From Reading Comprehension to Verbal Creativity – New Trends in Students' Response to Biographical Writings

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Abstract

A segment of literature in continuous expansion, texts of the biographical genre, represent a fertile ground for the development of communication competence due to their proximity to the referential, particularly in terms of understanding the written text. Drawing equally from fantasy and reality, journals, memoirs, autobiographies, and even autofictions bring to the forefront the way language operates, from the microstructural level of the word to the macrostructure of discourse and even meta-discourse, to name a certain reality. From this perspective, the current study aims to present a series of strategies that valorize this category of texts from the standpoint of communication competence, proposing several models of reception based on the staged realization of comprehension processes and an understanding of the poetic nature of language and how it can manifest its expressive resources in communication.

 Keywords: communication competence, linguistic competence, biographical text, reading comprehension processes

1 INTRODUCTION

The texts of the biographical genre, as Eugen Simion [1] calls this broad category of texts, journals, memoirs, autobiographies, autofictions, as well as interviews, memories, and impressions make up the literature of the author's existence, a type of discourse that exists in a space of paradox, where reality coexists with fiction. The first-person narration, as the scriptural matrix of these texts, leads to the overlapping of author-narrator-character discursive types, which presents the great advantage of authenticity, of delivering immediate experience, but it also has the disadvantage of introducing these categories of texts into the pattern of prose, of non-literature. Therefore, they have perhaps become circumspect to critics and even to writers who choose the path of fiction, as Mircea Anghelescu observed: "A more consistent look at universal and Romanian prose quickly shows us that autobiographical material melts more easily - although to different degrees - in works of fiction than in texts dedicated to the genre, such as memoirs, journals, or autobiographies proper." [2]

However, the decisive role that these texts play in the equation of any literature is unquestionable - the texts of the biographical genre thematize the most important element of literature - the author - always providing him with the irresistible pleasure of constructing his image according to a recipe with ingredients that are not always honourable, but always authentic and revealing for his image. These texts remain the first visit to the author's house, as Mircea Mihăieș also affirms: "Autobiography, a withdrawal of the author into himself, into his room and his time, no naivety of demonstration in his entire chronotope, I think it should begin somewhere very high up, from very beginning, to see, to understand how it emerges, how it seeps in, how it makes room, dilating the pages with more and more determination,

this damned ego, how it manages to discover itself, to look into its own eyes until clarity, until the clarification that analysts will bring much later." [3]

Despite being overlooked in the curriculum for high school, both at lower and upper levels, biographical texts are an integral part of literature studies during this period of education. By incorporating the personal development approach applied to the study of Romanian literature by Alina Pamfil[4], drawing on reception theories, and integrating literary texts into communication competence, these texts offer numerous advantages that justify their inclusion in a didactic corpus. Therefore, due to their ontological status, which places them in the liminal zones between referential and fictional, biographical texts can constitute, from the perspective of the integrated study of literature and language, a valuable resource for classroom activities. Additionally, the thematic spheres and the type of discourse adopted - subjective, in a semi-colloquial language, easier to understand for a reader in the process of experiencing - can turn biographical texts into fertile ground for practising communication skills. These primary functions are supplemented by others, common to all literature, but nuanced in the case of journals, memoirs, and autobiographies. The first of these refers to the ability of these texts to mediate reality, perceived and rendered subjectively, but in a coherent and nuanced manner, which can serve as a model for understanding the world and oneself. Often, biographical texts are the ones that faithfully reconstruct realities that are difficult to access due to temporal or spatial distancing, with the great benefit that the written pages implicitly mediate the world, making it fully intelligible, coherent, and meaningful.

From another dimension of these texts, the word claims its modelling function - from literature as a noble use of language to the patterns of configuration in discourse. The ability of literature to develop communication skills comes precisely from this area of language, from its ability to use language comprehensively, integrating all the combinatorial possibilities of words, all lexical categories, originating from different horizons and layers, viewed in synchrony or diachrony. Whether we are talking about linguistic patterns, textual structures, or discursive strategies, the biographical text sets them all in their highest form, highlighting the role that expressive tools have in communication. Although many biographical species do not advocate for "beautiful expression" by definition, they always have in mind a strategy of expression aimed at producing meaning, significance, and emotion.

2   METHODOLOGY

When analyzing biographical texts in terms of communication skills, it involves considering their connection to the two fundamental skills used in both spoken and written texts – comprehension and production. In this article, we will explore how these skills are incorporated into high school curriculum programs and provide examples of activities that focus on understanding autobiographical texts. We will draw on the theories and models of Jocelyne Gyasson and Claude Simard, educators and researchers in French language teaching techniques. They have a particular interest in methods for developing communication skills, especially in relation to the comprehension of written and oral texts.

The main goal of exercising comprehension is to enhance the mental processes involved in reading, with the aim of cultivating proficient readers who can effectively analyze various types of information. Through this process, readers strengthen their cognitive structures, such as their language knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as their affective structures, including their attitudes, interests, and emotions. The act of understanding itself

involves two steps: firstly, forming cohesive ideas by connecting personal experiences and long-term memory, thus creating a network that incorporates elements from the perceptual zone; secondly, selecting the relevant elements while disregarding the irrelevant ones, in order to construct coherent structures while deactivating others.

Jocelyne Giasson [5] provides a detailed description of the reading process by identifying the activated processes. This description (Table 1) is presented in a step-by-step manner and goes from understanding each sentence to establishing coherence at the statement and global level.

Table 1: Giasson's reading processes

Processes that are activated during reading:	Practising the necessary skills to understand the text:
Microprocesses (understanding information at the sentence level):	Word recognition Reading in groups of words Microselection
Integration processes (establishing connections between information in the text):	References Connectors Inferences
Macroprocesses (global comprehension of the text):	Main ideas Summary Text structure
Elaboration processes (the reader makes inferences not foreseen by the author):	Predictions Mental images Affective responses to the text Integration of knowledge Reflection
Metacognitive processes:	Identifying difficulties in understanding Improving comprehension

Another theoretical approach useful in exercising comprehension and understanding how language influences the act of communication is that of Claude Simard. The teacher and researcher in education sciences categorize communication competence into six components, as presented in *Éléments de didactique du français langue première*[6] :

1. Verbal Component - This component encompasses all aspects of language. It consists of a linguistic dimension, which involves knowledge of phonetics, vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. Additionally, it includes a textual dimension, which refers to the understanding and use of general rules for organizing a text, establishing logical connections between sentences and phrases, and identifying different textual structures such as narrative, descriptive, argumentative, explanatory, and dialogic. Lastly, it encompasses a discursive dimension, which involves the contextual use of language, registers, and rules of verbal interaction.

2. Cognitive Component - This component focuses on the intellectual operations involved in language production and comprehension, such as memorization, differentiation, classification, inference, and anticipation.

3. Encyclopaedic Component - This component aims to acquire knowledge of specific linguistic, textual, and discursive aspects related to various domains of human activity, such as history, science and technology, art, and more.

4. Ideological Component - This component emphasizes the ability to position oneself and respond to different ideas, values, attitudes, and principles conveyed through discourse.

5. Literary Component - This component involves literary references and the ability to explore verbal creativity.

6. Socio-Affective Component - This component encompasses beliefs, values, feelings, and attitudes that can influence one's verbal behaviour.

In consideration of Claude Simard's classifications in the reception of literary texts, the importance of the literary component in acquiring language skills and knowledge is evident. The first three components can be practised through exercises that eliminate linguistic, semantic, or referential difficulties encountered in the text but the last three components require an exercise of overall comprehension, which is achieved through reflexive autonomous effort after reading.

3   RESULTS

3.1   Giasson's model in reader response on biographical text

Through multiple uses of Giasson's model, it has been observed that it is an effective approach due to its division of the comprehension process into smaller steps. The following is an outline of an approach based on Jocelyn Giasson's classifications, specifically for a text fragment from "Șantier"[7] – a travel diary written by Mircea Eliade during his study visit to India. The goal of the didactic activity was to create a portrayal of the Indian culture by reading the text, through integration and elaboration processes, as these steps are necessary in allowing the reader to realize the cohesion of the text through statements that draw connections between sentences and phrases.

In the initial stage, known as the "breaking of the ice", a prediction guide was used. Students were asked to make predictions about various aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's life. The biographical issues were chosen to lead to the conclusion that Mircea Eliade's intention was to portray a great spirit of the Indian culture (e.g." Rabindranath Tagore was a Nobel Prize laureate." true/false; Although a poet, Rabindranath Tagore was a leader of a religious

movement in India." true/false) and to make students more curious about the text they were asked to read.

This step was followed by the text investigation stage, where students were required to make inferences by connecting the information in the text to their prior knowledge. The model used for this stage (Table 2) was meant to determine whether students interact with the text by associating its existing elements with those they already own and can associate with the present context.

Table 2: Inferences

The text says...	I know that...	I conclude/ infer that...
I immediately wrote down the conversation in a notebook specifically purchased from Calcutta...	Ex.: Calcutta is a city in India	Ex.: The meeting between the author and Tagore takes place in India.

In terms of forming a mental image (Table 3), our focus was on the students' ability to identify and remember important details from the text, rather than their artistic talents. As a process of elaboration, this stage allows the reader to go beyond the text and to create a connection between reading and visual representation, as they create a mapping of all the details and activate the working memory. This skill helped them to organize the information from the supporting text, leading them to make analogies and comparisons, decipher new meanings and flexibly integrate them into the personal map of meanings.

As the cognitive perspective on reading defines it, comprehension entails forming units of ideas in accordance with the reader's purposes, associating experiences and knowledge from long-term memory to form a network with elements in the perceptual area. Having already in mind the importance of the Nobel Prize and its value for universal recognition, students can relate this to the intention of the "Șantier" to portray a great spirit of Indian culture. Then, comprehension implies selection from the activation of relevant and irrelevant only of the elements that lead to the creation of a coherent structure (mental representations), deactivating the others. According to this step, the reader can establish its hierarchy within the informational field by positioning the information in main or subordinate structures. By synthesizing the information from the text and the jury's reasoning for awarding the Nobel Prize to Rabindranath Tagore in 1913, they were able to create a rough sketch of the poet's portrait as a way of structuring the information extracted from the text.

Table 3: Mental image

Please read the following text, which represents the jury's rationale for granting the Nobel Prize to poet Rabindranath Tagore in 1913, and then use the information to create a sketch of the poet's likeness.	
„...by virtue of his profoundly delicate, innovative, and exquisite verses, wherein he adeptly merged his poetic thoughts, conveyed in his unique English prose, seamlessly into the	Your drawing:

fabric of Western literary tradition." [9]

3.1 Verbal creativity as a component of communication competence

In practising the fifth component of Simard's classification, the selection of the text is of high importance. The expressive potential of language is particularly significant in literary texts, especially in terms of verbal creativity and literary style. This component is highlighted in poetic or descriptive texts, which offer numerous resources in this regard and can also be found in the biographical genre.

Simona Popescu's "Exuviile"[10]   provides a suitable field of work for exploring this direction. The text presents a true reading challenge as it is composed fragmentarily, reflecting the endless complexities of the human psyche, and adhering to the autofictional principle of giving words the initiative. The poetic aspect of language is another valuable element, aligning with the stylistic orientation of autofiction. Figures of sound, wordplay, significant repetitions, tropes, figures of construction, silences, and text repetitions can all be identified in the feminine syntax of the text, showcasing the resources of verbal creativity. Therefore, one of the activities in receiving the text can focus on this aspect of verbal creativity and how the literary component contributes to shaping the message of communication.

To initiate this activity, a reception grid can be used to monitor the affective response of students in the lower cycle of high school, who may not yet have fully developed skills in aesthetic reception. Students may find "Exuviile" intriguing, particularly with representative fragments that resonate with their own experiences of adolescence. The text requires increased attention to reading and challenges their ability to create mental images. The main approach can be to explore the linguistic level of the text, organizing discussions around different levels of language. At the semantic level, students can compare literal meanings with contextual meanings and the figurative meanings established through the use of words in autofictional discourse (Table 4). Unexpected combinations of words can be identified, superimposing the reality of language onto the reality of the world.

Table 4: Verbal creativity

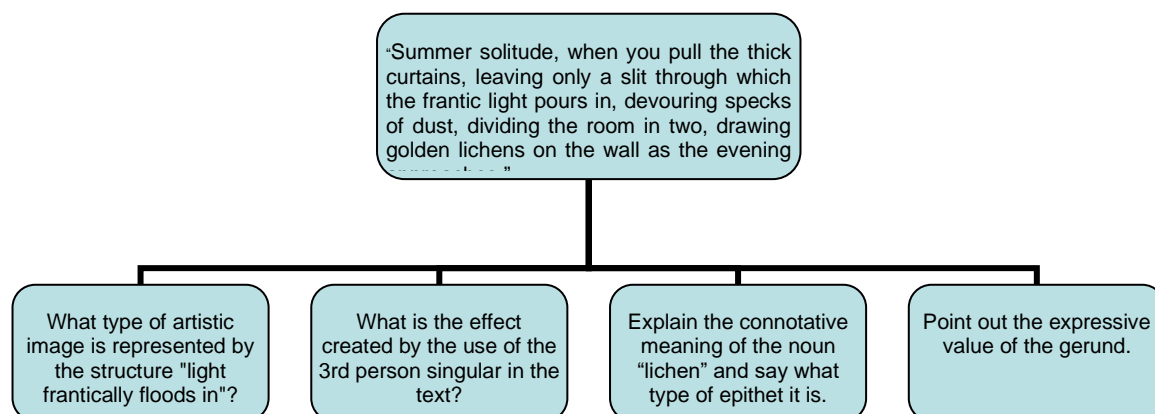| The literal meaning (dictionary meanings) – Transparency	The trigger word for creativity	Literary text – Opacity
"tender, delicate and soft"	**"fragile"**	*"fragile colours"*
"to settle at the bottom in the form of sediment", "to accumulate"	**"to deposit"**	*"colors that begin to deposit on things"*
"something that has cilia, "equipped with cilia"	**"ciliated"**	*"you project yourself in the form of a ciliated geography"*
"textile material obtained from coarse wool or animal hair beaten on a wooden paddle"	**"felt"**	*"all are made of felt among soft fibers"*

"shiny, as smooth as glass"	*"glassy"*	*"everything is coated and glassy"*

At the morphological and syntactic level, students will learn to recognize verb tenses and the impact of using second-person or elliptical predicate constructions. They will also analyse the significance of figures of speech and artistic imagery in supporting texts at the stylistic level, as demonstrated in the provided model – Fig.1. If creativity is equal to novelty and originality, students can observe that there are infinite ways to express creativity in discourse as there are infinite combinations of syntagms, lexis choices or syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices.

Another dimension of this analysis is the series of answers that might be given to questions like What is unusual in the language use? What is natural and unnatural in syntactic structure? What linguistic or textual changes prompt the changes in meaning? This way we can enhance the language awareness of the students and draw attention to the possibilities of linguistic creativity in discourse.

Fig.1: Poetic language in discourse

"Summer solitude, when you pull the thick curtains, leaving only a slit through which the frantic light pours in, devouring specks of dust, dividing the room in two, drawing golden lichens on the wall as the evening ..."

What type of artistic image is represented by the structure "light frantically floods in"?

What is the effect created by the use of the 3rd person singular in the text?

Explain the connotative meaning of the noun "lichen" and say what type of epithet it is.

Point out the expressive value of the gerund.

4   CONCLUSIONS

We consider that the biographical genre texts offer students a linguistic and (semi)fictional universe close to that of their reality, being more alike to current communication and its role in society, which represented an advantage in their easy acceptance by students, encouraging them to participate actively and responsibly in various interactions, respecting some conventions in communication. In the same measure, both strategies used in the reception and production stage of text can aim to practice all components of communication competence. The students are thus involved in interactions that simulate real communication contexts and we could integrate the literary text into our communication universe.

The use of teaching methods and aids focused on communication competence and less centred on the formation of cultural or aesthetic competencies is an appropriate approach for young students, at the beginning of the formation of their aesthetic reception skills. During the reflection stage, it is important to emphasize these elements to help students understand the importance of word choices in conveying and understanding messages. It also encourages

them to use language creatively in everyday conversations. Viewing literary texts through the lens of communicative competence is essential for preparing students for future cultural and aesthetic appreciation, acting as a valuable experiment. However, it is crucial to provide students with various contexts in which they can actively and responsibly engage in different interactions while respecting communication norms. Both the strategies used in understanding and producing texts can address all aspects of communicative competence, with a focus on the linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic components.

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