

Literary Education in Czech Schools

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Abstract

The authors of the paper introduce the readers to the context of the literary education in Czech schools. In Czech milieu were held many polemic discussions, that are known at least since the year 1890. Into that discussions were involved big personalities of contemporary cultural life, among others Hubert Gordon Schauer, František Krejčí, Jaroslav Vlček, Otakar Hostinský, Vilém Mathesius and Jan Mukařovský. In many cases they evaluated teaching of literature as distant from the life of a young generation, too historically oriented, and pointed out its deficient connection with aesthetics of a literary work. They held against excessive memorization as contrary to the little emphasis put on reading and analysis of literary work. The authors of the paper are strongly convinced that even after more than 130 years of polemic discussions about the form of literary education and a series of reforms (which cannot even be taken into account because it is not clear where one reform ends and another begins), the real curriculum of literary education has not fundamentally changed.

Introduction

Authors of this article teach at the Department of Czech Studies, Faculty of Education in the University of Jan Evangelista Purkyně in Ústí nad Labem. Both focus professionally on the methodology of teaching literature, and both were members of the working group for the curriculum revision in the field of literary education until July 2019, when the activity of this group was temporarily suspended. The authors devote the article to 130 years of polemical discussions on the form of literary education in the Czech education system. The authors regard the continuity of these discussions, as well as a clear reference for the future reform of the literary curriculum of Czech primary, secondary and higher education.

Polemical discussions related to the form of literary education/teaching literature have been observed since the 1890s¹. Over 130 years, their topic has not changed in its core; the only alternations are individual actors and discussion platforms. The core of these discussions is a critique of the excess of literary history in the literary curriculum, i.e. the conceptual contradiction between the declared literary curriculum and the more or less really taught literary curriculum in which literary history overwhelmingly prevails. We believe that resonant discussions are derived from these discrepancies which usually have the same agenda. Either 1/ discussions concerning the division or non-division of the educational subject Czech language and literature into two separate subjects or 2/ discussions promoting the integration of the three components such as language and a literary component of the subject taught in primary school (where grammar teaching predominates) and secondary school (where the teaching of literature in close connection with preparation for the Matura exam).

Controversial discussions continue until today during the preparation of the so-called 2030+ strategy, and also in discussions about the planned reduction of the literary curriculum by up to half.

Recollection of the polemics since 1890

In 1890 the journal *Secondary school (Střední škola)* published the article *Literature and Literary History (Literatura a literární dějepis)* by Hubert Gordon Schauer (1862–1892)². The author named phenomena which were later referred to in disputations of other authors as diseases of school literature / literary education. Schauer stated that liter-

¹ Although we studied the material after 1890, we realize that reflections on teaching literature can be reliably documented also in earlier publications, e.g. *Slovesnost* (1820). In this book, Josef Jungmann did not argue with the teaching of literature but assigned the reading and analysis of texts a more important role than to the teaching of literary history.

² Among other things, Schauer was the author of the famous article *Our Two Questions (Naše dvě otázky)* from 1886 and the author of public letters to T. G. Masaryk.

ary education did not fit the needs or reality of the young generation because it was overwhelmed with literary history: „dry enumeration of names, categorization, and recategorization” (Schauer, 1890, pp. 385–387). He emphasized that the purpose of literary education is not to provide a wealth of data, but above all to teach thinking.

A lot of important personalities of contemporary cultural life at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century evaluated teaching of literature as distant from the life of a young generation, too historically oriented, and pointed out its deficient connection with aesthetics of a literary work. They held against excessive memorization as contrary to the little emphasis put on reading and analysis of literary work. Amongst them were František Krejčí (1858–1934) contemporary philologist, philosopher of aesthetics, psychologist and politician, professor at Charles University in Prague, and teacher at three different secondary schools; Jaroslav Vlček (1860–1930), literary historian, politician, and Czech professor; and Otakar Hostinský (1847–1910), professor of aesthetics at Charles-Ferdinand University, music and theater theorist. Other personalities who contributed significantly to the polemical discussions were, for instance, Czech philologist and co-founder of the Prague Linguistic Circle Vilém Mathesius (1882–1945), and František Götze (1894–1974) literary historian, literary and theater criticist, theater theoretist and, among other things, dramaturg of the National Theater.

Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) also repeatedly commented on conceptual considerations about the teaching of literature. As early as 1925, he criticized “literary-historical method for its own sake” (Mukařovský, 1925, p. 18) in the article in the magazine *Secondary School, Teaching the Native Language in French Schools and the Need for its Reform in Our Schools*. In another, more remarkable article, *Poetics as the Basis of Literary Education in High School*, published in the same magazine in 1943 (Mukařovský, 1943, p. 205–215), Mukařovský stated that the basis of teaching literature in high school should be not literary history, but the poetics of literary work. He also described the secondary school teaching of literature as a full-fledged

education and consistently adhered to the concept of literary education. He emphasized that literary education „must not be treated as a set of knowledge, but as a means of the process of upbringing.” (Mukařovský, 1943, p. 215)

The demands for the reduction of the literary-historical curriculum were also voiced in the 1950s, when a wide range of diverse teaching materials were created, such as the *Methodology of Teaching Literature* (1949), in which V. V. Golubkov encouraged direct work with literary texts. Vítězslav Tichý, for example, called for an uncompromising reduction of the literary curriculum on the pages of the magazine Czech language and literature at the end of the 1950s:

This basic question, which will become more and more urgent, requires a completely uncompromising solution. First of all: It is an undeniable fact that the quantity of fact-oriented subject matter must also be restricted in literary education.... It is not possible for curricula, textbooks and reading books to be overwhelming for the students – as in the past – with names, titles or small meaningless examples. (Tichý, 1958–1959, p. 13–14)

The authors of literary education concepts in the 1960s also paid attention to the pupils’ reading interpretive activity³. This is proved especially by Šlajer’s (1968–1969) model of literary education directed especially to the secondary schools. According to this concept, the artistic and aesthetic component of literary education is „subordinated to the scientific and intellectual component, which has a secondary meaning of the means, even though it is an important factor which cannot be underestimated and neglected” (p. 351). The effort to introduce the artistic construction of a literary work and teach the students to orient themselves in its plans, components and their relations is evidenced by Šlajer’s method of orientational structural operations, which teach students to divert attention from the structure of the work in order to focus on other components and specifically to work with them. Another significant aspect of the method was letting students

³ The importance of these concepts was reminded by the authors of some didactic works created after 1989, e.g. Lederbuchová.

discover relations between the individual components and the whole context of the work.

Discussions around literary education (on the hegemony of literary history, overwhelmed by literary-historical facts, on reading education, putting the emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of literary work and the nature of literary education in general) and the linguistic education were repeatedly stimulated by reflections on the division of two dominant components of Czech language and literature into two separate subjects: Czech language and (Czech) literature. At the end of the 1960s, these discussions took place mainly on the pages of the magazine *Český jazyk a literatura*; in the 1990s, similar discussions revived (cf. D. Franta, in Čechová, Spěváčková, 2019, p. 120–123).

In 1970s and 1980s, many significant figures entered the discussion, e.g. Jaroslav Machytko, Jaromír Plch, Svatopluk Cenek, Otokar Chaloupka, and Dagmar Dorovská with her didactics textbook. For several decades, Slovak literary scholar and didacticist Marta Gerušková (among others the author of the monograph *Literary Text in Didactic Communication*) has been criticizing the disproportion between the literary-historical facts, and aesthetic or impressionable concepts of teaching literature (Gerušková, 2003, p. 8). She has suggested that it is necessary to liquidate this disproportion in order to achieve a higher quality of school literary education. Ladislava Lederbuchová has long been developing the concept of didactic interpretation of a literary work at school. In the *Outline of Didactics of Literature* (2004), Vladimír Nezkusil refers to the reader's approach, and Jiří Kostečka on the pages of the *Czech language and literature* speaks about an overwhelming factual, as well as historiographical conception of teaching in the literary education. (Kostečka, 2011–2012, p. 137)

Also in the 1990s, a proposal reappeared to retain the *Czech language, composition and communication* as an autonomous subject in the curriculum and to set aside literary education, and thus to reduce significantly its anticipated curriculum. It would be assigned to other aesthetic educational subjects (art education and music education),

and would thus form one subject integrating all three above-mentioned in Aesthetic education, i.e. literary, art and music education.

The curriculum of literary education in the 21st century

Jaroslav Vala (the author of the monograph *Poetry, Students and Teachers* (2013) with the subtitle *Reception, Interpretation, Teaching*) came to interesting conclusions. Vala with the members of his research team conducted a longitudinal intervention study in experimental classes and recorded students' views on poetry after the study. In addition to expressing their own views on the perception of poetry, students also spontaneously commented on how they were taught in literary education. Some students confided that only after experiencing direct work with poetry (with the staff of the team led by Jaroslav Vala) they were able to search for the meaning of the text, while previously they were led to memorize the meaning of the poem. For example, they said that poetry was previously a necessary evil for them, which they were just trying to endure. At the end of her monograph, referring to the pupils' statements, Vala writes that „this was the first real encounter with poetry for some students in the experimental classes.” (Vala, 2013, p. 250) Such conclusions show that the call for direct work with the text is even after 130 years of polemical discussions (and 200 years after the publication of Jungmann's Verbalism) only an unfulfilled ideal and remains unheard in school practice.

There have been only a few surveys in the last decade providing us with some clear data on the current form of literary education in secondary schools. Nevertheless, these are works that have provided valuable evidence of 21st century literary education. A survey by Věra Radváková from 2012 (Faculty of Education, UWB in Pilsen) conducted in sixteen grammar schools through 1,478 questionnaires filled in by students showed that “very little attention is paid to direct work with the text in school education. The text has not yet become the basis of literary education at the grammar school. Teachers seem to be

afraid to base entire literary lessons on the interpretation of texts; they do not even use the artistic text regularly in literary classes.”⁴

Ondřej Hník’s survey conducted in 2009–2012 (now PedF UJEP in Ústí nad Labem, then PedF UK) on about 550 free statements of students entering university studies from various regions of the Czech Republic, and coming from various types of secondary schools supplemented by statements of high school students about the form of teaching literature in primary and secondary schools, came to the conclusion about the secondary school literary curriculum that the real literary curriculum is predetermined by literary history. The actual analysis and interpretation of the work was transformed into an analysis or just a reminder of literary-historical contexts. If the teacher interprets the work, this is done only to a minimal extent, at least on the examined sample. The text fulfills a mere documentary function, not an aesthetic-educational function, i.e. it only documents the thesis communicated in advance by the teacher or textbook. The students spoke of a minimal degree, rather the absence of a reading experience in literature classes. The reading experience, the impression of the text was pushed out by the frontal lecturing of literary history by the teacher. Among other things, the survey again confirmed the disproportion between literary and language education in primary and secondary school (literature is insufficiently represented at the 2nd level of primary school, language is insufficiently represented at secondary school). This survey also showed that the overall approach to teaching literature has not changed even after the first ten years, during which the transformation of Czech education was already in full swing, neither the educational content nor the methods and forms of work changed significantly in the teaching practice of literary education at the 2nd level of primary or secondary school.

The potential of teaching for the development of student reading of poetic texts became the topic of the research, which was completed in 2015 and whose basic research method of data collection was the par-

⁴ Radváková, 2012, from the abstract to dissertation, no pages.

ticipatory observation of teaching with the focus on the interpretation of Czech poetry (Jindráček, 2015). The researcher participated 31 lessons, which took place in 2013 and 2014 in the seventh and ninth grades of four approved teachers at primary schools in the Ústí nad Labem and Karlovy Vary regions. During the research, a corpus of data was collected, including field notes, audio recordings of teaching and their transcription into text. The data embedded in real situational contexts of teaching made it possible to assess whether and how the educational reality is close to the concept of the curriculum designed in educational programs. Although teachers who took part in the research had different teaching practices, and the lessons took place in different types of schools (with different pupil capacities, in different locations), the lessons were similar: repeatedly (in the lessons of all participating teachers) pupils were instructed to read the text first, then the teacher asked questions to all students at once and usually expected an immediate response from them, without giving them the opportunity for detailed and multiple reading (i.e. the activities described in the FEP ZV and in the concepts of literary education, which we pointed out in previous sections of this article). Although pupils were given the floor quite often in the recorded lessons, their replicas were very short and seldom deviated from a traditional lesson structure in which the student’s brief answer to the teacher’s question received only a brief evaluation (the teacher’s comment, sometimes just a non-verbal signal).

Modern curriculum reforms in relation to the real curriculum of literary education in the 21st century

For a symbolic hundred years since Hubert Gordon Schauer first spoke about the form of literary education, the necessary curriculum reforms began to be discussed in Czechoslovakia. Although the first discussion of the curriculum after November 1989 started with the declared need for democratization and demarcation from the current socialist school, in principle the discussions focused on criticizing the

quantity of “study basics” which were still valid, abolishing them, and replacing them with so-called educational frameworks. Without exaggeration, the transformation of Czech education after 1989 can be described as a series of several successive reforms, which have always barely been completed and which have not ended to this day. Let us recall the strategic and conceptual document of the Ministry of Education Strategy of Educational Policy 2020 approved in 2014 (abbreviated to the 2020 Strategy) and the strategic and conceptual document of the Strategy of Educational Policy in the Czech Republic until 2030+, i.e. the discussed so-called 2030+ strategy which has been being prepared since 2018 and to be approved by the government in mid-2020. Both documents are available at www.msmt.cz.

The first mentioned document lists three strategic priorities, namely

- 1) reducing inequalities in education,
- 2) supporting quality teacher education and
- 3) responsible and effective management of the education system.

We believe that especially the second and third priority, their concretization and implementation into teaching of the subject Czech language and literature were not fulfilled. If teachers talk about literature without allowing students to encounter a literary text, they create a serious risk that their teaching will become just a kind of myth-making game, which, paradoxically, deals with what is not related to the literary work and what is accumulated on it as unjustified burden. Rather than stimulating thinking about literature when the reader seldom hears the distinctive voice of the text, it is recommended to work with the text directly. Such teaching creates barriers between the work and the reader, it also generalizes (and trivializes) literary work to various stereotypes and clichés. At the same time, the mentioned researches show that in school (often already at the 2nd stage of primary school) this frontally communicated literary history is introduced at an inappropriate pace. It is overwhelmed by a number of facts and forces pupils to passivity. Pupils thus mostly write down the facts, which they then have to memorize, they think much less about the meaning of the

text, etc. Pupils do not develop the personal educational strategies, and therefore it can hardly be accepted as a model from which quality teaching in the 21st century could be derived.

Regarding the priority of “responsible and effective management of the education system”, we ask ourselves whether our education system has been and still is managed responsibly and effectively, when there is no evidence of it in 130 years. During this period of time many theorists and practitioners have drawn attention to identical problematic areas over and over again, which obviously has not changed real teaching practice. If the document Guidelines for the Educational Policy of the Czech Republic 2030+ (working version) aims, among other, to “focus education more on acquiring the competencies needed for active civic, professional and personal life” (Veselý, Fischer, Jabůrková..., 2019, p. 16), which logically includes education for reading, then this direction of educational policy should more than ever wish for literary education. It should also wish for a communicative concept of teaching Czech language and literature (this concept has been compulsory since the introduction of the FEP, yet it is not fulfilled in teaching practice), as well as literary education based more on interpretation, and education for reading. Beneath the strategic objectives in this document are the so-called strategic lines, strategic line 1 is named as *Changing the content and way of education*. The 130 years of discussions that this article maps out do not point to anything other than changes in the content of literary education and changes in the way of teaching in literary education. If the conditions are created for the 2030+ strategy to be actually implemented in Czech schools, then – from our point of view, at least hypothetically – the ideal of teaching literature, which has been called for at least since the end of the previous century and which neither Czech nor Czechoslovak schools have reached yet, will be finally implemented in practice.

Summary

We are strongly convinced that even after 130 years of polemical discussions about the form of literary education and a series of re-

forms (which cannot even be taken into account because it is not clear where one reform ends and another begins), the real curriculum of literary education has not fundamentally changed. The changes can be observed rather in the level of small „cosmetic” adjustments, which do not change anything serious about the named problem. Although the formal curriculum of all subjects is defined by the framework curriculum, i.e. it is a framework, not a restrictive list of curriculum items, teachers often feel forced to teach particular information in a particular amount by traditional methods, regardless the school curricula being innovated.

After 130 years of polemical discussions about the form of teaching literary education, there is almost no documented shift of the focus in teaching practice from the dogmatism, and frontal presentation towards interpretation, and real work with texts. There is also no documented turn from literary history, almost exclusively frontally presented. The research about actual school practice describes situations in which a literary text is treated differently than as illustrative material only sporadically. This is evident not only in the second stage of primary school, but especially in secondary schools, where thinking about literature is all too often lost in traditional and repeatedly presented schematisms and phrases, the only purpose of which is (sometimes undisguised) utilitarian training for the school-leaving examination, expected on entrance exams for high school.

This enumeration of the current unhappy state of literary education is not a critique of teachers. We consider ourselves a teacher. However, the bearer of the reform cannot be an overburdened and demotivated teacher who does not enjoy the authority of either pupils or parents and who, instead of professional self-development, has to deal with immense electronic “paperwork” and administrative problems.

Nevertheless, we believe that it can significantly help teachers to break the curse of frontally presented literary history by:

- 1) the knowledge that the lesson is done by the teacher and no one else (director, deputy, head of the subject commission, inspector, parent),
- 2) the knowledge that literary education is not science. Awareness that literary education can be approached by the teacher as a real art edu-

cation, i.e. a subject at the same content level as art and music education,

- 3) the knowledge that an oversized poor quality catalog of names and facts required for the Matura exam is not a standard for a real curriculum. According to the law, this document is based on the framework educational programs and with their future change (within the 2030+ strategy) it will also have to change, according to the valid legislation.

If the proposed changes can be put into practice, the voice that has been heard in discussions of literary education 130 years ago (and perhaps even earlier) will finally be heard.

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