THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONTENT AND FORMAT OF TEXTBOOKS ON LEARNERS' CREATIVE LITERARY WRITING

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Abstract

The study aimed at finding the effect(s) of two types of learning materials on children's literary creativity: A Persian primary textbook and the supplementary material given to the students during their New-Year holiday as their homework. The former is a classic textbook with some texts (both literary and non-literary) followed by exercises as well as some illustrations, while the latter, in appearance, looks like a story book, including lots of poems, stories and illustrations as well as some non-literary material. The sections comprised the corpus of the study should aimed at teaching writing (with regards to grammar, diction, etc.) The participants of the study were 30 primary school students. They were given two types of questions, chosen from both texts, designed for testing learners' writing ability. It was to find out which would promote students' creative writing more-- the conversational questions or non-conversational ones. In particular, it sought to see if the type of questions would affect their creativity in writing. The students' writing was evaluated considering the following criteria: point of view, adjective, figurative speech, narrating, and personification. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers gave some suggestions for making textbooks more interesting and user friendly.

Keywords: Literary creativity, writing, primary school textbook, supplementary material

1. Introduction

A successful teaching/learning situation comprises numerous interrelated components, namely the teacher, teaching method, and textbook. Daoud and Celce-Murcia (1979) divide the components into human and nonhuman elements. By human elements, they refer to the teacher's and learner's role in the act of teaching and learning. By nonhuman elements, they mean the textbook, the syllabus, the time available, etc. Now, the question is which element can be more effective and important. While emphasizing the importance of both, the researchers of this study tend to work on the role of the type of exercises used in a textbook in a teaching/learning context.

Concerning the crucial role that textbooks can have in educational settings, it seems pertinent to focus on the need for textbook improvement through discussing issues related to the content of textbooks and the way to make them more interesting. Especially now that, with the advent of the computer, the world seems to be on a faster- than- expected shift from written texts to more visual ones, the learners' demand and expectation from a textbook is greatly changed. This issue is advocated by Mohammad and Kumar (2007: 2) who assert that "[I]n this post-modern world of technological advancement, rapidly changing markets and increasing competition, teachers are faced with new academic and pedagogical challenges." This issue is supported by a number of scholars (Els *et al.* 1977; and Finger, 1987, to name just a few). In this regard, Els et al., while emphasizing the psychological as well as didactic

features of the textbook to enhance learning and teaching, agree that the material of the textbook should be attractively presented and appropriately illustrated. One way to make textbooks more attractive is designing books containing colorful illustrations.

The textbooks under study are mostly designed for improving the reading skills. However, there are some scholars (Clay, 1992, Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores 1991, and Goodman, Kenneth S. 1969) postulate that children should be exposed to meaningful contexts to better acquire reading skills. The program following whole language approach does not limit learners to certain structures or materials. Learners, instead, are subject to authentic materials and will learn the required skill through meaningful interactions. They, in fact, take a more creative approach to reading. Krashen (2002), for example, calls these approaches the *Skill-Building* and the *Comprehension Hypothesis*. The latter hypothesis emphasizes "providing students with interesting, comprehensible texts". It, *involves instilling a love of literature, problem-solving and critical thinking, collaboration, authenticity, personalized learning, and much more* (Goodman, Bird, and Goodman, 1991, as cited in Krashen2002). This is what every education setting, along with the textbook, is expected to accomplish: helping learners to be more independent and creative.

Independency and creativity are, in fact, interdependent. Creativity, as defined by Ochse (1990) is one's ability to yield new and suitable ideas. Wilson (1997, as cited in Wikipedia) holds that there are two types of thinking, *divergent* and *convergent* thinking leading to creative thinking. The former has to do with the student's ability to elaborate issues and the latter is related to the learner's ability to employ *logical and evaluative thinking*. Wilson (2004) enumerates the features of creativity as follows: fluency, flexibility, elaboration, originality, complexity, risk-taking, imagination, and curiosity. Some of these features have already been introduced by Torrance (1979) who presented a framework for critical thinking. They are as follows: fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality.

1.1.The present study

The study aimed at finding the effect(s) of two types of learning materials on children's writing creativity: A Persian primary textbook and the supplementary material. The former is a classic textbook with some texts (both literary and non-literary) followed by exercises as well as some illustrations, while the latter , in appearance, which looks like a story book, including lots of poems, stories and illustrations as well as some non-literary material, seems more appealing to the students.

This study examines the types of exercises and questions included in these books. It intends to find out which type of questions would promote learning in general and creative writing in particular.

The reason for investigating the types of questions found in the textbook is that textbooks make up the basis of education in schools. Despite the importance of textbooks and their function(s) in the success of an educational program, scant attention is paid to investigating the role the content of a textbook may play in promoting learning (Carpenter et al., 2006). This led the researchers to make inquiries into questions used in the textbooks and their effectiveness in promoting writing creativity. The paper offers some suggestions to improve the textbook as an indispensible tool used in classrooms (Freeman & Porter, 1989, cited in Oakes & Saunders, 2004).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 *Participants*

Participants of this study included 30 students of the second grades of the primary school. The participants were selected on the basis of a purposeful selection; for the purpose of this study, we needed top students who could easily express their ideas and who were well in writing sentences. Then, we chose a private high quality school. There was only one grade two class in that school and hence all students of the class comprised the participants of the study.

2.2 Instrument

Two types of question were used to see which would promote creative writing more. A brief explanation of each is as follows: One type of question is more conversational (Type A); the second type contains classic questions and asked learners to answer the questions (Type B). Both types of questions may or may not accompany illustrations. Four questions are devised for each type of questions, comprising eight questions. The reason behind using a few questions was that the participants were primary school students and could not answer more questions effectively. Despite the small number of questions, the researchers devised the questions with great care so that they could encourage learners to include as more description and explanation in their writing as possible.

To measure creativity, the following features were considered to be signs of creative thinking and writing: point of view, adjective, figurative speech, narrating, and personification.

The present study, though, has not used the same terms found in the published literature, such as fluency, flexibility, and the like, those considered instead are quite related; in fact, some of these terms are either merged or divided into some subcategories. The term 'fluency' and 'flexibility' are merged; the former, as stated by Torrance (1979), refers "to the production of a great number of ideas or alternate solutions to a problem" and the latter, 'flexibility' "to the production of ideas that show a variety of possibilities or realms of thought". They entail describing pictures and expressing their feelings in different ways. Concerning the response we received from the students, we used the terms 'adjectives and personification', to be more exact. Furthermore, instead of the term 'elaboration' concerning "the process of enhancing ideas by providing more detail" (Torrance, 1979) we used 'point of view and narrating.' The other feature of creativity, according to Torrance (1979), is 'originality' referring to "the production of ideas that are unique or unusual". In this study, this idea is presented as 'figure of speech'. It is supposed that using figure of speech requires originality on the part of the speaker/writer. It is postulated that the more these features were used in their writing, the more creative their writing would be and the better their learning in general.

Table 1. *Translation of the questions used in the study*

Type A	Type B
1. If I were a book,…	1. What kind of book makes you happy?
2. Write your feelings about these pictures	2. What do you know about flowers?
3. Have you ever made snowman? Do you see any similarities between snow and cotton?	3. Complete the following sentences.
4. Look at the following pictures. Write what you see.	4. Name each of these items and write one sentence foe each.

Table 2. *Translation of students' response to questions-- some examples*

	Type A	Type B
Question 1 **Point of view**	I had a lot of knowledge. Whoever opens me up, (s)he would learn a lot. Then I would have a special house, called, a bookcase.	We will learn a lot of them, when we take care of them and we will do what is written there.
Question 2 **Adjective**	This boy and girl and very neat. I think, the mother of theses nice children is satisfied with them. So she should give them a gift. They are always smiley and always brush their teeth.	The flowers are beautiful and have good scent. We get some medication from some flowers. They are very useful. Flowers have different parts: ovary, petal, sepal, receptacle and anther. They are both beautiful and make everywhere beautiful.
Question 3 **Figurative speech**	Yes, I made. The snow is made by the God but human cultivates the cotton and makes it grow. The snow falls in winter but cotton is found all the year. The sun melts the snow but it cannot melt the cotton.	Foot for the human is like the wheel for the car. Clothes for human /animal covering. Food for human animal food. Hand for human is like foot. The plane flies in the sky. The wings of the bird, the wing of the plane.
Question 4 **Narrative**	Two girls and one boy are playing with small things. One with the dog, the other with the ball and the other the car. All three are playing enthusiastically.	Flowers are in different colors. The car is beautiful. Butterflies live in many places. We need water.
Question 5 **Personification**	In future, I like to become a girl because boys cannot have long hair.	Flower is a kind of plant which bears fruit and seeds.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study investigated the relationship between task types (promoted through two question types) on the creativity of learners. Table 1 presents the frequency of the features observed in the students' reply. Apparently there is a big difference between the reply to the two types questions.

Table 3.*The frequency of the features observed in students' writings*

Question Types	Personification	Adjective	Figurative speech	Point of view	Narrating	Total value	Total sentences
A	63	148	71	10	13	305	398
B	4	72	11	10	11	108	468

According to Table 3, in the corpus , out of 866 sentences, the most frequent feature used in the students' reply belongs to the adjectives (148 instances in Type A verses 72 in Type B), followed by personification (63 instances in Type A verses 4 in Type B). Figurative speech stands the third in terms of frequency (61instances in Type A verses just one instance in Type B. Concerning other features, no significant differences were observed.

Table 4. *A cross-tabulation of adjectives, personification and figure of speech used by learners*

	Observed N	**Expected N**	**Residual**
Adjective A*	148	110.0	38.0
Adjective B	72	110.0	-38.0
Total	220		
Personification A**	63	33.5	29.5
Personification B	4	33.5	-29.5
Total	67		
Figure of speech A***	61	31.0	30.0
Figure of speech B	1	31.0	30.0
Total	62		

  * p<0.01   ** p<0.01   *** p<0.01

As shown in Table 2, there were significant differences in the number of adjective, personification and figure of speech but no significant difference observed in other features, narrating (p<0.683), and point of view (each p<1.000). That is, except for the last two features which show insignificant or no difference in the number of instances used, with regard to the significant differences noticed, one can vividly see the effect of question types in promoting creative writing.

4. Concluding Remarks

This paper has focused on two types of questions derived from two types of reading materials (a textbook and a supplementary book) and investigated how students' reactions to these two input vary. More specifically, it looked at differences in utilizing innovations in describing the pictures and/or answering questions. As a result, it some considerable differences were observed in terms of employing those features considered as signs of creativity.

As the findings of the study show, students responded the questions differently in terms of the features they employed. That is, in comparison with the answers given to questions type B, the students, while answering question type A, used more innovations and more descriptions. What is important to note is that although the students made greater number of sentences in answering questions A in terms of the number of personification, adjectives, and the like, they were more productive. This indicates that questions Type B were more successful in encouraging learners to use their imagination and be more innovative in their replies to questions A. The other point worth mentioning is that students, in answering the questions, were very similar in employing the story telling style; they used narrations (13:10 instances) and took a particular narrator point of view (10 instances in each) in describing pictures or explaining the point in questions. This implies that although the students are equipped with utilizing narrations, in their response to one type of questions (Type A); they displayed their talent of giving life to their imagination more significantly. This further confirms that the type of questions in particular and type of texts the learners are exposed to can stimulate innovation and possibly facilitate learning in general.

The study of the effect of question types used in textbooks can shed some light into how they can lead learners to be more creative. This can have important implications for those involved in writing and preparing textbooks for primary school students.

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