Effects of Creative Writing on Students’ Literary Response

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Previous research has shown that different kinds of writing may have beneficial effects on students’ literary response and understanding (e.g. Boscolo & Carotti, 2003; Marshall, 1987). These studies focused on formal, academic modes of writing (essays, reviews) and/or personal writing (journals). Whether creative, imaginative writing may be beneficial as well has not been established.

Advocates of creative writing have repeatedly pointed out its value for literary reading. According to some, creative writing may lead to enhanced reading engagement and appreciation of literary texts, increased self-efficacy as readers of literature, deeper processing of literary texts, more knowledge of and insight into literary techniques. Also, it has been assumed that creative writing — as a pre-reading activity — may activate certain (meta)cognitive activities that are important for reading and understanding. In this view, creative writing may lead to positive changes in students’ reading processes, which in turn may lead to better reading comprehension and recall (Denner & McGinley, 1992).

In the present study we examined the effects of one particular creative writing assignment: writing a story in the pre-reading stage, predicting the story to be read. In this assignment, students are asked to predict story content and form, by writing their own story on the basis of certain ‘clues’ about the story to be read. We examined the effects of this type of writing on two outcome variables: reading process and story appreciation.

The main question was: does story writing as a pre-reading activity have beneficial effects on students’ literary response to short stories, compared to ‘no writing’?

‘Literary response’ refers here to both the process and product of literary reading. Following Denner and McGinley (1992) and others, we expected that students who
wrote their own story before reading, would show a different reading process compared to students who do not write. In particular, students would relate the literary story to their own story and they would show more emotional engagement during reading.

Furthermore, we hypothesized that story writing before reading would be advantageous for the outcomes of the reading process, for students’ appreciation of stories.

Method

An experimental design was used, with a control group and post-tests. Participants were 10th-grade students from different Dutch secondary schools (15–16 years old, pre-university and higher general education).

Participants were assigned to one of the following conditions:

- an experimental condition in which students \( n = 18 \) wrote their own story, before reading the original literary story under think aloud conditions;
- a ‘no writing’ control condition in which students \( n = 35 \) read the story while thinking aloud.

In both conditions students read two short stories, written by recognized authors of literary fiction. In the experimental condition, students completed two creative writing tasks, preceding their reading of each of the literary stories. In the writing tasks, certain clues were given about story content and genre, to be used by students in their writings. These clues consisted, for instance, of the title and the opening sentences; the task then was to complete the story, or to write a dialogue between the main characters. Students wrote their stories on a computer. They were given 45 minutes to complete the writing tasks.

Afterwards, they read the stories under think aloud conditions (about 15 minutes per story). The stories were presented, fragment by fragment, on a computer screen. Students could scroll forward and backward, as they liked. During reading they were asked to verbalize all their thoughts (see Janssen, Braaksma, & Rijlaarsdam, 2006, for the think aloud procedure).

In the control condition students just read the stories, under think aloud conditions, without any writing beforehand.

To get insight into students’ reading processes, their think aloud responses during reading were recorded, transcribed and segmented into statements. Statements were analysed for the reading activities they revealed (e.g. retelling, inferencing, problem detecting, evaluating, emotional responding). The coding scheme was developed and tested in a previous study (Janssen et al., 2006). Percentages were calculated for each reading activity in the scheme.

After reading each story, students were asked to indicate their liking of each story on a 10-point scale.