

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION THESIS**

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**THE INFLUENCES OF THE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT AND  
THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' COMPOSITION SKILLS**

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## **Thesis objective, subject delimitation**

The ability to create written compositions is regarded as the best indicator of education in written format. (Kádárné, 1990). Besides the writing talent, written composition requires many other skills, like verbal thinking, social interaction, language skills and these all have a role in the formation and development of writing abilities.

József Nagy (1996) defined composition as the system of rules for the written communication of coherent sequence of thoughts. It is not an easy task to put thoughts into words in such a way, that these thoughts become a coherent unity correlated to the subject along the cause and effect interconnections, while also putting an emphasis on the essential information and on appropriate expression of details. The use of an elaborate style, paying attention to spelling and to appearance makes it more difficult to achieve a good result. The technique of composition activates the personal content as well, the technique develops too. (Orosz, 1972)

Composition is a complex unity of language, thinking, co-operation, reading and writing skills that are synchronised when solving communication exercises, in order to provide the desired effect on the recipient (Kádárné, 1990). The functioning of the skill on operational level is realised in the process of composition, the elements of which are presented with different names under different approaches.

The researches conducted so far on composition were focused around one or two main elements (Hidi, Boscolo 2006). They were based either on cognition, excluding the motivational-sentimental dimension, establishing the researches related to self-efficacy and self-regulation; or approached the subject of writing from the social-cultural theory's point of view. The models focusing on the teaching of writing follow the same a dichotomy, they either concentrate on analytical skills in developing composition skills (Durst, Newel, 1989), or they emphasise that the most important is the context, in which the student recognises and exercises these skills (Graham, Harris 1994, 2000). Despite the numerous superficial differences, the models have several common traits, the synthesis and integrated approach of which offer many starting points on skill development.

In my work I have reviewed the most important models of composition (Takala, 1988; Hayes, Flower, 1980; Bereiter, Scardamalia, 1987; van Wijk, 1999; Hayes 1996;

Kellogg, 1996), as in the context of these I elaborate on the skill development and on the possibilities for improvement as well. According to Takala's (1988) „latent trait” approach, composition is a hierarchic organisation of different components - experience, skills and knowledge. The model of *Flower* and *Hayes* (1980, 1981) describes those writing strategies that are used by experienced and amateur writers, and which are realised on a higher level by those with good composition skills. Writing is considered a recursive process, the phases of which are continuously repeated. *Bereiter* and *Scardamalia* (1987) the writing processes of amateur and professional writers are completely different the amateurs present their thoughts through a display of knowledge, while the professionals create the text through a process of knowledge transformation. The knowledge transformation process is not only a professional method of composition, but also a model for acquiring knowledge through composition, by reorganising and strengthening the knowledge. The composition skill develops in parallel with the integration of other skills, and the language, cognitive, moral development, social thinking, ability for data processing and the thinking strategies are all conditions that influence its formation and development. (Bereiter, 1980) According to the individual-environment integrated model (Hayes, 1996) composition is a matter of cognitive, affective, social and physical conditions, and writing is an act of communication, that requires the social context as a medium. The aim of Kellogg's (1996) model is to integrate the composition processes and data processing systems in a uniform system. The adaptation of Levelt's (1989) oral production model (van Wijk, 1999) emphasises the similarity between the written oral composition processes.

The aim of the present thesis is to evaluate the composition skill levels and improvement possibilities during the final year of study in the Transylvanian Hungarian elementary schools. Several international studies examined the composition skill levels (IEA, 1983) and text interpretation skill levels (PIRLS 2001, 2006) among 4<sup>th</sup> grade students, thus allowing a comparison of performances on international level. Romania has participated in the PIRLS 2001, 2006 surveys, in which there were no information regarding the Transylvanian Hungarian students.

The survey conducted by dr. Rita Pletl (Pletl, 1997, 2001) is a representative evaluation that comprised the whole Hungarian school network, and studied the quality

level of mother tongue performance according to the factors influencing education (region, type of settlement, teaching environment). The aim of the research is to find an answer to the following problems, questions:

- An evaluation of the composition skills among the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Hungarian students, through two national, representative surveys (1995-1996, 2005-2006), which allow comparison of the results.
- The effect of curriculum change (between 1995-2005) on the development of the students' composition skills.
- Studying the composition skills of students in the aspect of the different regions (block, transitional region, diaspora) from the point of view of dominant language use.
- The effects of the socio-economic background (education of parents) on the composition performance.
- Study of gender differences in the composition process.
- Study of the relation between the number of read books and the composition performance.
- Evaluation of the content differences of the aims of the main hero per regions.
- Analysing how well the personal stories are formed.
- Comparison of the traits of the selected and rejected fairy tale characters per region taking into account the dictionary of 10-11 years old students.

### **Applied method**

The study is based on the data of two, transverse section researches conducted on national level. The drawing of elementary students to partake in the study was done with echelon sampling based on the following parameters: distribution according to regions (block, transitional region, diaspora), the type of school (elementary, secondary, upper secondary), distribution according to counties, language of study, school environment (city, village).

The region is an important parameter because the students in Transylvanian students live and study in specific language and cultural environment. On a national level, the schools that have Hungarian as language of teaching or have Hungarian

sections are of the following proportion: diaspora: 10%, transitional region: 30%, block: 60%. The mathematical model developed for the drawing could not be applied in a precise way, because that would have meant that certain counties, where the number of schools with Hungarian section is low would have been left out. Thus, we have applied the following modified proportions: diaspora: 15%, transitional region: 32%, block: 53%. The schools that were drawn can be regarded as representative for the national situation.

In case of the evaluation done in 1995-1996 the participation rate was 56%, the number of evaluated papers was 1023, and in case of the 2005-2006 evaluation the participation rate was 52%, with 635 evaluated papers. The following counties have participated in the evaluation from the different regions: diaspora - Arad, Hunyad, Barssó, Máramaros, Temes, Arad, Szeben, in the *transitional region* Bihar, Szilágy, Szatmár, Kolozs, in the block region Kovászna, Hargita and Maros counties have provided papers for the evaluation.

Data regarding the distribution of participants according to gender is available only from the second evaluation, as the papers in the first evaluation were provided anonymously. 52, 6% of the evaluated population was male and 47, 2% was female. The distribution according to place of living was the following: 38, 7% in cities, 58, 9% in villages.

The evaluation was done through circular notes that specified the subject, the aim of the evaluation, the expected practical use, the method of organisation; it also contained the set of exercises, the deadline for submission, and information on how the exercises had to be handed out. Next to the exercise sheet, there were extra information on certain questions (in the 2005-2006 survey), like: use of language in the family, with friends, with relatives, and with neighbours, number of books read in Hungarian respectively in Romanian, number of teachers, selected and rejected characters and their traits. In the 2005-2006 study there were questions regarding text interpretation as well (summary of fairy tale, finding a proverb). The students had one hour for the composition.

The evaluation of the compositions were done by pairs of evaluators, by students of pedagogy who were previously instructed. The two independent arbiters analysed the compositions from the point of view of given details, and evaluation guide, evaluating the

overall impression, content, structure, language correctness, spelling, appearance of these writings.

The evaluation system was based on the IEA composition evaluation guide, these were modified according to the circumstances of the specific study and the artistic form of the tale. A 1-3 step scale was rendered to these, and within the scale the evaluation was made according to the following points:

1. *Overall impression*: holistic opinion of the arbitrary (Kádárné, 1990)
2. *Content*: expression of the message according to the conditions set by the given artistic form (Kádárné, 1990) It is important whether there is a correlation between the tale content and the title, whether there are elements that are characteristic to the type of the tale, how the characters are described and how the action is unfolded.
3. *Structure*: organisation of the text, proportioning, appropriateness for the artistic form. (Kádárné, 1990)  
It is important whether the structural characteristics of the tale are recognisable, whether the metonymical (based on the cause and effect relation) structure is applied, whether the order of events is noticeable, whether the change between the narrating and the dialogue parts is signalled.
4. *Style*: appropriate language form used for the given situation, variety (Kádárné, 1990)  
It is important whether the appropriate tone was selected for the artistic form, whether the fairytale phrases were used appropriately, the level of the narrator's tone, whether the sentence structures follow the rules of social dialogue.
5. *Language correctness*: following the rules regarding language correctness. (Kádárné, 1990)
6. *Spelling*: following the rules of spelling and punctuation (Molnár, 2002)
7. *Appearance*: organised style of the text (Vidákovich, 1990)

Since the correlation value of the evaluation of the two independent judges were appropriate, the calculations were done with the mean values given by the two coders. These values were introduced with three decimal precision, as the final point value of the compositions evaluated by categories.

The *hypotheses* of the thesis were the following:

H1: The reform of the educational system has a positive effect on the composition and text interpretation skills of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in all three regions (block, transitional region, diaspora).

H2: Differences regarding composition skills can be pointed out between the different regions (block, transitional region, diaspora). Due to more frequent use of the mother tongue the performance is best in the block region and decreases towards the diaspora.

H3: The social-economic status of the parents has an influence on the development of the composition and text interpretation skills.

H4: The frequency of reading has an influence on the development status of the composition skills.

H5: The goals of the main subject can be different in content per each region (block, transitional region, diaspora) due to the lifestyle differences.

H6: As a specific characteristic of the mental evolution, the autobiographical Self appears next to the fictive elements in the stories.

### **Specification of results in thesis format**

The results of the research can be summarised in the following points:

- The differences between the two surveys (1995-1996, 2005-2006) are significant regarding their evaluation categories for content, structure, style, spelling and appearance. There is an opposite tendency regarding language correctness. All the students who participated in the survey performed significantly better in the second evaluation, which proves that the reform of the educational system contributed to the better performances in composition.
- Based on the differences between regions in the first study (1995-1996) there was a significant difference between language correctness and appearance. There is a significant difference in language correctness between the block region and the transitional region, in the studied compositions the language correctness was better in the transitional regions. There was a significant difference in appearance between the diaspora and the block, in the latter the compositions were submitted in a better

- organised form. In the second evaluation there were no differences between the regions, there was only a slight tendency in the appearance category. We can presume that the reform of the educational system brought about not only better performances, but also a levelling out of the differences between these performances. In case of artistic form appropriateness differences were only observed in the 1995-1996 survey, in the 2005-2006 survey every category had similar results (artistic form was appropriate, artistic form was not appropriate, impossible to assess, reproduced tale).
- There was a significant difference between the different settlement types in the 2005-2006 survey in structure, style and appearance. In each evaluation category the results were significantly better in case of the city. In the 1995-1996 survey there were no such differences noticed.
  - Based on gender differences we found variances in spelling, appearance, finding proverbs and sentence numbers, in all these categories girls performed better than boys. Girls create compositions that are more correct, more organised and use more sentences. The explanation would be the fact that girls read significantly more Hungarian books than boys.
  - There were significant differences in performance categories based on the educational level of parents. The children whose father was unskilled performed much poorer than those whose parents belonged to the higher degree education, middle grade or skilled labourer category. The same difference can be noticed in case of the mother's education.
  - The correlation between the frequency of reading and written composition was proved in international studies as well. In our own study we also noticed a significant correlation between the composition performance and the number of books read in Hungarian.
  - The characteristics most often used for fairytale characters along the lines of identification or rejection, described by words most frequent in the 10-11 year old students' thesaurus (Cs. Czachesz, Csirik, 2002) are the following: good, clever, beautiful, bad, ugly, kind, small, nice, fast, diligent, strong, helpful, funny, wonderful, modest, lazy, courageous, fair, hungry, skilful, cheerful, rich, friendly, mean, envious, fat, lazy, enchanted, faithful.



- In the evaluation of the character's aim perspective there was a significant difference between regions. In case of the diaspora the aim representation of satisfaction, preservation and crisis is higher, and the categories of performance and enjoyment are less represented. In the transitional region the preservation and enjoyment are better represented and the performance, satisfaction and crisis is less represented. In the block region performance is better represented, and the preservation and crisis are less represented.
- In the case of the fairy tales evaluated in the 2005-2006 study the stories with a real base, written in third person, singular, real animal tales, self based enchantment stories, and the "clear" autobiographical stories were considered as part of the autobiographical fairy tale category, that were written in first person, singular. From the 72 evaluated story 77% were well composed with appropriate structural elements. Those that were not well composed the coda, the feedback into the present was missing.

## **Summary**

The research studies the levels of written composition skills in two comprehensive surveys taking into account the decisive factors in mother tongue teaching. The situation report based on the empirical research gives feedback about the performance of Hungarian mother tongue students who study in different regions, different types of schools; it also points out correlation between the curriculum objectives, the circumstances of teaching and the characteristics of the compositions. The results prove that the reform of the educational system has a beneficial on the development of composition skills, and on the levelling of the differences between regions. In case of language correctness the tendency is opposite to that of the expected, which proves that the students are not yet able to apply the grammar rules they have learned, and information is processed as isolated knowledge. The results regarding the type of settlement, the social-economic status of the parents, the number of read books prove that these background factors determine the development of composition skills. These all emphasise the necessity of differentiated education in schools.

Based on the results and the theoretical premises there is a possibility of modernisation of the language teaching process in the final year of the elementary school environment, where students from specific, minority groups study, also offering an appropriate method for the modernisation process.