The comparison of reception of selected poems by students from varied schools

Jaroslav Vala*, Hana Marešová

Palacky University, Faculty of Education, Olomouc, 771 40, Czech Republic

Abstract

The article presents results of a research of the reception of poetry by the respondents (12-18 years of age) from three types of schools – an elementary school, secondary comprehensive school and secondary vocational school. The differences in the reception of selected poems were investigated as well as the effectiveness of the research tool for all age groups of the respondents. The semantic differential method was used monitoring the reception of poetry from the perspective of three factors: comprehensibility, evaluation and impressiveness. The factor analysis confirmed the saturation of the specific factor semantic differential scales and the effectiveness of this tool in all considered schools. Reliability was verified by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. We found that the most striking differences between secondary comprehensive school students and the students of the other types of school are reflected in the comprehensibility factor. It is a factor projecting reading maturity, language competence of the respondents and their overall cultural perspective. The evaluation factors show significantly lower performance of the students from secondary vocational schools. In teaching the motivational element needs to be strengthened and the students should be drawn more into the communication with texts. The occasional discrepancy between the declared low comprehensibility of the poem and the positive evaluation (especially among the younger respondents) suggests that some poems are understood more emotionally than rationally.

Keywords: Pedagogical research; semantic differential; literature; poetry reception

1. Introduction

Poetry in literary education is view by teachers and students as a demanding and the least favorite subject. (Benton 1999, 2000; Pike, 2000; Wiseman, 2011; Hanratty, 2012). Students are troubled by its ambiguity, they are not sure about its interpretation and they are afraid of giving wrong answers. A deeper insight into the process of the reception of poetry and identification of specific reading preferences may be provided by more appropriate teaching methods. The most common methods designed to investigate the formal aspects of the poem and suppressing subjective experience are rather discouraging for the students. This article deals with a comparison of the reception of three selected poems by the students from three types of schools - elementary school (EM), secondary comprehensive school (ScS), secondary vocational schools (SvS)

2. Research Design

The implemented research by the semantic differential (SD) was focused on the monitoring of reception of three selected poems by the students from different types of schools:

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +420 585 635 613
E-mail address: jaroslav.vala@upol.cz
• Elementary School - 256 respondents of 12-15 years of age. This sample represents an average population of students of this age in Czech Republic.
• Secondary comprehensive school - 221 respondents of 15-19 years of age. These respondents are among the best in secondary education and preparing to study at a university.
• Secondary vocational school - 136 respondents of 15-19 years of age. These respondents are the weakest from the point of view of their study marks. The following instructional programs were considered: a cook - waiter, shop assistant, confectioner and hair-dresser.

Table 1 describes the form of the research tool for monitoring the reception of poetry in terms of three factors - comprehensibility, evaluation and impressiveness.

Table 1: Semantic differential for monitoring the readers’ reception of lyric poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>comprehensible</th>
<th>incomprehensible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>simple</td>
<td>complicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand</td>
<td>I do not understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clear</td>
<td>hazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hidden</td>
<td>disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opaque</td>
<td>transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dislike</td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would read it again</td>
<td>I would not read it again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td>bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beautiful</td>
<td>ugly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not attract me</td>
<td>attracts me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unpleasant</td>
<td>pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong</td>
<td>weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shallow</td>
<td>deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dull</td>
<td>sharp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large</td>
<td>small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ineffective</td>
<td>effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>powerless</td>
<td>powerful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Results and Discussion

The research analysed how the perception of poetry was transformed with age and type of school. Lyrical poetry with the theme of nature was selected; the students were given a poem to assess without its title and the name of the author to avoid the influence by extra-literary context.

3.1. Text of the poems and students’ comments

P1: A. Sova: Spring night
A pensive, spring, perfume whipped breath ...
Sleeps the country as in dreams
In the light fibers of the flowers in the starlight.
Like a fairy tale it is!

Birches nod and moans the bush
blue shadow
on the pebbles in the ford falls
in white flowers in pools of water.

Though sleeping in the dark is the country
its Spring smile is warm
as if the survived pain
trembled in the dream of happiness.

It is not accidental that Sova’s poems belong to Impressionism. It is often said that this movement aims to capture the immediate mood. And so does this poem. It refers to the sleeping earth. But how? The country and the landscape are depicted by the features belonging naturally to a sleeping woman. A country – a woman. Dream and dreaminess, fragrance and gentle breath, all of this is set into a picturesque, quiet and comforting fairy spring background: flowers and stars, etc., and all of this again with an exclusively human personified expression.

Positive comments:
It seems to be light, airy and full of optimism. Yes, I would read it again - whenever I would be worried with complicated thoughts ... it relieves my stress // I love it, it is most beautiful. It is sensitive. All things awaken from winter, it is full of joy. // It has left a deep impression after the first reading. // It creates a nice atmosphere and images, it is sweet, like a fairy tale, it seems to me like a small caress. // It describes the beauty of spring.

Negative comments:
Nice, but more or less about nothing, it cannot evoke deeper feelings and ideas. // Reads well, but I do not like this idyllic poems. They are not realistic ... // It makes me sleepy, I cannot find anything deeper in it, it's an idealized view of nature.

P2: A. S. Puškin: Cloud
The last one of clouds of scattered a tempest,
Just single you’re flying in azure, the prettiest,
Just single you’re bringing the sorrowful shade,
Just single you’re saddening day that is glad.

In nearest past, you were storming skies, mighty,
And were quite enwind by the powerful lightning,
And you were the womb for divine thunders birth,
And quenching with rain the insatiable earth.

Enough, now vanish! Your time is not endless -
The earth is refreshed and away gone the tempest;
And now the wind, fondling leaves of the trees,
With pleasure is driving you out the sky bliss.

It is a text representing Romanticism, mood, atmosphere, nature and the elements. The Romantics saw nature as majestic, powerful, uncontrollable; they were fascinated by mountains and their power, by storms and their uncontrollability, the forests and their impenetrable and mysterious depths. This indomitable and unyielding, sovereign nature was a partner in their dialogue, because its order opposed social conventions which they tried to cross and destroy and break out of their grasp. Although the poem seems to be a monologue or an address of the storm, it's a dialogue: thunder and lightning, the nature addresses the poet and he responses, in fact, he worships the power, but he is an equal partner in the dialogue. Nothing more and nothing less.

Positive comments:
Celebration of the power of nature and its beauty. // I can smell something pleasant, coming after the storm - not only in nature, but even after a quarrel; it radiates strength and defiance, but also some respect. // I like it because it is rather dark and deep, but on the other hand it expresses hope. // I like the storm and the air when everything is over, I can imagine the verses.

Negative comments:
It reminds me of destruction, of a flood, it puts me in a bad mood. // It just happens, what is the point of writing about it? // I'd rather look at that sky myself instead of reading this poem. // Quite good, but it just does not fit, there are no feelings.

P3: Lady Ise - Necklace of Pearls
Hanging from the branches
Of a green willow tree,
The spring rain
Is a
Necklace of pearls.

The poem has the atmosphere of an early spring. For us it is mournful, the country has long been waking up, it is different in the East. Rain, water, plants everything is refreshing. Everything grows, gives life, it is the same. Therefore, in the poem there is love and nostalgia. Longing for unrequited love. Why? Because of the pearls. Where did the rain pour from? From the leaves of the willow. Everything is fresh and clean, the willow is a symbol of fertility, but also of modesty. Only we have a weeping willow associated with sadness, or rather with death today, but for the Japanese it is a symbol of purity and chastity, honesty and dedication, sense of belonging. A pearl is a precious gem in all cultures. Here it is likened to raindrops and tears. The tears of unrequited love, anxiety and sadness.

Positive comments:
*It is a sweet poem, gentle spring described in two sentences. // I like it because it is playful and gentle, a warm and endearing work. // I like the diminutive words, it is so nice. // It's so sweet, as if for children, gentle and pure.*

Negative comments:
*It is primitive, does not express anything, it is not even a poem. // I find it incredibly shallow for children of preschool age. // It seems childish, and it's not my style.*

3.2. Results of the reception poems and discussion

We expected the secondary school students to have higher factor scores in all poems. Comparison of all three types of schools is shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Comprehensibility</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Impressiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poem 1</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poem 2</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poem 3</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>5.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Primary school (ES), secondary comprehensive school (ScS), secondary vocational schools (SvS)

**Results of Comprehensibility Factor**

The most striking differences between the secondary comprehensive school students and the students of the other schools (primary and secondary vocational schools) are reflected in the comprehensibility factor (Graph 1). It is a factor reflecting projected reading maturity, language competence of the respondents and their overall cultural knowledge which can become a source of self-confidence when assessing comprehensibility of poems. The comparison of the results of the secondary vocational school and elementary school is of interest. Starting from the assumption that the secondary vocational school is attended by those primary school leavers with the worst marks it may be surprising that in the two poems they exhibit higher comprehensibility score than elementary school students.

We believe that the result is influenced by their shyness and unfounded respect for poetry and the concern that there is something else hidden in the text than they are able to detect. There were the students in the age group of 12-15 years. The younger group (6th grade) encountered the poetry for adults only rarely since the primary school readers include poetry for children and youth only. Poem B1 is an impressionistic picture of the spring landscape and the poem B3 is a typical Eastern poetic miniature. These are purely descriptive images lacking a plot or its suggestion resulting in certain comprehension difficulties experienced by the younger respondents. On the contrary, the older vocational school students have a higher self-confidence owing to their experience of life and the associated self-assurance which had an effect on their subjective assessment of the comprehensibility of the text. The poem B2 incorporating both plot elements and dynamic images offers similar results for both vocational and primary schools.
The results of the evaluation factor

The evaluation factors will attract interest with the similar results provided by the respondents from primary and secondary schools, especially in the poems B2 and B3 where they are almost identical (Graph 2). There is a significant contrast compared to the factor of comprehensibility where there is a clear dominance of the secondary school students while the elementary school students show the lowest value. The elementary school students according to their own statement do not understand the poem very clearly, but they value it quite high. The high score in the evaluation factor contrasting with the declared low comprehensibility of the poem, indicated a subjective understanding of the poem through emotions. We can say that it is a hidden understanding that the respondents would not even notice being afraid that there is something more in the poem which is beyond their horizon.

The students from the secondary vocational school scored higher than the elementary school students in comprehensibility factor but in terms of the evaluation of the poems they show a significantly lower score being less emphatic in the case of the poems B1 and B2 finding them aesthetically less appealing. The exception is the simple poetic miniature B3, in this case the vocational school students are closer in their assessment to the other respondents.

The results of the impressiveness factor

The Graph 3 shows primarily two things: the highest score among the primary school and a low score among the secondary school students.

The primary schools students are – possibly because of their age - willing to get inspired by the poetic text and display their emotions. In the impressiveness factor they show a significantly higher score for Sova’s impressionistic poems B1. Conversely, the secondary comprehensive school students who outnumbered the other respondents in other factors have an average impressiveness factor. Their higher reading competence and experience may contribute to the fact that they are not so easily emotionally influenced by the selected poems - note the low score of the semantic differential of the poem B3 (Mrs. Ise - Spring rain). In the light of the previous research it can be stated that secondary school students are emotionally affected by the texts with existential themes and the pure natural lyricism is not enough to add the high score to this factor.
4. Conclusion

The results of the readers’ reception of the specific poems provide a possibility to search for and offer appropriate texts for the students of different types of school. For example, students in secondary vocational schools need a strong motivational element, need to be drawn more and more into their communications with the text. The occasional discrepancy between the declared low comprehensibility of the poems and their highly positive acceptance (especially among the younger respondents) suggests that some poems are understood emotionally rather than by the reason. And it is the emotions that poetry influences most.

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References