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**SHORT STORIES BY WOLFGANG BORCHERT IN FLT**

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***Abstract***

The article approaches the potential of short stories by Wolfgang Borchert in FLT at students majoring German at the Faculty of Education in Hradec Kralove (the Czech Republic) because it is important for them as future teachers to understand the post-war situation in Germany so that they shall be able to explain both the historical-social changes and the development in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to their own pupils. The students' knowledge and their interest in post-war Germany situation, in Wolfgang Borchert as a typical author of rubble literature and in the short stories as a literary genre were shown and compared through a questionnaire survey at the beginning and at the end of the literary elective seminar in the winter term 2018. This text presents in practical examples the possibilities how foreign language lessons can be enriched with a literary text about the post-war situation. Emphasized are the timelessness and the timeliness of the topic, the practice of existing foreign language skills during seminars activities, highlighted is the growth of students' interest in the topic, the practice of existing foreign language skills during seminars activities, as well as the tendency of students to compare their present situation with the everyday life of the post-war period.]

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## 1. Introduction

Literature, language and history have a lot in common. Teaching history through literary text helps students of German language and literature to deduce historical analyses that can train their existing language skills (Paran, 2008). Current didactics of foreign language (FL) is based on communicative and intercultural method (Bracker, 2015; Dembeck & Parr, 2017; Göbel & Busse, 2017; Hall, 2005) which helps to require a balanced proportion of all language skills. Students can create their knowledge by communicating, comparing, discovering and confirming instead of only consuming in a passive way (Rampillon, 2000). Last but not least, according to Besedova, learning of FL is also the process of learning the correct pronunciation, intonation and stress (Besedova, 2016, p. 660), what can be trained during students' speaking activities.

Lately, the main / first FL in the Czech Republic has been English with German or Russian or Spanish being the second most important FL. According to Ondrakova (2016), the students' level of knowledge and skills in German language has decreased in recent years (, p. 984). The students majoring in teaching German as FL often study English as their first FL. According to Tauchmanova (2017), these students are not fully aware of potentials of the positive transfer from English to German and advantage of using and applying these already built language competences. As a result of the decreasing level of German language skills, the curricula changed and literature lessons were reduced. At the Department of German Language and Literature at University Hradec Kralove students have only one compulsory literary lecture in each semester. In addition, there are a lot of elective seminars, including literary ones. The advantage of these elective seminars is that only the students interested in the subject sign for these seminars. The elective seminars opened to all students majoring in teaching German as FL are often attended by students with different literary and historical backgrounds. Therefore, it is important to offer a theme that is enriching and accessible to all. Short story is an ideal form that can be offered in this elective seminar.

Short story is a typical little epic form suiting well to FLT. The plot of a short story is clear and linear in structure with no detailed descriptions of time, space or characters. Yet, in a short story you will find many symbols that have a deeper meaning. Short stories typical characteristics are as following: no introduction, a reader gets directly engaged in the action, a literary character is shown in a situation typical for the life of ordinary people looking banal from the outside, yet, crucial for the character. The characters do not develop and there is open ending which stimulates the reader to think over possible solutions and deduce possible endings.

Short story was the narrative form of the young generation in the early post-war period. The year 1945 is often called the birth of German short story, whose role model can be found in American short story (Durzak, 1980).

Wolfgang Borchert (1921-1947) was one of the first authors of German prose to draw attention to the situation in Germany after the Second World War. The recurring themes of his works are war experiences, the problem of returnees and the life in post-war Germany. With his work Borchert was the spokesman of his marked-by-war generation and his texts are examples of post-war literature and are anchored as school readings in the curricula of many German federal states. Borchert's characters are the 'next door little people' suffering away from the public eye and therefore appearing credible for common readers. Add to this the credibility of Borchert's short life, the veracity of his works, his pacifist attitude,

and the subdued pathos, and obviously the stories are convincing to the students (Große, 1995). His works are very significant in both literary and socio-historical way and therefore well suited for the FLT. Borchert's short stories provide 'emotional sustenance' and help the teacher to train and develop the existing language skill as well as increase historical and cultural awareness by students majoring in teaching German as FL (Lazar, 2015).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Borchert's work belongs to the rubble literature ('Trümmerliteratur'), which was the attempt to show the post-war situation to his contemporaries. His short stories are very impressive by reflecting real historical events using the example of concrete characters. Through his stories, students understand how historical events shaped people's lives in the given historical epoch. The students can compare their own life situation and conditions with the post-war situation of the people.

The three Borchert's short stories (*The Kitchen Clock*, *The Bread*, *The Rats do sleep at Night*) chosen for this elective course are suitable for FLT as they meet the requirements of the historical and psychological context - the story shows the situation and the feelings of everyday people in post-war Germany who are affected by the war and the students can identify themselves with one of the characters. When doing so, students naturally train their language skills.

## **3. Research Questions**

Bearing in mind the fact that the contemporary society needs FL teachers who are able not only to teach a foreign language but also to present to students the literature, values and also culture or history of a foreign nation in FL as well as the fact that it is important for the students (majoring German at the Faculty of Education) to understand the post-war situation in Germany in order to understand German literary history and life since 1945 (Heinrichova, 2017), the short stories by Borchert are ideal to use.

There are two essential research questions to be answered in this paper. "Do students have knowledge of the post-war history in Germany?" The second basic question to be answered is closely connected with the first one. "Does teaching history through short stories by Borchert stimulate students' interest in post-war history and lead to voluntary search for further information?"

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The objective of this study is to train the skills to read the short stories by Wolfgang Borchert as the way to understand life in post-war Germany as an important part of history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A questionnaire is used to compare the students' knowledge at the beginning and at the end of the seminar with the regard to a) the post-war situation; b) Wolfgang Borchert and c) the short story form. In addition, the students also practise their language skills during presentations, discussions and working on writing.

## 5. Research Methods

The elective literary course devoted to using short stories by Wolfgang Borchert in FLT in winter semester 2018 was attended by 16 students (14 female and 2 male students) majoring in teaching German as a FL. At the beginning and at the end of the literary seminar a questionnaire survey was realized to carry out quantitative analysis. The questionnaire was composed of three parts: an identification part, a part describing students' knowledge of the post-war situation in Germany (twelve YES/NO questions) and a part describing students' interest and relation to the topic of post-war and war situation and their knowledge of Wolfgang Borchert and short story itself (thirteen YES/NO questions). The students had to answer the 25 closed YES/NO questions at the beginning and at the end of this literary elective seminar to compare their interest in the subject and the achieved improvement of their knowledge.

In order to motivate the students, after the questionnaire survey they first tried with the help of an association game to activate their previous knowledge of the key word 'history'. After that, we used these following research tools to collect data to understand the extent of students' knowledge of Wolfgang Borchert and of the short story as a literary genre: a minute paper and a mind map. The students were also asked to give some concrete (positive and negative) examples (people, movies or books) about a war or a post-war topic.

Three short stories by Borchert were chosen for this elective literary course: *The Bread* (1946), *The Kitchen Clock* (1946/47), *The Rats do sleep at Night* (1947). The semester lasted 13 weeks. The key German post-war dramas *The Man Outside* by Wolfgang Borchert and *The Devil's General* by Carl Zuckmayer were treated in the further part of this seminar.

In the first seminar lesson the subject, the program, the objectives of the seminar were introduced and the timelessness of the topic was emphasized. The tasks for the next few hours were distributed. For the next lessons, two students were always supposed to prepare a presentation about Wolfgang Borchert's life and work, two other students presented after-the-WWII situation in Germany and the other two colleagues treated a short story as one of the literary forms. The remaining students took notes during the presentations so that they could take part in further activities that followed immediately afterwards. The aim of these activities was to revise the previous knowledge and to broaden it.

In each of the next hours a short story was worked on. The text of the short story was first cut into four parts. The students worked in a group - they read the parts and tried to find the right order of the individual parts of the text. The different solutions were compared in the discussion. The students were asked to identify themselves with one of the characters and to detect the decisions of the chosen character. During the role play, the students in one of the roles tried to explain the behaviour of the chosen character. After the role play, the students still in their group tried to think out a possible beginning and ending of the short story. Homework task was set to ask their grandparents or elderly family friends about their experiences and knowledge regarding the situation after the Second World War in Czechoslovakia. The students compared this information with other students in role plays during the next lessons. Besides this, the students discussed the meanings of key words *paradise* and *kitchen clock* (as used in the story *The Kitchen Clock*) and *bread* (as used in the story *The Bread*). They compared those meanings with the meanings they give these words in their own lives. The students thought about the lie in the last short story *The Rats do sleep at Night* (1947) and looked for more positive examples of when to help.

The students tried to write their own short story set in the post-war period. The seminar was completed by students writing an essay (400 words) about everyday life in the post-war period, about the dreams and wishes of the people, about their fears and expectations. The students could show their interest in the topic by their voluntary search for further examples of that period.

### **Course content - summary**

- *The Kitchen Clock*

A twenty-year-old man with a posture of a very old person comes to a bench occupied by other people. Holding a kitchen clock in his hands, he joins them and recounts his story. His parents died and his home was destroyed in a bomb attack. All he is left is a broken kitchen clock that he shows to the others. He explains the fact that the clock stopped at half past two in the blast of the explosion. The time reminds the young man of his return home at night when his mother would regularly get up on his arrival, made dinner for him and waited in the kitchen while he was eating. What he took for granted at that time, he only retrospectively recognizes as paradise since this common everyday routine made his life and home a safe place. After sharing the tragedy with the bench listeners, he falls quiet and his companions keep thinking about the meaning of the word 'paradise'.

- *The Bread*

A woman wakes up at night by noise in the kitchen and realizes that her husband is not lying next to her in bed. She finds him in the kitchen, where crumbs tell that he has cut a piece of bread. However, the man does not admit this claiming that he only wanted to see to it because of some noise. As she does not want to embarrass him, the woman tries to hide the fact that she sees through his lie. They continue an embarrassing conversation ending with a resolution that the gutter must have caused the noise. Then they go back to bed. Falling asleep, she hears him chewing secretly. The next evening, out of pity and on the pretext that she cannot tolerate the bread, the woman places her slice of bread on her husband's plate. Both initially avoid eye contact, but after a while the woman joins her husband at the table.

- *The Rats do sleep at Night*

Nine-year-old Jackson [Jürgen] sits in the ruins of a city destroyed by a bombing raid and guards the buried body of his four-year-old brother as he believes that it would otherwise be eaten by rats. An elderly man talks to him and realizes what the boy is watching over. With the rabbit food in his basket, he tries to arise the curiosity of the suspicious boy, but an invitation to look at his rabbit is rejected by the boy, since he could not give up the guard.

Only when the man turns to go, the boy named Jackson begins to tell. He tells of the bombing in his house and the little brother buried under the debris. His teacher had taught him that the dead were eaten by rats, which is why he keeps guarding the brother by day and night. The man then claims that rats sleep at night. Jackson could therefore suspend his watch after sunset and go home without worries. It is only on these words that Jackson allows himself to express being tired. The old man goes away with the promise to pick up the boy after dark, give him a rabbit and accompany him home to his parents.

## 6. Findings

At the beginning and at the end of the winter term 2018 a questionnaire survey was realized in an elective literary seminar to compare students' interest, relation and improvement of their knowledge of post-war situation, to present Wolfgang Borchert as a typical author of the rubble literature and the short story as the literary genre. Table 01 shows students' knowledge improvement of post war situation in Germany at the end of our elective literary course.

**Table 01.** Students' improvement of knowledge of post-war Germany

Questions	Right answer	Students' right answers at the beginning of the literary seminar (16 attendees of the seminar in total)	Students' right answers at the end of the literary seminar (16 attendees of the seminar in total)
<i>Did the World War II begin in 1933?</i>	No	13	15
<i>Did the WWII end in 1945?</i>	Yes	16	16
<i>Was Germany divided into four zones in 1945?</i>	Yes	12	16
<i>Was the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) created and formed in the two Allied zones?</i>	No (in the 3 zones)	10	16
<i>Was the German Democratic Republic (GDR) established in the Soviet zone?</i>	YES	15	16
<i>Did the construction of the Berlin Wall start in 1945?</i>	No (in 1961)	9	14
<i>Were both German states (the GDR and West Germany) founded in 1945?</i>	No (in 1949)	11	16
<i>Was Russian a compulsory foreign school language in the GDR?</i>	YES	14	16
<i>Was Russian one of the official languages in the GDR?</i>	NO	8	16
<i>Was English one of the official languages in West Germany?</i>	NO	12	16
<i>Did the German magazine "Der Ruf" appear in the Soviet zone?</i>	No	8	14
<i>Did the airlift keep going in Ost Berlin during the Soviet Blockade in?</i>	NO (in West Berlin)	7	13

Table 02 compares students' interest in this topic at the beginning and at the end of our elective literary course. This table also shows students' knowledge improvement of short story as a literary genre and of Wolfgang Borchert

**Table 02.** Students' interest in topic and their improvement of knowledge of short story and Wolfgang Borchert's life

Questions	(Right) answer	Students' (right) answers at the beginning of the literary seminar (16 attendees of the seminar in total)	Students' (right) answers at the end of the literary seminar (16 attendees of the seminar in total)
<i>Do you like to read books about the second world war?</i>	---	3 (YES)	4 (YES)
<i>Do you like to watch movies with the topic of war or post-war?</i>	---	4 (YES)	6 (YES)
<i>Are you interested in the history of the twentieth century?</i>	---	7 (YES)	11 (YES)

<i>Do you have an idea about everyday life in Germany after the Second World War?</i>	---	4 (YES)	16 (YES)
<i>Did Borchert receive the Nobel prize for literature?</i>	NO	2	13
<i>Was Borchert sent to the Eastern Front?</i>	YES	5	15
<i>Does Borchert thematise and breaks the taboo by showing feelings of the returning German soldiers?</i>	YES	5	16
<i>Does Borchert reflect the life of everyday people in post-war Germany?</i>	YES	4	16
<i>Did Borchert live in West Germany after the Second World War?</i>	NO (He died 1947.)	3	16
<i>Did the authors of American literature contribute to the popularity of the short story in Germany in the 1940s?</i>	YES	5	15
<i>Does the short story have an introduction?</i>	NO	8	16
<i>Does the short story end in open ending?</i>	YES	10	16
<i>Do the characters of the short story develop?</i>	NO	8	16

Research question 1: “Do students have knowledge of the post-war situation in Germany?”

After the questionnaire survey the students should have recalled five important historical events of 20th century. It is regrettable to note that spontaneous associations with the term ‘history’ did not prove that students had much knowledge. Majority of the students were unable to do so suggesting a lack of knowledge about 20<sup>th</sup> century history and a generally declining overview of the recent past. Students were further asked to remember some positive and negative examples (people, movies or books) about a war or post-war topic. The students mentioned only these following negative examples: Hitler, Heydrich, Stalin, Stalingrad, the Lebensborn program, Nazi concentration camps, persecution of Jews, Shoah, February 1948 in Czechoslovakia as a result of World War II (end of democracy, life in the Eastern bloc); and these following positive examples: Julius Fucik (a Czechoslovak journalist, an active member of Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and active in the anti-Nazi resistance, famous is his *The journalist's diary Notes from the Gallows*), the Red Army (only as a positive example), Marshall plan for West Germany. The students were not able to name any examples or associations of everyday life during and after WWII.

At the beginning of this elective literary course the students had minimal knowledge of the post-war history in Germany.

To answer the research question 2 “Does teaching history through short stories by Borchert stimulate students’ interest in post-war history and lead to voluntary search for further information?”, the students were also asked to produce some information about Wolfgang Borchert and short story. The name Wolfgang Borchert was known only to those students who had already completed the compulsory lecture on twentieth-century literature. Although all students must complete the compulsory Lecture Introduction to Literary Studies in the first semester, very few recalled the characteristics of short story form.

After reading, presentations, role-plays and writing, the students started to be interested in this topic. The students compared their own experience, dreams and image of future to those of post-war people. They

compared what the word 'bread' or the word 'paradise' mean for them today and saw the big differences. The most important moment for me was when the students started to be aware that nowadays not all people across Europe are so well-off.

We can say that short stories by Wolfgang Borchert have a big potential in FLT. His short stories motivated students and they searched for other information about this historical period. They discovered and found interesting following films from the last years: *Die Flucht* (2007), *Der letzte Zug* (2006), *Die Luftbrücke – Nur der Himmel ist frei* (2005), *Dresden* (2006) or information about Wilhelm Gustloff, which sunk by Soviet submarine (in January 1945) was the greatest maritime disaster in history with the largest loss of life at sea.

At the end of the semester, the students' interest, relation and knowledge were compared. We can clearly say that their knowledge improved, their interest in the subject increased, that teaching history through short stories by Wolfgang Borchert is suitable for FLT.

## 7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that short stories by Wolfgang Borchert can be used in FLT in a very interesting way to teach and to introduce the post-war history in Germany. The students started to compare their own situation to those of post-war people and they began to be interested in this part of history that led to their voluntary search for further examples and information in which the students saw the timelessness and timeliness of this topic, which is also confirmed in the questionnaire survey at the beginning and at the end of the semester. During the language activities, the students' German language skills were practiced as they voiced their opinions and experience in a FL.

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