Helping young children to become literate: the relevance of narrative competence for developmental education

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After a critique of the standard literacy practice in primary school, the article develops a Vygotskian view on literacy that defines literate activity as a generalised ability of using sign systems for personal and interpersonal use within specific cultural practices. Narrative competence is seen as one specific form of this literate activity. With the help of Vygotsky's theory of thinking, narrative competence can be further analysed as a process of constructing topic predicate structures. Data from two case studies illustrate the dynamics of this narrative competence and its development. Finally, it is demonstrated how the characteristics of this narrative competence may be seen as a result of developmental education, as is developed in The Netherlands on the basis of Vygotsky's approach.

Après une analyse critique des pratiques standards en matière de 'literacy' à l'école primaire, nous développons dans cet article une perspective vygotskienne qui définit l'activité à l'égard de l'écrit comme une capacité généralisée à utiliser des systèmes de signes pour un usage personnel et interpersonnel au sein de pratiques culturelles spécifiques. La compétence narrative est considérée comme l'une des formes spécifiques de cette activité. Grâce à la théorie de la pensée de Vygotsky, cette compétence peut être alors conçue comme un processus de construction de structures sujet-prédicat. Les données issues de deux études de cas illustrent la dynamique de cette compétence narrative et son développement. Nous démontrons en quoi ses caractéristiques peuvent être vues comme le résultat d'une éducation développementale, fondée sur une approche vygotskienne, telle qu'elle existe aux Pays-Bas.

Im Anschluss an eine Kritik der Standardpraxis zum Schriftspracherwerb in der Grundschule wird eine Vygotskische Sichtweise auf Literacy entwickelt, in der auf Lesen und Schreiben bezogene Aktivitäten definiert werden als eine genereralisierte Fähigkeit zur Nutzung von Zeichensystemen für den personalen und interpersonalen Gebrauch innerhalb spezifischer kultureller Praxis. Mithilfe

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Vygotskis Theorie des Denkens kann narrative Kompetenz weiter analysiert werden als ein Prozess des Konstruierens inhaltspredikativer Strukturen. Daten aus zwei Fallstudien illustrieren die Dynamiken dieser narrativen Kompetenz und ihrer Entwicklung. Abschließend wird gezeigt, wie die Merkmale dieser narrativen Kompetenz als Ergebnis einer entwicklungsbezogenen Bildung gesehen werden können, wie sie in den Niederlanden auf der Grundlage von Vygotskis Ansatz entwickelt wird.

Después de una crítica a la práctica estándar de la lecto-escritura en la escuela primaria, el artículo desarrolla una visión Vygotskiana sobre ésta que la define como la actividad de saber leer y escribir como capacidad generalizada en el uso personal e interpersonal de sistemas de signos dentro de prácticas culturales específicas. La capacidad narrativa se considera como una forma específica de esta actividad de saber leer y escribir. Con la ayuda de la teoría de la capacidad del pensamiento narrativo de Vygotsky se puede analizar más a fondo el proceso de construir las estructuras de lo que leemos y escribimos. Los datos a partir de dos estudios de caso ilustran la dinámica de esta capacidad narrativa y de su desarrollo. Finalmente, se demuestra cómo las características de esta capacidad narrativa se pueden considerar como resultado de la educación, como ocurre en los Países Bajos según las bases de la aproximación Vygotskyana.

Language learning in school critically reviewed

There is a wide consensus that language is essential for the development of thinking, and for cognitive development. In the 1920s and 30s Vygotsky (see 1982) and Luria (see 1976) made important contributions to the theory of cognitive development by arguing that the development of thinking is a cultural and historical process that is based on the appropriation of language. Since the seminal works of Vygotsky and Luria, many researchers have elaborated this point of view (see for example Scribner & Cole, 1981; Wertsch, 1985, 1990; Bruner, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Tomasello, 1999). Nelson summarised this point of view on the role of language in early cognitive development adequately when she wrote: 'Language is the mediator, the medium, and the tool of change in the major cognitive transitions of early development' (Nelson, 1996, p. 350).

Despite the consensus and the enormous amount of research done on this issue, there still remains a bit of confusion on how to conceive of 'language', particularly when we want to implement these insights in practical situations (like early years classrooms). The conventional linguistic conception of language as 'language competence' misses an important point. Instead of just being competent at producing grammatically appropriate sentences or at being technically able to read sentences and texts, language users are able to comprehend and produce (oral and written) language in *socially appropriate ways*. Hence, the important point about language use is the ability to employ it in functional and acceptable ways in socio-cultural practices. The acquisition of a range of discourses, speech registers, and genres is thus central to child language development in society (see for example Gee, 1999).

The conception of language use as a practice is usually expressed by referring to language as literacy practice. This is an important step because it aims at conceiving of language use as a cultural practice, with specific rules and tools. Unfortunately it has brought only little conceptual clarity to the precise content of the notion of literacy. Early years teachers, researchers, and policy makers tend to interpret this literacy practice primarily as learning to read and write (at the expense of oral language and narration), and sometimes even implement these processes through focused training. Moreover, in the assessment of children's ability to participate in literacy practices, early years teachers, researchers and policy makers often cling to the old tests of technical reading, spelling, and for the youngest child especially, vocabulary acquisition. It looks as if the practice of literacy is reduced to a limited range of decontextualised performances and tests for the sake of measurability. The literacy practice is transformed into school versions of reading and writing.

When we evaluate these literacy school practices from a Vygotskian point of view, we can criticise them on several points:

- They violate one of Vygotsky's methodological maxims, i.e. the principle that the *unit of analysis* should be a version of the cultural activity, which may be a simplified version, but still exhibits all the defining qualities of the original activity. It is obvious that faultless reading of lists of words at a certain speed, or reading and writing without any communicative need are not ecologically valid versions of literacy practices as they appear in sociocultural life.

- As the reading and writing operations are separated from an activity that makes sense for the pupils, the resulting actions don't have personal meaning for these children. Leont'ev (1981) has characterised such actions as alienating, as the person has no meaningful relationship with the course of the encompassing activity and its products. The personal sense and objective meaning are separated. *Alienation* is a negative condition for the development of human identity (Leont'ev, 1981, pp. 327-328). When reading and writing are practiced outside a communicative or thinking activity, pupils run the risk of becoming alienated from these cultural endeavours. In the standardised tests for vocabulary acquisition, young children are assessed with the help of isolated and accidental sentences that test whether they know a word or not. In fact these tests mainly establish whether the child has got the opportunity to encounter the word during his life and learn it within the settings given. Both the testing itself and the inherent suggestion of what it means to know a word, alienate the child from genuine communicative practices and needs.

- The structure of performances of the young children in traditional classrooms is not compatible with the *leading activity* of the children at that age, i.e. *play* (see Vygotsky, 1978, p. 103). Learning that is embedded in play activities is meaningful for the child and contributes optimally to the child's identity development. As I demonstrated elsewhere (van Oers, 2003a) play can be characterised by the format of its activity. One of the characteristics of this format is that it allows the player freedom to some extent in the choice of actions, goals, rules, and interpretations of

the situation. Language education on the basis of assignments, memorising and practising does not allow the pupil the freedom that is essential for playing and is prone to be mechanical, personally meaningless and non-functional in communicative activities. In fact, in one study with 5-year-old pupils we compared the playful word acquisition (based on communicative needs of the child) to direct instruction of words in which a word and its reference are simultaneously demonstrated (on the basis of a fast mapping approach, see Bloom, 2000, chapter 2). We found in this study that the playful vocabulary learning resulted in more and deeper word learning, and, moreover, that the children in the playful learning context more often used their newly learned words outside the original learning situation (see Duijkers, 2005).

Becoming literate: what does it mean?

The standard practice of most language classrooms does not bring us much further in the conception of what it means to become literate. In our own educational approach we wanted to develop a strategy for literacy development that is consistent with the Vygotskian approach. Therefore we first had to answer the question of what it means to be literate.

Basically, for Vygotsky, language is a symbol system that mediates between subject and an object. He pictures this relationship in his famous triangle (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 40):
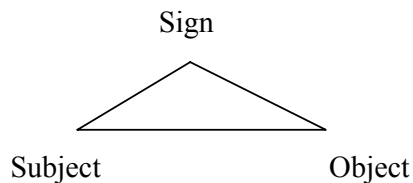
With the help of signs the subject (person, agent) can regulate his own actions on an object, and through the cultural meaning of the sign, the action becomes a cultural act, and not just a spontaneous reactive response to the object. Through the use of signs (particularly language), attention can be focused on relevant aspects of an object and the ways of dealing with this object. Picture for example a (simplified) situation wherein a young child is helped (by modelling and verbal regulation) to handle a doll. When the actions and the object become associated with the word 'doll', we can expect that the word 'doll' in new situations canalises the child's actions according to the cultural script of doll playing. The child's actions on this object are then cultivated with the help of the verbal sign 'doll'.

The triangle of Vygotsky, however, pictures a special situation where the subject is able to regulate his/her own actions with the help of signs. In most educational situations, however, there is another agent involved who regulates the child's actions with the help of verbal means: 'The child enters into relations with the situation not directly, but through the medium of another person' (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994,

p. 115). In this case the sign activity is an interpersonal process, where an exchange of meanings between subjects takes place with the help of signs (verbal means). The situation can then be pictured as follows:

$$\text{SUBJECT}_{\text{other}} \; [\; \text{Subject}_1 \; \text{------------} \; \text{object} \; \;]$$
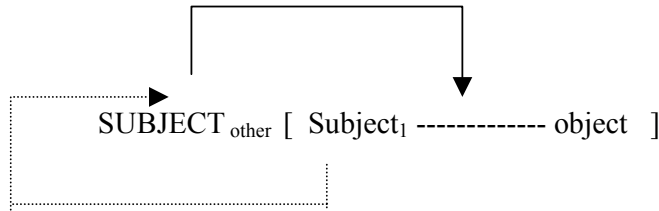
The subject$_1$ acts on an object and is influenced in his way of acting by SUBJECT$_{\text{other}}$. The SUBJECT$_{\text{other}}$ can do this by using signs (words, gestures, modelling behaviour) that can be understood by the subject. The subject's activity is symbolically regulated as in Vygotsky's triangle, but in this case by an external agent. Obviously, the subject can regulate this agent's actions by giving feedback on the agent's actions directed to the [subject – object unit]. So basically, language can be said to regulate human object-oriented activity, both on an intrapersonal and an interpersonal level.

This sign using activity is very important in the developmental theory of Vygotsky. Both on the interpersonal plane and on the personal plane the signs refer to ideal entities, called meanings. The signs designate the meaning of the object and the acceptable actions within the ongoing activity (or practice). Hence, we can say that the main function of signs is to represent, for personal purposes ('thinking') or for interpersonal purposes ('communication'). The greatest merit of Vygotsky is his understanding that thinking and communication are intrinsically related (see Vygotsky, 1982).

We can now bring our argument a step further. As far as language is a sign system that refers to meanings (and not directly to the objects of the world), it is an example of the general category of *sign using activity*, described by Vygotsky and Luria (1994), that functions as a means for organising human thinking and communication. In our view this is also the basis for literate behaviour: becoming literate means building up the *generalised ability of using sign systems for personal and interpersonal purposes within specific cultural practices*. So in our view this competence encompasses the mastery of written language, some forms of oral language (e.g. argumentation), but also forms of theoretical thinking (thinking in models, and theoretical relationships, paradigmatic rules, etc). Olson put this clearly when he wrote:

> The major feature of literate thought is that it is about representations such as explicit statements, equations, maps, and diagrams rather than about the world. (Olson, 1994, p. 277)

From this point of view, it is evident that the recent proliferation of literacies (scientific literacy, computer literacy, etc) is consistent with our definition of being literate. If schools accept the obligation to assist pupils in the process of becoming literate,

they need to invest in ways of developing literate activity in pupils, which is broader than just learning to read. Being literate requires the development of a new way of symbolic thinking, based on the generalised ability to use symbols and models meaningfully in the context of sociocultural practices.

For the innovation of early years practices, however, this is still not a sufficient explanation. We need to know what kind of human activities lay behind this literate competence, how we can make these activities accessible for young children. The activity of constructing and reconstructing *representations* for personal and communicative purposes in the context of some practice, we call 'semiotic activity'. Depending on the type of tools involved in this semiotic activity, several specific concrete forms of literate behaviour can be distinguished. In our research we make a distinction between the production and use of schematics representations (schemes, diagrams, graphs, models) on the one hand, and the production and use of textual representations on the other. The competence of producing textual representations in thinking and communication within a certain practice will be called *narrative competence*. Schematically we can picture the situation like this:
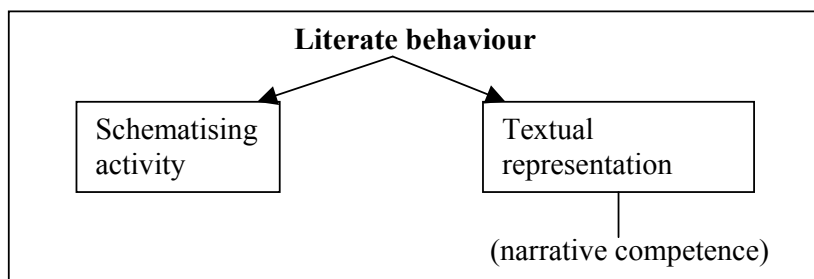
In the following part of this article I will focus on a further elaboration of textual representation and narrative competence. In our research programme we already carried out several studies on young children's schematising activities and we could demonstrate that these activities are accessible for children, if they are functionally embedded in play activity in which the children can and want to participate (see for example van Oers, 1994, 1996). We found evidence that this early schematising activity has a positive influence on later mathematical performances of the children (see Poland, 2007; Poland & van Oers, 2007; also van Oers & van Dijk, 2004). I will not dwell longer on this strand of our research programme here, and concentrate on narrative competence in the next section.

Narrative competence

Narrative competence is the ability and disposition to (re)construct and use textual representations for the purpose of clarifying meaning to oneself or others in the context of some sociocultural activity (social practice). It includes the ability to produce a system of (spoken or written) utterances (meant to be coherent). Being based on utterances, every narrative (as a product of narrative competence) has the

implicit or explicit quality of addressivity: it is intended to be comprehended by another person and by oneself. Hence, narrative competence also includes the ability to interpret the outlook and intention of others and anticipate their state of mind and possible interpretation of the others' utterances. So, like the word and the utterance, the narrative is '… the product of reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee…' (Vološinov, 1973, pp. 85-86). Hence, narrative competence essentially includes the ability to place oneself in the position of others and view the other (addressee) as an intentional agent like oneself. This latter ability is probably fundamental for all communication and the development of cognition. As Tomasello (1999) demonstrated, this ability emerges very early in development.

The relationship of this narrative competence with social practices has another important consequence. As a functional part of a social practice, narrative competence is subject to the historical exigencies of the practice itself, that is to say that it has to obey the rules and conventions of the practice and how its products should be constructed in order to be acceptable. Therefore, narrative competence also includes the ability to produce practice-related *genres* of text. In the context of a literary practice, the text will be of another genre (story, poem) than texts produced in a scientific context (argument, proof, etc). For young children the most accessible genre is that of story telling (see Engel, 1999). This is also the genre that we were interested in when studying the narrative competence of young children (5–7-year-olds).

In the past decade we conducted a number of studies of narrative competence in young children in the context of developmental education, in order to find out some of the characteristics and its dynamics, and to construct new ways of assessment. Some of the main outcomes of these studies thus far will be reported briefly below.

Studies of narrative competence in young children

Looking for the fundamental dynamics of narrating

Although Vygotsky did not use the notion of narrative competence, he did offer us a fundamental idea about how utterances are produced. In his *Thinking and Speech* he explains human thinking as a mainly predicative process (see Vygotsky, 1987, ch. 7). He emphasises that a basic feature of thinking and speech is the Topic–Predicate structure. In speech people have a topic in their mind they want to talk or think about. The process of speech consists of adding predicates to the topic that qualify the topic. The topic is elaborated and clarified by adding predicates (new qualities) to the already given topic. Take for example the situation that you hear something in another room that you interpret as something falling. So the topic is 'FALLING'. When you guess 'it must be the lamp falling from the ceiling' you have added a new qualification (predicate = LAMP) to the original topic. Vygotsky explains that thinking is mainly predicative because we don't have to repeat the topic for ourselves, and we can forward our thinking process by just adding new predicates. In an interpersonal communicative activity there is also a shared topic and much of this communicative thinking can also proceed on a predicative basis. The fundamental function of

predicates is *specifying the topic* and contributing to the growing understanding of the topic, and *distinguishing this topic* from other topics. In the example above, the fuzzy meaning of the topic FALLING is specified by the predicate LAMP, but it distinguishes this particular 'falling event' from the falling of a chair or any other object that could be falling. The predicate is not necessarily a single word; it can also be a longer statement about some topic.

Vygotsky's analysis of the thinking process incited several other researchers to deeper studies. Interesting here is the work of Doblaev (1982) who elaborated the idea of a text as a system of topics and predications. He demonstrated that texts can indeed be analysed as complex evolving systems of predicates and topics and their modifications. Two of Doblaev's findings are particularly important here:

- During the thinking or reasoning process, a *topic can change* (and often does change). When we discuss the topic of 'wild animals', the topic can for example be modified into 'camouflage'. The new topic was often a former predicate. The progress of a narrative is based on the evolution of topics and predicates. New topics often emerge when predicates are themselves qualified by sub-predicates.
- Predicates can have different functions and different relationships with the topic they qualify. Doblaev (1982, p. 81) mentions concretisation, conclusion or definition as possible functions of predicates in the process of elaborating the topic. In order to understand the psychological dynamics of the progress of a thinking or communication process, it is essential to know the ways in which predicates relate to a topic.

In a recent case study we started to make analyses of texts of 6-year-old children from this point of view, in order to explore the possibilities of this method of analysis for a deeper understanding of young children's narrative competence. We gave the children a picture of a farm scene showing all kinds of animals and activities that belong to a farm. We asked the children to write a story about what they see on the picture. They could choose anything from the picture they wanted to write about. One year later we gave the children the same picture, with the same assignment.

Jermain (grade 3, 6 years old) wrote the following story:[1]

> The white horse was escaping and the stork sits on the roof on her egg and the black horse was in the meadow the goat [unreadable] the peacock set up his feathers and the two tractors had a lot of people and there were woodpiles and there were two mole

There is no clear unique topic that can be read from this narrative. We might assume that the topic is not mentioned and that this pupil has the farm in his mind as a topic. In that case the whole narrative is a collection of unrelated predicates that tell something new about a situation the child has in mind (probably based on the picture given). From the point of view of narrative competence, it is obvious that the child does not explicate the topic, for instance in a title. The missing title shows that Jermain did not take into account that the reader is ignorant of his topic, so the text is not yet clearly addressed. Moreover, he does not give any information about the

relation of the predicates. The narrative competence of this child is still unorganised and mainly additive.

On year later, however, Jermain (now 7 years old) writes the following narrative about the same picture:

> the white horse
> the white horse is a ghost it looks like he is rearing up but he glides you know why for the farm is a haunted house the birds are bats and the horses are firehorses except the white horse that is a ghost and the people are monsters and there is lightning and there are lying [unreadable] and it is so scary nobody dares to go there the next day and sit on the firehorses with a [unreadable] and everything became

There are remarkable differences between the narrative of the previous year and this one. There is still no interpunction and the text is still more or less additive, but as a whole the text also demonstrates coherence, and is clearer about the topic. Considering the whole text, we can assume that Jermain has the farm as a topic in his mind, and his narrative wants to explain what kind of farm this is. He starts with *the white horse* and presents it as his first topic in the title. In the first sentence the white horse is first qualified as a *ghost* (first predicate) and then by its *rearing up* (predicate 2). This latter predicate is subsequently qualified by a subpredicate *gliding* (as a further and more specific qualification of 'rearing up'). Then the gliding is further explained by the predicate *haunted house* which becomes the new topic in the rest of the story. All the following statements qualify the haunted house. Note that Jermain also explains the relationship of the predicate (glides) to the topic of the white horse; he gives a reason: *you know why for the farm is a haunted house*. We can also read the following predicates as an explanation of *the haunted house*.

In the space of one year, Jermain has improved his narrative competence remarkably. The topic–predicate dynamic becomes more perspicuous, explicit and coherent. In a similar way we analysed in this case study the narratives of four children in their fourth and fifth grades (ages 7–8). The following conclusions could be drawn:

- Narrative competence seems narrowly related to the child's ability to construct evolving and conceivable systems of topic–predicate structures.
- When children have been in school longer, their topic–predicate structures tend to be more elaborated, coherent, and perspicuous. Nevertheless in grade 5 (age 8) in some cases topics are still introduced or modified with no apparent reason; predicates are sometimes just summed up without a clear reason. Obviously, the way predicates are connected to a topic in order to construct a conceivable message that makes sense in the situation at hand is a major developmental issue in the formation of narrative competence.
- As children grow older they are obviously complying with the literary genre, which is evident from the use of interpunction and capital letters (by some of the other pupils in our sample), but also by the use of adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions and words for moods of persons.

In this case study we explored the possibilities of the topic–predicate analysis suggested by Vygotsky for the explanation of the dynamics of a narrative competence. Although a general positive conclusion can be drawn, there is a lot more to investigate, especially the rules that children use for the selection and application of predicates, how topics are modified in the proceeding narrative, how relations between topic and predicates are expressed with literary means, etc.

Exploring topic–predicate relationships

Part of these questions could be addressed by re-analysing a previous case study (Edzes, 1996). The researcher/teacher set up a narrating activity (textual representation) with children as an interpersonal activity. By doing this she could study narrative competence in a publicly accessible form. This researcher (and by that time, grade three teacher in a school in Amsterdam) organised a situation with four 6-year-old children who were encouraged to write a story together on the basis of a page from a picture book. The picture showed a landscape with a green meadow, a house at a distance, a tree and a person (could be a man or a woman) sitting on a trunk under the tree. The children were invited to propose sentences for their shared story and to decide collaboratively whether the proposed sentence was acceptable or not. The teacher participated peripherally in this activity, only guided the process when necessary, and wrote down the story that the children invented. The whole session was video-taped (38 minutes) and transcribed. For further information see Hännikäinen and van Oers, 2002.

   The children decided to name the man on the trunk Mr Harry. After much discussion and deliberation the following story was collaboratively made up and written down by the teacher:

> (1)   Far away from here
> (2)   Lived Mr. Harry
> (3)   He lost his purse
> (4)   He went out to look for it
> (5)   Then he saw the trunk
> (6)   And Mr. Harry sat down on it
> (7)   With his fat bottom
> (8)   And he pondered
> (9)   Mr. Harry went to the farmer
> (10) and he asked for a horse
> (11) And the farmer said: 'why?'
> (12) 'because I lost my purse'
> (13) And the farmer said: 'my wife has found a purse'
> (14) The farmer went to his wife:
> (15) 'did you find the purse of Mr. Harry?'
> (16) The farmer points to Mr. Harry
> (17) The wife said: 'I didn't find it'.

The story shows that Mr Harry is obviously the main topic of the story, but from 11 to 17 the topic changes to the farmer, making Mr Harry an element in the statements predicating the farmer. Most of the story is elaborated on the basis of predicates or subpredicates qualifying Mr Harry and the farmer.

When we look at the protocol of the children's conversation, and analyse the deliberations of the children before deciding which sentence should be included in the text, we can find different relations between topics and predicates:

● *Associative relations*: some predicates did not follow clearly from the course of the story; one child brought in the suggestion—probably based on association—and the other children decided whether it was acceptable or not (see for example statement 10). Especially when the association (and the related predicate) had some humour in it, the children could easily accept it (see for example statement 7). Association seemed to be one source for the invention of predicating statements.
● *Consistent elaboration*: new predicates are proposed and evaluated as consistent elaborations of the story. The children discussed, for example, whether Mr Harry would follow the farmer when he went to his wife (14), but this was not accepted because then it would not make sense that the farmer pointed to Mr Harry (15).
● *Stylistic dressing up*: the children produced and evaluated new predicates from a stylistic point of view: does it make the story more beautiful, more exciting, etc. One pupil proposed that the farmer's wife would not give back the money to Mr Harry; others found that she should return half of the money or even less. This was discussed in terms of which would make the story better, more beautiful, etc. Obviously the children proposed and evaluated new predicates from the point of view of aesthetics and style. Likewise, they discussed a possible title for the story. Although they all agreed that there should be a title, they didn't succeed in getting to a consensus on this. They found that the title should say something new about the whole story, but the proposals were always rejected as too vague (e.g. 'Mr Harry' as a title), or as too revealing (giving away too much of the plot, e.g. 'Mr Harry lost his purse'). The idea to predicate the whole story by a title is actually an example of how the genre influences the predication process, but it is also an expression of the awareness of addressivity. Likewise, the children's attempt to make the story exciting and beautiful is another aspect of the literary genre in which they apparently feel engaged.

In this public (interpersonal) organisation of the narrative activity we could observe a bit more of the dynamics, particularly the deliberations regarding the statements that could be made about the topic. Although we still cannot see the inner part of the process in the participants (i.e. how and why they invent these ideas at that moment), we can see the type of deliberations they have regarding the proposed predicates.

Promoting narrative competence in developmental education

The important question, finally, is how can we explain the development in the narrative competence of Jermain and his peers, and can we organise the educational

interactions with children in school in such a way that we may expect that the development of their narrative competence and literate behaviour will be promoted?

Within our schools for developmental education, much is invested in the literacy development of young children. As I will argue below, much of the teachers' educational activities can be interpreted as assistance in the development of topic–predicate structures. The curriculum is essentially a play-based curriculum (see van Oers, 2003a, b, part II). I will summarise the main points of this approach here:

- *Language is a communicative tool* within the context of activities that are meaningful for the children, and that follow the playful format. Therefore, all communication and language learning is embedded in thematic activities that make sense for the children. As an example I can refer to the context of the travel agency. Within this context children play roles and use the tools related with this role. The travel agent tells about the trips, makes telephone calls (oral language), makes invoices for the customers, and writes tickets, makes advertisements (written language), etc. The children follow the rules of this practice, are involved and have some degree of freedom in the way they accomplish their tasks, set goals, use instruments, etc. In this context, reading and writing are enacted as communicative acts.
- *Teacher is participant* in the children's play activities. In a natural way, she asks questions, asks for clarifications if necessary, revoices the children's utterances if necessary, and helps the children with writing down their messages (as in the example of Mr Harry). Basically, the teacher evaluates the predicates with respect to the topic and helps the children to invent means for expressing these relationships explicitly (e.g. by means of conjunctions).
- *Writing before reading:* writing is an extension of the children's ability in productive (oral) language with the help of new instruments. When writing, children objectify their speech and can analyse their messages (with the help of others) explicitly and publicly. In one of the classrooms (grade 4) we came across the following example: when a boy (7 years old) had written an invitation for his birthday party, the teachers reflected with the boy on this message, asking if the message was clear enough regarding the time and place of the party. In the terminology of the present article we can say that the teacher reflected with the boy on the topic ('birthday party') figuring out which predicates (new information!) could be attached to this topic, how these predicates could be stated or refined, and why these predicates should be included, given the communicative intentions of the boy, and the scripts of this practice. After writing, the children start reading each others' messages and finally messages of people they don't know (nor their intentions or backgrounds). Children are encouraged to write texts together and are invited to evaluate texts of each other. By so doing they practice narrative competence in a collective form before it becomes a personal competence.
- *Practice different literary genres*: fiction, non-fiction, poetry is produced and discussed.
- *Make the writing products public and communal*: children's texts are shared in the classroom or used for public communicative purposes (e.g. advertisement for

school's annual celebration, announcement for the parents of an exhibition or a dancing performance, etc). The teacher helps the children to make these texts as much as possible in accordance with the public (spelling) conventions and the genre of story telling. Most texts are saved in the pupils' portfolios so that they can be read again later.

● *Assess* the narrative competence collaboratively in meaningful and real contexts, either by systematic classroom observation, or by systematic examination of the child's writing products.

All these ideas are implemented in the early years classrooms in developmental education. In the construction and use of textual representations, teachers and pupils systematically reflect on the topic of a text and how it can be elaborated with appropriate predicates. Vygotsky's idea of the predicative structure of thinking and communication turns out to be a promising tool for the innovation of the literacy practice in early childhood education, but also for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of narrative competence.

On this very same basis we also constructed assessment instruments for monitoring the development of narrative competence. On the basis of systematic evaluation of the narratives of children made up over a picture (assessing different criteria such as vocabulary, the use of adjectives, title, addressivity), we constructed an instrument to measure narrative competence, and particularly to trace the development of narrative competence as the ability to construct conceivable and systematically evolving topic–predicate structures. Our experiences up to now show that it is possible to make a valid and reliable instrument, although many trials still have to be done before we can definitely qualify the instrument. Our first experiences with the instrument show that systematic *collaborative* attention to how young children compose their messages and elaborate the topic they want to communicate, can indeed stimulate their *personal competence* at making narratives. Our practice of developmental education with young children helps these children to become literate and lays a firm foundation for meaningful participation in cultural practices.

Notes

1. There were a lot of spelling errors in the text (as these children are beginning writers). This feature is lost in the translation.

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