EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR LITERARY EDUCATION ON LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL (LIFT-2 PROJECT)

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Key worlds: literary education, educational content, literary educational conception, reading education, reading levels, child as a reader, secondary school.

Abstract: The article reviews one of the European Comenius multilateral project: *Literature Framework for Teachers Secondary Education* (LIFT-2). The applicant of the project is the Royal University of Groningen, Holland, and has six partners: Holland, Germany, Czech Republic, Romania, Portugal and Finland. One of the aims of the project is to contribute to the meaningful literary education by defining different reading levels from two perspectives: 1. text itself and 2.the reader.

Introduction: why to establish different reader´s levels

The contemporary literary education in many European countries is still dominated by literary history and pure knowledge about literature (text, author, history) but the general movement seems to go towards the child / reader as the subject of the education. If we accept the literary education focused on the reader, we have to find the precise aims and categories related to the text as the proper content of literary education. One of the efficient instrument of such oriented literary education that respects child as a reader is to define different levels of the reading. If we, as teachers, are aware of different ways how to read the text, we can introduce our pupils / students to the real textual problems and to the sense of the text more effectively.

Introducing the LIFT-2 project

In this article, we would like to introduce one of the European multilateral projects, compiled within the Comenius program - the Literary Referential Framework for Elementary and High School Teachers. Among other things, this project standardizes reading levels for upper level of elementary school and for high schools, and via its web page provides the teachers with the opportunity to participate in polls about the reading levels. The project involves 6 countries (aside from Czech Republic, Finland, Holland, Germany, Portugal and Romania). The project leader is a Dutch reading expert from the University of Groningen, Theo Witte. The project has been in progress since October 2010, and will be finished in June 2012.

Mapping the European curricular terrain

The first necessary step of the project was to define the existing state of things; that is to examine and describe the situation in the field of education and literary education in each of the countries. It was assessed how the literary education works in the participating countries, if it is possible to find similarities, and how to deal with the differences.

First, each of the countries presented its educational system, described the formal and functional curriculum, and the position of literary education in relation to it (whether it is a separate subject – as in for example Holland, or a subject related to the teaching of the native language – as in Czech Republic). Outputs and aims of the literary education were analyzed based on the reader, text, context/author and individual reading competences (e.g. literal understanding of the text, its interpretation, evaluation etc.) ratio. Theorists from individual countries commented on whether there is an existing canon of literary works within their literary education, and whether the criteria for the text selection or the number of books to be read per year are defined. In the dissertation thesis of a Dutch post-graduate student Marijne Slager, the data concerning individual educational systems and programs were contrasted and compared; the similarities and the differences were pointed out and denominated. This analysis served as a basis for the subsequent definition of the reading levels – that is for the creation of the European literary referential framework.

The methodology of assessing the reading levels in the LIFT-2 project

Assessing the reading levels was one of the central aims of the project, and therefore it took place throughout its entirety, that is between the years 2010 – 2012. The qualitative research was conducted in two phases, national and international, in each in two rounds (one for the upper level of elementary school, and one for high schools), by combining the methods of expert opinion, annotation, and controlled discussion.

In the first phase (national level), each of the project partners (Holland, Germany, Czech Republic, Romania, Portugal and Finland) organized a day-long workshop with the teachers – experts. The teachers-experts were selected from various school types, partly based on the recommendations of the university professors and faculty colleagues (The Centre of Pedagogical Practice of Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague), and partly on the recommendations made by the principals or the teachers from the selected schools. In organizing the meeting, we aimed for a heterogeneous workgroup, i.e. a group consisting of junior, as well as senior teachers of Czech language and literature, teachers who used different teaching methods, teachers with different minor subjects, and if possible, both male and female teachers.

Before the day-long workshop, concerning the assessment of the readers´ level, we asked all the teachers who confirmed their participation, (two workshops took place, one for elementary, one for high schools, as mentioned above), to prepare sixteen books they knew from practice to be read by a significant number of their pupils/students, or which they thought appropriate to be a part of the literary education on the upper-elementary school level, or high school education. The selected titles could be both Czech and foreign; the ratio between the two was not designated. However, the books should equally reflect the demands on the reader, the variability of genre and topic, and the reading interests of both sexes.

We then compared the acquired lists of titles (from one country), analyzed them, and selected sixteen titles, which were to become the basis for the workshop discussion. We provided the teachers-experts with this list; they could now express their personal arguments for the selection of the books into levels. Subsequently, we selected a ´quintessential book´ for each level, which was agreed upon by most of the teachers-experts. Each of the experts wrote down a *quick scan* for one of the ´quintessential books´. *Quick scan*, that is a brief, but clearly structured characterization of the examined book (1-2 pages long), containing the basic information about it from both the reading and textual standpoints. This characterization led the teachers to deeper contemplation on the title and consequently to a more careful categorization.

The day-long workshop, conducted mainly in the form of a controlled discussion, was always supervised by one of the partners – project solvers. The workshop took place concurrently in each of the countries, resulting in 12 meetings overall (six countries, two times in each). The meeting was always recorded on a tape recorder, and all the key information (concerning the reading levels and related arguments) were noted down by two reporters.

The meeting was structured in the following manner: first, the teachers-experts individually compiled characteristics of the reading levels, both from the standpoint of the reader, and of the text (using the structure of the abovementioned *quick scan*). They then debated their notions of various reading levels and explained their perception, looking for accordance. Consequently, they negotiated the inclusion of particular books (from the list of 16 titles) in the individual levels based on their relative difficulty - whether they were too easy or too challenging for a particular reading level. The workshop coordinator also logged the key information in prepared charts, concerned with the four reading levels. The analysis of the acquired information then allowed us to expand the outlines produced during the meeting with further arguments and details.

In the second phase of the project (international level), we confronted the national outputs (consisting of **eight preliminary reading levels**) with each other, and specified the outcome both horizontally (the textual layer) and vertically (reading levels). The result was the **six preliminary reading levels** (see appendix), formulated in such a manner as to achieve transparency and overlapping for lower and upper secondary .

General description of the reading levels formulated within the LIFT-2 project

The reading levels were determined with regard to the age of the readers, specifically between 12 and 19 years of age, which corresponds to the upper level of elementary school, and high school, in the Czech educational system. In some states of the European Union, however, high school is finished in 18, rather than 19 years of age.

Individual reading levels, labeled by numbers 1 – 6, as well as six key attributes (experiencing reading, engaging reading, exploring reading, interpretative reading, contextualizing reading, pre-academic četba) were always formulated based on two standpoints: 1) student´s perspective and 2) the textual perspective.

From the student´s perspective we chose the categories of reading experience; *reading experience, interests, general knowledge, literary knowledge,* from the textual perspective we chose immanent textual layers: *style, character, action, chronology, storyline, perspective, meaning*. We believe that these aspects are crucial for a modern, reader-oriented literary education, which sees the text itself as the content of the literary education, and the student as an active subject of the educational process.

Upcoming web pages

The produced European literary referential framework will be published on the project web pages (in all six languages). In the first phase, each level will be assigned 10 titles (see chart 2), whose inclusion can be influenced by teachers through a poll. It is interesting to note that several books on the list were assigned to two different reading levels (it is a case of a ´reading level transcendence´); this should prompt the teachers to examine the title in relation to both these levels, and help classify the titles that are hard to categorize (those that could not be agreed upon by the teachers-experts). Furthermore, for each level, there are 2 titles from world literature, included in the lists of all six countries (for example for the third reading level of the upper elementary school, it is Orwell´s *Animal Farm*, and Tolkien´s *The Hobbit*).

Teachers can also propose additional books for various levels, and thus expand the existing lists. In the next phase of the project, each book will be provided with a characterization in the form of the abovementioned quick scan, which will be further upgraded by didactic and methodological recommendations.

Methodological support

In the final phase of the project, methodological recommendations for the teachers will be compiled, concerning the questions on how to achieve the aims of a particular reading level (and also which skill is dominantly developed by it), and which methods and activities should be included in literary education, in order for the students to gradually achieve a higher reading level.

Representative books for different reading levels

Lower secondary
Level 1 (Experiencing) C. S. Lewis: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe
Level 2 (Engaging) P. Pullman: The Golden Compass (Northern Lights)
Level 3 (Exploring) J. Gaarder: The Orange Girl
Level 4 (Interpretative reading) W. Saroyan: Tracy´s Tiger

Upper secondary 15-18
Level 1 (Experiencing) S. Meyer: Twilight
Level 2 (Engaging) P. Šabach: Shit burns (Hovno hoří)
Level 3 (Exploring) I. Dousková: Proud Budžes (Hrdý Budžes)
Level 4 (Interpretative reading) E. M. Remarque: Three camarades
Level 5 (Contextualizing reading): G. Orwell: 1984
Level 6 (Pre-academic reading): F. Kafka: Trial

Exemple of one of the reader´s levels formulated within the project LIFT-2

Level 6 (Pre-academic reading) |upper secondary 15-18| Representative book:		
STUDENTS	**Reading experience**	Have broad representations of literary texts from different epochs, styles and cultures.
	Interests	Have extensive interests; also in aesthetics, style and the authors' poetica.
	General knowledge	Have versatile historical and cultural knowledge they can use for contextualizing what they read.
	Literary knowledge	Can use different perspectives in approaching literature.
BOOKS	**Style**	Experimental, poetical and metapoetical uses of language.
	Character	The book may require to recognize references to classical archetypes.
	Action	Action is no longer the main focus of the text or it has a symbolical/implicit/more general meaning.
	Chronology	Subjective and relative chronology. Different timelines and shifts in time.
	Storyline(s)	Meta-narrative sequences exposed to the reader.
	Perspective	Changing of different perspectives is not transparent.
	Meaning	There are intertextual, meta-narrative, concrete and abstract motifs and even subtle leitmotivs to be found.

Conclusion

In the conclusion we would like to sum up the benefits and limitations of the European literary referential framework, which emerged from individual phases of the project.

The European literary framework can serve teachers as a means of monitoring the reading development of their students, for the reflection of the reading by the students, for formative, or even summative evaluation, for the students´ self-evaluation, and to motivate students towards reading. The European literary framework helps to fortify the position of reading as a part of the curriculum, a center of the literary education. We also find beneficial the involvement of teachers in the creation of this tool (book suggestions, their evaluation), and the possibility of sharing experience with other teachers.

The problematic areas were the following: deciding on a way in which to select the titles (whether the criteria should be based on the interests of the readers or the curriculum), the classification of the titles into the individual reading levels, characterizing the levels themselves (not only from the international, but also national standpoint), and ensuring the inclusion of individual reading skills (with progressive difficulty) on each reading level. We also find limiting the fact that the students themselves have so far not been included in the project.

APPENDIX 1 - **Quick scan**

Heading:
author(ess) of this analysis

Jostein Gaarder / The Orange Girl / Oslo 2003 / C Level

introductory remarks: representative to what extent / link to national heritage - world literature – intercultural literature / cross-media-relations / cultural resonances (valued / much spoken off / present in the media…)

Dimension	Indicator	Description (complicating factors)
General demands for engaging in the book	Time	158 A5 pages (Czech version)
	Interests	The theme of childhood and growing up, seeking for the fundamental values of life, delimitating against the others, family and oneself, but above all confronting the death of someone near (the death of the father). Although the main character is Georg – a boy, both the boys and girls will be addressed. Ages 12 up.
	Reading experience	Mature teen reader; should be able to cope with the recurring theme of death. The book contains a number of retrospectives and short reflections. The letter of Georg's father including the story of the Orange Girl alternates with the story of George that takes place in present time. The reader should be able to distinguish these two time level and understand that in fact it is Georg who tells the story in the book.

	General knowledge	No specific knowledge needed, though some basic political and astronomical (the Hubble's telescope) matters occur. The demands lie in life and reader experience. No further knowledge of Norwegian realia required, all the young reader will need is presented in the book.
	Domain specific knowledge	No specific knowledge required.
Familiarity with literary style	Vocabulary	Present-day colloquial language prevails. The symbolic character is embodied in the story itself and its strength; there is almost no figurative language in a lexical layer. Some terms of astrology occur, but they are used in context so they are easily understandable.
	Sentence construction	The narrative layer of the father's letter: written discourse, yet close to spoken language in its syntactic and lexical aspects. The commentary of the main character: close to the spoken language of a teen child.
	Stylistics	Relatively simple language without figurative meaning (see above).
Familiarity with literary procedures	Action	A terminally ill father writes a letter to his son Georg. Georg is only about four when his father dies. His father is aware of the fact that his son is too young to understand the message of the letter. The father intends George to read the letter when he comes of age, so he hides the letter into a baby coach and wishes it not to be thrown away after his death. The essence of the letter is the story about the Orange Girl (who is, as we realize at the end of the letter, Georg's mother). It is not only a love story, it is a tale of life way, a tale worth of deeper reflection.
	Chronology	There are two or in fact three parallel storylines: one is the story of the Orange Girl and Georg's father who wanted to find out who the girl was since the day he met her in a tram; the other are the father's commentaries as he made them when he was writing the letter; and the third line is reading the letter by Georg.
	Storyline(s)	Georg's father feels that he is seriously ill. He decides to write a letter to his little son that should be read when his son grows up. When Georg is 15, his grandmother finds that letter. Georg reads it in a short time and adds his commentary and reflections. That is how the book The Orange Girl comes into being.
	Perspective	Personal narrator. The tale of the Orange Girl is a first-person narrative (narrated by Georg's father); Georg's "book" (written after the discovery of the letter on his father's computer) is a first-person narrative, too.
	Meaning	The meaning of the book lies in the message that the father transmits to his son via the letter. Georg can confront with the life story of his father (and mother) and put up with death and finiteness.
Familiarity with literary personages	Characters	Georg: calm, even-tempered, clever. Georg's father: a kind of hero, he was able to accept his inescapable end and did not linger to pass on his message. Georg's mother: the ideal of Georg's father and beloved mother.
	Number	One main character - Georg - followed by his father and mother (the Orange Girl) and his family.
	Relations	Simple relations; the only complication for readers may be how the story of the Orange Girl is developing (when it comes out that the Orange girl is Georg's mother).

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