

ASSESSMENT OF INTEGRATED NARRATIVE COMPETENCE USING THE TRIADIC MODEL “SYMBOL, EMPATHY, CREATIVITY”: RESULTS FROM THE CONTROL STAGE

Adelina OLTEANU-STURZA, PhD student,

„Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chişinău, Moldova

adelinaolteanusturza@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article presents a study on the effects of Propp’s Cards method—as adapted by the author with the aid of artificial intelligence—on narrative competence, as integrated through the triadic model “Symbol, Empathy, Creativity” (TRECS), during the final, control phase of the research. Narrative competence is defined by three dimensions: creativity, receptivity, and identification with the literary character. The sample consisted of 240 children, aged 5–10, divided throughout the study into three categories: preschoolers, first- and second-grade students, and third- and fourth-grade students. The assessment took place during a 3-minute oral test using the metaphorical “Happy Ending” card. The children answered three open-ended questions regarding creativity, symbolic identification, and empathic identification. We can observe that the overall TRECS average in the control phase increased significantly depending on the age group. The results support the usefulness of the TRECS model in children’s and students’ reception of the fairy tale.*

Keywords: *narrative competence; fairy-tale reception; TRECS model; symbolic interpretation; empathic identification; creativity; metaphorical cards.*

Introduction

In contemporary education, reading fairy tales risks becoming a passive activity for children and students. In the age of artificial intelligence, children read fewer stories, and a modern method was needed to motivate them and actively engage them in experiencing literary fairy tales. Studies show that it is very important to rethink reading as a complex experience that combines children’s cognitive, affective, and creative dimensions, giving them an active role in literary engagement (Zipes, 2006).

Narrative competence is a fundamental component of children's cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and cultural development. Through stories, children learn to organize events in temporal and causal sequences, to determine the behavior of different characters, to interpret their actions considering certain values, and to reinterpret different parts of the story through the lens of their own life experiences. Thus, in preschool and elementary school education, narrative competence should be viewed as more than just the ability to reproduce the content of a literary text. We are also referring to the ability to assign meaning and to adopt a different perspective, as children reshape the narrative content through their own imagination.

Fairy tales provide a very suitable context for this development in children. The characters, symbolic objects, the trials the characters undergo, the transformations and specific resolutions found in fairy tales, and the happy ending offer children a familiar narrative structure that develops their imagination, allowing them to engage in personal interpretations of the fairy tale. Vladimir Propp, in "The Morphology of the Folktale" (1970), identified 31 narrative functions of the folktale that make its structure stable enough to be recognized by children and flexible enough to be reworked. From an educational perspective, this dual function of the fairy tale allows children to gradually progress from recognizing narrative patterns to actively reconstructing them.

The traditional approach used with preschoolers and young schoolchildren limits literary reception and emphasizes specific questions regarding characters, actions, and chronological order. These questions help children understand the fairy tale, but they do not capture their symbolic, emotional, and creative engagement. Literary reception in an educational setting must be viewed in a broad sense, in which reading represents an encounter between the text, children's life experiences, and their imagination (Marin, 2008; Pâslaru, 2001; Șchiopu, 2007).

According to Craft (2006), creativity is the process comprising the totality of meaningful alternatives produced by children, not merely a few unusual responses.

Within this educational context, the need arose for a new method, namely the Triadic Model of Fairy Tale Reception—TRECS, a model developed by the author. The model was developed based on three fundamental dimensions of fairy tale reception: symbolic interpretation, empathic identification, and creative reconstruction, with the aim of assessing how children understand, experience, and recreate the fairy tale. As part of the research, the model was implemented using four sets of metaphorical cards:

- The Story Gang – Archetypal fairy tale characters,

- Abracadabra – Symbolic objects and magical elements,
- Adventure – The fundamental structures of the fairy tale,
- Emotico – The characters' emotions and feelings.

This article presents the results of the research from the final phase of the experiment's validation. The aim is to assess the narrative competence of preschoolers, first- and second graders, and third- and fourth graders, and to compare the results of the initial assessment with those of the final assessment.

Aim and research questions

The purpose of this research is to assess narrative competence integrated through the triadic model of "Symbol, Empathy, Creativity" during the final, control phase of the experiment and to identify age-specific characteristics in the development of its symbolic, empathic, and creative dimensions:

- What is the overall level of narrative competence in the control phase among preschoolers, first- and second graders, and third- and fourth graders?
- How do creativity, symbolic interpretation, and empathic identification change across the three age groups covered by the study?
- What changes do we observe between the initial phase and the final control phase?
- Which of the three dimensions develops the most, and how can the children's qualitative responses be interpreted?

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Narrative competence as an integrated construct

Narrative competence is a complex structure formed by various cognitive, linguistic, affective, symbolic, and creative processes. This competence does not refer to a child's ability to retell a story, list the characters and their actions, or name the main events in the story, but rather to the child's understanding of the relationships between these elements, the attribution of meaning, and the child's active participation in reconstructing the narrative arc. A child who has developed this skill does not merely recount what happened in the fairy tale, but tries to explain why the events occurred, why the characters acted in a certain way, what consequences and lessons we can draw from the story, how it might continue, or what other ending the story might have.

On a cognitive level, the child lists the characters in the story that was read or told, their goals, the obstacles encountered throughout the

narrative, the magical objects that help the main characters overcome these trials, the chronological sequence of events, the cause-and-effect relationships, and the ways in which the main conflict—which forms the plot—is resolved. For a child to understand a fairy tale means that they construct a mental image that is as accurate as possible, in which the unfolding events are part of an organized whole and are not isolated. A competent child must recognize the connections between the beginning of the story, the development of the action, and the story's conclusion, and be able to describe the changes that occur in the characters' lives.

An important role is played by the child's ability to make interpretations that go beyond the initial information received. In many narrative situations, the characters' emotions, their intentions, and the motives behind their actions are not directly conveyed to us; they must be discovered through gestures, actions, choices, and the relationships between characters. Thus, psychological processes are involved in the reception of the story: not only memory and attention, but also flexibility of thought, the ability to anticipate events, and an understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.

From a linguistic perspective, narrative competence refers to the use of appropriate vocabulary, grammatically sound language, the formulation of coherent responses, and the logical organization of narrative discourse. The development of this competency aligns with the child's ability to use words and expressions that indicate temporal and causal relationships, to describe characters and situations, to express various inner states, and to stay on topic throughout the story. Through these storytelling activities, the child develops both receptive and expressive language and learns to transform mental representations into verbal structures that are meaningful to the listener.

On an emotional level, the child can recognize the characters' emotions, understand the motives behind their actions, and adopt the characters' perspectives. Empathic identification means more than simply evoking an emotion. Empathic evocation involves understanding the context in which that emotion arises, relating it to the character, and visualizing how the child would feel in a situation like the one in the story. Through stories, the child can symbolically experience various feelings, such as joy, fear, loss, courage, injustice, hope, and the desire to belong. Through stories, the child does not risk facing a real-life dangerous situation; everything remains on a symbolic level.

When a child identifies with a particular character, they are developing the ability to understand other people's mental states. The child gradually begins to distinguish between what they know, think, feel, or

desire, and what the story's character might be experiencing. This differentiation forms the basis of empathy, emotional self-regulation, and the development of social skills. When children are exposed to distinct narrative perspectives, they come to understand that the same situation can be interpreted in multiple ways.

On a symbolic level, the child assigns meaning to the characters, objects, settings, and actions in the story. In fairy tales, magical objects, the journey, the forest, and the trials and transformations the characters undergo are not merely elements of the story's setting; rather, they evoke real-life situations, fears, conflicts, desires, or even processes of maturation. Symbolic interpretation occurs when the child moves beyond the initial phase of identifying an element to the stage where the child associates an element with a function, a value, or a meaning related to the entire story.

Symbolic thinking makes it possible to move from concrete to the possible and from immediate reality to imaginary representation. A child may understand that a key can be used to open a door, but symbolically, it can also represent finding a solution, entering an unknown space, or overcoming an obstacle. Similarly, a road can symbolize a quest, just as a magical transformation can evoke a character's inner change. All these processes relate to the ability to attribute meaning to experiences and deepen literary comprehension.

At the productive and creative level, the child modifies, expands, shortens, or rephrases the story. They may introduce a new character, propose an alternative resolution to the conflict in the story, alter the function of a symbolic object in the story, or suggest a different ending. If a child is narratively creative, it does not mean that they will give more unusual answers, but rather that they evoke alternative situations that are plausible and logically relevant. From a narrative perspective, an idea has greater value than the more original it is, provided it is meaningful to the situation at hand.

Creative reconstruction involves the flexible use of already familiar events. In reconstruction, the child starts with familiar characters, actions, and situations, but reconfigures them and gives them new meaning. At this stage, reproduction and creation should not be considered two separate processes. Initially, the child relies on models they are familiar with and reproduces familiar solutions consistent with their life experience. Then, the child begins to combine elements, reformulate them, and adapt them, producing personal variations. The development of narrative competence can be described as a gradual transition from the reproductive level to the productive and creative levels.

Affective, cognitive, symbolic, and creative processes do not develop in isolation but are interconnected. Symbolic understanding underlies emotional involvement; the way a child perceives a character's emotional experiences is influenced by the meaning of a situation. Emotional involvement can support creative reconstruction, and thus the child is motivated to seek solutions, to symbolically rectify an unjust situation they have encountered, or to imagine a different ending to the story. The changes proposed by the child reflect how he or she interpreted the narrative situation, so creativity in this case highlighted the level of symbolic understanding.

According to Marin (2008), Pâslaru (2001), Șchiopu (2007), integrated narrative competence is defined as the child's ability to derive narrative meaning based on visual and symbolic cues, to understand and empathize with the protagonist, and to add a meaningful and original element to the narrative flow of the story. Through this definition, we can observe the connection between the child's personal experience and literary understanding, the connection between the child's ability to express themselves and their emotional engagement, and the connection between the child's creative action and reception as an active process of meaning-making.

The integrated nature of narrative competence presupposes a harmonious relationship among these three dimensions. Symbolic interpretation adds depth to understanding; empathic identification refers to personal involvement; and through creative reconstruction, the child actively transforms the material of the fairy tale. Together, these elements form a profile of reception that reveals not only what the child understood from the story, but also how they experienced it and recreated it.

Why is the concept of integration important? Because children may vary from one dimension to another. A child may give a very creative response that is unrelated to the story's symbolic logic. Or they may correctly identify the narrative situation but without emotional or imaginative engagement. The child may recognize the character's emotion but be unable to explain the symbolic significance of the context or propose an original continuation.

These differences should not be viewed as limitations, but rather as indicators of a child's developing profile. Some dimensions emerge earlier, while others develop after literary exposure, numerous guided conversations, and repeated educational contexts. The way a child responds to narrative tasks is influenced by age, level of language development, prior experience with stories, family environment, and the teaching strategies used.

The TRECS model does not treat an isolated response as proof that narrative competence is present in children. Instead, it emphasizes the profile formed by the three dimensions: Symbol, Empathy, and Creativity. This approach involves observing competence, as well as any imbalances among the three components. The assessment does not determine whether a response is correct or incorrect; rather, it identifies the quality of the child's participation in the narrative process.

From an educational standpoint, the teacher can analyze the integrated profile and provide pedagogical support. If a child demonstrates a low level of symbolic interpretation, activities based on exploring the meanings of objects and actions are needed. If a child shows limited empathic engagement, we can help by asking questions about emotions, intentions, and perspectives. A child with reproductive creativity can be supported through exercises involving continuing, transforming, and recombining story elements. Thus, assessment is not merely a measurement tool but a starting point for designing educational activities.

Integrated narrative competence can be defined as the ability to construct, experience, and transform narrative meaning. This competency highlights how children organize the information they receive, interpret symbols, understand the experiences the characters go through, and use their imagination to create alternative scenarios. The TRECS model captures this complexity through multidimensional assessment, tailored to the specific characteristics of preschool and early elementary school-aged children.

Fairy-tale morphology and metaphorical mediation

Vladimir Propp (1970), in his famous work "The Morphology of the Folktale", identified 31 recurring narrative functions in folktales, structured into a fixed pattern of action. These functions describe recurring moments, such as: the initial situation, the prohibition, the violation of the prohibition, the inquiry, the delivery of information, deception, complicity, absence, mediation, the hero's consent, departure, the first function of the donor, the hero's reaction, the receipt of magical aid, the journey to the place of the quest, the battle, the hero's marking, victory, resolution, the hero's return, the persecution, saving aid, arrival incognito, the false hero's false claims, the difficult task, completion of the task, the recognition, unmasking of the false hero, the transformation, punishment of the antagonist, and marriage. These functions can be translated into educational practice through visible cues and various activities that help children recognize the logic of the fairy tale, the sequence of events, and the roles of the characters.

Propp's functions should not be presented to children as abstract concepts, but rather through images, symbols, questions, or play situations. In this way, the child observes that the fairy tale is not merely a list of events but has a specific narrative structure in which a problem, a mission, a lack, obstacles, helpers, confrontations, and a way to restore balance all appear. When children recognize these patterns, they have reference points for understanding the text and for reformulating their own narrative texts.

The metaphorical cards used in the research were designed as a mediating tool between the literary text and the children's responses. Their purpose was not to replace reading, but to facilitate the observation, expression, and discussion of narrative situations. The metaphorical card serves as a starting point for interpretation, allowing the child to formulate hypotheses, establish connections between characters and actions, and attribute meaning to elements in the story. Each set of cards has specific objectives, tailored to its function in the process of engaging with the fairy tale. For each set of cards, we propose the following methodological approach:

1. The "Story Gang" set—character cards, with the primary objective of developing the recognition and analysis of fairy tale characters.

2. The "Abracadabra" set—cards featuring symbolic objects, with the primary objective of exploring the symbolism of magical objects and their role in narrative development.

3. The "Adventure" set—cards with narrative functions. Primary objective: Understanding the structure of the fairy tale and its narrative stages.

4. The "Emotico" set—cards featuring emotions and moods, with the primary objective of developing empathy, emotional intelligence, and identification with the characters. The use of metaphorical cards in fairy tale comprehension offers significant benefits to both teachers and the quality of literature lessons and activities, having a direct impact on the development of innovative children capable of critical and creative thinking. The use of these four sets of cards—each containing 10 cards—fosters the development of the symbolic, empathetic, and creative dimensions in the interpretation of fairy tales. The training workshops included guided reading activities, heuristic conversation, role-playing, dramatization, predicting events, devising alternative endings for stories, collaborative storytelling, drawing, and creating digital stories. Through these activities, the children were encouraged to move beyond simply recognizing and reproducing familiar elements from fairy tales to combining, transforming, and using these elements in new contexts. The metaphorical cards opened

the door to open-ended contexts, with different responses depending on each child's life experience, age, reading experience, language skills, and imagination.

The cards also contribute to the development of vocabulary and oral expression. Using an image, the child can define characters, emotions, actions, and objects; establish temporal and causal relationships; and formulate statements of gradually increasing complexity. The teacher can support the child's response through follow-up questions, rephrasing, and the introduction of new words and expressions, without limiting the child's imagination in their interpretation.

Metaphorical cards serve educational, formative, and evaluative purposes. They facilitate access to the structure, symbols, and emotional dimension of the fairy tale as a learning resource. As formative tools, they promote dialogue, participation, divergent thinking, and creative reconstruction. As an assessment tool, they allow for observation of how the child engages in symbolic interpretation, adopts a character's perspective, and integrates personal elements into the narrative process.

Metaphorical mediation transforms the reception of the fairy tale from a passive activity, focused on reproducing content, into an active process of meaning-making. The method, inspired by the morphology of the fairy tale, emphasizes the development of integrated narrative competence.

The TRECS model: Symbol, Empathy, Creativity

Symbolic interpretation refers to a child's ability to observe and interpret signs that indicate a certain state. In the test administered during the final stage of the experiment—the control test—the child was expected to conclude that the story had a happy ending, using elements from the image and imaginary sounds: fireworks, applause, smiling characters, their reunion, returning home, the celebration, the castle, and the disappearance of the danger.

Through empathic identification, the child recognizes the hero's emotional state but also imagines how he or she would feel in the hero's place, thereby developing the empathic dimension. Simply naming an emotion, such as "happy," indicates a basic level of recognition. When the child gave responses such as relief, pride, gratitude, fulfillment, or satisfaction, these evoke a more developed narrative-emotional understanding.

Creative reconstruction refers to the child's ability to symbolically add to, transform, or improve an element of the final scene, either by introducing a concrete element based on the given image or through an

original narrative expansion. What matters here is not originality, but the introduction of the new element into the narrative process.

Methodology

Research design and context

The research was conducted in three distinct stages: the initial stage, the formative intervention, and the final, control stage. The formative component consisted of seven TRECS modules in which the triadic model of fairy tale reception was applied through interactive teaching activities to stimulate active reading, narrative empathy, and creativity. This article presents the results from the final stage of the experiment and compares them with the initial results.

The research was conducted in bilingual Romanian-nationality institutions in Hungary, namely the “Lucian Magdu” Romanian Elementary School and Kindergarten in Bătania, the “Grădina Fermecată” Romanian-Nationality Kindergarten in Micherechi, and the Bilingual Romanian-Nationality Elementary School in Micherechi.

Participants

The study was conducted on a sample of 240 children aged between 5 and 10. The participants in the experiment were evenly divided into three educational categories: 80 preschoolers in the older group, 80 students in grades 1–2, and 80 students in grades 3–4. The same children took both the initial and final tests.

Educational category	Approximate age range	n
Preschool – final kindergarten year	5–6 years	80
Primary school – grades I–II	6–8 years	80
Primary school – grades III–IV	8–10 years	80
Total	5–10 years	240

Source: Author's calculations based on the research dataset.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by educational category

Formative intervention

The program was organized using narrative-based training modules, rather than rigid, one-hour modules. This format allowed for the duration and activities to be adapted based on the children's ages and individual characteristics, the complexity of the fairy tale, and the group dynamics. The modules included reading, conversation, interpretation, role-playing, collaborative

storytelling, drawing, and digital creation. The four sets of metaphorical cards were used in all modules.

Initial and control-stage instruments

Both assessments, the initial and the final ones, were conducted individually, through oral tests lasting approximately 3 minutes for each child. In the initial stage, we used the metaphorical card “The Treasure Chest.” The questions referred to the symbolic role or power of the object, the message it conveyed, and how the child might have used this magical object. In the follow-up phase, the stimulus was the “Happy Ending” metaphorical frame, which included the same three dimensions and the same rating scale.

The questions asked in the control phase were as follows:

- Creative Reconstruction: What would you add to the final image so that everyone’s joy is even more clearly visible? It could be an object, an animal, a person, or another imagined element.
- Symbolic Interpretation: How can you say that the story ended well? What do you see in the image, or what sounds do you imagine you hear, that show this?
- Empathic Identification: How do you think the hero feels now, at the end of the story? How would you feel if you were in the hero’s place?

Scoring procedure

Each response was coded, in both stages, using the same four-point scale. A score of 0 indicated the absence of a relevant response; a score of 1 corresponded to a reproductive response, based on an obvious and concrete element; a score of 2 indicated a productive response, which included an explanation, a personal connection, or a meaningful relationship between elements; and a score of 3 corresponded to a creative response, characterized by originality, elaboration, expressiveness, or symbolic integration.

The maximum total score was nine points, and the individual TRECS average was calculated by dividing the sum of the scores obtained across the three dimensions by three.

Score	Level	Operational descriptor
0	No relevant response	No answer, refusal, or response unrelated to the prompt.
1	Reproductive	Simple, concrete responses are based mainly on an obvious feature of the

		image.
2	Productive	Personal interpretation, explanation, causal connection, or meaningful extension.
3	Creative	Original, elaborate, expressive, or symbolic reconstruction integrated into the narrative.

Source: Author's TRECS coding grid.

Table 2. TRECS response-level descriptors

Data analysis

In the first stage, quantitative analysis was conducted by calculating the means and differences between the scores obtained in the two stages.

Qualitative analysis focused on the children's responses: adding a new element, symbolic deduction, causal explanation, naming emotions, adopting the character's perspective, moral interpretation, and creative continuation of the story.

Ethical considerations

The databases used the participants' initials, not their full names. Before working with the children, we obtained parental consent from each institution for their participation in these research activities.

Results

Overall TRECS performance at the control stage

The overall results show a clear progression associated with age. The average TRECS score was 1.26 for preschoolers, 1.69 for students in grades 1–2, and 1.90 for students in grades 3–4. The final average for the oldest age group approached the productive level, corresponding to a value of 2.00, while the average for preschoolers remained closer to the reproductive level, with some productive responses appearing.

Age group	n	Mean	SD
Preschool	80	1.26	0.30
Grades I–II	80	1.69	0.41
Grades III–IV	80	1.90	0.35

Source: Author's calculations based on the research dataset.

Table 3. Overall TRECS scores at the control stage

Results by TRECS dimension

The three dimensions developed at different rates. Symbolic interpretation recorded the highest average in every age group, although the difference was small among preschoolers. Creative reconstruction became increasingly evident in older age groups, reaching an average slightly above 2.00 in grades 3–4. Empathetic identification increased steadily but remained in the dimension with the lowest score.

Age group	Creativity M	Creativity SD	Symbol M	Symbol SD	Empathy M	Empathy SD
Preschool	1.29	0.53	1.35	0.51	1.15	0.36
Grades I–II	1.70	0.62	1.84	0.58	1.54	0.59
Grades III–IV	2.01	0.54	2.03	0.50	1.65	0.64

Source: Author's calculations based on the research dataset.

Table 4. Control-stage means and standard deviations by TRECS dimension

Distribution of response levels

The distribution of responses clarifies the significance of the obtained means. Among preschoolers, 75.0% of the responses related to creativity, 66.2% of those regarding symbolic interpretation, and 85.0% of those concerning empathy were classified at the reproductive level. Productive responses accounted for 21.2%, 32.5%, and 15.0%, respectively. Responses corresponding to the creative level were rare in this category.

Among students in grades 1–2, productive responses became predominant in the case of creativity (52.5%) and symbolic interpretation (63.7%). Regarding empathy, responses were more evenly distributed between the reproductive level (51.2%) and the productive level (43.8%).

Among students in grades 3–4, productive responses accounted for 71.2% of responses regarding creativity and 75.0% of those regarding symbolic interpretation, while 15.0% and 13.8%, respectively, reached the creative level. Responses regarding empathy were more varied: 47.5% were productive, 43.8% were reproductive, and 8.8% were creative.

In the control phase, no response was coded as absent. The high response rate may indicate the children's familiarity with the assessment format, greater confidence in oral participation, or the accessibility of the "Happy Ending" metaphorical stimulus.

Comparison between the initial and control stages

The initial averages were recalculated directly based on the 240 individual score records to ensure consistency between the raw data table and the reported statistical values. The corrected initial overall averages were 1.03 for preschoolers, 1.13 for students in grades 1–2, and 1.05 for students in grades 3–4. The final averages were higher in all three educational categories.

Age group	n	Initial M	Initial SD	Control M	Control SD	Mean gain
Preschool	80	1.03	0.57	1.26	0.30	0.24
Grades I–II	80	1.13	0.45	1.69	0.41	0.57
Grades III–IV	80	1.05	0.56	1.90	0.35	0.85

Source: Author's calculations based on the research dataset.

Table 5. Overall TRECS change from the initial to the control stage

Change by dimension

Age group	Dimension	Initial M	Control M	Gain
Preschool	Creativity	1.21	1.29	+0.08
Preschool	Symbol	1.00	1.35	+0.35
Preschool	Empathy	0.86	1.15	+0.29
Grades I–II	Creativity	1.28	1.70	+0.43
Grades I–II	Symbol	1.18	1.84	+0.66
Grades I–II	Empathy	0.93	1.54	+0.61
Grades III–IV	Creativity	1.24	2.01	+0.78
Grades III–IV	Symbol	1.06	2.03	+0.96
Grades III–IV	Empathy	0.85	1.65	+0.80

Source: Author's calculations based on the research dataset.

Table 6. Initial-to-control change by TRECS dimension

The smallest change was observed in creativity among preschoolers (+0.08). In contrast, symbolic interpretation and empathy increased by +0.35 and +0.29, respectively. Among first- and second-grade students, all three dimensions showed improvement, with the most pronounced increase observed in symbolic interpretation (+0.66), followed by empathy (+0.61) and creativity (+0.43).

The oldest age group showed the greatest increases across all dimensions. Symbolic interpretation increased by +0.96, empathy by +0.80, and creativity by +0.78. In the control phase, the means obtained for the symbolic and creative dimensions slightly exceeded the threshold for the productive level, corresponding to a value of 2.00,

indicating that productive responses became predominant and creative responses were no longer isolated.

Qualitative characteristics of the responses

Qualitative data highlights a shift from simply naming visible elements to integrating them into narrative explanations. Among preschoolers, responses frequently consisted of adding concrete elements, such as flowers, balloons, animals, food, or more fireworks. These additions were appropriate for the image but were not always accompanied by explanations. The preschoolers' productive responses associated the added element with the celebration or the hero's success, for example by suggesting a "heart full of love" or a decorated castle.

For students in grades 1–2, the added elements took on a more functional and personalized character. One child suggested "balloons and fireworks with the hero's name on them, as a sign of gratitude" (Participant 30), thus establishing a link between the visual element and social recognition. Another child proposed a trophy inscribed with "THE VILLAGE'S SAVIOR" (Participant 96), transforming the final scene into a symbolic reward bestowed upon the hero. These responses indicate that the students were not merely adding objects but were assigning them a narrative function.

Among students in grades 3–4, several responses took on a more explicit symbolic character. One participant added the sun because it suggested that "there is always something good" and that one must "see the sun after every cloud" (Participant 104). Another proposed a friendly dragon to help those in need (Participant 113), reimagining a traditional antagonist as a helpful character. Such responses demonstrate greater flexibility in the use of roles and symbols specific to fairy tales.

The development of symbolic interpretation was evident in the shift from identifying a single clue— "there are fireworks"—to the coordinated use of multiple pieces of evidence, such as fireworks, applause, smiling faces, the characters' reunion, the restoration of the castle, and the recognition of the hero's success. Older students were more likely to explain why these signs indicated the conclusion of the narrative: the danger had passed, the community had been saved, or the narrative conflict had been resolved.

Empathetic responses evolved from general labels, such as "happy" or "good," to more nuanced emotional states, including pride, relief, gratitude, peace, fulfillment, and moral satisfaction. Some children linked the hero's feelings to the effects of helping others: the hero was proud because the village had been saved, relieved because the danger had passed, or happy because the other people were happy. However,

many responses remained brief, which is consistent with the lower scores recorded on the empathy dimension.

Discussion

Development of integrated narrative competence

The results indicate a progressive reorganization of narrative comprehension across the three educational levels. Preschoolers responded primarily through concrete associations and by directly naming emotions. Students in grades 1–2 increasingly established connections between visual details and narrative meaning, while also offering personal explanations. Students in grades 3–4 demonstrated more consistent productive performance and the emergence of creative and symbolic integration.

This evolution is consistent with the development of language, causal reasoning, the ability to adopt another’s perspective, and the accumulation of literary experience. Older children have a richer vocabulary for describing motivations and consequences and are better able to coordinate multiple elements within the same response. However, the age-related differences observed should not be explained solely by maturation. The instructional activities repeatedly required children to identify narrative functions, interpret emotions, and generate alternative narrative possibilities. Therefore, the final responses may reflect the interplay between individual development, accumulated experience, and instructional guidance.

The high final scores obtained by the oldest age group do not indicate that the development of narrative competence is complete. Rather, they show that productive interpretation has become predominant, and creative responses have begun to appear more frequently. The 0–3 rating scale was designed to capture this transition, not to measure the full complexity of literary interpretation beyond the primary school level.

Why symbolic interpretation showed the strongest growth

Symbolic interpretation showed the most significant development, particularly among students in grades 3–4. One possible explanation is that the activities inspired by Propp’s theory made narrative functions and visual signs explicit. By repeatedly associating objects, characters, emotions, and events with the roles they play within the story, the children learned to view the image not as a collection of isolated details, but as a system of narrative clues.

The “Happy Ending” card also provided several converging clues: fireworks, a crowd of people, flowers, a festive atmosphere, and the

restoration of social order. The older children were able to connect these clues and deduce the deeper meaning of the resolution of the narrative conflict.

Empathic identification as a developing but demanding dimension

Empathy showed increases across all age groups but remained the dimension with the lowest average score on the final assessment. Recognizing that the protagonist is happy requires less interpretive effort than explaining nature and cause of this state of happiness. A well-developed empathetic response must establish a connection between the narrative event, the way the character evaluates that event, and the personal reaction the child imagines in a similar situation.

Many children used a limited emotional vocabulary, repeating terms such as “happy,” “good,” or “very good.” More developed responses included emotions such as pride, relief, gratitude, or fulfillment and justified these feelings by referring to the protagonist’s actions. The results suggest that future training modules should include more explicit activities focused on differentiating emotions, expressing causal relationships, and adopting the character’s perspective. “Emotico” cards can support this process by facilitating the transition from simply naming an emotion to explaining its trigger, its intensity, and how it may evolve over the course of the narrative.

Creative reconstruction and narrative flexibility

Creative reconstruction showed a modest average increase among preschoolers but a considerable improvement among elementary school students. This result does not mean that preschoolers lack imagination. Their responses often included playful additions, but the evaluation criteria required that the new element be meaningfully integrated into the narrative structure. Thus, a child who simply named an animal received a lower score than a child who explained how the animal would participate in the celebration or help the hero.

Older children increasingly transformed the conventional elements of the fairy tale. They created rewards, public signs of recognition, magical aids, natural elements with symbolic value, and possible continuations of the narrative. Such responses correspond to the productive and creative use of narrative structures, as described in approaches to literary education focused on developing creativity (Craft, 2006; Rodari, 1996). The child does not reject the structure of the fairy tale but uses it as a framework for generating new narrative possibilities.

The impact of metaphor cards

The use of metaphor cards in fairy tale instruction offers significant benefits to both teachers and the quality of literature lessons, having a direct impact on the development of innovative children who are capable of critical and creative thinking.

1. Impact on teachers

Metaphorical cards serve as an innovative teaching tool, offering teachers a structured and interactive way to approach reading fairy tales.

Benefits for teachers:

- Facilitating interactive teaching—teachers are no longer merely sources of information, but guides in the active discovery of the story.
- flexibility in use – the cards can be adapted for individual, group, or improvisational activities, allowing for personalized learning.
- increased student engagement – activities and lessons become more dynamic, and students actively participate by analyzing, reinterpreting, and dramatizing the fairy tales.
- integration into the curriculum – the cards can be used in literature, emotional education, and personal development lessons, supporting cross-disciplinary skills.
- encouraging learning through play – playful, card-based methods increase children’s motivation and reduce the rigidity of traditional lessons.

2. The importance of cards for the quality of literature activities / lessons

Teaching literature to preschoolers and early elementary students must be interactive, participatory, and multisensory. The use of cards improves the quality of activities/lessons by:

- transforming reading into an exploratory process. The “Aventura” set helps children recognize the stages of a story, allowing them to anticipate the action and understand the logical flow.
- developing critical and reflective thinking. The “Emotico” set helps them understand the characters’ emotions, creating connections between fiction and their own experiences.
- promoting learning through collaboration and play. The “Abracadabra” set stimulates imagination and creativity by reinterpreting the roles of magical objects.

- fostering empathy and emotional intelligence. The “Story Gang” set helps children recognize character types and understand their motivations.
- formative assessment is integrated into play: the teacher can assess children’s understanding of the fairy tale through their responses, without formal tests. Children demonstrate their understanding of the story through discussions, drawing, role-playing, and reinterpretation.

3. Fostering innovative children

Modern children must be more than mere listeners—they must be active explorers of the story, conform Marin, 2013. Metaphorical cards help foster innovative children who:

- thinks creatively and proposes new solutions: by reinterpreting the story, the child learns to invent alternative endings, add new characters, and create their own versions of fairy tales.
- analyzes and makes decisions: through the moral dilemmas in fairy tales (doubt and reflection), the child develops the ability to make decisions and anticipate the consequences of their actions.
- becomes an active storyteller: instead of passively receiving a text, the child constructs their own version of the fairy tale, takes on roles, and creates original stories.
- develop emotional intelligence and empathy: through discussions about the characters’ emotions, children recognize and express their own feelings and learn to understand different perspectives.
- learns with enjoyment and stays motivated: card-based lessons eliminate boredom, transforming reading into an interactive and captivating adventure.

This approach to engaging with fairy tales through play, interaction, and personalized interpretation can redefine how children perceive literature, offering them not just stories, but also tools for thinking and exploring the world.

The use of metaphorical cards in engaging with literary fairy tales represents an innovative teaching strategy that transforms reading from a passive process into an interactive, participatory, and creative experience. Building on Vladimir Propp’s theories about the structure of fairy tales and the imaginative methods proposed by Gianni Rodari, this educational model offers a modern and effective approach to stimulating children’s linguistic, narrative, and emotional skills.

Thus, the integration of metaphorical cards into the educational curriculum represents a step forward in fairy tale pedagogy,

demonstrating that literature can be more than just reading—it can become an adventure of learning, discovery, and creation.

Contribution of the TRECS model

The TRECS model contributes to the assessment process by highlighting the internal profile of narrative comprehension. An overall score may mask significant differences between the dimensions analyzed: a child may demonstrate creativity without providing a symbolic justification or may correctly interpret the symbolic meaning of a situation without adopting the emotional perspective of the protagonist. The three-dimensional profile allows the teacher to identify both the child's strengths and the areas that require support and further development.

The model also establishes a direct link between assessment and the teaching process. The same categories used to code responses can guide subsequent teaching activities: symbolic questions may explore the meaning of an object or event; empathetic questions may focus on the character's emotions and their causes; and creative questions may ask students to expand, transform, or reconfigure the story. This alignment between teaching and assessment supports the formative nature of assessment, as it does not appear as a separate test, detached from literary activity, but rather as an integrated component of the process of interpreting and making sense of the text.

Pedagogical implications

The research findings highlight the need for an integrated approach to literary reception, in which the understanding of meanings, emotional engagement, and creative reconstruction are fostered in a balanced manner. The differences observed among the three dimensions of the TRECS model, as well as the age-specific characteristics of children, provide important guidelines for designing instructional activities for preschoolers and early elementary students. We propose that pedagogical practice move beyond questions focused exclusively on content reproduction and create contexts in which children can interpret narrative cues, explore the inner experiences of characters, and actively participate in transforming the story's world. Based on these findings, the following directions for pedagogical application can be formulated:

- The use of triadic questions after reading a literary text. A balanced discussion should include at least one question regarding meaning, one concerning the character's inner experience, and one focused on the creative transformation of the narrative.

- Visual cards should be used as mediating tools, not as substitutes for the literary text. The image should open possibilities for interpretation, while maintaining a connection to the narrative structure and the values of the fairy tale.
- Explicit development of emotional vocabulary. Children should be encouraged to distinguish between happiness, pride, relief, gratitude, hope, courage, and fulfillment, and to explain the narrative cause of each emotion.
- Differentiating expectations by age. Tasks for preschoolers can focus on concrete associations and simple causal relationships, while older students may be asked to explain symbolic meanings, compare characters' perspectives, and create alternative endings.
- Combining oral, visual, dramatic, and digital expression. Children with limited oral fluency can demonstrate their narrative understanding through drawing, role-playing, sequencing cards, or creating digital stories.
- Using sample responses to provide formative feedback. Teachers can demonstrate how a reproductive response becomes productive by adding justification, and how a productive response becomes creative by integrating a new element into the story's internal logic.

Consistent application of these pedagogical approaches can transform the reception of literary texts into an active, differentiated, and formative process, tailored to the age and developmental characteristics of children. By integrating the questions of the triadic model, the use of visual mediation, emotional language, and various modes of expression, the teacher can support a gradual transition from reproductive responses to productive and creative ones. In this way, assessment no longer serves solely to determine the level of narrative competence but becomes a tool for guiding educational intervention and stimulating individual progress. The TRECS model thus provides a practical framework for organizing reading experiences through which children learn to discover meanings, understand the characters' perspectives, and personally participate in reconstructing the narrative world.

Conclusion

The results obtained in the control phase highlight the progressive development of integrated narrative competence throughout the preschool years and the early years of schooling. The overall TRECS average increased from 1.26 for preschoolers to 1.69 for students in grades 1–2 and to 1.90 for those in grades 3–4. Compared to the

corrected initial averages, the most significant progress was observed among students in grades III–IV, followed by those in grades I–II and preschoolers.

Of the three dimensions analyzed, symbolic interpretation emerged as the most highly developed component in the final assessment, while also showing the greatest increase. Creative reconstruction also showed significant improvement among the older age groups, where productive responses became predominant, and creative responses appeared more frequently and consistently. Empathetic identification showed progress across all educational categories but remained the comparatively least developed dimension. This result highlights the need to continue pedagogical activities focused on distinguishing emotional states, explaining their causes, and adopting the character's perspective.

Taken as a whole, the results confirm the usefulness of the TRECS model as a framework for describing and evaluating the relationship between meaning-making, emotional engagement, and narrative invention. The model establishes a link between the structural stability of the fairy tale and the child's active participation in its interpretation and reconfiguration. Its primary educational value lies in transforming literary reception from an activity centered on reproducing content into an active process through which children recognize and interpret narrative cues, relate emotionally to the protagonist's experience, and construct alternatives relevant to the story's universe.

However, interpreting the conclusions requires methodological caution. The observed changes are consistent with both the natural progression of children's development and the influence of the formative approach applied. Nevertheless, before drawing any causal conclusions, it is necessary to conduct a separate analysis of the experimental group's progress in comparison with the control group, as well as to strengthen the evidence regarding the reliability of the assessment process. Within these limitations, the research provides a coherent foundation for the further validation of the concept of integrated narrative competence and for the use of metaphor cards in literary education in preschool and elementary school.

References

- Banks, J. A. (2016). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching*. Routledge. Doi: 10.4324/9781315622255
- Bettelheim, B. (2010). *The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales*. Vintage Books.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.

- Craft, A. (2006). *Creativity in schools: Tensions and dilemmas*. Routledge. Doi: 10.4324/9780203357965
- Gherguț, A. (Coord.). (2016). *Educația incluzivă și pedagogia diversității*. Polirom.
- Marin, M. (2008). *Principii de dezvoltare a atitudinii elevului față de opera literară*. CEP IȘE.
- Marin, M. (2013). *Didactica lecturii*. Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu”.
- Pâslaru, V. (2001). *Introducere în teoria educației literar-artistice*. Museum.
- Piaget, J. (1972). *Psihologia copilului*. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Propp, V. (1970). *Morfologia basmului*. Univers.
- Robin, B. R. (2008). Digital storytelling: A powerful technology tool for the 21st century classroom. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(3), 220–228. Doi: 10.1080/00405840802153916
- Rodari, G. (1996). *The grammar of fantasy: An introduction to the art of inventing stories*. Teachers & Writers Collaborative.
- Șchiopu, C. (2007). Receptarea operei literare: Condiții, etape și niveluri. *Pro Didactica*, (1–3).
- Zipes, J. (2006). *Why fairy tales stick: The evolution and relevance of a genre*. Routledge. Doi: 10.4324/9780203700662