

The Rate of Understanding of Texts by Lower-Secondary School Pupils on the Example of Publications on the Topic of a Multilateral View of Shoah Events

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Abstract: *The first part of the article is devoted to the presentation of the need to acquaint pupils and students with a multilateral view of the Shoah or Holocaust events. We focused mainly on the potential of this approach in connection with the development of desirable axiological values of young recipients and in the connotation with the development of their skills associated with critical thinking. In the middle of the article there is a presentation of selected results of a research survey, the aim of which was to determine the rate of reception and interpretation of selected texts, in which a multilateral view of the events of one line of the Second World War is themed. The respondents of the research were lower-secondary school pupils. Pupils from each year filled in a specific questionnaire, which included a sample from one publication, which mentioned five or six questions that examined various aspects of the reception and interpretation of the artistic narrative. In the article, we present the results of those items within which we determined the level of understanding in the questionnaire postulated excerpt. If we compare the results of questions focused on comprehension of the text between all participating years, we must state that the difference in comprehension of the text depending on the age of the tested pupils did not manifest itself significantly. The pupils' answers to some extent reflected the different levels of factual knowledge that pupils from individual grades have. This aspect is, in our opinion, very important for an adequate reception of such focused texts.*

Key Word: *Shoah; Holocaust; Reception; Interpretation; Lower-Secondary School; Multilateral View; Research Survey.*

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I. Introduction

In this paper, we present the results of a research survey, which focused on determining the rate of reception and interpretation of artistic narratives, in the center of which is the phenomenon of the Shoah. At present, there is a certain rise in fiction publications, which represent the experience of the events of the Second World War from the position of persons of Jewish nationality. We agree that this group of people was most affected by Nazi stigmatization and persecution practices, on the other hand, this approach in essence leads to a certain flattening of the view of the Shoah or Holocaust events, in the direction of a certain narrow focus of such oriented presentation. Connoted with current global needs related to, for example, the need to actively maintain a democratic political establishment, to fight for the rights of various minorities, to oppose authoritarian political regimes, to draw attention to the equality of all people before the law or in connection with the migration crisis which is currently somewhat delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but still has not disappeared, to point out the warnings that the Shoah or Holocaust phenomena present to us, not only in connection with their experience by Jews, but multilaterally, i.e. the focus of the various national or religious groups affected by Nazi politics. It is the multilateral view of defined events that, in addition to the desired axiological values, can develop other positive qualities in pupils and students, which they will undoubtedly use in their future lives. It is mainly about developing skills not to make unsubstantiated judgments, avoiding a schematic view of certain events, eliminating one-sided opinions without the ability to listen to others and, last but not least, developing the ability of art-related argumentation techniques to defend one's opinions, critical thinking and ability to find relevant information and evaluate the sources from which it comes.

We believe that literary texts, centered on a multilateral view of Shoah events, have considerable potential to develop not only these skills, which are very important in today's increasingly globalizing world, but also to identify events of the Second World War from a historical point of view. Of course, we are aware that many teachers integrate examples from various literary forms into the teaching of this subject, which in our opinion supports our thesis. In connection with this statement, it should be mentioned that teachers must carefully distinguish between historical and literary truth. The historical one, as a factual and recognized record

of a given situation, must be reconciled with literary truth in the line of expressing the essence of a specific event and at the same time give sufficient space to literary expression as a means of storytelling... (Lindquist, 2008; compare Lindquist, 2010; Lindquist, 2013). In our opinion, this aspect is also very important, because the impact of the sounding of the mentioned phenomena presented by means of artistic narratives can be higher than the “mere” list of factual and other data, for example in the History lessons. Regarding Kokkola (2003), many works contain peritexts that inform recipients about how much of the text is based on historical evidence and how many are based on imagination or unsubstantiated findings, thus mixing historiography with fiction. According to Kokkola (2003), the given trends are not surprising, because teachers are encouraged to use Shoah-literature to supplement the teaching of History.

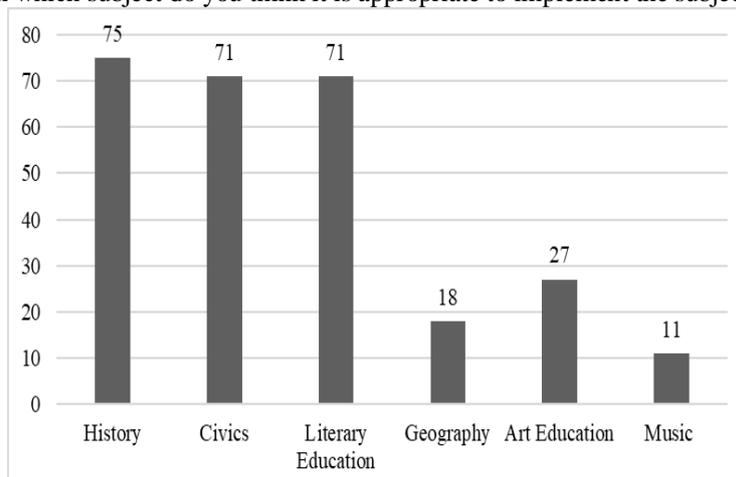
II. Research Background

The main goal of the research was to determine the rate of reception and interpretation of selected texts, in which the multilateral view of the Shoah events is thematized. We perceive the level of understanding of fiction texts as the ability of the recipients to reveal in the narrative the messages contained in it, to connect the artistic narrative with their own life and to relate the warnings to current world events. Finally, we tried to find out how much factual data the tested students have. In the Czech Republic, students of basic institutional education are acquainted with the period of the Second World War within the educational field of History in the 9th year, i.e. the last, year of compulsory school education, within the thematic unit “Modern Times”. Due to this fact, we are aware that respondents from lower grades who participated in the research, even due to this fact, from our point of view cannot have sufficient basic facts from the historical stage. However, we are convinced that pupils are acquainted with defined phenomena in other subjects as well, for example in the cross-sectional topic¹ of Democratic Education, Multicultural Education or Education for Thinking in European and Global Contexts, cross-sectionally throughout the second stage of basic institutional education.

One of the results of the research survey, through which we wanted to find out the opinion of teachers of the educational field of Czech Language and Literature working professionally on the lower-secondary schools for the implementation of the subject of the Shoah in the teaching of Literary Education (for research methodology and other results, see Mašát, 2019a; Mašát, 2019b; Mašát, 2019c or Mašát & Sladová, 2019). Within the questionnaire item, the teachers tested the teachers in which educational fields in their opinion it is appropriate to include the subject of the Shoah. We present the results in Table no 1.

With regard to the aspects outlined above, we believe that even pupils who did not attend the last year of basic education at the time of the research survey have a certain amount of basic information about the period of the Second World War.

Table no 1: In which subject do you think it is appropriate to implement the subject of the Shoah?



¹ Faltýn et al. (2021, pp. 132) characterize cross-sectional topics as follows: “Cross-sectional topics represent (...) areas of current problems of the contemporary world and become an important and integral part of basic education. They are an important formative element of basic education; they create opportunities for individual application of pupils and for their mutual cooperation and they help to develop the pupil’s personality especially in the area of attitudes and values.”

III. Research Survey Methodology

The research survey, the partial results of which are in the middle of our paper, was carried out using a non-standardized questionnaire. The questionnaire for pupils from individual years was specific, a unique research tool was compiled for each group of respondents. The questionnaire consisted of a sample from one publication, which deals with a multilateral view of the Shoah or Holocaust events, which was accompanied by five or six questions, in which we determined the rate of understanding of the narrative, depth of interpretation and in connection with the topic of the excerpt also the current knowledge of the tested pupils about the Second World War. At the end of the questionnaire, there was a section in which we found out basic demographic data about students relevant to the evaluation of questionnaires, we found out whether the passage with which the tested students worked was considered long or short and whether the research participants read books in their free time. We also researched whether the students would like to read the entire book from which the sample was excerpted. For the evaluation of the questionnaires, the decisive year is the age affiliation of the respondents, not their age.

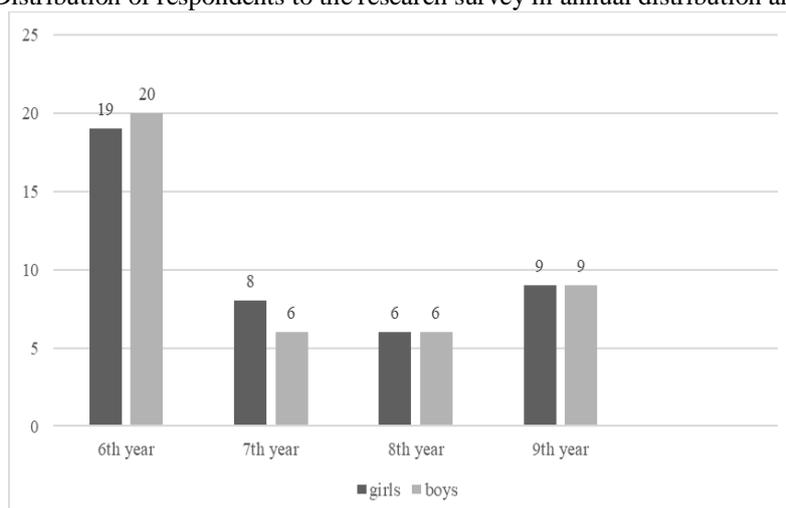
Pupils from the 6th grade worked with an excerpt from Danny Wattin's publication *The Treasure of Mr. Isakowitz* (2014). Multilateralism is depicted in the publication on several levels: on the one hand in the line of trauma of survivors of forced residence in extermination camps or on the part of the approach of the state to which they wanted to emigrate.

Participants in the 7th year research survey worked with an excerpt from Erich Hackl's publication *Farewell Sidonia* (2001). The multilateral view of the events of one line of the Second World War is thematized here through a somewhat delayed issue of the Roma Holocaust. Tapio Tamminen (2020, pp. 73) notes: "It was not until the 1980s that historians turned their attention to the mass murder of Roma. Estimates speak of 500,000 to 1.5 million victims of the Porajmos [term for the Roma Holocaust, article author's note]. For example, according to a report by The *International Organization for Migration* 3.5 million people were murdered. No matter where the exact number is between the two estimates, the Roma have been murdered at least as intensely as the Jews in relation to their ethnic numbers."

Pupils from the 8th grade worked with an excerpt from Ruta Sepetys' book *Salt to the Sea* (2016). The multilateral view of selected events of the Second World War emerges from this publication mainly due to the excellent author's intention, by looking at similar events with the focus of the four above-mentioned characters. Due to their previous life, their pre-war experience, each person interprets the event in different ways, based on their social status before the Second World War and during this war or in the connotation with their backcloth. It is at this point that we see a key aspect of why this publication should be part of the reading of children and adolescents in the field of literary events of the Shoah or the Holocaust.

The multilateralism in the area of the Shoah in the publication *Between Shades of Gray* (2013) by Ruta Sepetys, with which the participants of the 9th grade work, is represented by a different view of supporters of the Nazi regime, specifically its army. The people of the Baltic countries and Finland see it as their savior from Soviet terror, as their liberators. This fact is quite understandable: the inhabitants of these countries felt practically the persecution of the Soviet Union, for the time being they learn about the actions of the German army only by hearsay, while the fact that Hitler's troops strongly oppose communism is excerpted from the assumptions. They have not yet heard of the Nazi extermination policy against persons of Jewish nationality, they consider the case to be marginal, because the majority Baltic society is not an active follower of Judaism. A total of 83 pupils from all grades of the second stage of basic institutional education took part in the survey. There was a total of 39 pupils from the 6th year, 14 from the 7th year, 12 from the 8th year and a total of 18 pupils from the 9th year. A more detailed differentiation of respondents is shown in Table no 2.

Table no 2: Distribution of respondents to the research survey in annual distribution and their gender.



IV. Results and Discussion

The results of the described research, which are at the center of this part of our paper, demonstrate the rate of understanding of selected narratives by the tested pupils in connotation with the desired wording in the questionnaires of the implemented excerpts.

In the 6th year questionnaire, the processes of comprehension of the text were monitored in two questions: *Who is the narrator of the story?* and *When can the work take place?* To the first postulated question, the respondents answered:

- “Mr Isakowitz;
- Leo;
- Leo’s sibling;
- Leo’s daddy;
- dad;
- mom;
- grandfather;
- grandson;
- the son is the narrator of one part and the father is the narrator of the other part”.

Most of the answers related to one of the family members, which is not surprising given the content of the passage. The answers of the respondents again point to their ability to search for the desired information in the text and to some extent to relate it to the overall sound of the sample.

The answers to the second question were:

- “during or after World War II;
- home;
- 1975;
- morning in the kitchen;
- after war;
- in Germany;
- 1945”.

Although the semantic field of the phrase “at war” or “during the war” filled the most answers, the results of this item demonstrate that first-year students in the second stage of basic institutional education do not yet have a sufficient amount of factual events related to the Second World War.

Some answers also point to the fact that pupils compensated for their knowledge deficit by trying to find a certain clue in the text, so the answers are given, for example, “morning in the kitchen” or “at home”. This fact again manifests a relatively high degree of ability of tested pupils from this year to search for the required information in the text.

To understand the text and to find out the level of skill of searching for information by the tested pupils, the question was asked for those from the 7th grade *What did you learn about Sidonia?* Respondents entered the questionnaire:

- “that she is a little girl married to the Roma;
- she is probably Romani;
- that she did not want to go to her mother, she is a Romani woman, she took the train away;
- she was an unhappy Roma woman;

Roma

- it was a little girl who was separated from her parents and taken away by train, she was probably a woman;
- Sidonia is a Romani woman who has no parents;
- is of Roma origin, she is 10 years old, she did not want to go back to her family;
- that she has been adopted;
- Sidonia didn't have the best fate, but she couldn't blame her, she had to be helped by a social worker".

Based on the pupils' answers to the above question, it can be stated that the respondents from the 7th grade were able to search for the required information in the text, which they connected in most cases.

The level of understanding of the sample among respondents from the 8th year was determined through the question *What did you learn about Joana?* Pupils answered:

- "it was a girl who fled, worked in a hospital;
- was from a wealthy family, had shoes for her mother and worked in a hospital;
- lost her mother while fleeing Lithuania;
- her mother gave her shoes;
- belongs to refugees, is from Lithuania;
- she was fleeing with 15 refugees, she was from a wealthy family, when she and her mother were fleeing from Lithuania, so she was left alone in Inserburg and has not known about herself for 4 years".

Student replicas demonstrate the ability of recipients to focus on the required section of the sample, which is one of the basic prerequisites for a correct understanding of the text. After the respondents focused on the relevant section, they had no problem extracting information from it that enabled them to answer the postulated question in a qualified manner.

For respondents from the 9th grade, the level of understanding was determined by the question *Who is the narrator of the story?* Recipients wrote:

- "woman;
- Andrius;
- Ona;
- daughter of Jonas".

The answers given point to a certain dispersion of students' answers. In our opinion, this situation may be caused by a relatively demanding composition of this narrative, which students from a given year have not yet encountered in most cases. On the other hand, we believe that this fact to some extent ensures the identical position of the tested students, and thus a certain informative value of the research survey, not only the parts that were focused on understanding the text.

V. Conclusion

In the first part of the paper, we presented the need to present a multilateral view of the Shoah or Holocaust events to pupils and students at various levels of institutional education. We focused in particular on the potential of this approach in connection with the development of desirable axiological values of young recipients, awareness of basic democratic principles that are to some extent threatened in current global events, and also in the connotation of developing critical thinking skills, by developing argumentation techniques or with the ability to critically assess data and refine the view of various information sources.

We are convinced that artistic narratives thematizing a multilateral view of specific events, which can be represented, for example, by presenting the impact of stigmatizing or persecuting practices of Nazi policy during World War II on ethnic or religious groups other than Jews. We realize that the primary victims of perverted Nazi ideas were Jews, but the recipients should not be exposed to such a relatively narrow focus of literary texts. It is the application of different views on given phenomena in narratives that can lead to the development of the above-mentioned student abilities and skills. We also briefly mentioned the possible implementation of defined phenomena in other subjects than only in History, which is intended for the purpose of the history of events.

In the middle of the article there is a presentation of selected results of a research survey, the aim of which was to find out the rate of reception and interpretation of selected texts, in which a multilateral view of the events of one line of the Second World War is themed. The respondents of the research were lower-secondary school pupils (i.e. 6th–9th grades). Pupils from each year filled in a specific questionnaire, which included a sample from one publication, which listed five or six questions that identified various aspects of the reception and interpretation of the artistic narrative. In the article, we present the results of those items within which we determined the rate of understanding of the postulated passage.

If we compare the results of such focused questions between all participating grades, we must state that there was no significant difference in the understanding of the text depending on the grade of the tested pupils. They all master this basic technique of reading literacy at a level that has enabled them to adequately answer the

postulated question, depending on their previous reading experience or cognitive maturity. The answers to some extent reflected the different levels of factual knowledge that students from individual grades have, and which in our opinion are very important for a reasonable reception of such focused texts.

In this paper, we have tried to demonstrate the potential of publications that deal with a multilateral view of the Shoah or Holocaust events. We focused mainly on the range of possible development of various abilities and skills of pupils, the mastery of which is indisputably desirable in today's society, through these narratives. In addition to the possible use of these texts at this level, we believe that students should also be acquainted with some events of World War II from other points of view than from the point of view of persons of Jewish nationality, which may lead to the formation of their desired personality profile.

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