The New Educational Review

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Integration of Innovative Methods into the Teaching of Literature in Lower-Secondary Schools

Abstract

This paper focuses on the issue of integrating innovative methods into the teaching of literature in lower-secondary schools. It aims to highlight the factors that influence these methods' use and thus fill a gap in the existing research in the field. The research inquiry is based on a qualitative approach; the group of respondents consists of male and female teachers working in lower-secondary schools at the time of the research. The structured interview method was chosen for data collection, and the data obtained was evaluated using grounded theory. We present the results obtained from 24 interviews. Due to the research's qualitative nature, it is impossible to generalise from the findings. The so-called time and teacher factors and the classroom factors are associated with not using these methods, and developing competencies and applying them to life factors are associated with using them. The paper also comments on the influence of school support, the influence of inspiration from university teachers, and the positive experiences of the respondents. The influence of the age of the teachers was found to be insignificant.

Keywords: *innovative method, literary education, lower-secondary school, qualitative research, investigation, factor*

Introduction

The transformation of society associated with the change of the political establishment in Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1980s significantly impacted the approach to the Czech educational system and individual educational disciplines. According to experts, the teaching of literature was to become a full-fledged part of education based on an aesthetic approach, with an aesthetic-educational character, and based on pupils' direct reading experience with the text (Hník, 2017).

In this paper, we present the results of interviews with Czech language and literature teachers who were working in Czech lower-secondary schools at the time of the research. The focus of the interviews was, among other things, to find out to what extent these teachers are familiar with so-called innovative teaching methods. We perceive these methods to be practices related to the didactic interpretation of a text, which, in a certain way, activate students in the constructivist learning sense at the expense of transmitting knowledge. In the context of literary education, Hník (2017) perceives the so-called innovative methods as practices that lead to teaching literature in the sense of reading it. This reading-oriented subject, the basic building block of literature teaching as the didactics of literature currently conceives of it, also works with the concept of creativity, which is an integral part of the didactic interpretation of a literary text. An innovative concept of teaching literature does not eliminate that curriculum but should be conducted in the sense of learning about the work, not learning the work (Hník, 2017). The contemporary didactics of literature often uses the term "experiential literary education" for this. That means a "purposeful concept fitting into the intentions of an innovative conception of literary education" (Hník, 2017, p. 35).

In this article, we focus on the issue of incorporating innovative methods into the teaching of literature in lower-secondary schools. The central part of this paper presents research building on the results of past research that dealt with the constitution of the separate, disciplinary didactics of literature in the conceptual sense of the word, as well as research that focused on identifying the integration of innovative teaching methods into actual educational practice at different levels of education.

Research Methodology

General Research Background

We note, for example, Ondřej Hník's research on first- and second-year university students' previous experiences of the teaching of literature. His central question was, "What was the teaching of literature like in lower-secondary and secondary school?" The research results can be summarised in his statement about "the absence of a reading experience" (Hník, 2017, pp. 23–25). The sample of 203 respondents in the first phase of the research (2009–2010) demonstrated very similar findings. Hník continued interviewing students in 2011 and 2012, when 191 statements were collected. It confirmed the previous results: Direct reading experiences are absent in actual educational practice.

We did not find any academic contributions abroad that have innovative methods of teaching literature at their core. The need to transform these didactics in the context of contemporary social changes is addressed by Martinazzo (2022) and Okhrimenkova and Radyginova (2021). Critical thinking methods related to innovative methods have been discussed by several experts in relation to different aspects of education. Recent publications include Brookfield's *Teaching for Critical Thinking* (2022) and Chatfield's *Critical Thinking* (2022). Developing students' critical thinking through literature is addressed, for example, by Li and Liu (2022), Azizi et al. (2022), and Marsuki et al. (2022). A considerable number of scholarly articles are devoted to innovative methods in the context of foreign language teaching (Amanov, 2023; Najmiddinovna & Najmiddinovna, 2022) However, in our opinion, the given assumptions, which can be summarised in the need to apply constructivist knowledge acquisition at the expense of transmissive knowledge acquisition, can be applied to a wide range of subjects (Nisanbayeva, 2023).

As the above suggests, our research can fill a certain gap in the existing research in this field. Based on this research, taking targeted steps to improve the expected situation will be possible. Extending this research investigation to survey a larger pool of respondents is also proposed.

Research Sample

Twenty-four Czech language and literature teachers working in the lower-secondary schools, four men and 20 women, participated in the research. The selection of the participants was deliberate; the researchers approached them based on previous contacts and cooperation. The most important criterion for selecting

participants was the years of experience. All teachers voluntarily participated in the research based on a verbal agreement with the researchers, so we did not require any confirmation of their consent to participate. The names given here are fictitious (Table 1).

Table 1. Research sample

	Anonymised name	Length of teaching practice		Anonymised name	Length of teaching practice
1	Pavel	1	13	Josefína	12
2	Josef	2	14	Kateřina	16
3	Monika	2	15	Helena	17
4	Veronika	2	16	Irena	17
5	Anna	3	17	Renata	20
6	Pavla	4	18	Patricie	22
7	Tamara	4	19	Elena	24
8	Romana	6	20	Marta	25
9	Ludmila	7	21	Ilona	27
10	Tadeáš	7	22	Patrik	27
11	Marika	9	23	Martina	32
12	Aneta	12	24	Petra	38

Instruments and Procedures

The following research question was set: *How do lower-secondary school teachers use innovative methods in teaching literature?* Given the nature of the research question, we chose a structured interview containing 11 questions as the data collection method. Another reason for choosing this method was the number of researchers. Four researchers were involved in conducting the interviews, so we chose a structured type of interview so that the substance of the information obtained would be consistent and suitable for comparison. Each of the four researchers conducted six interviews. They met with some participants in person and some online, with an average interview time of 30 minutes. Participants knew the interview topic in advance but were unfamiliar with the exact wording of the questions.

Data Analysis

We chose grounded theory as the method of data analysis. We draw on the grounded theory of Corbin and Strauss (1994; cf. Keenan, 2022) and use the three coding steps they recommended. Three researchers (coders) conducted the analysis. All interviews were analysed as follows:

1) Open coding

Each researcher read their interviews several times and produced codes that were entered into a shared codebook. Researchers generally coded entire interviews – one to three codes appeared in response to a single question. Subsequently, a meeting of all researchers was held in which they compared the codes and agreed on the wording of the core codes. It was made possible by the narrowly worded questions. After the first coding session, the researchers agreed on more than half on each code. After discussion, the codes were modified and consolidated to the 24 codes listed (Table 2), according to which the interviews were coded. Coders provided each other with coded interviews, including selected core data fragments.

Table 2. List of categories and codes

form of teaching   traditional approach
activity of pupils   passive pupil   active pupil
teacher self-development   inspiration from the internet   inspiration from further education   does not actively seek further training opportunities   inspiration from colleagues   actively seeks further training opportunities   inspiration from university teaching
circumstances   time constraints   teacher's priorities   specifics of the class   extracurricular reading   interest in reading'
teaching aids   working with available materials   text (excerpt) from the reading material

knowledge of concepts derived definition own definitions
working with text discover the idea in the text promoting reading habits surface work with text
working with text discover the idea in the text promoting reading habits surface work with text
the purpose (benefit) of reading the personal dimension of reading the development of the pupil's personality development of aesthetic sensitivity

2) Axial and selective coding

Categorisation, i.e., axial coding, was performed by one researcher. Several categories emerged by comparing the codes and looking for relationships between them. The other two researchers supplemented the categorisation thus made with their observations and added additional data fragments from their interviews. From exploring the relationships between the categories, new cues emerged, giving rise to new hypotheses through the continuous comparison of and returning to the individual codes and data fragments. This process was completed when neither researcher had any newer notes to add to the categories.

Research Results

Respondents' ideas about innovative methods

The respondents' ideas about innovative methods can be divided into three groups. Some respondents provided a definition that we called a derived definition. The formulation shows that they are not familiar with the term "innovative methods" and describe it using logically related terms such as "new" or "original". Other respondents described the concept briefly and correctly, which we called the basic definition. For these respondents, the term was familiar. A few respondents formulated an elaborate definition – adding to the basic details about what such innovative methods develop and how they do so. Apparently, they commonly encounter the term, know it well, and think about its broader context.

Among other matters, we were interested in which specific innovative methods the teachers know. As attitudes to the term vary slightly across the professional community, we asked the question broadly, aiming to map all methods teachers perceive as innovative in practice. All respondents listed similar methods.

Why do some teachers not use innovative methods?

The time and teacher factor

The first factor most often identified is the time factor: "Because of what I have to discuss with the students, I don't use [innovative methods] much, there is no time" (Josef). We add the teacher factor to time, as it depends on the subjective assessment of whether there is time for the methods. While Pavla says that "there is no room for it, I neglect it in favour of the prescribed curriculum", Josef's approach is quite different: "A teacher who wants to can certainly find space for the effective and meaningful inclusion [of such methods] in the classroom, and not just in the context of literature teaching".

Early in one's career, navigating all the demands of teaching is challenging, so we understand it can be challenging for beginning teachers to incorporate innovative methods into their teaching. In later years, when teachers have already worked out the didactic content to deliver, they gain more space for combining it with innovative methods. For more experienced teachers, there is a greater distance in their teaching from the "lessons to be covered". It was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews that if the teacher wants to, time can be made to use innovative methods so that pupils do not lose out on "undiscussed" material. Yet experienced teachers also cited time as a reason for not using innovative methods.

Classroom factor

We called the next factor the class factor. Compared to the time and teacher factor, it is significantly less represented among respondents. It appears on two levels – the classroom as a community of learners (the atmosphere in the collective, the abilities of individual learners) and the classroom as a room (the layout, the options for using the space). Teachers do not perceive this factor as limiting; rather, it influences their thinking about using the methods.

Why do some teachers use innovative methods?

Most teachers said they use innovative methods to make their teaching more varied and attractive. These responses appeared across all lengths of practice. Aneta

describes trying to make literature teaching a "more fun form of literature" and recognises that innovative methods make it easier for pupils to learn.

The factor of developing competencies and applying them in life
In searching for an answer to the research question, we identified the factor of developing competencies and applying them in life.

Renata sees overlap with the motivation to learn in general in the use of innovative methods: "If they are used regularly, pupils are used to working interestingly; this can have a positive effect not only on their interest and attitude, but also on their results". Many teachers who incorporate innovative methods would like to have a two-hour block for literature teaching to take full advantage of such methods. Marika appreciates these methods because they offer opportunities for students to experience the story of the text more fully; she also sees the benefit in developing pupils' communication skills, a social dimension, as they often work in pairs or groups, and she also believes these methods reach the emotional level and develop the imagination.

What other factors influence the use of innovative methods?

School support
The entire school setting influences the use of innovative methods. Teachers whose school is involved in projects to promote reading (e.g., Helping Schools to Succeed, formative assessment) listed the largest number of innovative methods, were clear about their benefits, and reported that they used them routinely. In some cases, the entire school is not involved in systematic learning, just a few individuals are.

Inspiration from HEIs
Beginning teachers often reported that they had been strongly influenced by an inspirational teacher at university. In most cases, they were introduced to innovative methods theoretically in terms of their benefits for pupil development and then in practice – the students tried out the innovative methods through role play, which made it easier to apply them to their own teaching.

One's own positive experience
Teachers' motivations are naturally influenced by their own good experiences, as Veronika says: "Pupils, at least mine, enjoy any kind of work with a text as long as it's not just reading and answering questions. We do different variations of the text, we change the situations, kind of what if we change the form, so the pupils make

a comic book. We've also successfully tried dramatising a prose text. And we also talk about the text, the pupils can share their experiences and compare themselves with the main character".

The unit is not always successful because the method does not always suit the pupils. Sometimes, the reasons for that are completely different, e.g., they have just come from a previous stressful lesson or are anticipating taking a test in a future lesson. It is therefore not good to jump to conclusions, for example, that a particular class cannot handle other types of methods.

Age does not matter

Our research sample does not confirm that age is one of the factors influencing attitudes towards the use of innovative methods. Some very new teachers (1–5 years of experience) are not familiar with the methods and do not use them, while some teachers with 20 years of experience or more are open to the methods, find them beneficial for their pupils, and try to incorporate them into their time-space.

Discussion and Conclusions

We are aware of the research's limitations, especially in the relatively small number of respondents and the lack of similarly methodologically guided research that could have been used as a starting point. We perceive the results of this research as a first step towards possibly improving the implementation of innovative methods in teaching, and not just of literature, in educational institutions.

Most teachers stated that they consider the most important goal in literature classes at the lower-secondary school level to be motivating pupils to read in their free time, to read on their own, and to discover that reading can benefit their personal life, and they therefore actually consider reading to develop desirable competences (for continuing education, etc.). We are surprised that the remaining responses did not reveal specific ways of trying to do this. The teachers wish the pupils to take this away from the lessons, but they are nevertheless devoted to the "material they have to go over", preparation for the entrance exams to secondary school, and basic analysis of the text. Innovative methods can let pupils experience that a text does not just serve for formal analysis but that they themselves can experience the story it tells. It is how we fulfil the expressive component of literature teaching, which can influence "not only the mind, but also the child's feelings, will and character and shape his aesthetic taste" (Hník, 2017, p. 12).

Only a few respondent teachers knew almost nothing about innovative methods and did not use them regularly. These were teachers with 20 or more years of experience. These teachers described themselves as busy, not dedicated to their own further education, and thinking about teaching literature in the traditional context of learning and reading artistic examples, especially from the required reading list, and their approach corresponds to a factual conception of a literary education. This fact supports our assumption that if a teacher is open to further learning and innovation, then that is reflected in the fact that he or she perceives teaching as applicable to the lives of his or her pupils.

In summary, it can be stated that in most cases, the respondents who took part in the research incorporate innovative methods into the teaching of literature, although in some cases they cannot name a specific method, just to describe it. We believe this is sufficient to improve the current situation in implementing innovative methods in teaching in Czech primary schools (including lower-secondary grades). If we compare our presented results with the research of Ondřej Hník (2017), then we can conclude, with a certain degree of simplification, that the current situation in the field of integrating innovative methods into teaching is improving, although the potential of the given methods is not yet being completely fulfilled in the current concept of teaching in the Czech Republic.

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