Possibilities Of Positive Influence On The Attitude Of Students Towards Poetry

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Abstract

In the course of the research focused on the reception of poetry and the possibilities how to influence it, we observed the classes in eight experimental classrooms and monitored the possibilities of building positive attitudes towards literature (poetry) among the students with the use of suitable methods. The teachers used specially designed methods and worksheets. By the analysis of the students’ records in their diaries, we are able to observe how their attitudes towards poetry have changed, see the results of their own poetry writing, or the assessment of their classmates’ poems. This article presents detailed results obtained in a selected classroom with students aged 14–15. The results show that a sensitive approach to teaching when the students’ opinions are respected and the atmosphere of mutual trust in the classroom along with using creative methods can show the students the way towards poetry.

Keywords: reception of poetry; literature teaching; literature didactics; longitudinal research; students’ records, diaries

1 Introduction

The experience of the teachers of literature shows that poetry is one of the least popular subjects. There are various reasons for this situation that can be divided into several categories:

• In the past, poetry was often considered to be ‘high’ art targeted at ‘elite’ readers and this approach has continued up to the present day. The students consider poetry to be very difficult for them to understand and, at the same time, they assume the ‘understanding’ it in a strictly exact sense.

• Reading focused purely on getting information is applied to poetry. (Fleming, 1992) While reading, students tend to use the stereotypes used for reading prose texts and try to understand each line separately instead of trying to perceive the poetic text as a whole.

• The students consider their emotions and feelings evoked by a poem as being too vague and hardly graspable and find it difficult to verbalize them. Then they think they have failed, not realizing the fact that poetry is actually and very often inherently the ‘expression of the inexpressible’, which is to be understood as the tension between what a poet wants to express by his words and what the words are able to evoke (partially). (Režná, 2007). Then, the ambiguity of the meanings of poetic texts seems natural.

• Teachers themselves are often afraid of dealing with poetry, they lack confidence and avoid teaching poetry. Insensitive approach of teachers and inappropriate teaching methods make the students’ reception of poetry difficult for them. A teacher should be cautious and try not to disrupt the initial impact of the poem on the students, not to impose their opinion on the students and not to deprive the poem of its liveliness. (Zeleňáková, 2011)

• A wrong selection of the texts which do not correspond to the age of the students. If they are asked to analyze certain kinds of poetry at a too young age, they may perceive reading poetry as a problem instead of enjoying it, and this feeling gets imprinted on their memory for years to come.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Dr. Zafer Bekiroglu of Cognitive – Counselling, Research & Conference Services C-crcs.
• Insufficient knowledge of the theory of literature, cultural and social context of a certain historical period.

As a response to the above described situation, in 2011 we started a three-year research project under the auspices of Grant Agency of the Czech Republic focused on the research of the reception of poetry in students at lower secondary schools and on the possibilities of influencing it by various teaching methods. This article explains the objectives of the research, its particular stages and the methods used. We focus predominantly on the longitudinal part of the project within which we monitored literature classes in eight classrooms for one year. The results of a selected class of students aged 14–15 are presented here in detail.

2 Objectives of the research

The main objective of the research project is to get deeper insight into the process of the reception of poetry in pubescent and adolescent readers (aged 12–19). We aim to obtain a complete image of the students and their reading of poetry and, at the same time, of the possibilities of changing its quality in a positive direction. We consider it important to maintain lively contact of the students with the arts and to look for the ways which will enable such contacts.

Precise formulation of the objectives:

• Analysis of the readers’ perception of poetic texts in students of lower secondary schools of various types.

• Comparing the results of reading preferences according to different types of poetry and different groups of respondents: according to age, sex, field of study, school records, attitudes towards reading, their own literary activities etc.

• Creating a set of effective teaching methods and techniques based on Experience Pedagogy and Applied Aesthetics which would respect the principles of the Reception Aesthetics.

• Description of the development and changes in the attitudes towards poetry (longitudinal research) in students of eight classes (at lower secondary schools) in which the above stated methods will be used. The technique of parallel groups is applied and the results are compared with a control group at a school of the same type.

• Analysis of the results of all the research measurements and defining essential trends in the development of poetry reception according to the various categories of respondents.

3 Methods of the research

When combining quantitative and qualitative approach, there are several possible ways how to include both approaches and relevant methods of data collection into particular stages of the project. Our research project focusing on the attitude of students towards reading uses both types of methods simultaneously. Quantitative methods are primarily used for monitoring the changes, qualitative methods to capture other contexts of the researched issues from the point of view of the participants in the project. The research project is conducted in school classrooms – both during and outside the classes – with the aim of obtaining as realistic depiction of the researched educational reality as possible.

The members of the research team not only conduct particular research activities but they also take active part in teaching in the experimental classes. The reasons are several – being involved in the process of teaching, they get deeper insight into the situations, get better acquainted with the circumstances under which the research is carried out, are included in common work of the groups during the classes and their immediate participation in the classes can result in closer relations between them and the participants of the project and gaining the students trust gradually. The researchers’ role then lies in both the research and the education. An ideal situation for meeting the research objectives is if the researcher is able to create an open, supportive and ‘safe’ atmosphere. The teaching methods which we use in the classes are based on the findings of Reception Aesthetics Theory and the methods of Experiential Pedagogy.

In the longitudinal part of the research, questionnaires and ‘students’ diaries’ were used. In both the initial and final stage of the project, the students filled in the questionnaires monitoring their attitudes towards literature, poetry, literature teaching, teaching methods, etc. The identical questionnaire was filled in also by the students of control classes where literature was taught by standard methods. We monitored the shift in the opinions of the students of the experimental classes and compare them with the control groups. The set of statements was used in the questionnaire and the students were asked to express the level to which they (dis)agree with the statements, marking it on a five-point scale. The statements can be summed up in several categories according to their topic. Several examples are provided below:

a) The attitudes towards literature and reading fiction in general: Reading books is useful for life. I like reading books.

b) Personal attitude of a respondent towards poetry and teaching poetry: I like reading poetry. I hate poetry. I do not often understand poetry. Reading poetry can bring me pleasure. Poetry is very important for my life. Poems often
seem incomprehensible to me. I can understand the message of most of poems. I am not confident when dealing with poems. In a few years time I might understand some poems in a different way than today. I better read a poem on the Internet than in a book.

c) **Perception of poetry in general:** Poetry may be important in some people’s lives. Poetry is meaningless in today’s world. One poem can be perceived in different ways by different readers. Poems are aimed at small group of readers only. Poems are aimed at all readers.

d) **Writing poetry:** I try writing poetry. I can imagine myself writing a poem. I think I could enjoy writing a poem. If I try writing poetry, I will understand poems better.

e) **Teaching methods in literature teaching:** The atmosphere in literature classes is pleasant. Literature classes made me read poetry. I can express my opinions on literature texts/samples in the classes. Discussion with my classmates over literary extracts is important. I would like to discuss literary extracts with my classmates. I am afraid of saying my opinion on literary extracts in the classes. The teacher is interested in the students’ opinions on literary extracts. I want to say my opinion on literary extracts in the classes. We can discuss literary extracts with my classmates in the classes.

f) **Perception of poetry:** I see poetry as: a problem, a challenge, boring, worries, contemplation, joy, expectation, feeling, reason.

Another method used for monitoring the students’ attitudes towards poetry was their diaries. In the course of the experiment the students, according to their teacher’s advice, recorded in their diaries their reflections on teaching methods and selected poems. Through the analysis of the diary records, we can monitor the changes in the students’ attitudes towards poetry, see their own works and assessment of their classmates’ works.

The teachers involved in the longitudinal part of the project were provided with twenty suggested topics for the classes and could freely select those which they were going to use in their classes. Besides these topics, they received the detailed explanation of five activities that were supposed to be carried out in all the experimental classes – some of them repeatedly – by the end of the calendar year 2011:

\[ a) \] **What is a poem – research in an experimental class according to the given criteria.**

We try to challenge the students to reflect on what is the essence of poetry and create their own personal definitions that can later be verified while assessing 14 different texts.

\[ b) \] **Completing missing words (or verses) in poetic texts.**

This activity is meant as the preparation for writing their own poetic texts. The students’ works are compared to the original poem, the shifts in meanings are observed and the students’ reflections are recorded.

\[ c) \] **Repeated analysis of complicated texts.**

Selecting an inspiring, thought-provoking, enigmatic poetic text without stating the author’s name or the title and students record their readers’ responses to it in various situations:

- immediately after reading the text;
- after discussing the text with the classmates (without being directed by the teacher’s comments);
- after being provided with the information about the author, the time and circumstances it was written in, etc.

\[ d) \] **Transforming poetry into prose and vice versa.**

The students’ task is to become aware of essential attributes of poetic texts based on the comparison of their various forms.

\[ e) \] **Writing poetry.**

It is necessary to grant the students anonymity if they wish, later they can claim their authorship. Involving all the class in assessing the texts was proved successful, too. Then their reflections on this activity are observed: the students record their impressions after being assigned the task and after the assessment of the results.

4 Students’ reflections on the classes

For the analysis of the results of the selected activities, we chose one selected class at the secondary school in Novy Jicin with the students who were 14–15 years old at the time of the experiment.

**Definition of poetry**

At the beginning of the project, the students were asked to try to define the essential features of poetry in their own words. Their definitions reflect their previous experience with poetry. They are attempts in various ways to grasp and express what the contents and the essence of poetry is. The students’ opinions reflect the fact that their class was a selective one, i.e. for gifted students who were used to deal with poetry often in creative ways. That is the reason why they, unlike other respondents, did not emphasize the formal aspects of poetry (such as regular organization of the text, rhythm, rhyme) but concentrated mainly on the contents and the message of the poetic text:
• It is something that we can use to express our feelings, to share something and to avoid suppressing the feelings of something we have experienced, we liked, but also of something we are worried about.
  • In my opinion, poetry is the expression of a poet’s feelings. The poet wants to “say” what they feel, what is hidden or suppressed in them. There is a bit of a poet in each of us but not everybody discovers it in themselves.
  • It is something that we can use for expressing something that we feel, that we are worried about or that we have experienced. At the times when people were afraid to speak because they might have been persecuted, they wrote poetry.
  • There must be a lot of kinds of poetry. For me, poetry is the means that I can use to express my feelings and opinions. I think rap is a kind of poetry, too. If you are good at it and able to sell it, then even rap is a great opportunity. For me, Japanese poems haiku are inspiring. Although they are short and concise, they often say more than they seem to. Poetry has been a part of our lives since childhood, in the form of nursery rhymes, and I hope that poetry won’t be rejected by the modern world.

Completing missing words
The students received a poem with omitted words four times during the research project. Their task was to complete the gaps with suitable words and to create their own variation of the given text by doing so. The aim of the activity was not to guess the correct word used in the original text but to try to think like a poet, let their imagination loose and look for the words to fill in the gaps in the way so that they do not contradict the general context of the poem but complete it suitably. This activity is meant as a preparation for writing their own poems because it raises the students’ confidence and assures them of being able to take part in co-creating (reconstructing) poetic texts and at the same time it provides them with the insight into the poet’s creative process. We do not present any particular examples of the students’ work here because of the language barrier – they worked with poems in Czech language – but some of their reflections on this activity are presented below:
  • I liked this activity because we all could try and experience how difficult it is to write something meaningful. Filling in the omitted words seems more difficult to me than writing one’s own poem because first we have to understand the poets’ feelings and what they wanted to express in their poems.
  • I liked this activity although it was a bit tedious. I was very surprised by the fact that our versions of one poem were so different. I was also surprised that the versions were different from the original, too.
  • I would love to repeat this activity. Only it was a bit too long. I liked the versions created in the class a lot, some of them were even better than the original.

Transforming poetry into prose and vice versa
Half of the students were asked to transform a selected poem (‘Krajina’ by Vitezslav Nezval or ‘S lodí, jež dováží čaj a kávu’ by Konstantin Biebl) into a prose text. Their classmates in the other group then tried to create a poem from the previously transformed text. Brief reflections after finishing this activity show that the students experienced various difficulties with this activity. Some of the students in the second group blamed the difficulties on their classmates who, in their opinion, transformed the poem in a wrong way or their writing was illegible. Others, on the contrary, were happy with this cooperation, and appreciated the beauty of the poems – their reflections were positive. The students’ works themselves are very interesting, sometimes they are close to the original, sometimes completely different texts with its distinctive poetics.
  • Working with the text was quite easy. I think that it was less difficult than transforming prose into poetry.
  • I liked working with the text, but I think the other group had a more difficult task, compared to our group. I would like to do this activity once more but swap the roles so that we can try the other part, too.
  • I was not very good at this activity because I got the text from another student who omitted essential words in the text and then I could not find the rhymes.
  • At the beginning, it was quite difficult for me to work with the text because I did not know at all how to make a poem from that text. But after I wrote the first line I just started and then it became very easy.

Repeated analysis of complicated texts
Students were provided with a text of the Czech ‘underground’ poet I.M.Jirous which he wrote in 1980s while he was in prison. The poet was imprisoned because of political reasons, in his poem he addresses God and asks him to set him free from the ‘hell’ he was currently experiencing. Paradoxically, the prison was located in the buildings of a former Carthusian monastery and one part of the prison was a deconsecrated church with several baroque statues. Students were not given either the name of the author or any other circumstances in which the poem was created. Most of them set the poem in the Middle Ages or the period of Baroque, which was invoked by the religious motifs and symbols used in the poem. They assumed that the poet describes wartime suffering, oppression by another nation or plague epidemic. Their interpretations were only based on the text itself and were not affected by any extratextual reality. The aim of this activity was to show the students how the information about the author and knowing his biography can narrow the possibilities of interpretation and how, on the other hand, not knowing the background can make it possible to perceive a poem as a message in a more generalized sense.
Writing poetry

For this activity, it is necessary to establish appropriate relations between the teacher and the students in the class based on mutual trust. The students have to be sure that their emerging thoughts will be respected if they are meant seriously and are sufficiently grounded. We chose the topic of Shoa in literature as suitable for working with poetry in this class. We prepared several stages of the work in classes the output of which was expected to be the students’ own poetry. Moreover, it was important to interrupt the creative stages and insert the stages of providing new information about holocaust so that the students had enough knowledge and information about the topic at the end of the whole block of tasks and could try to create their own poems on this topic. The objective of the above described process and historical information provided was to raise adequate motivation and emotions that were expected to serve as a motivating force for and during writing their own texts. The task was: “You are Jews, it is the period of WWII, write down what your feelings are.” Contrabass music was played in the class and students got really absorbed in this activity, which is shown in their reflections:

- Creating this poem I liked best. The bass viol sound is dark and deep and the theme of Shoa is sad and dark, too, the same as the sounds of the contrabass. While listening to such music, I found writing the poem very easy.
- It was a great idea. The class was silent, only there was the music that invoked such a depressive atmosphere and helped us empathize with those people and their situation.
- At first I did not get any ideas but after a while I was able to recollect all those depictions of scorn, disrespect and inhumanity towards the Jews I had seen in documentary series and I could empathize with being one of them. Then it was not difficult for me to write a poem any more.

Conclusions

A lot of people in today’s hectic world find poetry too abstract, subtle, ungraspable, as if from another world. However, poetry provides its readers with the opportunity to confront themselves with the thoughts and feelings of the authors from various periods of history. Real artists are able to formulate and name their inner feelings that we ourselves cannot grasp. They do not induce them upon us, only try to awaken them in us and express what we ourselves are aware of but have a very vague notion of.

The final students’ reflections bring us the evidence of how the project was perceived by the students of the above mentioned class:

- Last year I was not able to understand poems much. But we have worked with it a lot and thanks to that it is different now...
- We have been working with poetry for some time now. The classes are really nice, all of us glow with optimism...
- Working with poetry was very positive. We have tried something new. And the feeling after someone reads something that I have created is nice.

The current project aimed at teaching poetry shows that a well-prepared teacher can become a guide for the students during their getting acquainted with arts, in this case poetry. If teachers apply sensitive approach in the classes, respect the students’ opinions and succeed in creating the atmosphere of mutual trust in the classroom, they can, with the help of creative methods, show the students the way towards poetry, and then poetry can show them the way towards themselves.

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References: