

Innovative Methods of Teaching Literary Education

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ABSTRACT

In the article, we present an innovative concept of teaching literature in the Czech Republic. First, we introduce the context of Czech didactics of literature, the development of the discipline as it is relatively new. We summarize the arguments for the innovative concept of teaching literature that is grounded in constructivism, student-centred teaching approach and the development of reading literacy. There are three key elements of this concept that should be equally present in literature classes – reading texts, learning facts and creation. The teaching approach of innovative concept is student-centred. The aim of literature classes which is to provide a space for individual reading experience and creative expression. We explain these terms in a context traditional teaching approach in literature classes. We also present a number of innovative methods of literature instruction mainly for lower-secondary schools (ISCED 2). These methods are designed to develop reading literacy in a broader way: to develop understanding of artistic texts and comprehension (cognitive), critical thinking and understanding of relationships and human experience (affective) which is exclusively present in artistic texts. This understanding of reading literacy is common in Czech education. These methods include key three elements of literature classes and take into consideration a student as an individual who is being educated cognitively and affectively.

1. Introduction

Literature is tightly connected with the nation. Therefore, teaching literature differ in particular nation. Even though there is not only national literature taught at schools in the subject of Literature or Language Arts, but world literature as well, there is a specific instruction used and specific teaching methods and approach in general. Nevertheless, there are many similarities and many ways to get an inspiration from each other's teaching cultures.

In the Czech Republic, literature is a part of the main subject called Czech language and literature. At primary schools, the aim is to teach children how to read fluently and the content follows it. The great discussion has been developed lately around the content of literature

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classes at Czech lower-secondary schools (ISCED 2). Lederbuchová (2010, p. 41) states that an artistic text in has a number of functions, but two are considered to be the basic ones: text is a content and art at the same time. Teacher uses the text in a certain way to fulfil the goal of a lesson. Apart from that, it is a subject of art with its aesthetic function. Even outside of the didactic intention of the teacher, as independent piece of art it remains ready to offer the aesthetic experience to the reader.

Hník (2012, p. 60) points out the concept of literary education in the sense of an educational concept: If we accept teaching literature as education in verbal art, and not as a mere doctrine of the historical and biographical contexts of literature, we should ask teachers to convey (not convey) the meaning of the artistic text to students; after they read and try to understand the texts.

Artistic texts should be the cornerstone of literature class. Hník (2017; 2012) characterizes literary text by the following aspects: fictional nature; bringing the reader closer to national culture and tradition; providing aesthetic and emotional experience, understanding of human behaviour, relationships etc. Text is a subject matter, aimed to be read and interpreted by students and teachers, to be discussed, to be understood or misunderstood etc. Students learn to communicate with the text and through the text, they are led to individual active and in-depth reading aiming to develop their own creativity and understand the wider literary-historical context (Jindráček et al., 2011, p. 12).

Teaching literature essentially consists of two interconnected fields: literary science, which brings the content, and didactics of literature, which transforms the knowledge of literary science into educational practices. The necessity of a connection of these two fields was already stated by Jurčo & Obert (1984, p. 9): literary science and didactics of literature are formed independently, but it is difficult to imagine didactics of literature without theory and history. Literary science deals with literature and arises from philology, it is an established discipline and consists of literary history, literary theory, comparative literature and literary criticism.

The main goal and content of literary education is to provide students with artistic texts adequate to their cognitive abilities, reading skills and preconceptions. Preconceptions might also be observed within the students' perception of texts. For this purpose, artistic text belongs to the individual characteristics of each learning individual [and which] is the product of conscious and unconscious experiences, subjective psychological processes and personality dispositions (Jindráček et al., 2011, p. 79). The changes that students create based on the active transformation of their own concepts of the world are deeper and more permanent than the knowledge created by the mere transmission of ready-made knowledge and memorization. Preconceptions of reading influence reading in a fundamental way. They usually make reading easier for the student, but they can also hinder adequate communication (Lederbuchová, 2010, p. 123). Lindquist (2013, p. 32) comments on preconceptions in the field of the Shoah: Teachers should emphasize students' prior knowledge because all new knowledge is in some way shaped by the existing knowledge.

The importance of reading and individual reading experience is a key topic of Czech didactics of literature. In the following parts, we introduce what led the didactics of literature to be established as a separate discipline. Further, we summarize arguments for innovative concept of teaching literature and its aim. At the end of the article, we present concrete innovative methods to be used in literature classes.

2. Innovative concept of teaching literature

Art is an expression of an individual. Literature is art expressed by words, the images and stories are mediated by texts. Literature as a school subject is, therefore, an expressive subject, and expressivity means creativity and creation itself. However, the research results outlined above show that literature classes remain a knowledge-based subject where literary science dominates over the space dedicated to creation. The key difference between the orientation to knowledge and expressivity of a subject is the way how students acquire content knowledge.

Table 1.

Status of literary education

basis in the literary science, factual-based, knowledge-based, objectivity of knowledge is important	basis in current changes in teaching approaches, student-oriented, skill-oriented, individual aesthetic experience is important
science	education
history, theory	art
memorization of information	experiencing art, production of art, expressivity

Source: Hník, 2017, p. 32.

In the contemporary didactics of literature, a term experiential learning is widely used. Learning through experience, specifically reading experience, is the basis of innovative concept of teaching literature (Hník, 2017, p. 35). Chaloupka (2003–2004, p. 172) uses the term ‘interactive concept of reading’ which is a theory that builds on the affirmative concept, but in its essence pushes its boundaries and exceeds. This perception presupposes those readers reconstruct the work themselves and vice-versa, they reconstruct themselves according to the work and they are in a way “changed” by reading the text (Chaloupka, 2003–2004, p. 172).

This concept corresponds with the concept of transactional reading theory of Rosenblatt from thirties in Great Britain and theory of reader-response criticism described by Iser and Jauss in sixties of 20th century in Germany. Even though, those concepts were studied outside of the Czech Republic already in the last century, the outcomes of the concepts were projected into Czech Framework Education Programme for Basic Education at the beginning of the 21st century and teaching literature in Czech schools has been changing slowly since then.

The innovative concept of teaching literature is associated with the experience as the intermediation between the reader and the interpretation of the text. Within the framework of the innovative concept, the act of reading of texts (students themselves read the texts), and creative activities with the texts (creative expressivity) should dominate (cf. Hník, 2007; 2012; 2017).

This innovative concept does not distance itself from the transfer of a reasonable amount of knowledge from history and theory of literature. The balance of these components in the real curriculum ensures the presentation of literature as an aesthetic education. The traditional concept of teaching literature focuses on knowledge about literature while the innovative concept, in addition to the knowledge focuses an individual experience with art – reading the art and production of art.

3. An innovative concept of teaching literature: A subject focused on readers

Teaching literature should be perceived as a mean of educating students through reading artistic texts. The content of the subject is derived from the artistic text and its interpretation, from the individual reading experience. In the Czech context, there are two other terms used to describe

this concept – interpretive because its integral part is an interpretation of artistic texts, and experiential because it depends on the reader's experience (Hník, 2017, p. 84). It is then the subject focused on readers.

Lederbuchová (1995, p. 19) adds to reader's perspective: Even today, many teachers and educators do not recognize the benefits of innovative concept of teaching literature focused on readers. It might be rooted in a traditional approach to teaching in general which is focused more on a teacher and a transmission of knowledge rather than a reader – a student, and their reading skills, reading preferences and overall development of student's personality. What connects both approaches, the traditional approach, and the innovative concept, is an artistic text. The differences between them are seen in the perceiving the role of the text in the educational process.

The traditional approach to teaching literature might be characterized as learning about the texts, in which students are passive and they are introduced to the plot of the text, the author's life and basic interpretation of one or more texts written by the author. Hník (2007, p. 37) comments on this approach to the text that it only plays a role to support the teacher's literature lesson. Therefore, this approach cannot stand in subject focused on readers and individual reading experience, subject of art where a creativity must be present and used.

The innovative concept of teaching literature perceives the artistic text as a central part. It needs to be read, interpreted, and discussed. Students get to know the text in an active and creative way, as constructivism shows to be the only effective approach to learning. Students (readers) co-create the meaning of the text and via cognitive activities they build the content, which requires a certain degree of interpretation. The interpretation of the text and related reading activities are one of the forms of creation and production. In this case, the text is not at the centre of teaching as an evidence or proof, but as an ever-living artifact, as an unexhausted creative force (Hník, 2007, p. 37).

The concept of the subject focused on a reader may be seen as the culmination of numerous discussions about the role of artistic texts in literature classes, from their functions of building certain national feelings through their use in linguistics to the basis of literature instruction.

4. Elements of the innovative concept of teaching literature: reading, learning, creation

Literature instruction in the Czech Republic usually consist of three elements: reading the texts, learning the facts, and creating text and/or with the text. In an innovative concept, these components work together. The mutual complementation of reading, learning and creation makes an aesthetic-artistic product of the reception of artistic texts for students. Only a connection of these three elements can help eliminate mentioned asymmetry between the knowledge and a low degree of experience and expressivity. According to Hník (2017, p. 41), the asymmetry is mainly between the memorization of theory and history of literature and the individual reading experience and student active creation.

Through constructive activities, students get to know literature with aesthetic intentions. As Jurčo & Obert (1984) add, based on creative activities students acquire values, attitudes and shape their axiological values.

One of the three elements of this concept of teaching literature is creation. In other words, creative literary expressivity which Hník (2017, p. 122) defines as creation in the sense of creative activity done by a student followed by adequate space for reflection. The reflection in going in two areas:

1. reflection of individual reading experience;
2. reflection of creation, which is related to the perception of reading as a unique type of creative expressivity.

Creative expressivity in literature classes can participate on educating the students as whole beings. Creative production itself, might be realized in a great number of forms. Creative activities with texts, their interpretation and even the didactic games are presented below. Creative expressivity is an element which purposefully and systematically fulfil the aims of literature classes – reading, learning and creation. Reading includes individual reading experience – active work with texts including students’ interpretation.

The interpretation may be creative as well. Hník (2017, p. 71) sees creative interpretation of texts as a game that should be attractive, and at the same time fulfilling the aim of literature classes. It is for these reasons that creative game must have clearly defined rules and boundaries as to be a didactic game. Text should remain in the centre (see Table 2 for more details).

Table 2.

Academic approach in literary education	Artistic educational approach in literary education
indirect experience with the text the text primarily fulfils a supporting function	direct experience with the text the text primarily fulfils an aesthetic and educational function
work with a literary work is minimized the content of literary works is communicated, sometimes even dictated to be memorized formalized thinking in relation to the text the over-dimensioning of the educational content pupils are more passive focus on the work-character interpretation as a derivative of the literary creation as an appendix	work with a literary work is maximized the content of literary works is offered for reflection and experience functional thinking in relation to the text space for the reading experience pupils are more active focus on the work-thing history interpretation and as a personal experience creation as one of the starting points
operates with a larger proportion of knowledge of a historical (art historical) nature and a smaller proportion of knowledge of a theoretical (theoretical-artistic) nature	operates with a larger proportion of knowledge of a theoretical (theoretical-artistic) nature and a smaller proportion of knowledge of a historical (art-historical) nature, or with an equal share of theoretical-artistic and art-historical knowledge
emphasis on knowledge	emphasis on knowledge and imagination (in mediated content as well as in student work)
emphasis on memory acquisition of knowledge	emphasis on own construction of knowledge: deriving knowledge from reflection on reading and creation
emphasis on the result (e.g. a literary work as the result of a creative act)	emphasis on the process of reading and creation and their reflection (or understanding a literary work as a creative process)

Source: Hník, 2017, p. 31.

Hník (2007; 2012; 2017) presents in his work many creative activities for literature classes:

- completing the text (students complete the words in the text);
- inspired creation (students create text based on a picture);
- retelling the story (students describe the main idea of the text);
- summary of the main situation of the lyrical text (students describe the main idea of the text);
- paraphrase of the narration (students retell the narrative in their own words);

- imitating the style of narration (students try to follow the narrative style based on the text they read);
- reconstruction of the record (students reconstruct the original text);
- creating an outline (students create an outline);
- entry into a foreign perspective (foreign role) – change of focalization (students change the perspective of the narrative);
- consideration of text variants (students consider variants of the text/texts);
- condensation and reduction of content (students reduce the text and describe its main idea);
- comparison of texts (students compare different texts with the same theme);
- work with the title of the book (they predict the text based on the title).

Gejgušová¹ (2009) defines other methods to work with text at literature classes:

- interpretive reading (that is, reading with aesthetic dimensions);
- use of sound qualities of the text;
- repeated reading;
- silent reading;
- use of the title of the work;
- work with the first page of the publication;
- work with the role of narrator;
- internal structure and coherence of the text;
- working with rhymes;
- comparison of texts;
- intertextuality;
- creating an illustration;
- dramatization;
- use of key words of the text;
- creation of literary texts.

A certain form of text creation is creative writing. Fišer et al. (2012) define a current goal of creative writing as a restoration of confidence in the written word and its appropriate, cooperative, non-manipulative use in communication. The training the text competence, the development of the speaker's receptive and productive skills, lead to the restoration of verbalized imagination, deepening the interest in the spontaneous expression of the speaker's emotions, knowledge and attitudes. Fišer et al. (2012) further state that creative writing supports the creation and development of strategies of effective textual communication. In addition, it develops the ability to search for information and formulate arguments as well which are key competencies for students to gain at school.

The third element is learning the facts. Facts in literature classes are from the field of history and theory of literature, so called literary science. It consists of knowledge from reading and creation expressed by the knowledge of the cultural context. Hník (2017) recognizes two sources of this knowledge:

1. traditional teaching, where the student passively receives information from the teacher;
2. knowledge and skills that arose as part of the reflection of reading and creation.

¹ We don't characterize these methods in more detail, as they are related to the innovative methods defined above.

Only a balanced connection, a certain equalization, of those three elements of teaching literature – reading, creation and learning – leads students to emotional and intellectual development and fulfils the creative, reading, interpretive, experiential concept of teaching literature which we call an innovative approach.

5. Conclusions

Innovative concept of teaching literature has the roots in constructivism and student-centered teaching approach. Therefore, the main focus is on the students who are readers in this subject. That is the reason why the innovative concept is supported in theories of reading aesthetics and theory of a process of reading and meaning-making.

Innovative literature instruction consists of three elements: reading the texts, learning the facts, and creating text and/or with the text. In an innovative concept, these elements work together. In terms of reading, we talk about individual reading experience which is gained through student active reading of artistic texts. Learning is understood to be knowledge about the context of a certain text, author, and artistic period. Creation is described as a creative activity with texts such as interpretation. All these parts should be equally present in literature classes.

As we want to educate students as whole beings, literature is a great tool. Czech research shows that most students in the lower-secondary schools not ready to work in literary education classes with methods of literary creative expressiveness (Hník, 2012; Jindráček et al., 2011). We believe that one of the causes of this situation is the fact that the teachers of the Czech language and literature do not know the methods, or how to incorporate them into literature classes for a certain year-class. Therefore, there is a huge need of raising awareness. We suggest that teachers are more active in gaining the knowledge about specific methods and the innovative concept of teaching literature and gaining the skills and experiences as well.

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