MODERN FICTION FOR PRIMARY AND PRE-PRIMARY CHILDREN – THE ALBUM AND THE COMIC BOOKS - A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: *The album and the comic strips are the first forms of culture a child learns to manipulate with great pleasure. The new syllabus for the preparatory class includes them as instruments for developing the comprehension of a variety of written messages in familiar communicative contexts. The present paper aims to present a pedagogical approach to these modern fiction pieces and help preschool and primary school teachers use them as educational tools to foster children's development of communicative and cultural competence.*

Keywords: *comic strips, album, pedagogical tools*

Children's literature – the best tool to start building early cultural competence in children

In this part of the article we will look at how children's literature can help children acquire a rich and varied culture – this is the grounds on which the examples of educational activities with albums and comic strips will be based in the second part of our paper.

The primary school curricula in Language and Communication states that, at the end of the cycle, pupils should be able to read by themselves and listen to literary texts and whole children's literary works appropriate for their age. This skill is essential to validate the mastery of the Romanian language of the general curricula. During our observations on primary school lessons, we were able to attend Communication in Romanian classes, based on the exploitation of children's literature texts, where the purpose was only to gain knowledge of Romanian language. The pupils had different tasks, producing written, vocabulary exercises but which all referred to language proficiency. However, the literary texts are not always a tool for the mastery of language. Through children's literature, pupils develop other linking skills and knowledge with other pillar form the primary school curricula. Techniques such as *the literary networking*, *meeting the authors*, or *reading for pleasure* go beyond mere literary work and allow opening other dimensions. We think that the representations that children get from their readings explain their ability to master literary works more easily. Schools, parents, librarians and book sellers, they are all responsible for plunging children into the fascinating world of books, for accompanying the child in the choice of reading, for the development of their cultural competence.

Children's literature, which is omnipresent as early as preschool education, plays a major role in the development of the child: it allows him/her to dream, to question, to share, etc. Thus, children form an early age should start building a first literary culture through gradually exploring literary texts appropriate for their age and level. Teachers pave the children's way to encounter strong literary works, which are considered the *real classics* of the kindergarten. Later, in primary school, the goals are

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similar but lay stress on reading networking which can be made possible by exposing children to a wider variety of literary works. At the end of primary school, children should be able to explore more rapidly different children's literary works. The key is to allow the literary work to register in each child's memory thorough its various elements: the characters, the narrative, the text of a strong passage, etc.

The album

The album is one of the first cultural objects a child learns to manipulate. More than one child develops great joy in *reading* the album. This leads the child to explore different themes and imaginary worlds. It seems that the first albums appeared during the XIXth century, but were perceived to publishers as simple collections of images. Later on, brief texts were added and the literary genre of the album was born. At first conceived as a collection of images, it became a story articulating images and texts altogether. During the first half of the XXth century, the word *album* started to designate a book in which images became an essential part of the narrative, along with the text, offering an open and imaginative reading to children.

There are three main types of articulations between the text and the images of an album. Firstly, there are those albums displaying a redundancy between text and images. The story unfolds from the text and the images illustrate the story. It seems that the text and the images can be explored and understood separately. Then, there are albums showing a complementarity between text and images. One cannot be explored without the other as they are both necessary to understanding the story. The text gives meaning to the pictures. Finally, there are albums with a narrative shift between text and images. The story told in the text is different from that described in the images.

Paradoxically, the words are somehow present in the images, in most of the albums; although invisible, they actively participate in its decryption. The text generates mental images which, in their turn, generate words in children's minds. This means that images and text tell the same story – there are two narrators: the textual narrator and the image narrator, interacting to tell the same story. The double narration is used in the case where images intersect the text. The narrator is external to the story and tells it to the child. We can find these features in the images where the book narrator reveals his/her omnipresence with rather wide plans or even giving further details on the story that on the text. On the other hand, the narrator can be placed inside the story. He/she is part of the story, a character addressing the reader.

The authors of this literary genre often play on how they articulate text and image. Some choose to focus the story on the text, while others will favour the images. Those parts where the narrator fails to provide certain information to the reader, either in the text of in the images, are elements that can be found in all types of albums. Indeed, the authors consider certain parts of their story as unimportant for to the thread of the story, and will choose not to give details and leave it to the reader to interpret the passage in a personal manner. There are also implicit passages in the story when something is only suggested to the reader, but not clearly explained. It is again the reader who needs to interpret those passages in a personal way.

Finally, the texts of some albums play with intertextuality and *inter-iconicity*, in the images. Intertextuality refers to the way a text *speaks* about a previous generally known text, and the same can happen with the images. Album characters talk about classic famous characters in children's literature, such as Snow White or The three little pigs.

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At the first sight, the album appears quite accessible. However, once you take into account the processes of double narration and the correspondence between the text and the image, one can notice how complex these pieces of children's literature can be. More fragile children can often find it difficult to understand the fictional illustrated stories. Indeed, not all children have the *school* culture of the album, the cultural dimension and the family practice. The linguistic dimension (the reading or listening text) can be a barrier to understanding. The ability to recognise or decode the images is not always available to children and they might not always resonate with the world of the story; there may be no anchorage in their practical experiences and their interpretation field. The characters' feelings might not necessarily be within the children's reach and the thread of the story of the permanence of the characters is not self-evident for the youngest ones. That is why some pedagogical work is necessary to enable them to explore the story with fun and empower children to start building their literary culture, regardless of their family backgrounds.

Methodological ways of exploring the album in class

There are various ways of exploiting albums in class, with children. The most common way would be to tackle the albums as part of a ritual, while the teacher s reading and showing the album to the class. It is neither a decoding, nor a decrypting exercise for children but a moment of collective listening to a story, without pedagogical implications. The goal of this activity is to experience together the pleasure of entering a story, while fully taking into account the text and the specific syntax of the book. An album reading session, in the morning, when children come to school, can serve as a bridge between the family world and the school world. In any case, it is important to save a moment during the school day to read an album to the children. Albums could be placed within the easy reach of the children, in a reading corner of the class for them to leaf through, at any time.

Each album has its own specific features which lead to creating and implementing specific didactic activities in order to achieve various objectives and develop particular skills. The teachers can diversify the approaches. If they start by exploring the images of the album, children can then develop their linguistic and semiotic skills while interpreting the images and discussing on them.

The album networking can also be an excellent way to build a literary culture. The objective of this type of activity is to comparing and crossing the books and to establish a problematic. For example, the networking of the works of an author refines children's understanding and interpretation of each of the works. The stories they listen to are stored in the children's minds and turn into reference works. Children are imbibed with the linguistic universe of a certain author and better understand his/her writing intentions. These networking activities can be carried out as a project that culminates with meeting the author. Here are the stages that can be followed during the teaching process: album discovery - the children become familiar with the form and the hypertext of the album, the cover, the name of the author, the name of the illustrator, the collection, etc. – when children make assumptions about the story (pre-listening); information about the author that can be searched on the Internet, together with the children, on the author's web page; reading of the album performed by the teacher and then verification of comprehension through questions regarding the text and the images, finding the morale, where appropriate; group work - children work together on questions that could be addressed to the writer, at a later stage; networking the works of

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the author; building a poster with titles of albums written by the same author; inviting the author in class for discussion.

Another way to approach albums in classroom, with older children, may include the following stages: teacher's reading and first collective reformulating from children to create a plan of the main ideas; switching from oral to written activities – children write after dictation the reformulated text, following the plan of main ideas; children write the plan on the blackboard, taking into account the chronology of the text; children are invited to imagine a written text, an episode of the story, taking into account the logic of the text and using the dialogue. The teacher can also have children practice vocabulary items, based on the text of the album: names of professions, onomatopoeia; or grammatical structures.

The albums in which the written text is missing and where there are only images to unfold the story are also valuable resources for producing oral messages. Children can be invited to add words to the pictures in the album, exploring one page per day, at the beginning of the school programme.

The comic books

The comic books designed for children represent a unique way of expression, a sort of a play between an interesting story and a well done drawing. They are stories, told in successive images of different shapes, which use of cinema techniques, such as framing and ellipsis. A specific code is used in comic books and they represent a literary form of its own, recognised as the 9th art. These modern creations are attractive, interesting and captivating for any child. The concept is quite simple: an image summarises a story or a scene, and, above that, a few text lines briefly describe the action depicted by the image. As the stories of the comic books are told with the help of the images, they are quite expressive and, therefore, easy to read.

The comic strips tell a story in images that can be read from left to right, in a chronological order: there is a time dimension inferred by the drawing, there are movement, portrait and representation. There is also juxtaposition, or, more precisely, a mixture of text and image.

This particular way of reporting events has long existed but it was not until the twentieth century before the comic strips took the current shape ruled by a set of conventional codes.

Methodological ways of exploring the comic books in class

The comic books help children start building their reading autonomy: they read independently and reading becomes fun and appealing. If children are not used to reading novels or others forms of literature, they generally know and practice themselves reading comic books. For those children who still have difficulty with reading, the comic books represent the easiest form of literature they can practice reading independently.

When used as a source of literary exploitation, the comic books allow a networking approach based on characters, genres (science fiction, adventure), authors and their works, format (strips, gags on a board, short stories, albums deployed on several pages).

Just as a theatre play, the comic book is a privileged tool for the study of the dialogue it uses almost exclusively. Through the techniques it uses, those of framing

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and directing of the characters, the comic books are similar to a piece of picture theatre and can become a pedagogical tool to have children practice their diction while dramatising the story described in the comic strips.

The comic books can also represent a starting point in writing projects on at least three levels. One of the didactic activities that can be performed in class would be the extension on an unfinished story. The best example is the suspense in the images and lines in the footer of a page, that is to say - when the hero in the last box on a board is astonished as he/she spots something that the reader has not been able to discover yet, as it is drawn on the next page. The teacher can ask children to write the story form that point on. Another didactic activity could be writing dialogues: children are asked to insert dialogues in the boxes above the images, while taking into account all the visual information provided in the comic strips (attitudes of the characters, scenery, time of the action, etc.)

Finally, and more complex but quite comprehensive, teachers could ask children to write a script. This requires to have studied a script before, where they can find both the text describing the stage direction and also the presence of dialogues, just as they appear in a play.

As the comic book primarily describes a story, it can also be used as a tool for practicing literary interpretation, similarly as analysing a tale.

Conclusions

It is important that all pupils have the opportunity, during their school years, to come across rich literary works and learn to return to those literary texts, later in life. This matter leads us to see how children interact with the literary works, how can we help children start building their cultural competence by using albums and comic strips as valuable pedagogical tools in early education. Since not all children come to school with the same *cultural capital*, exploring children's literature at an early age is quite essential. The educational environment should reduce these inequalities between children. It plays therefore a key role in building this literary culture, but it is not the only player in this process. School partners, such as libraries or book fairs can play a similar role in building that culture. The albums and the comic strips have special features. They can be regarded as useful pedagogical tools to open the children's minds to the world and help them build their literary culture. Many didactic activities based on albums and comic books can be offered to preschool and primary school children.

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