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LEARNING HISTORY THROUGH STORIES ABOUT EAST
GERMANY

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Abstract

The article presents the results in which university students – majoring in teaching German as FL – expressed their ability, viewpoint and experience with using contemporary German literature to understand the life in East Germany as a part of history of the 20st century. The research was carried out in the winter term 2016 and 2017 on the basis of the following books, all awarded / nominated for the German Book Prize: Eugen Ruge's (2011) *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts (In Times of Fading Light)*; Lutz Seiler's (2014) *Kruso*; Uwe Tellkamp's (2008) *Der Turm (The Tower)* and Angelika Klüssendorf's (2011) *Das Mädchen (The Girl)*. The aim of my literary course was, firstly, to provide the skills to read literature as a resource for understanding life and historical change, how other people experience emotional issues, and secondly, to give students an outline of the life in East Germany, to see the parallels with other countries in the Eastern Bloc and to stimulate students' interest in the history of other countries in the Eastern Bloc. Thirdly, the aim was to use the texts as a stimulus to practice writing and speaking in discussions. Last but not least, to present how a teacher can enrich the foreign language lessons with literary text because the future teachers should not neglect the possibility of using literature in FLT.

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1. Introduction

Literature, history, language and speech have much in common. Learning history through literature helps the students of German language and literature to deduce historical analyses, which can provide an emotional experience and improve language skills. It is widely acknowledged that people make history and that their lives and life choices shape history. Current didactics of FL is based on intercultural and communicative method that requires a teacher to be almost on the level of a native speaker and to be able to present to the students' literature, culture, values as well as history of a foreign nation in FL (Göbel & Busse, 2017; Dembeck & Parr, 2017; Heinz, 2010; Bracker, 2015; Rampillon, 2000). The communicative method encourages enhancing of communicative competences in the target language (Hall, 2005, pp. 47-57). The communicative approach requires a balanced proportion of all the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking); and it has four main objectives: educational, linguistic, formal and cultural educational. "Learners are trained in conversation and not only in structural phrases" (Besedová, 2017, 33-34). Students create their knowledge by comparing, discovering, communicating, refusing and confirming instead of only accepting and consuming in a passive way (Rampillon, 2000, p. 122).

In the Czech Republic, German (as well as Russian and Spanish) is now the second most important FL and the students' level of knowledge and skills in German language has decreased in recent years (Ondrakova, 1984). The main FL is still English. Students' previous experience with language learning and skills gained from learning languages must not be ignored (Tauchmanova, 2017). Using literary texts in FLT helps to understand and to exercise students' experiences from other languages in discussions or in students' writings about particular books.

It is important for a teacher to acquire methods which improve students' skills and which are based on students' own work. These techniques support students' problem solving and own thinking which in case of presenting historical events through literature can wake up interest of a student in a particular period – in our case in the life and youth in East Germany. Though the existence of the GDR (the German Democratic Republic) belongs to the past, the literature about the history of this state and life in it has been growing both in intensity and in quality (which is proven by many prizes awarded in last years). The authors from the former GDR enable the readers from old federal states to get insight into that perished world, the world till now unknown, partially even adventurous, absurd and incomprehensible. The life in the GDR (1949–1990) is often depicted as the life of one or more family generations, influenced by political events, restrictions and the ideology of the state, with limited chances of individual development in the socialist society.

The example of four books German of prose published after 2000 devoted to history of the East Germany – Eugen Ruge's (2011) *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts (In Times of Fading Light)*; Lutz Seiler's (2014) *Kruso*; Uwe Tellkamp's (2008) *Der Turm (The Tower)* and Angelika Klüssendorf's (2011) *Das Mädchen (The Girl)*, which have been awarded (or nominated for) the German Book Prize. The premises behind this study is to show that, apart from enhancing foreign language skills, learning history through literature stimulates students' interest in the historical period.

2. Problem Statement

Numerous films, documentaries and novels including their film adaptations in the 21st century are evidence of the current interest in analysing recent history. “Writers from the former GDR devote minimally to the topic of the 2WW. More often they cover the period before, during and after the fall of the Berlin wall” (Heinrichova, 2017, p. 184).

This article presents the results of the research in which university students voiced their experience and opinions with the use of German literature with the aim to understand history of East Germany and to improve their language skills.

Why learn history through literature? Literature narrates about different historical periods. Literature reflects real historical events using the example of particular characters the students can identify with. Through literary stories, students understand how these events formed the life of individuals. Literature is an authentic text and can enhance and improve student’s critical thinking skills (Lazar, 2005; Van 2009; Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012). Literature stimulates their imagination, can help students to identify the emotions of the characters, motivates students for lifelong reading and develops basic language skills. Learning of language today is also the process of learning the correct pronunciation, intonation and stress (Besedova, 2016, p. 660), what can be practiced during the discussions.

3. Research Questions

There are two basic research questions to be answered in this paper. The first was: “Have students got knowledge of the history of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany)?” The second essential question to be answered was closely connected with the first one “Does learning history through stories about East Germany stimulate students’ interest in history of the other countries in the Eastern Bloc and lead to voluntary search for further information?”

4. Purpose of the Study

Learning history through stories brings the past to life and helps the students understand historical change. The objective of this study is to provide the skills to read literature as a way to understand life in East Germany (1949-1990) as part of the history of the 20st century, to see the parallels with other countries in the Eastern Bloc, to teach reading, writing and speaking. Last but not least, to compare students’ knowledge of this part of history at the beginning and at the end of the winter term.

5. Research Methods

The literary seminar devoted to Interpretation of German literature of the 21st century about the life in East Germany in winter semester 2016 and 2017 was attended by 35 students (26 female and 9 male students). At the beginning and at the end of the literary seminar a questionnaire survey was realized to carry out quantitative analysis. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: an identification part and a part describing students’ knowledge of the history of the German Democratic Republic. The students had to

answer the same twenty closed YES/NO questions at the beginning and at the end of the winter term to compare the improvement of their knowledge.

After the questionnaire survey these following research tools were used to collect data about students' knowledge: *Snow ball activity*, *Mind map*, *A minute paper*, and *a Concept map*. The students tried to find answers to the following questions: *What do you know about East Germany? Which historical events about East Germany or political and cultural personalities do you think are important and why?*

The four literary texts devoted to the life, childhood and youth in the GDR were chosen. All students read all four books in German as FL as their homework task. The priority was, firstly, reading skill and, secondly, historical knowledge about the GDR. The students worked in groups of four-five students. Every group prepared a presentation of one book for the other attendees of the seminar. The semester lasted 13 weeks. Every three weeks one book was presented. In the two following seminars after the presentation a discussion, role-plays, games, open dialogues, information/problem solving activities followed. In the discussion, different opinions were compared. The students were asked to identify themselves with one of the characters, to detect their decisions, reactions and attitudes. In the role-plays, the students tried to explain the decision of the chosen character. Next, as a homework task, a summary and explanation of the decision of the chosen character was set to elaborate (400 words).

Regarding the roll-plays, the students first asked their grandparents (parents / family friends born after 2WW) about their experience before 1989; afterwards, the students tried to find some information about other countries in the Eastern Bloc and finally, the students compared this information with other students in role-plays during the course.

The seminar was completed by students writing an essay (500 words) about the life (childhood or youth) in the former GDR or in another country of the East Bloc. The students could use other informations acquired by their own voluntary research concerning this topic in this final essay.

Course content - summary

- **Eugen Ruge** was born 1954 in the Soviet Union, living in East Berlin since 1956, he was awarded the German Book Prize for his novel *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts* (2011, *In Times of Fading Light*). His multi-generational saga describes the world of East Germany and looks at the whole German history of the 20th century from the deepest insight. It is a story of the novel narrator Alexander, who represents the third of four generations of GDR. He deals with the utopian ideas, on which socialism was based, the influence of the Soviet Union on the life of his society, the frequent barbarian habits and behaviour of the Soviet people. The first generation's representative of his family, Werner lost his life in Vorkuta work camp. The second generation's representative is his father Kurt, who came with his Russian wife Irina back to East Germany and who is one of the most productive historians in the GDR. Markus represents the last generation. The GDR before the fall of the Berlin wall is a mere history for him. He is not interested in the political situation; he lives in Cottbus and enjoys his life (discotheque, alcohol, drugs) with other young people from West Germany. He does not have any relationship with either his father or his stepfather.

- **Lutz Seiler** (born 1963 in Gera) has been awarded several prizes as well. His outstanding debut novel *Kruso* (2014) is written as if by a student of German studies, Edgar Bendler. In 1989, Ed travels from Halle an der Saale to the island of Hiddensee to his friend's funeral to say goodbye to her, but also to learn more about her previous life and death. She was interested in Hiddensee, the remarkable island in the Baltic Sea, lying almost on the other side, at the end of the GDR, close to freedom of thoughts. Edgar finds there a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant, meets a charismatic Russian called Kruso. Krusowitsch has a privileged position on the island; he set up a kind of rescue station for the "shipwrecked"- helping the rebellious outsiders of the mainstream society. Some of them planned to leave the GDR from this island and the others try to help them.
- **Uwe Tellkamp** (born 1968 in Dresden) is a German writer and physician. He practiced medicine until 2004. Tellkamp captured his family in social novel *Der Turm* (2008, *The Tower*) seven years before the revolution (from December 4, 1982 to November 9, 1989 - the day when the Berlin Wall was pulled down). The novel is situated in a Dresden villa quarter, in a street called *Turmstraße* (Towers street). Tellkamp was awarded the Leipzig Book Fair prize for this novel. The life of three generations of one family and the picture of an educated, but bourgeois society, served the author to draw a monumental panorama of the GDR approaching its inevitable end. With humour and overstatements, he commented on the decline of the social system in which it was not desirable for anyone to stand out. The main character, Christian Hoffman, grows from a dependent spoilt mother's boy into a confident young man who prefers military service to medicine studies thus disappointing his father, a chief clinic surgeon Richard Hoffman. Besides his wife Ann, who in the course of the story gets emancipated and finally participates in demonstrations before the fall of the Berlin wall, Richard leads a double life having a daughter with a hospital colleague. The mammoth saga (1000 pages) features some characters built to real life personalities of East German dissident or cultural life.
- Memories of childhood and adolescence in the GDR are described in the novel by **Angelika Klüssendorf** (born 1958 in Ahrensburg, since 1985 living in Federal Germany). The novel *Das Mädchen* (2011, *The Girl*) nominated for the German Book Award, is a story of a cruel childhood in the former GDR, that was compared to a huge children's home. The main character is a nameless, skinny and defiant girl whom nobody calls by name because they do not know it. She grows up with her alcohol-addicted mother who beats her, or in a children's home.

6. Findings

The questionnaire compared the improvement of students' knowledge of the history of the German Democratic Republic at the beginning and at the end of the literary seminar in winter term 2016 and 2017.

Table 01. Students' improvement of knowledge of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)

Questions	Right answer	Students' right answers at the beginning of the literary seminar (35 attendees of the seminar in total)	Students' right answers at the end of the literary seminar (35 attendees of the seminar in total)
<i>Was the GDR founded in 1945?</i>	NO (1949)	25	33
<i>Was East Berlin the capital of the GDR?</i>	YES	30	35
<i>Was the GDR established in the Soviet zone?</i>	YES	31	35
<i>Was Russian a compulsory foreign school language?</i>	YES	22	33
<i>Was Russian one of the official languages in the GDR?</i>	NO	12	28
<i>Did the construction of the Berlin Wall start in 1961?</i>	YES	24	34
<i>Did the fall of the Berlin Wall begin in November 1989?</i>	YES	22	35
<i>Was the GDR a Member of the NATO?</i>	NO	9	29
<i>Was the GDR a Member of the Warsaw Pact?</i>	YES	13	33
<i>Was military service mandatory in the GDR?</i>	YES	30	35
<i>Did Marshall plan help the GDR economically?</i>	NO	12	32
<i>Could the GDR people travel freely all over the world?</i>	NO	25	35
<i>Was the Soviet rouble the official currency in the GDR?</i>	NO	8	35
<i>Could people enjoy free speech in the GDR?</i>	NO	8	33
<i>Did the German reunification formally take place on 3 October 1990?</i>	YES	17	34
<i>Is the 3 October a national day in Germany?</i>	YES	18	33
<i>Was Konrad Adenauer the president of the GDR?</i>	NO	10	35
<i>Was Erich Honecker a Member of the Bundestag after 1990?</i>	NO	16	30
<i>Did Thomas Mann, a German writer and the Nobel prize winner in literature, live in the GDR?</i>	NO	14	4
<i>Did the GDR army occupy Prague during the Prague Spring in 1968?</i>	NO	8	33

Research question 1: "Do students have knowledge of the history of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany)?"

To obtain this data, the students were asked: *What do you know about East Germany? Which historical events about East Germany or political and cultural personalities do you think are important and why?*

The students were asked to recall historical milestones of the GDR (1945, 1949, 1961, 1989, 1990), personalities from the political or cultural life. Most students (29 of 35) connected the history of the former East Germany with the year 1989 (fall of the Berlin wall). The students knew (26 out of 35) that East Germany was established in the Soviet zone after the 2WW, while the Federal Republic was established in the three western zones, but they did not remember exactly the beginning and the end of this country (1949 - 1999). The students consider as important the years 1961 (beginning the construction of the Berlin Wall, 30 out of 35 students) and 1968 (The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, 33 out of 35 students). The students mentioned only the following names of the historical and cultural/literature personalities: *Erich Honecker* (20 students knew his position in the system), *Bertolt Brecht* (33 recalled him thanks to the literature lessons at university), *Katharina Witt* (an East German figure skater; 8 students who study German and Sport remembered her).

At the beginning of the literary course, the students had minimal knowledge of the history of East Germany although it was a neighbour country with the same system.

To answer the second research question: “Does learning history through stories about East Germany stimulate students’ interest in history of the other countries in the Eastern Bloc leading to voluntary search for further information?”, the students were asked: *What parallels do you see in the history of the GDR and the other countries in the Eastern Bloc, what lessons can we draw from them?*

As the first was called the political system, then followed Soviet influence, communism. The students asked their parents and the family friends who were born after 1945 and emphasized as the worst experience the impossibility to travel (28 out of 35), only five students contradicted and considered the loss of democracy to be the worst aspect instead of impossibility to travel.

The students saw at the beginning only partially the danger of the non-democratic tendency which is hard to recognize at first sight. After reading, presentations and writing, the students tend to see the existence of the non-democratic systems and understand the tragic consequences resulting from support in every period and every society.

Learning history through literature motivated students. The students did become interested in this period of history leading them to participate in other activities. They prepared for other colleagues e.g. a quiz and crossword and searched for other information used during their discussions.

The students identified themselves with one of the characters. The most chosen and likeable characters were as following:

- Narrator’s character (Eugen Ruge, the author as Alexander) in the book *In Times of Fading Light* was favoured 19 times; the character of his father (the most hard-working historian in the GDR) was preferred 5 times; his mother, following her husband from Russia was chosen 3 times; his son Alexander living in West Germany 8 times; the characters of Werner, having lost his life in Vorkuta work, was selected twice
- Characters of the *The wall* by Uwe Tellkamp were chosen in the most balanced way: Christian who voluntarily wants to join the military service before studying medicine (chosen 10x); his father Richard leading a double life (chosen 8x); Richard’s brother-in-law Meno sympathizing with dissident (4x); Richard’s wife Anna (7x); Richard’s mistress Jossa (6x)

- In case of novel *Kruso* by Lutz Seiler 25 out of 35 students chose the character of student Edgar, who is saved by a charismatic Russian called Kruso (chosen 10x)
- In Angelika Klüssendorf's memories of childhood in the GDR *The Girl*, the character of the girl was chosen 33x whereas her mother was selected twice

In the role-plays and in the writing assignments, the students looked for arguments to justify the character's behaviour which they tried to comprehend. Some students criticized the selected character they identified with because they found the behaviour incomprehensible. During presentations, role-plays, games, crosswords and writing assignments, language skills were practised as well.

At the end of the semester, the students reflected on the suitability of the four novels to comprehend the historical period. The aim was to survey comparisons of students' present knowledge with their knowledge at the beginning of the semester.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that reading literary texts about East Germany can be used in an interesting way to learn about the history of 20th century. The results of the questionnaire survey at the beginning and the end of the winter term showed improvement of students' knowledge of this topic. The students started to read literature as a resource for understanding life in totalitarian regime. After reading the four books, during presentations, when preparing quizzes or other activities for students in this literature course and in their writing assignments and discussions, in which students identified themselves with a character of their own choice, the students began to be interested in history of the other countries in the Eastern Bloc that led to voluntary search for further information. During the language based activities realized either in lessons or at home, students' language skills were practised as the students voiced their experience and opinions in the target foreign language.

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