

THE POWER OF A STORY IN THE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE LITERACY

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Abstract:

In this paper we tried to demonstrate the power of a story in the function of language literacy. We are going to build up our argument from the general premises of the cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner dispersed in many of his books, which postulate that our experience of ourselves and the world is structured in a narrative form – like a story. We think that the best way to acquire language literacy is to start from a story and then to proceed to language. Listening to stories (told or read by a teacher) equips students with the skills and attitudes that afterwards enable easier acquisition of pre-reading and reading skills. Such pre-reading skills are making distinction between written and spoken language, recognition of articulation, intonation and diction in language, and understanding that language is always entangled in meaning. The studies have shown that having access to imaginative and properly structured stories adequate for students' developmental level is very important and beneficial for understanding of how language works. Language and stories are essentially interconnected and one cannot exist without the other and that is why the structure of narratives discloses the structure of language.

Key words: language, literacy, story, structure, teacher

INTRODUCTION

“Why has not his concept of *peripetia* been as widely taught to school kids as the geometer's less magical notion of the hypotenuse of a right triangle”... “Why do we fob Pythagoras off on eight – graders but never breathe a word to them about Aristotle on narrative?” (Brunner, 2002: 5). The question that Bruner asks, concerning one of Aristotle's main elements of the story in his theory of tragedy in *Poetics*, is not rhetorical, but a deeply relevant question that touches the fundamentals of education in the Western post – enlightenment world. In his most famous work, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* he distinguishes between two modes by which we think and experience the world. The first one is the *paradigmatic or logico – scientific*, that is characterized by its reliance on the methods and explanations of mathematics and logic: categorization and conceptualization conjunction and disjunction, consistency and non-contradiction: “It leads to good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument, and empirical discovery guided by reasoned hypothesis” (Bruner, 1986: 13). This mode has dominated Western culture since the late renaissance, and especially since Descartes's paradigmatic revolution and his formalization of the mathematical and geometrical methods. The other one, which is older and easily forgotten, but nonetheless always present and active, is the *narrative mode*, that leads to “good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily “true”) historical accounts. It deals in human or human like intentions and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (1986: 13). Knowing that the human cognition is

conditioned by those two modes of experiencing and knowing the world, we are going to focus more on the nature of the second one, and its main instrument, the story.

The famous English contemporary novelist A. C. Byatt thinks that “narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood” (Byatt, 2001: 166). Stories are old as humanity and by telling them, we make sense of the world, and the people we share it with. By narrating we form that which intrinsically is formless, and also, impregnate time, succession and causality. Even our sense of self and our being in the world as subjects is formed by narratives (Taylor, 2013: 43-83). As we already said, stories are not entertainment, but modes of knowledge, and we know this because of the word’s etymology: “Even etymology”, says Bruner, “warns that ‘to narrate’ derives from both ‘telling’ (*narrare*) and ‘knowing in some particular way’ (*gnarus*) - the two tangled beyond sorting” (Bruner, 2002: 27). That means, (if we go back to our opening statement about Aristotle’s *Poetics*), that storytelling and stories are as important subject for education as the sciences, and that it has to find its formative place in the curricula. Because, as we know from linguistics, semiotics, and literary theory, narratives are not just a spontaneous overflow of talent and expression, or personal idiosyncrasies of the author, but manifestations of deep structures and regularities that can be known, and systematically studied. The studies of myth by Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1977: 213-241), structuralism by Culler (Culler 1976) and narratives in general by Bruner (Bruner, 2000: 139-159), provide evidence that the distinction between science and stories, and between the *paradigmatic* and the *narrative* mode is not as clear cut and distinct as it might seem.

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How can this be relevant for education, and more specifically, how is it relevant for language literacy? In the language of common sense we know that stories and language are deeply intertwined (stories are told with words and sentences), but we have to go more deeply, beyond common sense, in the domain of theory, if we want to talk systematically about stories in education.

We can start by elaborating on the obvious connection between stories and language, as well as their connection on a structural level. The ancient Greek word for story is *mythos* (or *mythoi* in plural), and there are number of scholars that have elaborated on this connection. We can give two examples, from two different philosophical traditions: Ernst Cassirer in his book *Language and Myth* (Cassirer, 1946), and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Structural Anthropology* (Lévi-Strauss, 1977). Both authors argue that language and myth (stories) are substantially intertwined, and that they probably appeared simultaneously. They both have *structure*, and they both generate *meaning*. As Lévi-Strauss showed in his essay *The Structural Study of Myth* (working on the basis of the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure), *myth is language*, in the sense that their structure is elementary the same.

Jerome Bruner in his book *The Process of Education* claims that structure is everything: “Grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how things are related” (Bruner, 1999: 7); and he adds: “The teaching and learning of structure, rather than simply the mastery of facts and techniques, is at the center of the classic problem of transfer (...). If earlier learning is to render later learning easier, it must do so by providing a general picture in terms of which the relations between things encountered earlier and later are made as clear as possible” (1999: 12). As we can see, understanding structure is the most important part of the educational process. Since Bruner is one of the foremost defenders of the *spiral curricula*, we can notice what he wants to point out by insisting on the structure. If narratives and language have some familiar resemblances in their structure, than, consequently, learning the structure of the first, will aid learning the structure of the second. More specifically, if we put it in the

context of our own paper, learning or discovering the structure of the stories, will help the students learn more efficiently the structure of language, and most importantly will help in the process of developing language literacy.

Children have natural predispositions for hearing and making up stories: “Children enter the world of narrative early... We seem, then, to have some predispositions, some core knowledge about narrative from the start” (Bruner, 2002: 33). That means that they can be a perfect starting point for every education, especially suitable for school beginners. Our thesis in this paper is that stories (narratives) are very useful methodical tools for children who are beginners in the field of language. In other words, narratives are a perfect starting point for acquiring primary language literacy.

Children at the beginning of school (6-7 years old) are on a liminal psychological developmental level, which means that they are between the preoperational phase, and the phase of concrete operations, but leaning (with individual variations) to the second, more advanced phase. We are going to briefly sketch the second phase (from the scale of Piaget), because by making a clear connection between the developmental level of a child in the approximate school grade, and the methodical solutions we are trying to propose and develop, the argument is going to show itself as clearly as possible.

The school period, or the level of concrete operations, is characterized by suppressing the mental model of “trial and error”, when the thinking becomes internalized and reversible, which means that the data collected by the senses is organized in the mind and can be stored for latter usage. It means that the mind progressively grows from the simple data collecting- and quickly forgetting phase, to the more abstract level of “real” thinking and reasoning. Nonetheless, the child on this level of mental development (“internalized structure with which to operate”), still has difficulties in grasping things that were not represented to their senses. That means the he/she is still “caged” by the concrete, and cannot let go of the singular and the specific. Also he can’t anticipate all the possible options in the future relations between things (which does not mean that anticipation in general is not possible), because he/she still clings to the concrete, and not the concept (Bruner, 1999: 33).

Integrating narratives in the curriculum on this level of development comes in perfectly because narratives are mediators between the concrete and the abstract, between the empirical and the conceptual, between the past and the future, and between the known and the unknown. As Bruner shows, in narratives there is a constant dialectical relationship between the past and the possible, the canonical and the avant-garde, and the expected and the unexpected (Bruner, 2002: 13). It means that the story is a convenient instrument for developing the mind for abstract and formal thinking, which is, according to philosophers and linguists, one of the main benefits of language (Cassirer, 1951). The same applies to grasping the working of time (succession and simultaneity) and the concept of linearity and causality. If we go back to Aristotle and his *Poetics*, we can find out that he makes his case for the good plot on the basis of causality. On the sentence level, as the French linguist Emile Benveniste shows, letters and words are not merely elementary particles valid by themselves, but become vessels of meaning that are significant only as a part of the whole (Benveniste, 1971: 107). And the story, the narrative, in the theory of Roland Barthes, is just a long sentence (Barthes, 1997: 79).

The term “culture of speaking” denotes a competence (or competences) for oral and written communication that is based on an intellectual capability for expressing thoughts, emotions, desires and other psychological states in a simple, but grammatically correct, logical and beautiful expression. Imbibing the culture of speaking and writing is a progressive process. It can be developed and improved by systematically planned exercise. The school is the institution that is greatly responsible for this process, but it has to be mentioned, that the process does not end with finishing school, but goes on indefinitely. It starts with the uttering of the first word, and it goes on until the end of our lives.

The development of speech is a process deeply intertwined with the development of thinking skills. The development of thought is accelerating the development of speech, and vice versa. Speech is the manifestation of thought, and is forming medium; without it, there is no thought. If the students are going to use the written and oral language, they have to learn how to use it accurately, logically and fluently. The process is far from simple, and it needs planning and systematical introduction by the teacher in a far reaching sets of different speaking and writing exercises.

But how do we implement the story in the curriculum? Now we have to make the final step, and breach the gap between the theory of narratives, and the theory of education, and go straight to didactical and methodical solutions. Corden in his book *Literacy and Learning Through Talk* recommends that the story has to have a key role in the education of children, and we are going to point out some concrete examples that are prominent in the contemporary literature on education.

By including stories into the teaching process, the student can learn to imitate and investigate language, and by doing that, they become more confident and more adept in telling their own stories. By listening, and then narrating themselves, the children easily grasp the concepts of drama, suspense, character and situation that help them in finding their way into the richer world of the written word. Language acquisition is very complex, and children need all the encouragement that they can get. Making things interesting, but also challenging, is one of the ways by which they can learn more easily. Corden believes that telling stories to the young students helps them differentiate between the spoken and the written word, since by telling and retelling stories to each other, the children are starting to understand how language works (Corden, 2000: 147). Also, other authors take it as a fact that by constructing and listening to stories, students, as we have already pointed out, "can make the important distinction between speaking and listening, and to walk the bridge between reading and writing" (Grainger, 1997: 9). Although the spoken and the written word are connected in many ways, their differences are worth pointing out. This is also the difference between listening and reading. Oral storytelling and retelling stories is based on listening, and is distinguished by its primary element, the voice, but also nonverbal communication, gesticulation, mimic, etc. On the other hand, reading is deeply committed and based on the written text, and is more individualistic. Nonetheless, their invariant element is the story, which makes the necessary connection between them. The difference between the two is easily spotted and learned, especially with instructions and guidance by the teacher.

Providing access to the exciting, imaginative and well-structured stories is very important for children that are starting to read. Good stories, especially those with illustrations, encourage them to interact with the text, and are also very important for developing interest and love towards books and literature, instead of fear. Discussion and opinion-sharing about the illustrated books has a great value for understanding literacy, because the teachers that use them and show enthusiasm in telling and reading stories stimulate the students to develop not only talking and listening skill, but also reading and pre-reading competences. Not only illustrations, but also words, encourage the children in making their transition to easier and less stressful reading. The potential of narratives for education is enormous because through them, the children are grasping comprehensible structures, notions and concepts, like causality, that helps them to understand the subject, ask questions, or dive in with wonder, in difficult and complex problems, without being aware about the difficulty before them (Hayes, 2017: 226).

Also, one of the most important benefits of the story in education is the development of imagination. The development of imagination is very important in the process of education, because it does not represent (as it is commonly thought) fleeing from the world of realities, difficulties and problems – that is the domain of fancy or fantasy. Contrary to that, imagination helps in dealing with problems and obstacles in a creative and surprising ways. Whilst listening

to real or fictional stories, their imagination develops, and they grasp the structure of future and possible problems and their solutions (Scruton, 2006: 56-67).

The theory and practice show that not every story is suitable for the curriculum and the educational process. Here is a short list of the qualities that the stories should necessarily have: simple narration; a time frame; connection with real life; suspense; mystery; different perspectives; problem solving; to tell the truth without sugar coating; to have dramatic pauses, articulation and diction; to give solutions to real problems; to enable possibilities for interaction; the end of the story should prove a point; to enrich the vocabulary.

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Snaga priče u funkciji razvoja jezične pismenosti

Sažetak: U ovom radu pokušat ćemo prikazati moć priče u funkciji jezične pismenosti. Izgradit ćemo naš argument iz općih premisa kulturalnoga psihologa Jeromea Brunera zastupljenim u mnogim njegovim knjigama koje pretpostavljaju da je naše iskustvo o nama samima i svijetu strukturirano u narativni oblik – kao priča. Smatramo da je najbolji način za stjecanje jezične pismenosti početi od priče, a zatim prijeći na jezik. Slušanje priča (koje je učitelj ispričao ili pročitao) razvija kod učenika vještine i stavove koji će im kasnije omogućiti lakše stjecanje predčitalačkih i čitalačkih vještina. Takve predčitalačke vještine čine razliku između pisanoga i govornoga jezika, prepoznavanja artikulacije, intonacije i dikcije u jeziku te spoznaje da je značenje bit jezika (da nešto znači). Istraživanja su pokazala da je pristup maštovitim i pravilno strukturiranim pričama koje su primjerene razvojnoj razini učenika vrlo važan i koristan za razumijevanje funkcioniranja jezika. Jezik i priče u svojoj su biti isprepleteni i ne mogu postojati jedno bez drugoga i zato struktura narativa otkriva strukturu jezika.

Ključne riječi: priča, struktura jezika, jezična pismenost, čitalačke vještine

Die Macht der Erzählung als Mittel zur Entwicklung der literalen Kompetenz

Zusammenfassung: Diese Arbeit versucht die Macht der Erzählung als Mittel zur Entwicklung und Förderung der literalen Kompetenz darzustellen. Unsere Argumente bauen auf den allgemeinen Prämissen des Kulturpsychologen Jerome Bruner, die in zahlreichen seiner Schriften vertreten sind und die voraussetzen, dass unsere Selbsterfahrung und die Erfahrung der Welt in narrativer Form – als Erzählung – strukturiert ist. Wir finden, der beste Weg zur Aneignung literaler Kompetenz ist, mit der Erzählung anzufangen und dann zur Sprache überzugehen. Wenn Schüler Erzählungen, die der Lehrer erzählt oder liest, zuhören, entwickeln sie Fertigkeiten und Einstellungen, die ihnen später einen einfacheren frühen Schriftspracherwerb und die Aneignung der Lesefertigkeiten ermöglichen. Diese Vorläuferfertigkeiten des frühen Schriftspracherwerbs machen den Unterschied aus zwischen der geschriebenen und gesprochenen Sprache, des Erkennens der Artikulation, Intonation und Diktion in der Sprache sowie der Erkenntnis, dass Bedeutung der Kern der Sprache ist (dass sie etwas bedeutet). Untersuchungen zeigen, dass der Einsatz phantasievoller und korrekt strukturierter Erzählungen, die dem Entwicklungsstand der Schüler angemessen sind, sehr wichtig und nützlich ist für das Verständnis der Funktionsweise der Sprache. Sprache und Erzählungen sind in ihrem Wesen ineinander verflochten und können ohne des anderen nicht existieren. Deshalb enthüllt und offenbart die Struktur der Narration die Struktur der Sprache.

Schlüsselwörter: Erzählung, Sprachstruktur, literale Kompetenz, Lesefertigkeiten