

Subjective Concepts of Reading Literature Among Future Foreign Language Teachers of German: Implications for Theory and Practice

Abstract

The reading of literary texts has been strongly affected by modern times and media developments. In the development of reading, a proficiency gap can be perceived. In this contribution theoretical starting points are presented for viewing reading from the perspective of scientific disciplines and these are supported by empirical data on the subjective concepts of reading literary texts among future teachers of foreign languages. Teachers, with their inclination or refusal to read and their competences, transmit their views intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously to students. At this point their subjective concepts of reading have consequences beyond the subjective. Illustrative segments from interviews and subsequent analysis will allow for a discussion and categorization of concepts held by readers and of guidelines for the education of teachers.

Keywords: *literary reading, reading competence, interview, reading concepts*

Reading literature was once a favoured activity, particularly for leisure time. Knowledge about literature and quotations from great authors' thoughts used to be a sign of intellectual prestige. Modern developments in the media have strongly interfered with this ancient Aristotelian tradition of reading culture, and have changed it significantly. The new media have become significantly more attractive than books and have presented themselves as their successful competition. People have taken interest in these media, developed skills and abilities that are necessary for successful handling of those media, and have increasingly less time, will power

and energy for literary reading. As a consequence, one sees less developed reading skills and abilities. Literary texts have thus become so alien to many readers that they do not accept the reading of literary texts as a challenge (e.g. Bonfadelli, Bucher 2002; Pečjak 2008; Jazbec 2009).

These developments in the media and the change in the tradition of reading have left their mark on school work. The book used to be an indispensable medium for teachers and their work, and students used to read literary texts frequently and successfully. The reading skills thus developed were successfully transferred to non-literary texts. Today, the situation in schools is very different because many teachers and students read books only occasionally or give priority to other media. The PISA study (2000) surveyed students' reading skills, and the results in some European countries, e.g. in Germany and Slovenia, proved to be alarming. The experts have proclaimed reading skills and abilities to be the "key or basic competence of modern man" (Groeben, Hurrelmann 2002; Rosebrock 2001; Saxer 2002, Garbe 2012) and have called for their systematic encouragement at various levels of education.

Numerous efforts to enhance reading and literary competence have been designed for students and young readers. Our purpose is to show that much greater attention should be paid to one crucial set of participants: teachers or teacher trainees. These are the people who, according to our hypothesis, with their inclination to read or their refusal to read, their more or less developed competences, intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously transmit their subjective views and developed competences to their students. This is the point where the teacher's otherwise subjective theory of reading is significantly extended. In this context, we will not be analyzing the contribution of teachers but that of students, i.e., of future teachers in the last semester of their studies. We assume that the findings will not be identical to those that would have been obtained by studying teachers, but they are comparable. At the same time, we wish to draw attention to the need for enlarging the empirical sample and encouraging research into and recordings of reading strategies, as well as reflecting on the subjective reading strategies of teachers of foreign languages.

In this contribution we will present theoretical starting points for viewing reading and compare these with empirical data on the subjective concepts of reading literary texts among teacher trainees of a foreign language, namely German, in Slovenia. We assume that illustrative and exemplary cases will show that the gap between theory and empirical reading is thus considerable in educating teachers and consequently pupils. New concepts of reading, especially of reading literature, need to be considered as well as various approaches to teaching literature. Fur-

thermore, we believe that the findings will be interesting for other countries where similar problems exist: poorly developed reading ability, and reading avoidance among pupils as well as teachers.

From the above concepts of reading biography research (Schön 1990; 1997, 2004), the reception theory of Iser (1978) and Jauß (1970), cognitive psychology research (Christmann, Groeben 1999), and sociological point of view (Graf 1997) we can briefly conclude that reading is not just passive summarizing of the meaning of the text, but a mentally challenging, complex and complicated interactive process. It is influenced by constants such as the text and the reader, and by variables such as individual experience, knowledge, the individual's starting points and his differently variegated reading and literary history. We will concentrate on these subjective concepts of reading in individual readers. We are interested in locating the junction of objective theories of reading and subjective practice, in finding the deviations and in determining how these findings can constructively revise the guidelines for literary didactics.

Data collection and analysis

The empirical data concerning subjective theories of reading were obtained in guided interviews with 7 students of German in Slovenia. The number of students is not representative as this is a qualitative case study, but it is illustrative and exemplary. The interviewees expressed their reflections on reading with prompting (indirect questions) from the interviewer. They meditated on reading in their childhood, the people who had an important impact on their reading, on the books they read, their reading at school, their teachers of literature, the act of reading literary texts, the importance of reading, etc. We recorded and transcribed these discussions and thus obtained a valuable corpus of empirical material for research into the various dimensions of reading (Jazbec 2009). Here we only have space to concentrate on one aspect of the subjective theory of reading and that is the individual's reading concept, which we will reconstruct from the reflections on reading, while considering the consequences for teacher trainees and their education.

Using the "cut-and-paste-technique" as a descriptive-reductive analysis (Lamnek 2005), we have selected from the extensive interviews those containing relevant information for our research problem.

We will present several possible reading concepts, as we are more interested in the widest range of concepts than in a full and detailed analysis of them. First, we will list a section of an interview, followed by an analysis of each individual reader,

and then we will try to classify them, despite the individuality of the responses, into a number of categories. In the case of our interviewees, we are dealing with individual perceptions of reading in a group of teacher trainees in Slovenia with comparable levels of education, literary socialization in school and professional interests. Because of that, the individual theories also display a general dimension, on the basis of which we can develop categories and which we must take into account in proposing new teaching guidelines.

Data analysis and interpretation

The interviewees, students of German in Slovenia, are future teachers of foreign languages. Reading is an important, comprehensive and intense part of their study and work.

Interview statement – Beno (all names in this article are pseudonyms):

Beno: The nicest thing about reading is that I, I believe, indeed, I read the words, from another person, but in this manner I can become more engrossed in myself, er, in the sense, well, if I read this, I think, I always think why the author has written this, but not in the sense, why, why actually, but what has moved him to write, er, er what did he want to say to us with that. Then I also think about my interpretations, why I think so and, and er, I, I learn from all fictitious and also real texts, I believe, since life is global, well, I have always thought and always acted so that the more one speaks with people, well, I also believe if one reads, indeed, one, one has a dialogue with people, he does not speak back, but one, one reads his words and I found this always the nicest thing.

For Beno, reading is an intense mental process, real mental training. The text provides primary guidance for him and forms the generator of his thoughts. In reading, he communicates with the authors, one-sided communication. Beno uses the author's words for a journey 'into himself' and as a stimulus for his own thinking. It is important that, despite the prominent creative role that he attaches to the reader in the process of reading, the reader is in a position that is absolutely inferior to that of the text and author. This is reminiscent of the traditional concept of reading, and in particular the exaltation of the importance of the author and the text and not of the meaning of the text as constructed by the reader. From the cognitive-psychological point of view, we could say that bottom-up processes absolutely dominate top-down processes in this student's approach to reading.

Interview statement – Klara

Klara: [...] the nicest thing about reading, for me is to switch off, I do not know, I can have two exams the next day, but I take, I always take time the evening before, before

I go to bed, to read for two, two hours. This switching off, not thinking of the problems, to take it easy completely, I like this.

For Klara, reading is a way to relax, enjoy the moment and switch off from reality, to escape from the problems and challenges of everyday life. For her also, the text dominates the reader. The statement above by no means confirms the theory of the crucial constituent role of the reader in the process of reader attribution of meaning to the text. At most, it is the other way round, the kind of reading that finds expression with Klara is reminiscent of classic trivial reading. Literature is functionalized because it is absolutely subordinated to the subjective aims of the individual. In this case, reading, according to Graf, is a medium of “the instinctive economy,” while in contrast to this sophisticated aesthetic literary reading is a medium of “consciousness development” (Graf 1980, 19).

Interview statement – Tina

Tina: well, actually, just what I can imagine myself, how the protagonists, the persons are, how the actions are, that I sort of make a movie and that I imagine how it goes for these persons, protagonists, what they think, well, what picture I can form from it myself

Tina emphasizes the activity of the reader. This reverses the relationship of the dominant factors as seen in Beno and Klara. Tina needs the text only as an impulse, as a basis for her own directing. While Tina strongly emphasizes her own activity, which unwinds away from the text and from the book medium toward the film medium, the text recedes into the background of her act of reading.

Interview statement – Hana

Hana: well, er, one has, actually, time for oneself, er, one is relaxing, one dives into another world, well, one forgets everyday problems, this is, actually, the best

Hana reads when she has time to devote to herself. Devoting time to herself, according to her, means relaxing and withdrawing from the real world, complicated by problems, to a different world of literary texts. Hana’s reading experience highlights the specificity and originality of literary texts, which are ‘conformable’, and holistic and address the reader simultaneously as an individual, a cognitive and emotional being, while the reader in real life functions in the respective roles. Hana has thereby indicated that she understands the key feature of literary texts, a characteristic that separates literary texts from non-literary texts: they address human beings holistically (Šlibar 1997).

Interview statement – Aleksandra

Aleksandra: The nicest thing, really, in books, is I can relax a little bit, I can see people, er, especially, if the stories sound so realistic that they, er, that always, that, er, that you always have to go on, er, that one always fights on,what people earlier, well, people that have lived at that time, what kind of problems they dealt with, etc., I simply enjoy this, the knowledge, always something new to find out, no matter whether it is in the sense of reality, well, in this sense, that it, that something happened in that way and such, but also, about new countries, cultures, about other way of thinking, well, anyway.

Aleksandra also highlights the enjoyment of reading. The realism of texts, which contrasts with the fundamental principle of literary texts in our social context, namely that these texts are fictional, is of particular importance to her. Aleksandra also stresses the importance of a positive note and the sense of security that reading gives her; she regards reading also as the acquisition of knowledge. Although the acquisition of knowledge is among the weakest functions of literary texts (Šlibar 1997), it is interesting that this particular aspect is crucial for Aleksandra.

If it was obvious that Beno equates the experience gained by reading to those he has gained himself; for Aleksandra, the two are clearly separated. She enriches her personality with her own experience; reading gives her only information about these experiences. Aleksandra talks more about the substantive aspects than about reading itself, and only implicitly can we deduce from her statements that the reader is guided, informed and 'delighted' by the text.

Interview statement – Andrej

Andrej: The nicest thing? I believe, to have a little time for yourself, to go to a room, switch off a little and only be concerned with yourself, if I say so, actually, because one has this time for himself only and, one switches off from everything, from the surroundings and becomes absorbed in the story, one tries in such a way, yes, and above all also acquires information [laugh] I am the kind of person, who likes to, I believe, the word does not fit, it is a little, not vulgar, but, ... I am a bit of a smartass.

Andrej reads at the time that he spends with himself, when he disconnects from the outside world both locally, because he shuts himself into the room, as well as mentally, when he is dealing with the content of the reading. It is interesting that he does this in a calculating and selfish way, so that he will be able to relate it to others and thus consolidate his important role in life. He acknowledges honestly and directly that he is knowingly using the strategy to show off before others with information and in that manner recharge his ego. Reading serves him as an impor-

tant source of interesting information, which he acquires through reading and does not construct, which means that Andrej affirms the traditional understanding of reading as the decoding of information from the text.

Interview statement – Meta

Meta: er, [...], I can identify that way, I can identify with the central figures or with one person in the literary text and then put, er, myself in his or her thoughts and think about how I would do this, er, how nice or how bad it would be if I had to do the same thing or if the same thing happened to me.

Meta uses reading to test different life roles. The possibility of identification in reading is a common strategy of reading (Heuermann, Hühn, Röttger 1982). The question of whether the reader who identifies with the literary figure is more mentally active than the one who merely observes it from the side, exceeds the boundaries of this contribution. However, we can surely reconstruct that in Meta's reading the text has a leading role, not the author and not the reader. The reader only delivers himself to it and makes use of text signals for his own mental acrobatic performance beyond the text.

The Results: Categorization of readers

For these interviewees, the individuality of their reading achieves clear expression, although they may, depending on their superindividual dimensions of reading, be arranged into three categories.

1. The reader is an almost equivalent factor with the text and the author in the literary communication. Beno belongs to this group. His way of thinking clearly distinguishes him from other interviewees. Detailed analysis of the entire interview established Beno as a deft and active reader of different types of texts and also a competent user of various media. He skilfully transfers skills gained in various areas from one place to another. Beno alone managed to come close to the current theories of reading earlier presented with his concept of reading. Nevertheless, even with Beno it can be noted that he does not attribute the same important role to the reader in literary communication as he does to the text and the author.
2. The reader is completely subordinate to the text and the author in literary communication. With the majority of other interviewees, the flabbiness, passivity, and subordination of the reader in relation to the text in the process

of reading are all the more apparent. They also strongly and clearly highlight the self-indulgent function of reading. Interestingly, there is a strong belief in theory that in today's modern world enjoyment belongs to other domains and not to the medium of the book (Rupp, Heyer, Bonholt 2004), but as is clear from the interviews, this does not apply to these interviewees.

3. The reader is the most decisive and most important factor in literary communication. Only Tina can be placed in this group. She views the texts only as a source of ideas for directing her own movies, which take place beyond the text. Such "unbearable lightness" in the conception of reading and interpretation of texts is a deviation from the actual reading, which allows freedom for the reader, but also demands his constructive cooperation and constant returning to the text as well as avoidance of optionality.

The three concepts of reading emerging from the analysis of exemplary individual cases are sufficiently general that we are able to categorize most readers from the group of future teachers of German as a foreign language accordingly. Clearly, however, none of the concepts stands out as more, if not fully, congruent with the theoretical starting points presented. We can therefore ascertain a considerable gap between the theory of reading and the reading process and practice of reading among teacher trainees in Slovenia. The intuitive notion of reading as a skill to be learned and to know and that gives us pleasure while literariness itself retreats to the background, is still very topical. At the same time, reading is still, above all, the decoding of the meaning of the text encoded into the text by the author (this is particularly topical in literary texts). The reason for this comprehension is the culture of learning in Slovenia, which still insufficiently encourages productivity or creativity in teaching (Ivanuš Grmek, Javornik Krečič 2004). Consequently, the student readers are not constructive while reading, even while reading literary texts. This fact is particularly problematic despite their intense practice of reading and their continuous contact with literary texts throughout the course of their education.

Conclusion

It is a great challenge to closely examine the process of reading literary texts. Owing to the exceptional intricacy of the process and numerous factors that affect it, the research is actually only a process of approaching the phenomenon. The individual interviews provide a significant and interesting viewpoint on reading. The analysis of those interviews has thrown light upon certain viewpoints and

pointed out the vital cruxes of reading of future teachers of foreign languages. Even if these interviewees have developed their own reading concepts, analysis suggests these to be variously differentiated and, above all, more reader – than literary text-friendly. It appears that these future teachers are inclined towards reading that is comfortable and pleasant and into which they put only as much effort as they themselves wish, even when the text is exacting and requires intense and absorbed reading. We can imagine that a teacher with such an individual reading concept will only rarely successfully stimulate intense reading by pupils, regardless of the degree of professionalism. Therefore, we believe that it is necessary to supplement the teaching concepts during the university education of teachers.

Given the importance of comprehending individual perceptions of reading, particularly for the teacher-reader, we believe that it is necessary to start changing the current practice of reading. Since these are important, socially deep-rooted and individually internalized processes, we need to be aware that this will be a complex, long-term process. Therefore, teacher trainees should primarily know and explore the process of reading in the light of various theories, which should enable them to be aware of its complexity. They should discuss the great importance of reading for the individual in particular, especially in the age of new media. They should apprehend that skilful reading of literature is a competence that intensifies and helps build competence practices with other media and also that the medium of the book is complementary to other media. Teacher trainees should be aware of their own process of reading and reading socialization. The most important thing, however, is that curricula at all levels of education should also implement a requirement that readers talk and learn about “how” to read and not only about “what” to read or about the text being read.

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