

9. DIDACTIC STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING THE ART-LANGUAGE TECHNIQUE INTO THE FOURTH GRADE READING CIRCLE

Smărăndița – Elena Costin²⁹⁰

Abstract: *This article presents methodological suggestions for integrating art-language activities into reading circles for fourth-grade students. The focus is on fostering creativity, interpretative skills, and active participation through multimodal and interactive reading experiences. By valorizing the expressive and aesthetic dimensions of language, the suggested strategies aim to enhance students' engagement with literary texts and to develop their communicative competence. Practical examples are provided to illustrate how art-language technique can be used to enrich reading comprehension, stimulate imagination, and encourage personal responses to literature. The proposed approaches are anchored in contemporary didactic principles and adapted to the cognitive and affective needs of primary school learners. The case study will focus on Veronica D. Niculescu's novel *A Summer with Isidor*, which will be explored through an interdisciplinary lens by the students, with particular emphasis on its visual dimension.*

Key-words: *art-language technique, reading circle, fourth grade, teaching strategies, literary education*

1. Beyond the text: reading as a perspective on the world & the importance of the visual dimension in children's literature

The use of the visual dimension in acquiring concepts – be they literary or grammatical – is essential in primary education, particularly during the early stages of literacy development. Complementing the teacher's oral explanations with relevant visual aids that support the comprehension of the text contributes not only to the decoding of its meanings but also to the formation of interdisciplinary habits of content exploration. In order to intensify children's engagement with literature, the teacher – who is, in turn, passionate about and interested in the infinite possibilities literature offers in shaping behavioral models and valuable moral reference points for the future adults' ethical consciousness – can design attractive extracurricular activities to extend the contact between child and book.

One such extracurricular activity aimed at reinforcing the bond between the young (or more experienced) reader and literature is the reading circle. A methodological and pragmatic overview of the benefits of these extracurricular interactions is offered by Emanuela Ilie, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Letters in Iași and a nationally renowned didactics specialist: “Complementing the literature class, the teacher who wishes to stimulate or develop the students' reading competence can also employ several types of extracurricular activities, transforming them into new—and highly appealing—ways of engaging with reading in an environment free from constraints: the workshop, the reading circle, and the book club” (Ilie, 2020: 299).

Interdisciplinary approaches to literature in settings free from institutional rigor and programmatic obligations offer children, on the one hand, an unfiltered view of beloved literary works and, on the other hand, allow for the interconnection

²⁹⁰ Candidate Doctoral, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, România, email: elenavasilachi99@gmail.com, ID ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6077-0392>

of “the instances that circumscribe and determine, in a complex dialectical interplay, the mode of being of reading (the text, the codes, the reader, the context)” (Cornea, 1988: 118). The ritualization of the reading process, which can be successfully implemented in various non-formal environments (literary cafés, libraries, outdoor spaces, etc.), is, according to Alina Pamfil, one of the key steps in cultivating children's long-term attachment to reading: “The success of attempts to spark and maintain interest in reading depends significantly on: 1. The strategies that accompany the encounter with the text—be it literary or non-literary—and 2. The relationship between the reader's horizon of expectation and that of the text.” (Pamfil, PDF document)

Following the above idea, Alina Pamfil argues that the encounter with the book should take on a festive air, a celebration of the word as a ticket to destinations inaccessible outside the realm of reading. Moreover, she suggests that the teacher's attitude plays a crucial role in inspiring a love for reading, since, as Aristotle stated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we should always be in a “training of virtue” (Aristotle, 1988: 231): “Furthermore, there exists—at least in the case of the literary text—an entire methodology of seduction, developed within reading circles, workshops, or book clubs. Among the many such techniques, I would highlight the practices of ‘celebrating’ the encounter with the book (e.g., presenting favorite books, character parades, book exhibitions), some of which may also be transferred to the reading of non-literary texts. Also part of the seductive dimension is a certain type of educator behavior—a demeanor that radiates interest in books and joy in reading” (Pamfil, PDF document).

Argentinian essayist Alberto Manguel frequently evokes in his writings the act of reading as a profoundly formative experience – one that humanizes and adds depth to human existence. From a deeply humanistic perspective, Manguel sees the discovery of literature's possible worlds as one of humanity's sine qua non purposes: “We are born with the purpose of finding narrative in everything around us: in landscapes, in the sky, in the faces of others, and, of course, in the images and words that our species creates. We read our own lives and the lives of others; we read the societies we inhabit and those beyond our borders; we read images and buildings; we read what is found between the covers of a book” (Manguel, 2023: 11).

In his *A History of Reading*, Manguel discusses, among other things, the symbolism that reading once held in early Jewish communities, where a child's first encounter with the written text was marked by the ritual act of tasting honey from a tablet: “In every literate society, learning to read is a form of initiation, a ritualized departure from a state of dependency and rudimentary communication. The child who learns to read gains access to the shared memory through books and, thus, discovers a collective past that he or she renews to varying degrees with each reading. In medieval Jewish society, for example, the ritual of learning to read was explicitly celebrated. During the festival of Shavuot—which commemorates the day Moses received the Torah from the hand of God—the child to be initiated was wrapped in a prayer shawl before being led by his father to the teacher. The teacher would take the child on his lap and show him a tablet on which were inscribed the Hebrew alphabet, a passage from Scripture, and the words ‘May the Torah be your

preoccupation.’ The tablet was smeared with honey, and the child would lick it, physically assimilating the sacred words. Biblical verses were also written on peeled hard-boiled eggs and honey cakes that the child would eat after reading them aloud to the teacher” (Manguel, 1998: 93).

Equally important, the degree of attractiveness of the activities carried out within a reading circle depends largely on the creativity of the teacher or the person responsible for bringing it to life, as well as on their openness and playful disposition. As we know, modern didactic methods (cutting-edge, alternative) invite students to actively and responsibly participate in the construction of meaning within theoretical content, integrating them into a playful, interactive, and multidimensional context. All the more so in a space dedicated to discovering and deciphering the hidden meanings of texts, a pedagogical toolkit adapted to the age and potential of the children will bear fruit in achieving the main goal: connecting students to the fascinating world of books. In the same interpretive key, Angelica Hobjilă observes that the literature circle: “constitutes a pretext, on the one hand, for cultivating the pleasure of reading and, on the other hand, for consolidating intellectual work techniques specific to the reception, decoding, and interpretation (from emotional-affective, comparative, critical, etc., perspectives) of a literary text” (Hobjilă, 2024: 462).

Regarding the choice of didactic tools used in approaching literature in the primary cycle, most specialists agree that at a young school age, illustrations are essential in receiving the message of a literary work, as they “operate as a complex system of signifiers conveying information about who characters are and what they do” (Nodelman, 2008: 11). Beyond the aesthetic graphic aspect, illustrations – thus, the visual key to interpreting a text – contribute to unlocking several layers tied either to the reader’s affective response or to their openness to reading. Therefore, the text–image parallel grants children’s literature (and not only) the privilege of benefiting from a “dual narrative” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). I have discussed the importance of illustrations in books intended for young readers, using as a case study the novels by Grace Lin, *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* and *When the Sea Turned to Silver*, as well as those by Ioana Nicolaie, *Vertijia*, *Ferbonia*, and *The Rescue of Onux*, in a recent study²⁹¹, which begins from the idea that the underestimation of children's literature lacks any qualitative or intrinsic justification.

The art-language technique, which this study focuses on, involves “the reasoned association of a literary/non-literary text’s message with a work of art, chosen from a selection” (Ilie, 2020: 160). By appealing to the pupil’s capacity to create valid, critically filtered connections between the reading’s message and a possible artistic realization of it, this technique activates both the children’s creative spirit and their ability to intuit both the broader and subtler elements through which the two types of discourse are connected: “Applied in the right and responsible way, it facilitates communication, personal expression and active listening; ensures each member of the group a certain comfort of expressing their own perspective

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regarding the theme/topic of debate; considerably increases the critical spirit, the ability to reflect on some themes reflected artistically; stimulates artistic taste or aesthetic sensitivity; develops cultural competence and increases interest in the variety of artistic discourses specific to several eras, currents, schools, etc.” (Ilie & Vechiu, 2024: 358).

It is important that the chosen paintings be relevant to the discussed texts, so that readers can identify either a shared content element or a similar graphic detail. Nevertheless, the teacher may select provocative artworks that push children out of their interpretive comfort zones. Choosing nonconformist compositions that illustrate various dimensions of the cultural sphere (historical, architectural, social, ideological, etc.) will prompt students to search for more refined similarities between text and image. At the same time, a major benefit of this technique is children’s exposure to art. By introducing the names of artists, information about their painting styles, and the context in which the works were created, students will gain a global understanding of the world they are part of, while also realizing that all forms of art are interconnected.

In a “civilization of the spectacle,” where “entertainment ranks first in the scale of values, and [...] this ideal of life is perfectly legitimate” (Llosa, 2018: 29), it is preferable that at least the young—roots of society—be guided toward the values of Greek *kalokagathia*—truth, goodness, and beauty. As other notable thinkers have also observed, those who interpreted the worldviews of universal titans such as Goethe, the cohesion of body and mind must form the basis of a person’s discovery of the world in harmony with the universe they inhabit: “Goethe is among the few cultural figures through whom something else emerges: gazing, immediate experience, the spirit’s stroll through the surrounding world. He cultivates himself through seeing, practicing, conversing, feeling – more than through formal instruction” (Noica, 1976: 33–34). In the wake of Goethean ethics, shaping a moral and behavioral conduct from childhood ensures, as I noted in another study, “the multifaceted development and preparation of the pupil for life” (Costin, 2024: 373).

2. The use of the art-language technique in reading circle activities in the fourth grade

Starting from the definition and stages of the reading circle proposed by Jocelyne Giasson, a professor at the Faculty of Education at the Université Laval, we will suggest, for each of these sequences, a set of methodological recommendations, with an emphasis on the visual component, to facilitate and enhance the activities of these literary-themed gatherings. First and foremost, Giasson argues that the core of these extracurricular meetings with literary value consists of “the discussions that students themselves lead, during which they comment on the texts they have read, confront their ideas, and so on” (Giasson, 2005: 89). Secondly, in order to emphasize the importance of harmonizing all dimensions of reading competence, the author draws a suggestive parallel between the act of reading and the performance of a symphony: “Reading may be compared to the performance of a symphony orchestra; in order to interpret a symphony, it is not enough for each musician to know their part – all the parts must also be

performed in harmony by the entire ensemble” (Giasson, 1990).

Synthesizing Giasson’s perspective on the reading circle, three distinct phases can be identified in its unfolding: *the reading phase; the writing phase based on the reading; the discussion phase*. We will take as a case study the novel *A Summer with Isidor* by Veronica D. Niculescu, which was offered as supplemental reading at the beginning of a learning module to a fourth-grade class in a primary school. Given the generous length of the novel, students will focus their reading circle discussions on the chapters “Isidor’s Nights and Days,” “Only Bars,” and “Fly!”. The activity takes place in the school’s specially arranged library, equipped with a video projector, comfortable seating for young readers, and, serving as a ritualistic aid, tea.

In what follows, we will propose, step by step, a didactic strategy for each of the three phases of the reading circle. The choice of the fourth-grade class for this case study stems from the profound belief that: “The taste for reading is most often developed between the ages of 10 and 14 — this is the period when readers either begin to truly enjoy reading or, on the contrary, drift away from it, considering it a waste of time. And this depends not only on the latent dispositions of young readers but, to a great extent, also on the texts that we, the adults, offer to children who are either assailed by countless temptations to ‘have fun’ or overwhelmed by various responsibilities aimed at making them ‘competitive’” (Sâmihăian, 2010: 6).

3. Reading phase

In this initial phase, fourth-grade students will re-read individually the three chapters selected for discussion, highlighting the passages they found most relevant for understanding the overall message. To this end, the teacher will provide them with sheets folded in half, using the *double-entry journal* method, which allows readers to record impressions/thoughts/feelings elicited by the passages they deemed significant. This method, originally proposed by A. Berthoff in 1981, aims to foster awareness of the emotional responses children experience during reading. The main advantages of this technique have been clearly articulated by Emanuela Ilie: “The method facilitates the deep processing of new information, develops a higher level of thinking and creativity, and helps the teacher highlight students’ progress in learning and reflection” (Ilie, 2020: 153).

As a transitional moment between the reading phase and the next stage, students will work in pairs to share their *double-entry journals* with each other, exchanging ideas and exploring their peers’ different perspectives, thus learning that literature is subjective and that each reader is, to paraphrase the literary critic Liviu Papadima, an explorer “on the path to discovering the world and the self” (Papadima, 2010: 8). After this mutual sharing of reading impressions, the teacher will solicit a few answers in plenary, without placing pressure on the reading circle participants. This type of interaction and open conversation encourages not only the direct, unfiltered expression of the students but also the shaping of literature as a safe yet challenging and adventurous space, as suggested by Umberto Eco:

“There are two ways to walk through a forest. In the first, we move in order to follow one or several paths (to exit quickly, or to reach Grandma’s house, or that of *Little Tom Thumb*, or *Hansel and Gretel*); in the second, we move in order to understand

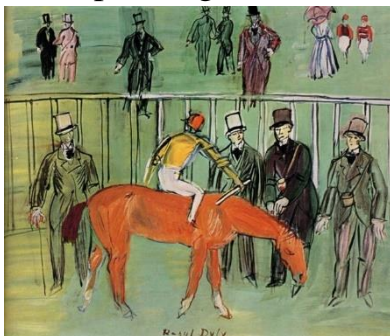
how the forest is made, and why some paths are accessible and others not...” (Eco, 1997: 39).

As a topos, literature can be likened to a walk through the forest of universal knowledge. Whether this experience becomes curative, therapeutic, entangled in the thickets of memory, or takes on an initiatory character – as in Mircea Cărtărescu’s splendid short story *The Fourth Heart*, from the collective volume *What’s the Deal with Reading?*, coordinated by Liviu Papadima – depends entirely on the traveler-reader: “By deciphering the strange runes on the wings that beat lazily, you realize they speak of crystal cities and undergrounds full of monsters, of mysterious queens and centuries buried in oblivion – all these wonders, miraculous or terrifying, are already within you. They were there before your journey began. By reading and flying, which are one and the same thing, you are merely drawing the magical map of your own soul” (Cărtărescu, 2010).

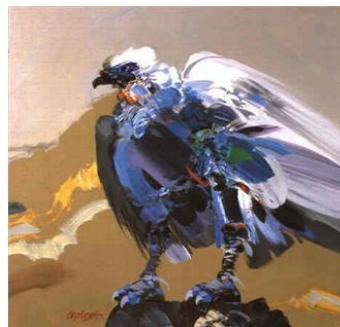
4. The writing phase based on the reading

Following the moment of sharing reading impressions, facilitated by the *double-entry journal* method, the next phase focuses on fostering a deeper familiarity between students and the selected excerpts. In order to achieve this connection, the teacher will place particular emphasis on *art-language technique*, highlighting the multiple dimensions of literature and its intersectional character. The creation of the *fictional pact* described by Umberto Eco involves, among other things, the acceptance of the narrated world as a world that exists. In order to “contaminate” the reader’s horizon in this way, the teacher must present the fictional world within the narrative fabric of reality. Consequently, we propose a series of didactic tasks designed to facilitate this pact between the reader and the world of the book.

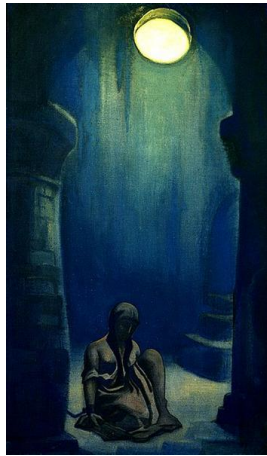
To identify the thematic elements in the first selected chapter, *Isidor’s Nights and Days*, the teacher will project a series of suggestive paintings that depict the conditions of Isidor’s captivity in the zoo, as well as the attitudes of the visitors. After displaying the artworks, students are given five minutes to associate them with the appropriate sequences from the chapter. Subsequently, the teacher invites the students to share their responses, emphasizing the importance of coherent and well-reasoned justifications for their choices. Discussions may be guided by questions such as: “Why do you believe the chosen painting represents Isidor’s condition in the zoo?”; “Which visual and textual elements demonstrate the connection between the artwork and the selected passage?” etc. We have curated a selection of representative paintings, as follows:



The Thoroughbred, 1940
Raoul Dufy



Cóndor, 1987
Alejandro Obregon



Captive, 1937
Nicholas Roerich



The bird cage, 1944
Pablo Picasso



Checkmate, 1942
Conroy Maddox

For the literary exploration of the second chapter, *Only Bars*, the students are offered, as an entry ticket, Serena's following reflection: "It was as if the camera had not been able to go beyond the fence, just as the bird could not pass to this side" (Niculescu, 2017: 46). Based on this remark, the teacher launches the following challenge: "Read Serena's statement and draw the scene she would have wished to capture in the photograph. When creating your drawing, paint in the style of your favorite painter. If you have no idea whom to choose, I will show you several models for inspiration. Once your drawing is completed, you will justify the choice you made."

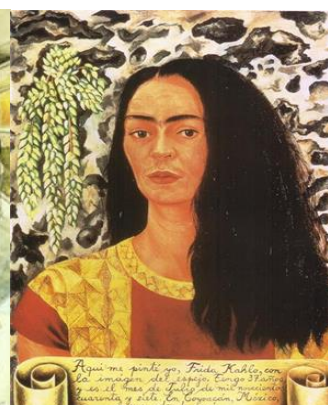
Through this task, students are encouraged to understand that any analogy between distinct types of artistic discourse must rely on a valid reasoning process. Furthermore, the activity fosters critical thinking and the ability to support one's claims with arguments. To provide the children with visual support, the teacher projects several famous paintings by globally renowned artists, in order to expose students to a variety of artistic styles:



Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, 1910
Pablo Picasso



Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, 1910
Pablo Picasso



Self Portrait with Loose Hair, 1947
Frida Kahlo

After the children complete their drawings and justify the choice of the artistic style employed, the teacher transitions to the final stage of the reading circle using the VAS technique, slightly adapted to suit the previous activity. Theoretically, this technique is meant to capture the reader's reaction to the studied text, "related, this

time, to the grid of see, hear, feel” (Hobjilă, 2024: 323). In practice, the teacher distributes cards featuring drawings of eyes, ears, or hearts; depending on the card received, each student will express what they saw, heard, or felt while creating the drawing in their preferred artistic technique.

Lastly, the final chapter under discussion, *Fly!*, will be introduced to the students in a way that highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in primary education and beyond. Initially, the teacher informs the young readers that Isidor and Serena are about to meet other characters from children's literature, and that they will act as intermediaries for these encounters. Through a creative writing technique, the pupils are invited to compose a short text of approximately 10–15 lines in which they introduce two other characters from stories they have already read, thus creating a “*story salad*” (Stoian Cristescu, 2018: 28). Afterwards, they will be asked to come up with a clever title for their composition, in which they have merged characters from various tales within Romanian or world literature that they have previously encountered.

5. The discussions phase

After reading the texts, small groups will be formed, within which discussions will be initiated regarding the topics addressed. In order to diversify the subjects of discussion, the teacher will provide each group with a question to start the conversation, such as: "What is your opinion on the friendship between Isidor and Serena?", "How does Isidor feel in captivity?", "How do you perceive the behavior of the visitors?", "What common elements of content can be found in the three chapters covered?". To conclude the activity, all students will be awarded symbolic certificates recognizing their engagement as *dedicated and persevering readers*.

6. Conclusions

Through the methodological suggestions outlined above, this study underscores the significance of visual impact in the reception and interpretation of literary texts. The visual dimension can be effectively amplified through the use of *art-language* technique which, as demonstrated, contribute to the development of critical thinking, enhance creativity, and promote awareness of the intricate interconnections between universal artistic forms. The novel chosen as a case study addresses pressing contemporary issues such as animal captivity in zoos, the inappropriate behavior of visitors, and human indifference to the needs of others, while also conveying the enduring message that kindness and empathy remain the most powerful attributes of truly free individuals. In this context, the promotion of ethical conduct and moral values should remain a central concern in literature intended for children.

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