Serious Ludic Language and Literature Activities

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Abstract

The act of reading and writing for actual teenage students seems to be mostly related to an enforced rather to an enjoyable activity. How can we abridge the gap between reading and high-school students? How can we deescalate their repulsion towards literature and non literature text? How can we soften the phenomenon of "writer's block" towards the empty sheet of paper? The introduction of serious, well organized and purposeful playful activities in the language and literature lesson, concerning reading and writing, seems to be part of the answer to the above questions. Therefore, in this paper, are presented applied and evaluated as effective ludic activities of reading and writing in language and literature lesson. Such ludic activities concerning reading, are, indicatively: the empty box (students deposit images, ideas, feelings triggered by reading), the reading pantomime (students represent in small scale applied dramatization acts ideas, facts, conditions that are read), the reading scaffolding (students are guided with note-diaries and reading helping papers in referent and aesthetic reading). Ludic activities concerning overcoming "writer's block" and acquiring writing skills are, indicatively, text transformative exercises (altering, adding or canceling writing techniques or expression modes or textual elements).

Keywords: *ludic activities, reading and writing skills, high-school students*

1. Introduction

How can we correlate playing to Language and Literature Teaching and Learning? How can we introduce in Teaching and Learning the natural flow of playing –since "...play presents itself to us in the first instance: as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives." (Huizinga, 1955: 9)–, by "naturalizing" playing in the teaching procedure? Why should we welcome it in Language and Literature teaching and let our students experience entering what Huizinga called "the magic circle", a temporary world within the ordinary world (Huizinga, 1955: 10)? And through this procedure, through the concept of fun of playing, "that resists all analysis, all logical interpretations" (Huizinga, 1955: 3), can we transform the way teenage students react towards Language and Literature Teaching? Can we make them enjoy Language and Literature Learning? Can we reconcile the spontaneous, autonomous ("All play has its rules", "Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count", Huizinga, 1955: 11-12), non imposed physiognomy of playing ("It is never a task", Huizinga, 1955: 8) with the structured, concrete and severe physiognomy of schooling?

Playing can be related to Language and Literature, since through Language, Art and according to Huizinga, through Playing "society expresses its interpretation of life and the world" (Huizinga, 1955: 46). The fun of playing is inherent to literature and especially to poetry: playing is placed out of logical thinking, is apart from practicalities, like poetry. The ludic side of literature and its seriousness is well captured in OULIPO's (Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle/ Workshop of Potential Literature) ludic literature propositions, in which are based some of the activities that are described afterwards. Rules, playing, liberation and creativity characterize OULIPO literature games.

The serious assumption of introducing playing into Language and Literature can be traced in two ludic teaching tools: Creative Reading and Creative Writing. The correlation between Creative Reading and Writing is articulated in Ralph Waldo Emerson' s sentence "There is then creative reading as well as creative writing" (Richardson, 2009: 7). Creative reading presupposes the transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1994· 1995) and is described as a creative adventure, a "poem", an event (Rosenblatt, 1994: 12, 20-21). The rosenblattian term of "aesthetic reading" opposed to "efferent reading", describes everything that happens to the reader (emotionally, mnemonically, intellectually) when he is reading guided by the textual grid. Creative Writing can be described in multiple ways; we distinguish three of them (Berry, 1994: 56): the selection of creative reactions that presupposes the activation of imagination and critical thinking, of reading adequacy and fluctuating freedom (Harper,

2013; Gross, 2010); the pedagogical method of reaching the literary text so as to read it, a way of literary reading; a new literature theory based on the writer's view (Kotopoulos & Nanou, 2015).

In order to exploit the ludic side of Creative Reading and Writing in a high-school classroom it is necessary to ensure a "safe" learning environment, such as a creative and dialogic classroom or a creative workshop.

1.1 Creative and Dialogic Classroom

The ludic approach of texts, literary and non-literary, presupposes a creative classroom, proof to students' fear (Alexander, 2008). On behalf of the teacher, it is expected that he utilizes during teaching the non scheduled micro-moments, where the creative contributions of students and the non expected answers are intense and await to be exploited (Beghetto, 2013; 2016) and that he has to ability to improvise in a disciplined way (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2011; Sawyer, 2004); to exploit the creative ruptures that are provoked in the planned lesson as it is transformed into lesson-as-lived.

It also presupposes a dialogic classroom (Alexander, 2008; Nystrand, 1997; Juzwick et al., 2013), where the dialogic teacher (Juzwick et al., 2013) does not impose –sometimes via his questions– answers to his students, knows the art of questioning (Burke, 2010) and grants them enough time to respond.

1.2 Transactional Creative Writing Workshop

The Transactional Workshop (Bishop, 1990) is an organism alive, where the students are treated like writers and are put in motion (Bishop, 1990: 14) so as to compose texts in a creative and safe frame. In the Transactional Workshop, the teacher believes in every student's writing ability (Bishop, 1990: 41) and acts as an evaluator but mostly as a collaborator. The Transactional Workshop aims at liberating the participants to travel through language. In such a supportive environment, creativity is a natural outcome (Bishop, 1990: 43). The model of the bishopian Transactional Workshop seems to adjust well and to be productive in high-school classrooms.

2. Ludic Creative Reading Activities

The following ludic Creative Reading activities have been applied in Language or/and Literature teaching in high-school classrooms either in their typical form (classroom consisting of 20-27 students, who are taught and evaluated according to the curriculum and the educational laws/rules) either organized in a Transactional Creative Writing Workshop (in this case, the Workshop consists of a few students –up to 15– that attend the Workshop after having freely chosen to participate in this activity, which is not necessarily "controlled" by the established curriculum).

2.1 Empty Box

In this activity, students are asked to empty their mind from words or images after reading a text (Anderson & Rubano, 1991). Students are rarely asked of what they "saw" while reading. Through this activity of revealing the images that were born through the reading activity, students are encouraged to visualize the text, to realize that in this visualization procedure subjectivity is legalized, as well as to reduce their imagination poverty.

2.2 Passing Notes

The activity of passing notes (Probst, 2000: 10) originates from school life and refers to students' "underlife" (Beach, 1993: 110) that consists of communicative acts during school day, such as real passing notes. In this ludic activity, the content of passing notes is referring to the text that is read: students exchange with their classmates (in groups of 2) opinions and thoughts released after having read a text, literary or non literary. A silent text-centered dialogue is settled and the opportunity is given to every student to deposit his point of view.

2.3 Pantomime

The introduction of theatrical techniques into Language and Literature Teaching can be fruitful, since texts are embodied and students are activated to interpretate or to remodel texts into "texts" of another

kind (Heathcote, 1984), encouraging creative understanding and experiential learning. During this reading pantomime, students are performing parts of the texts, chosen by them or by the teacher, through movements, expressions, grimaces etc. The pantomime is a kind of silent expressive interpretation of the text and a challenge to highlight non visible or less visible textual folds.

2.4 Reading Scaffolding

Playful reading scaffolding, such as playful worksheets, note-diaries and reading helping papers (e.g. shakespearian "death-clocks", character cards, mystery activities etc.), which require imagination and playful disposition as far as the teacher is concerned or can involve students in designing them, can maximize the students' reading appetite.

3. Ludic Creative Writing Activities

3.1 Reversal Games

Reversal games consist of reversing/annulling characteristics of the text. These activities are considered to trigger creativity in the word level (Bishop, 1990). It permits to the student to distance himself from the text. Canceling a text trait, such us the use of a metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) or of dialogue, makes it easier to decipher its function (Gunsberg, 2016).

3.2 Overflowing the Text

Overflowing a text permits to the students to realize the text economy. Reconstructing the text by adding episodes or by giving voice to its targeted silences, pendings or gaps helps students comprehend the function of the textual absence. Anderson and Rubano (1991) suggest the activity of an alternative end to a text/a story, especially when its natural end is an "open" one. By altering the text balance, students can understand the text economy and the non randomness of the creator' s choices.

3.3 Snowballs and Ladders

Writing playfully with constraints is a liberating for the creativity activity, proposed by OULIPO (https://www.facnh.com/post/oulipo-word-games-and-creative-writing). In "snowball" students must respect a specific constraint so as to generates a text, mainly poetic: the first line must have one letter, the second line two letters, the third line three letters and so on. This playful constraint activity, which obliges the students to combine meaning and rules, is a good language exercise.
Ladder is an Oulipian activity to generate texts/poems by linking words. It starts with two words (preferably with opposite meanings), each having the same number of letters: the first is placed in the beginning of the text, the other in the end. Gradually, by changing letters and by creating new words, the first word becomes the second one: a difficult, provocative struggle with words and meanings.

4. Conclusion

Approaching text, literary and non literary, via playful Creative Reading and Writing activities can ascribe a charming tinge in Language and Literature Learning and Teaching and optimize the way students "communicate" with texts. The proposed playful activities, and plenty of others, can contribute to the cultivation of reading and writing literacy as well as of literature and critical literacy (Athanasopoulou & Douzina, 2022). At the same time, students seem to enjoy the reading and writing procedure and to overcome, more or less, counterproductive reading and writing procedures, such as embarrassment during reading large texts and writer's block. These playful activities presuppose experienced teachers, willing to support creative and playful teaching methods, believing in creative and dialogic teaching. In a typical classroom or in a creative workshop the targeted interference of playful reading and writing activities can, based on experience, transform spectacularly the way students communicate with texts. This is a serious case and can be done only in a serious, though ludic, way.

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