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GENERATIONAL NOVEL *IN TIMES OF FADING LIGHT* BY
EUGEN RUGE IN FLT



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Abstract

Significant part of post-2000 German prose is so-called “generational novel”. The paper is a contribution to the usage of multigenerational novel in FLT – Eugen Ruge’s novel *In Times of Fading Light (In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts, 2011)* – by university students majoring in German as foreign language at the Education Faculty of University in Hradec Kralove. Typical features are no omniscient narrator with several narrative levels and perspectives in this family saga which conveniently enables its use in the German FL lessons. The aim of this paper is, firstly, to explain the suitability of several narrative levels and narrative perspective to train students’ existing German skills. Secondly, to make students look for arguments to justify themselves with one of the chosen characters. Last but not least, to explore their motivation to read a literary text as a way to understand the life and the history of the 20th century and to compare their current life with the life in East Germany and in the Eastern Bloc. All these activities help them later as would-be teachers to be able to explain the German history, culture and literature to their pupils.

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1. Introduction

According to Amanda Steward, nowadays, the generational novel has emerged as a popular form for presenting the German past (Stewart, 2019) and it also has a great pedagogical potential in foreign language teaching (FLT). Generational novel *In Times of Fading Light* by Eugen Ruge is one of the best examples of this purpose when teaching FL. This bestseller book, which was compulsory reading for high schools in the German state of Saarland (2015-2018), has been translated into many languages (Ágel, 2015), including Anthea Bell's translation into English. In 2011, Ruge won the German Prize for this novel. This story was filmed, besides this, here is a theatre version (2013), audio book (2011) and radio play (2017) based on Ruge's story. Ruge exposes how the memory changes from generation to generation and hereby the partially inherited memory, dreams and fears of each generation (Hirsch, 2008). He writes an intricate saga of family life in East Germany and exposes the disintegration of the Umnitzer family within the political system of the former GDR with a lot of allusions, associations, references to the former GDR (e.g. to Trotsky, Gorbachev, Erich Honecker, Sputnik, the gulag, the clanks of Lada and Trabant automobiles etc.). Important moments in the life of the family take place on the background of the historical events of the "short twentieth century" (Hobsbawm, 1995). This family novel is created like a mosaic of stories by individual protagonists of a family. The novel does not plod forward in a predictable, linear way and there is no omniscient narrator. Each of twenty chapters is told from a different perspective. The characters born as far apart as 1889 and 1977 are depicted in parallel narrative. We can find many parallels between the Ruges family and the characters in this family novel. It is Alexander, who represents the third generation, and whose character is the closest to Ruge in age and experience. Like many other authors of the family novels (e.g. Julia Franck, Uwe Timm), Ruge only wrote this book after the death of his parents and grandparents (Heinrichova, 2019).

Using generational novel by university students majoring in German as foreign language enhances their communication competence, cultural awareness and their motivation to read a literary text as a way to understand the life and the history of the 20th century (Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012) thanks to the fact that they have a lot in common. Teaching history through a literary text helps students of German language to deduce historical analysis, which can consequently improve their language skills and provide emotional experience. A literary text, as well as e.g. music, are also connected with building mental abilities, with the development of the person's ideas, imagination and memory, and these are an integral part of learning and teaching of foreign languages (Besedova et al, 2019).

Current didactics of FL is based on communicative and intercultural method. The students as future teacher should be able to present literature and history of a foreign nation in FL (Bracker, 2015). They also have to learn to encourage pupils in case of different opinions because it is important to support students' own thinking as it can wake up interest of a student, in our case, in other generational novels. Finally, yet importantly, they also have to be able to explain to the learner where and/or why the mistake is made if a pupil makes an error and hereby "foreign language teachers can effectively motivate their students to constructive using of the already built abilities and skills in [the] sphere of grammar" (Ondrakova & Tauchmanova, 2019, p. 624).

2. Problem Statement

English is usually taught as the first foreign language in the Czech Republic and according to Mullerova (2019), German is still the most frequent choice as the second FL. This is the reason why it is important to motivate students of German language to develop their interest, their knowledge about life, literature and history of Germany so that they can later offer it to their own pupils.

Eugen Ruge's generational novel *In Times of Fading Light* is very impressive by reflecting real historical events using the example of concrete characters. The students can identify themselves with one of the characters and as a result they can try to find the potential reasons of character's decisions. Through this text, students understand how historical events have influenced the life in 20th century and they can also compare their own situation with the life of literary characters. At the same time, the students can train their existing German language skills.

3. Research Questions

There are two basic research questions to be answered in this paper that are closely connected:

Q1: *Do students have knowledge about the history of East Germany and the Eastern Bloc?*

Q2: *Does using of the generational novel – by Eugen Ruge *In Times of Fading Light* – motivate students' interest in other generational novels which leads to voluntary search for other information about the history of 20th century?*

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study is to explain to the university students majoring in teaching German as a FL during an elective literary course on the example how and why we can use the family saga by Eugen Ruge *In Times of Fading Light* in FLT. Since Ruge unfolds this generational novel on several narrative levels and he also changes the narrative perspective, it is possible, as the first aim, to train students' existing German skills when reading this book as a way to understand life in Eastern Bloc as an important part of history of the 20th century. Secondly, to make students look for arguments to justify themselves with one of the chosen characters. Lastly, the students also practise their language skills while working on writing and discussions.

5. Research Methods

The elective literary course devoted to phenomenon and using of family novels published after 2000 in FLT in winter semester 2019 was attended by 14 students (12 female and 2 male students) majoring German as a FL. The semester lasted 13 weeks. The generational novels *The Unfinished (Die Unvollendeten*, 2003) by Reinhard Jirgl and *Visitation (Heimsuchung*, 2008) by Jenny Erpenbeck were treated in the further part of this course.

In order to motivate the students, they first tried with the help of an association game to activate their previous knowledge of the key words 'Life in East Germany and Eastern Block'. After that, we used research tools (mind map, concept map) to collect data to understand the extent of students' knowledge of

historical events of following years 1952, 1959, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1973, 1976, 1979, 1989, 1995 and 2001. These years are also the titles of the chapters in the family novel by Ruge. The students were also asked to give some concrete (positive and negative) examples (people, movies or books) connected with East Germany or Eastern Bloc. All students read all three books (*The Unfinished*, *Visitation* and *In Times of Fading Light*) as homework.

In the first course lesson the objectives and the program of the seminar were introduced and the tasks for the next weeks were distributed. For the next lessons, two students were supposed to prepare a presentation about Eugen Ruge's life and work, three other students presented the most important historical events connected with the GDR and the three other students presented historical events related to the dates of following years 1952, 1959, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1973, 1976, 1979, 1989, 1995 and 2001 which are also the titles of the chapters in the family novel by Ruge. The students took notes during the presentations so that they could take part in further activities that followed afterwards. The goal of these activities was to revise the previous knowledge and to broaden it in this natural way.

All fourteen students were divided into two groups for speaking activities. Firstly, in each group, the family tree of the literary family, the timeline of the novel, the characteristics of the main characters and the historical-social background were prepared. Secondly, role play of Wilhelm's birthday party, the key event of the book, followed. Students had to agree in German in each of these two groups, who will take on the roles of those present at the party (Wilhelm and his wife Charlotte, Kurt and his Russian mother-in-law Nadjezda, Marcus) and who wants to be in the role of the absent people who comment on the celebration and the other guests (Irina and her son Alexander). The students identified themselves with one of the characters and they were asked to detect the decisions of the chosen character. This was followed by a series of dialogues, the inner monologues and comments. During this role play, the students in one of the roles tried to explain the behaviour of the chosen character. It was compared with what was said in the dialogue and in the inner monologue. After the role play, the students still in their group tried to think out a possible following of the life of Kurt, Alexander, Marcus und Melitta, who are still alive.

Homework task was set to ask their parents, grandparents or elderly family friends about their experience and knowledge regarding the situation in Czechoslovakia during the communism period (1948-1989). The students compared this information and experience with other students in role plays during the next lessons. Then they compared those findings with their current situation and with their own lives.

Besides these speaking activities, the students trained also their existing writing skills. Every student had two home writing tasks. Firstly, they had to write a fictional letter of 300 words. Each student had chosen a character from whose perspective he wrote this fictional letter and a character from the novel to write to. Next week, the other students in the course were supposed to guess the writer of this letter and to whom the letter was written. This letter takes, into account the flashbacks related to the author and recipient of the letter. Secondly, the seminar was completed by students writing a 500 words long essay about everyday life in Eastern Bloc, about the dreams of the people, their expectations and fears. The students could use other information acquired by their own voluntary research.

Information to the book (title, structure and content)

In Times of Fading Light is the debut novel of Eugen Ruge (b. 1954 in Sosva/Ural). This novel is loosely based on the fate of Ruge's own family and tells the story of the four generations of the Umnitzer

family. Eugen Ruge like Alexander Umnitzer, is a son of the East German prominent historian (Wolfgang Ruge). In this central figure, Alexander, we can see Ruge's alter ego. The title of this novel is firstly, a reference to the potato harvest in the village in the Ural in early fall. Secondly, it is a metaphor for the fading light that the communist ideal shines on the Umnitzer family and this light gets weaker and weaker with every of the four generation. The structure of this novel is very interesting and elaborated. As Ruge swiches between different time periods, he also changes the narrative perspective. Each key character becomes the center of the story in one of twenty designated chapter — and thus has the chance to tell their own version of the story. These individual tales blend together to form a rich narrative mosaic.

This novel covers overall a period from 1919 to 2001, the first and the last chapters as well as three others take place in 2001, around the time of September 11. These five chapters named “2001” are told from Alexander's perspective. The first chapter describes how Alexander (Kurt's and Irina's son), just diagnosed with an obviously incurable form of cancer, takes care of his father who suffers from an advanced form of dementia. He wants to recognise the history of his family and find sense of his life, that is the reason why he travels to Mexico, a place he knows from many conversations at home, where his grandparents lived for a long time. His journey is full of memories and nostalgia. There are two flashbacks, two more chapters here “1959” and “1973” which are also told from his perspective. Alexander left the GDR shortly before its complete collapse. He thinks about his failed career in West Germany, his inability to feel at home anywhere, his failed relationships with women, his complete failure as a father. The socialist ideal was never something that appealed to him, but he wasn't able to find something else to occupy this empty spot in his life.

Each of six chapter titled “1989” are told from multiple perspectives. On October 1, 1989 Wilhelm's ninetieth birthday is celebrated and it is the only one central event in the book, it is a day in which almost the whole family comes together and in which the open and hidden conflicts are revealed.

From Wilhelm's perspective, only this single chapter is told. Wilhelm Powileit was a metal worker, party member from the time of the foundation of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) in 1919. His exile in Mexico, later a short stay in Russia and return in 1952 to East Germany strengthened his belief in the Stalinist ideas. As an emigrant to the West, he was not able to rise to a higher rank in the party hierarchy in East Germany. But he is very active in the party and every year his activism earns him a new medal of honor. He has an exemplary curriculum vitae, even though it is fairly obvious that the official CV is more a legend than the truth.

Wilhelm's wife Charlotte (divorced Umnitzer, hence the different family name of the following generations) made quite a career in the newly founded academy after returning to the GDR from Mexico. Her belief in the communist ideal, and their long life together was always submerged to the fight for an allegedly brighter future for the working class. But the communist ideology was also a kind of escape, an idea that filled in a void in her life. This ideology provided the stability her life was lacking, because she had a very unhappy and abusive childhood and difficult first marriage with two children. Charlotte's perspective delivers three chapters: the second one in book “1952” told from Mexico, then “1961” and finally chapter “1989”.

Contrary to the oldest generation, who have no doubt about their political beliefs, the same cannot be said for Kurt Umnitzer, Charlotte's son and Wilhelm's step son. Kurt is an academic, one of the leading

historians of the country, and a very productive one. He is not blind for certain unpleasant truths. As an adolescent, he and his brother Werner were growing up in the Soviet Union to be trained as a part of the future post-WWII elite in Communist Germany. Because his brother, Werner, and Kurt voiced doubt regarding the wisdom of the “Molotov-Ribbentrop pact”, in a letter and this letter was discovered, their lives changed dramatically. They were exiled to different camps in Siberia. Werner didn’t survive this punishment in Vorkuta, but Kurt, exiled to another place, managed to do so to later return with his Russian wife Irina and their son Alexander to East Germany. Irina’s mother Nadjeshda later joins, but she never feels at home in the GDR and dreams about going home to her village in the Ural. From Nadjeshda’s perspective only one chapter “1989” can be read and from Irina’s perspective we can find in addition to chapter “1989” two more chapters, two other flashbacks “1976” and “1971”.

Markus, the youngest Umnitzer, and representative of the fourth generation, is not interested in the political ideas of his grandparents and great-grandparents despite the fact that once his great-grandfather Wilhelm visited the school to tell the students about his early years in the KPD and his acquaintance with Karl Liebknecht, the party founder. From Marcus’ perspective two chapters are told: “1989” and “1995”, when the funeral of his grandmother Irina takes place. Because he lives in Cottbus, early Federal Republic of Germany and has no contact with his father, he only watches his family without speaking to them.

By the novel’s end, most of main characters are dead or dying. The same can be said of the society in the East Germany in which they lived.

6. Findings

Research question 1: *Do students have knowledge about the history of East Germany and the Eastern Bloc?*

At the beginning of the course, the students were asked to recall historical milestones, personalities from cultural and political life from East Germany. Majority of the students in our elective literary course were aware of some events and dates connected with the history of East Germany (1949, 1989, 1990, 1961, Berlin wall, Soviet zone). Yet, they mentioned only the following names: *Erich Honecker*, *Bertolt Brecht* and his theatre *The Berliner Ensemble*. The students were also asked what parallels they saw in the history of East Germany and the other countries in the eastern Bloc. Each of them knew the parallels like *Soviet influence*, *Josif Stalin*, *communism*, *non-democratic regime*, *impossibility to travel*. As far as the history of the other Eastern Bloc countries is concerned, the students were able to name a few personalities from the former Czechoslovakia and also their (positive/negative) influence, role and meaning: *Klement Gottwald* (the first communist president in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1953), *Milada Horáková* (a victim of judicial murder committed by the communist party, executed in 1950), *Alexander Dubček* (a Czechoslovak politician who attempted to reform the communist government during the Prague Spring in 1968), *Prague Spring* (suppressed and followed after the Warsaw-Pact-invasion in August 1968), *Václav Havel* (a writer, former dissident and the last president of Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992, the first president of the Czech Republic, 1993-2003), *Karel Kryl* (an iconic Czechoslovak poet, singer-songwriter and author of many hit protest songs in which he criticized the communist regime), *Julius Fučík* (a Czechoslovak communist journalist and critic, an official hero for socialist Czechoslovakia, executed in Berlin 1943) and *Emil Zátopek* (a Czechoslovak long-distance runner and winner of three gold medals at the 1952 Summer

Olympics in Helsinki). Regarding the history of the other Eastern Bloc countries, the students, unfortunately, had no knowledge or associations.

After these activities, we tried to collect information concerning the following years and events: 1952, 1959, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1973, 1976, 1979, 1989, 1995 and 2001. We used research tools of *mind map* and *concept map* to collect students' knowledge. Students were only able to give some information without preparation for the following years of 1961, 1989 (The Berlin Wall which divided Berlin from 1961 to 1989) and 2001 (terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda against the United States on September 11, 2001). With regard to the novel by Ruge, it is important to say that the historical events are only a backdrop of everyday life and the students could later realize whether and how the major historical changes affect everyday life.

At the beginning of this elective literary course, the students had only basic knowledge about the history of East Germany. They were only able to give some examples and historical connections from Czechoslovak history. Students were not interested in the history of the GDR or in the history of the other Eastern Bloc countries.

To answer the research question 2: *Does using of the generational novel – by Eugen Ruge In Times of Fading Light – motivate students' interest in other generation novel which leads to voluntary search for other information about the history of 20th century?* the students were asked: *What other family novels do you know? Did you like them and why?*

The first mentioned novels were *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann, *The Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy and the first family novel in the German literature *Parsifal* by Wolfram von Eschenbach. These family novels were either read or watched as films. All students confirmed that they liked family novels.

After their presentations, group work, role play based on the key event of the book, their internal monologues and dialogues in which they trained different perspectives of the protagonists and looked for the arguments for their behaviour and after their writing activities, the students started to see the big potential of this generational novel. They identified themselves with one of the characters in their *fictional letter* writing activity. The other students in the class considered the flashbacks in the letter related to the author and tried to disclose the recipient of this letter. So, it was easy for the colleagues in the course to guess who writes this letter and who is the recipient.

This literary course was attended by 14 students (12 female and 2 male students). It was interesting to see that the course participants preferred the female characters. It was easier for them to write from a female perspective. The characters most often chosen and likeable were as following: the character of Irina, Alexanders' mother, who followed her husband from Russia, was chosen three times. Charlotte, Alexanders' grandmother, was even favoured four times. Nadjezda, from whose perspective only one chapter was told, was surprisingly preferred twice. Narrator's character, Alexander, was favoured only twice. The character of his father, Kurt, the most hardworking historian in the East Germany was chosen once only too. The character of his grandson, Marcus, was not chosen at all. The character of Wilhelm, whose 90th birthday was celebrated, was selected twice.

The students wrote also an essay in which they compared their own current situation, their own experience, dreams and image of future with the life in the former Eastern Bloc and could see the big differences.

It can be said that the generational novel by Eugen Ruge *In Times of Fading Light* has a big potential in FLT. This novel also motivated students and they were voluntarily looking for more information about the history of the 20th century as well as other examples of family novels in post-2000 German prose in which the events of the 20th century are presented.

7. Conclusion

The intention of this contribution was to show suitability of the generational novel by Eugen Ruge *In Times of Fading Light* for FLT. It can be concluded that this novel is a powerful pedagogical tool to enhance students' interest to read a literary text as a way to learn about history of 20th century. The various narrative perspectives played a major role, enabling the students to identify themselves with different characters and at the same time express themselves to the same situation from the different perspectives. After performing a role play, during presentation and other activities, the students started to compare their own life to those of Eastern Bloc situation, which naturally led to their interest in this part of history and to their voluntary search for other examples and information. During all the activities, both their existing German language skills and reasoning skills were practised.

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