

VALUING CREATIVE WRITING TECHNIQUES IN SPACE REPRESENTATION AND GEOGRAPHICAL PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present some creative writing activities in which three techniques have been used: the comics, the writing marathon, and the lost manuscript. The activities were organised in a rural school, and the participants were some secondary school students. In this study we analysed the organised learning activities and their results. The tasks given, the way of organising the activities, giving positive feedback during the activities, led the students to value the activities as interesting, motivating, challenging, and to continue the writing process outside the school. As a result of applying these three creative writing techniques, the students wrote interesting narrative texts, while their degree of complexity increased by rewriting the texts, this way proving their efficiency. We came to the conclusion that one of these creative writing techniques, well explained by the teacher and correctly applied by the students, stimulated the creative process and gave them the opportunity to be as creative as possible and to create interesting stories in a geographical area described with sufficient details regarding space and time.

Keywords: *geographic space, description, spatial representation, drawing, geographical process, rural environment*

INTRODUCTION

During our teaching process, we found out that students have difficulties in describing what they observe in real life. By studying *Geography* in the secondary school, both training and development of the general competence to students follow "The Presentation of Geographical Reality Using the Specific Languages and Means" (MEN, 2017a) and of other more

specific competences related to them such as “the using of geography in different contexts”; “the description of some elements, phenomena or geographical processes which are noticed directly or indirectly”; “the making of a geographical text, using the given terms”; “the structured presentation of geographical information” (MEN, 2017a).

For the *Romanian language and literature* subject, in the middle school, both training and development of several general competences follow: “the involvement in verbal interaction concerning different situations of communication, through the reception and the production of the oral text”; “the reception of different types of written text”; “writing different types of texts”; “the correct use of the language in both written and oral communication processes”; “the expression of linguistic and cultural identity in the national and international context” (MEN, 2017a).

In order to form and develop these competences, we involved children in many activities of creative writing during which they wrote some texts and comics, as a result of applying some methods and technics of creative writing. The main objective of this research is the investigation within the making process of these texts and comics and the analysis of students’ products.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In geography didactics, we are largely concerned with the elaboration of scientific texts (Mândruț & Dan, 2014). The importance of creating scientific and literary texts is emphasized by other didactic professionals. Places which children observe directly or in photographs (Dulamă, 1996, 2000) are described within these texts. In order to achieve these kinds of tasks we have to observe and study the places very well (Dulamă, 2010a, 2010b). To observe and describe these places in writing is a good exercise for the development of mother tongue, not only for literature specific competences, but also for the geographical ones (Dulamă, 2013), to develop the sense of observation, to understand the place, its components and the relation between them (Dulamă, 2011, 2012).

In geographical literature, the importance of the geographic space observation was emphasized (Mehedinți, 1930), and this observation was appreciated as a very important method in both geographical research (Ilovan, 2006; Ilovan & Mihalca, 2014) and as a didactic method through which the learning of geography was facilitated (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2015, 2017). The knowledge of both built and natural patrimony (Ilovan, 2007; Cocean, Boțan & Ilovan, 2011) is assured by systematic observation and the training premises of geographical representations are being created (Dulamă, Ilovan & Vanea, 2009). Geography teachers appreciate the educational value of direct observation activities in different environments (Dulamă et al., 2016; Dulamă, Ilovan & Magdaș, 2017; Ilovan et al., 2018)

and students frequently use it in online visual material (Dulamă, Magdaş & Osaci-Costache, 2015).

In Romanian literature, there are several theses concerning the creative writing (Alexandru, Anghelescu & Balotescu, 2006; Sălcudean & Stănescu, 2014). In geography didactics, several methods and techniques of creative writing (Dulamă, 2008) are presented, many of them being also used for the development of the critical thinking (Temple, Steele & Meredith, 1998a, 1998b). Amabile (1997) made an accurate presentation of some methods that can be used successfully to stimulate children's creativity. Other studies are based on the connection between the study of reality, its representation in drawings by children and the development of their creativity (Dulamă, Alexandru & Vanea, 2010).

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Phases of research. This qualitative research was undertaken during 2018-2019 school year at Tureac secondary school, in Bistrița-Năsăud county. During the first stage of research, in order to test students' creative potential, we asked them to solve several writing tasks such as: to tell a life story, to continue a story, to predict the action in a story. During the second stage of research, we involved students in many activities of creative writing, from which three of them are analysed in this study. In one activity, children had to represent some places by drawings, and in other activities, they had to write something on one county they had already known about. During the third stage, we asked students to solve similar tasks to those in the first stage, in order to emphasize the obtained progress as a result of their involvement in activities of creative writing.

Participants. 19 students took part in this research – ten girls and nine boys between 10 and 15 year-old from the secondary school of Tureac, Bistrița-Năsăud county: four students from the fifth grade, five students from the sixth grade, five students from the seventh grade and five students from the eighth grade. In this study, we analysed both students' drawings and their written texts. The students had been exposed to a medium and heterogenous level of knowledge and creative potential. They perceived the author of this study as a teacher not as a researcher.

The research material consisted of comics and texts created by students during the initial testing, the activities of creative writing or the final testing.

Research methods. We collected the research data on learning activities through the method of participant observation and the method of individual and group postmodern interview conducted during the carried-out activities. The data obtained regarding the process of creation have been subjected to phenomenological analysis. The texts were subjected to content analysis and thematic analysis, and the drawings were analysed by visual methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of creative writing. During the activity entitled "The Tureac Village Seen through My Eyes", students had to achieve several objectives: to write a short and correct text using the illustrations, making an authentic comics, to mandatory use at least ten words from the required vocabulary established by the teacher, and to be as creative as they can in both writing and sketches or comics. In order to help develop their creative potential, we used the "Comic Strip" technique (Amabile, 1997) alongside other didactic methods and procedures (the conversation, the explanation, the exercise) (Dulamă, 1996). We requested students this task so that we could observe how creative they could be in the process of making stories through drawings and illustrations.

The students made groups of three. The first group was made of students from the sixth grade and the second group of students from seventh grade. Each student prepared colored pencils and a white paper on which they wrote their name and the number of the group. The groups were requested to make some comics, with a character of their choice, who visits Tureac village. During the writing process of the text, we requested the use of twelve words which represented the environment components in which they lived and components from the local horizon (church, shop, mountain, landscape, river, bridge, house, road, village, animals, city). We suggested them not to concentrate so much on the drawing process and its complexity, but on the plot, they are going to create. The fact that the comics have to be accessible for the large public because they are going to be posted on the school wall was stated in the given task.

The students worked in groups focusing on the text and the creation of the comics. They started to share their ideas and to gather them in order to achieve a final interesting version of both text and comics. In the end, the representative of each group presented, in front of the others, their work. The representative of each group explained the main idea of the creation process, what every member of the group felt during the process, which were the difficulties encountered during this process and how they combined their ideas in order to achieve a complex and interesting final product.

We encouraged the students to express themselves freely and to explain each step of the creation process. We asked them how much they liked that activity and if the idea of the comics during the process of writing a text helped them to be more creative than if they would have written a simple text on a piece of paper. Students were excited about this activity, expressing their willingness to repeat it, but with more groups and more students. We gave students a positive feedback for their drawings, which were more complex than we expected and for that reason we were so excited.

Both discussions and debates concerning the students' final product helped us to achieve the research objective. We concluded that this

VALUING CREATIVE WRITING TECHNIQUES IN SPACE REPRESENTATION ...

technique, well explained by the teacher and correctly applied by students, stimulated the creation process and gave students the opportunity to explore the art of writing. Through this technique, students were challenged to be more creative and to make stories as interesting as they could. By drawing a comics, students were motivated to imagine the story better.



Fig. 1. The comics of the first group (6th grade)



Fig. 2. The comics of the second group (7th grade)

The second activity of creative writing was entitled “The Visit of a French Tourist in Bistrița”. During this activity, we aimed to achieve the following objectives: to write a short and correct text from the point of view of a French tourist who is visiting Bistrița city, to express what the tourist wants to visit and to do during his visit in town, to rewrite the text in a final version in order to be published and read by many people. To develop the creative potential, we used the lost manuscript technique (Temple, Steele & Meredith, 1998a, 1998b). The activity was performed by two girls from the eighth grade. They had to write individually, in ten minutes, a short text about a French tourist’s visit in Bistrița city. Then, we took the manuscripts and asked them to imagine that they lost it. The second task was to rewrite the texts in a final version in order to be published in the school magazine. We suggested them to write the second text without thinking of what they had already written in the first text and trying to make the final product as interesting and complex as possible.

The second version of their texts was publicly delivered while being discussed over the changes between the first and the second version. The students compared the texts, they tried to explain the differences between them and concluded that the second version was better than the first one (Tables 1 and 2). We gave them feedback on their creation.

Table 1. Versions of the manuscript created by Student 1

Manuscript no. 1, Student 1	Manuscript no. 2 (final version), Student 1
<p>On a summer day, a French tourist came to our town. He wanted to know the places and the specific things of our city. I have accompanied him to show him all the places he wanted to see. He was very excited to see those places, and he loved them so much. He took photos of all interesting things he had seen, and he said that he went home happy because his welcome here was amazing. He didn't see so much richness and so many interesting places and he would come here whenever he could.</p>	<p>On a sunny summer day, I was just walking in the park. At some point, a family friend came closer to me, greeted me, while introducing Robert, his friend from France who came to Romania on holiday. I knew some French from school and I politely said "hello" and I was excited to know him. Robert came on vacation and he wanted to visit the city. Paul asked me if I would go with them. I accepted and we went with Robert to show him the most interesting places in Bistrița. He was so excited, and he said he would buy us some icecream at the end of the day.</p> <p>We accompanied him all around the city, in the park, to the museum, to the cinema, and that evening he invited us to eat that promised icecream.</p> <p>It was a wonderful day; we talked a lot in French, and I found out that I knew French so well. I was also teaching him some Romanian words and he said that Romanian was a difficult language. Our tourist will come more often in Bistrița and he wanted us to accompany him in other wonderful places and towns as well.</p>

Table 2. Versions of the manuscript created by Student 2

Manuscript no. 1, Student 2	Manuscript no. 2 (final version), Student 2
<p>One day, a French tourist around 20 years old arrived in Bistrița. He had some friends, but he went out walking in the park. I was sitting in the park with my friend. He came to us and asked us what the time was. I noticed that he was not a Romanian guy and I tried to answer</p>	<p>One evening, I was just walking into the park, I felt so peaceful. Suddenly, a careless guy bumped into me. I almost fell and he helped me and asked for my forgiveness with his hoarse and raspy voice. He had a very kind look. He talked to me in French and I was so scared because I was embarrassed by my French</p>

<p>him in French. Then, he told us his name and he asked me some things about Bistrița. He invited us to go out with him the next day because he was so excited that I managed to talk to him in French. We accepted the invitation and the next day we presented him the most interesting and beautiful places in town. He was so happy that we became friends and because he saw so many things and places in Bistrița.</p>	<p>skills. I never thought I would speak to him in French. Then, ashamed, I tried... I was sure that he wouldn't understand me. He smiled and then I knew he had understood me, and we introduced ourselves. He was a French tourist who came to Romania within an exchange programme. He was a medicine student. He asked me some things about me and then he asked me if I wanted to show him some interesting places in Bistrița. I accepted. The other day, we met in the park and we walked around the city. He was so impressed by the old buildings, the museum, the park, and the shops. He said that he wanted to keep our friendship alive. He would like to come again to Bistrița, and we shared our phone numbers. We said goodbye and we went home. It was a mutual special experience.</p>
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During another activity of creative writing, we proposed eighth grade students to write about "The Visit of the French Tourist in Bistrița County". On this subject, we launched the Writing marathon, another technique of creative writing (Temple, Steele & Meredith, 1998a, 1998b) in which the subject is approached from different perspectives or in different moments. We asked students to write for almost 5-7 minutes about the visit in Bistrița, from both the son's and the wife's perspectives and to say what they thought they wanted to do in Bistrița. The marathon can continue with other writing sessions in which the plot is realised from other characters' perspectives (the friend, the sister, the parents of the tourist, etc.). We suggested they asked the following questions: "Which are the first impressions of his wife? What would the wife like to visit in the city? What does she really visit in the city? What does the tourist in the city like or doesn't like? etc." After the writing session, students read the written texts from all the given perspectives.

We discussed together with the students about the creation process and we asked them to explain what they felt while they were writing the texts, and which was the core idea of their texts. The two students were so excited with the manuscript idea, but also with that of the marathon and they found it interesting to be a character and to have the possibility to write all their thoughts and feelings. At the end of the activity, they wanted to continue the marathon at home and to rewrite the story from several other perspectives. In the next table, we present the students' works from the wife's and son's perspectives (Table 3).

Table 3. Created text from two perspectives

Text from the wife's perspective	Text from the son's perspective
<p>It's our vacation week. We decided to spend our holiday in Romania this year at my sister's. We took the first plane and went to Bistrița with my husband and my son, Andrei, who is 7 years old. The first thing we did when we arrived there was to go to a restaurant with Romanian menu... I was missing it so much.</p> <p>The next day, I wanted to go to the hairstylist and my sister accompanied me. She arrived here because she was married with a Romanian guy from Bistrița. The next days, we visited Colibița Lake, the mall, some wonderful restaurants and the pool near the lake where we spent some quality time and we relaxed together. I would like to come every year in Bistrița because I think it is a wonderful and peaceful city.</p>	<p>I was a tourist in Romania. I went there with my family in vacation. I visited Bistrița because my parents have friends there. Our trip was about one week. I would like to visit some interesting places such as: a big library, a park full of grass and playgrounds, the army, the central museum, and the cathedral. I visited all these places and I went to the cinema to watch a film I had been waiting to watch for a long time. My parents satisfied all my whims and we felt amazing during this holiday.</p>

The analysis of the comics. The sixth-grade students realised a comics of nine drawings in which there were two characters, a boy and a girl. In the first three drawings, the characters were in an unknown cloudy space and a house with sharp towers. In other drawings, the sun is present, and in the last three drawings, the characters are situated on a microsphere of relief which could be considered a berm, this signifying the change of the place, or a movement in space. The place changing is also given by the background colour, which is different from a drawing to another. Even if in the task is mentioned the village name, as the place where the action is going to take place, in the drawings the correspondence with the specific places of the village is not visible. In the characters dialogue, the students used only five of the terms established by the teacher.

The comics of the seventh-grade student is made by 12 drawings. The change of the places in which the two characters are placed – a boy and a girl – is shown by some represented/drawn elements: the church and two trees in the first two drawings, two trees in the third drawing, mountains with sharp mountaintops and brown shades in the other drawings, butterflies in the first drawings and birds in the others. The flat background, the Sun and the clouds present in all drawings represent an element of spatial and temporal continuity. We note that the second comics is more complex than the previous one, it has several elements of the environment represented, and it uses more geographical terms than those given by the teacher.

The analysis of written texts applying the lost manuscript technique. Even if we asked students to write the texts from the French tourist perspective, we noticed that the texts were written from the author's perspective, from the perspective of the Romanian citizen who was in contact with a French man in Bistrița county. This misunderstanding of the task was determined by the fact that the task was given orally, and students did not perceive it correctly or probably they chose the easier way in solving it – to write from their own perspective. We observe that both subjects wrote wider narrative texts, more complex in the second stage, which indicates the efficiency of this creative writing technique.

The analysis of written texts applying the writing marathon technique. In this activity, each subject wrote a text about the visit of one member of the French family in Bistrița. In order to develop the competences of creative writing, it is necessary that the same person writes about the same place.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the creative writing activities, we consider that the students received the adequate information to fulfill the given tasks, received constructive feedback during them and a positive feedback at the end. Students appreciated these activities in which they were asked to write everything they felt or thought, as being interesting, motivating, and challenging. In the end, they expressed their desire to continue those activities at home and to rewrite the "stories" from several perspectives.

As a result of performing the three creative writing techniques – comics, the writing marathon, the lost manuscript – the students made interesting narrative texts, and their degree of complexity increased by rewriting the texts proving their efficiency. We conclude that one of these creative writing techniques, well explained by the teacher and correctly applied by the students, stimulates the creative process and gives them the opportunity to be as creative as possible, and to create interesting stories in a geographical area described with sufficient details regarding space and time.

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