

THE TEACHER AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH TO LITERARY EDUCATION

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Abstract: Certain intensive challenges have been set before the teachers lately concerning literary education. While the status of literary education has dramatically changed in recent years, the tradition of literary education in Czech schooling system remains very firm. Fact-oriented, literary-historical, scientific. A contradictory tradition has been crystallizing for almost a hundred years – an innovative approach that can be described as interpretative, reader-oriented, experiential. Both approaches differ the most with respect to high school education, however, traditional approach, by nature, also influences lower elementary education. While a lower elementary school teacher can combine both approaches to get the best results, a high school teacher can no longer walk both the road of quantity and quality.

Keywords: Teacher, literary education, literary educational conception, teaching tradition, interpretative approach, non-interpretative approach.

1 Introduction

We believe that certain very intensive challenges have been set before the teachers lately concerning literary education.

They are by far not only challenges related to the transformation of the Czech schooling system, or official and explicit demands, e.g. through the Framework Education Programs or School Education Programs, but also to a deep, global transformation within contemporary society.

It appears that current era diminishes faith in the written, but also the spoken word, in favor of the visual. The visual is ubiquitous, self-evident, undeniable. Our world is considerably faster and more uncompromising than it used to be: the speed of life and material demands leave almost no time for reading, let alone reading detailed, attentive and literarily privy.

Literature itself has also lost its privileged cultural position; before, a writer used to speak for the whole nation, and the nation considered him its voice, in contemporary society, every author speaks only for himself. With the diminishing prestige of literature, the prestige of literary education, and therefore school literary education, has also weakened.

While the status of literary education has dramatically changed in recent years, the tradition of literary education in Czech schooling system remains very firm. Fact-oriented, literary-historical, scientific.

Literary education has never achieved the status of a true aesthetic education in the Czech schooling system, even though the disputation about the need of transcending the purely scientific approach has been present at least since the 20s (compare for example Mathesius 1992; Mukařovský 1925) and has been growing in intensity since the 60s (for example the magazine *Český jazyk a literatura*).

We are left with the question if, and to what extent, can the traditional, scientific approach to literary education retain its position in the face of the dramatic changes of contemporary reforms and societal changes as such. To what extent do we need a new, innovative approach, which can be called interpretative, experiential, reader-oriented, and what requirements does such an approach put on the teacher. In our article, we are focusing on the third, last question, but we also feel obligated to answer the second one as well.

It is also necessary to point out that the traditional, scientific approach is not connected only to high school, but also lower elementary school education. For this reason we are addressing

challenges related to the lower elementary, upper elementary and high school teaching.

2 Lower elementary education

A lower elementary school teacher obviously works in conditions which are very favorable of the interpretative, experiential approach to literary education. This approach is by its nature closest to the children's attitude, since it can easily connect with their imagination and the strong desire to experience, try and create.

The approach to literary education at the lower elementary level is different in the first two grades and the subsequent three. In the 1st and 2nd grade, the aim of literary education – in accordance with the name of the subject, *reading* – is mastering reading as a skill. In this period, the teacher's attention is focused on mastering and developing reading skills. In the subsequent years, the attention is split between additional reading skills and an introduction to elementary layers and functions of a literary (but also factual) text.

The differences in content (based on the differences in the educational aims) in the first and the second period put different demands on the literary education teachers.

In the first two years, the teacher, who always works with a text, has to use the texts to acquire and develop reading methods and skills. By this we mean simple, basic interpretative activities (see below) which help the students understand the text, but also for example many cultural contexts.

Direct work with a text is motivating for the student, and naturally leads to a more effective acquisition of reading skills and reading literacy. The teacher himself has to be creative in the selection of the text (he is always the first reader) and working with the text in class. A lower elementary school teacher is challenged to find such a text that will, by its nature, make the introduction to reading easier and that can interest the students repeatedly. He also has to construct the (elementary) interpretative lesson with the aim of understanding the text, including intuitive understanding of its basic layers (for example composition, language and style etc.) but also a strong reading experience in mind.

From the third year, one of the aims of literary education is to adopt elementary literary terms, but this aim can also be achieved in other ways than through the traditional, terminology-oriented approach. Understanding of basic literary terms is also possible through a direct, creative and interpretative work with the text. An example of basic interpretative activities for adopting the terms *rhythm and rhyme* would be for example filling in words into a poem or finding redundant words in the text (intentionally added by the teacher), etc.

Teachers who have decided to use the interpretative approach to literary education can find great help in dramatic activities and creative dramatic methods.

Methods and techniques of dramatic education use literary text to mediate the experience that the text itself provides. Creative, personal approach to a literary work provides permanent acquisition of knowledge and the possibility of a subjective interpretation of the literary work's form and content. Dramatic methods fully respect the demands of the interpretative approach to literary education.

Even though a lower elementary school teacher often „supplements“ the interpretative approach to literary education with the traditional one, especially in the last years of the lower elementary education, it is the interpretative approach that is, from the point of view of the educational aims, indispensable

and quite essential. The lower elementary school environment is also a natural environment for creativity, imagination and fantasy. However, if we were to answer the question which of the two approaches is professionally and personally more demanding on the teacher, we would have to say it is the interpretative, reader-oriented, experiential.

3 Upper elementary education and high school

3.1 Introduction

The above mentioned discrepancy between the two approaches to literary education becomes even more prominent in the later years of study; whereas with the lower elementary education, many teachers utilize experiential, interpretative, reader-oriented approach to literary education, and accept it because of its „playful“ and creative character, natural for younger children, and use this approach for example together with the traditional one, scientific, non-interpretative, at high school, we can observe a certain irreconcilability between the two approaches, because they are both different in terms of aims, contents and methods.

Hints at the surviving historicism and factualism of the traditional approach, especially at high schools, can be found even in the works of otherwise relatively optimistic methodists of literary education (see Řeřichová, 2004 a Vala, 2011), „*In the last years, the reader-oriented approach with aspects of experiential learning has become more prominent at elementary schools, however, this development is much less noticeable with respect to high schools.*“ (Vala, 2011, s. 14)

3.2 Upper elementary literary education school teacher

An upper elementary school teacher who decides to utilize the interpretative approach to literary education, that is the innovative direct work with a text, is much more than his lower elementary colleague confronted with the curriculum volume. From the point of view of a naive observer, the question could be formulated for example like this: *How to go through all the important authors, but at the same time pay enough attention to live work with the text and reading experience?* However, for an experienced and self-reflecting teacher, this questions contains a multiple paradox:

1. As a teacher, I do not really have to go through all the important authors. A binding collective body, which determines the authors and their works, exists only notionally. The school education program also defines only the framework and the expected outputs, not lists. A large number of teachers unnecessarily cling to the old quantitative curriculum.
2. It is up to me as a teacher to choose which path I want to take: fewer texts, which will be delved into in depth, or going through a larger amount of texts and authors, but with lesser depth. (this is a problem of both educational content and method)

We therefore believe that the solution to the problem of volume is fully in the hands of the teacher.

The real problem is the methodology, that is how to construct a reader-oriented, interpretative lesson. Such a lesson should be rooted in the work with the text (and therefore the reading experience). In the interpretative approach, the teacher can no longer do with a text that merely proves statements communicated in advance. The text must become a cornerstone of further efforts.

A meaningful interpretative literary education lesson also cannot merely work with a text, not even creatively. It is reflection (reflective dialogue), based on this work, that brings meaning to the innovative approach. Through reflection (in hindsight) the students discover relationships and natural rules, which by their nature would either not be possible to be discovered through the

traditional approach, or they would be merely verbally conveyed in a simple enumeration and written out on the blackboard. The possibility of experience and reflection is by itself a very strong motivational tool. Motivation is often a problem for the teachers who prefer transmissive educational model and frontal education.

A teacher of literary education who chooses the interpretative approach must construct such a lesson that would place the same importance on the students' creative production and on reflection (see Slavík 2001). Creative activities often have an experiential aspect, and the teacher must be able to accept the role of a partner, guide, or a coordinator of student's activities. Such a teacher must however possess a natural respect that is not forced and must often reevaluate his relationship to the students and the educational content.

It is quite clear that a teacher, who meticulously thinks through the construction of the lesson, text selection, the work with the text, who decides how to prepare the situation for a particular experience (reading experience as well as creative experience) and the subsequent reflection, must spend considerably more time on preparation for the lesson than a teacher who favors the traditional approach, for example a lecture on literary history or theory or a lecture followed by reading of an extract from the text without (deeper) reflection. The same is true for the lesson itself, which requires a creation of creative climate, the ability to participate in a discussion with the students, to lead the discussion but also transforming suggestions for further innovations etc.

3.3 High school literary education teacher

The high school teacher often feels responsible for the students' preparedness for the final exam and both the school and the parents place a considerably stronger pressure on him than on his colleagues from upper elementary school. However, it is also important to realize that the primary purpose of a school system is to prepare the students for life. That is why we must not limit our efforts to a simple mastery of (any kind of) exams and resign on the higher aims of education. A mere factual drill (for example the state exam test) can never be identified with a meaningful literary education. This would be valid to some extent only if the official exams respected the highest educational aims, which is however very unrealistic.

A high school teacher should feel true responsibility for his students as intellectually independent beings, nurtured towards humanity, as the main and most general aim of education is „*making a person able to live their life in an independent, socially responsible, meaningful and good way.*“ (Brezinka, 1996, p. 38)

More so than his colleagues from elementary school, a high school teacher must, if he wants to employ the interpretative approach, deal with the problem of reducing the educational content. He must carefully consider into what depth he wants to delve in the interpretation and reflection of the literary works, and therefore which authors and works, included for example in textbooks, he has to omit.

A high school teacher has to clearly choose between quality and quantity; there is essentially no compromise, as the teacher who chooses to go the way of quality, direct work with the text and reflection, necessarily encounters the fact that simple notes about a particular literary work / text, synopsis of the content, or its rephrasing, cannot supplement direct, lively work with the text and the knowledge gained from such an approach. Without confronting the reading experiences of the students – their preconceptions about the fictional world of the text – adequate understanding of the literary work cannot be achieved. (see Doležel, 2003.)

The teacher who is aware of the fact that students need to acquire knowledge of a permanent nature, knowledge rooted in

personal experience (in the case of literary education working with texts, as this is the very content of literary education) chooses the qualitative approach, which, in our, intentionally escalated rendition, correlates more with interpretative, reader-oriented, experiential approach.

The teacher who decides to employ the interpretative approach to literary education in no way resigns on acquiring general knowledge, cultural and historical context, memory. However, it is true that interpretative approach favors aesthetically-scientific understanding rather than the factual, biographical knowledge. If we accept the fact that the content of literary education consists of texts, then the aesthetically-scientific understanding is fully legitimate and indispensable, and is only expanded by biographical knowledge. The interpretative understanding is tied to a lively reading experience, direct work with the text, and therefore allows the students to better understand textual relationships, acquire skills, and form attitudes than the purely factual approach. While the traditional, factual approach focuses on *knowing about literature*, the interpretative, reader-oriented and experiential approach focuses on *direct work with literature* and knowledge, skills and attitudes, acquired by *understanding literature*.

4 Conclusion

A lower elementary school teacher who decides to employ the interpretative approach is challenged to search for texts which have a potential of expanding elementary reading skills and basic reading methods, texts that can interest the students repeatedly. He must carefully consider the elementary interpretative activities and construct the lesson in a way that combines the development of basic reading skills with understanding of the meaning of the text. Aside from the literary education exercises, a large focus is also put on a holistic development of the child.

An upper elementary school teacher is required not to abandon direct work with the text, which relates to children's natural curiosity and creativity, even though he is confronted with a larger volume of information than his lower elementary colleague.

A high school teacher must deal with the pressure created by the final exams, the school's policy, the parents and the public. Should he decide to employ the innovative, interpretative approach to literary education, he must not resign on direct work with the text as the cornerstone of gaining knowledge. He is challenged to responsibly choose into what depths he wants to delve regarding text interpretation and if and how he wants to reduce the curriculum.

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