

LITERATURE AND CREATIVE WRITING PROJECTS

VIERA ELIAŠOVÁ*

Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia

ABSTRACT

The article reflects on teaching literature in Slovak secondary schools with reference to literature and creative writing projects, on the need for a change in our attitude in teacher training to one focused much more on teacher development. The article attempts to show the objectives of teaching creative writing and literature, looks into the background of initiating the two programmes and attempts to identify the main tasks facing the teachers and teacher trainers.

KEY WORDS

Change in attitudes, developmental training, students' self-expression, students' self-reflection, teachers' and students' self-construction, process-centred teaching.

RESUMEN

Este artículo versa sobre la literatura que se enseña en las respectivas lenguas extranjeras en las escuelas secundarias eslovacas. Presenta dos proyectos: La Literatura presentada en la lengua extranjera y La Escritura creativa. Para la realización de ambos proyectos en la enseñanza se necesita una preparación especial de los maestros. El artículo indica los objetos y motivos de enseñanza en lo respectivo a la problemática de los proyectos. Tiene por objeto también el especificar la tarea que espera a los maestros y sus instructores.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cambio de postura, entrenamiento evolutivo, autoexpresión de estudiantes, autorreflexión de estudiantes, autoformación de estudiantes y maestros, enseñanza orientada al proceso creativo.

* Viera Eliašová is a teacher and university lecturer at Comenius University in Bratislava and an in-service teacher trainer for secondary school teachers.. Previously she taught at secondary school in Bratislava. She is an editor of the Creative Writing Handbook and has published a number of articles on the teaching of literature and creative writing. Among her other interests is managing and choreographing a highly successful dance group with an international reputation.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article reflète l'enseignement de la littérature aux lycées slovaques présentant deux projets: a) littérature dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères, et b) écrit créatif dans le même genre d'enseignement. Il met en évidence la nécessité des innovations dans l'approche à la formation suivante des enseignants où la priorité essentielle consiste dans le développement individuel de l'enseignant. L'article traduit les priorités dans l'enseignement de l'écrit créatif et aussi de la littérature en réfléchissant sur les raisons et les objectifs qui mènent vers leur insertion postérieure dans l'enseignement en général. L'article esquisse les tâches et les objectifs qui se dressent devant les enseignants et ceux qui les forment.

MOTS-CLÉ

Changements des attitudes, entraînement dans le développement, auto-expression de l'étudiant, auto-réflexion de l'étudiant, auto-formation de l'enseignant et de l'étudiant, enseignement centré sur le processus.

In 1999/2000 two projects were started in Slovakia. The first one **Creative Writing in Language Learning (CWILL) in Schools in Central Europe** is a widely conceived project initiated and run by the British Council. Its ambition is to address a large range of professionals –writers' organisations, writers, teacher trainers and teachers from Slovakia, Great Britain and Central European countries. The second project **Using Literature in ELT Classroom and Creative Approaches to Language Learning** is the INSET course, run by the Methodological Centre in Bratislava with the target audience of secondary school teachers (including 8 years gymnazia).

Even though the two projects have different statuses, organisational form and address different audiences, they have a lot of things in common, mainly from the point of view of the objectives, the background of initiating the two programmes and the tasks facing the teacher trainers.

THE MAIN OBJECTIVES

- to encourage the development of English language skills,
- to help learners to explore their own creative as well as empathic abilities,
- to encourage learners' personal growth by means of exploring and expressing their own perception and experience,
- to raise learners' interest in reading and writing,

- to get them to feel pleasure in the work that language can generate (at the level of production as well as at the level of perception),
- to promote learners' cultural enrichment,
- to open a window on to the curriculum in Slovak schools for the introduction of a creativity component into language teaching,

THE BACKGROUND OF INITIATING THE PROJECTS

Educational strategy at schools is oriented mainly towards rational activity and cognitive efficiency, it neglects the emotional side of development, social and personal self-reflection of students.

In Slovak secondary schools there is an over-emphasis on oral skills and functional language, as it is commonly supposed that the communicative capacity of the learners is reflected mainly in speaking skills and can be evaluated by means of exams based on oral presentation and grammatical accuracy. Writing and reading are considered to be less important.

The over-emphasis on oral skills is then reflected in a consequent weakness in the more complex cultural and fine arts content of the English curriculum. The culture of English speaking countries is mediated and learned almost exclusively by the sum of facts and ready-made information while contact with people' beliefs, ideals, values and their self-reflection in works of art is neglected.

In secondary school practice literature has been either totally excluded from the teaching of foreign languages or has been kept distinct from language learning. In the first case it has been either thought that teaching literature has nothing to do with the main goal of teaching languages, i.e. developing learner's communicative competence, or that literature is inappropriate for teaching language skills because of its linguistic, cultural, conceptual and perception difficulties. When it has been taught, the most common way of teaching literature has been a conventional approach, very often connected just with providing students with a lot of informative materials (critical concepts, socio-historical background and biographical information). The works of art have been declaratively "adored" but not read.

THE TASKS FACING THE TEACHER TRAINERS AND TEACHERS

From the point of view of teacher training this means looking for ways of implementing the ideas and ambitions of the projects into

teaching practice and of making them effective. On a practical level it means for a teacher trainer to focus not only on knowledge and skills transmission (the *whats* and *hows* of teaching literature and creative writing), but mainly on developing and influencing teachers, as they ought to understand the necessity of changes, the reasons and background of introducing creative writing and literature into ELT classes: they ought to understand the *whys* in the whole complexity. At the first stage it means encouraging the teachers to reshape and redefine their own teaching activities and efforts in many aspects. At the final stage it means encouraging them to take part in the process of reshaping the whole educational strategy, content and forms of teaching in Slovak secondary schools.

Having in mind humanistic tendencies, connected with school education, it is important to change a student from the object of teaching, a pure "reproductive mechanism" into an independent subject, a partner in learning process, i.e. into a *living* being who thinks, acts, creates, feels, evaluates, expects, who learns by experiencing and interiorizing. Reading of literature provides the students with background material - ideas, myths, legends, cultural memory of mankind, etc., and creative writing provides the students with the possibility of self-expression.

It is important to get the teachers away from their preconceptions about teaching literature. The teachers often subconsciously reproduce their own experience from being the students themselves. Having in their minds, for instance, the reading of Beowulf at the very beginning of their acquaintance with English literature is rather demotivating and results in an unwillingness to start using literature in ELT classrooms. A shift from their possible bad personal experience towards openness and readiness to welcome work with literary texts as a new challenge is therefore a factor of crucial importance.

Another important fact is to make the teachers understand that language and literature teaching and learning can and should complement, not exclude one another, that they can and should be understood as interacting elements, that a great benefit can be achieved from better understanding the continuities between the study of the language and the study of the literature written in this language. They ought to understand that literary text is language in use, it is a non-trivial, valuable authentic material open to multiple interpretation and can therefore be used in foreign language acquisition practice.

When speaking about the place of literature in ELT classroom, it is necessary to realize, that there are different approaches to the use of this kind of texts. Some of the approaches use literary texts mainly for general language improvement. In this case literary text is treated in ways which may not be radically different from the ways in which any other kind of text is treated: text serves primarily as a source and stimulus for various language activities in order to develop reading comprehension, speaking and writing skills. Another approach underlines learner's personal growth –literary text is dealt with in such ways as to help students to get involved with the text, to get students to explore and express their own perceptions and experience, to help them to explore their own empathic as well as creative abilities.

The teaching of creative writing integrates with current teaching of both language and literature. Creative writing techniques serve to reinforce desirable goals in both spheres, i.e. verbal and written language expression, skills in decoding oral and written language, basic comprehension, analytical abilities, literary interpretation. Creative writing may be understood in two basic ways. It may be the main and final teaching focus: after providing the students with some models of literary texts, followed by descriptive structural, stylistic or thematic analysis and interpretation, the students are encouraged to generate their own images, perceptions, original language patterns, to explore their creative abilities. On the other hand creative writing may play the role of motivating entry into the text, a means for encouraging personal involvement with the text; or it may have the function of follow-up activities aimed at the creative implementation of some ideas acquired from the work with literary text. Any form of incorporating creative writing into work with literary texts helps students to understand the literary texts from inside.

As any interpretative and creative work is based on different understanding, it is important to encourage teachers to be open to pluralism of opinions. The orientation of the methods used in work with creative writing and literary texts should be aimed not at teacher- and product-centredness but at student- and process-centred activities. The teachers should understand that creative reading and writing provides a genuine ground for a multi-transactional process between reader-writer student-teacher and their creative writing into the texts. There is no end to the process of decoding a text, of revealing layer after layer of its meaning, its influences, its life in the interior world of the student.

It is important to encourage the teachers to understand that implementing creative writing or creative work with literary texts requires a different attitude to students' assessment and evaluation, as not the result, but the process leading to it is important. Misunderstanding, puzzlement, honest attempts with questionable outcomes or even no outcomes ought to be regarded as legitimate and important elements of learning. The creative process enabling students self-expression and self-reflection counts in the long run.

I was present at three 4-hours creative writing workshops, carried out by two British Council lecturers and a visiting poet from Britain, Kevin Crossley-Holland in a common secondary school classroom. Even though the students had no previous experience with creative writing (initiated by poetry or prose) they reacted naturally and created marvellous fresh and unconventional poems and stories. To my surprise those students who were according to standardized tests regarded to be very poor, were as active and creative as their "excellent" peers. They had, perhaps, more grammatical mistakes or not so rich vocabulary, but their motivation, efforts and self-confidence were comparable with the others.

It would be useful to encourage the teachers to understand, that their role should be that of a facilitator, to encourage them to learn the pedagogical metalanguage of facilitating (as opposed to manipulating).

Having in mind the complexity of such changes in teacher thinking the role of teacher trainer is far from easy.

Many of those teachers who attend methodological seminars (unfortunately there is no obligatory form of INSETT training in Slovakia) come to the seminars in order to gain new ideas they can try out "tomorrow" in their classrooms. The motivation of these teachers is easy to understand and definitely not to be condemned. Anyway, our attitude (of the teacher trainers) is sometimes similar: "This is what I do in my classroom so this is what I would get the teachers do".

The trainer's efforts should not be reflected just in helping other teachers to make their classroom routine fresher, to make small corrections and "cosmetic changes" in their teaching practice.

All the changes should be seen from a developmental view of teacher trainer's efforts. According to Donald Freeman's specification of training and development (*TESOL QUARTERLY*, Vol. 23, No. 1, March 1989), the main difference between these two main educational strategies is seeing *training* as a direct intervention by the teacher trainer to work on specific aspects of the teacher's teaching (mainly in the level of knowl-

edge and skills), while *development* is a strategy of influence and indirect intervention that works on complex, integrated aspects of teaching (mainly in the level of attitudes and awareness).

Implementing literature and creative writing into the ELT classroom requires more than training, more than knowledge and skills transmission, it needs to generate in teachers change in attitudes (towards themselves, teaching content, teaching activity and students) and awareness of how the new or changed attitudes are productive.

It cannot be carried out by providing the trainees with directive instructions, recipes or models that can be directly copied, on materials coming only from outside.

Using a developmental approach the teacher trainer should generate qualitative changes in beliefs and expectations, initiate a continual and open process of the teacher's self-reflection, self-education and self-construction.

And not only that. The teachers who have started the process of reshaping and redefining the teaching content and forms should play the role of change agents among their colleagues teaching English, other foreign languages as well as among native language teachers.

To be more detailed about the particular steps to be taken in developmental education of teachers is rather difficult, because concrete forms of this work depend on a wide range of various factors, for instance, different types of schools, different language competence of students, different teacher's experience in creative work, etc. Anyway, a few general principles of the educational process of influencing could be mentioned:

- any shifts, stated above, connected with teacher's reevaluation of the content and forms, with attitudes and awareness, should be first of all in the minds of teacher trainers,

- the process of changes should start by clarifying and expanding the teacher's awareness of what that teacher is doing and why,

- the solutions should be again generated by the teacher, based on the teacher's awareness and understanding of the situation,

- a teacher trainer should not play the role of a knower, but of a co-operator, or a facilitator, working with the trainees on a partnership level,

- no model could be used as the only working one, developmental shifts should not be carried out by copying of the teacher trainer's mod-

el or attitude, but by creating teacher's own one, the emphasis should be on trainee's design,

- teacher trainers and trainees should look for effective ways working together,
- some of the materials, especially in the final phase, should be generated from the trainees,
- changes can be achieved by constant attention, critical evaluation and involvement of the teacher in her/his teaching (keeping diary studies may be very effective),
- sharing personal teaching experience may facilitate evaluation of achieved changes,
- results of the changes cannot be seen or expected within a short period of time.