



Close Reading in Language Teaching Strategies

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Abstract

Close Reading skills are essential in language teaching strategies. The shortness of Hemingway's stories and the richness of submerged meaning justifies the use of his short stories in classroom situations. We have chosen "In Another Country" by Earnest Hemingway to illustrate several most important steps of close reading. As the first step of close reading procedure the students should read the story at home at least twice and look up all the unknown words in both translation and explanatory dictionaries. As the second stage the students are asked to concretize their understanding of the text. Students have to ask questions (written in advance) on the story and answer them. To prove any point, one has to turn to the exact wording of the text and give definite answers. The presentation illustrates the suggested method with focus on the composition of the story, strong position and foregrounded parts. The readers discover that the form of the story is meaningful. As a result, students get a very clear understanding of the story, they discover its veiled meaning, its message. Close Reading improves student reading-comprehension and language skills and boosts language learner engagement and outcomes.

Keywords: *Close / Slow reading, teaching strategies, concretization, E. Hemingway "In Another Country".*

1. On the terms used: interpretation, close / slow reading, concretization

Text interpretation has existed for as many years as the texts themselves have existed. In theology the term *hermeneutics* was actively used, and in Russian philology of the 20th century the term *interpretation* took root. Foreign etymology of the word (from the Latin *interpretari* 'to interpret, explain; translate') provided the word 'interpretation' with a successful terminological existence in the Russian language. Curricula of philological departments in Russian Universities invariably include "Linguistic interpretation of literary texts", "Workshop on the interpretation of literary texts" - integrative courses that summarize the results of both linguistic and literary studies. The interpretation of a literary text is one of the main aspects of the final qualification exam for a major in philology. In this case, we are talking about philology, understood as "a community of humanitarian disciplines that study history and find out the essence of the spiritual culture of mankind through the linguistic and stylistic analysis of written texts" [1]. In English, the word 'interpret', meaning 'explain the meaning of; make understandable' in relation to literary texts and, more broadly, works of art in general, has become associated with arbitrariness, which could not but cause a protest from writers and culturologists. Susan Sontag, in a 1964 essay, compares interpretation to the stinking veil of factory and car smoke over cities, to the darkness that poisons our perception [2]. This message was supported by many philologists and the terms *close reading*, *slow reading*, *deep reading* are used today. A vivid example of the use of the phrase '*slow reading*' as a term, most often cited by foreign authors as the earliest, we find in F. Nietzsche's preface to his work "The Dawn of Day. Thoughts on Prejudices of Morality" (1887): "Philology is exactly a respectable art that requires, first of all, one thing from its admirer – to go by the side, to give yourself time, to be quiet, slow, like the jewelry art of the word, which performs only delicate, careful work and which can ruin everything if it is in a hurry. That is why it is now more necessary than ever, it is precisely because of this that it attracts and fascinates us, in our age of 'work', an age of fussiness, an age of madness, not sparing strength, haste, – an age that wants to have time for everything and everyone, with every old and every new book. Philology does not do everything so quickly – it teaches to read well, i. e. slowly, peering into the depth of meaning, following the connection of thought, catching hints; seeing the whole idea of the book, as if through an open door ... My patient friends! This book can only be read by experienced readers and philologists: learn to read well!" [3].

'Close Reading' and 'Slow Reading' are widely used today in the meaning of the art of cognizance of texts, the art of comprehending the languages of culture, the direct practice of reading as the interpretation of the text. In Russian philological science, the principles of Close / Slow Reading have deep roots and are associated with the names of M.O. Gershenzon, Yu.N. Tynyanov,



V.B. Tomashevsky. The Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences has recently published two monographs [4, 5] devoted to the principles and specific experiments of Close / Slow Reading, the books present new experiences of rereading and, at the same time, the theoretical foundations of the modern theory of reading.

Under the term '*concretization*' introduced by the Polish researcher R. Ingarden [6], one understands the meaningful whole that was revealed to the reader in a given literary text. Concretization can represent either a small part of the objective content of the text, or quite a lot of the objective content, but in both cases, concretization is something integral – the result of the synthesizing creativity of the reader. According to R. Ingarden, during concretization (i.e., in each specific act of perception of the text by the reader), some narrowing of perspective occurs, firstly, due to the multilayer and complexity of the literary work, and secondly, due to the fact that when reading the reader has to perform many different kinds of cognitive, creative actions, and he / she is not able to perform all these actions from different positions at the same time – with an equal share of attention, activity and assessment of the aesthetic values of the work. In addition, depending on the personality of the reader, concretization may reflect different positions. For example, reflect the naive position of a simple layman who perceives a work of art as a “real” reality (“an incident from life”), either from the position of a person who has certain political, religious and other interests, or reflect a purely research position, which, for example, the reader or literary critic adheres to. Finally, the reader's perception can turn out to be completely arbitrary and bypasses the creative intention of the author, and at the same time be aggressive, not allowing any other positions and interpretations, and, moreover, outside interference in his or her, the reader's, zone of perception.

2. Teaching Close / Slow Reading in a classroom

Close/ Slow reading initially presupposes a link between literary text and a reader. The reader, by recreating the content of the text, thereby interprets the text – he or she recreates what he or she perceived. This is evidenced by at least such a commonly asked question – what did the author want to say? This question is asked almost by any reader, who has just read a certain fictional text. Yu. M. Lotman, philologist, semiologist, thinker, who developed the theory of the artistic structure of the text [7], noted that the reader who recreated the content inherent in the text is congenial to the author, i. e. close in talent. Judging by the use of words, the closeness of the author and the reader in talent is determined by such parameter as creativity. What is implied? A well-known Russian thinker Valentin Asmus wrote that the content of a work of art does not pass – like water pouring from a jug into another – from the work into the reader's head. It is reproduced, recreated by the reader himself / herself – according to the guidelines given in the work itself, but with the final result determined by the mental and spiritual activity of the reader [8]. People, readers and writers, each have their own unique life experience, which includes everything that a person reads, what a person sees, what a person listens to, and even what foods a person eats. This maxim is expressed in proverbs and in metaphorical images that arise among philologists. As the Eastern wisdom says: “The amount of water you get from the sea depends upon the vessel you come to the sea with” or two readers in front of the same text are like two sailors throwing each of their lots into the sea: everyone will reach depth no further than the length of the lot [9]. Complete congeniality, complete understanding, according to the words of Apostle Paul, is impossible within our life: we see “as if through a dim glass” (1 Cor. 13:12). To fully understand, you need a perfectly matching life experience, which is certainly impossible. Does this mean that understanding is impossible at all? Not at all. Understanding within certain limits is not only possible, but it can be taught and it can be learned. Close / careful / thorough reading can and should be taught. In such reading there is the labor and creativity of a search – an effort to find; there is the discovery of the sought-after – the discovered / open content (meaning discovery). And such a work of the reader will always be crowned with a result that brings not only new knowledge and deepened understanding, but also has, as academics have recently found out, a significant therapeutic effect [10]. If we talk about modern fictional prose, keeping in mind its properties, then for the reader, the discovery of the content of the read text means the discovery of the “content of the form” – the discovery of the subtext: the conjugation of verbal and supra-verbal, “increment of meaning” in the artistic structure of the text. In English terminology, the subtext is submerged / suggested / hidden / undercurrent meaning. A student of the Close Reading course is, in a certain sense, a trained reader: as a learning future philologist, he or she is already to some extent enlightened in order to adequately perceive the content of a literary text, i. e. to perceive the depicted reality as a fruit of the author's fiction, and not an image of events and phenomena that actually happened, that is, not to take the depicted as real reality, at least. Another thing is to perceive the subtext, as well as to adequately convey what was perceived – here, along with theoretical



knowledge, a well-established skill of thoughtful, in-depth reading is also required. Actually, the task of this training course is to bring a novice philologist closer to the realization that there is a literary text, that there is reading as a meaning discovery process.

2.1 Ernest Hemingway's story as teaching material

Our teaching experience has proved that using a short story, mostly 6–7 pages long is most effective and productive in the classroom situation. Such a volume allows the reader to quite easily keep the entire text in his or her attention and, according to the general belief of experts, a text of such a volume, due to the richness of its artistic structure, has a continuous impact on the reader, regardless of the individual characteristics of the latter. We have chosen "In Another Country" a story by Ernest Hemingway, first published in 1927.

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), American 20th century most renowned author. His writing is depictive. He paints pictures of the things he writes about, and that often with the help of details simple and direct to perceive. In Hemingway's works, what shows on the surface is only the smaller part of the large whole, – the rest is submerged in such elements of the work's poetic structure that are not easy to discover. The reader is supposed to be sufficiently trained and observant to do it, – to discover what is implied, gapped, just only hinted at, juxta- and counterposed, or foreshadowed. The author's way in literature, his ethical and aesthetic stand, his manner of writing – all have greatly influenced the tendencies then evolving in the post—world-war-2 world literature. The writer was awarded the Nobel prize in 1954.

2.2 Instructor's role in the process

The educator / instructor / teacher is the central figure in the learning situation under consideration. He or she functions as an intermediary between the literary text and the student / reader. The instructor's attention is simultaneously focused on two objects: on the content of the literary text and on how the student / reader recreates / understands the content of the text; the instructor makes sure that the student / reader, expressing his or her judgments about the content of the text, remains in the sphere of the text itself, not leaving it for a moment, since talking about the content of what has been read is at the same time talking about the direct verbal realization of this content [11]. Instructor has to introduce the concepts of strong position and foregrounding and make sure the students pay attention to the structure (composition) of the literary text.

Since the instructor is a philologist, who perceives the text deeply and fully, he or she should direct the students' attention to the important, foregrounded areas of the literary text. However, it should be borne in mind that if students become exclusively an object of teaching, they would often lose the creative impulse, the desire to find "what the author wanted to say."

The instructor develops methodological techniques for identifying concretization, i. e. the content initially perceived by the reader, as well as methods of correction of cases of distortion by the students of the content of literary text. It is the responsibility of the instructor to consistently introduce into classroom discussions the necessary nomenclature of terms - the metalanguage of philological description. It is the instructor's work to come up with a set of assignments on the literary text, taking into account the peculiarities of the artistic structure of each text.

2.3 Obligatory steps

The first step is attentive reading (2–3 times) of the text with the obligatory use of explanatory and translation dictionaries. Since Close Reading is a part of foreign language learning a lot of attention should be paid to the vocabulary of the literary text and translation of the unknown words into the mother tongue of the students. One-time reading, due to the peculiarities of perception, does not make it possible to delve even into the plot of the story. Students are asked to read the story at home and obtain additional information on the writer, make sure they know when the story was written and identify any possible connection of the story with the biography of the author.

The second step is the formulation of questions. Students are asked to cross-question the story. The questions are supposed to be written down in the students' notes and the students should be ready to answer the prepared questions themselves in the classroom.

The third is concretization: identifying what was initially perceived. The technique of revealing is that the compiler himself / herself gives the answer to the previously compiled question. In the answers to the question, it is highlighted what it is that is specifically understood or misunderstood from the objective content of the text. The questions and answers make it obvious what is perceived by the reader. Concretizations add up to one whole picture, by which the instructor can judge the level of understanding of the objective content of the text.



The fourth step is correction: correction of inadequately perceived content of the text (cases of distortion, inaccuracies, misunderstanding, etc.). Methods of correction: the instructor draws the reader's attention to the text for confirmation of a student's statement. The impossibility of finding a confirmation of any statement in the text is a diagnostic factor indicating a distortion of the objective content, since there is nothing in a work of literary art that would not be expressed at the verbal level, that is, in the text of the work itself, the very form of which is already meaningful [12].

Here is an example of concretization and correction done while working on Ernest Hemingway's short story "In Another Country". In the classroom, work begins with listening to pre-written questions. Each question is answered by the compiler himself / herself. Checking the adequacy of the answer – re-referring to the text – is an operation directed by the instructor / teacher. *Student A*: Question: "Why is the story called "In Another Country"? Answer: "Because the narrator is American and the action takes place in Italy." Correction of this only partly correct answer requires turning to the text: Student A is asked to trace how the space of the text is distributed between the characters. It turns out that the story of the American as a character who narrates the story occupies two out of sixteen paragraphs. Only in two of the sixteen compositional units / paragraphs the narrator's 'I' is a thematic word: (1) *The doctor came up to the machine where I was sitting...*; (2) *My knee did not bend...* Six paragraphs are dedicated to the Italian major, a former fencer. The rest of the text space in its compositional and thematic content forms a grid of co- and opposed themes: a) all the characters in the story ↔ war; b) all (except for the major) characters ↔ people from the street; c) those from the group with medals (except for the major) ↔ an American and his medals; d) American ↔ Italian major. In the final six of the sixteen paragraphs, the Italian Major is foregrounded as a protagonist. Conclusion: "An American in Italy" is only one of the main themes of the story, therefore, the title "In Another Country" carries more than one meaning – the title is ambiguous. The word 'country' in the title obtains a symbolic meaning of the separate worlds ("countries"), populated by the living and the dead, those who fought in the war and who didn't, and so on and so forth. The concretization and the described procedure of the correction meant primarily the discovery of the form of the story, its composition, i. e. something previously hidden, implicitly expressed.

Student B, an attentive, sensitive to the word young lady, declared that she could not formulate a question about the content of the text – she senses some kind of internal plot, but very vaguely, she clearly sees only the direct plot: a group of officers wounded at the front come to the hospital for treatment. In the similar way, without the intervention of the instructor, many cases of inadequate perception were identified by the students themselves. Most often the inherent connotations of different words were not perceived, sometimes the stylistic coloring and emotive-expressive properties of words were overlooked. Sometimes students missed the additional connotations acquired by words in the context (lexical-grammatical, situational) of the story. Sometimes the conflict of the story was assessed from the standpoint of everyday morality (good / bad), i. e. considered as a fact of reality. The categories of author and narrator were not differentiated: Hemingway (the author) was equated with an American narrator, and accordingly the evaluative / ideological point of view was not identified. It was essential to keep the focus on that segment of the text to which the question was indirectly / directly asked or related. The role of the instructor was to ensure that the statements made, i. e. the answers to the questions asked, were confirmed by the text, which made it possible to correct arbitrary interpretations not supported by the wording of the story. Students, who saw for themselves where the text was leading them, began to relate to the close reading procedure in a completely different way, acquiring a genuine interest in revealing the content.

Conclusions

The limited space of the article makes us put an end here. A fully illustrative example of the close reading and interpretation (analysis and explanation) of the story "In Another Country" (as well as other stories of British and American authors) is given in the study guide "Analysis and Interpretation of Literary Text in the Classroom" [13], published at Kuban State University. The described step-by-step method of close reading of a literary text has been tested over a number of years and gives excellent results, making the process of reading and understanding as interesting and fruitful as possible. It boosted students' language mastery and performance.



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