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Developing Creative Writing Skills in Early Childhood: A Case Study from Pakistan

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Abstract

The study explores how a teacher of Early Childhood teaches young children creative writing skills in a community-based school in Karachi, Pakistan. A qualitative case study method was used to examine the practices of the teacher and four early years' learners (seven to eight years). Data was generated through semi-structured interviews; classroom observations and document analysis. Findings reveal that current practices of teaching and learning creative writing as development of language and literacy skills are highly influenced by how the teacher herself perceives creativity and creative writing in young learners. The teacher selects the topic for the children to write and produce the final piece in a single attempt, thus ignoring the writing process. The teacher introduces the topic through detailed discussion in which her interactions with the children are most of the time in English as required by the school policy. However, with children not understanding English she quickly reverts to translations in Urdu (national language). Hence, children remain confused during their writing. Bilingualism further confuses children, who think in Urdu and write in English with little or no understanding and spontaneity; children experience difficulty in expressing their creative thoughts in English. In the writing process grammar, spellings and sentence structure are checked by the teacher's constant interjections as required to pass in Language. This hinders creative writing and creates ambiguity in children's minds between creativity and the convention of language with correct product and little process for leaning and enjoyment. Consequently, it increases the children's struggle to write creatively. In conclusion, research findings indicate a dire need to bring improvement in the teaching and learning practice of

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creative writing. The study sets a direction with some recommendations for teachers in this particular context.

Keywords: Early Years Learners, English As A Second Language, Creativity And Creative Writing Skills, Bilingualism

Introduction

In many Pakistani schools young children rarely get opportunities or the choices to express their ideas and creative thoughts in writing. They are exposed to either tracing the letter formation, copying from the blackboard, text writing, and filling workbooks/sheets. Some schools claim that children do creative writing; they write on selected topics given by teachers; for example, a rainy day, my family, my school and others. Teachers provide the main ideas and some key words to the children to write and produce their work in a single attempt. Such teaching practice is the requirement in the school syllabus whereby, teachers are required to introduce essay writing to the children and prepare them to reproduce the same in examinations on given topics in the syllabus.

Edwards and Springate (1995) contend that children learn by 'doing'. 'Doing' is about undertaking meaningful activities which are relevant to children's lives. Classroom observations show that children's writing is seldom related to their real or personal life experiences or contextual situations. Children who are imaginative expressionists and good story tellers have little or nothing to say through their writing, hence perform a routine task with little or no enjoyment and interest.

How Literature Views this Area of Study

Creative writing implies imaginative tasks such as writing poetries, stories and plays (Harmer, 2001). In the early years, young children are not expected to write stories, plays, and poetries in a systematic manner as adult writers do. The teacher often is the scribe for young learners. Godwin and Perkins (1998 & 2002) claim that young children entering early year's settings bring with them a vast array of experiences and knowledge of print which they observe around them. All these experiences require an environment. Riley and Reedy (2003) contend that in any early year's environment there should be

allocated spaces for literacy work. A specific writing area must be identified and furnished with all the relevant materials such as ready-made blank booklets, draft papers, markers and pens. This works as a stimulus for children to write as well as it helps in satisfying an inner urge of theirs to be able to place their thoughts in print.

The interpretation of the term 'writing' is sometimes confusing. Kane and Ogdon (1993) explained writing as a process which is true and yet misleading; true in a manner that it is a rational activity that involves thinking; by cognizant efforts or simply through intuition. It is misleading also because the term 'process' indicates neat and well-defined steps to be attempted in a sequence. From both views, the 'process of writing' is emphasized, although there is not one set way to follow while learning to write. Hence, the idea of expressing creativity or communicating one's own thoughts through writing is to produce something different, unique and new from others because writing involves one's own thinking, feelings, emotions and viewing the world from one's own perspective.

Furthermore, creative writing is not only what students write as per their choices; rather, when they write, they are involved in a continuous thinking process and become thinkers. De Bono (cited in Curtis, 1998) affirms this view; Children can be brilliant thinkers.... A child enjoys thinking. He enjoys the use of his mind just as he enjoys the use of his body as he slides down helter- skelter or bounces on a trampoline... If children can always think so well at this stage, then surely the long years of education must develop this ability to a high level. Not so. At the end of education, there has been no improvement in the thinking ability of children; in fact there has actually been deterioration. (p. 65).

Conversely, the situation in Pakistan is more like what Harmer (2001) shares, that is teachers act as 'controllers' in the classroom setting, where they transmit their knowledge to their students. This may also imply expressing creativity in writing guided by adults. Vazir (2007) sheds light on contextual realities in Pakistan and elsewhere, where students' voices, which are rooted in their emotions, feelings and creative thoughts, are seldom heard because young children are considered immature. The fact she emphasizes is

that young children are often referred to as blank slates, on which adults write according to their wishes and thoughts. These contextual realities have implications on children's writing in early years and throughout their education where the element of creativity is basically ignored. Therefore, what is required here is the shift in teachers' role that is, from controller to facilitator, who provides a scaffold for children, when they experience difficulty in writing. Gradually the teacher removes that scaffold and provides children the space to build their potentials and practice creative writing comfortably.

Background and Context

This research was an attempt to explore how teachers teach creative writing skills in English language in a community-based school; a unit of a large private school network in Karachi Pakistan. An Early Childhood Development (ECD) program was initiated in 2002 at the school. It is a four- year program encompassing ECD- I, II, III and IV, which aims towards young children's (3 to 8 years old) holistic development. The ECD- IV Grade 2, classroom was selected because it served as a single entity to examine how the teacher was teaching creative writing in a natural setting. The study also examined how young children learn and respond to various creative writing activities.

Methodology

A qualitative case study research method was applied to explore how a teacher of young children teaches creative writing skills in an ECD classroom. Data was collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews of the research participants, and by analyzing relevant documents, which included the teacher's weekly and yearly planner, lesson plans and students' pieces of writing in the real classroom situation.

Research participants included as per the criteria an experienced teacher (3-5 years) in the language and literacy area working in the ECD Section-1V, and four young children (seven to eight years old) from ECD IV, (Class-2). Selection of the research participants was based on the children being confident and clear in their responses to the questions asked to the whole class about language learning, and

those that demonstrated their keenness to share their experiences of learning to write willingly in the classroom after the purpose of study was shared were the ones identified as research participants.

Apart from the primary research participants, the school head teacher, the learning area coordinator of language and literacy and other students in the classroom were the secondary participants in the study. They were also interviewed for the purpose of triangulation of the data and its validity and reliability. Moreover, other young children were observed along with the focused group in the language classroom.

Findings and Interpretations

The following findings emerge from the study; (a) Teacher's Perception of 'Creativity' and 'Creative Writing'; (b) Teacher's Understanding of the Writing Process;(c) Current Practices of Creative Writing;(d) Impact of Bilingualism;(e) Children's Experiences of Creative Writing.

Teacher's Perception of 'Creativity' and 'Creative Writing'

The manner young children practice creative writing and the kinds of writing opportunities that the teacher provides, reflect how the teacher perceives creativity and creative writing. The teacher perceives creativity as "if I need to deliver a story to children, it depends upon my creativity that in how many ways I can do it". She further explains;

If I narrate a story of a King and his wife to the children and at one point if I leave the story incomplete, then it's the children's creative mind how they take the story further, how they put their creative thoughts in writing to complete the story. Grammar and vocabulary will support them in writing.

This indicates that although the teacher is sharing her understanding of creativity, she may not be viewing children as creative thinkers; the fact that they can originate their own thoughts. Rather, it appears that for her, children's creative thoughts emerge only when they are provided with a storyline and some ideas by the teacher. Lesson observations revealed that most times, a story was narrated to the

children. This was followed by series of questions put forth to the children by the teacher. Key words from the story or topic selected by the teacher were placed in a topic web on the blackboard. Children's original ideas built around the story were not expressed; rather they were simply made to repeat the words which were in the teacher's head.

The teacher also enforced the use of language-related and grammar rules in creative writing. She emphasizes its significance, "when children do creative writing, they need to be careful about punctuations, commas, full stops, exclamatory marks and grammatically correct sentences, because I am helping them to learn grammar as well." In the current scenario, children's creativity when entangled with language barriers causes a mental breakdown in their creative thinking. It does not allow children to communicate their creative thoughts to the audience; rather, the concern relies on spellings and sentence structures defeating the purpose of individual imaginative thoughts in writing.

Teacher's Understanding of the Creative Writing Process

The teacher perceives the writing process as; "Steps which I follow as a process to deliver the lesson. For example, my topic for today is, 'My birthday party', how I deliver the lesson is my writing process." Children's involvement in the writing process, she adds;

It's really tough to go for a process. It is really time consuming to go to each individual and check the work of forty children. Whatever children produce in writing, the teacher gets an idea while taking rounds in the class.

For the teacher writing does not seem to be an individual endeavor, hence individual learning styles, development and growth in children are not a primary consideration for the teacher; one shoe fits all. It further demonstrates the teacher's simplistic or unfamiliar view about the writing process. The teacher views it as an end product. The procedures she follows to introduce topics for creative writing are heavily guided by thinking that occurs in her head; as the correct and only way. Classroom observations are evident that the children are expected to produce their writing in a single attempt with her

checking the products for assessment purposes. Her writing responses do not indicate her providing children the opportunities to read and review their own writing with her assistance or that of peers. Hence, the whole notion of the writing process seems absent; rather the teacher seeks complete or incomplete work from the children. The purpose of checking the teacher defends as;

It is our practice to check the last creative writing done in the month. It is a part of assessment. Had I left it out, the books would have gone home and parents who are usually very concerned about their children's work would have rubbed that and rewritten the sentences. Therefore, my motive of doing assessment there and then would not have been achieved.

The teacher's dilemma is obvious, on the one hand it is the requirement of the school, and on the other it is the expectation from parents at home. The teacher tries to address both concerns; leaving the child; the most important stakeholder at bay. Parents who have not been able to seek education through formal schooling in Pakistan have high expectations from the school, not understanding the development of language and literacy skills they only seek right or correct answers. Incorrect spellings and grammar mistakes made by the child often results in an attitude of the child not performing well in school. Hence children are often made to feel guilty and blamed as non-achievers by the parents and the school with the teacher's primary aim to present neat and correct writing work in children's books. Assessment rather than being seen as an on-going process of observing, recording and documenting the work of children does not reflect how they go about doing and improving their work. A variety of educational decisions that affect the child is not considered as important by the teacher (Bredenkamp, Knuth, Kunesh and Shulman, 1992).

For the teacher, the criteria for checking creative writing are correct spellings, grammar and children's neat hand writing. This existing assessment practice develops ambiguity in children's creative instincts in writing. The use of language rules further exacerbates the situation as children are expected to produce grammatically correct

creative pieces. The purpose of assessment is to assist a child with assessing his/her own progress or understanding and supporting other children's development as required in High/Scope, this remains to a large extent unaddressed. Besides as social research studies support that children learn from each other therefore, teachers can make efforts to promote children's positive attitudes towards their less interactive and less verbal peers by raising the latter's profile of achievement (Katz and McClellan, 1997)

Current Practices of Creative Writing

Excerpts from classroom observations demonstrate the reality the teacher and the children encounter in a creative writing session.

Lesson Observation

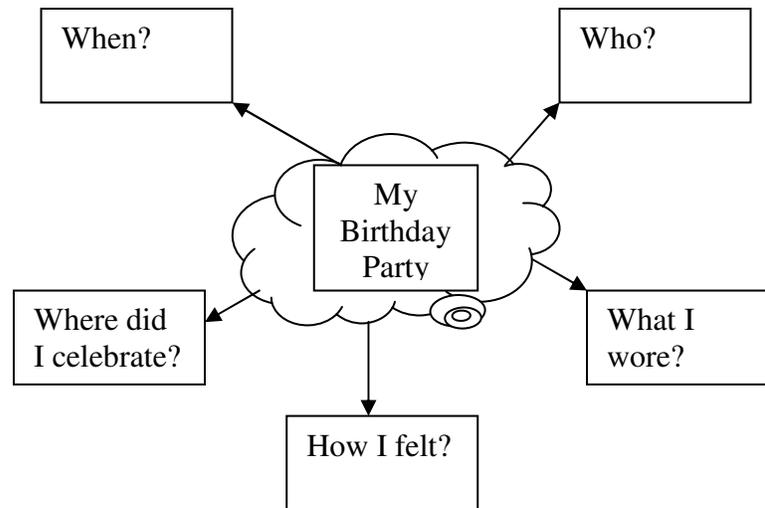
The teacher begins the lesson as a large class with a question. How many of you celebrate your birthday?

Most children raise their hands to show that they celebrate their birthday. The teacher and the children share their own experiences on their birthday.

Next the teacher reads the story from the Big Book and simultaneously, discusses with the children about celebrating a birthday party. Discussions are in Urdu to help children understand the task. The teacher sometimes used English terms and sentences as well. After reading and discussion the children are asked to write about how they celebrated their last birthday. They get some instructions.

T: Ok, You all have to write about how you celebrated your last birthday. Before writing, I will give you more instructions; you don't have to start now. Your eyes should be on the black board... Write whatever you want on 'My birthday party'. Can we brainstorm some important things which have to be included in your writing?

Topic Web



The teacher further instructs;

T: Ok, after you write, you just check that you have covered all these five points. These five points are very important...I am giving you just fifteen minutes to write, after fifteen minutes...I will take your paper. If you feel any spelling problem, write it down. Don't worry about the spellings and grammar.

In one of the groups, children were talking while writing;

SS. 1: I know my mother cooks Biryani (dish prepared with rice and meat) on my birthday.

SS. 2: But in your writing, have you answered the teacher's question, 'what', 'how' and 'when' as given in the web?

SS. 3: My dad came late from the office for my birthday

SS.4: I did not celebrate my birthday as my mummy forgot

After fifteen minutes, the teacher asked them individually to read aloud what they had written on 'My birthday party.' Although, these children shared their own experiences during discussion, it did not come out on paper in their creative writing. The teacher collected all

the papers for correction. This example indicates that the topic web caused hindrances for the children to think beyond what is expected of them to write. Children's experiences shared produced stereotype and time-bounded work; it was more like responding to the teacher's questions as earlier experienced by the children rather than stretching their thoughts in expressing what they have actually experienced. Limiting children's thoughts to a specific time did not allow children the time to think freely.

In addition, it brings to light the teacher's competencies in promoting creative writing and the kind of instructions she gives the children. Deuchar (2005) contends that it is the teacher who ensures that children consider their writing as an important and meaningful task. Moreover, teachers may facilitate children to express their personal writing, so that they develop clarity in their thoughts and communicate to the audience their rich experiences. However, it seems that children are not taking their creative writing as a means to communicate their thoughts to others, rather, they are writing because they are asked by the teacher to do so. This is reflected in the teacher's statement, "I think in the ECD classroom children need clear instructions so that they can work with concentration."

This statement indicates two things: a) children's work driven by the teacher's instructions, b) teacher's lack of trust in children's abilities to think and write. This may be the teacher's assumption that children only concentrate on their work if they are properly instructed. However, this does not mean that there should be no instructions at all; instead, instructions should be for facilitation to the learning process to write creatively, rather than for mechanical reproduction of concepts.

Impact of Bilingualism

Bilingualism is one of the major issues that had a strong impact on children's creative writing. The following excerpt is evident of Bilingualism from one of the lesson;

The Animal Story

T: There are two kings now Elephant and Camel. To jungle mein do king to nahin ho saktey. To kaun hoga King. [So

there cannot be two kings in one jungle, hence, who would be the king?]

SS: Elephant, elephant, elephant... (Children shouted)

T: And assistant king because agar kabhi elephant bemar ho aur chutti per ho to camel jungle ko sambhale. [...if the elephant falls ill ever and needs to take a sick leave the camel can run the system]

SS. Hann [Yes]

T. Is ka matlab hai key hum ney sari pichly stories ko change kardiya key zaruri nahin kay lion hi jungle ka king ho. [It means we have changed all old stories that not necessary that lion is the king of jungle.]

My Favorite Game

T. I am giving you only five minutes to discuss. Is key baad aap ko individual writing kerni hogi. Jaldi sey sochein ...group mein apney experiences share karein, [After which you will have to write individually. Think quickly and share in group your experiences of playing games.]

SS. Kitney sentence likhney hai? [How many sentences do we have to write?]

T. Seven to eight

T. Ok class, time is up. Eyes on the board now. I want short and sweet paragraph. Sab sey pehley kya ayeega. [What will come first?]

SS. Heading My favorite game.

T Very good first of all you have to write the name of favorite game... you have to write

short and sweet paragraph. Zaruri nahin hai key saarey points likhey [Not necessary

that you write all the points.] Come on open your copy and start writing... I am going

to check who the quick writer of the class is.

The teacher felt that the kind of interactions as mentioned above is helpful for the children to develop their listening and speaking skills, which ultimately leads them towards writing. She clarifies that if she uses English continuously in the class, then the children would not

be able to understand. However, the question emerges that how can listening and speaking in Urdu facilitate children's writing in English? Moreover, if the teacher does not facilitate listening and speaking skills in English then it will always be difficult for them to understand English. Due to bilingualism, the teacher further uses the translation method as she explains;

I feel that all the children in my class do not understand whatever I deliver in English. That is why I have to translate in Urdu in order to build their understanding. They understand in Urdu, that is why we have bilingualism.

One of the implications of bilingualism is that children struggle to express their creative thoughts while writing. They mix the two languages into one system which Weitzman and Greenberg (2002) refer to as 'code mixing'. Although the teacher feels that she may be facilitating children to understand the concepts in the mother tongue besides expecting what and how to write by translating in Urdu, she seems to be overlooking the quandary she places children in. If children understand and develop their thoughts in Urdu, how would they be able to write creatively in English? Are children's minds capable of making this frequent shifts of language conversions from Urdu to English without giving them ample wait time to think and write their ideas? Both bilingualism and translation methods fail to resolve the struggle children face in writing creatively. What the teacher overlooks is that the amount of contact with each language determines the number of words learned from each language. Therefore, if Urdu is dominant in class, children will find it easier to write creatively in Urdu and not English which is the second language, as the latter they will simply imitate or copy words. Research suggests that it takes five to seven years to be able to think in the second language (Weitzman and Greenberg, 2002).

Children's Experiences of Creative Writing

Children's responses indicate that though they fulfill the teacher's expectations, their wish to express their thoughts is still a wishful thinking. They have eloquently expressed their views, feelings and experiences of doing creative writing in the class;

Student 1 shared: My teacher does not know our favorite topics we want to write, that is why I have to write on the topics the teacher gives.

Student 2 mentioned: I write on the topics given by the teacher, but I also want to get a chance to write on topics of my own wish.

Student 3 explained: I do the task given by my teacher, but I like to write on my own.

Student 4 felt: Whatever the teacher asks us to write we do. But I don't enjoy it. I like to write more on my own wish.

It is evident from children's conversation that writing for them is a chore; it brings boredom and restricts the flow of creativity when they are told what to write and how to write. Children seldom being given the opportunity to write as per their choices, it is no longer fun and enjoyable activity. It is more about doing work out of obedience and expectations of the teacher with wishful thinking from young children to be left to do writing on their own. Despite experiencing language barriers children feel confident they can write. This correlates with the teacher's views. However, the teacher looks at writing and thinking about ideas in fragmentation that is why she gives them the instructions to do it according to her way of practice. In addition, children also shared their concerns about corrections being done by the teacher:

Whenever I read my work after writing, I feel that I wish there were no mistakes. I mean that when I wrote 'in' in the sentence and teacher cut it and wrote 'on'. I feel I have to check my work before giving it to the teacher for correction.

Teachers are required to be aware about how children feel about their writing. It is also evident in the above mentioned excerpt that since the teacher checks many grammatical mistakes, children feel like producing their perfect piece of creative writing. They do not want to appear wrong in the teacher's eyes. A student further explains,

I read my writing many times, but I cannot change it because my teacher has already checked it. Teacher says not to

change because she says that once you have written in whatever way, it's done.

The teacher does not appear to be aware about the processes of writing; therefore children are not required to make drafts. This does not enable them to make mistakes and correct them as a process. Children express this ambiguity in creativity and conventions in writing that it curbs their learning of creative writing. Furthermore, these findings also draw our attention towards the word 'mistakes'. It has been taken with its lexical meaning; rather, these mistakes can be viewed as children's learning experiences through which they progress and learn to become writers.

Recommendations

- Taking into consideration the importance of creative writing and its significant role in the cognitive development of children, it is necessary to bring improvement in the teaching and learning of creative writing in early years. It is necessary to develop language skills in teachers; to get them well-equipped with the language teaching skills in general and creative writing skills particularly. Teachers must develop a shared understanding about creative writing; what it means and what kind of tasks engender and promote creative writing in young children. Besides, parents too need to be oriented in the process of creative writing with due importance given to children's creative thinking and less emphasis to neat and correct writing script.
- Bilingualism and the translation method should not be confused because unless children figure out the rules of the language they may continue to make many grammatical errors. While, bilingualism serves the purpose of children's conceptual understanding of their task; children who come with little or no English must experience feelings of being socially isolated, confused and frustrated. Therefore the teacher must be able to support children's efforts to learn a second language by allowing and facilitating them to express their ideas in English by making her input easy to understand. Furthermore, it is imperative for the teacher to

learn to use sequential bilingualism as a learning process i.e. she must be able to recognize the three stages of language learning among children; mixing, separating and finally using one main language.

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