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### **STORIES, DESCRIPTIONS AND ESSAYS AS CATEGORIES FOR TALKING AND WRITING**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we explore the meaning of the main textual modes (narration, description and exposition) in a writing task performed at school. These modes are thought as typical discursive genres in school that are constituted as participants' categories in this arena. From this point of view, we analyze conversations between student pairs planning a text about a photograph. Each pair planned a text in a different discursive mode depending on the condition they were assigned. Results show that these discursive modes appear in conversations as procedures and resources designed by participants in the conversational process, in order to construct knowledge about the picture, rather than as static schemas.

**KEYWORDS:** Written composition - planning - Genre - School - Conversation Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to explore the meaning of different types of texts in light of their conversational occurrence in a particular school-writing task. In this paper, our purpose is not to explore textual diversity from an ontological point of view, as has been done in classical cognitivist studies (e.g. Hidi and Hildyard, 1983; Langer, 1985, 1986a, 1986b; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Rather, we wish to analyze how these textual forms are constructed through discursive practices in specific writing tasks that take place in school, and their importance as resources for constructing meaning.

This implies turning our concept of what are the traditional modes of discourse (narration, description and exposition). This turn will be taken from two sides, one theoretical and one epistemological and methodological. From the first side, we will re-conceptualize these discursive modes from genre theories (see Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Russell, 1997). From the second side, we will take this mode as discursive practices in which students and teachers or researchers engage in a school context, and analyze these practices from the epistemological ground of Discursive Psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1997; Edwards, 1997).

Classical cognitivist studies of written composition present global models that describe writing as a set of strategies and constraints which subjects use in order to compose a text (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). From this point of view, such categories as narration, description or essay are fixed and conventional schemata independent of text content that children have to learn in order to write conventionally. These schemata are defined a priori, and developmental trends in written composition of different genres are mapped out on the basis of these ideal, reified definitions. These approaches lose what, from our point of view, is an important matter in educational writing research: how students define and manage different kinds of texts in actual writing tasks.

However, new approaches to written and speech genres have a very different vision of this topic. These approaches have their roots in linguistic philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1988), dialogical theories (Bakhtin, 1986) and social constructionism (Bruffe, 1986; Rorty, 1991). From these perspectives, textual and speech forms are intimately linked to the social and historical situation in which they are produced. From this perspective:

"the composing of texts traditionally regarded as containers of knowledge comes to be seen, far more dynamically, as part of the social process by which that knowledge, 'the world, reality, and facts' are made." (Freedman and Medway, 1994, p. 5)

In general, discourse genres are defined as discursive recurrent actions that members of a group know to develop joint actions. They are cultural artifacts which can be explored analyzing the ethnocategories of discourse that members use, in place of the theoretical classifications offered by linguistics or rhetoricians. According to Miller (1994):

"we might characterize a culture by its genre set (...) The genre set represents a system of actions and interactions that have specific social locations and functions as well as repeated or recurrent value or functions. It aluminates a relationship between material particulars, instantiations of a genre in individual acts, and systems of value and signification." (p. 70)

In this sense, we consider that stories, descriptions and essays are recurrent actions in school settings, which are inscribed into joint actions performed by students and teachers when they are engaged in literacy activities. In this context, the bakhtinian concept of 'addressivity' is essential to understand these school genres. Children write for their teachers, who are their addressee, but this does not mean that the teacher functions as an addressee in the proper sense of the term, as a person who will read the message written by students with a special interest in its content. Indeed, teachers give priority to the intellectual function over the communicative function in literacy activities.

This circumstance is not an essential characteristic of the teaching to write situation, rather it is a feature of a specific pedagogical orientation towards writing. This orientation - unfortunately, very common in Spain - treats writing as an individual ability, which has to be acquired by children by means of following prescriptions and improve skills that are ordered in a hierarchy of complexity. In this sense, narrative texts are considered to be easier to learn than non-narrative texts, and students are engaged in learning to write and understand these kinds of text in this order, without thinking about why and for what are they learning them. In this sense, whereas writing outside the school means performing actions with important social functions in a complex network of communication, writing in the school has only one purpose: satisfying the teacher's expectations.

In this paper, we prefer to conceive these discourse modes (narration, description and exposition) as language games (Wittgenstein, 1988) performed by students and teachers in the school area of human activity. Wittgenstein defined language games as the whole that is formed both by the language and the actions involved in it. According this author, an example of a language game might consist of the actions performed and the words used by adults and children when the latter are learning to talk; for example, the ostensive teaching of vocabulary, when an adult signals some thing and pronounces a word and the child repeats it, is a language game. In the same sense, writing a story in a classroom context is a language game in which rules are defined by participants in the course of its performance and by

their shared knowledge of the situation. This language game is different from writing a description or making a comment, and participants have to take into account such differences in order to make such games distinguishable one from the other.

Therefore, we conceptualize different kinds of texts as generic forms or ethnocategories inserted in communities of literary practice and which achieve their functionality as operative categories used by people in those communities. What we propose in this study is to approach the writing of different kinds of text in school as a set of discursive practices where participants account for the topic that they write about and construct different versions of it. Studying and analyzing these discursive practices has a special relevance in an educational context where it is useful to know the ways in which learners understand the literary practices in which they are involved.

## **METHOD**

In this paper we take our methodological background from Discursive Psychology. From a discursive approach to cognition (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Edwards, 1997), psychological matters are understood as participants' categories that they use as resources for their participation in everyday social practices, such as writing in school. Discursive psychology takes its theoretical and methodological resources from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Button, 1991) and Conversational Analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992; Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Ethnomethodology is an approach to the study of the methods used by people to make sense of the world. In this context, CA emerges as a way of exploring these methods in situations of intersubjective action, and in this way conversation allows us, as analysts, to access the public deployment of these methods. The fundamental difference between this approach to the study of types of texts and the way that has been traditionally proposed is that in this case we do not begin with a normative definition of narration, description or exposition. Rather, we consider that such types of text are discursive frameworks that are constructed for the occasion by people in their everyday writing activities, on the basis of a joint understanding about what they are attempting when they narrate, describe or expose. In this sense, CA enables us to recognize these labels as categories that are defined by the participants in a scholarly task.

### ***Procedure and participants***

This study is part of a research project in which pairs of children from three different educational levels planned three different types of text (narration, description or exposition) about the same topic (a photograph of a beggar) and then wrote the text individually. A total of 184 Spanish students participated, with 64 fourth graders, 66 eighth graders and 56 twelfth

graders completing the entire process. Each age group consisted of three entire classes, which were individually assigned to either the narrative, descriptive or expository conditions. Participants received written instructions, which are shown in Figure 1.

The study took place in the classroom. We used a photograph to prompt children's writing. The photo was of a beggar with a child on a snow-covered commercial street. First, children worked in pairs planning the text about the "beggar's photograph" together. The process of planning in pairs was audio tape-recorded. Each pair had a tape recorder on the table. When they had finished planning, we took away the recorder, and they were asked to write individually the text that they had planned.

Your task consists of<sup>1</sup>:

1. Discuss in pairs:
  - a) What are we going to say in the composition?
  - b) How are we going to write the composition?
2. Write individually:
  - Tell a story about what you see in the photograph<sup>2</sup>
  - Describe the photograph<sup>3</sup>
  - Comment the photograph<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1: Instructions Sheet**

In this paper, we analyze the conversations of 87 pairs of students concerning this writing task (Table 1). Conversational analysis focused on two kinds of conversational sequences: (1) Those instances in which participants explicitly mention the categories "narration" or "story", "description", and "essay"; and (2) those instances where participants collaborated in producing an oral text about the picture. Analyzing the first kind of instances we wish to know which activities surround the use of these categories and what meanings they acquire in their use. With the second kind of instances, our purpose was to analyze discursive approaches to the reality reflected in the photograph.

**Table 1: Number of conversations analyzed by grade and by type of text**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Story	10	12	6	28
Description	10	9	9	28
Comment	10	12	9	31
Total	30	33	24	87

**RESULTS**

***Analyzing stories, descriptions and comments as ethnocategories***

**Stories**

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of pairs that mentioned the category "story". (chi square, non-significant)

**Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of pairs which mention the word 'story' in their conversations**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Mentioned	6 (60%)	11 (91,7%)	6 (100%)	23 (82%)
Not mentioned	4 (40%)	1 (8,3%)	0	5 (18%)
Total	10	12	6	28

We were interested in the implications of using this category in the conversation. The analysis of the sequences in which participants mentioned it showed that they are capable of employing the category in different ways, and to refer to different things. Mention of this category was usually followed by a sequence in which participants constructed the plot of a story, a plot that might be more or less elaborate. In Extract 1, in which two eight graders are planning a story, there is a prototypical example of the definition of "story" as a plot.

**Extract 1**

16. **Ana.** Did you understand? Like a story?
17. **Lidia.** Well, here there is a woman that is in the street begging because she is poor, isn't it?
18. And people pass and look at her, but they do not give her any money
19. **Ana.** It's that..., I guess I don't know. I don't know, a story...
20. It can say that someone is begging in the street but... people pass by

In this extract, Lidia's answer to Ana's questions (Like a story?) is a basic plot which has as its principal character a woman with certain features (she is poor) and who is performing a concrete action (she is begging). This answer, despite the fact that it does not have the form of a formal definition we can find in linguistics books, shows that Lidia is implicitly defining a story as a discourse about somebody (a woman) who is doing something (begging) for a reason (because she is poor). However, Ana is not very satisfied with this definition (line 19), and she completes Lidia's definition with another element: a problem or an irregular situation. In this sense, Ana agrees with Lidia about the protagonist and the action that she is performing, but she introduces a problematical element; that is, people passing by while the person is begging. Thus, a story can be discourse in which an irregular social or personal situation is exposed and, probably, explained. In this extract we can see how these two students are engaged in a language game that consists of delineating an utterance which can be called "a story".

In the next extract, we can see a similar phenomenon. This time, the plot is going back in time, and Maria is introducing elements that explain why the

person in the photograph is begging. Unlike extract 1, where the participants were relying on the information shown in the photograph, María is constructing a plot that includes information about how a person can become a beggar (lines 20-22).

### Extract 2

16. **B.** You have to reach to an agreement about how... what you are going to say about this photo and how you are going to tell the story
17. **Pedro.** That is, to describe it
18. **B.** No, it is to tell a story
19. **María.** Ah, so that the beggar...
20. The beggar was rich before
21. Then, he lost everything,
22. And then he had to start begging.

In Extract 2, these two eighth graders talk in a different way about the story too, which occurs relatively frequently when pairs of children planned a story. This way consists of differentiating the story from other discursive forms, as a description. In this case, it is the researcher (B., in line 18) who emphasizes the contrast between a description and a story, as part of the task. Recognizing the difference, María (line 19) demonstrates here that she knows that they can engage in different language games in relation to the photograph –in this case, to describe it or to tell a story about it.

In other cases, the definition of what a story implies is not defined by the elaboration of a plot or a contrast with other discursive modes. In some cases, participants defined their task of telling a story as telling what is happening in the photograph. Consider the following extract:

### Extract 3

33. **Javier.** ((Reading the instructions)) Tell a story about what you see in the photograph... a story (???)
34. **Ivan.** I have it, look, What are we going to say in the composition? Well, what is happening in the photograph.

As we can see in Figure 1, the instruction sheet required the participants to tell a story about what they saw in the photograph. Javier and Ivan, two four graders, know that they have to take this instruction into account in order to carry out the first part of their task: to discuss the photograph in pairs, and Ivan uses this information (line 34) to answer the first question posed in the sheet (What are we going to say in the composition?). Notice that the answer that Ivan gives to this question is not just "we are going to tell a story". On the contrary, this condition, that they have to tell a story, is a nuanced response. It means that telling a story about what you see in a photograph means that you have to tell what is happening in the photograph. In this sense, Ivan is relating this discursive mode to the relation of facts or events. And it implies, in another sense, that there are different modes of perceiving the photograph.

In other cases, telling a story means for students a process of invention that can go beyond what they see in the picture, as the participants in the next extract.

**Extract 4**

23. **Alba.** Ok, this you put: story, but, how can we begin, let's see?  
24. **Celia.** You have to make it up. Like if you tell a storytale but a story (???)  
You do not understand anything, do you?, it's like a storytale, but it's a story,  
to tell what is happening here  
26. **Alba.** What I mean is how do we begin?  
27. **Celia.** That there were some poor people and that.... as you wish, each of us is going  
to write one, and I cannot tell you

In this extract, Alba and Celia, two fourth graders, are trying to clarify what means to write a story. Alba is worried about the very wording of the text, how to begin it (line 26). However, Celia is invoking a different process of production, (invention) that is linked in some way to the writing process. In this sense, they cannot talk about what they are going to tell in the text.

Other language games in which participants were engaged deal with the classical difference between Fabula and Siuzhet (Tomashevski, 1925, quoted in Onega and García Landa, 1996). The Siuzhet is the narrative plot, the causal and temporal events chaining, whereas the fabula is the intemporal and static part of the narration or, in other words, the discourse (White, 1992) or the narration topic. This distinction can be detected in some of the conversations, as in the next extract, taken from a conversation between two twelve graders:

**Extract 5**

15. **Juan.** Sit down properly. We are going to discuss. I think that we should talk  
about poverty in the world, (???) as  
16. **Miguel.** The story  
17. **Juan.** Because I believe that really... ((he is interrupted by another pair))  
18. **Juan.** I think that we should tell that the poverty (???)  
19. **Miguel.** (???)  
20. **Juan.** No, but I think that we should tell that... what is happening in the world and  
so  
21. That is, that it is a photograph of a developed country where there is poverty  
22. And in even so people are going to the shops, because we can see it in this  
bag, can't we?  
28. We can see it in this child here, (???)  
29. And then I think that we should say that this is a photograph about a  
developed country, a capitalist country in the sense that poverty (???)  
30. **Miguel.** (???)  
31. **Juan.** Yes, but...  
32. **Miguel.** A story about what you see  
33. **Juan.** Yes, but I think that we should emphasize more  
34. **Miguel.** So, once upon a time that...

In line 15, Juan poses the task as talking about a generic topic: poverty in the world. In the following lines, Juan develops this statement, whereas Miguel is trying to adapt this proposal with the task that they have to do: to tell a story. From line 20 to 29, Juan develops the topic, poverty in the world, in relationship with things that they can see in the photograph. His argument consists of interpreting the photograph as a situation in which there exist a contrast between poverty and consumption (in the picture we can see people with bags and shops, apart from the beggar with the child). He situates this scene in a developed and capitalist country. In line 32 arises the necessity to shape this argument in a story. It is then when Juan changes his discourse and begins to talk about the story as a thing that has to be marked using some specific expressions, as the popular 'once upon a time'. In this way, we can find two related senses of story in this conversation, one in which this format can be used to transmit an argument, and other in which a story has some formal characteristics.

Finally, the participants referred to different genres of stories that they could write, such as Sandra, an eighth grader, in extract 6.

#### Extract 6

15. **B.** You have to write a story ((addressing the whole classroom))  
16. **Sandra.** A legend? A legend...

In Table 3 we show the frequencies of each phenomenon in the conversations (chi square, non-significant).

**Table 3: Senses of the word story in each grade (more than one sense might be referred to in a single conversation)**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Plot	5	7	3	15
Differentiation	1	4	3	8
What happened	2	2	0	4
Invention	1	2	1	4
Fábula- <i>Siuzhet</i>	0	1	2	3
Genre	0	2	1	2
Others	0	1	2	4
Total	9	19	12	40

As we have seen, the meaning that participants give to the category 'story' are multiple and diverse. More complex forms, as the differentiation between the plot and the topic of the story, and the allusion to specific narrative genres, are absent in the conversations of the younger students. In the following sections we will see how the meanings of the term 'description' and 'comment' are much more scant.

## Descriptions

In table 4, we present the frequencies and percentages of pairs that mentioned the category 'description' (chi square= 7,53; p=0,023)

**Table 4: Frequencies and percentages of pairs which mention the word 'description' or 'to describe' in their conversations**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Mentioned	4 (60%)	8 (89%)	8 (89%)	20 (72%)
Not mentioned	6 (40%)	1 (11%)	1 (11%)	8 (28%)
Total	10	9	9	28

In this table, we can see how the group of younger students mention less frequently the category 'description' in their conversations. In contrast to the diversity of meanings that the word 'story' had for the participants, our analysis of the conversations where participants mention the words 'description' or 'to describe' showed that they used them just in two senses. Let see some examples. In Extract 7, two fourth graders are working in pairs:

### **Extract 7**

49. **María.** So, I believe that there is... there is a poor woman who has a son,  
50. They are covered, but they are poor  
51. And there people walking  
52. it's Christmas and it is snowing, and they are cold  
53. **Pedro.** Well, more or less it's the same, I think that we have said  
54. Well, so I don't know, how can we.... eeeh,  
55. Another thing that we can do is to describe more like this, to put more details

In this extract, we can see how participants are talking about the photograph and saying what they see in it. In line 53, Pedro ratifies what María said, and he proposes a new action: to describe in more detail. In this sense, he is defining implicitly "describing" as an action consisting on mentioning things that they can see in the photograph. This action can be performed whit more or less level of detail. In this sense, the description is posed as a linguistic task that consists of mentioning things that there are in the picture and as an action that can be performed at different levels of depth and detail.

On the other hand, description was described by participants as a linguistic procedure not just for categorizing, but for arranging the visible objects in a descriptive text. Let see extract 8:

### **Extract 8**

12. **B.** What you have to do is to make a description  
...  
13. **Pilar.** So, we talk first about these characters who are there in the middle and a little

- bit about poverty and then we talk about the rest
14. **Andrés.** Yes, that's it, so, what do, we say, first we say that it is winter,
  15. That it is a photograph that was taken in winter and it could be at Christmas
  16. **Pilar.** Christmas

In this extract, participants are not only mentioning elements compounded the photograph, but they are saying how they are going to arrange these elements into the text. In Table 4, we show the frequencies of pairs that used the two meanings of description in each grade (Chi square non significant).

**Table 5: Senses of the word 'description' in each grade**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Categorization	4	6	3	13
Organization	0	2	5	7
Total	4	8	8	20

### Comments

Table 6 shows the frequencies and percentages of pairs mentioning 'comment' or 'to comment' (Chi square=10,97; p=0,05). As we can see in the table, fourth graders rarely mentioned these categories, and the two times they did, it was reading the instructions literally. Most of the occasions where participants used the category 'essay', they assimilated this category with description.

**Table 6: Frequencies and percentages of pairs which mention the word 'comment' or 'to comment' in their conversations**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Mentioned	2 (20%)	10 (83,3%)	7 (78%)	19 (61,3%)
Not mentioned	8 (80%)	2 (16,7%)	2 (22%)	12 (38,7%)
Total	10	12	9	31

Consider extract 9, where two eight graders are working together:

#### **Extract 9**

9. **P.** I have said it ten times. What you have to do is to comment
10. **Alicia.** To describe it, isn't that it?
11. **P.** No, not to describe, comment, to comment what is in the photograph
12. **Alicia.** What?
13. **P.** To comment, not to describe
14. **Roberto.** As a little description more or less
15. **P.** This is a comment on the photograph
- ...
19. **Alicia.** You have to describe. We didn't comment on anything. Come on, a description

In this extract, one of the researchers (P) is trying to establish that the task does not consist on writing a description but on writing a comment. However, Alicia and Roberto do not consider the difference between these two discursive modes. This is a very common phenomenon in pairs working

on comments. Despite of the strong difference that P. is making (line 13), participants resist the difference between description and comment (line 14 and line 19). In line 19 it seems that Alicia recognizes that describing and commenting are different actions, but she insists in writing a description.

In Extract 10, we can see another way in which participants talked about comments: contrasting this kind of text with the descriptive text. In this case, there is not an identification of the two modes, but a differentiation.

#### **Extract 10**

35. **Javier.** Let's go to tell this of the photo, that is, to describe it  
36. **Sonia.** But it is a essay, it isn't a description  
37. **Javier.** It is, it is the same an essay or a description  
38. **Sonia.** Man, but you have to talk more about what it inspires you  
39. That is, I don't know, to say that... that that, that is, that it seems as winter, Christmas  
41. And that there is a woman there begging and nobody gives her money, and that a child in her arms, and those kinds of things

In this extract, Javier, a twelve grader, poses the task as composing a description of the photograph (line 36), but Sonia does not agree with this. She establishes the difference between a description and an essay (line 37). She defines this difference as talking more about things that the picture inspires (line 39). In this sense, it seems that the difference between a description and an essay for this participant is in the ground of feelings, which are allowed to be introduced in an essay, but not in a description.

The next two examples consist of extracts in which participants plan what they are going to write in their comment, what kind of things they are going to say. The difference is that in the first one (eighth graders), 1 and 2 are referring to a concrete situation around the beggar, and in the second one (twelve graders), they recur to the situation to talk about a general topic: poverty in the world.

#### **Extract 11**

19. **1.** Let me see, what did she say has to be done first? What did she say has to be done first?  
20. **2.** This, to comment on it  
21. **1.** So that, what does she want us to comment on? Well, we can see a woman here begging with a child and in the background we can see people strolling in a street  
22. and it is snowing, and in the background we can see more shops, and and, so that,  
23. and more or less at the bottom left-hand corner we can see a little photo that cannot be made out  
24. It's ready, let me see, how are we going... to write the composition? So we are going to write, we will try with a pen.

**Extract 12**

3. 1. We have to discuss... we are supposed to comment on it  
 4. ((éééé))  
 5. 1. Well, so what are we going to do?  
 6. 2. Eh, what do we have to comment on?, the country's misery? This looks like Russia,  
 I would say  
 7. 1. I don't know, it must be a northern country, because it is snowing...  
 8. and in the newspaper article, well, the magazine, it talked about poverty, I don't know

In Table 7 we show the frequencies of the senses that participants gave to the word 'comment' in their conversations.

**Table 7: Senses of the word 'comment' in each grade**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Description	0	5	3	8
Contrast	0	3	2	5
Situation	0	3	0	3
Generalization	0	1	3	4
Total	0	12	8	20

Concluding, we can say that the different ways in which participants talk about different discursive modes does not respond to the traditional idea that states that these modes are stored as discursive schemata that direct the composition always in the same way, and are compounded by thematic categories and ways of ordering information. In these analyses we have seen that these textual forms are more like procedures that participants bring to the activity around the picture and the textual mode implied in the task, that they are diverse and that they arise in the conversation as a pair's intersubjective construction.

***The kind of knowledge that participants made relevant in their conversations***

In the previous section, the analysis referred to those conversational sequences in which participants mentioned the categories corresponding to the modes of discourse implied in the task. However, in the participants' conversations there are other phenomena which can be useful to understand how participants manage different ways of meaning. These phenomena consist on sequences in which students compose with their partner a sequence about the picture. Table 8 shows the number of sequences by grade and by condition, and between brackets it is the number of pairs in each cell.

We performed a preliminary analysis of these 192 sequences looking for differences in the way of constructing knowledge about the photograph. We found three clearly different kinds of sequences, that we called narrative

sequences, descriptive sequences and explanatory sequences, independently of the condition in which the participants' conversation was taking place. These sequences was characterized by a very different approach to the photograph

**Table 8: Frequencies of sequences about the picture**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Story	14 (10)	26 (12)	9 (6)	49 (28)
Description	28 (10)	30 (9)	16 (9)	74 (28)
Comment	18 (10)	26 (12)	25 (9)	69 (31)
Total	60 (30)	82 (33)	50 (24)	192 (87)

Narrative sequences were sequences in which participants talked about the picture telling a story about it. On most of occasions, these conversational stories were not very elaborated, and what made us classify them as narrative was the use of past tense, as in the next extract. In Extract 13, a pair of fourth graders in the comment condition are talking about the picture:

**Extract 13**

16. **Luis.** More or less, it is a (???) that there was a pair, a father and a kid who were alone in the snow and there were people over there (???)
17. **Manuel.** People were not giving them money, or doing anything, they did not pay attention to them
18. **Luis.** they did not pay attention to them
19. **Manuel.** They were hungry
20. **Luis.** They were hungry

Despite this pair is working in the comment condition, their conversation takes the form of a narration about the people who appear in the photo. Notice that Luis and Manuel are talking about these people taking for granted lots of information, as the relationship between the main characters in the picture (father and daughter), their gender or their state of starvation. In the same way, the relationship between the main pair and the rest of the people is a charity relationship, were people who are strolling have to give money to the hungry pair. In this sense, narrative sequences told the picture of the beggar using three different areas of knowledge: the situation depicted in the photograph, its relationship with everyday poverty situations and knowledge of the use of narrative discourse.

Table 9 shows the frequencies of narrative sequence in each condition and in each grade.

**Table 9: Frequencies of narrative sequences (in brackets the number of pairs in which these sequences appear)**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Story	6 (6)	8 (4)	2 (2)	16 (12)
Description	10 (5)	3 (2)	0	13 (7)
Comment	6 (4)	0	0	6 (4)
Total	22 (15)	11 (6)	2 (2)	35 (23)

In this table, we can see that fourth graders are the ones who use more narrative sequences (twenty two sequences in fifteen conversations), and these sequences are distributed in all conditions, that is, four graders use narrative sequences in descriptive and comment conditions more frequently than eighth graders and twelve graders.

On the other hand, descriptive sequences are pieces of conversation around the picture in which participants talk about the picture in an 'objective' way, relying in the taken-as-visible elements in it. Consider extract 14, where two eighth graders are working in the narrative condition:

**Extract 14**

- 30. **Elisa.** Let's see, I think that it is a very bad day, as can be seen
- 31. **Amelia.** Very cold
- 32. **Elisa.** Very cold, where it is snowing
- 33. **Amelia.** Yes, where it is snowing
- 34. **Elisa.** Yes, it is snowing in the photograph
- 35.           and it we can verify that there is a person with a baby in its arms who is begging
- 36.           and people pass by and do not pay, that is, attention

In this extract, there are three occasions in which participants make reference to the visibility of elements that they are introducing in their conversation. In line 30, Elisa introduces the weather as a visible element in the picture. However, the following affirmation by Amelia about the coldness of the day is not followed by this reference of visibility. In line 32, Elisa turns to refer to an element of the photograph as visible: the snow in the picture, and she follows her intervention making reference to the beggar and the child and the relationship of people with them as something that can be 'verified' in the picture. This way of referring to the photograph, as compounded of elements, actions and persons which can be seen, is typical in descriptive sequences. Participants talked about the picture as a visual object, where things, people, and even social relationships in the photograph were accounted for as things that could be seen from an objective point of view.

**Table 10: Frequencies of descriptive sequences (between brackets it is the number of pairs in which these sequences appear)**

	Four graders	Eight graders	Twelve graders	Total
Story	5 (3)	8 (5)	0	13 (8)
Description	12 (7)	26 (9)	10 (5)	48 (21)
Comment	10 (7)	21 (12)	9 (4)	40 (23)
Total	27 (17)	55 (26)	19 (9)	101 (52)

Table 10 shows the frequencies of descriptive sequences in each condition. As we can see in this table, descriptive sequences appeared more frequently in eighth graders. Also, they were less frequent when participants were in the narrative condition. This can mean that description and comment were two discursive modes that were less differentiated by participants. In the table, we can see how the frequency of descriptive sequences in the comment condition decreased in twelve graders, what can mean that this group was more able to make a distinction between a description and a comment.

Finally, explanatory sequences were instances in which participants talked about the picture by elaborating an explanation about what was happening in it. Some of these explanations were references to the situation of the beggar and her/his child, and the reactions of the people walking around, but, on the contrary that narrative sequences, these references were made in present and as an explanation of what the photograph was representing. On other occasions, these sequences referred to general matters such as poverty in developed countries, presenting arguments about these themes that implied the possession of personal opinions. On most occasions, this 'social and political' knowledge was presented using a method of comparison between important concepts, such as wealth and poverty. Consider extract 15:

**Extract 15**

47. **Marta.** So that, we are going to write that it is an actual situation that the poverty of a capitalist society can be seen.... so we begin writing that, that it is a country...
48. **Moises.** It is a country...
49. **Marta.** In the north
50. **Moises.** In the north, very at the top...no, so that, the weather is cold, there are bad conditions to be in the street, that people are cold, a little the society like this
51. **Marta.** Present, of our century
52. **Moises.** And then we begin with the description of the photo, don't we?, and then a little criticism of the society, O.K.?
53. **Marta.** That is superfluous, for what?
54. **Moises.** Man, you make a criticism with the position of the lady, and that,

The participants in this extract are two twelve graders which are working in the comment condition. In line 47 Marta begins to talk about what they are going to write in terms of a topic: poverty in capitalist society. This topic is

presented as the introduction of the composition about the picture which will be followed by a description of the picture (line 52). In this sense, Moises is making a contrast between what means to comment and what means to describe. To comment is to introduce the topic of poverty in a capitalist country, which works as an interpretation of the picture that explains it and, in some sense, is independent from it.

**Table 11: Frequencies of explanatory sequences (in brackets the number of pairs in which these sequences appear)**

	Fourth graders	Eighth graders	Twelve graders	Total
Story	3 (3)	10 (6)	7 (4)	20 (13)
Description	6 (2)	1	6 (4)	13 (7)
Comment	2 (2)	5 (3)	16 (7)	23 (12)
Total	11 (7)	16 (10)	29 (15)	56 (32)

In Table 11 we can see that twelve graders are the group that introduces more explanatory sequences in their conversations. On the other hand, it is interesting to note the large number of explanatory sequences in the narrative condition, almost as much as in the comment condition. Maybe it could be explained saying that, sometimes, participants took the function of a story to be the explanation of a problematical situation, and this lent them to use this kind of discourse frequently. However, this is affirmation would have to be explored in more depth.

## CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, we found that participants used different kinds of knowledge and procedures for constructing meaning to approach the picture from the points of view of narrative, descriptive or explanatory discourse. Analyzing conversational practices taking place around this writing task enabled us to describe these procedures in some detail, and to determine possible differences between and within the age groups that participated in this study. Analysis of the conversations that took place in the context described above show how participants used narration, description and essay as very different resources for meaning making.

If we know how students perceive different kinds of text, we can introduce these kinds of texts as learning tools in other parts of the curriculum, by introducing them in literacy practices. These areas might be for example moral education, in the case of narration, analytical tasks in the case of description, or social sciences in the case of essays.

On the other hand, knowing the implications of using these different kinds of discourse, can lead to a relativistic education, where students are trained to change their way of investigating events that surround them. This is essential for an educational process that wishes its students to think reflexively and critically, and not to take as real and true every

representation that they find in their society but rather to reflect on how they have been constructed.

### NOTES

1. The examples and transcripts in this paper have been translated into English from the Spanish original. For the original Spanish texts, readers can consult the Spanish version of the paper in the same issue of the journal.
2. For students in the narrative condition.
3. For students in the descriptive condition.
4. For students in the commentary condition.

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