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TEACHING HISTORY THROUGH GERMAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The text presents the results of the research in which university students – majoring in teaching German as the foreign language – expressed their viewpoint and experience about help of contemporary German literature to understand history. The research was carried out in the winter term 2016 on the basis of the following books: Günter Grass *Im Krebsgang* (2002); Uwe Timm *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003); Uwe Tellkamp *Der Turm* (2008); Jenny Erpenbeck *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015). The students were offered an opportunity to deduce historical analyses through literary text of the second language literature which can provide an emotional experience and interest which leads to a) consequent (voluntary) search for further information about the period of history; b) willingness to produce creatively. The objective of my research study is firstly to give the skills to read literature as a resource for understanding historical change about how other people experience emotional issues; secondly to give the students an outline of the change in 20st century; thirdly to teach the other language skills (writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar). Very important for me is to show students that people make history and that their lives and life choices shape history.

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1. Introduction

Teaching history and teaching literature are not two completely separate academic subjects. Teaching history does not mean memorizing names and dates, teaching literature does not mean memorizing authors and their works. Currently, students of German language and literature as the foreign language are offered an opportunity to deduce historical analyses through literary text of the second language literature which can provide an emotional experience. Present didactics of foreign languages is based on communicative and intercultural method requiring a teacher to be nearly on the level of a native speaker who is able to present and mediate student's negotiations in a foreign language, culture, values as well as history of a foreign nation (Heins, 2017; Rampillon, 2000; Krumm, 2010; Widdowson, 1984; Parkinson & Thomas, 2000). Communicative method makes use of reading literature not only to get to know the foreign culture, history, traditions, values of the foreign nation but encourages enhancing of communicative competences in that language too (Hall, 2005, pp. 47-57). The teacher unites students, a literary text and a historical event negotiated. The teacher must be a respected authority, an erudite source of knowledge. Yet, the teacher needs to be empathetic to be able to support students in case of different opinions in discussions that consequently encourages their confidence. If a student makes a mistake, according to Ondrakova, teachers have to be able to explain to learners where and why the errors are made and how to avoid these errors. (Ondrakova, 2016, p. 107).

It is important for a teacher to acquire methods based on students' own work. These techniques emphasise students' own thinking and problem solving which in case of presenting information about historical events consequently wakes up interest of a student in a particular period. Students are encouraged to carry out their own research in secondary language literature about the problem. Besides developing their thinking, also their flexibility, independence and creativity evolve. Students are lead, to express themselves to various issues, which emerge from a text or a following discussion. According to Ute Rampillon, pupils create their knowledge by discovering, comparing, connecting, communicating, trying evaluating, refusing and confirming instead of only accepting and consuming in a passive way (Rampillon, 2000, p. 122). The education process becomes the third space, where surprisingly new views and opinions are presented, while this place is the place of intersubjective interpretation (Bracker, 2015, p. 70). Students gain competences which might help them communicate and deal in real life situations (Krumm, 2010, p. 1530).

The example of four books of German prose published after 2000 - Günter Grass *Im Krebsgang* (2002); Uwe Timm *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003); Uwe Tellkamp *Der Turm* (2008); Jenny Erpenbeck *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) – devoted to important historical events confirms that teaching history through literary story wakes up emotions and interest which leads to consequent (voluntary) search for further information about the period of history; b) willingness to produce creatively. Besides developing students' thinking, also their flexibility, independence and creativity evolve; language competences improve and language areas are strengthened during presentations, discussions, working on writings and other activities.

2. Problem Statement

The text presents the results of the research in which university students expressed their viewpoint and experience with help of German literature to understand history.

Why teaching history through literature? History deals with studying processes of the past, examining reasons and consequence of individual events. History is a sequence of events which must be remembered, which in most cases means learning by heart. If we draw history closer thanks to a stirring story, emotions open the mind. The most effective way to teach history is to tell a story. Literature tells us about the historical events, the different cultures and about the experiences of people. When we read primary sources, we experience life in different places and ages.

Teaching history through literature offers the following educational benefits:

- Individual characters show their daily life with the historical background
- Students learn naturally about history and culture of a foreign nation in a period given
- Interest in the given period strengthens motivation for following research in a foreign language to learn about less known context of a particular event
- Improves critical thinking skills, creativity of students and stimulates their imagination
- Supports the ability to reason and to present their own (sometimes different) opinions
- Students can go beyond what is written and dive into what is meant
- Develops basic language skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking. Learning a language is not a mere process of learning the correct grammar, structures and vocabulary, but it is also a process of learning the correct pronunciation, stress and intonation (Besedova, 2016, p. 660)
- Evokes feelings and thoughts in heart and in mind - helps students to identify the emotions of the characters so that they can learn how others cope with situations and problems similar to their own experiences (Hismanoglu, 2005, p. 64)
- Motivates students to become a lifelong reader

Above mentioned arguments justify teaching history through literature. According to Lee W. Formwalt, there are seven rules for effective history teaching among which are enthusiasm, less reliance on textbooks, usage of well-written secondary sources etc. (2002, pp. 1-2). Even though war topic is recommended to avoid (Formwalt 2002), and more topical issues such as gender are suggested, my contribution covers other aspects of war adapted by German prose after 2000 which were enabled by the change of socio-political climate.

2.1. The topic in German prose after 2000

The topic of history together with the topic of language and the topic of privacy are the most common in German prose after 2000 (Heinrichova, 2015, p. 99). These three main themes become intertwined and appear across all generations, including authors of non-German origin, who enrich them by their understanding from the outside (Heinrichova, 2015, p. 77). The topic of Holocaust, Nazism, and

World War II have been running like a common thread through German literature. How these incomprehensible proceedings are to be put in words is the question that has posed German literature since 1945 till today. The necessity of the Teaching Holocaust leads from understanding and knowledge to prevention (Misco, 2009, p. 15). Literature reflects the gradual process of removing the taboos from these events in the two German different political systems until German reunification (e. g. Kubica 2015, Urvalek 2015). An ever growing, effort to deal with the past is typical for German literature after reunification. The time interval and the different socio-political situation allow a new perspective to examine the past. The authors have the common tendency to address the following issues: one's own painful family past, active collaboration with the Nazi Regime in the Third Reich, and the image of the civil Germans as victims, a long-taboo subject. 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. In the latest literature we come across current issues, which we also focused on in our research, such as the growing number of refugees in Germany.

2.2. From literature to history and back

According to Collie and Slater (1990, p. 3), literature makes a valuable authentic material. From a linguistic point of view students meet different language forms which are primarily intended for native speakers. Collie and Slater introduce three other advantages of using literature in lessons which might be applied for the needs of our research. These are cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Thanks to its authenticity, literature captures and reflects real historical events in the example of particular characters who the students can identify with. Students perceive that literary characters experience the similar feelings and problems in different periods despite the fact of facing extremely psychically demanding conditions. Through literary text students meet historical events and understand how these events formed the life of individuals.

3. Research Questions

Based on the findings presented in literature of both domestic and foreign provenance combined with twenty years of the author's own pedagogical experience, the following questions are to be answered:

- What historical events are presented, what lessons can be drawn from them?
- Why are these topics still relevant?

The research focused on searching the answers to the above questions and simultaneously tried to come to the conclusion whether to support or refute the following hypotheses:

- H1: Students tend to identify especially the period of the Second World War with the topic of German history
- H2: Teaching History through literary story wakes up emotions and interest which leads to:
 - Consequent (voluntary) search for further information about the period of history
 - Willingness to produce creatively

4. Purpose of the Study

Literature is a resource for understanding historical change. I want students to see that people make history and that their lives and life choices shape history. Firstly, the objective is to give the skills to read literature as a way how to understand a historical change and also learn about how other people experience emotional issues; secondly, to give the students an outline of the change in 20th century; thirdly, to teach reading and writing. Last but not least, my aim was to compare knowledge of history of students of pedagogical faculty majoring in teaching German as the second foreign language at the beginning and at the end of the second term (semester) 2016.

5. Research Methods

The literary seminar devoted to Interpretation of German literature of the 21st century in winter semester 2016 was attended by 16 students (12 female and 4 male students) majoring in teaching German as a foreign language. At the beginning of the seminar I realized a questionnaire survey to carry out quantitative analysis followed by the answers evaluation.

Communication methods for assessing Snowball activity, A minute paper, Mind map, Concept map were used at the beginning of the seminar to gain the prior knowledge of the students. The students were asked questions such as: *What is history? Which historical events of the 20th and 21st century do you find important and why?*

Based on these findings, following criteria to choose particular literary texts were taken into consideration:

- Is it an interesting story?
- Does the book tackle timeless or topical issues and questions?
- Can the students look up information regarding the event in other sources?
- Does the story provide strong enough “emotional sustenance”?

Fulfilling these criteria determined subsequent choice of the four books which the students finally read. Each student read all four books. Presentation of each book was prepared by a group of four students for the other attendants of the seminar. The chosen books reflect important historical events including the recent past which appear in novels published after the year 2000:

- Breaking taboo of historical events which were not pictured for decades and reflection of their other aspects: Günter Grass *Im Krebsgang* (2002) / *Crabwalk* (2003)
- Portraying intentionally forgotten painful events of one’s own family after the members of previous generations pass away: Uwe Timm *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) / *In My Brother's Shadow: A Life and Death in the SS* (2005)
- Topics from recent past:
 - Life in the GDR before Berlin wall fall: Uwe Tellkamp *Der Turm* (2008) / *The Tower* (disambiguation)
 - Refugees in Germany: Jenny Erpenbeck *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) / *Go, went, gone* (disambiguation)

The winter semester lasts 13 weeks. Every three weeks one book was presented. The presentation was followed by discussion to compare and clarify different opinions and a homework task was set to elaborate a piece of writing (400 words long) in which the students were asked to identify themselves with one of the characters, to detect their attitudes, reactions, decisions.

The seminar was completed by students writing an essay (500 words long) built upon new knowledge about German history gained by reading German prose published after year 2000. In this final essay the students could use also other further information acquired by their own voluntary research regarding the events.

At the end of the seminar the students answered:

- To which extent they got involved comparing fiction with non-fiction works
- How they evaluate suitability of the novel to comprehend certain historical period according to the following topics list:
 - Reflection of the totalitarian regime
 - Expulsion of Germans at the end of the Second World War
 - Growth of right-wing extremism in today's Germany
 - Image of Germany before reunification
 - Timelessness or topicality of the theme

The aim of the survey was to compare their present knowledge with their knowledge at the beginning of the semester.

Course content – summary

The stories give a feeling for an historical period. They are organized in chronological order.

1. In the book *Im Krebsgang* (2002), Günter Grass, the winner of the 1999 Nobel Prize in Literature, breaks the taboo of the events from 30 January 1945 when the refugee ship Wilhelm Gustloff, full of Germans, was sunk with saving only 1,239 out of 10,582 passengers (Dönhoff & Berg, 2009, p. 287). The narrator doesn't forget to mention that besides German refugees from east Prussia, mainly women and children, the ship had a military escort. Even though it is one of the deadliest maritime disasters, it was not covered by literature for a very long time. Because of war horrors caused by Germany, from the end of the 2nd world war it used to be an unwritten rule (except for the right-oriented) not to draw attention to suffering of Germans. Textbooks of the former eastern bloc made this topic a taboo as the ship was sunk by Russian submarine. Apart from historical facts and people connected with construction and the fate of the ship WG, Grass points at the growth of right-wing nationalist tendencies in contemporary Germany resulting from the "unsolved" past. Grass is of the opinion that there has not been put enough attention to the question of the expulsion of Germans from east Europe. In the story, a deportee of the first generation moves her trauma to her grandson, a member of the 3rd generation, who is manipulated by her and finally kills another boy.
2. Uwe Timm's novel *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) represents the second generation of authors (offspring of those who survived the 2WW) and becomes a typical example of a

situation experienced by many German families: absent and, yet omnipresent family members who are not talked about since “the dead ones deserve their peace” (Timm 2010, p. 7). After his relatives have passed away, Timm reveals his brother’s story who of his own free will joined SS-Totenkopf units at the end of the 2WW. The plausibility and authenticity of the novel come from italicised annotations of his brother’s diary (technically, an illegal document) which is surprisingly returned to the family as part of the hero’s leftover belongings. *In my brother’s shadow* opens the question of responsibility of ordinary people living under a terror regime and not wanting to know what really happens. He accuses his parents’ generation negligence of truth which is cowardice that has become commonplace.

3. Uwe Tellkamp’s novel *Der Turm* (2008, film 2012) is set in the last seven years of the existence of German Democratic Republic (10 November 1982 – 9 November 1989), from the death of Brezhnev to Berlin wall fall, and follows the fates of a Dresden cultivated, middle-class family. A successful surgeon Richard Hoffman, leading a double life and wanting to become a director of a clinic, is blackmailed by Stasi. His free-minded brother-in-law Meno also faces a breaking point. He works as an editor in a publishing house and falls in love with a writer from the Opposition. Another character, Hoffman’s son Christian, needs to make a choice whether to “voluntarily” join the East German Army in order to achieve acceptance at university of his dreams. The novel masterfully reveals the great number of perspectives of the time and criticizes both the members of the “nomenklatura” as well as ordinary people battling for individuality, retreating to nostalgia, choosing to conform, or finally toeing the very dangerous line between East and West.
4. Jenny Erpenbeck deals in the novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) with current events in Germany. Her novel tells the tale of Richard, a retired widowed professor, who meets a group of young Africans waiting in Berlin as asylum seekers. The author herself spent a year talking to refugees, accompanied when dealing with office workers, helped them to get the proper documents. In the same way Richard becomes embroiled in their harrowing fates, assists them and experiences a humiliating bullying of German offices. He accommodates some of them in his flat; he realizes a dream of another one by showing how to play the piano. Talking to refugees, Richard learns who one becomes when losing everything that matters (family, work, home) as well as who he himself has become and what his pains are. |

6. Findings

|Research Question 1: What historical events are presented, what lessons can be drawn from them?

What came out was a very interesting finding that 11 out of 16 students regard the Second World War as the only turning point of the 20th century in the history of Germany. The First World War was not mentioned by any of the students. Two of them stated, besides the Second World War, the year 1968 (The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia), two others the year 1990 (the German reunification), while splitting Germany and erecting the Berlin Wall (1961) were not mentioned at all. Students believe in importance of studying history in order not to repeat the horrors of the past. Nevertheless, some find

the mankind incorrigible and emphasize the necessity to support democracy and are in favour of harsher punishment for law offenders.

Results of the questionnaire survey confirmed Research Question one and Hypothesis one too (Students tend to identify German history especially with the period of the Second World).

Research Question 2: Why are these topics still relevant?

Students see timelessness of the topic in danger which is hard to recognize at first sight. Nondemocratic tendencies, left- or right-leaning attitudes exist in every period and in each society. In the time of the crisis they might gain a high number of supporters who are not aware of possible tragic consequences resulting from support of such a party. The issue is still topical as conflicts still break out. The newly published fiction books with the theme of the Second World War reveal other aspects not discussed during the Cold War either in Eastern or Western Block

Hypothesis 2: Teaching history through literary story wakes up emotions and interest which leads to a) consequent (voluntary) search for further information about the period of history; b) willingness to produce creatively

History presented through stories is engaging for students, not a single negative refusal of such a method was noticed. The positive outcome is that the students decided to participate in other activities earnestly by:

- Writing a poem in which they tried to identify with emotions of one or more characters in order to understand their hardly comprehensible acting (concrete poetry, Haiku, Elfchen were produced)
- Preparing a quiz for other students
- Creating a crossword to the particular event

After presentation of every book a homework task was set – a piece of writing in which the students were to identify themselves with one of the characters and they were to explain the character's attitudes:

- In case of novella *Crabwalk* by G. Grass 14 out of 16 students chose the deportee character of Tulla, representing of the 1st generation, who moves her trauma of a refugee to her grandson Conrad (character of Conrad was chosen twice)
- Narrator's character (Uwe Timm, the author himself) in the book *In My brother's shadow* was favoured 10 times, the character of brother voluntarily joining the army was preferred 4 times and characters of their parents from whose perspective is the story told were selected twice
- Characters of *Der Turm* by Uwe Tellkamp were dealt with in the most balanced way: Christian (chosen 4x) who wants to study medicine and follow in his father's footsteps (character of father, Richard, leading a double life selected 4x), Richard's brother-in-law Meno (chosen once), Richard's wife Anne (4x), Richard's mistress Josta (3x)
- In J. Erpenbeck's novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, the character of retired professor was chosen 13 times, Ali and Karon (African refugees) were selected once

In their writings students identified themselves with a character of their own choice, they looked for arguments to justify the character's behaviour which they tried to comprehend. Even though it is often a very incomprehensible behaviour, none of the students criticised their selected character who they identified with.

During presentations, discussions, working on writings and other activities, more language skills (writing, speaking, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar) were taught. Thanks to emotional involvement teaching is "not merely about transmitting skills but about transforming students as person" (Marchenkova, 2008, 56) and it also improves students' soft skills. According to Lou, "the writing task and speaking task make them realize that individual engagement and group operation in teamwork would lead to increased self-confidence and collective sense of achievement." (Lou 2015, 1984-1985). In the final discussion, students stated how much they got involved comparing fiction with non-fiction works. I personally find very important the fact that besides emotional experience they emphasize the necessity to use non-fiction literature to comprehend the particular historical period properly. According to the criteria set at the beginning of the seminar, students were able to mark the novels as (un)suitable or (not) reflecting historical aspects concerning the topic of expulsion of Germans, image of totalitarian regimes or Germany before reunification. They also managed to express their views regarding the topicality or timelessness of the novels.

After reading and presenting the stated books and following writing and oral activities realized in the lessons and at home, we can conclude that the abovementioned hypotheses were fully confirmed.

7. Conclusion

Students of pedagogical faculty in Hradec Kralove majoring in teaching German as a foreign language were offered an opportunity to deduce historical analyses through literary text of the second language literature which can provide an emotional experience. According to present didactics of foreign languages, which is based on communicative and intercultural method and which makes use of reading literature not only to get to know the foreign culture, history, traditions, values of the foreign nation but encourages enhancing of communicative competences in that language too, the students were encouraged to carry out their own research in secondary language literature about the problem.

The example of four books of German prose published after 2000 – Günter Grass *Im Krebsgang* (2002); Uwe Timm *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003); Uwe Tellkamp *Der Turm* (2008); Jenny Erpenbeck *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) – devoted to important historical events confirms that teaching history through literary story wakes up emotions and interest which leads to a) consequent (voluntary) search for further information about the period of history; b) willingness to produce creatively. Besides developing students' thinking, also their flexibility, independence and creativity evolve; language competences (reading, speaking and writing skills) improve and language areas (i.e. pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar) are strengthened during presentations, discussions, working on writings and other activities. In their writings students identified themselves with a character of their own choice, they looked for arguments to justify the character's behaviour which they tried to comprehend. When reading and presenting the stated books and following writing and oral activities realized in the seminar lessons and at home, we can conclude that the abovementioned hypotheses were fully confirmed.

The presented research did not definitely cover all the possibilities offered by the topic. Teachers have many other ways how to teach history through literature as a part of curriculum for would be teachers of German as a foreign language via communicative and inter-curricular method that grows into interdisciplinary method. Possible examples might be: interview (explaining attitudes of literary characters; description of period photographs, report comparing a place before and after the event (war); book review of the read book for the public; letter of a literary character to their descendants; for-and-against essay dealing with hypothetical past (what if Hitler defeated Britain); writing lines and performing scenes of the story etc. |

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