

THE PLEASURE OF CONVERSATION: ETHICS IN THE COMMUNICATION CLASSES OF LITERATURE

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*Why would you attempt to teach someone something unless you assumed that they did not know something?*¹

Abstract

The article deals with the following questions: Which are the essential changes offered by the so called communication classes of literature? What is the role of teachers in this system? Which is the best way for a teacher to consider the principles of dialogic reading? How to adapt his/her reading to the imaginative faculties, expectations and literary interests of a young reader? And, finally, which are the phases of a teacher's preparation for the classes of literature?

The author proceeds from the hypothesis that with communication classes, ethical principles are incorporated into teacher's simultaneous consideration of a young reader and his imaginative world, as well as into the necessity of the deepening of his literary and aesthetical experience. The latter results from a reader's role in the creation of textual world. His role is substantiated in the difference between the primary and the secondary existence of a text, which gives ground to the basic definition of communication classes – relevance of texts for readers. Therefore, the

¹ D.R. Olson, N. Torrance, 1996: *The Handbook of Education and Human Development*, Cambridge, Ma., Blackwell.

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starting-points of teacher's preparation for the literature classes are:

- *teacher's reading and pupils' reading are the setting up of a secondary existence of a literary text – neither the first nor the second can be attributed absolute validity or superiority;*
- *teacher proceeds from his/her pupils' subjective responses, finding ways in them to deepen the experience – so his/her own as children's – as well as to acquire experience for the work with future generations (the supposition of hypothetical children's reception);*
- *the sense of teacher's work is substantiated in the relation between a text, young readers and the knowledge of literary science, which is a component of the faculty of reading.*

These starting-points enable teachers to form steps in their preparations for literature classes. These are: 1. adult person's reading and his/her own understanding of a given text, 2. anticipation of hypothetical children's reception, 3. technical preparation with text analyses, 4. goal definition and 5. the choice of appropriate cognitive and teaching methods. With each of the steps, ways are given for its most adequate realization, as well as possibilities for the trivialization of literature classes.

Ethical principles are therefore also encoded in the teaching of literature, not only in its creation and expert interpretation.

Some preliminary questions

Participating in the reform of literature classes as well as following its gradual implementation in Slovenia² brings us to the following issues:

- *Which are the essential changes offered by the communication classes of literature?*
- *What is the teacher's role in such classes?*
- *How can teachers consider the principles of dialogic reading, how can they adapt their reading to the imaginative faculties, expectations and literary interests of young readers, and which are the phases of teacher's preparation for literature classes?*

² In the Republic of Slovenia, the reform started in 1992 with educational seminars for teachers, at which new, non-traditional concepts of literature classes were presented. In the later period, the reform acquired a formal framework (expert evaluations for the Ministry of Education, for ex.), followed by the adoption of the new curriculum in 1998. From that year until today, evaluation of curricular documents along with transfer of findings into means of instruction and new models of classes has been in course.

It seems that literary didactics only started dealing with these questions in the recent time; the problems of teachers' approach to a literary text, their - basic, autonomous, adequate, superior? - and undoubtedly profoundly **different** processing of fiction as compared with the same on the part of pupils, has so far not been the subject of the same attention as (for ex.) aims and methods of literature classes and pupils' role in them. No different is the status of teacher as participant in reading in contemporary discussions on literature, reading and classes. Thus the two miscellanies of the *Reading Association of Slovenia* (member of the *International Reading Association*) are almost entirely dedicated to the reading habits of pupils. Very welcome in both the publications are the explanations of the processual nature of the reading development, of reading as rendering meaning to a printed text (it takes place in foreseeable steps and is distinctly subjective), as well as explanations of the linear nature of reading along with the warning that subjective descriptions should not be generalised at any rate. Despite laying great stress upon reading strategies and processes of understanding of texts, these publications reflect the awareness that teachers are no passive observers of the spontaneous development of reading abilities. It is not their role to stand aside silently watching the intertwining of the textual and imaginative worlds of the young. Their role is in fact very important, their duty being - according to the psychologist S. Pecjak - to

introduce to pupils different strategies of text reading, and to train them for a flexible use of different strategies in different circumstances. This is not just about the explanation of reading strategies; a teacher is advised to model or rather demonstrate to pupils how to use certain reading strategies. Teachers are reading models in fact; their reading ability affects the reading abilities of their pupils, while, as an example, teacher is also an essential factor of the reading motivation. Such understanding of teacher's role - be it in reference to fiction or non-fiction - is not far from Chambers'³ descriptions of the advisory role of grown-ups, from demands for evaluation in the discussions on reading, and from the statement that readers are generated by readers. A teacher is also a reader generating new readers; therefore, the question that is most interesting for the literary didactics is **how and to what extent should a teacher "interfere" with pupil's spontaneous, subjective creating of textual worlds.**

1. Traditional and communication classes of literature

1.0 Curricular reform changed the teaching of literature in Slovenia from the traditional model of transmission instruction to the new principles, aims

³ Comp. A. Chambers, 1996: *Making Readers; Telling the Tale; Proceedings of the 25th Congress of the IBBY, Groningen.*

and working methods with text; the new model was called **communication classes** of literature by the literary didactics. The traditional and

communication classes differ in many ways, the following table showing only some differences:

TRADITIONAL CLASSES	COMMUNICATION CLASSES
<p>The choice of texts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - based on the literary science: period, important names, biography, work, characteristics of style, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - based on the imaginative world of young people, as well as elements that provide for the experience of literature or subjective creation of text;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the list in the curriculum is final; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - texts in the curriculum are just proposals;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - many authors and works, the wish to inform readers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>less is more</i>: in-depth analysis of a selected work, with attention to responses, opinions, interests of pupils and their creativity.
<p>The role of pupil:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to accept data on literature, dictated by the literary science via the curriculum. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to co-create textual world, to create dialogue with the text through games, thereby learning text elements and its different contexts.
<p>The role of teacher:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to mediate knowledge and to adapt scholarly interpretations to the school use; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to direct activities, to stimulate conversation, to point out the overlooked components of the text and to take part in the process of the creation of meaning through one's own understanding, to be a model to young readers as a reader.

1.1. With the communication classes the role of all the three elements that co-create the school interpretation of literature is changing. **Literature** is not just a complex of texts that can be

learnt about; in this type of instruction it is defined as a result of an encounter or interaction between a text and a reader: *the existence of literature depends upon the existence of its readers*. The idea

that the reader is the one that ultimately creates literary text out of printed letters (lines and circles) - that reading is therefore an encounter between a text and a reader at a certain time and in a certain place⁴ - emphasizes the major role of reader's expectations and anticipations on the one hand, and textual corrections on the other hand. Images that make fictive textual reality are reader's creations, depending upon his imaginative world resulting from his/her intertextual and non-literary experience and being a consequence of social, educational and cultural patterns. Literary text, defined as a meeting between a reader and a text, is neither just an author's vision of the world, nor an autonomous (independent of the text) literary experience on the part of the reader. If we defined literature as the latter, we could no longer discuss reading a certain work, nor compare and value these readings, or even point at a more perfect experience in the classroom. *Literature thus exists when someone is reading it* - and yet reading is also a confrontation with author's conscious tendency to establish communication with readers and to create a new, unusual, surprising representation or interpretation of the world. Of course, author's representation is just schematic and

⁴ Comp. J.A. Appleyard, 1991: *Becoming a Reader, the Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*, Cambridge University Press.

often undefined⁵, but this is the gap the reader fills with his dialogic reading. Text is therefore not a static, unchangeable, finite string of letters, but above all a very special reality, springing up in the reader's imagination. It is from the mutual relatedness of the phenomenal layer, which is usually unchangeable, permanent and given to reader, and of the quasiphenomenal layer, which is subject to development, changing and completion within the process of reading, that the literary theory derives the difference between the **primary and secondary existence of literature**.⁶ The primary existence of a literary text is related to its creation and ends with the text being finished. The secondary existence is thus a reproduction or completion of something that has existed before; it is the manner or degree of this completion that shows the **essential difference** between the *scholarly* and *school* reading of literature. If it is essential for the literary scholarship (science) and its scholarly (scientific) character to have a detailed and reliable reconstruction of the primary existence of a literary text, i.e. text in the process of artistic

⁵ Comp. R. Ingarden, 1965: *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tuebingen.

⁶ In the Slovene literary theory, the phenomenal and quasiphenomenal layers, as well as primary and secondary existence, were extensively dealt with by the reputed professor of literature Janko Kos who based his theory on the works of F. de Saussure, J. P. Sartre and R. Ingarden.

creation regarding the complex relations between the biographic, historical, linguistically-formal and other attributes, it is the secondary existence, marked by the imaginative world of 'an ordinary reader' that matters most for the everyday reading practice and classroom. The reader's reproduction of text is often discordant with the primary existence of the work; sometimes it is even self-willed.

1.2. Definitions of literature - especially with regard to literary and didactic questions - cannot be independent of **readers** and their self-will. Imaginative worlds and interests of (young) readers in the historical development and transformation of the horizon of expectations resulting from ever new reading experience and theories, are not something permanent and unchangeable. Therefore it is understandable that contemporary teaching must be different from the traditional one. The reader in traditional classes is confronted with a mass of literary data and definitions, and - which is even more disputable - with '*foreign*', as it were, interpretations of a literary text. So a reader has to deal with a vision of (objective, verifiable) primary existence of a text though this is but one of the possibilities of the secondary existence. According to this starting-point, readers are expected to more or less passively accept foreign reading and foreign text in secondary existence: a text, dictated by literary science and the related school interpretation. In the extreme form such

automatically superior and right existence of literature can bring to learning (and testing of) text contents resumes, as well as style and formal definitions, without any real connection to the reader's own reading. In such approach a pupil is permanently labelled as the one that doesn't know anything or at least one that is incapable of autonomous text interpretation. From pupils' viewpoint, literature classes are thus changed into the supply of knowledge that often achieves lexical dimensions; testing, based on such classes, often turns into a repetition of learnt interpretations and into a kind of self-censorship, i.e. pupil's conscious renouncement of creative reading and text interpretation.

Regarding readers, contemporary teaching is based on completely different starting-points. Interlocutors of young readers in school interpretation (planners of curricula, textbooks authors, teachers) should consider the following if they want to take reader's role seriously and not just as an empty principle:

- a text is only relevant for a reader if it addresses him with some element (topic, problem, hero, etc.);
- literary education, i.e. knowledge of literature, is not necessarily a sign of highly developed reading abilities;
- the basic or canonical elements of literature can be defined from very

different standpoints, which is why (above all) contemporary literature cannot be put on lists that would satisfy everyone, as such lists would be infinitely long;

- necessary selection (also of the so called basic) literary works is not a sign of ignorance but rather a sign of subjective selection and supply, completed by pupils; in contemporary classes, the teacher is not the person possessing absolute knowledge, as today this is no longer possible, considering the contemporary literary production;
- the teaching is based on pupils' subjective response to text, their specific, developmental and socially conditioned experience and understanding of text elements, whereby pupils must not be deprived of their right to make mistakes;
- a reader enters the dialogue with a text as a interlocutor, so he is free to comment upon, criticize or reject the text (its ideological and emotional elements for exp.) - if possible with an argumentation, though not necessarily;
- reader's understanding of the text is subject to development and completion during reading and through dialogue with other readers; therefore it makes no sense to absolutise pupils' spontaneous experience, as the latter deepens

with the inclusion of other abilities, mental processes and skills.

It is through a playful dialogue that a pupil **gets to know** the structure of a literary text, its social conditioning and relation to diverse, also contemporary contexts (social criticism, ideology and stereotypes, media and visually supported narrations, etc.). Communication classes do not exclude literary knowledge, nor do they understand it as a threat to spontaneous experience and child-friendly classes. The only difference lies in their understanding of the function of such knowledge: factographic knowledge is not the ultimate or basic aim of teaching; it is just one of the components that provide for a better experience of a literary text along with the development of reading abilities.

1.3. The third element of didactic interaction in class is the **teacher**. *What is his/her role in communication classes?* Even in some older, principal texts dealing with school and reading, the teacher's role was ascribed great importance in the context of recommendation that pupils' experience is the only possible starting-point for their acquisition of reading competence. The main problem of literature classes is how to help to develop pupils' perception, understanding and appreciation of literature. There are several ways to achieve this goal; however the recommendations that a teacher should especially avoid the following are the most interesting:

- authoritative critical opinions and absolute truths (teacher's or critical judgements) that make readers distrustful of their own experience and
- too extensive interpretations and analyses of text without paying attention to pupils' response and readiness for such analyses.

Despite all the warnings it should be remembered that teachers are not supposed to stand aside, admiring pupils' spontaneous responses; in fact they should be just the contrary - patient and tolerant links between pupils and a literary work. Such classes are no doubt more demanding for teachers as they request activities and responses that are often mutually contrasting, like the two principal demands for teacher's simultaneous consideration and correction of pupil's spontaneous experience of literature. Teacher's focussing of classes on pupils is therefore more demanding, but also - due to the unpredictability of young readers' responses - more interesting. Thinking about the pretentiousness of contemporary classes it should not be ignored that literary didactics labels teacher as a special kind of professional readers who do not read for their own pleasure but with the purpose of taking part in the school interpretation. As a reader, a teacher of literature is sensitive to literary texts, following pupils' responses and their literary sensitivity, knowing different methods of literary text analysis and related

interdisciplinary problems (history, psychology, etc.), as well as using new didactic approaches (problem classes) and new technical means (today also internet).⁷

2. Teacher's preparation for reading in the classes of literature

2.1 Theoretical frameworks of teacher's qualification and its relatedness to different sciences are clear: a teacher is not only an expert in his/her subject and the research dealing with the teaching of this subject, but should also be familiar with the basic pedagogical doctrines.

2.2 Every teacher has to deal with the following dilemma: *how and to what degree should s/he pay regard to the principles of dialogic reading within the framework of his classes preparation, and how to adapt his/her reading to the imaginative faculties, expectations and literary interests of young readers?* The didactics of literature tried to do away with these dilemmas by preparing a description of the steps of teacher's technical reading:

1. technical preparation (technical analysis of the text),

⁷ In Slovenia, young readers, mentors of reading and experts, gathered in the movement for the promotion of reading, called *Reading badge*, discuss books on the Internet pages of the *Reading chatterbox*.

2. setting a goal (the definition of the components pupils are expected to comprehend),
3. the choice of cognitive and teaching methods (the teacher gives priority to pupils' independent work).

Among the three steps highlighting the teacher's processing of text and the transfer of his/her understanding into class (in relation to curriculum demands), the nowadays principal question is ignored: **how does the selected text address young readers**, i.e. which elements in this text are new and exciting for them and what their spontaneous response will be like. As a reaction to the insufficient attention to the children's world, a kind of radicalization of the role of spontaneous children's reading took place in the Slovene literary didactics of the 1990s. This model of teaching stresses the significance of children's experience of literature, the teacher's role being mostly to stimulate children to fantasy playing with the text and to the deepening of their understanding of text. The teacher also calls the children's attention to the ignored text elements. The recommendations that teacher's literary-aesthetic and technical reception are not the matter of classes but class preparations, and that teacher should have no influence upon pupils during reading, clearly reflect the following view: **pupils' spontaneous experience is the starting-point and aim of school interpretation, and adult understanding of text should**

have the least possible impact upon the primary child's literary experience. The stressing of the central role of child's imaginative world in the concept of communication classes can be understood in the context of the consideration of the artistic character of (children's) literature as the basic principle of its teaching. Namely (due to the spirit of the general liberalization of the society⁸) - in the beginning of the 1990s, the contemporary Slovene literary didactics actualized the demand for **autonomy** of literary text and literary experience. Artistry as the essence of literature prevents subordination of literary text to cognitive and educational goals; therefore it is no coincidence that the didactic concepts, published in this period, are again full of warnings against moralism and overemphasizing of the cognitive layer of literature in the model of the so called integrated classes, in which imaginative textual world was understood as an imitation of non-literary reality, while the reading of fiction was mostly regarded as motivation for getting acquainted with non-artistic themes. Fantasy and playfulness of literary texts which question the **trivialization** of literature classes - the latter is sometimes still

⁸ This period was characterized by parliamentary democracy and plurality of ideological systems. The reading of literature is thus no longer an instrument of ideological education but an opportunity for artistic experience of the world.

visible in the demands for superior contents or target clusters - have brought to occasional overemphasizing of children's spontaneous experience and its expression. In such concepts literary text is also subject to goals that are not directly linked to the promotion of reading competence; these are mostly the models that doubt any possibility of posing questions or understand reading only as a motivation for creative writing. According to these theoretical and practical concepts the teacher's role in class is in fact superfluous; they could be summed up into the recommendation that *the best thing a teacher can do for spontaneous child's experience and creative expression is to do nothing at all.*

2.3 Primary spontaneous experience is of course the appropriate starting-point, though its incompleteness and arbitrariness prevent it from being the final goal of reading. In such models of classes of literature teachers, treated only as stimulators of the game in introductory motivation or as organizers of performing activities, do not participate in the development of the pupils' reading competence, which is the basic functional goal of classes. To be able to reach this principal goal, he must seriously consider the fact that primary, spontaneous experience of text is incomplete and often full of inner contradictions. Last but not least, this fact is also related to the sense of teacher's work in class: *Why would you attempt to teach someone something unless you assumed that they did not*

*know something?*⁹ Or, in different words: a pupil can read, but he can read better. That's why it is not only the »right« of the teacher, but also his responsibility to 'interfere' with spontaneous reading, developing and upgrading it in this way. Thereby s/he cannot but proceed from his/her own interpretation of the text, i.e. from the answer to the question **which are the essential characteristics of a literary work, and if and how they might be relevant to pupils.** The answer to the first part of the question lies in his/her own text analysis along with his/her literary plus broader knowledge, while the answer to the second hides in his/her familiarity with the imaginative world of the young - not as a generalised abstraction but in its concrete local and temporal dimension. Only thus can reading and school interpretation be the real pleasure of conversation¹⁰, in which a young reader with his spontaneous responses and an adult reading mentor appear as equal though not same interlocutors. Of course the mentor, who knows more (and can read with a deeper understanding) than his young interlocutors, should not modestly conceal his knowledge and abilities but apply them in a democratic dialogue with the latter. Classes in which the teacher (considering the

⁹ D. R. Olson, N. Torrance, 1996: IX.

¹⁰ Comp. P. Nodelman, 1996: *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, New York, Longman.

degree of pupils' reading development, of course) as the (more) experienced or advanced reader participates in the setting up and discussion of the textual worlds, will for him also be an opportunity for personal engagement¹¹ with the fantasy world emerging in class. Due to the circumstances in which the school interpretation takes place, this world can never be just the imaginative world of an *individual* pupil. From the literary and didactic viewpoint it is better for the theory and practice to produce recommendations and models how to help young readers set up a literary text in its secondary existence. The first step of successful mentorship is no doubt the selection of suitable books, along with paying attention to individual differences between children, to the meaning of a pure fantasy play and emotional responses, and to pupils' subjective interpretations. Yet this is not enough – the teacher as the initiator of (deepened) reading motivates pupils for active contact with fiction also in such a way that s/he invites the more advanced and the less able readers to comment upon the text, that s/he stimulates dialogue, discusses his/her own response to the text (which can also be a memory of child reading) and supplies such information on text - literary and otherwise - as deepens the

interaction between the text and the pupils. Only thus can children's (which prevail in elementary school) and all other texts be truly interesting for all participants of shared reading, i.e. adults (teachers) and children (pupils). Such basis of teacher's cooperation originates in the fundamental pleasure of reading (children's) literature, which P. Nodelman defined as **the pleasure of conversation** - *the pleasure of literature is the pleasure of conversation - of dialogues between readers and texts and between readers and other readers about those texts* (p. 22). This conversation and thereby meaning of the text are based on intertextual network of ideas, stories, images and emotions in which children also participate. So - child and professor alike are caught in this network; the response of a child is certainly neither less nor more important than the response of professor. The former is above all different from the latter, thus adding meanings to text and enriching literature as a whole. Children's reading, perhaps less elaborated, is therefore an enrichment of the adult perception of literature, although grown-ups also teach children the strategies of reading. Here Nodelman specifically touches upon the role of knowledge in the development of the faculty of reading; for the beginning he rejects the assumption that it is in the nature of children to be capable of enjoying reading, as many do not read at all - *they prefer TV or playing basketball* (p. 26) - or lack the more complex strategies that would help

¹¹ Comp. M. Asselin, N. Pelland, J. Shapiro, 1991: *Storyworlds, Linking Minds and Imagination through Literature*, Markham, Pipin Publishing Ltd.

them discover the overlooked layers of the text. He also doubts that these strategies could develop on their own, and shares the opinion of those who believe knowledge and literary discussions to be important for the development of reading strategies. Children find greater pleasure in literature when teachers discuss the hidden layers of texts with them. In this linking of knowledge and development of faculties (strategies), the author underlines several principles, e.g.: free choice of books, the significance of subjective responses and their relatedness to different kinds of experience (even with television, toys and films), the linking of spontaneous experience with metacognitive processes (being conscious of the process of reading), and the incorporation of *knowledge*, related to the awareness of the way a literary text functions on the level of its components. *Developing such an awareness depends on having a way to describe it, so we should be willing to teach children the language that will allow them to formulate and develop understanding of their reading experiences; words and phrases like image, structure, gap or story-pattern (...)* (p. 31). Cognate to these definitions is the text written in the course of the shaping up of the starting-points of the curricular reform of the classes of literature; the text is deduced from Jauss' aesthetics of reception. According to this theory, literary knowledge is the prerequisite for the transition from spontaneous to reflexive

reading. The latter is supposed to be related to the reflecting on the read text, to the discovering of narrative methods, and to the accepting or rejecting of tradition within the framework of one's own horizon of expectations. Of course, such literary knowledge cannot be self-intentional, but should be built into the developing reading competence. To be familiar with components of a literary work means to be able to recognize, experience, interpret and estimate them, and also to understand their mutual relatedness, all this being a step towards the so called functionalization of the literary knowledge.

2.4. The abovementioned literary-theoretical and literary-didactic findings can thus be summed up into the following **starting-points of teacher's preparation for the text reading in class:**

- *teacher's and pupils' reading is the setting up of a secondary existence of a literary text - neither the former nor the latter can be attributed absolute validity or superiority;*
- *teacher proceeds from subjective responses of pupils, finding in them ways to deepen experience - so his own as children's - and to acquire skills for the work with the coming generations (presumption of the hypothetical children's reception);*
- *teacher substantiates sense of his work with the relationship*

between text, young readers and the knowledge of literary theory, which is a component of the reading competence.

2.5 How should a grown-up read when preparing for the school interpretation of a literary text?

2.5.1 The written-down starting-points provide basis for the shaping up of the steps of teacher's preparation for literature classes, as well as for his ethical attitude towards communication within class. The most interesting thing here are the self-imposed limitations grown-ups should avoid when preparing - from kindergarten to university - to classes. Above all we should not limit our literary experience with the awareness that the text is to be read in class; a teacher of literature *never* reads only through the eyes of his children nor only for the implementation of curriculum.

Literary didactics gives different descriptions of teacher's preparations for class reading; on the basis of old and contemporary recommendations, the following five steps of his/her reading as preparation for the school interpretation of text can be extracted:

1. grown-up person's reading and his/her own understanding of text,
2. anticipation of a hypothetical children's or teenagers' reception,

3. technical preparation with text analysis,
4. setting of a goal,
5. the choice of cognitive and teaching methods.

2.5.2 Adult person's reading and understanding of a text, which is completely unrelated to a young reader, is the basis of school interpretation; if a grown-up person cannot/does not know how to establish personal, responsible understanding of children's books, it is very likely that his/her reading with a group of children in class will also turn out to be a routine, or it will simply remain superficial, insincere and schematic. If the pleasure of reading is the pleasure of dialogue with a text, a teacher should take reading also as a private reader, that reads mostly for his/her own satisfaction and because he/she finds reading a very special **value**. His/her reading is determined by specific, subjective intertextual networks, linked with spontaneous, unexpected responses that may originate in the subconscious, or with analytical responses to the text's structure and effect (e.g. estimation of the efficiency of the text form). A complete description of the original, subjective literary experience is not possible, so a reader can never exhaust all the elements of experience - the mass of images, emotional responses, associations, topical connections, etc. Despite the complexity of experience and its description it is possible to point at certain elements that might trivialize such an experience. Especially the adult

reading of children's literature can lead to a priori **self-restriction**: *the view that the book belongs to children's literature prevents grown-ups from fully enjoying the play of meanings and connections, offered by the text.* And yet all literature can be read in a free and completely 'open' manner, not only children's books. Even romantic poetry and poetry from the Age of Enlightenment can be actualized in the context of artist's status in, as the poet from that period stated, *delicate years, in which (according to a romantic poet) last year a cheat was selling old junk, yet this year bought himself a mansion.* So literature poses questions, and a reader answers them in such a way that he recognizes the picture of his own world in it, which means - as is true of young readers - that s/he understands the relevance of (every) text for him. Experience, acquired on the basis of different guided or shared readings show such open, free, perhaps even anarch(ist)ic understanding of a text to be a frequent source of inspiration to teachers regarding their classwork, as it provides for a live, polysemous and communicative discussion about work; due to the unpredictability of "brainstorming", such discussions are never in danger of becoming schematic and thematically empty.

2.5.3 Anticipation of hypothetical children's or teenagers' reception is not just reading through the eyes of children, i.e. adaptation of the text message to their reading competence, but above all an answer to **the question**

of the relevance of a particular text for them. If children's or teenage experience of a text is to be the focus of school interpretation, it is perfectly clear that the reflection concerning the connections between topical 'potential' of a selected text and reading competence on the one hand, and expectations of a young reader on the other hand cannot be just a marginal question. M. Grosman, the president of the *Slovene Reading Association*, quotes some research studies, which ascertained that teaching that is not based on pupils' needs and their direct interest, reduces literature to learning by heart and kills all the pupils' inborn interest for this subject. Reading through the eyes of young readers is of course far from the reducing of associations and intertextual connections, typical for adult reading; first and foremost – a young reader reads **differently** than a grown-up one, and this difference can be profitable for both of them. An adult reader can consciously 'detach' himself from the possibility that children might grasp the complexity of the themes, dealt with by children's literature. Although perfectly aware that this genre also comprises unusual texts and topics, and that every text can be optionally upgraded, he nevertheless *assumes that children are not able to understand this and that some texts are completely unsuitable for them.* P. Nodelman defines the basic presumption of such restricting in his chapter *Childhood reading and censorship: Many adults are far more interested in determining what children*

should not read than what and how they should. (p. 85) Young readers can be restricted in different ways: either by rejection of inappropriate books or by superficial interpretation of a selected work. As for contents, restriction is shown in the rejection of taboos (horrific scenes, unsuitable messages, stereotypes, sexuality, etc.) or in the rejection of works describing inappropriate children's behaviour. With literature, filtering of contents is **unethical** both for literature and its reader, *ignorance is always likely to do more harm than knowledge can.* (p. 86) A priori fear of taboo themes - despite the seemingly acceptable and likable principle of the right to a happy childhood - is a strong indicator of the fact that grown-ups use this presumption to keep young readers within the framework of a naive, innocent and above all unconflicting relation to the world. Protecting a child in its safe shelter demonstrates the wish to have control over childhood; at the same time it thwarts or even prevents one of the basic functions of reading, i.e. critical illumination of the existing reality. Neglect of provocative literary works leads to the deafness of conversation about literature. To avoid this sidetrack of literature classes, it is wise to know the different defence strategies of the reading mentors against censorship (p. 87-88), i.e. the awareness of one's own censorial tendencies, the choice of books that stimulate children although they seem problematic, substantiated refusal of censorial reproofs, stimulation of discussions

about the whole book, not just some problematic parts (in cases of disagreement with the text), defence of freedom of speech, and the exposure of the apparent subjectiveness of censors' views. However, the awareness of thematic multilayeredness of children's literature and of the necessity of its being considered in the class talks - the contemporary children's literature knows no taboo topics, dealing with parents' divorce, war, death of child, drugs, sexual abuse, etc. - must not lead to the other extreme, i.e. the exaggerated emphasizing of the topicality of contemporary literature or to exclusive treatment of taboo themes. The consideration of pupil's viewpoint is not a radical elimination of all classical and older texts, as it is not true that these works display no familiarity with the imaginative world of a young reader. Even older texts can be a subject of problem-oriented classes: Andersen's *Emperor's new clothes* relate to (teenage) doubt in the (court) authority, and a chapter from the *Odyssey* to the wish to travel around the world, whereby the hero's inventiveness and good magic conquer all enemies. Just because this world is so very different, the type of school interpretation that understands classical texts as an expansion of imaginative faculties of young readers, and not just as an opportunity to supply data on them, cannot remain at the level of superficial explanation of literary-historical and style theories plus terms. The reader's pleasure in the concretization of the unusual textual reality, identification or

dialogue with the main hero, or in the reflections about the topic, will not suffer if some explanation of the historical period, or of effect of the structural elements of text are given. Even more, it seems quite possible that someone reading *Odyssey* might be tempted to learn more about the Greek mythology ...

Reading through the eyes of a child, seemingly the only real or authentic reader of this genre, can bring about different trivializations of the reading experience. If, with the adult reading, it is possible to point at the inadequate self-restriction, this phase shows the problem of reduction of the reading experience – adult's, child's and teenager's - above all because of the rough and often unsubstantiated assumptions regarding the limits of child's horizon of expectations. Let's risk a daring hypothesis: no text is *a priori* too difficult or too easy for a young reader, neither is it completely adequate or completely inadequate; the *Little Prince* can be read (sensibly) so in kindergarten as in secondary school in spite of the huge differences between the reading roles¹², assumed by young readers. And since the roles, experiences and expectations differ so significantly, the anticipation of reception remains the domain of an individual teacher – s/he is the only one that knows the children's response to a selected text with regard to the

changing facts influencing the school interpretation of literature.

2.5.4. Technical preparation is a systematic analysis of a certain text; a teacher makes it independently or with the help of manuals. This phase denotes his **shift from a spontaneous to a reflective experience with didactic purpose**, which means that proceeding from his own original experience and anticipated response of young readers, he chooses those typical text elements that will serve as the basis for the shared text analysis in the class. The selected elements do not originate only from the catalogue of knowledge or educational goals, their real foundation being the reading competence or **reading strategies**. From the literary-didactic viewpoint, these can mostly be observed according to the *timing* of their use (*temporal*) and *relatedness* (the reading strategies referring to *contents*). The strategies *before reading* aim at the evocation of prior experience and knowledge, related to a selected literary text. They mostly take place as memories of reading (intertextual links) as well as announcing and actualization of the text contents. The strategies *during the reading* are even more closely related to the reading strategies referring to contents: while reading, the reader is observing or creating literary text on the basis of the following strategies: *concretisation, literary character, story, theme, structure and perspective*. The strategies *after the reading* are directed into the confrontation of expectations and

¹²Comp. J.A. Appleyard, 1991.

established textual world, into the evaluation of the persuasiveness of the text according to different not exclusively literary contexts like social reality, manipulateness, media... Experiences from the in-service teacher training prove that the following steps of analysis are particularly useful:

- **definition of the text topic:** despite the fact that topic (idea, message, moral) is not and must not be the only strategy¹³, it is nevertheless among the more demanding elements, providing for response to literature, especially if the subject of interpretation happens to be a contemporary, multitopical work;
- **search for the focal word:** this is the word or word association that is essential for the message - usually it resumes the contents or the topic, though not necessarily - it can also be related to a text image or some noticeable trait of a literary character;
- **definition of essential elements for the development of reading competence,** the choice of reading strategies, related to contents;
- **anticipation of possibilities for the actualization of the text:** development of the post-reading strategies, creative responses and

tasks for the deepening of the experience.

This phase of the teacher's preparation can also be trivialized in several ways, as pointed out by P. Nodelman (p. 29-30): we do not overburden ourselves with explanations of unknown words, we do not always read analytically and not always boring texts, we learn neither geography nor history, we do not repeat authorities' interpretations, and we do not indulge into senseless though funny activities (like cooking the food described in the text). Nodelman's warnings may only be witty remarks, but the truth is that the following presumptions can seriously define, limit or trivialize technical preparation:

- *subordination of literature reading to the contents or aims of other fields:* the use of literature as illustration of topics from natural or social science and compulsory planning of joint thematic clusters;
- *realization of school lessons solely on the basis of textbook:* despite its extent and complexity, didactic apparatus can only supply basis for the school interpretation - a teacher is free to choose from the offered questions and exercises, as well as to adapt these to the reading competence of his pupils;

¹³Comp. Nodelman, 1996: 55-56.

- *placing too much stress on the role of external assessment:* literature classes should never become a preparation for external assessment as the latter only focuses on selected goals without checking some other activities (like listening).

Literature classes can obviously neither be directed by external factors, nor other subject fields, textbooks or external assessment of knowledge. The only proper basis for creative literature classes are developing reading strategies, defined as activities by the curriculum.

2.5.5 Definition of the goal is the phase in which the teacher decides which goals from the curriculum he intends to realize and with what activities. The essential factor here is his **selection**: once s/he chooses the text, it doesn't make sense to "snatch" for goals and activities; it is better to choose the ones that are truly important for the deepening of reading experience and for the development of reading competence. Another useful recommendation (apart from the necessity of selection) is **diversity** of activities; observing the sonority of language with every song, and defining character traits of literary heroes in the narration would mean the same stereotyping as persistent defining of metric schemes, studying biographies and tireless creative writing. Another problem of preparations is that the concretely set goals are still **too**

general. Goals, written down in the curriculum, are not transferred into the preparation in their original form, but are (only the most important ones) linked with the contents of the selected text. That is why the advice that goals should be set as concretely as possible is perfectly to the point - e.g. *they recognize the rhythm ... and unusual neologisms*, and not too generally, like *they enjoy reading poems*.

2.5.6. Conclusion is dedicated to the **choice of methods and forms of work**. In principle, especially diverse methods of literature classes are suitable, according to their relatedness to different class activities. According to the concept of contemporary curricula and with regard to the development of reading strategies, the methods, linked with the four speech activities, could be labelled as essential: these are the methods of independent reading, listening, talking (about literature and pupils' own fantasy worlds), interpretative and analytical plus research writing about literature. Methods related to reading strategies are the methods of imagining and experiencing text pictures and atmosphere, methods of perception, understanding and evaluating of literary characters, topic, story, structure and perspective. It seems that these methods are also connected with different taxonomic grades of knowledge as well as to the activities, relating to individual grades. According to the basic principle of contemporary literature classes - communicativeness - it could therefore

be said that the most suitable forms are the ones providing for the greatest creativity and independence; apart from individual work on a text, these are forms of group work (group illustration, discussion of contents, book production, dramatization, discussions in pairs). However, it would not be bad if the “classical” frontal method got its place among the different forms, of course not without teacher’s “surrender” to the text and his/her consideration of pupils’ interests.

3. Conclusion

Teacher’s preparation for literature classes is therefore extremely demanding - perhaps more than in any other subject. It comprises different, mutually often contradicting activities; completely free interpretation of text and limitation of one’s own associations on the basis of familiarity with the reading competence of young readers, consideration and development of children’s literary interests, structuring of preparation and avoidance of some boring patterns. The didactics of literature is a great help to all of us that teach reading, and yet we would be disappointed if we expected it to give us a clue as to what the future classes of literature will be like - with the coming generations and with the swiftly changing world. Perhaps we could draw some comfort from the thought *that even the nearest future can only be imagined if we try to think of the*

impossible, as the reflection on the present possibilities gives no basis for making pictures of the future (M. Grosman).

Ethical principles are therefore also encoded into the teaching of literature, not only into its production and expert interpretation. And if it still makes sense to talk about the teacher’s ethics in reference to contemporary teaching, the only ethics worth talking about is the one reflected in:

- responsibility to literature (a teacher must know it, as well as read it),
- in the development of teacher’s own reading competence, and
- in non-restrictive, yet professionally responsible relation to young readers.

Literature has another interesting quality. Sometimes, with reading a chosen text with children on a sunny morning, even the most elaborate theory turns out dull, stereotyped, if not cliché-like, because the truth is that true literature tends to escape interpreters and scholarliness.

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