The interpretation of an old Japanese five-line poem with a focus group method

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Abstract

The goal of the study is to find out how students are able to interpret poetic text without significant help of their teacher. A subject of their interest was an old Japanese five-line poem written by Lady Ise – Thread of Pearls. We used the semantic differential and focus group method (15 – 16 years old respondents) to determine the extent of their insight into the poem. A record of the discussion in the focus group showed a sufficient reader’s receptiveness of this text from non-European culture.

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1. Introduction

The perception of poetry is an exclusively individual act depending on both the person who presents the students with a poetic text and the student who reads it. This holds true not only for school, it holds true in general. For any age group and in any circumstances. It is unimaginable that art should be measured by anything else than the depth of the art and the depth of the artistic sense, by personal and cultural input of each recipient.

At the Pedagogical Faculty of Palacky University in Olomouc, a research project is conducted that monitors the attitudes of students towards poetry and to what extent it is possible to influence the students’ attitudes by certain teaching methods. This contribution deals with the students’ perception of an old Japanese five-line poem, i.e. a poetic text which is relatively remote from European traditional culture. First, we present a literary critical analysis of this poem, and then we present the transcription of the discussion among the respondents in our focus group, the critical evaluation of the poem and selected results of the perception of this poem processed by semantic differential.

2. Research methods

Despite the contradictory relation between school and intimacy, the conducted research tries to get an insight into the student reception of poetry with the following research methods: semantic differential (SD) and focus group. The research by semantic differential aims to find out how students aged 12-15 (256 respondents) perceive various kinds of poetry and give their interpretations. An assessment scale of SD modified and verified by factor analysis, enables to monitor the feelings of the readers – respondents – from the point of view of three factors: comprehensibility, evaluation and impressiveness (Vala, 2011).

An interesting insight into the ways of interpretation of the selected poems is shown by the transcript of the recording that was made among the students (aged 15-16) at a selected general secondary school by the focus group method. This method enables to obtain the data using group interactions that emerge and develop in the discussion on a given topic (Morgan, 2007). We monitored the extent to which the students were able to get close to the meanings of the poetic text during the group interactions. It was a group of 13 students (4 boys and 9 girls) attending a optional literature classes. The recording was made in October, 2012. The presenter of the discussion, who was at the same time the teacher in these classes, gradually suggested several possible
topics and issues and the students expressed their opinions. In the literal transcription of the discussion, these topics are highlighted by headlines in bold.

3. Literary critical interpretation of a selected poem

**Lady Ise - Thread of Pearls**

_Hanging from the branches_
_Of a green willow tree,_
_The spring rain_
_Is a_
_Thread of pearls._

The poem’s mood signals the beginning of spring. In our country, it is sad, the soil wakes up into life slowly, and this is different in the East. Rain, water. Refreshing greenery. Everything grows up, giving out life, it is the same. That is why the poem contains the feeling of love, and sadness. Sadness caused by unfulfilled love. Why? Because there are the pearls. Where do the raindrops flow down from? From the willow tree branches. Everything is fresh and clear, a willow tree symbolizes fertility, but also chastity. It is only in our country that we associate a willow tree with sadness, or nowadays even death, but Japanese people associate it with the meaning of purity and chastity, sincerity and devotion, belonging. Pearls are perceived as precious gems across various cultures. Here, they are a simile to raindrops and they mean tears. Tears that are shed out of unfulfilled love, fear and sadness. At the same place there are growth and strength and majesty together with tears and crying. Bitter tears of love are noble and nobody should feel ashamed. Pearls are on a thread. They are tied together. A rope, a string, a thread – it means relation, subordination, compassion, sadness and nostalgia. Lack of something, emptiness without love when there should be love. The string might be tied in a knot. If the pearls are tears, if they do not get tied and embraced in a firm hug of love and hot passionate grasp, then what is left is exactly this sadness caused by unfulfilled, undesired, denied love.

When we use the term ‘miniature’ in the sense of a poetic form, the best known is haiku. Haiku is an ancient poetic form associated predominantly with Japanese literature. And there is a reason why it is considered noble. It takes pride in its purity, crystal-likeplainness, stability, precision; it results in commitment, responsibility, obligation and order. Its usage – fulfilment, in fact – excludes arbitrariness; it brings about refinement and helps the perfection of soul. It inclines towards a simple purity of a sudden insight. The meaning of haiku lies above all in feeling the mood of the poem, in the revelation of a moment, baring of the perception, all of them pervade and brighten all the space and time of the daily world.

Haiku enables us to pervade into the wholeness of the world and, being there, we free ourselves of our own imperfection. It is the way towards perfection: absolution and balance. Rest. That is why the authors of haiku poems find the inspiration in noble dignity of nature and pay very little attention to their own emotions or heart-rending self-searching however much they love or suffer in their lives. In spite of that there is love and pain – sometimes more, sometimes less – hidden, but it is not in the form of a feeling that is growing and getting stronger, but as a fact, constant, omnipresent, invariable and inherent to the world and people. The fact that will never diminish and that, with the flow of time and as we are getting older, changes, gains in value and flourish. Haiku teaches love and the pain of listening.

4. Interpretation of the poem by focus group method

Express your impression of the poem by an adjective.

- Hidden, clear, melancholic, romantic, sad, silken, delicate, interesting, tranquil, light, beauty in details, playful, peaceful

What mood does the poem evoke?

- Michal: It’s soothing, I would say. I can remember certain moments when I try to express various relations even with the use of metaphor.
- Jindra: I can see a nice spring day in it, light showers, the sun is shining through them, so I can see a rainbow on the horizon.
- Filip: Happy mood as when we notice the things around and enjoy them however small they are.
- Katka: We can enjoy details, too.
- Katka: I can absolutely imagine it... the morning is all spring, the dew is still on the grass and in the garden everything is bursting into bloom and the birds are singing, I can see a picture like this in it.
- Barbora: I rather feel freshness after a little morning rain, there’s beautiful smell everywhere around and there are drops in the grass, the sun is shining on them and the rainbow reflects everywhere around.
- Alice: It seems to me that we can find a kind of wealth also in the things which are not precious at all.

What is valuable in the poem, what is hidden in it? How do you perceive its end?

- Veronika: I see in it that we can concentrate on those details and we don’t have to think of our actual problems, that it helps us forget about them at least for a moment.
• Michal: In one word – humility.
• Katka: It says we must look around us, we must open our eyes and look at the details that often help us improve our mood more than any big issue or thing.
• Katka: I just got an idea – which the best things and the most beautiful things in life are just for free…
• Barbora: The pearls, it is the wealth.
• Filip: To make a reader contemplate over it and make their own opinions.
• Katka: The string is something tiny, nearly invisible, but it holds the pearls together so without the string the poem would lack something that the author tried to express in it.

Positive, or sad?
• Veronika: My impression is ‘sad’, but I can see in it also bit brighter thoughts…
• Jindra: I have to contradict a bit. It seems to me like more than sad, like the break of a new day when, actually, the trees as if they were awakening, birds singing and all the landscape around coming alive, so actually it is as if everywhere there was joy.
• Veronika: I get the feeling as if a new day was born and new possibilities for everything to become beautiful, even though we may feel not good.
• Michal: It reminds me of the details that are perceived by those who are truly present here and now, who notice things which happen around them, for example these details in the poem, too.
• Ondra: They could be tears, as well.

4.1. Commentary to the recording

According to the students’ opinions, the poem is soft, delicate, beautiful in details, peaceful. Those who do not have that much sense for originality in an adjectival expression help themselves using more constant expressions as ‘romantic’ or ‘melancholic’. However, nearly all of the respondents marked the atmosphere and mood of the poem as the most dominant feature in it. Jindra states that he can see “the break of a new day when trees were as if awakening, birds singing and all the landscape around coming alive, as if everywhere there was joy”. His contemplation is interesting also because of the fact that it helps us follow the train of thought of the respondents and the ability to get to the meaning of the text, via the pearls they get from the original feeling of joy to weeping, and finally they equate the pearls with tears (Ondra). Nearly all of the respondents noticed the importance of details and marginal facts, but they were not able to specify and grasp the whole which is hidden behind, they only can sense it. Nevertheless, it was Michal who got to it in an arbitrary and spontaneous way – pronouncing the word ‘HUMILITY’. A bit more analytic, but precise and surprisingly wise was Katka’s opinion: “The most beautiful and best things in life are for free”.

5. Summary of the results obtained by the semantic differential method

• Younger students (aged 12-13) were impressed by the simple and playful tone of the poem and they considered it to be more impressive than the older students.
• The most significant differences were proved as the differences between boys and girls. The girls, unequivocally, perceived the poem as more positive than the boys, and they were impressed by its tender and dreamlike nature.
• Readers evaluated the poem more positively than non-readers; they appreciate delicacy and sophistication of the old Japanese five-line poem while non-readers, who are mostly students with lower grades, appreciated provocative, decadent texts more.
• The students with the special subjects focused on humanities show higher SD score in the factors of comprehensibility and impressiveness. Those specializing in sciences consider the poem too dreamlike and abstract.

6. Conclusion

While assessing the poems by SD method, the respondents were granted space for their free commentaries and associations, some of which show intuitive comprehension, for example: A nice simile. It makes me feel relaxed in a way with a bit of tenderness. In the whole set of the students’ reflections we can find several significant features: lack of understanding of non-European culture, trying to find the meaning where it is not present and cannot be present, interest in diminutives and ornaments in which the respondents find the meaning according to their own life experience or emotional deficiency. It provides us with an interesting set of responses to the topic that is relatively distant and very close at the same time to all of us.

The focus group method showed that the respondents were able to get to the deeper layers in the meaning of the text even without the teacher’s substantial interventions in the discussion. The most important fact is their level of motivation, mutual trust and their ability to open themselves to their feelings and experiences and share them with one another.
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References