

A READING-BOOK IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE: THE TEXT PREPARATION AND THE FIRST OPINION OF ITS USE

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, students of the Russian language have tended to analyse and interpret the texts of literary works in an overly simplistic manner. Such analysis tends to refer only to the text itself, sometimes only to the plot. It was the recognition of this fact which provided us with the inspiration to prepare a new reading-book concerned with Russian literature, which motivates the students not only to read literary works, but also to gain knowledge on how to read, understand and interpret a literary work. Initial feedback concerning the use of the reading-book has shown the concept to be successful.

Key terms

Russian literature, reading-book, interpretation, complex understanding of the literary work



Ruská povídka

čítanka a cvičebnice interpretace literárního textu

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Introduction

In this article, we address the process of preparing a reading-book for Russian literature. Specifically, we provide information about its primary rationale, about the circumstances which led to its development, about the selection process behind the included texts and about the formulation of questions which guide students during their encounter with the reading-book. We aim to acquaint the reader with some of the students' and teacher's initial experiences with using the reading-book.

The initial idea and its origin

Students of foreign languages at the university level should not only be able to speak the language, but should also learn about the cultures of those nations which speak the language as a mother tongue. Literature comprises a special part of the national culture – it is bound to a nation's history, to its social life, to its art more generally, to its philosophy, to its ideological and cultural concepts and to the nation's language as a basic means of expression as relating to all these categories. Therefore, the history of the development of Russian literature – including knowledge of the most prominent Russian authors and their most important works – plays a substantial role in the teaching of Russian as a foreign language (Dohnal, 2015, pp. 26-31).

Over the last two decades, we have observed a clear trend towards a more visual way of perceiving of information in teaching-learning process, and this same tendency can be seen in the field of literature as well. Contemporary students prefer to watch films and to listen to audio books, and as such they read fewer books in the traditional, written form. This trend has resulted in a dangerous tendency towards a kind of 'digital dementia', with quite a lot of students having problems understanding more complicated texts (i.e. they are not used to appreciating all the layers of the literary texts which they are expected to read in order to get acquainted with the most important authors and literature of the nation whose language they are studying). (Dohnal, 2013, pp. 88-94) This is also the reality among students of Russian in Czech and Slovak universities. Although the teaching of literature is considered to be an important element of such language studies, the number of classes concerned with Russian literature has been cut significantly since changes to the teaching of Russian language were made after the social changes which took place in 1989 (Dohnal, 2007, pp. 126-128). Until that time, the Russian language had been a compulsory subject in both basic and secondary Czechoslovakian schools, so universities were not required to concentrate inordinately on teaching just the language itself, and could thus assign more time to the study of more theoretical subjects and of Russian literature. Classes at the university level should ideally build upon the abilities of students to understand literature – abilities already developed at secondary school – but our experience shows us that literature classes at secondary schools have lost their former position, such that many secondary school-leavers do not have a good command of the skills necessary for individual and independent reading, or for the understanding of literary works of art. Such a state of affairs is not restricted to Czech or Slovak schools – the same conclusions have been stated in the results of research conducted in Russian universities: "Исследования показывают, что российские школьники читают в целом больше, чем их западные сверстники, но анализируют и интерпретируют содержание хуже. Таким образом, в вуз студенты приходят часто с недостаточно сформированными навыками чтения и анализа текста, иногда они не в состоянии понять текст и интерпретировать его. Особенно это касается художественных текстов, где смысл никогда не бывает выражен напрямую." (Nikolayeva, 2008). Very similarly formulates A.B. Biryukova her experience concerning the students' ability to perceive the full range of meanings and aesthetic values of literary works of art in such a case when the literary text shall be read in a foreign language: "[...] ни изложение биографии автора, ни описание околелитературных событий не является собственно литературой. Представление о художественном языке, авторском стиле, то есть о том, что делает текст собственно литературным, остается для многих иностранцев мифологемой. Нередки случаи,

когда Пушкин или Булгаков знакомы иностранному учащемуся по переводам на иные (родные) языки, а предложение прочитать эти тексты в оригинале вызывают состояние культурного шока. Причина одна: и иностранец, изучающий русский язык, и русскоговорящий учащийся рассматривают литературу в основном со стороны сюжетной линии, нарратива. Знание сюжета художественного текста, чему способствуют и многочисленные экранизации, снимает познавательный интерес и невольно отменяет эстетическое, эмоционально-чувственное восприятие текста.“ (Biryukova, 2015).

The two most important decisions concerning the reading-book

All the factors mentioned above led us to the decision to prepare a reading-book containing texts by Russian writers. Immediately after making this initial decision, two very important questions arose: first, the question as to what the goals of the reading book should be, and second, the question as to how many texts should be included within it.

The question of goals was the easier one to answer. Our many years of experience suggested immediately which areas would be most relevant in assisting students to develop their abilities, so as to broaden their understanding of the meaning of literary texts, and of the various forms of literary works. Our decision was to concentrate on texts which could be used as:

- extracts to lectures focused on Russian literature from the second half of the 19th century and from the first half of the 20th century;
- a “digest” of works by the most inspiring writers of those times;
- examples of themes frequently depicted by the Russian writers of that period;
- demonstration of various literary movements of that period;
- case studies for the interpretation of the meaning of those literary texts;
- an incentive to learn more about the authors, about the nature of certain literary movements and about those qualities which comprise a literary work of art;
- a means of improving knowledge of the Russian language.

Our wide variety of goals, when considered in conjunction with the limited amount of publishing space available, made it quite difficult to decide which texts could or should be included in the reading-book. This required us to make difficult decisions. A primary consideration in the decision-making process was that it would probably be best for students to be provided with complete texts – some extracts from longer texts would not be sufficient for them to be able to comprehensively cover the plot, the meaning and the specific formal features of the respective texts. Prior experience led us to the decision to include only short, prosaic texts (i.e. short stories). We excluded the idea of including poetry: the complicated language of poems, and their complexity of formal features, would be an obstacle for the student to take in all of the subtleties of the text. Similar problems could arise in the case of plays: even were only short dramatic works to be used, it could prove difficult for the students to simultaneously follow the scene changes and cast of characters on the one hand, and to follow the author’s intentions on the other.

Conversely, short stories typically offer less complicated situations, characters and formal techniques. They also typically employ an uncomplicated plot for the reader to navigate. For the student of Russian as a foreign language, it is easier to understand the language of a short story as a prosaic work of art. Another important consideration in the decision to include only short stories was the fact that many famous Russian writers of the chosen period wrote short stories and were concerned with themes which highlight the social and cultural atmosphere of that time.

The selection of the short stories for the reading-book

The next step was the selection of texts, which was a very complicated process. The reading-book was intended for one-semester classes (i.e. for about 15 weeks of teaching) which meant choosing about 15 short stories. By the end of this process, we had selected the following 16 short stories, a selection which comprises both better-known and lesser-known authors, so as to give a good sense of the richness and variety of Russian literature from this period.

The following short stories were chosen for the final selection:

Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev: Mumu (Муму)

Sergei Nikolaevich Sergeev-Tsensky: Diphtheria (Дифтерит)

Vsevolod Mikhailovich Garshin: Attalea princeps

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy: Father Sergius (Отец Сергий)

Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov: In the mirror (В зеркале)

Nikolai Semenovich Leskov: Concerning the “Kreutzer Sonata” (По поводу «Крейцеровой сонаты»)

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: Unter Prishibeev (Унтер Пришибеев)

Ivan Alekseevich Bunin: Easy breathing (Легкое дыхание)

Leonid Nikolaevich Andreev: Rules of Good (Правила добра)

Fedor Sologub: Worm (Червяк)

Alexander Serafimovich Serafimovich: Sands (Пески)

Mikhail Petrovich Artsybashev: Horror (Ужас)

Maxim Gorky: In the steppe (В степи)

Skitalets (Stepan Gavrilovich Petrov): Revenge (Местъ)

Evgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin: Martyrs of Science (Мученики науки)

Teffi (Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Lokhvitskaya-Buchinskaya): Dog (Собака).

The fact that all of the above works are in the public domain (i.e. no longer under copyright) was another reason for their ultimate inclusion.

The exercises connected with the chosen texts

As a means of helping the students find a coherent way to understand and interpret the texts, it was also necessary to prepare some questions related to the texts. These questions were produced with the intention of motivating the students to get acquainted not only with the text itself, but also with its author, with the literary movement to which it belongs, and even with some theoretical notions that are either entirely new to the students, or which they had learnt at secondary school but subsequently forgotten. The questions were also designed with the intention of motivating students to identify certain details which are unique to the respective stories, drawing their attention to particular aspects of the text which might otherwise be overlooked were such a guideline not available. The emphasis of these questions was placed not on the plots of the respective short stories, nor on the ability of the students to summarise them, but rather on the students' ability to recognise certain qualities of the text, certain details of the narrative technique. In the case of lesser-known authors, the questions were designed to lead the students to the biographical details of his/her life and to his/her status in Russian literature.

In such a way, students are instructed not only to read the texts, but also to seek out additional information which can help them to properly situate the text within the dynamic process of Russian literary and social development, as well as its connection to broader European trends.

As a means of illustrating what kind of tasks the students are confronted with while working with the reading-book, we here provide an example. The following instructions and questions appear after the text of Artsybashev's short story, Ужас:

- 1) Mikhail Petrovich Artsybashev is not a well-known writer. Get acquainted with his life and name his most famous works.
- 2) To which literary trend are his works dated?
- 3) What was the fate of M.P. Artsybashev after 1917? Where did he pass away?
- 4) Which works by M.P. Artsybashev were translated into Slovak? When they were translated / printed?
- 5) What is remarkable about the beginning of the story called “in medias res”?
- 6) To what extent can this story be considered a criticism of the established order? What exactly is depicted in the story?
- 7) Find the means by which the atmosphere of something negative, oppressive, terrifying is created in the story.
- 8) Contrasts are common in the story – find as many of them as possible and point out their role in the text.
- 9) By what means does the author convey / portray the speech of drunks?
- 10) How are the thoughts of the characters conveyed in the text of the story? How does this method fit the category of an all-knowing storyteller?
- 11) In the story, hints are often found, much is called indirectly. Give examples of such an indirect representation of events.
- 12) Which details depicted in the text of the story can be considered naturalistic? Why do you think so?
- 13) Most of the characters are not named by name and patronymic. How are they named? What does it do?
- 14) Which writer is close to M.P. Artsybashev by the way of depicting the action, by the style of narration?

The instructions and questions apply to the aforementioned text, but they differ substantially in focus so as to cover a relatively wide range of literary elements, which helps train students to recognise them when they are reading a literary work.

The use of the reading-book in the seminar classes and the first impressions of it

We have already been using the reading-book for two academic years, and we use it in the following way. In the very first class we present the reading-book to the students, instructing them how to use it and how to work with it. The texts and the instructions/questions contained in the reading-book are then used to guide students during their preparation for the seminar classes. We stress the necessity of individual preparation, of getting the students to acquaint themselves with the sources they can use to find answers to the questions. We also present how the seminars are to be conducted in the ensuing weeks.

At the beginning of each seminar, the students are encouraged to present their opinion of the assigned text and to answer the questions: in this way do they prove their comprehension of the text. Thereafter follows the discussion, in which we tend not to interfere until it has come to an end. Sometimes we provoke the students to continue the discussion by posing questions, opposing the students' views, drawing attention to some peculiarities in the text, presenting our own opinions about certain details, providing quotations made by other authors about the text, and so on. Only at the end do we summarise complex views and evaluate the discussion. In the event that the discussion has not led to any meaningful conclusion, we will then try to help the students formulate one. Up to now, we have contradicted with the students' views to a full extent only in very rare cases.

The first impressions from the students of the reading-book are quite interesting. During the first few seminars, the students were somewhat afraid to present their views, and they typically

expressed themselves in only a few sentences. It seemed they were not convinced that anybody would listen to their “unprofessional” analysis. Similarly, they looked for the information needed to answer questions concerning literary terms or historic data mostly on Wikipedia. Only after 3-4 seminars did the students begin to believe that they were really allowed to have their own views, that we as teachers would not press them to adopt some fixed, “correct” analyses of the text, or of answers to the questions. Sometimes it was necessary to demonstrate to the students where to look in the text for signals of irony, of doubts, to show the power of the description of the nonverbal signals in the texts. But subsequent seminars were livelier: the students were mostly better prepared, and their fear to present their own views slowly disappeared. The students’ knowledge of literary terms, of the story’s historical background, of the features of the literary movement to which the work belonged and of the biography of the author, helped them to gradually gain a deeper insight into the form and meaning of the texts, and into the evolution of literature. While they weren’t always rewarded with happy endings to the stories, when we saw how often the students digressed from discussing a given text and began to relate the particular topics, problems and questions that the text raised to their contemporary situations, we could see that they were encountering the text not as a sterile or obsolete work of art, but rather as a catalyst to think and feel. Nevertheless, they did make one request that we were unable to fulfil: for texts that were more optimistic. Perhaps we will be able to include some happier endings in the next edition of the reading-book.

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