



DEVELOPING WRITTEN TEXT PRODUCTION COMPETENCE USING THE READER-RESPONSE METHOD

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Abstract: The first part of the present paper deals with the analysis of the literary theory and linguistic background of the reader-response method, respectively with the presentation of the process of composition and its psychological components. The reader-response textual interpretation method can take several different approaches of literary theory, sometimes the borders being so fade, that they cannot be distinguished, they melt into each other. In the context of hermeneutics, Gadamer and Ingarden state that a literary work is finished by the reader, as the process of reading is carried out through the interaction between reader and literary work. In Iser's opinion the hiatus of the work is filled in by the imagination of the reader. The father of practical literary science, Richards says that meaning, sense is tied to the inner and outer status of the individual, thus it is a relative thing. According to transactional literary theory (Rosenblatt) meaning is born within transaction. From the linguistic point of view, the semantic approach states that meaning is the dynamic interaction between language and reality, thus it is relative, as the individual interprets the world through her/his own experiences. Sociolinguistics analyzes the cultural influences, presenting how a certain culture raises its system of conventions, and the individual is adapted through the process of socialization, and all this influences her/his points of view. Through the psycholinguistic approach I have outlined the principle of word association. It can be seen how the reader-response method can be seen from different perspectives, in fact different tendencies have different approaches of the same principle: meaning is created by the reader. Concerning the components of the abilities of expression in writing I am presenting the model of Hayes, according to which these abilities are influenced by individual and environmental factors. The former include motivation, short-term and long-term memory, cognitive psychological processes, while the latter include the factors of social and physical environment. I have sketched the process of composition regarding the specificities of age. About the teaching of composition I have presented the steps of the process. The second part of the paper includes the presentation of my research, the formulation of the results and of the conclusions, which confirm that applying reader-response in textual interpretation is a huge gain.

Keywords: written text production competence, reader-response method

Introduction

The tendency of national curricula of regarding developing reading comprehension, which is one of the most important components of our communicative competence, as the main task of school education seems to be supported by the results of the PISA study. According to the functional perspective on language the aim is forming an independently thinking personality with basic literary and communicative skills who is able to use her/his abilities in an efficient and creative manner.

Communicative competence is needed in every field of life and it is not an exaggeration to state that communication is vital, since we all communicate with our environment. In order to achieve a higher level of communicative competence we need time, effort and developing certain psychological functions. The process is comprised of several stages whereas the pace is established by the development level of the child. Oral and written comprehension and expression skills are based on several sub-skills (e.g. writing, reading etc.) which, all together, hierarchically form the communicative competence.

The present study is a non-exhaustive analysis of the ways in which text interpretation skills influence the ability of expression in writing (formation and development thereof) of an age group (3rd graders) that already has the necessary cognitive functions and sub-skills. In the case of text interpretation we have employed the reader-response method which is akin to the level of creative reading, whereas in essays we primarily focused on the representations of linguistic creativity.

The literary background of the reader-response method

The development of literary discourse is molded by the esthetic expectations of the ever changing social reception. Subjectively, its trends provide reading strategies with the help of which it becomes easier to access literary meanings and references. The need for this is testified by the fact that new literary works require a new interpretation in the light of which the interpretation of earlier works can also be done differently. How literature is „used”, i.e. interpreted, always depends on its receiver; comprehension is constantly influenced by the emotional, cognitive, social and cultural background of the reader. Thus the interpretation of a literary work is nothing but the response of a certain generation to the questions of insight into human nature, as well as into themselves. By changing the context every literary work gains a new meaning, bearing, in this respect, self-creating potential. The list of new messages to be found is never ending and the meanings harbor endless possibilities. (Bókay, 2006: 11–13)

The literary trends of the 20th century focus on the text and approach it from several perspectives (e.g. linguistic-structural, psychological or as a historical product), but Gadamer and Ingarden, representatives of the new hermeneutical trend, professed that there is a very close connection between the essence of the literary work and the reader. In their opinion, literary works are 'schematic structures' rounded off by the reader, whereas the actual literary work is an interplay between reader and piece of art. In the course of this interplay text and reader interpret each other.

Going beyond the open object-subject interpretation of hermeneutics, Iser, the best known advocate of the reception theory, states that every piece of literary art contains hiatuses to be filled in by the imagination of the reader. The American wing of reception esthetics, the reader-response, shifts the focus even more on the receiver, in D. Bleich's opinion the meaning of a piece of literary work can only be captured within the reader, thus the more readers, the more interpretations of the same text. (Veronika Spira, 1995: 50–58)

According to the theory of reader-response literature only exists if it is read, thus even the process of interpretation can be seen as a creative one. Another essential principle of this theory is that literary texts elude precise and unchangeable definition and that they can be viewed as a constant dialogue between the literary work itself and its receiver. (Gyöngyösiné Kiss Enikő - Németh Anita, 2008: 217)

Actually, the concept of reader-response can be traced back to I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*. The aim of the book is researching readers' response and it is based on the theory of relative meaning: *the Meaning of Meaning*, according to which thoughts evoked in a reader by a piece of literary work are mere variables of past relationships and references. Because of this subjectivity each interpretation is different. In this work the Cambridge professor analyses interpretations of poems by his students and the degree to which the personality of the receiver influences poem interpretation. The American New Criticism is based on Richards' works and considers Richards as its founding father (in the 1930's Richards emigrates to the USA), but rejects the theory which considers receiver experience of paramount importance. New Criticism focuses only on the text, ignoring all interpretations beyond it.

Starting with the 1950's reader-response starts again to gain importance, but at this time attention was given only to the linguistic aspects of the issue. In the 1960's psycholinguistics joined the effort with its investigation of the cognitive processes of reading and later, in 1978, an extremely important work was published: Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*. It is after this work that reader-response was, again, spotlighted. (Adamikné Jászó Anna, 2006b: 477–483)

The reader-response theory is identical to the theory of transactional reading introduced by Louise Rosenblatt. According to the theory of reader-response reader and text intertwine during their interaction and this intertwining results in a creative process. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* is a

summary of her earlier works and experiences. Rosenblatt differentiates between aesthetic reading which has an experimental character and efferent reading that is information-based. The reader's prior knowledge and experience is nevertheless paramount in both reading types. In aesthetic reading the reader focuses on the quality of emotions, ideals, situations and characters and formulates the response on the basis thereof. Efferent reading is based on the facts and requires a cognitive, logical and analytical approach.

The transactional reading paradigm has a philosophical background according to which man is part and parcel of nature, individual and community elements combining with cultural and natural elements. Taking psychological and neurological research into account, Rosenblatt supports Pierce's sign theory the crux of which is the dynamic relationship between sign, object and interpreter. She also makes reference to Vygotsky's theory: language is internalized in the transaction between man and a certain environment. In the reading process both the transactional nature of language and selectiveness are to be found next to each other and complementing each other. Meaning is born during transaction. The linguistic-experiential baggage influences the cultural, social and personal experiences of the reader, and these, in turn, develop expectations with regard to the text.

Rosenblatt draws a parallel between the reading and the writing process. Even in the writing process the emphasis falls on transaction, highlighting the author's approach, her or his perspective on the text and interpretation thereof, as well as the communication between author and reader. (Adamikné Jászó Anna, 2006b: 483–499)

The linguistic background of the reader-response method

The theory of semantic relativity stipulates that meaning is relative, for the individual interprets and completes it through the filter of her or his experiences. According to the teachings of the ancient philosopher Gorgias language developed as a consequence of external influences upon man, thus the content of language is given by the degree of familiarization with the outside world, whereas meaning is updated by the receiver. In their 1923 *The Meaning of Meaning* Richards and Ogden reformulated Gorgias' theory. People communicate by means of symbols, they use words that denote and replace certain things, all the while evoking various thoughts depending on experiences. Richards uses the word 'cat' as an example for a concept that defines an external object. Those who have had pleasant experiences with cats think of a fluffy and friendly animal, those who did not think of them as a possible source of danger. If two such people have a conversation the experiential difference can lead to misunderstandings. This can be defined as the dynamic interaction between language and reality. (Adamikné Jászó Anna, 2006b: 459–460)

The American psychologist Lenneberg pointed out that from the perspective of language acquisition social and emotional factors bear a much more significant relevance than the age-appropriate cognitive abilities. Language acquisition is a kind of socialization process; its development is culturally conditioned and depends on the cultural knowledge of the speaker. Text interpretation and production require a mental lexicon. The lexicon comprises linguistic elements, their particularities and the relationships between them. Structurally it can be divided into three parts: active and passive vocabulary, as well as baggage of words and suffixes typical for agglutinative languages. The boundaries between these may be crossed in certain situations. With regard to the functioning of the mental lexicon the results of word association researches prove that the so-called spider web theories best illustrate the relations between units and their functions. Therefore a single unit can be directly connected to several other units which, in turn, develop other units. Thanks to the complex network-like structure of the nervous system we can link two very different concepts based on certain notes.

Although independent, reading and writing are closely linked to each other. Both readers and writers develop their symbolic structures during the transaction with the text, following identical linguistic traditions and thinking patterns. Since one cannot replace the other, but they influence one another, they should be taught as completing skills. Linguistic traditions and thinking processes influence each other, thus the connection between reading and writing made by the pupil is highly dependant on the educational circumstances and the teaching method. The key of the educational process is creating a suitable learning environment which is based on the communication between pupils and educator.

Dialogue is extremely beneficial especially when developing reading and writing competences. If pupils share their thoughts about a certain text than they can consciously observe their own reading processes; if they discuss their interpretation-related questions, they develop their critical reading skills reaching metalinguistic consciousness. The reader-response method links the process of understanding a piece of literary art with various activities and creativity, process reading being one of the best ways to trigger understanding.

Process reading is a type of text interpretation which can be traced back to the method of reader-response. Its core idea is that, after being presented with a fragment, pupils formulate hypotheses and predictions followed by debate and discussion. Complex cognitive and thought processes are triggered in this manner. Thus we can state that process reading is a dynamic text processing method. It is most efficient when used in small groups or pairs. Generally we can distinguish the following stages in the process:

- predictions formulated based on the size of the text fragments which illustrate prior knowledge, attitude and hypotheses; pupils form an opinion and express their wishes;
- problem solving process, debate, discussion
- evaluation of the literary work of art
- recreation of the piece of art through another method (visualizing, staging, putting to music etc.)
- self-evaluation

Naturally such processing of a literary work can leave a number of unresolved issues behind, which can be dealt with through a traditional, more in-depth dissection based on the rules of analysis-synthesis, therefore the two text processing methods complement each other. (Adamikné Jászó Anna, 2006b: 499–502)

The ability of composing texts is a complex process comprised of countless variables. However the developers of text production models (Flower–Hayes, de Beaugrande, Bereiter–Scardamalia) agree that the process of composing is made up of several sub-processes that can be broken down into different stages in which certain processes play the central role.

According to the **Hayes-model** the most important aspect is the relation between individual and its environment. Hayes reckons that the social and physical environmental factors, as well as the individual's motivation, short- and long-term memory and cognitive psychological processes are paramount to the process of composing. Hayes separately analyzed each element. The impact of social factors on language and vocabulary had been researched by many other psychologists even before Hayes. Bernstein concluded in 1996 that families having different social statuses communicate using distinct code systems. In 1983 Heath researched whether or not social background has an effect on the amount a person writes during their lifetime. O'Donnell and colleagues concluded that collaborative writing has a positive impact upon the individual composition competence.

Motivation which is an individual, internal factor can be seen in every aspect of a person's life. This also applies to the process of text composition. Short- and long-term memory is essential to any cognitive process, the former storing flexible information, while the latter stores and structures linguistic systems (the linking elements of text semantics and grammar), problem solving schemes, genre knowledge and information on a certain subject. These all together make up the text production competence.

In Hayes' view the cognitive processes can be broken down into text interpretation, reflection and text production (written and oral). Internalizing representations of linguistic and graphic signs during text interpretation is dominant in the writing process, i.e. those who read poorly more often than not also write in the same manner. During reflection internal representations metamorphose into new and different representations by means of problem solving, opinion forming, decision making and conclusion drawing. Text production is, in fact, the produce of the exteriorized internal representations. Furthermore Hayes states that the quality of linguistic competence also influences the quality of the written text.

When teaching composition we differentiate between free compositions and compositions on a certain subject. Even though the two differ in subject and motivational level, attention should be paid to structural elements and logical, linguistic, technical and style features in both cases. We must teach children to use language as a tool. Our approach to language formation has been drastically changed since Chomsky's generative grammar. According to his theory competences regarding linguistic rules and language use are instinctual and are genetically passed on. This is, in fact, a mental program during the running of which an individual is able to recognize and formulate an infinite number of sentences based on a finite number of signs. Thus, the primary goal of school education is letting this ability blossom, which can be achieved through an enriched environment and proper motivation. Conveying text knowledge also entails all aspects of text interpretation, for the reception and production of texts are intertwined. Its passive form is text comprehension, while the active form is text production. While conversing we form dialogues and opinions and ask children to reformulate sentences and phrases. Theater pedagogy offers a broad spectrum of creative tasks that prove to be very efficient in forming and developing text production competence. This is followed by conveying genre-related information, structural division (introduction, body and conclusion), structural logic (chronologic and spatial features) and, finally, stylistic information. We must spur children to acknowledge the relation between title and text and give them different perspectives. Outlining the text precedes the composition per se and helps children organize their thoughts. After writing the composition the educator should encourage the children during the discussion and evaluation round to develop their self-criticism as early as possible. The educator evaluates together with the children and measures the performance of each child in accordance with the general performance of that very child.

Schools play an incredibly important role in tapping creativity hidden in language and language use, as well as in developing oral text production competence. School education in this day and age has the key task of developing linguistic competences in a manner that allows the graduate to efficiently communicate also in non-school environments. The proficient use of the mother tongue in any given communicative situation is a precondition to a person's success both in their personal and professional life.

Research

The aim of the present study is to assess the importance of text interpretation competence in the process of text production, as well as to analyze the way in which the reader-response method influences the development of written text production competence. The study was conducted in two Cluj-Napoca (Romania) based schools on third graders. The method employed was, as mentioned before, the reader-response method. Children of similar social background and cognitive competences attend both schools.

The tasks of the pre- and post-test (nine sub-tests in total) assessed various aspects of written text production competence: finding synonyms, antonyms and adjectives, word associations, interpreting proverbs, characterizing a story character, writing a letter, continuing a story or formulating the introduction thereof.

Analyzing the performance of the children we have concluded that the experimental group exhibited more difficulties in the letter writing, characterization and proverb interpretation tasks. Approximately 70% was the performance of children in the concrete text production tasks. They achieved better results in simpler tasks: above 80% in synonym and antonym finding, as well as spelling and above 90% in finding adjectives. Thus we concluded that the text production competence of the experimental group is average. The same applies to the control group. The value of *p* is greater than 0.05, therefore the difference between the results of the two groups in the pre-test bears no significance.

Table 1: Comparison: the results of the experimental and control group in the pre-test:

Pre-test	Average	Deviation	t	p
Experimental group	7.62	1.78	0.57	0.56
Control group	7.35	1.40		

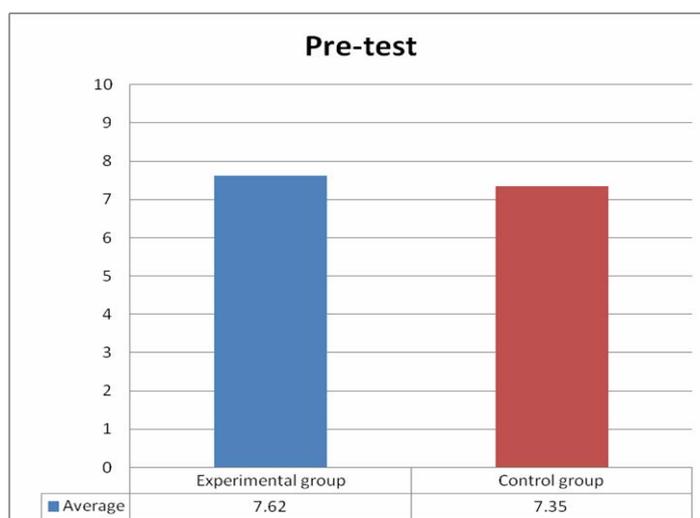


Chart 1: Comparison: the results of the experimental and control group in the pre-test

Based on the results we drew up a development program that ran five months. Interventions were based on the process reading of the reader-response method. The children were asked to work in groups, pairs and individually. We adapted literary texts to the age group of the children, a part of these texts were extracted from Ida Kénosi Dénes' textbook *Ablak a világra* (Window on the world), the others from András Ferenc Kovács' poems for children. The aim of the interventions was the development of linguistic creativity and text production competence.

Analyzing the results of the post-test we established a significant improvement in the experimental group, the performance was above 60% in the task of proverb interpretation and task 8 of text production, above 70% in characterization, above 80% in word association, task 9 of text production and spelling. The performance was above 90% in finding synonyms, antonyms and adjectives and in letter writing. The value of p is smaller than 0.05, thus the difference between the results of the two groups in the post-test is significant as shown in the following table and chart.

Table 2: Comparison: the results of the experimental and control group in the post-test:

Post-test	Average	Deviation	t	p
Experimental group	8.57	1.50	3.30	0.002
Control group	7.03	1.55		

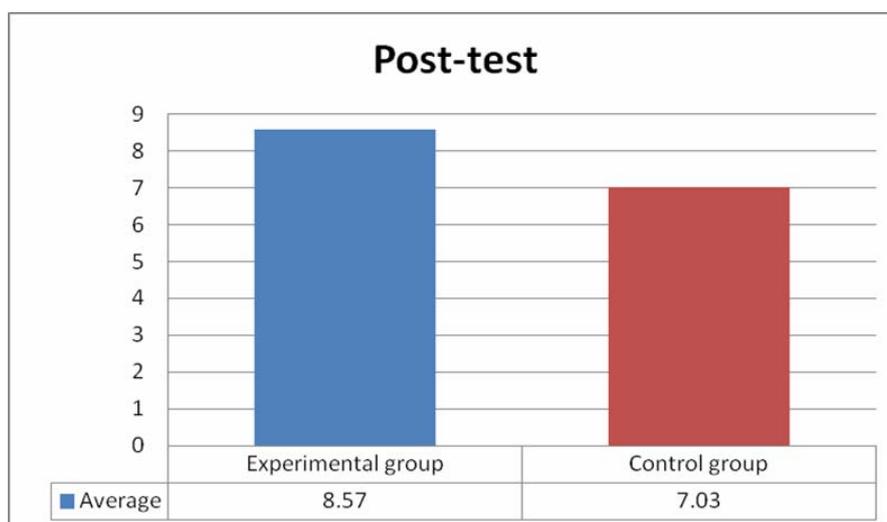


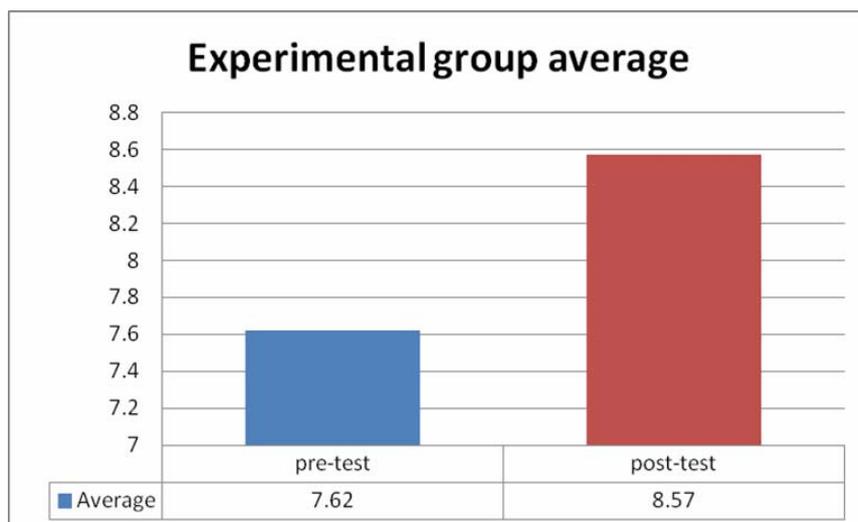
Chart 2: Comparison: the results of the experimental and control group in the post-test

In the case of the experimental group which had been very active during the development program we have also analyzed the development of their text production as compared to their level assessed by the pre-test. As clearly shown by table 3 and chart 3 the difference is significant ($p= 0.012 < 0.05$) fact that proves the efficiency of the employed development program.

Table 3: Comparison: The result of the experimental group in the pre- and post-test

Experimental group	Average	Deviation	t	p
pre-test	7.62	1.78	2.81	0.012
post-test	8.57	1.50		

Chart 3: Comparison: The result of the experimental group in the pre- and post-test



The results of the research confirm our hypothesis according to which the reader-response method applied in text interpretation enhances text production competence. The pre-test given to both the experimental and the control group showed no statistically measurable, significant difference between the two groups (the experimental group had a performance of 76.2%, the control group 73.5%, the value of p was 0.56, thus $p > 0.05$). The results of the post-test showed a significant improvement of the experimental group (experimental group performance: 85.7%, control group: 70.3%, the value of p was 0.002, thus $p < 0.05$).

Conclusions

As a result of the interventions the reader-response text interpretation method had a positive effect on the development of written text production competence. It was an excellent opportunity for all to participate in group work, therefore the feeling of achievement was guaranteed for everyone. Even less competent children actively worked in the groups and expressed their opinions, contributing to writing the stories. These activities were perceived as very motivating and based on the feedback of the children we concluded that they gladly participate in the Hungarian classes and they love putting their imagination to work. The atmosphere of the classes was also very relaxed and the children were so absorbed in the joint activities that we didn't even have to discipline them. It is our conviction that this method should be used as often as possible not only because it breaks the monotony of the traditional teaching-learning method, but also because it creates new stories in which the children are not only writers, but also protagonists. In this manner learning becomes a creative process which is not concluded with simply conveying lessons but which opens a door to endless possibilities and becomes a true and unique value.

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