

LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF A STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING INTERVENTION

Alexandra Prentza
University of Ioannina
GREECE
aprentza@uoi.gr

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a case study which examines whether a student-centered teaching intervention would improve language skills in a class of 23 Greek-speaking 8-year-old primary school children. The targeted language skills involve acquaintance with literary text conventions like personification and metaphorical language, as well as the use of these conventions in a guided writing activity, along with the use of grammatically accurate and stylistically appropriate language. The student-centered intervention is based on a specific model of differentiated teaching (see Fykaris, 2014; Tomlinson, 2005) and employs literary texts that the students are familiar with, since the school implements a project which aims at cultivating positive book reading habits and attitudes. According to the National Curricula, acquainting students with Literature and cultivating a culture of reading is identified both as one of the main goals of language teaching and as one of the means of improving language skills. Qualitative data was obtained by means of class observation which targeted the implementation and the outcomes of the intervention according to the goals set, while data from activities was analyzed by both the teacher and the researcher against the following criteria: a) student understanding of the literary conventions investigated and b) student ability to use grammatically accurate and stylistically appropriate language in the guided production task. As regards the overall evaluation of the process, emphasis is placed on student involvement and participation. The results showed that students produced texts which purposefully used personification and metaphorical language, while they used language accurately and appropriately according to their age. What is more, student involvement was enhanced advancing positive attitudes towards book-reading and language instruction in general.

Keywords: Primary school, language skills, student-centered approach, literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the directions of the Greek Ministry of Education and the National Curricula (National Curricula & Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education 2003, New National Curricula, 2011), the cultivation of positive attitudes and habits towards book reading is identified as one of the goals of language instruction. At the same time, literary texts are a basic means of teaching language and other subjects of the curriculum, since they can be used to acquaint students with different types of texts (novels, poems, fairy tales, fables), and, consequently, registers, genres, dialects, writers, historical eras, cultures, among others. A main goal of teaching through literary texts is the cultivation of critical reading (Collins, 1993. Jaffar, 2004), a skill that has received much attention in educational research (see for example, Erkek & Batur, 2020; Yasemin, 2020). Wallace (2003) in her influential work defines critical reading as the ability to perceive what the text reveal about social life.

In Greek primary school, along with the language textbooks, students are given two books which comprise a selection of literary texts; one book for grades 3 and 4, and one book for grades 5 and 6. For the first grades of the primary school no such material is available, yet teachers are recommended (National Curricula guidelines, teachers' books guidelines) to use literary texts to support and enrich language instruction. Some schools in Greece have implemented projects that aim at cultivating positive habits and attitudes towards book reading and have organized literature groups for younger children, sometimes under the supervision and with the scientific support and guidance of University Departments of Primary Education. This is the case of the school where the present research took place.

This paper investigates whether a student-centered teaching intervention would improve language skills in a class of 8-year-old Greek-speaking primary school children. The targeted language skills involve acquaintance and use of literary text conventions, as well as use of grammatically accurate and stylistically appropriate language for the successful completion of a guided writing activity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Literature, reading and writing in primary school

Reading and writing are the two main objectives in the first grades of primary school worldwide. Research has shown that they complement each other (Rojas-Drummond et al. 2017); reading involves the cultivation of phonemic (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1989) and graphophonemic awareness (Linnea & Soffer, 1999), while writing involves reading skills, transcription skills (i.e., spelling and handwriting, see Salas & Silvente, 2019) and language processing and planning at the level of word and sentence (Salas & Tolchinsky, 2017). Additionally, the writer must be able to make grammatically accurate and pragmatically appropriate language choices, according to the communication context within which the text will be placed (purpose of writing, type of text, genre, intended audience).

The use of literary texts in teaching reading and writing has been investigated in educational research over the years with results showing positive effects in the development of language skills in primary school children (see for example Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Lancia, 1997; Love, Anyamene, & Anyachebelu, 2021. Papadopoulou-Mandakaki, 2003). Specifically, Lancia (1997) reports that children in written production tend to borrow a variety of elements from the literary texts they read: elements of the plot, characters, plot devices and elements of genre and register. As regards, elements of genre and register, which is of interest in this study, the researcher reports that children borrow stylistic devices across the different types of texts they read. The use of literature has been reported to have positive effects on critical reading as well (Belet & Dala, 2010; Duran, & Yalçintaş, 2015; Hoffman, 1992).

2.1 Student-centered approach

Learner-centered approaches to teaching (see Brown, 2003; Gathercole, 1990; Weimer, 2002) signaled a shift from traditional teacher-centered instruction and one-size-fits-all instruction to an instruction where student needs were placed at the center of the educational process (Androulakis, Mastorodimou & van Boeschoten, 2016; Benson, 2007; Brown, 2009; Smith, 2008). Within this framework differentiated teaching has emerged as a methodology that realizes this transition (Fykari, 2014; Gibbs & McKay, 2021. Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012. Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2014). Tomlinson (2014) identified four core practices associated with differentiated and student-centered teaching: student readiness, student interest and student learning profile. These basic practices should inform the content, the process and the outcome of the instruction and are closely related to the emotional

effect of teaching to the student (Gibbs & McKay, 2021). The positive effects of a differentiated student-centered approach on the overall development of the student are highlighted in recent research, especially within a highly diverse linguistically and culturally educational context (Carreira & Chik, 2018; de Jager, 2017; Haelermans, Ghysels & Prince, 2015. Kokkinos, & Gakis, 2020).

The current study employed a model of student-centered differentiated teaching (Fykaris, 2014, based on Tomlinson, 2005) which is grounded on aspects of learner profile and key objectives of the National Curriculum. Table 1 presents the rationale of the model:

Table 1. The approach (Fykaris, 2014, based on Tomlinson, 2005)

Curriculum	Learner Characteristics		
	<i>Readiness</i>	<i>Talents and interests</i>	<i>Dynamics</i>
Level 1: Introducing the instruction context	Prior knowledge the investigation	Emergence of learner interests relevant to the object of instruction	Accessibility of content to the learner
Level 2: Deepening process	Relation of prior to new knowledge	Interest activation & adjustment	Student interaction & cooperation
Level 3: Instruction assessment	Evaluation of produced material & feedback	Outcome evaluation (knowledge - produced material) & feedback	Evaluation of quality & effectiveness of communication

The aforementioned model was used by a recent study on Greek-speaking primary school children of different ages (age range: 8-12) with an emphasis on the cultivation of creative writing skills (Zachou, 2021). According to the results, the student-centered approach enhanced the creative writing skills and the overall language skills of the students, since, as the researcher points out, it boosted self-confidence and learner autonomy and involvement.

3. METHODOLOGY

For this case study, we examined 23 Greek-speaking primary school students aged 8 years old who attended Grade 2 of a state primary school in Ioannina, Epirus, Greece. The two-hour teaching intervention took place in May 2021. The literary text used is an extract from the Greek version of the “Giving Tree” by S. Silverstein. This story was used because the students had read parts of it in the months prior the intervention. The intervention targeted the last part of the story where the Boy returns aged to see the Apple Tree. A detailed lesson plan based on the model of the differentiated approach presented in Table 1 was developed by the teacher of the class and the researcher. The materials also involved two worksheets, one to be used in guided writing and another in grammar activity, as well as an observation sheet given to the teacher. The guided writing worksheet presented the purpose of the text, i.e., the students had to decide to write a letter either as the Boy or the Apple Tree that would complement the end of the book. The students were also given keywords and phrases that they could use. The words involved adjectives (e.g., *happy, sad, sorry, tired, aged*), nouns (e.g., *branches, trunk, apples, money*) and verbs (e.g., *give, leave, take, love, forgive*). The grammar worksheet involved an exercise where children had to categorize the words of an adjusted extract of the story into nouns, verbs and adjectives, based on morphological and syntactic cues. The observation sheet involved an evaluation categorical scale (yes, no, in doubt) which targeted the implementation and the outcomes of the intervention according to the goals set. The researcher explained the rationale, outline, procedure and goals of the intervention to the teacher of the class in two

sessions that took place before the teaching intervention. The researcher did not teach or observe the students herself due to pandemic restrictions.

4. INTERVENTION AND RESULTS

4.1 The Intervention

The stages of the teaching intervention were the following: At Level I (*Introducing the instruction context*), the teacher asked questions on what the use of personification brings to the story, as well as on its use in Aesop's fables that the students are familiar with (duration: 5 minutes). In the first phase of Level II (*Deepening process*), the teacher aimed at directing the student attention to the language phenomena under investigation. To this end, students were asked to underline three tokens of personification in the text (e.g., *the apple tree whispers, the apple tree is happy, the apple tree straightens its trunk*) and to discuss in groups why the writer decided to make these stylistic choices (duration: 10 minutes).

In the second phase of Level II, the teacher gave the students a worksheet with an adjusted extract from the text and asked them to categorize the words of the extract into nouns, verbs and adjectives. This exercise was important, since students had to process the text at word and phrase level, i.e., both morphologically and syntactically, in order to complete it. This could help students raise their metalinguistic awareness, but also support the guided production task in two ways: first, students had to re-read the extract carefully enhancing the deepening process that this level targets, and second, the words given in the grammar activity were also used as cues in the guided production worksheet (duration: 15 minutes). The next phase of Level II aims at activating the students' ideas. Students are given a worksheet with prompts and key words (*adjectives: happy, sad, sorry, nouns: branches, trunk, apples and verbs: apologize, love, forgive*), and they are asked to write letters on the basis of the following instructions: students are asked to choose whether they will be the Boy or the Apple Tree and decide what they would want to write to the other character as an end or conclusion to the story. Ideally, this activity would be done in groups of more than two students, however, due to pandemic restrictions, the students worked in pairs of two, with students sharing the same desk forming a pair¹. During the writing process, the teacher supported and encouraged the students helping them when asked (duration: 40 minutes). In phase 3 of Level II, the students presented their texts in class. The teacher asked question on the content of the letters (i.e., why students chose to be the Boy or the Apple Tree, why they decided to be forgiving or regretful, or not) as well as on the choice of particular words, on the use of personification and metaphorical language and their effects on the text and on the audience. All students are encouraged to participate in this constructive evaluation of the dynamics of the produced texts. Pair work is meant to empower weaker students and allow them to participate more actively (see for example, Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014. Cohen, & Lotan, 2014).

At Level III (*Assessment of instruction*), the objectives set, the course and methodology adopted and student performance in the guided writing and language activities were evaluated via formative assessment. As regards the overall evaluation of the process, emphasis is placed on student involvement, while with respect to the language skills the criteria set were: a) student ability to understand the literary conventions investigated and b) student ability to use grammatically accurate and stylistically appropriate language in the guided production task.

¹ In one case, three students cooperated for the writing of the letter, since the number of the students in the class is odd.

4.2 The results

The results showed that students produced texts which purposefully employed personification and metaphorical language, while they used language accurately and appropriately according to their age. What is more, student involvement was boosted advancing positive attitudes towards book-reading and language instruction in general. Specifically, starting with the language activity where children had to categorize words, students basically relying on morphological cues and on the function of the words within the short text were very accurate in the categorization of words as nouns, verbs or adjectives. Some instances of inaccurate responses concerned abstract nouns (e.g., the word “time”) and modal verbs (e.g., “can”). Turning to the written production of the students, from the 11 short letters, 8 were addressed to the Apple Tree, since students decided to assume the role of the Boy, while only 3 were addressed to the Boy. In most of the letters, the students chose to have the Boy apologize to the Apple Tree for his selfish behavior. The students used the past tense, as well as phrases like *“I am sorry that I made you sad, I apologize for cutting off your branches, you must have hurt terribly, you loved me but I was selfish, I hope you will accept my apologies”*. In one of the letters that were addressed to the Boy, surprisingly the Apple Tree appeared apologetic *“for not being able to offer the Boy what he wanted”*. The students successfully used the literary device of personification and were accurate in the choice of grammatical elements like tenses. The students also used the letters to talk about the destruction of the environment by the people, showing an understanding of the symbolic use of the characters and an ability to extend the topics of other readings, from literary texts and textbooks, to this writing activity. The mean length of the letters 9.5 lines and the mean number of verbs used per text (an index of the mean number of sentences) were 9. The spelling errors were infrequent and mostly on verb suffixes in the passive voice.

As regards observation data from the teacher report, this shows that the intervention was generally successful meeting the objectives set. The students were able to understand the uses of personification in literary texts and to apply this knowledge in the guided writing activity. The texts were pragmatically successful and involved only a few grammatical mistakes, which are common for students of this young age. The teacher reports that the prior acquaintance of the students with the text, as well as with other stories and tales read and discussed within the book-reading project implemented by the school helped students not only in these activities, but in the overall development of their linguistic skills. One of the problems reported by the teacher is the time during which the teaching intervention was realized. Since schools in Greece close for summer holidays in June (the end of June this year due to the pandemic adjustments) and the intervention took place in May, the teacher reported that the students would have been even more successful if they had not been that tired from a very demanding and prolonged school year.

5. DISCUSSION

The data presented in this paper are in line with the results of previous studies which report a positive impact of student-based differentiated teaching interventions both on the linguistic and on the social and emotional development of the students (Carreira & Chik, 2018; de Jager, 2017; Fykaris, 2014; Haelermans, Ghysels & Prince, 2015; Kokkinos, & Gakis, 2020; Tomlinson, 2003; 2005; 2014; Zachou, 2021). Additionally, the use of literature in the teaching of language-related skills has benefited the students, raising their awareness on stylistic and linguistic issues and helping them produce written texts more effectively. These results agree with previous research which shows positive effects of the use of literary texts in the development of language skills in primary school children (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Lancia,

1997; Love, Anyamene, & Anyachebelu, 2021. Papadopoulou-Mandadaki, 2003). Moreover, as Lancia (1997) reported in his study too, the students borrowed stylistic elements from the story, as well as from previous texts that they had read within the book-reading project implemented by the school and used them in the written production task of the discussed intervention. The successful incorporation of these elements possibly shows that the exposure and processing of literary texts has boosted critical reading as previous research has shown (Belet & Dala, 2010; Duran, & Yalçintaş, 2015; Hoffman, 1992). Critical reading is a prerequisite for the successful incorporation of elements of literary texts to stories produced by the students.

As regards the limitations of the study, the pandemic restrictions prevented the work of students in groups (see for example Pelaez & Novak, 2020) which would have maximized the positive effects of the intervention on student cooperation (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014. Cohen, & Lotan, 2014).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Within a highly diverse linguistic and cultural context, the results of the present study lend further support to the methodological direction of student-centered and differentiated teaching, against the one-size-fits-all approach of the previous years. Additionally, the results highlight the potential of using literary texts in language teaching even with very young students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the teacher of the class, the students, the headmistress and the head of the boarding school for their invaluable help.

REFERENCES

- Androulakis, G., Mastorodimou, E., & van Boeschoten, R. (2016). Using qualitative methods for the analysis of adult immigrants' L2 needs: Findings from a research project in Greece focusing on school-parents *Communication. Irish Journal for Culture, Arts, Literature and Language, 1(1)*, 1-19.
- Belet, S. D., & Dala, S. (2010). The use of storytelling to develop the primary school students' critical reading skill: the primary education pre-service teachers' opinions. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 9*, 1830-1834.
- Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language teaching, 40(1)*, 21-40.
- Brown, K. L. (2003). From teacher-centered to learner-centered curriculum: Improving learning in diverse classrooms. *Education, 124(1)*, 49-55.
- Brown, J. D. (2009). "Foreign and Second Language Needs Analysis". In M. H. Long & C. Doughty (eds.), *The handbook of language teaching* (pp. 269-293). Blackwell Publishing.
- Byrne, B. & Fielding-Barnsley, R. (1989). Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge in the child's acquisition of the alphabetic principle. *Journal of Educational psychology, 81(3)*, 313-321.
- Carreira, M., & Chik, C. H. (2018). Differentiated teaching: A primer for heritage and mixed classes. In *The Routledge handbook of Spanish as a heritage language* (pp. 359-374). Routledge.

- Cohen, E. G., & Lotan, R. A. (2014). *Designing groupwork: strategies for the heterogeneous classroom third edition*. Teachers College Press.
- Collins, N. D. (1993). *Teaching critical reading through literature*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication.
- Copland, F., Garton, S., & Burns, A. (2014). Challenges in teaching English to young learners: Global perspectives and local realities. *Tesol quarterly*, 48(4), 738-762.
- De Jager, T. (2017). Perspectives of teachers on differentiated teaching in multi-cultural South African secondary schools. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 53, 115-121.
- Duran, E., & Yalçintas, E. (2015). Review of the critical reading education in the primary schools. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 174, 1560-1566.
- Erkek, G., & Batur, Z. (2020). A Comparative Study on Critical Thinking in Education: From Critical Reading Attainments to Critical Listening Attainments. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 8(1), 142-151.
- Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). *Guiding Readers and Writers, Grades 3-6: Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy*. Heinemann, 88 Post Road West, PO Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881.
- Fykaris, I. (2014). Teaching applications of differentiated teaching in early school years. In Katsarou, E. & Liakopoulou, M. (eds.), *Issues of teaching and education in multicultural schools. Unit 2, Teacher Training Material. EU Program "Educating Foreign and Returnee students*. Thessaloniki. Accessed 5th May 2021. Available at: http://www.diapolis.auth.gr/epimorfotiko_uliko/images/pdf/keimena/yliko/enotita_a/fykaris.pdf [Διδακτικές εφαρμογές διαφοροποιημένης διδασκαλίας στην πρώτη σχολική ηλικία. Στο Κατσαρού, Ε & Λιακοπούλου, Μ. (επιμ.) *Θέματα διδασκαλίας και αγωγής στο πολυπολιτισμικό σχολείο. Ενότητα β'. Επιμορφωτικό υλικό. Πρόγραμμα ΕΣΠΑ «Εκπαίδευση Αλλοδαπών και Παλιννοστούντων Μαθητών»*, Θεσσαλονίκη. Ανακτήθηκε 5 Μαΐου 2021 από: http://www.diapolis.auth.gr/epimorfotiko_uliko/images/pdf/keimena/yliko/enotita_a/fykaris.pdf]
- Gathercole, I. (1990). *Autonomy in Language Learning*. Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, Regent's College, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4NS, England (7.95 British pounds).
- Gibbs, K., & McKay, L. (2021). Differentiated teaching practices of Australian mainstream classroom teachers: A systematic review and thematic analysis. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 109, 101799.
- Greek Ministry of Education (2003) *Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education (DEPPS)* (Ministerial Decisions 21072β/Γ2/28-2-2003 and 21072α/Γ2/28-2-2003).
- Greek Ministry of Education (2003). *National Curricula*. Ministerial Decisions 21072β/Γ2/28-2-2003 and 21072α/Γ2/28-2-2003).
- Greek Ministry of Education (2011). *New national Curricula*. Accessed 5th May 2021. Available at <http://digitalschool.minedu.gov.gr/info/newps.php>
- Haelermans, C., Ghysels, J., & Prince, F. (2015). Increasing performance by differentiated teaching? Experimental evidence of the student benefits of digital differentiation. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 46(6), 1161-1174.
- Hoffman, J. V. (1992). Critical reading/thinking across the curriculum: Using I-charts to support learning. *Language arts*, 69(2), 121-127.
- Jaffar, S. (2004). Teaching critical thinking through literature. *Journal of Research (Faculty of Languages and Islamic Studies)*, 5, 15-26.
- Kokkinos, T., & Gakis, P. (2020). Student teachers' differentiated teaching practices for high-achieving students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1-16.

- Kokkinos, T., P. Gakis, A. Iordanidou & C. Tsalidis (2020). Utilizing Grammar Checking Software within the Framework of Differentiated Language Teaching. In *The Proceedings of 2020 9th International Conference on Educational and Information Technology (ICEIT 2020)* (pp. 234–240). St Anne's College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom.
- Lancia, P. J. (1997). Literary borrowing: The effects of literature on children's writing. *The Reading Teacher*, 50(6), 470-475.
- Linnea C. E. & Soffer, A. (1999) Graphophonemic Awareness: Development in Elementary Students, *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 3,1-30.
- Love, O. C., Anyamene, A. N., & Anyachebelu, F. E. (2021). Effect of literature circle and peer tutoring on the reading comprehension achievement of primary school pupils in Awka South local government area of Anambra State. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 12(1), 33-38.
- Pelaez, M., & Novak, G. (2020). Returning to school: Separation problems and anxiety in the age of pandemics. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 13(3), 521-526.
- Papadopoulou-Mandadaki, S. (2003). *The socioemotional teaching of language through children's realistic novels*. Athens: Metechmio [Η κοινωνιοσυναισθηματική διδασκαλία της γλώσσας μέσα από το παιδικό ρεαλιστικό μυθιστόρημα Αθήνα: Μεταίχμιο].
- Rojas-Drummond, S. et al. (2017). Dialogic literacy: Talking, reading and writing among primary school children. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 12, 45-62.
- Salas, N., & Silvente, S. (2019). The role of executive functions and transcription skills in writing: a cross-sectional study across 7 years of schooling. *Reading and Writing*, 1-29.
- Salas, N., & Tolchinsky, L. (2017). Hunting for the links between word-level writing skills and text quality. *Developmental perspectives in written language and literacy: In honor of Ludo Verhoeven*, 103.
- Santangelo, T., & Tomlinson, C. A. (2012). Teacher educators' perceptions and use of differentiated instruction practices: An exploratory investigation. *Action in Teacher Education*, 34(4), 309-327.
- Smale-Jacobse, A. E., Meijer, A., Helms-Lorenz, M., & Maulana, R. (2019). Differentiated instruction in secondary education: A systematic review of research evidence. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 2366.
- Smith, R. (2008). Learner autonomy. *ELT journal*, 62(4), 395-397.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2003). Differentiating Instruction in Response to Student Readiness, Interest, and Learning Profile in Academically Diverse Classrooms: A Review of Literature. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 27 (2/3), 119-45
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2005). Travelling the Road to Differentiation in Staff Development. *Journal of Staff Development* 26 (4), 8–12.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2009). Intersections between differentiation and literacy instruction: Shared principles worth sharing. *New England Reading Association Journal*, 45(1), 28-33.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom. Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. 2nd ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
- Wallace, C. (2003). *Critical reading in language education*. Springer.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Yasemin, B. A. K. I. (2020). The effect of critical reading skills on the evaluation skills of the creative reading process. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 20(88), 199-224.
- Zachou, K. (2021). *Applying Differential Teaching as a means of achieving Creating Writing in Primary School*. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of West Macedonia.

APPENDIX

Sample of student written production

