

The Use of Stories in the Teaching of History

Dursun Dilek and Gülçin Yapıcı, The University of Marmara, İstanbul/Göztepe, Turkey

Abstract *This research was undertaken between 2002 and 2003 by using qualitative research techniques. The study consists of two phases. In the first stage a story was written by the researchers about Anatolian Seljuks History. In the second stage, this story was taught and the lessons were video recorded. Interpretative analyses were made of dialogue between pupil-teacher, pupil-pupil and teacher-group and of pupils' creative work undertaken during the lesson.*

According to the findings of this study historical stories have important functions in the development of pupils' historical understanding, and contrary to the principle of the Piagetian approach, which asserts learning develops in relatively rigid sequential stages which are qualitatively different, moving from concrete to abstract thinking, it is understood that primary students can learn from abstract to concrete. We shall call this 'abstract thinking specific to childhood'. Stories can be used as vehicles for exposing and developing this potential. History has an abstract nature so it may be said stories have an important role in developing abstract thinking and historical understanding.

This study offers some suggestions for consideration in teaching history.

Key words Abstract thinking, Historical story, Historical understanding, Ironic, Kieran Egan, Mythic, Historical Narrative, Romantic

Introduction

The use of stories has been a powerful tool in history lessons through teacher's activity based on traditional teaching techniques. Storytelling is usually seen as a part of instruction method and is not included in problem solving techniques. Therefore, it has been neglected by Piagetians. Paradoxically, teachers' resistance to problem-solving methods results in an attitude that there is no need to improve their existing instructional approach grounded in narrative genres.

Story and Fictionalisation

Fictionalisation is an abstract process which includes the imagination of both historical materials and images in a sequential order in one's mind. In this process, the historian/writer interacts with historical materials through his/her imagination. These interactions in a story or an historical text are transferred to the listener/reader as verbal/oral symbols. One who reads/listens to the historical story that reflects the experience of teller/writer re-constructs it through his/her own experiences. In this re-construction process reader/listener empathises with the writer of the story or its heroes through his/her imagination by using his/her creative thinking skills (such as knowledge, logic, identification, associative and intuitive thinking). In the end of this process personalised original works are produced. So, both story making and story listening/reading can be assessed as a process which includes creative thinking. Egan (1978; 1988) describes four stages for historical understanding and he attributes a special significance to stories in these stages. These stages are below:

Mythic Stage (ages 4 to 9)

Children have no conception of time, place, causality, and otherness. However, they have similar needs as myth-tellers. These needs are the explanations of the world by contrasting opposites. There are stereotypical good and bad people and right and wrong. The content of the primary curriculum is usually prepared in accordance with

the subjects and concepts which are related to children's close environment. But, children tend to identify directly with monsters and talking animals living in strange places. They perceive the world through images that they create in their imagination and such abstract concepts as love, hate, fear, right and wrong which constitute their affective world, rather than concrete concepts included in the content of primary curriculum.

Romantic Stage (ages 9 to 15)

Children develop a sense of appreciation of the autonomy of the outside world with the concepts of historical time, continuity, causality and otherness. The child feels him/herself in a world that is created in the story and s/he identifies him/herself with the heroes and shares their triumphs.

A sudden interest arises in discovering the limits of the world. The child is influenced by the magic of events in the story in terms of exaggeration, oddness, perfection and so on. S/he prefers to make romantic connections with the most strong and noble characters and powers of the story and identifies him/herself with them. The child increasingly makes individual connections with the past. Concept of otherness, including a sense of living in different places and times and different life styles, takes place in the centre of imagination and interest of a typical romantic child.

Philosophic Stage (ages 15 to 20)

This stage occurs in the form of developing individual connections with the past. The past is not only seen as a series of stories and lives, but also as a dynamic and unique story. Students see history as their own personal story of a past that determines their present world and identities. Principles and laws explaining endless and chaotic situations excite students. Then, the aim of historians and the learning of history are to discover the principles and laws.

Ironic Stage (ages 20 and upwards)

The student understands that principles and generalisations are insufficient to explain the past's unique events and the historian's intellectual activity is more effective. So, s/he constructs his/her historical understanding according to this point of view. In this stage, students' historical understanding reaches the level of 'history for its own sake'.

Egan sees the physical activity of the child as central to learning which the teacher observes. But, there are learning models developed which are specific to each individual and learning is realised beyond the observed behaviour of the learner. So it cannot be possible to develop standardized learning models based on generalised stages. Actually, the concern for developing stages in learning, as in the Piagetian approach, may prevent the development of more advanced cognition.

It can be argued that the world of the past is even much closer to the child's imaginative world than the concrete world in which s/he lives because s/he meets a past in which s/he is able to practice such concepts as goodness, badness, fear, happiness etc. and a world in which s/he can feel the sense of otherness through identification and empathy (see Egan, 1978). The sense of otherness directs pupil to identify him/herself with an historical character. This is the first level of making empathy needed for historical understanding. Therefore, it is a functional tool in the development of primary children's historical thinking.

Features of Stories

Relationship between History and Story Adults' and children's interest in documentaries, historical fiction and stories rather than school history (see Watts, 1972) indicate the possibility of consumption of the past when it is presented as a

fiction. So, fictional creativity is a main vehicle in both stories and historical studies to construct different versions of the past. Historian's creativity consists of three stages:

- Understanding creative effects of human behaviour on the traces of past.
- Using a creative imaginative activity in order to fill the gaps in the process of reconstruction of the past.
- Historian's style which distinguishes him/her from the others.

Abstract thinking specific to childhood Although primary children are widely accepted as being at Piaget's concrete operational stage of thinking, we believe that they can think abstractly through developing imaginative and associative thinking (Dilek, 2002a) through and with the use of stories. In reality, the child's world of the imagination is an indicator for his/her potential abstract thinking.

Images of places, events and characters described in a story and establishing connections between them in the mind of reader/listener are formed through activation of associative, intuitive and creative thoughts which are the basis of abstract thinking specific to childhood. This kind of thinking is richer than our understanding of adult abstract thinking that seeks concrete equivalents for things with logical limits. In other words, a child realises his/her learning from abstract to concrete while s/he enlivens symbolic expressions in the story through images in his/her mind, instead of beginning from concrete events. As a result, in the child's fiction of the past, there are battlefields, castles, towns etc. and human links with them and human reactions and behaviours in response to them which are re-described his or her mind.

Re-constructing a Story through Imagination Place, time, people and events described in a story through symbols and words are linguistic codes, and are still unanalysed messages because they are not enlivened in the reader's/listener's mind. The reader/listener transforms these components into images in his/her mind by using these messages. Namely, intellectual activity associated with these unanalysed messages conveyed by language, is a function of abstract experiment and shows that there is a relation between language and thought. Likewise Vygotsky (1985) observed that children have less difficulty in expressing their abstract thoughts when they develop their vocabulary. As he (1985, pp. 101-2) pointed out, the child can make amazing connections to reach generalisations and is able to make astonishing transitions when s/he ventures to force the limits of his/her own thinking which is based on his/her experiment of a small concrete world. His argument may be accepted as evidence for 'abstract thinking specific to child'. So studying texts which are related to concrete experiments of children may have a part in developing imagination and abstract thinking.

On the basis of Mehler and Bever's research, Chomsky (2002, p. 138) mentions that intelligence has no developmental stages as Piaget and his colleagues investigated and argues that there is a possibility that intelligence has some different features. He considers that abstract stage described in Piaget's research, may be realised in the early stages of intellectual development, and the child's experiments are the process of adaptation to the existing intellectual structure. Hayek (1969) argues that individuals who have no concrete experiments can easily make abstract connections with things. These arguments show that history can be learned from early ages and children's potential can be a starting point for this learning. Capita, Cooper and Mogos (2000) also argue that learning history in early ages helps individuals not to develop prejudices about the past.

Stories, by defining events, facts and historical characters, send messages to the child's mind through symbols. These messages are re-organized by creative thinking skills of the child and initiate imaginative processes. According to Fines (2002)

imagination consists of *static* and *dynamic* processes. While static imagination refers to functions of seeing and depicting historical components in a period of time, dynamic imagination includes more complex processes of knowledge, experience, empathy and logical thinking. Static imagination re-produces images which are close to original ones. On the contrary, dynamic imagination re-constructs historical reality through using creative thinking processes.

Teachers and Pupils' Roles in Story Based Activities

The teacher acts as informer, demonstrator, facilitator or interpreter when s/he uses stories in the teaching of history. Depending on this, pupils' activities are varied. The teacher may frequently ask questions (closed/open) while s/he tells a story and give opportunities to children to ask their own questions about the story. Although not used in this research, maps, pictures, illustrations, etc. can be used when a story is told. The use of stories may be supported with drawings that reflect their content.

When a story-based activity includes drawings or re-productions of materials described in the story they have features of historical evidence. When questioned about these materials described in the story in terms of how they were made and for what purposes and when the development of historical events and responses of people of the past are discussed, there is a possibility that children may study like historians and develop a sense of appreciation for history.

Research Methodology

The focus of this study is to find out the effectiveness of story related activities in terms of developing historical understanding. The first hypothesis examined is a common claim that history cannot be understood if it is not concretized for primary children under the auspices of such principles as 'learning from concrete to abstract', learning from simple to complex' and so on into academic debate. Secondly, we test the hypothesis that learning can be realised through moving 'from the abstract to the concrete' relying on the idea of 'abstract thinking specific to childhood', as it is called by the researchers of this study. The study examines the individual's attempt to associate existing abstract thought with concrete experience through literature.

This study was designed as classroom based action research relying on qualitative research techniques. Research was carried out in a sixth grade class of eleven year olds at Ihsan Sungu Primary School in Istanbul between 15th of December 2002 and 15th of January 2003.

Data gathered from the classroom practices were analysed through a hermeneutic approach. Pupils' answers were analysed according to Egan's and Fine's levels of historical understandings.

Findings and Interpretations

Findings were classified under three headings based on the telling of a story written by us called 'Grandfather Seljuk' to the class of eleven years olds. The story was divided into parts. At the end of reading each part, children were asked to make drawings of events, materials and historical characters. During story reading, the teacher asked questions, gave feedbacks and made explanations.

Pupils' Drawings

Pupils concretized events, artefacts and historical characters through drawings. Pupils were not shown the original pictures and photos of the materials and historical characters described in the story. Similarities and differences were analysed between these drawings and original descriptions.

A flask, which pupils were asked to draw, was described in the story as below:

Servants were pouring rose sherbets into our glasses from a ceramic flask, being very round like a globe, it has a peafowl figure on its surface. There were two handles next to the rim of this interesting flask which is like a ball.

Below, a photo of the original flask and a pupil's drawing deriving from above description are given:



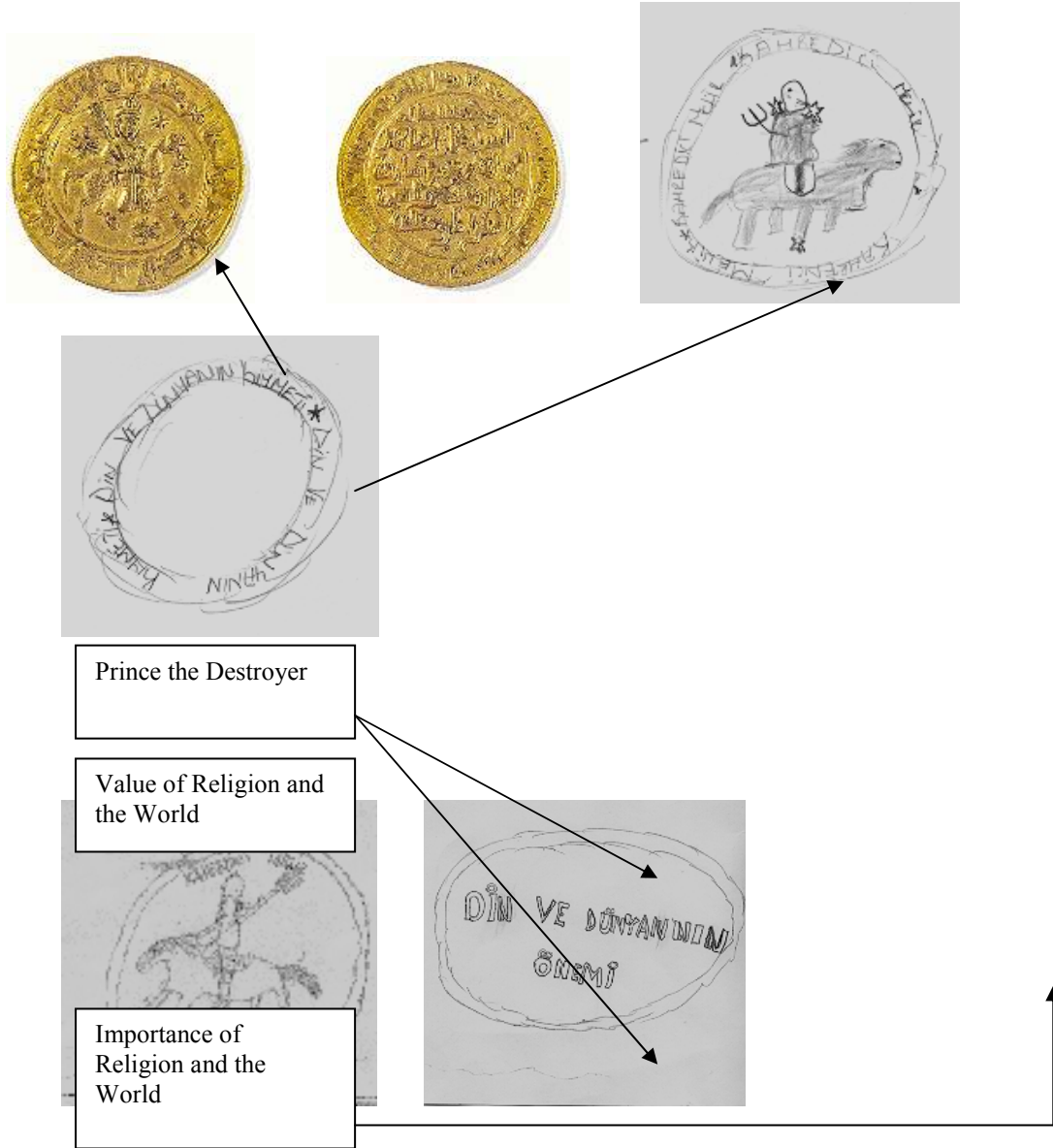
Drawing 1

As can be seen the pupil's drawing is very similar to the original flask. The pupil transferred the image of the flask that he formed in his mind to his drawing by using components of the flask described without creative activity. It can be said that this is an example of using static imagination.

Pupils were asked to draw pictures of a coin minted in the name of Suleiman Shah during his reign. The coin was described in the story below:

A round metal... Suleiman Shah mounted on his horse was depicted on the front side of the coin. He was carrying a weapon in his hand reaching to his shoulder. This interesting weapon looked like a fork with three prongs. This was a pitchfork that had been used since ancient times. There were three six-angled stars over his each shoulder and down of the legs of his horse. 'Destroyer Prince' was printed in Arabic letters on the surrounding part of the front side of the coin. '[He is] the value of religion and the world' was written on the back of the coin.

Below are the original coin and drawings by two pupils derived from the description in the story:



In general, pupils' drawings look quite like the original coin that was not seen by pupils before and can be seen as products of static imagination process. But these drawings have some details that show transition from static to dynamic imagination process. For instance, although headgear, saddle, boots were not described in the story, these are shown in *drawing 2* as in the original coin. The pupil used logical and experimental understandings of dynamic imagination process in order to fulfil the gaps because of lack of information given in the story. These understandings are related to addition of details by using description of the coin as primary source in the story given and were formed through a process of interaction between pupil and the story.

Below, the original plate and pupils' drawing derived from the description in the story are given:

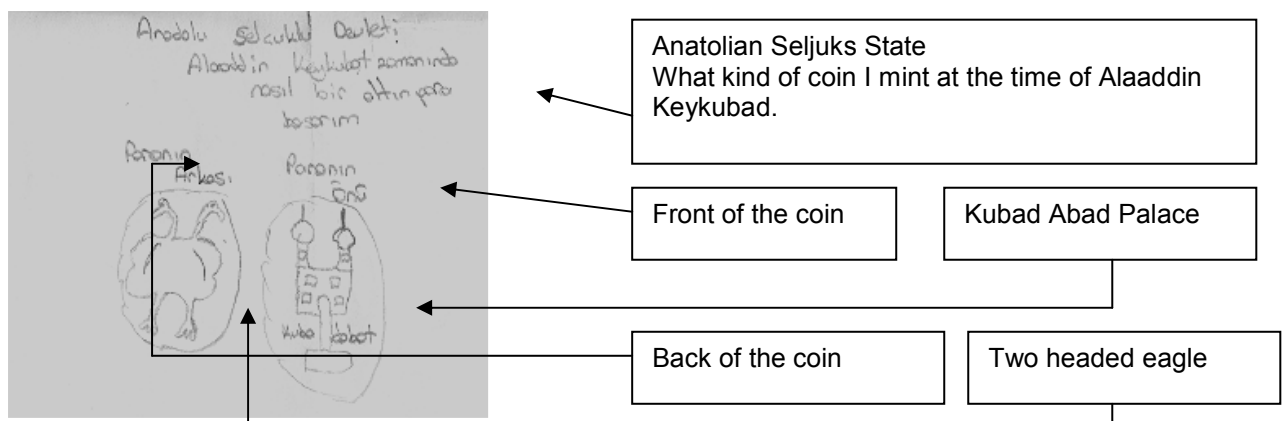
There were very beautiful plates that I have never seen before in the big bronze trays which were brought us by menservants. On the plate three dancing women were drawn wearing very long dresses which had large designs. Women were holding glasses. The edges of the plate were decorated.



Drawing 3

Drawing 3 can be seen as an example of features of transition from the static to dynamic imagination process. In this drawing, while the pupil drew features that were given in the description, he also added musical notes on the plate in order to make women figures more reflective of the tones of the musicians' instruments which were mentioned in the wedding feast description of the story.

When creative thinking skills of children are developed, processes of dynamic imagination (knowledge, empathy, experiment and logic) are put into use. Likewise, *Drawing 4* indicates the presence of these. It can be said that a coin was thought of as a sovereignty symbol because the pupil drew a two headed eagle, which is the symbol of Anatolian Seljuks, on the back of the coin and Kubadabad Palace is on the front side, which shows the economic power of the state. In the same way, the teacher mentioned that a coin was one of the symbols of sovereignty. The pupil drew figures needed for this sovereignty symbol by using descriptions given in the story. In the story a metaphorical connection was made between two rival dynastic brothers (Mansur and Suleiman Shah) and a two headed eagle. This also shows that children may produce works via associative connections that are historically acceptable. These works are similar to interpretations and historical facts that historians reach at the end of the abstract thinking process.

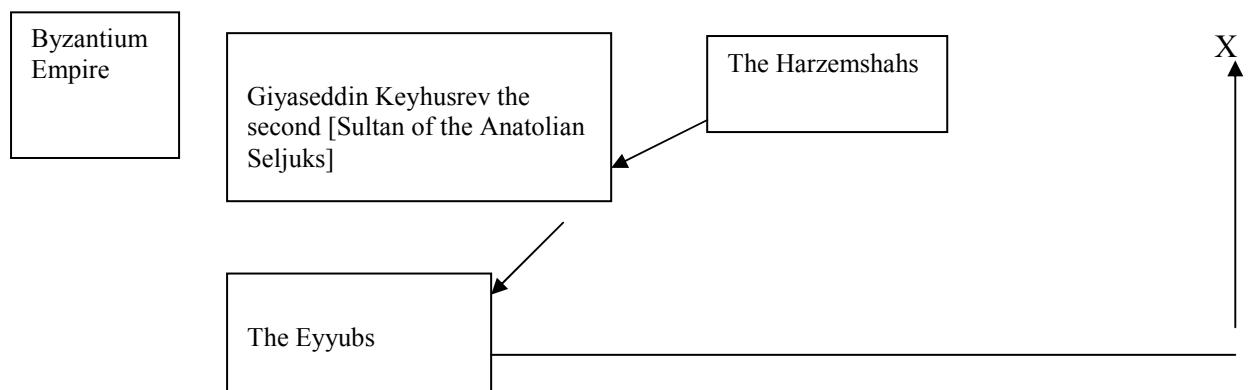


Drawing 4

Pupils' Answers

Pupils' answers were analysed according to historical understanding by using both Egan's (1978) and Fines' (2002) explanations.

After the story reading activity, pupils were asked to answer: 'If you were Giyaseddin Keyhusrev the second (Sultan of Anatolian Seljuks) what war tactic would you use against the Mongols?' A war tactic developed a pupil is given below:



The Eyyubs, Harzemshahs and Giyaseddin Keyhusrev the second make peace. I could sent an army to the X place by establish an army. Then, I bring an army that stayed in Turkey to the Harzemshahs's place. The army in the X attacks the Mongols. Then the army in Harezmsahs's place attack the Mongols. And the Mongols were being defeated by sticking in two armies. I could use the same tactic for Byzantium. At the end both states would be destroyed, three states would be united.

It can be said that, being affected by the War of Miryokefalon between Seljuks and Byzantium in the story, the pupil made a war plan which is similar to traditional Turkish war tactics (spurious withdrawal/eyebrow tactic). This, may show that skill of making generalisations, in which Egan (1978) calls the philosophic stage and which he believes develops between the ages of fifteen and twenty, and creative thinking including logical thinking, in which Fines' (2002) imaginative approach starting from knowledge, are used.

When the teacher described the War of Miryokefalon, pupils linked it with the War of Uhud (a war between Muslims and pagans at the emergence of Islam). In connection with this the teacher asked children 'How do you link Miryokefalon with Uhud?' Two of the students answered this question as below:

Pupil A:

The War of Uhud; the Prophet Mohammed made war against anti-religious people. The Crusades [in this case, it was the case war of Miryokefalon]; becoming united Christians, made a war for the purpose of saving holly places from Muslims.

Pupil B:

If I make connection between Miryokefalon and Uhud, I say that the same tactic was used in both wars [This pupil made a generalisation that 'if the enemy that escapes, is chased by a unit, that unit is defeated'. In Uhud, a small group of archers leaving their places chased the enemy, but they were defeated. Likewise, in Miryokefalon Byzantium army chased a small Turkish unit but it was defeated by the main Turkish army that was located in behind.]

Most of the pupils' answers were classified as romantic because the story used in this study included a lot of romantic level elements. However, some students such as pupil A and pupil B needed to make connections between Miryokefalon and Uhud. Generalisations that they reached by making connections and explanations for the

drawing above, may show that some primary students also reach historical understandings of what Egan called philosophic stage, though he pointed out that this is usually typical of older students. Fines called this the dynamic imagination process.

Video records

Interactions between pupil and teacher and between pupil and pupil were analysed according to Egan's typology of historical understanding that pupils demonstrated through empathy and identifying with historical characters through story. The first dialogue relates to a pupil's identification with an historical character:

- Teacher Well, who did Suleiman Shah [Sultan of Anatolian Seljuks] apply to when there was a conflict?
- Pupils To Melikshah [Emperor of All Seljuks] [Teacher repeats he applied to Melikshah]
- Teacher Well, what did Melikshah do?
- Pupils [He sent] a commander whose name was Porsuk.
- Teacher Well, who was the person that Porsuk fought?
- Pupils Mansur.
- Teacher Well, what happened at the end?
- Pupils Porsuk killed Mansur.
- Teacher Yes, did Mansur die? [Teacher draws X on the writing of Mansur on the blackboard]
- A boy pupil No! He didn't die.
- Teacher Dead... Well, our Mansur was dead [in the story].
- Teacher Now then, Porsuk won. Who did win when Porsuk won?
- Pupils Suleiman Shah.

There was a pupil called Mansur in the class. As can be understood from this dialogue, the pupil identified himself with Mansur in the story. Some of the pupils preferred to be supporters of Mansur, while the others supported Porsuk when the teacher read the related section. One may argue that as there was a pupil called Mansur in the class he could easily identify himself with the historical character Mansur. Nevertheless, pupils' attempts to identify themselves with Suleiman Shah or Tutus who were in conflict show that pupils of this age can also be at what Egan called the romantic level in terms of historical understanding. At this stage, pupils meet the concept of 'otherness' by sharing and understanding thoughts and feelings of past people and establish personal relationship with them.

In the process of empathising, which is different from identification, the individual attempts to understand and interpret the feelings and thoughts of an historical character with whom s/he empathises in an historical context. The interpretation includes not only historical empathy but also dynamic imagination. For this reason pupils used such expressions as 'if I were him I could do this' in the story activity. This is related to a pupil's process of empathising based on an historical event in the story.

[The teacher asks 'if pupils have different military tactics' after explaining how the Turks used a military tactic in order to win the war of Miryokefalon.]

- Teacher What war tactic could the Turks have used? If the Turks hadn't used traditional war tactics. Now, Rah... [a boy pupil] will show us.
- Pupil We have arrows. I mean arrows with fire. There were good marksmen archers. There were archers here. If there were archers here.
- Teacher Umm there were in fact.
- Pupil There were. There were archers...

- Pupil Now, if I were [him]...I don't locate [archers] I wouldn't do. Here, as Byzantium army was there. Here were the Turks. Armies came in this way after the Turks escaped.
- Other pupil: Rah But, when the Turks escaped was the Byzantium army going to forward?
- Pupil Well, I said this too. I was going [to send] them [a small amount of Turkish Unit]. How can I say? I was going to send them to the way of death. Then, because when these [the Turks] were dead, Byzantium certainly could say that they won the war. They were going to drop their swords. After this, here the Turks moving here [the Turkish units which were located both side of the mountain] were going to kill all of the Byzantium army that had no sword and shield.

The teacher, while reading the story, told that the Turks won the war because they used traditional Turkish military tactics in the war of Miryokefalon.

The pupils used the dynamic imagination process, which included creative thinking, in addition to empathy and identification. The pupil reconstructed the war of Miryokefalon based on historical conditions. In this dialogue the pupils engaged in what Fines defined as knowledge, experiment, empathy and logical thinking processes that are involved in developing historical understanding.

The knowledge and creative thinking that pupils gained when they engaged with historical stories enabled them to make fictional constructions through empathising and identifying with characters like Kilic Arslan the Second who won the war of Miryokefalon. This meant they could produce interpretations that are logically acceptable. A close look at the verbal data in terms of Egan's stages of historical understanding shows that such construction relates to his romantic and philosophic stages. This cannot be explained through binary oppositions of the mythic stage. Maybe the best explanation for this is that the pupils made genuine mental constructions of a past event without generalising. Instead, the pupils had made a transition to some features of the ironic stage. Likewise, instead of accepting as a generalisation that the Turks always won a war when they used traditional military tactics, pupils understand as a result of questioning that they in fact developed different tactics.

Findings from our research suggest that it is possible to use 'abstract thinking specific to childhood' when teaching history through story. Findings indicate the particular Egan stages achieved.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study aimed to find out how history can be learned without concretization by asking how stories can be used in the teaching of history. The story was made up of difficult and complex texts for primary school children, beyond what the Piagetian approach accepts as being possible at the concrete level of cognitive development. The stories provided challenging situations for pupils' learning to develop. Deriving from the events, characters and phenomena in the story such activities as drawing pictures, making war plans, answering open and closed questions, empathising and identifying with historical figures were taking place in the class.

Findings were obtained through these activities in which pupils, by transferring them as images in their mind, constructed more or less different versions of the past as historians did. These findings can be interpreted as the outcomes of a process of concretising messages conveyed from abstract symbols of the story after transforming them into images in the mind. Instead of providing a learning environment by using teaching materials such as pictures, photographs, CDs,

textbooks in accordance with a Piagetianist approach, pupils were given opportunities to listen a historical story in which they could think creatively and with which they could grapple mentally. In other words, a historical topic was narrated according to its abstract nature, and this narration was supported for concretising through pupils' historical interpretations and constructions (writings and drawings).

But this concretising may be thought of in terms of the needs to create authentic works and to share these works with others (see Dilek, 2002b) which is different from reinforcement of learning. This sharing enables the teacher to give feedback by determining pupils' historical understandings and perceptions. The argument developed in this research is that learning is realized through a circular process with three dimensions. The first dimension is individual that is the mental activities of a pupil. The pupil constructs things that the teacher teaches in this dimension. The second is to share creative constructions that are developed further through interaction between the individual and group or class with these. Creative work is revealed as reflections of reciprocal interactions different from the first construction. The third is the dimension of a process based on teacher's feedback through continuous interaction with a group or class. The teacher gives feedback to pupils' answers for questions that they ask from the beginning of telling or reading a historical story. This feedback is spread out along the learning process. Consequently, these three dimensions take place in a circular process in learning.

Theories of learning reduce learning to a mechanical level through attempts to form classifications and formulas. At the same time, it has been paradoxically stated that learning occurs individually in this mechanical view. It seems that pedagogic-pragmatic claims for concrete understanding combine with the need for connection with technological developments (such as working principles of computers) in exploring learning. Little importance has been given to the priority of the abstract in learning, and direct teaching techniques have been little utilized for the sake of Piagetianist approaches in which learning is based pupils' stages of pupil development.

This study conveys the priority of putting the abstract in historical learning on to the research agenda. It has showed in the action part of this study that abstract thinking specific to childhood could be realised through the use of historical stories. Below some suggestions are given in the lights of findings of this study:

- Levels of historical understanding can be developed through historical stories and texts irrespective of pupils' ages.
- Classroom activities such as listening, reading and explanation can contribute pupils' skills of making historical interpretations.
- Through stories challenging learning environments can be provided in which pupils use their dynamic imaginations.
- Stories provide opportunities for pupils to study like historians in order that they can construct the past which may be one of the ways of effective teaching.
- The use of stories can improve pupils' skills of language, their abstract thinking and questioning.
- Teachers or pupils may contribute to the content of history lessons by activities of reading or writing stories.

Correspondence

Dursun Dilek and Gülçin Soğucaklı Yapıcı
The University of Marmara
İstanbul/Göztepe, Turkey

email dursundilek@marmara.edu.tr

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