PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING/LEARNING THE WRITTEN FRENCH LANGUAGE FROM CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Abstract: First of all, I'll give the historical background to our way of asking the question of learning, that is considering the child's culture in the making, because learning is establishing one's culture. Then, I'll explain what I mean by the French word *réseaux*, which is the key-word, actually the key-stone, of the child's culture in the making. So, I'll show how the French elementary curriculum has specified this notion since 2002. Lastly, I'll say how children's involvement in a true writing dynamic significantly modifies a question which is so close to my heart: to make all the pupils succeed at school.

Key words: Children's literature, culture, elementary school, learning, making links, reading, réseaux, writing

French résumé. [Translation Laurence Pasa].
J'évoque tout d'abord le contexte historique ayant conduit à considérer la question de l'apprentissage de la lecture comme une entrée dans la culture. Ensuite, le terme réseaux est explicité dans la mesure où il est au cœur de l'émergence des conduites culturelles de l'enfant. Ce terme est d'ailleurs précisé dans les programmes d'enseignement en France depuis 2002. Enfin, je montre comment l'investissement des en-

fants dans des activités d'écriture dynamiques permet d'envisager autrement une question qui m'est chère: celle de la réussite scolaire de tous les enfants.

Portuguese resumo. [Translatation Pauloa Feytor-Pinto]
Antes de mais, apresentarei o quadro histórico do modo como encaro a questão da aprendizagem, isto é, considerando a cultura da criança na sua construção, pois aprender é estabelecer a própria cultura. Depois, explicarei o que entendo pela palavra francesa "réseaux" que é a palavra-chave, a pedra basilar da cultura da criança em construção. Mostrarei, portanto, como é que o currículo básico francês especificou esta noção, em 2002. Por fim, referirei como o envolvimento das crianças numa verdadeira dinâmica de escrita modifica significativamente uma questão que me é muito cara: fazer com que todos os alunos tenham sucesso na escola.

Polish. Streszczenie. [Translation Elzbieta Awramiuk].
Przede wszystkim, zarysuję tło historyczne naszej drogi do poruszania kwestii uczenia się, która traktuje je jako kulturę dziecięcą w trakcie rozwoju, ponieważ uczenie się jest kształtowaniem czyjejś osobistej kultury. Następnie wyjaśnię, co rozumiem przez francuskie słowo *réseaux*, które jest słowem-kluczem, tak naprawdę filarem kształtującej się dziecięcej kultury. Pokażę, w jaki sposób francuskie programy szkoły podstawowej realizują tę myśl od 2002 roku. Na koniec przedstawię, jak uczestnictwo dzieci w pisaniu (procesie dynamicznym) znacząco modyfikuje pytanie bliskie memu sercu: jak sprawić, aby wszystkie dzieci odnosiły sukcesy w szkole.

Greek. Περίληψη. [Translation Panatoya Papoulia-Tzelepi]
Κατ' αρχήν θα δώσω το ιστορικό πλαίσιο του τρόπου που ρωτούμε για τη μάθηση, δηλαδή το γίγνεσθαι της κουλτούρας του παιδιού, διότι μάθηση είναι η δημιουργία της κουλτούρας του καθενός. Έπειτα θα εξηγήσω τι εννοώ με τη γαλλική λέξη réseaux, η οποία είναι η λέξη-κλειδί, μάλλον ο θεμέλιος λίθος της δημιουργίας της κουλτούρας του παιδιού. Έτσι θα καταδείξω πώς το αναλυτικό πρόγραμμα του Δημοτικού Σχολείου στη Γαλλία έχει εξειδικεύσει και προσδιορίσει αυτή την αντίληψη από το 2002. Τέλος θα πω πώς η εμπλοκή των παιδιών σε αληθινή δυναμική γραψίματος διαφοροποιεί σημαντικά ένα αίτημα το οποίο είναι κοντά στην καρδιά μου: Όλα τα παιδιά να επιτύχουν στο σχολείο.

German. Zusammenfassung. [Translation Irene Pieper].
Zunächst umreiße ich den historischen Hintergrund für unsere Art und Weise, nach dem Lernen zu fragen, also die kindliche Kultur als Kultur im Werden zu verstehen, weil Lernen heißt, die eigene Kultur zu formieren. Anschließend werde ich das französische Konzept *réseaux* erläutern, das als ein Schlüsselbegriff für die kindliche Kultur im Werden fungiert. Ich werde demonstrieren, wie das französische Curriculum im Elementarbereich dieses Konzept seit 2002 spezifiziert hat. Schließlich werde ich ausführen, wie das Involviert-Sein von Kindern in authentischen Schreibprozessen deren Erfolgschancen in der Schule erheblich erhöht.

Dutch. Samenvatting. [Translation Tanja Janssen]
Eerst schets ik de historische achtergrond van onze kijk op leren, namelijk vanuit het perspectief van de cultuur in wording van het kind. Leren is op te vatten als het tot stand brengen van (eigen) cultuur. Daarna leg ik uit wat ik bedoel met het Franse woord *réseaux*, het sleutelbegrip, of eigenlijk de hoeksteen van de cultuur in wording van het kind. Ik laat zien hoe het curriculum van het Franse basisonderwijs dit begrip vanaf 2002 heeft uitgewerkt. Tenslotte laat ik zien hoe deelname van kinderen aan een waarlijke schrijfomgeving van belang is voor de kwestie die mij zozeer ter harte gaat: hoe alle leerlingen kunnen slagen op school.

1.   IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1 To promote a cultural subject

The work party I formed in 1981 was interested in the production of narrative texts at elementary school by children who were able to read, it means children aged 7 to 11. Through the implementation of our writing propositions, we identified the very

first source of children's difficulties at school: a lack of roots in a culture made of literary texts. This culture must not be a product of a fragmentary literary transmission, even if it could have short-time meaning. This culture really comes with an appropriation, an active making, an interactive establishment, made by the children themselves who are in the centre. This true culture can only be created in a long period.

For children who don't have access to such a culture at home, it has to happen early, at nursery school, in order to allow a real cultural share-out. The successive French curricula had worked on this principle but it had no real effect on schooling. For instance, in 1977, nearly thirty years ago, the French curriculum for nursery school recommended it laconically:

> "Dans beaucoup de milieux, la lecture est loin d'être une occupation familière et favorite; il appartient donc à l'école, et avant toute chose, de créer ce milieu culturel. / In a lot of environments, reading is far from being a familiar and favourite occupation; so school has to create this cultural environment".

Actually we had to wait for the year 2002 to read on the new nursery school curriculum that two important cultural objectives were developed in two successive points which are: "Découvrir les cultures orales. / Discovering oral cultures" and "Se construire une première culture littéraire. / Making a first literary culture".

As early as in the 80's, our working party has attempted to clarify and to describe some processes which have cultural making at the centre:

- planning every day substantial times when the teacher reads stories to the children and reads them again. To sum up, it means to take time;
- turning the nursery form into a cultural place. To sum up, it means to organize the space. What makes the success of a child possible is not the toys he plays with (like dolls or small cars) during his nursery schooling. What makes his success possible are the places where his culture can be in the making, it means where the child becomes a cultural subject. That's why we have to give a very important place to books in the nursery classroom. Those moments and those spaces are a proof of the ambition of a strategy of success. Those books allow great imaginary projections, in particular for children who don't have them at home. Actually, books always turn out to be more interesting than toys which are progressively neglected.

We have the same logic for the years of primary school which are called "cycle des apprentissages fondamentaux / cycle of fundamental learning" for children aged 5 to 8. We don't consider the access to the written language as a technical problem but as a fundamentally cultural establishment. On this account, besides literary texts (like albums, tales, nursery rhymes, poems), there are informative books (like zoological albums, encyclopaedic books, documentaries, painters' monographs, etc.). A daily dense relationship between children and cultural objects induces some cultural attitudes: they wish to listen again to the books they know, they wish to read them by themselves, they want to "know more" about the books. They're involved in those cultural elaborations.

In such a context, children take the initiative in writing! That's a new power they feel they begin to have, and that's an irreplaceable pleasure to discover that power.

So, our writing propositions have increased: children aged 5 to 8 have written for instance and several times an additional sequence in a repetitive tale, they've written a nursery rhyme, they've written the text on the back cover of an album, they've written the identity card of an animal, etc. As early as the year 1987 to 1990, we have worked on our first books and, in that way, we could link together the texts children met and wove, and our short and various enough writing propositions.

1.2 No cultural subject without thinking by making réseaux

It was the time when writing "like a writer" started to be in fashion. But, and still today, this activity consists in giving a text and its main features, then asking children to do the same thing, to write in the same way... The first problem lies in the fact that a child who had difficulties at school immediately failed in such an activity. The second problem lies in the fact that such an activity deeply misrepresents the idea of a cultural establishment. To help children find their way into the texts, we have to mark it out with literary references. Those references are effective only if children are given a lot of them in a long period. In that way, they could make links and establish ties.

I'm not using the English word "network" to translate réseaux because this is much more than a network: this is a child's brain work... So, I'm keeping the French word réseaux without literal translation but I'll explain this concept. When a child meets children's literature and works of art, he makes intellectual links and emotional ties between himself and the books or works he meets. That's the way he weaves his culture like the spider spins its web... When The Little Prince asks the fox what "tame" means, the fox answers: " It is an act which is too often neglected. It means to establish ties". That's how children progressively elaborate a system – many systems – made of cultural relationship, made of that way of thinking. Learning is establishing one's culture by making réseaux.

Our way of asking the question of learning has been inspired by the epistemological trends of the 20th century, I mean the "theory of systems" and the "method of complexity". This approach can concern a priori all the areas of knowledge. We don't want an inherited school from history, based on the transmission of compressed and reduced knowledge to its simplest elements. What we want is a cultural school, where children establish complex competences by activating many links, which can only be possible if this schooling has ambitious and cultural preoccupations.

In this way, we have to think out the connection between reading and writing in such a context that gives meaning to it, that finalizes it, that makes it fully efficient. Such a context is considering schooling as a cultural establishment. That's why we have entitled our first books: *Lire et écrire: des apprentissages culturels / Reading and writing: cultural learnings.*

2.   READING TEXTS IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH ONE'S CULTURE BY MAKING *RÉSEAUX*

For the very first time, reading texts by making *réseaux* was recommended in the publications of the state education system in 1997. It was in the selection of the *1001 books for school*. The right quotation is:

> "Apprendre à lire, c'est rassembler peu à peu les éléments d'une culture personnelle. Celle-ci implique que l'enfant lecteur apprenne à mettre en relation les textes les uns avec les autres. [Learning to read means gradually gather the elements of a personal culture which implies that the reader child learns how to make links between the texts he reads] "

On the current curriculum, published in the year 2002, literary education has an important place, particularly for children aged 8 to 11. The curriculum says: "Pour que l'élève puisse acquérir des références culturelles, il importe que les lectures ne soient pas abordées au hasard, mais se constituent, tout au long du cycle, en réseaux ordonnés. / To make pupils acquire cultural references, it is important that they read books by making well-ordered *réseaux* throughout the cycle".

Because we have jointed for a long time culture and *réseaux*, we had to be fully satisfied with the new curriculum in the year 2002... But recent text-books which are supposed to apply the curriculum are the expression of a misinterpretation which we had sensed because of the term "well-ordered" next to the word *réseaux*. I mean that a lot of text-books often propose, at the end of a didactic sequence, a grouping books by categories, under the title of *réseaux*, even if it is a misinterpretation.

Now I'm taking for instance the text book *A livre ouvert CM1* (*Open book* for 9 years old children) published by Nathan in 2005. Each chapter ends with a page whose title is "Books in *réseaux*" and illustrates these two main approaches:

- some thematic grouping books, which don't correspond to any identifiable literary preoccupation. I'm taking for instance this extract called "Autour des premières amours / About first loves" which proposes five titles as a complement of the extract (that children have read before) from *Ben est amoureux d'Anna = Ben is in love with Anna*, by Peter Härtling

- some grouping books which pretend to have literary preoccupations. I'm taking as an example this extract called "Autour du vrai Sherlock Holmes / About the true Sherlock Holmes" which gives some parodies presenting the famous detective.

I must lay stress on the fact that those grouping books are very different from what we call *réseaux*. If you want to make pupils understand the different presentations of a same character, it has to happen in a long period with a comparative approach which has to obey these following principles.

- First of all, you have to put into circulation a lot of detective stories, which give children a clear idea of this narrative genre. Children read by themselves in order to exchange their feelings, in order to read loud and clear some extracts they choose (as speech production training). The teacher regularly reads detective books to create some roots of a shared culture.

- Then, children have to compare the detective characters they meet in the books: by contrast, they understand there are different examples, different types of detectives. That's the way the identity of each one appears.
- Only in such a context, where many "Sherlock Holmes" by Conan Doyle are read by children (different editions are within the reach of pupils) it becomes easy to understand when an author plays with the main character by making allusions, by sending veiled messages to the reader, by using re-writing processes, by making parodic transpositions, etc.

We therefore defend a quantitative approach of literary reading. Are children taking risks of scattering and confusion? No, they're not if we make a daily effort to help them establish *réseaux*. In such a context, made of a dense cultural establishment with complex interactions, pupils are able at the same time to make links connected with a genre, with some narrative features, with enunciative aspects, with writing processes, with syntactic or lexical choices... We have always written *réseaux* in the plural because of this plurality of simultaneous perspectives.

The alternative can be formulated like that: either we accept this profusion which has to be well-ordered, as a learning dynamic, or we only read the few books which allow to make pre-programmed links.

Another problem lays in the use of one only book to teach one only notion. I'm taking for instance the view point which has been a classic notion in the narrative didactic for many years. The prevailing didactic approach needs a model text in order to work on the aimed notion. So, it's fashionable today in France to work on *Voices in the park* by Anthony Browne = *Une histoire à quatre voix* (*A four voices story* as a literal translation). It's a story about a walk in a park which is successively related by 4 characters: one middle-class mother and her little son, one unemployed father and his little daughter.

So it's fashionable to work on the view point in *Voices in the park*, it's up to date to "exploit" (that's the word) the album right up to reach saturation point. A lot of children have written and still write a fifth voice. There is nothing in it for pupils (who can't take any more voices in the park...) nor for literary culture.

On the contrary, children must be lead to a profitable dialogue between a lot of ways of presenting the view point. So children will be given enough books (instead of one) and the teacher will read some of those. For instance:

- For young children, we have *Le déménagement* (*Moving*) by Michael Rosen et Sophy Williams, and *Le chat de la maison* (*The house cat*), by Helen Cooper. These books are two different stories about moving, seen by the cat. Another book is *La vérité sur l'affaire des trois petits cochons* (*The true story of the Three Little Pigs !*) by Jon Sciezska and Lane Smith: it is a spicy re-writing of the traditional tale, seen by an inoffensive wolf, so inoffensive!
- For different ages, we have *Le journal de Lucie = Lucy's diary* (*Dear Diary*) by Sarah Fanelli. This story is successively related by the little girl, by a chair, by a spider, by a firefly, by a knife and a fork, by a dog called Boubou and by a ladybird.

- More difficult is *Je m'appelle Alice* (*My name is Alice*) by Martine Delerm. This story is an evocation of Alice's loneliness: she's dreaming of Lewis and of the Wonderland he is creating for her.

Those few titles are enough to show that it is always possible to propose to children aged 7 or 10, some books which are going to interact, by making children ask each other questions, notice and compare elements. This is a true learning dynamic which can't be reduced to the traditional teacher's questions.

I must lay stress again on the fact that cultural learning behaviours are more authentic if children have to establish the view point notion by themselves. It means that they abstract this notion in a comparative process which needs a long period and includes stories where the view point is not marked. In that example and in the former one (about detective stories), you can see that the quantity turns into quality thanks to the collective intellectual establishment of likenesses and contrasts between the texts, which is *réseaux*, because this learning dynamic is deeply rooted in an experience of the texts.

3.   THE WRITING DYNAMIC IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

What about the articulation of reading and writing? In prevailing practices, writing seems to be an extension of reading, as a kind of evaluation, at the end of a teaching sequence. In the text-book I showed you in the second part of my speech *A livre ouvert* (*Open book*), the chapter about detective stories ends with a page whose title is "Rédiger une histoire policière / How to write a detective story". The first step is "Rechercher des idées / Finding ideas", the second one is "Organiser le récit / Organizing the narrative" and the last one is "Rédiger le texte / Writing up the text". Who can believe that such a page could ever make pupils succeed in writing a detective story (which is a complex genre) after a few hours spent on the text-book?

We lay stress on the importance of writing situations in children's involvement. In order to develop prolific interactions between reading and writing, we must consider writing practices, particularly writing plans, as a privileged way of creating a dynamic to learn the written language.

In the example about detective stories, what makes writing legitimate and necessary are a lot of books (read by children or by the teacher), a lot of times for comparison between the books and for *réseaux*. Finding ideas, organizing the narrative and writing up the text actually are problems which are an opportunity of reading the books again and again. This work takes a long time. I maintain that those rereadings require authentic literary questions, like an author wonders how to write, because those rereadings are called by true writing problems.

Now I'm taking again the example from *Voices in the park* in order to show you how the writing plan can come. As I said before, it's fashionable today to ask children to write a fifth voice. Nothing in this album by Anthony Browne can bear out such a proposition. It's not the same mistake as in *A livre ouvert* (*Open book*), but it's also a mistake because it can't make children write anything interesting !

To make children succeed in a view point writing, we want to help them appropriate several ways of writing the view point. It needs more than one only book.

Voices in the park has to interact with other texts like those I mentioned in the second part of my speech. Other books also are different kinds of specific narrative: for instance some personal diaries of fiction. Here are three of them which are in the list of the 300 books for the third cycle:

- Journal d'un chat assassin (Diary of a killer cat), by Anne Fine
- Mon je me parle (My I'm talking to myself), by Sandrine Pernush
- Je t'écris, j'écris (I'm writing to you, I'm writing), by Geva Caban

There's a big difference between the fifth voice from *Voices in the park* and this reading practice by making *réseaux*. With reading by making *réseaux*, children are given the means to make their texts take the form they want (with the view point they choose). Actually children feel like writing their own diary...

We can go even further. In *Escales* (*Calls*) by Rascal and Louis Joos, the few days before the Titanic was wrecked are related in a diary and also in a sketch book. It's an opportunity of following a new track, which articulates imaginary diaries and works of plastic arts. Profitables links with other references can be woven. For instance:

- Le naufrage du Zanzibar (The wreck of the Zanzibar), by Michael Morpugo
- La fabuleuse découverte des Iles du Dragon (The Unprecedented Discovery of the Dragon Islands) by Kate Scarborough
- Les derniers Géants (The last Giants), by François Place. It's not a diary but it's a story about an explorer who keeps a personal diary, with also drawing boards.

From the diary to the travel book, an idea is born among the children in the classroom: they want to write an imaginary travel book. Each pupil maps out his itinerary on a photocopied planisphere, then imagines to meet some pirates, to weather a storm, to find an island. And many other events. The materiality of the support is taken into account: the reference books induce plastic arts researches, it means a real work on the books considered as objects...

Very different now are the questions which are the concern of the mastery of the written language:

- In the shared cultural space of the classroom, interactions grow in number, more and more ideas are exchanged. A true writing dynamic is set up.
- This dynamic has some needs: rereading by the teacher, taking the initiative out of school in reading and rereading by children, looking for some extracts as an answer to identified writing problems (for instance the view point).
- Little by little, the writing work and the work on language merge together when children find the phrase structures which are stylistic processes, when they take an inventory of the lexical fields, etc.

When the writing plan has a real meaning, children are involved. All the aspects of the mastery of the written language are concerned in a perspective where we take into account the enunciative aspects, the features of a genre and the textual components. Phrase grammar actually is a continuous writing tool.

From one year to the next, cultural references are diversified. So are the writing plans which are based on oral cultures and children's literature. At the end of Elementary School, all the children should have established some efficient cultural representations, they should have written and read again and again a lot of tales, leg-

ends, detective stories, fantasy stories, diaries of fiction and a lot of various poetical texts.

To conclude, work on the written language from children's literature means establish a coherence throughout Primary School (which is in France nursery school and elementary school). This coherence obeys some fundamental principles:

- First of all, children must be given enough literary books: quantity is the first proof of a strategy of success.
- The texts are chosen in order to interact, in order that children weave those interactions.
- Then, the idea of a writing plan emerges from this pleasure in reading and making *réseaux*.
- Thanks to this writing dynamic, more and more books are read again and again, in order to make *réseaux* which can be an answer to the writing questions born during the writing plan.
- In the context of such a complex dynamic, children can observe the written language in a reflexive way, as it is recommended on the curriculum. It can have a real meaning and be efficient only in this context.

Only under those fundamental conditions, which also are founder conditions, all the pupils will be able to join a dynamic of success. And I would like to say that it is an inexpressible satisfaction to see children who used to have difficulties at school become involved in writing, in an existential way, and assert that they would be writers...

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