particular whose entry ability to create narratives was qualitatively weaker according to the degree of complexity.

In the last phase of intervention, Martin repeatedly created narrative types of action sequences; which means that he mastered the criterion of time. In further development of his capacity to produce a narrative text, emphasis should be put on raising his awareness of causative relations in the actions of characters, especially through projecting such events in the actions of characters that can be considered goal-oriented.

Tomáš and Eva, in their stories, demonstrated identically their ability to create an episode. In further development of their narrative skills, such experience should be strengthened so that the gradual and irreversible process of forgetting would not affect their individual disposition for narrating texts.

The intervention program did not induce a qualitative improvement in Tamara and Emma. Tamara repeatedly created reactive sequences after the intervention, thus she remained at the same level as prior to stimulation. Emma benefited the least from the stimulation; the story written after the completion of the program can only be assessed as a reactive sequence, which is, compared to the pre-intervention episode, a decline. These findings may indicate three things:

1. Intervention must be more consistent in its preparation and development stages for those writers who have developed a concept of a narrative text model,
2. The distance between the ability to create a narrative of the reactive sequence type and the perceived ability to create an episode is, for some writers, too challenging to overcome just through short-term intervention,

1. An episode as a regular expression of text production should first be mentally mature since an episode is a central unit of narrative that the author consciously develops, which requires a certain degree of cognitive maturity.

Discussion and conclusion

In the introduction to the study we highlighted the inconsistency of pedagogic transformation of the communicative and compositional education curriculum in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th years of primary school. The notion of pedagogic transformation is perceived here in relation to the concept of didactic communication. If didactic communication represents "*the process of transfer and mediation of the results of scientific knowledge into the knowledge of individuals who have not participated in the creation of knowledge*" (Adamčíková – Tarábek, 2008), in other words, if the didactic communication is "*didactic bridge between scientific knowledge and mental representations in the mind of learners*" (ibid.), then pedagogic transformation is a pillar of this bridge. Pedagogic transformation however, does not mean the transfer of scientific content into a simplified, understandable-to-learners educational content. It is not a reduced knowledge, but, in terms of assimilation-accommodation principles, it is a reconstruction of knowledge, a specific way of learning. In view of the above, children's intuitive knowledge of text production is essential for teachers.

Based on the findings on children's preconceptions of story and pupils' ability to apply narrative text macro-strategy, we want our study to contribute to such a pedagogic transformation of curriculum that would respect the level of conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge of junior school aged children. We thus outline a didactic system (setting targets, content, process and outcomes) in the form of a proposal for content and performance standards of communicative and compositional education in the area of developing productive textual competence of the pupil (the knowledge of narrative text model, the ability to apply narrative text strategy):

a) Year 2:
- content standard - didactic concepts: storytelling, story;
- performance standard - pupil discerns central event (plot) in the story, applies temporal and cause-effect relationships between the events in story, creates own stories on the basis of prompts (pictorial and verbal), narrates a story based on own experience, explains what it means to tell a story.

b) Year 3:
- content standard – didactic concepts: narration, introduction/ core/conclusion of narration;
- performance standard - pupil creates stories maintaining temporal and cause-effect relationships between the story events, can utilise intentional action of the main character when producing text, segments the story into introduction/core/conclusion, can explain what the terms introduction, core and conclusion mean, creates the continuation of the story based on the qualities of the characters and the course of events in the literary work.

c) Year 4:
- content standard - didactic concept: narrative;
- performance standard - pupil in storytelling expresses intentionality of characters' actions can apply descriptive parts (description of characters, environment), creates a story with conflict and its solution.

In presenting the findings, we are aware of the limitations of the study, which resulted from the methodology used and from other factors affecting qualitatively oriented research. These findings cannot be generalized for the population of 8 year-old pupils. When interviewing pupils, it appears more apt to use unstructured interviews instead of structured interviews. The researcher would thus obtain more detailed explanations of children's conceptualisations of stories. In determining the complexity of stories we are also aware that it is only a partial view on

the ability to create a narrative text, taking into account N.Stein's research. Some other characteristics of the text should also be examined, at least those which are related to the linguistic features of the text, such as coherence and cohesion.