

The Teacher's Role in the Creative Teaching of Literacy

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Abstract

The teacher plays the central role in the educational process. In Croatian language teaching, the teacher represents a role model for his or her students in both speaking and writing. This is why it is very important to encourage teachers in language and language expression classes to stimulate and develop the creative thinking of their students by promoting new and interesting ways of finding different solutions to various problems. The creative teaching of literacy involves the use of different methods and techniques that teach students how to solve the posed problems in a creative manner (Hunt & Quaranta, 2014). Studies (Aladrović Slovaček, 2012) have shown that integration and correlation in Croatian language teaching are insufficiently used and that the level of descriptive knowledge is higher than the level of procedural knowledge. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the techniques and methods used in Croatian language classes in lower grades of primary school by teachers who aim to encourage the development of creative thinking in literacy teaching. Fifty (N=50) teachers, who differ in age, years of service and attitude toward working in school, participated in the research. It was expected that in teaching literacy, teachers use the techniques and methods that stimulate the development of creative thinking only sometimes and that these teachers perceive themselves as creative. It was also expected that younger teachers are more creative and that teachers who are more content use methods and techniques of creative thinking more frequently.

Key words: *creative thinking; Croatian language teaching; literacy; teacher; teachers' attitudes.*

Introduction

The central person in the educational process is the teacher. Throughout history, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century, when more and more people

began to attend primary education, the teacher was the moral and spiritual vertical in places where they worked and teaching was considered a highly valued profession. Over the years, this role has changed significantly and the changes have affected the entire system of education. At the end of the twentieth century, education has greatly been influenced by the development of technology that began to be increasingly common as a medium or mode of transmission of certain teaching contents. With the development of technology, contemporary school administration sees its future in which the role of the teacher is almost marginalized. If we talk about the teaching of the mother (Croatian) tongue, then the teacher is the written and spoken model, and by selecting teaching methods, the teacher greatly affects the process of writing. Teaching literacy involves mastering the content of spelling and grammar, and these are activities students often find tedious, difficult and frustrating, and they negatively influence their attitudes towards the Croatian language as a school subject, but also in general to the mother tongue, i.e. Croatian language. Closely related to this is the fear of language (Jelaska, 2005), which is often present in elementary school, but also among adults. That is why creativity in classes is necessary, and divergent thinking by students is encouraged as opposed to the lateral teaching practice in Croatian schools. Creativity is not innate, as some researchers have assumed, therefore, we can learn how to be creative and that is the point in approach to creative thinking in teaching, especially in the teaching of Croatian language.

Creativity and Creative Literacy Teaching

Joy Paul Guilford started to research creativity in mid 20th century. He defined creativity as acquisition that includes: spotting, experiencing and producing different and unusual ideas. It is believed that a creative person looks at things in an interesting and unusual way (Huzjak, 2008). School has a predisposition for the development of basic creativity because teachers in school make new course contents and in that way include creativity in the teaching process.

Simel and Gazibara (2013) investigated the frequency of use of different teaching methods of work: individual, work in pairs, group work and frontal work in teaching the Croatian language. The results showed that frontal and individual work are the most frequently used methods in Croatian language teaching. Such work does not encourage creativity among pupils. On the other hand, working in pairs or in groups, enables collaborative learning that encourages students to be creative, teaches teamwork and tolerance, and makes pupils more motivated for work. The authors have also conducted research on pupils' attitudes towards the Croatian language. The results showed that pupils are not motivated for work and that the lessons are not interesting. Research studies (Aladrović Slovaček, 2012; Jelaska, 2005; Pavličević-Franić, 2005, 2011; Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2008) showed that the integration and correlation in teaching of the Croatian language is lacking, and that students' declarative knowledge is better than procedural. It is therefore necessary that teachers intervene and teach students in a more creative manner, possibly developing more positive attitudes toward the school subject.

Creative teaching of literacy implies using different methods and techniques that will teach students to creatively solve problems (Hunt & Quaranta, 2014). Because of that, a project was initiated within Erasmus+ “The development of creative thinking in the teaching of literacy and the development of language skills“ (2014 – 2016, partners: Great Britain - LEAP - Language Education and Partnership, Germany - VHS - Volkshochschule im Landkreis, Italy - IEC - Istituto Educativo Comprensivo, and Croatia - The Faculty of Teacher Education, Zagreb), which aimed to devise methods and techniques of creative thinking in the teaching of literacy and how to educate as many teachers as possible. For this project, principles of creativity in teaching literacy were defined: openness, curiosity, critical thinking, flexibility, originality, innovation, initiative, unconventionality, the ability to associate, motivation and self-confidence. These principles were used in the formation of the self-assessment questionnaire about teachers’ creativity in teaching the Croatian language.

The Role of Teacher in the Process of Creative Teaching

The teacher is the key person of the educational process and (s)he takes on many different roles in the process of pupil education. Besides being the organizer of the educational process, the teacher is very often the leader, parent and source of information. In their role as parents teachers provide continuous support for students in their growth and development. The teacher as a facilitator needs to discipline students and teach them how to behave in different social situations. Also, the teacher organizes the students’ environment and motivates them to learn and, to a large extent, transfers the contents of subjects to students in an appropriate manner. Although in today’s schools more time and attention is given to the transmission of content and its evaluation, the educational role of teachers and schools should not be neglected, as it is very important for the development of each individual. Educational tasks are an integral part of each subject including the Croatian language in particular. It is therefore important to encourage creativity in teaching, i.e. present the subject in an interesting way in order to develop their attitudes, socialization and emotional intelligence. To meet all these tasks, the teacher should be well prepared for classes and be a role model to students, and in addition to having content knowledge, they also need general human virtues. It can be said that in quality education, students largely depend on well-trained teachers. A good teacher is a teacher motivated by the profession. Therefore, high-quality teachers are key factors for the optimal functioning of the educational system. It is not enough to know and use good methods and procedures in the organization and teaching of lessons, but the personality of the teacher is also very important. Good teachers are recognized, students value their characteristics, such as assisting, encouraging interest in the work, good humor, friendly attitude and compassion for their needs. For every teacher motivation, self-esteem and job satisfaction are the key as they help to build a positive environment for the transfer and acquisition of new knowledge (Gazibara & Simel, 2013).

Vrsaljko and Ivon (2009) cite the definition of creative teacher as the person who owns the primary image that guides its actions and opinions; accepts her/himself firmly, accurately and realistically; uses their full potential; is aware of other people, is sensitive to them and responds to people, ideas and events; has a sense of insecurity and uncertainty, tolerates ambiguity; a person who is a student. They also state that creative teachers show satisfaction with the job and try to develop creativity in their students.

Additional education also affects the creativity of teachers while teacher training helps teachers to encourage student creativity. The task of the teacher is to talk to students about their ideas and accept them, or encourage students to find different solutions, and not ignore them. The goal is for students themselves to come up with a solution and not get ready-made solutions. Today, there are procedures in teaching methodology that encourage creativity in the classroom, such as guided meditation, sociodrama, acting, mind maps, clusters... A description of these and other methods can be found on various web pages that are designed to develop creativity in school-age children (example: <http://kreativnost.pedagogija.net/mod/resource/view.php?id=8>).

Future teachers should be familiar with these procedures and use them in their work (Bognar, 2012). Finally, a teacher should be a creative person who encourages and directs communication, who teaches, acts and learns together with his/her students.

Research Aims and Hypotheses

The main aim of this research is to examine the views of teachers on the promotion of creative thinking in the teaching of literacy in elementary grades. According to the set aim, the following objectives are posed:

- P1 – To examine how teachers most frequently prepare for teaching Croatian language.
- P2 – To examine teachers' self-assessment of their own creativity and creativity in teaching literacy.
- P3 – To examine teachers' self-assessment according to the principles of creativity in the classroom.
- P4 – To examine whether there is a difference in teachers' responses with respect to years of service and satisfaction with the school.

In line with the fundamental objectives and research aim and tasks the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1 – It is expected that teachers usually write their own preparation for the Croatian language lesson because that is the best way they can express their creativity.
- H2 – It is expected that most teachers consider themselves creative people who feel competent in creative literacy teaching.
- H3 – It is expected that most teachers consider themselves highly motivated people, and that the fewest of them see themselves as flexible people.
- H 4 – It is expected that younger teachers (teachers with fewer years of service) perceive themselves as more creative, and satisfied with their work.

Methodology

The Research – Description of Sample

Teachers from nine different primary schools (N=40) participated in the study. The sample consisted of 75% of teachers from seven different primary schools in Zagreb, and the other 25% from primary schools near Zagreb (Oroslavje and Krapinske Toplice). For the purpose of this study, the teachers were compared according to age and years of service to see if there was a significant difference in their responses. Teachers with up to 40 years of service make up 27.5% of the sample, 45% of the sample have 41-50 years of experience, and 27.5% have more than 51 years. Fifty-five percent of the teachers have 16-30 years of service, 30% have 15 years of service and 15% more than 31 years of service. Teachers were also classified according to the category of “job satisfaction”. In fact, 88% of teachers surveyed were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with their work.

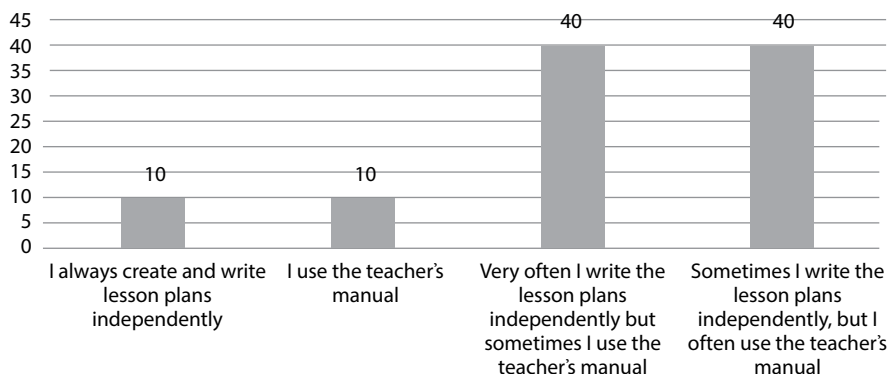
Description of Research Instruments

For the purpose of this paper an online questionnaire about creativity in teaching literacy was used. The questionnaire was created in the framework of the Erasmus+ project “The development of creative thinking in the teaching of literacy and the development of language skills” (The Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb and partners). The questionnaire consisted of 12 open-ended questions. In the first part of the questionnaire teachers were asked to fill in information on demographics – the place where they work, what class they teach, how old they are and how many years of experience they have. Then, the teachers were asked to mark, on a scale from 1 to 5, their satisfaction with work in the school. Age, years of experience and job satisfaction are dependent variables. Following that, the teachers chose responses on the list regarding how they prepare for teaching Croatian language lessons. It is important to see which elements of creativity they use. On a 5 point Likert scale, teachers carried out self-assessment against the criteria of creativity (Pavličević-Franić, Cvikić, & Aladrović Slovaček, 2015) on the basis of which arithmetic means were calculated. Teachers were also asked to define creativity, and on the basis of their responses to answer what a creative approach would be. Then, using a 5-point Likert scale, the teachers evaluated their creativity in teaching, in particular, the process of creative teaching. Data were analyzed using SPSS software for statistics, i.e. the Kolmogorov test, Mann Whitney U test, Kruskal Wallis test and Spearman correlation coefficient.

Results

The first problem was to examine how teachers most often prepare for teaching Croatian language. For this question teachers were given four answers. Forty percent of the teachers *often* write their own lesson plans and only occasionally use ready-made plans. However, the same percent of teachers (40%) often use the teacher’s manual and only *sometimes* write plans by themselves. Ten percent (10%) of teachers exclusively use the teacher’s manual and an equal percent (10%) write *independent plans* for lessons

(Graph 1). Because creative teaching implies the use of different methods and techniques that will teach students to creatively solve problems, the fact that only 10% of teachers write independent lesson plans is very little indeed. Perhaps that is the cause of absent interaction and encouragement of students to independently solve problems and create their own ideas in the majority of lessons, which is the basis of creative ways of teaching.



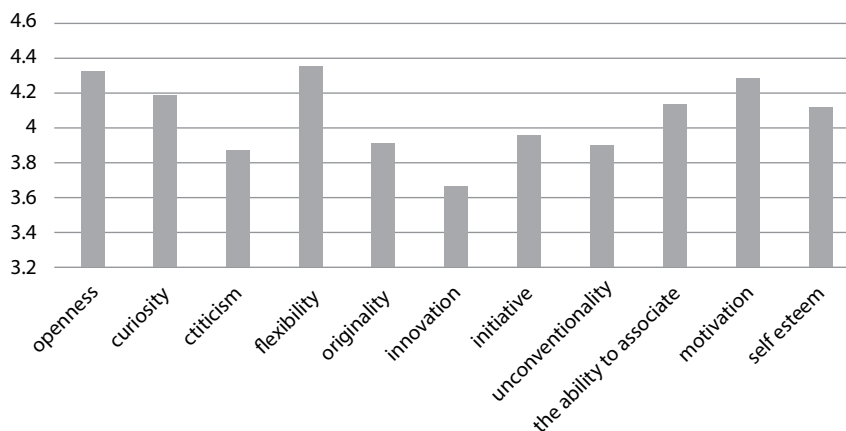
Graph 1. Answers to the questions about lesson plans for Croatian language teaching

The results are in contradiction with the first hypothesis, which assumes that most of the teachers independently write the lesson plans for teaching Croatian language. It is assumed that the teacher's guide helps them to prepare their teaching but at the same time it "prevents" their creativity in the design of teaching lessons and in the selections of teaching methods.

The second aim of the study was to examine the self-assessment of teachers on their own creativity and creativity in teaching literacy. The results show that 75% of teachers consider themselves to be *creative*, 7.5% *very creative* and 17.5% *neither creative nor uncreative*. It is interesting that none of the surveyed teachers consider themselves *uncreative* persons. Creativity is often associated with the teaching profession. It is assumed that the majority of students, who are preparing for the profession, consider themselves creative in a particular area. In the process of creative teaching in literacy, 62.5% of the surveyed teachers feel *competent* to teach literacy in a creative way, 10% feel *fully competent* and 27.5% of teachers feel *neither competent nor incompetent*. So, although some teachers consider themselves to be creative or creative, when it comes to teaching literacy, some teachers do not feel completely competent. As expected, the second hypothesis was confirmed, i.e. the majority of teachers consider themselves to be creative and competent in teaching creative writing. Since creativity has an influence on additional training and continuously encourages teachers, especially during their university study, the creative approach should be applied as often as possible not only in professional development but with pre-service Croatian language teachers as well (Bognar, 2012).

The third goal of the research was to investigate the self-assessment of teachers according to the above-mentioned principles of creativity (Pavličević-Franić, Cvikić, &

Aladrović Slovaček, 2015). According to the teachers' opinion, the first three places are flexibility, openness and motivation, while the last three places are innovation, critical thinking and unconventionality (Graph 2). This self-assessment is connected with the result of understanding creativity. In fact, very often creativity is associated with a distinct ability in a particular area, rather than as a way of solving problems using unconventional and different ideas and solutions.



Graph 2. Self-assessment of teachers in the principles of creativity

The results show that the third hypothesis can be partially accepted, that is, the first part of the hypothesis, which assumes that the majority of teachers put motivation in the first place, was confirmed, but the part of the hypothesis which assumes that the majority of teachers consider flexibility the least important creative element was rejected since most teachers consider innovation as the least creative element.

The fourth objective of the study was to examine whether teachers differ in their answers regarding age, years of service and job satisfaction. The Kruskal Wallis test showed that there is a statistically significant difference in terms of teachers' age for the variable - *How competent do you feel in creative teaching of literacy* ($p < 0.01$) in which teachers between 41-50 years of age feel significantly more competent than other teachers, while teachers over 51 years are significantly less interested in further education in the field of creative teaching literacy, which is somewhat expected. Kruskal Wallis test also showed that there is a statistically significant difference with respect to teachers' years of service for the variables self-assessment criteria of creativity – openness and unconventionality - teachers with 31 or more years of service feel significantly more unconventional and open than others. It is interesting that teachers who are not at all satisfied with the job are significantly more confident than others, and teachers who are very satisfied with their work are significantly better able to process association. Spearman's correlation coefficient showed that people who have more years of service ($r = -0.256$) and people who are more satisfied with working at school ($r = -0.365$) do not necessarily feel more creative. In fact, there is a negative correlation between these two variables at a significance level of 1%.

Also, Spearman's correlation coefficient showed that the teachers who are assessed as creative and those who are satisfied with their job feel more competent in their approach to creative literacy teaching, but people who have more years of service do not feel more competent. It is interesting that people who have more years of service are not necessarily more competent in preparing creative literacy teaching, but they are more creative and more satisfied with their job. The results contradict the fourth hypothesis.

Discussion and Conclusion

The role of the teacher as the motivator in the educational process, despite the development of technology and changes in the education system, is unavoidable in the construction of high-quality teaching and learning. Their role is extremely important in the process of teaching literacy. Literacy begins in early language learning on which foundations depends the overall construction of literacy of a person and the entire nation. Therefore, which methods teachers use in this process and how many are struggling with being creative is not irrelevant. Research confirms that during that period both attitudes toward school and attitudes toward language are already formed, so the more positive they are the more positive the effect on literacy or education will be. This is confirmed by the results of the conducted research that show awareness of teachers about the need for creativity in language teaching and the majority of respondents believe that creative and competent people can prepare for creative teaching of literacy. However, in contrast, most teachers reported that they do not prepare for class but use manuals. Since they are considered creative, it would be expected from most teachers that they are the creators of their lessons or lesson plans, but this is not so. It is believed that the main reason for this is a large number of teachers' manuals published by almost all publishing houses that publish textbooks thus making it easier for teachers to prepare their teaching. Equally, it is important that teachers perceive themselves as confident persons because confident teachers are more creative and more open for further professional development.

The research results suggest that teachers should be educated in more creative methods of teaching literacy, especially in order to raise their awareness about what creativity implies and what methods and techniques of teaching and learning can be applied specifically in teaching literacy. These methods develop divergent thinking, which will encourage students to reach a solution to the problem themselves by including different activities.

Throughout this process, teachers should be more motivated, more flexible, more open and more willing to innovate in order to provide students with the experimental model and example in the process of acquiring new knowledge and skills. The challenge is to change the entire way of teaching that will yield more satisfied students, students willing to cooperate in reaching a solution to the problem in interesting and innovative ways. They will thus know how to adequately evaluate and apply ideas in different situations. A good teacher directs and leads the whole process and therefore, it is extremely important to educate young teachers about creative methods of teaching literacy.

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Uloga učitelja u kreativnom poučavanju pismenosti

Sažetak

Učitelj je središnja osoba odgojno-obrazovnog procesa. U nastavi Hrvatskoga jezika učitelj je i pisani i govorni model svojim učenicima. Upravo je zato jako važno poticati učitelje da u nastavi jezika i jezičnoga izražavanja potiču i razvijaju kreativno mišljenje svojih učenika, osobito potičući traženje različitih rješenja problema na nove i zanimljive načine. Kreativno poučavanje pismenosti uključuje upotrebu različitih metoda i tehnika koje će učenike naučiti da na kreativan način rješavaju postavljene probleme (Hunt i Quaranta, 2014). Istraživanje (Aladrović Slovaček, 2012) pokazuje da su integracija i korelacija u nastavi Hrvatskoga jezika nedovoljno iskorištene te da je deklarativno znanje učenika veće od proceduralnoga. Stoga je cilj ovoga rada ispitati stavove učitelja o poticanju razvoja kreativnoga mišljenja u poučavanju pismenosti u mlađim razredima osnovne škole. U istraživanju je sudjelovalo četrdeset (N=40) učitelja iz desetak osnovnih škola, različite dobi, različitih godina radnoga staža i različitog zadovoljstva radom u školi. Postavljene su hipoteze potvrđene jer učitelji samo ponekad rabe tehnike i metode koje potiču razvoj kreativnoga mišljenja u poučavanju pismenosti, ali sami sebe doživljavaju kreativnima. Pokazalo se također da su mlađi učitelji kreativniji, a zadovoljniji učitelji češće rabe metode i tehnike kreativnoga mišljenja.

Ključne riječi: kreativno mišljenje; nastava Hrvatskoga jezika; pismenost; učitelj; stavovi učitelja.