POETRY READING AND WRITING: ENHANCING LITERACY IN LESS PROFICIENT READERS OF FIVE TO EIGHT YEARS

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Abstract. This article sets out to demonstrate the possible links between poetry and the acquisition of literacy skills, especially in less proficient learners. First we examine poetic and psychological theory to show how poetry responds to both requirements of learning to read: becoming other and connecting with the function of language by adopting a semi-objective position. Lacking somewhat in support from the official programmes in France, we have tried to collect data from expert and less-expert teachers as well as from children in difficulty, and to relate this to the reality of students' oral or written poetic compositions, which are far richer than they might appear. The first comparisons are encouraging, despite the fact that poetic didactics is, to a large extent, neglected in this country.

Keywords: reading, poetry, awareness, self image, linguistic abilities, less proficient students

Chinese
[Translation Shek Kam Tse]
標題: 詩歌閱讀及寫作：提升5至8歲能力稍遜讀者的讀寫能力

摘要:

本篇文章闡釋了詩歌和讀寫能力的習得之間的關聯，尤其是針對能力稍遜的學童。首先研究員會探討詩歌和心理學的理論，展示詩歌如果對應「學會閱讀」的兩項要求：採取一個次目標，把語言的運用功能轉換，並把兩種功能互相聯繫成來轉變成語言運用的焦點。法國的中央課程缺乏支援的情況下，研究員嘗試從專業及非專業的教師和具有學習障礙的學生收集資料，把資料與學生的實際口講和書寫詩歌作品互相連繫，發現這些資料所包含的意義十分豐富。雖然詩歌教學在這個國家不受重視，但這次的詩歌教學的比較研究，結果令人鼓舞。

關鍵詞: 詩歌、覺識、自我形像、語言學知識、能力稍遜的學生

Dutch
[Translation Tanja Janssen]

TITEL. Poëzie lezen en schrijven: het bevorderen van geletterdheid bij 5- tot 8-jarige zwakke lezers.

SAMENVATTING. Dit artikel gaat in op de mogelijke verbanden tussen poëzie en het verwerven van geletterdheid, met name bij zwakke leerders. Eerst gaan we in op theorieën over poëzie en op psychologische theorieën, om te laten zien hoe poëzie aan beide voorwaarden voor het leren lezen voldoet: een ander worden en verband leggen met de functie van taal door het innemen van een semi-objectieve positie. Zonder veel ondersteuning van de officiële programma's in Frankrijk, hebben we getracht gegevens te verzamelen, zowel van ervaren en minder ervaren docenten als van kinderen met leerproblemen. Deze gegevens hebben we gerelateerd aan authentieke, mondelinge en schriftelijke gedichtjes van kinderen, die veel rijker zijn dan ze op het eerste gezicht lijken. De eerste bevindingen zijn bemoedigend, ondanks het feit dat poëzie-onderwijs grotendeels verwaarloosd wordt in dit land.

TREFWOORDEN: lezen, poëzie, bewustzijn, zelfbeeld, taalvaardigheden, zwakke leerlingen

French
[Translation the authors and Laurence Pasa]

TITRE. Lecture et écriture de la poésie: favoriser l'apprentissage de l'écrit des enfants de 5 à 8 ans en difficultés.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article voudrait montrer les liens possibles entre la poésie et l'apprentissage de la langue écrite, notamment pour les enfants en difficulté. Nous interrogeons d'abord la théorie poétique et psychologique pour montrer que ce qui fait événement dans le poème correspond aux deux impératifs de l'apprenant lecteur : devenir autre et s'attacher au fonctionnement de la langue en adoptant une position de mi-distance. Faute d'appui solide dans les textes officiels français, nous avons essayé de collecter des données auprès d'enseignants « ordinaires », d'enseignants « experts », et d'enfants en difficulté, et de les confronter à la réalité des créations poétiques orales ou écrites d'élèves de classes expérimentales plus riches qu'il n'y paraît. Les premières mises en relation sont encourageantes malgré une didactique de la poésie largement défaillante dans ce pays.

MOTS-CLÉS : lecture, poésie, conscience, image de soi, compétences linguistiques, élèves en difficultés

Greek
[Translation Panatoya Papoulia Tzelepi]

Τίτλος. Διαβάζοντας και γράφοντας ποίηση Προώθηση του γραμματισμού σε λιγότερο ικανούς αναγνώστες.

Περίληψη. Το άρθρο αυτό επιχειρεί να δείξει τους πιθανούς δεσμούς μεταξύ της ποίησης και της απόκτησης του γραμματισμού, ειδικά σε λιγότερο ικανούς μαθητές. Αρχικά εξετάσαμε τις ποιητικές και ψυχολογικές θεωρίες για να δείξουμε ότι η ποίηση απαντά και στις δύο απαιτήσεις της εκμάθησης της ανάγνωσης: Στο να γίνει κανείς κάποιος άλλος και στο να συνδεθεί με τις λειτουργίες της γλώσσας με την υιοθέτηση μιας ημι-αντικειμενικής στάσης. Επειδή υπήρχε κάποια έλλειψη υποστήριξης από τα επίσημα προγράμματα στη Γαλλία, επιχειρήσαμε να συλλέξουμε δεδομένα από έμπειρους κα λιγότερο έμπειρους δασκάλους καθώς και από παιδιά που αντιμετώπιζαν δυσκολίες, και να τα συσχετίσουμε με την πραγματικότητα των ποιητικών τους συνθέσεων, γραπτών και προφορικών, οι οποίες είναι πολύ πλουσιότερες από τις αναμενόμενες. Οι πρώτες συγκρίσεις είναι ενθαρρυντικές, παρά το γεγονός ότι η διδασκαλία της ποίησης έχει παραμεληθεί σε μεγάλο βαθμό σε αυτή τη χώρα.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: ανάγνωση, ποίηση, επίγνωση, αυτο-εικόνα, γλωσσικές ικανότητες, λιγότερο ικανοί μαθητές.

Italian
[Translation Francesco Cavigli and Manuela Delfino]

TITOLO. Scrivere e leggere la poesia: migliorare le competenze di lingua scritta in lettori meno competenti tra i cinque e gli otto anni

SINTESI. Questo articolo si propone di dimostrare i possibili nessi tra la poesia e l'acquisizione di abilità di scrittura, specialmente in bambini meno competenti. Per farlo, prima di tutto, esaminiamo la teoria nel campo della poesia e della psicologia per dimostrare come la poesia risponda ad entrambi i requisiti necessari per imparare a leggere: divenire altri e connettersi con le funzioni della lingua adottando una posizione semi-oggettiva. In mancanza di un supporto dai programmi scolastici ufficiali emanati in Francia, abbiamo provato a raccogliere i dati sia da docenti più o meno esperti che dai bambini in difficoltà e a collegarli con la realtà delle composizioni poetiche scritte e orali degli studenti, che sono molto più ricche di quanto non possa sembrare. I primi dati di confronto sono incoraggianti, malgrado la didattica della poesia sia estremamente carente in Francia.

PAROLE CHIAVE: lettura, poesia, consapevolezza, immagine di sé, competenze linguistiche, studenti con difficoltà

Polish
[Translation Elzbiéta Awramiuk]

TITUŁ. Czytanie i pisanie poezji: poprawianie umiejętności czytania i pisania u mniej biegłych czytelników w wieku od pięciu do ośmiu lat

STRESZCZENIE. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie potencjalnych związków między poezją a przyswajaniem umiejętności czytania i pisania, szczególnie przez mniej biegłych uczniów. Najpierw analizujemy teorię poetycką i psychologiczną, aby pokazać, jak poezja odpowiada na takie potrzeby uczących się czytać, jak stawanie się innym i łączenie się z funkcją języka poprzez adoptowanie półobiektywnych pozycji. Odczuwając brak wsparcia w oficjalnych programach we Francji, staraliśmy się gromadzić dane zarówno od doświadczonych i mniej doświadczonych nauczycieli, jak i od dzieci z trudnościami, a także odnosić je do uczniowskich mówionych i pisanych utworów, które były o wiele bogatsze niż mogłoby się wydawać. Pomimo faktu, że dydaktyka poezji we Francji w dużym zakresie jest zaniedbywana, pierwsze porównania wypadają zachęcająco.

SŁOWA-KLUCZE: czytanie, poezja, świadomość, wyobrażenie o sobie, umiejętności lingwistyczne, mniej biegli uczniowie.

Portuguese
[Translation Paulo Feytor Pinto]

TITULO. Leitura de poesia e escrita: a promoção da literacia em leitores fracos, com cinco a oito anos de idade

RESUMO: Este artigo procura mostrar a relações possíveis entre a poesia e a aprendizagem da língua escrita, especialmente em crianças com dificuldades. Primeiro, reflectimos sobre a teoria poética e psicológica para mostrar como a poesia dá resposta aos dois imperativos da aprendizagem da leitura: tornar-se outro e adoptar algum distanciamento relativamente ao funcionamento da língua. Dada a falta de apoio sólido dos textos oficiais franceses, procurámos colher dados junto de professores "normais", de professores "especialistas" e de alunos com dificuldades, confrontando-os com criações poéticas orais ou escritas de alunos de turmas experimentais, mais ricas do que à primeira vista poderia parecer. As primeiras comparações são encorajadoras apesar da deficiente didáctica da poesia praticada no nosso país.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: leitura, poesia, consciência, auto-imagem, competências linguísticas, alunos com dificuldades.

Spanish
[Translation Ingrid Marquez]

TÍTULO. Leer y escribir poesía: mejorando las habilidades de niños de cinco a ocho años que tienen dificultades para la lecto-escritura

RESUMEN. Este artículo pretende demostrar una posible relación entre la poesía y la adquisión de habilidades de lecto-escritura, especialmente para los estudiantes menos capaces. Primero examinamos la teoría poética y psicológica para demostrar cómo la poesía cumple con los dos factores necesarios para aprender a leer: volverse "otro" y conectarse con la función del lenguaje al adoptar una posición semi-objetiva. Dada cierta deficiencia en apoyo de parte de los programas oficiales en Francia, hemos recopilado datos de maestros expertos y menos experimentados y también de niños con dificultades; hemos comparado estos datos con las composiciones poéticas orales y escritas producidas por dichos niños, las cuales resultan ser mucho más ricas de lo que puedan parecer a primera vista. Las comparaciones iniciales son alentadoras a pesar de que en este país, en gran medida falta una didáctica de la poesía.

PALABRAS CLAVE : lectura, poesía, conciencia, auto-imagen, habilidades lingüísticas, estudiantes con dificultades

INTRODUCTION

There is currently a contradictory tendency in mother tongue didactics in France: while youth literature is being more strongly promoted at school than previously, the teaching of literacy, and especially reading, has clearly become separated from literature (Official Programmes, 2002[1]). This tendency is reinforced by the fact that literary genres are not given equal weight; poetry has been superseded by narrative as the main genre taught at school (Official Programmes, 2002). We, on the contrary, wonder whether poetry could help create a link between literature and the teaching of reading at primary school for students aged 5-8.

It is certainly time to reinstate poetry, not only classic poetry, but modern, sound poetry[2], graphic poetry, and to try to illustrate the two main points of our argument: modern poetry is able to highlight almost all the linguistic components we need to teach literacy, while stimulating attention to language; second, most primary pupils seem to enjoy poetry[3], and especially the less proficient readers. For these pupils, is it sufficient to emphasize the separate linguistic components of phonics and syntax, or should another more indirect, more implicit means be explored, which would consider not only the effects but the sources of difficulties?

First we will look at the theory behind the use of poetry as a linguistic and psychological tool, then show that a didactic method based on creativity is able to initiate a more positive attitude towards language and reading. We shall argue in two ways, first show theoretically that poems are a good linguistic and psychological tool; second, that a didactic method based on creativity is able to initiate a more positive attitude to language and reading. Two types of investigation are possible, quantitative tests or specific case studies. Both will be used here.

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[1] *Qu'apprend-on à l'école élémentaire? 2006-2007 – Les Programmes, CNDP, XO éditions*
[2] *Sound poetry (poésie sonore) has been created in France these last forty years by major poets like H. Chopin and B. Heidsieck*
[3] *Our testing*

1. READING AND POETRY: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

1.1. Cognitive reading perspective

What is accepted as *a minima* now by all cognitive researchers (Romdhane, Gombert, Belajouza, 2003, for a summary) is that the knowledge of word and sentence linguistic components is the main ability needed to begin reading at around 5-7 years. The second point most of them agree on is the requirement of consciousness, especially of the grapho-phonemic constitution of European languages, before and while learning to read. It means that reading beginners must have understood that spelling is based on alphabetic principle, that oral words are made of different phonemes, and they must be able to distinguish many of them. What some French researchers insist on is to consider the grapho-phonemic consciousness not as the only crucial requirement: Gombert (1990, 2000) extends metalinguistic knowledge to morphology (Gombert, 2003), syntax and pragmatics, but limits it to "epilinguistic knowledge". Total conscious reflexivity about the alphabetic spelling system, according to Gombert, would be almost impossible at five or six and cannot be considered as a requisite; only skilled use based on games and comparison would occur at this age, which he calls "epilinguistic care". Chauveau (2001, 2004) on the other hand tries to find a common ground between the cognitive phonemic side and the top-down "cultural" side, based on global or semi-global text reading (Goodman, 1976, Smith, 1980), which was theoretically over-ridden in France in the seventies and eighties, but remains important, at least in the didactic practices up to now. So even if the last official programmes (2002-2007) insist on the systematic learning of phonics and spelling, even if many researchers consider metalinguistic knowledge (or the level below that) as crucial, most researchers and teachers remain very cautious about the precise methods to be used in class. Therefore some of them try to find a balance between new technical and former cultural injunctions.

1.2. Poetry as a linguistic object

Poetry is a matter of words: in poetry, words are seen and heard partly for themselves. What is a run-on line if not a stop after a word, which breaks the syntactical process for a while, and obliges one to consider it differently, partly for itself? The contemporary poet André du Bouchet talks about a "half turn"[4] ("demi-tour"): poetry is less linear to read than narrative; one stops after words; during the pauses one remembers what has been read or heard. Through verse with regular syllabic patterns, phonic stresses and rhymes, and in modern poetry, through serial occurrences and special graphic effects, the notions of letter, phoneme, syllabic rhyme and attack[5], the syllable itself and lexical segmentation, appear as if on stage, and can be emotionally felt and mentally registered. So what is considered by cognitive re-

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[4] *Bouchet, A. (du), Pourquoi si calmes (1996) Fata Morgana, pp. 13 &29.*
[5] *Inside of syllable, cognitive research calls "attack" the first phonic group, and "rhyme" the second; so in "hard", the attack would be "h", and the rhyme "ard", in "cruel", the attack "cr", the rhyme, "uel".*

searchers as the main point in the reading process shows up clearly in poetry, as if through a magnifying glass.

Second, poetry is a matter of syntax, too. There are two kinds of syntax organizing poetry. First, standard sentence syntax, of course: two events, at least, catch the eye – and the ear – repetition, as mentioned by Jakobson (1977), because poetry may emphasize serial arrangement, and then syntactical expectation, especially in the run-on line. The second kind is "plural syntax". To be more exact, four different units interplay in poetic composition: 1) the poem as a whole (Meschonnic, 1989, 1995), 2) the line, 3) the sentence, and 4) a kind of "moving unit" based on serial prosody and repetition of the same phonemes and rhymes (Dessons & Meschonnic: 1998). Each unit gets its own punctuation, black, white or phonic (Favriaud, 2004b), its own syntax, standard and linear, or "out of the line" and vertical (up-down or down-up) (Favriaud, 2003). Of course, young students cannot catch completely and precisely these four kinds of syntax and resulting plural semantics, but their emotion or their surprise may allow them to note some features. So if not the complete syntactical awareness, at least the beginning of awareness may be initiated by poetry as well. Perhaps only the syntactical repetition or funny (in both senses of the word) arrangement will reach them. But the point is that the young students could get in touch with it emotionally, and, implicitly, the different organisations of words could convey meaning effects in a pleasing and reflexive mood.

Third, poetry is a matter of semantics and interpretation. In poetry, something very undefinable and mysterious appears, which allows personal and subjective meaning, because there are several active syntaxes and many ways of understanding and getting involved. Of course all the meanings and interpretations are neither final nor equal; it is a difficult task for a young student to tackle by himself and, moreover, to start building syntactical awareness. Therefore the organisation of the class on the pattern of an "intersubjective community" (based on Tauveron's narrative "*communauté d'interprétation*" – Tauveron, 2002) could lead easily to the comparison of different interpretations and more or less to the first step of metasyntaxis and metasemantics. What a single student of this age cannot do by himself, discussion facilitated by the teacher inside a learning group may achieve.

So poetry by itself contains and emphasizes the linguistic discovery we need for teaching reading. Moreover the problem of meaning and comprehension, which some researchers attached to the cultural approach continue to support, would be addressed. Therefore poetry could be an excellent medium for developing reading proficiency. For phonemic, syllabic and even standard syntax levels, regular rhymed and metric poetry seems better because it shows items more clearly and distinctly. For letter and lexical segmentation, plural syntax and semantics, modern irregular poetry may be better: so we will try to use both in didactics. We must add one distinction, however: our aim is not to choose the best poem to teach a specific linguistic point, which would mean reducing poetry to an explicit linguistic teaching method. Thus the point to be argued now is no longer about linguistics, but about psychology related to less proficient beginners. In so far as the problems of some students are not limited to poor linguistic abilities that systematic exercises might solve, is poetry able to positively affect their own subjective image as learners?

1.3 Poetry as a desirable object for beginners

In France the role of picture books, tales and narratives is very important in education (Bettelheim, 1976, *Documents d'application des programmes*, 2002). So we can say that stories for children, in written traditions as in oral, are rich in knowledge of the world and its rules, especially society and family, allowing one to imagine life and growing up. What is the educative interest of poetry? Poetry contains less social involvement (later we will see a didactical way of reintroducing social context, which proves, in fact, quite necessary). We could define the poem as follows (Meschonnic, 1995): the relationship between three emergent parts which are not completely designed at first, but are created in the poem itself: world, language and I.

World is not exactly social world, it may be cosmos, but it is rather an image of the relationship between world and I. The language used in poems is partly standard social language, but also partly personal language, Lacan would have said "lalangue"[6], in one word: the very specific language of each baby using sounds and gestures in his very specific relationship with his mother. This "lalangue" has to be given up in time in favour of social language; but the loss of "lalangue" hurts when the baby has no "secure attachment" (cf. infra). The very special language of a poem's "I" is a new creation every time, which is partly social, partly personal. And so what is "I"? It is the third, but certainly the main target. "I", different from *ego* (the permanent psychological image), is different in every poem and in every interpretation; it is "the poem's I" (Meschonnic), whose other name inside of the poem may be "you".

Poetry, when it is creative, facilitates a new relationship between child and language[7], in a "transaction area" (Winnicott, 1969), because the archaic "imaginary" is again involved in learning, and because motivation can positively activate reading and writing (Gardner, 1996). A child who is prisoner to a bad self-image and has no taste for learning and growing (Golse, 1995, Mazet, 1996), is not "secure" enough to take the "risk" of literacy (Cassidy, Shaver, 1999; Bowlby, 2002). To learn is to reconcile security and risk. Poetry, mostly by structural repetition and lexical or phonic isotopic limits, may foster a sense of security and something of a lacanian "lalangue"condition and by syntactical arrangement and plural semantics may promote play and risk. The link between poets and less-advanced readers is not artificial but basic; their tongue and their own image cause them pain. and they try to find their own language to form a bridge between social use and inner need. So could poetry not be used to make literacy learning easier for these students? And how? We tested expert teachers, less-expert teachers and pupils to see how these problems are addressed in theory and practice..

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[6] *For this psychoanalyst, « lalangue » ("the-language" in a single word) is the first prelinguistic language a baby uses with his mother which he must give up when learning the common social language.*
[7] *Many thanks to Nathalie Panissal, ALEP member, for these psychological references.*

1.4. The almost immeasurable place of implicit learning

Research in implicit acquisition (summed up in France by Perruchet, 1998; Gombert, 2003) tries to argue that learning is not only an explicit affair, and that implicit acquisition may have a major influence as first step. Here again poetry takes on special interest. We have said that in poetry the linguistic components required for learning reading were often, but not systematically as in regular training exercises, emphasised. The first consequence is that it may not be a good thing to transform poetry into a means of teaching writing and reading, as literature would no longer be desirable.. The second consequence is that a creative and subjective use of poetry and literature may not be enough to assure literacy, and results may only appear in the long term.

     As such, it seems still more difficult to measure this implicit learning in so far as the effects of the two methods, regular training and implicit poetic environment, may be hard to separate in a real class situation. So we will try to highlight this second influence through an ethnomethodological questioning of less-expert teachers, expert teachers, the students themselves, as well as by examining their oral and written productions.

2. TESTING THE LINK BETWEEN POETRY, LITERACY
AND LESS PROFICIENT STUDENTS

2.1. What less-expert teachers think of poetry as a tool

In the French official programmes over the last forty years poetry has become less important, even if a very positive tendency appeared in a rather recent Web document[8] (Favriaud 2007)[9]. Meanwhile the place of narrative literature has grown considerably. The only overall aim ascribed to poetry is "acculturation" (official programmes, 2002). Three kinds of exercises are recommended: reciting, comprehensive interpretation in groups, and individual writing by imitation. Most of the less expert teachers do little of it, except reciting and reading some poems[10]. The official programmes make very few links between poetry and the rest of literature, no link with literacy teaching, no link with class life and solutions of various behavioural or learning problems. So the questions we asked them were new and somewhat surprising, thus their answers could be personal.

     Using a written survey we asked these elementary school teachers (students aged 6-11) the specific question: *"How do less proficient students react to poetry in your class?"* The survey was given to 180 teachers coming to our university from 2003 to

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[8] *Maîtrise du langage et de la langue française; Dossier « La poésie à l'école », Eduscol, 2004.*

[9] *See particularly Instructions relatives à l'enseignement du français à l'école élémentaire, Imprimerie nationale, 1973, pp. 35-37; and Contenus de formation à l'école élémentaire, cycle moyen, Centre national de documentation pédagogique, 1980, pp. 26-27 and 35-36.*

[10] *According to our testing 76.7 % of the teachers have a good or very good opinion of reciting, and 77 % a good or very good opinion of writing by imitation. But they practice the first far more often and regularly than the second.*

2006 for in-service training on mother tongue didactics. The survey was done in my presence at the very beginning of my class, and lasted around 10-15 minutes, without limitation of time, without explanation of the questions. This precise question (supra) was the 12th out of 13. The first ten questions were about poetry (general knowledge and didactics), although poetry was not the main target of the training course, simply the topic of my part of it (less than 10%).

- 33 out of 180 (18.3%) did not answer this question, and among the 147 answers, many showed that it surprised them. It was the same for the previous question about the link between poetry and literacy teaching. Many of them are not used to connecting poetry, literacy and less proficient students. But here many of them (81.6 %) considered the question positively.

- 59.4 % noted a "positive" or "very positive" attitude of the less proficient when teaching poetry, and exactly half of them a "very positive" attitude.

- 6.6 % noted a rather negative attitude, and 15 % a changing attitude according to the type of exercise. Since it was an open question their exact answer is indispensable; most of them said that this kind of student has memory difficulties and so feels ill at ease memorizing and reciting poems in front of the class. On the contrary, most less proficient students feel better in creative exercises of diction or composition. This answer can explain some of the 12 negative judgments. If correlated with the kind of exercises they are used to teaching (Questions 5-6-7), we can see that most of those 12+28 (22.2 %) teachers use reciting as their main exercise and do not feel like changing this traditional pattern.

Of course it would be more significant to differentiate between teachers of the "second cycle" (ages 5-8) and teachers of the third (8-11), but it seems there is no great difference. So a big majority of less-expert teachers think that poetry is a good activity for less proficient students and feel comfortable with it most of the time (except for reciting). My testing, which as stated earlier surprised them, opened up new possibilities for them, since very few had considered this kind of relationship before.

It is interesting now to consider their answer to the previous question about poetry and literacy-grammar[11]: more than half of them (51.4 %) consider, surprisingly, that poetry could be connected positively with literacy. Of course it is just a feeling since almost all of them have never been asked about this link before. But they could infer it from their own experience, which they tried to theorize in formulating their response. The point is that these less-expert teachers rarely make the actual link between poetry, literacy and less proficient students.

2.2. Opinions coming from learners themselves

Interviews and talks collected in the expert teachers' classes of members of my research team[12], can highlight the problem. We can consider ALEP's four teachers as

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[11] *"Would you consider poetry interesting for analysing language and learning grammar?" 7% did not answer, 1.7% said that the interest was weak, 39.7 % the interest average, 51.4 % the interest strong.*

[12] *ALEP members are Nathalie Panissal, PhD of cognitive sciences, Fabienne Plégat-Soutjis, PhD of semiotics, Cathy Rastoll, IUFM music teacher, Claire Escuillié, Alain Miossec,*

expert teachers, since they have a special teaching degree, they have worked in this team for four years, and they are used to reading poetry for themselves. Every year, for the 5-8 year-olds whom they teach, they have a didactic plan in poetry; their overall aim is twofold: poetry as a major part of literature, and poetry as an implicit means for students to discover and invent language organisation, and, at the same time, find out more about their own personality in itself and in relation to the social group.

Maryline Vinsonneau is an expert teacher (6-7 year-olds), whose teaching degree was related to poetry. Her didactic plan last year was based on presenting poems, discussing them and using vocal and musical means to discover and experience texts. The students are even used to writing kinds of musical scores, based on Xenakis, indicating how the poem could be said. The school is situated in a middle-class outlying suburb of Toulouse and the teaching team is very efficient and helpful. I visited this class in March with a student of mine and each of us attended a course with half of the class (around twelve children). The different steps of the lesson were: presenting the short poem (six lines of James Sacré[13]) in a very neutral mode, then exploring it with voice exercises they were accustomed to doing, then talking about the poem, its meaning and their feelings, in an "interpretative community" (each of the twelve speaking or answering in turn), then completing a short paper saying what they recalled of the poem and the different ways it was performed. The two teachers could help with writing down what the less proficient pupils dictated. After that class in a separate room I recorded individual talks which I had with two advanced and three less proficient students.

Among the less proficient, E., who was not involved at all during the vocal period, did not want to talk about this verse that he was apparently not interested in (see the beginning of the interview in Appendix B). Unfortunately the microphone did not record the first talk and we were obliged to start again, which E. accepted easily. The first words that he recalled are "little words" that he can read by himself. So he shows that the real interest of the exercise for him was not voice nor comprehension as asked, but learning to read.

The only word which he wanted to explain was "fragile". In his first talk he said that "fragile" was related to girls, then he said it could be related to boys, and finally that it could be good to be "fragile". So E. is not able to talk at length about language and poetry, but the question of his "I's image" is important, and especially the dilemma of fragility and being a boy. There may be a connection between this existential question and his difficulty in learning to read. His home life is problematic, as his parents have got divorced, therefore he has felt troubled all year long.

F. is very different, smiling, very close to his teacher and needing contact, answering questions and trying to do his best. His family comes from the Maghreb, he seems very happy at school, but at that time he was behind in learning to read. He was very pleased to answer my questions (see Appendix C).

Maryline Vinsonneau , Michel Poletto, primary school teachers, and Michel Favriaud, founder (PhD of linguistics and contemporary poetry).
[13] *See appendix A.*

Two main points appear clearly; first F. says continuously that he wants to read and he makes a link between poetry and learning to read ("ça me fait comprendre un peu de lire" which, since it is not clear in French, in English probably means, according to what he said subsequently: "it makes me understand a little reading"). He says that he wants to write, but just poetry. So there is a clear and hopeful relationship between poetry and learning literacy; "the shining house" of the last line is compared to a letters and numbers house; he is attracted by letters, especially in their aesthetic mode. Second, he mentions a very specific use of poetry ("if one hits someone else, one can apologize by writing a poem – the poem helps to make friends"). Poetry has a symbolic and social purpose: the avoidance of violence.

So these two boys have a similar problem: how to learn to read and how to be oneself in front of other people. But their social and linguistic trust is not the same. Moreover their learning strategies are opposed. F. seems more interested in letters, language, writing, poetry; he views letters and words as important when reading, even more important than a comprehensive image; the aesthetic way seems to suit him. But perhaps he is too fascinated by letters and language, without sufficient reflexive distance. The fact that meaning is not a goal for him may prevent him from having a good idea of what reading is. E., on the other hand, is sad and disinterested, picking just one word out of the whole; he seems to be interested both in words that he could read as a whole and in special meaning related to a single word. His image, mainly negative, could be improved by poetry but the risk in front of the class is too high; he cannot use his imaginary world as a learning tool in the class; only individual talk could help him make progress, apparently.

So poetry seems to be a good magnifying glass by which to examine less proficient students' representations of what learning reading is, but, as seen, this kind of dual explanation is not easily carried out in normal school practice. Let us now explore a new didactic use of creative writing where the teacher has to look carefully to see things usually unseen in the class.

2.3. The metalinguistic knowledge working in students' creations

2.3.1. M.'s case (5.5)

Alain Miossec (5-6 year-olds) is a great lover of poetry and a teaching expert. His class is situated in a rather poor suburb of Toulouse, Le Mirail. Around half the pupils were born in rather poor migrant families. His poetry teaching is based on frequent reading of poems to the pupils, then group discussion. They also compose oral poems on the pattern of nursery rhymes or peculiar, strange or funny phrases or sentences which arise in conversation. One day, it was on the basis of "daddy Monday" ("papa, lundi"). Another day, in the middle of the school year, he noted these phrases in the school yard before teaching time. M., six years old, came up during the break to Alain, his teacher, and said: "Je m'appelle la porte", Alain replied: "Je m'appelle la feuille"[14]. And M. ran away, laughing with pleasure! This phrase was then offered to the classmates and became the pattern of other metaphors and verses.

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[14] *My name is: the door! – My name is: the sheet!*

On another day, a second boy, holding his school bag on his head at the end of class time, said: "I have my snack on my head!"; M., the first boy, replied: "Me, I have my words on my head!" According to Alain, M. has repeated the year, coming from a Moroccan migrant family (he was ill as a baby, and had problems when his younger brother was born). He had difficulties when speaking French and learning how to read. His analysis is twofold: first M., by joking poetically, grasped the "authorisation" to use language in a non-serious way; during the year, his mood changed and he became happier. Second, he began exploring meta-linguistics by playing with words and language; M. meant that this work with words was interesting for him with the teacher who is, at the same time, the guarantor of standard language.

2.3.2. Etoile's case (6 ½ -7 ½ years old)[15]

Etoile was the least advanced student of her class according to official tests of phonetics, morphology, syntax and comprehension at the beginning of the year. Our own test confirmed how far from learning to read she was. Her family problems were obvious: she was educated by her single father who did his best, but she missed her mother terribly. According to Claire, Etoile was afraid of making mistakes, and little involved in learning. So remedial assistance was organised for her through a public organisation, RASED. The class was situated in an average outlying district of Toulouse. In this school the teaching team is rather united, and Claire, who had passed her special teaching degree on this topic shortly before, can be considered an expert teacher of reading and poetry. She taught poetry from December to June, and continued teaching the same class the following year. Her poetry plan was based first on her reading poems to the pupils, on their copying the poems that they like into their own anthology, and then on their own creative writing. If the students were not able to write, even a little, by themselves, which was Etoile's case, the teacher wrote what the pupil dictated. Another main point of the poetry plan was to stimulate writing through emotional or artistic events, like a dance show performed by pen-friends from another school. Pupils had an oral exchange, before writing and after, to exchange ideas, phrases and suggestions with their classmates: this is the crucial social point; every one is different, every one can help, every one respects his classmates' proposals. Our purpose now is to analyse through her compositions how the two goals of epilinguistic position and self image interact.

This is Etoile's first « poem » at the beginning of the poetry project (January 2004), based on an acrostic pattern (the first letter of each line composing a vertical word, very often a child's first name):

Étincelle je t'aime
Léopard tu je parle
Oh! Zoo
Idée dédé

---

[15] *These data were supplied by Claire Escuillié, teacher of the class, ALEP member*

Simon dondon
Étoile daldal

This poem was dictated like the rest. The teacher gave a double pattern: acrostic and inner rhyme ("Léo**par**d / tu je **par**le" is the result of it). By the middle of the year Etoile was able to produce near-rhymes, which means that her phonic consciousness is real, but the rhymes (she did not find all of them by herself) remained poor. The standard syntax is still weak ("Léopard **tu je** parle").

Her second poem was an imitation of poems which children had to choose from and write down in their poetry books (April 2004). It was about a teddy bear or a puppet coming from home. Here the teacher tried to help them feel comfortable and secure. They were told that they could write what they felt about or what they could do with the puppet. Of course, here Claire worked less with language constitution than with subjective image.

chat la gare puma balle
la peur requin lampe
porc éléphant arc-en-ciel
tourne joue pleure nage
elle sent qu'elle est gaie
pense elle me touche
elle ressent la fleur
je ressens la pluie

This dictated poem has two different parts; the first four lines have irregular syntax and parataxis, with a definite article just twice. This irregular syntax is no problem for our team; the teacher did not say anything negative about it, but explained that this kind of syntax must be a means of conveying special meaning effect. However the lists of nouns in the first three lines and verbs in the fourth convey some morphological classification. The regular syntactical sentences occur in the last four lines, clearly, as if the language has moved from chaos to an ordered social construction. The self-image construction is obviously successful and happy: there are two figures, "she" and "I", which are rather confused to begin with, but at the end these two figures are alike (she feels – I feel) but in the process of differentiation through the objects (she feels – smells? - the flower / I feel the rain – which in French is rich in meaning). This second poem shows significant progress in Etoile's construction of her image, and her syntax.

At the end of April, she began writing creatively on little scraps of paper, by using words from her exercise book:

étoile la fée vole
vers le
ciel et

We cannot say a lot about this writing nor why the words are arranged this way. Of course, the dialogue between the student and the teacher can reveal information im-

possible to report in entirety here. It was followed, on May the 10th, after a circus performance by:

> *mon petit pote*
> *la roue et la terre se*
> *font entourer de toile*
>
> *petit dauphin saute*
> *petit oiseau tourne*
> *arc-en-ciel même le ciel*
> *Monsieur rigolo tourne son dos*

The crucial point for us, according to the teacher, is that the student insisted on cutting lines this way, which was well-accepted by the teacher who is used to distinguishing between line and sentence. So Etoile had reached a point where she could employ the double poetry syntax, based on sentence and on line closed by blank. Better still, morphologically speaking, she was able to realize the notion of word, different from the notion of syntagma (word group). Such an unified verbal syntagma as "se font entourer" is cut consciously as a means of playing with language and obtaining special musical and meaning effects. Writing is not yet something private; other pupils gave her ideas, there were many exchanges inside of the class. In the following pieces she continues to play with morphology and syntax and insists on these precise cuts when dictating.

May the11th:

> *petit chat a un*
> *pull qui vole*
> *petit dauphin saute*
> *l'étoile met son*
> *pull*
> *arc-en-ciel joue*
> *avec le soleil*
> *petit oiseau tourne*
> *la terre rigole*
> *et vole*
> *la gare rêve*
> *de la terre*

This next one arises from a dance program performed by another class:

> *le monstre peur, et la grande fête*
> *se croise les pieds le monstre et la peur,*
> *le parterre colle un fil est là, la terre brûle,*
> *appelle la grande fête*

In this last one, imagination seems more important than language consciousness. Two antagonistic figures seem to fight: fear & monster on one hand, and feast on the other, which finally wins. The poem enables her to tell about herself, her inner life and imagination, her inner conflicts. She seems to be accepting language as a pleasing and peaceful means of expression. She works <u>in</u> language, by creating her own social and subjective language - no longer against, or worse, outside of, language. In June she finally wrote all by herself for the first time, for fathers' day, and asked the teacher for permission to use the dictionary to write words correctly:

> *Pierre tu es beau comme*
> *un machaon le rouge gorge*
> *et comme l'alouette et comme*
> *le lézard et l'escargot*
> *la fleur liseron et la violette*
> *le élan le pétunia*
> *la fleur azalée les dauphins*

Of course this new behaviour conveys a double symbolic meaning: she accepts social language and social rules of language, and she is expressing her admiration of and love for her father. As before, she uses some lexical lists, she mixes flowers and beasts poetically and her syntax is still poor. But the double cut after "comme" (like) means she has not lost her lexical and syntactical power. Moreover, "like" is the icon of poetry and poetic fiction; it means that "a" is "b" and at the same time "a" is not "b"; language is a simile she has become aware of, a powerful simile which pleases her and will please her father; she has acquired some metadiscursive distance. Language is not real world, it is just "like". The comprehension of it, playing with it, inside of Winnicott's "transaction area", makes studying literacy possible and perhaps exciting. At the same time in June, Etoile chose a textless picture book, and wanted to "read" it to all her classmates. According to Claire, she adopted a reader's behaviour for the first time, which corroborates her involvement in writing.

The final reading test (at the end of year) showed that Etoile had improved in reading: she could match seven out of ten utterances with the right picture, she could recognize letters and complete sixteen words out of twenty with the right letter (even of close sounds, like p/b), and could choose (five times out of ten) the right word out of five close words for the picture. But some important difficulties remained when faced with a text alone.

In February 2005, second year, after the teacher had read eight poems from Alain Serres, Etoile composed four texts, among them two calligrams, and this poem:

Marine va vers le
haïku qui m'a touché le
plus c'est le sang qui a de la poésie

aussi ce que j'aimais beaucoup
c'était la poésie que j'aimais

bien elle me touchait beaucoup
c'est pour ça que je les aime
et elles font du sens
et elle joue du [illegible word]

Etoile wrote here about the relationship between poetry, her own physical body and feelings; she asserts (through "Marine", her best class friend) her good "secure" feeling about poetry and language. She is capable of sensitive judgment, as shown by the rhymed words, "sens" and "sang" (meaning and blood). Her way of cutting sentences and syntagmas without coincidence between line and sentence, which she had asked for eagerly, has certainly been psychologically important, and corresponds to our plural syntax and to language awareness. To some extent Etoile offered us a good definition of poetry, something like "a poetic art", bringing into play her self-image, some violence, inner feelings, with judgment and distance, in a special mastered arrangement of words, based on both subjective rhythm and social convention! Reflexivity was confirmed on February the 10th: it was the first time she used corrections and dared rewrite above the line (Fabre, 1990); the written text was not a poem that time, but certainly this metalinguistic and metadiscursive evolution had been prepared for by the work done in poetry. Etoile, at the age of 7 ½, entered literacy.

In this special case, as in her usual practice, Claire insisted on the partnership of classmates. Help and exchange is important, and we realize how its benefits are twofold: it really helps supply ideas, but this help is not normative, since classmates have proposals respecting Etoile's imagination, which she can accept or not. It gives every pupil the assurance that he can be different and this difference becomes a value. For my part, I must insist on the teacher and her "professionalism": not only in supplying the necessary means and tools, but in accepting abnormal proposals when something important is at work. It is one of the crucial differences between inexperienced teachers and experts.

CONCLUSION

The didactical situation in primary school classes (especially for 5-8 year-olds) nearly seems to fit the theoretical overview: poetry, by definition, makes the double link between literacy on one hand, motivation and one self 's image on the other hand. The agreement on the second point seems better than that on the first, according to the less-expert teachers, the expert teachers and case analyses. Of course it is work where one only sees results in the long-term.

Poetry however seems to have a good influence on the first point too: the less-expert and the expert teachers think so, but still practice it little. The results of explicit and implicit training in our expert teachers' classes cannot easily be distinguished in an authentic schooling situation. It seems, according to our team's research in progress, that the use of creative poetry could induce a rather good meta-linguistic and meta-discursive attitude. But it needs expert accompaniment that less-expert teachers while not used to, would be eager to acquire: to let students propose,

experiment with language, to show them and then to ask them the meaning effects of their linguistic choice. We think that through poetry, letters, sounds, morphology and syntax can be partly caught and felt emotionally, but emotion itself can also prevent learning; it seems necessary to explore, didactically speaking, both sides: emotion/reflection, language for itself/meaning.

This link between poetry and literacy does not take the place of systematic linguistic training. It just prepares it, and for less proficient students it may accompany it as a way to restore their own image and to start "playing seriously" with language. The richness and flexibility of poetry in didactics makes poetry capable of fitting almost any situation, for advanced students as well as for less proficient, but goals and tasks must be adapted. However we are still a long way off reaching our own research goal: to build wider poetry didactic proposals, according to its huge potentialities. As a conclusion, let our "Star" in verse say good bye to her previous world (end of second year – 7 ½):

Une rose de l'hiver
Blanc l'eau de coeur toutes
Les roses ont froid[16]

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[16] *A rose of white*
  Winter heart water all
  The roses are cold

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APPENDIX A

James Sacré's poem:

Un jour la maison rêve on a le cœur

Qui s'en va loin,

Comme des oiseaux fragiles, dans la couleur
tendre et légère.

Quelque chose ressemble à la joue

D'une pluie d'été dans les fleurs;

On a du pollen dans les yeux, la maison
brille.

James Sacré, 2001, extrait du livre: Si peu de terre, tout, p. 87

APPENDIX B

Translation of E's interview

(M=teacher; E=student)

M: What's your name?
E: E
M: Do you like this poem by JS, which we have just spoken of, or not?
E: I don't like it.
M: You don't like the poem at all?
E: No.
M: There's nothing you like, some parts…
E: No.
M: Nothing!
What words have you chosen?
E: a, the, but, not, has the, heart, bird, fragile, flower, and …one, "one" twice
M: You have repeated these words a lot; can you say why you liked them?
E: Because.

M: Earlier, you said "fragile birds"; why do you like that expression?
E: Because I like it a lot…
M: Earlier you made a remark about "fragile"!
E: Fragile, everyone is fragile, but mainly girls, but also boys a bit.
M: And is it good to be fragile?
E: Yes.

APPENDIX C

Translation of F's interview

M: What's your name.
E: F.
M: So, how did you like that lesson on the poem by JS?
E: Well, I liked to read the first sentence, and I also liked the poem!
M: Especially the first sentence!
What did you like in the first sentence?
…
You can look at the text, it is in front of you.
E: one day the house dreams we have our heart goes far... away, (he reads the first sentence)
M: Is it the sentence you preferred?
E: Yes…
M: Why did you like that sentence?
E: Because it's nice to read.
M: It's especially reading that you liked?
E: Yes!
M: What kind of diction did you like best?
E: The first sentence…that's all!
M: Did you see a scene in your mind, did it give you a picture in your mind? Would you talk to me about what you see?
E: I feel to read ["je ressens de lire" in French is not clear].
M: What do you see?
E: There, for example, I see the letters, as I said before.
Letters and numbers. Yes, they have houses, and also people, letters, numbers and people, lots of people. that's all!
M: And these pictures that you describe…have you seen them... in a television programme?
E: In cartoons.
M: It makes you think of cartoon pictures. Ah! That's interesting!
Are there words that stay in your mind?
E: house, dream, birds, flower, and... and also these words « I », "one day" [he uses slow spelling].
M: Can you tell me why these are your favourite words?

E: These words are a bit big and are funny to say.

M: When we worked on diction together, did it help you understand the poem better, when the others…

E: It helped me understand a bit reading.

M: What did it help you understand?

E: It made me understand that now I read very well, because before I didn't read too well, but now I read well.

M: And when we said the words loudly…

E: Yes, a little.

M: What did you like?

E: When R. shouted the words, the word was funny and everyone laughed.

M: You weren't bored at all during all the work on diction?

Did you change your opinion on the poem?

E: Yes, I said myself that it wasn't very good, and now in the end that it was good.

M: So you changed your mind!

Imagine that Maryline [his teacher] worked on the poem with you, what would you like to do with the poem now?

E: Well, I would work!

M: Would you like to say, write something, make a poem a bit like that?

E: Yes, all of that!

M: Are you ready for everything?!!

Maryline told me that you liked the poems.

E: I like writing.

M: Poetry or all sorts of writing?

E: Only poetry…poetry is as we like, you can write anything you want to, you can invent…If you hit someone, you can say sorry with a poem.

M: Oh yes? It can be an apology!

 You can use it to be nice to someone!

E: You can use it to make friends.

M: You know that James Sacré, who is an seventy-year-old man, said that poetry is friendly, he said that poetry can be used to make friends. He said exactly what you did!

E: Oh yes!!! [his shining eyes seem very happy]

M: You are alike!

Well, thank you very much, F.