



# Features of Assessment Activity at the Lessons of Literature

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The rational way (a mark, a test) of assessment of a school student's perception of art contradicts the principles of personality oriented learning and reduces the interest of a child in fiction. In the article the problem of assessment of learners' achievement in the lessons of aesthetics, namely in literature lessons, is solved. The author identifies the reasons for the lack of result in the research into the problem: the figurative nature of the literary text which accounts for the plurality of its interpretations, impossibility to define the criterion for assessment of free communication of learners discussing the work of art. The emotional nature of esthetic perception interferes with objective assessment of the reader's activity, and the children with a more developed sphere of feelings find themselves in a less advantageous position, than the children with developed analytical thinking, however not inclined to empathy. The author sees the solution to the problem by means of rating scales of assessment widespread in psychological diagnostics. Such scales should be developed by each class staff on the basis of their own experience of class work with a literary text, they will have a different number of criteria, but that will allow to do justice to every learner.

*Keywords:* education, personality oriented learning, assessment, work of art (fiction), discipline of aesthetic cycle, evaluation criteria, rating scale

## INTRODUCTION

The problem of educational outcomes assessment is recognized by educational community around the world. Since the end of the XXth century it has been actively analyzed (e.g., Sadler, 1989; Black & Wiliam, 1998) and is still being discussed. Since then, the idea of «formative assessment» has been established in the educational community: «Everyone knows that formative assessment improves learning» (Shepard, 2005). Formative assessment is called «one of the most powerful tools available to guide classroom decisions» (Dorn, 2010). Its principles and forms of realization are disclosed in in-depth study of many respected authors (Moss, Girard & Haniford, 2006; Cizek, 2010; Bennett, 2011). The undoubted advantage of properly organized evaluation they call the stable feedback of the teacher with the student (Orsmond et al., 2013).

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In the Russian science the problem of assessment is presented in different ways. This is a structure and functions of assessment (Ananiev, 1980); assessment as a component of theoretical thinking (Guzeev, 1996); student-focused orientation of assessment (Hutorskoy, 1996; Yakimanskaya, 1996); the role of age-related features of students in the formation of rating scales (Guzeev, 1998); the need for assessment skills formation of students from the earliest stages of learning (Elkonin, 1989; Vorontsov, 2002); the ability of students to assessment and its impact on the development of self-sufficiency, self-control, independence, intellectual and personal qualities (Matyushkin, 1982). The assessment is investigated as a necessary component of training activities aimed at measuring the level of knowledge compliance with the curriculum, as a means of the educational process promoting and the regulation of pupils' behavior (Amonashvili, 1990).

And still this tool of impact on students has never been universal: «The theory of formative assessment has less relevance for outcomes in which student responses may be assessed simply as correct or incorrect» (Sadler, 1989). And above all, it concerns the disciplines of aesthetic cycle, which includes fiction. Assessment activity at the lessons, dealing with different kinds of art, requires a special consideration.

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study of fiction in the school of any level has several objectives:

- 1) expanding horizons (conversance with the texts recognized by a society);
- 2) development of pupils' thinking and speech;
- 3) development of empathy - the ability to sympathize, to empathize (decentration of a personality);
- 4) comprehension of figurative nature of a literary text, awareness of metaphorical artistic style;
- 5) acquisition of specific terminology and methods of research (scientific, literary knowledge).

### **The first aspect - the reading circle**

The list of proposed to the study fiction is criticized every year primarily by parents, depending on their tastes and preferences. The list of "favorite" fiction in each family is their own, and every parent thinks that his/her tastes must be taken into account by the school: «The domain of text / literature involves both cultural patrimony and more recent developments of texts ... Specific tensions arise however when trying to define the literary canon and its role in the language as subject curriculum. ... To protect the interests of pupils for whom choice of reading content should not be arbitrary, to ensure some element of curriculum entitlement for all pupils, and to allow consideration of the balance of the prescribed curriculum between national and multicultural texts, classic and modern» (Fleming, 2007).

Mass education should, on the one hand, take into account individual preferences of students, and on the other – to provide a unity of requirements: «there are also arguments for not abandoning completely the notion of a canon, but for approaching it in a more dynamic way to prevent the de facto canon from being left to chance, to protect the interests of pupils for whom choice of reading content should not be arbitrary, to ensure some element of curriculum entitlement for all pupils, and to allow consideration of the balance of the prescribed curriculum between national and multicultural texts, classic and modern» (Lazar, 2008). Is it possible with such ambiguity of basic foundations of the discipline to assess unambiguously?

## **The second aspect - the development of thinking and speech**

Reading is a universal activity that expands the horizons of the student, develops his/her speech and thinking. There is no area of human knowledge, which would not be covered in fiction to a greater or lesser extent: and morality, and religion, and philosophy, and even science: «Students are introduced to reading and writing and to the world of literature and language. They learn to master an increasing repertoire of genres both in oral and written communication and to explore the world of texts, media, communication and symbolic interaction. Thus language is not only developed as a means of communication. The heuristic or epistemic use of language also has its place in LS: via language we develop new insights and can acquire knowledge» (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

The State Educational Standard directs teachers to achieve such results as "understanding of literature as a phenomenon of national and world culture", "the formation of ideas about the world, the Russian history and culture, the original ethical ideas, concepts of good and evil, morality» (Federal State Educational Standard of Primary General Education, 2009). The Literature develops the worldview, culture, morality, values. But these concepts are more related to personal ones than to objective learning outcomes, and qualities of the personality, as you know, must not be subjected to a personalized assessment.

## **The third aspect - decentration of a personality**

The most loyal allies of the teacher in the Literature lesson are those children who are capable of empathy, they perceive artistic words above all by heart. Even in high school, many of those students who prefer to read "for themselves", protect their subjective perception from strangers. The presence of other and even opposing views about the book for many students (particularly in a primary school) is unexpected and unpleasant: «Interpretation is based upon an understanding of literary text as being ambiguous» (Pieper et al., 2007). For selfish children the fiction often remains closed. In the read they want to see only a confirmation of their own position in life. Their judgments are categorical. The teacher requires the real mastery in order the psychological changes in the mind of a child occur gently and do not cause his/her negative reactions. But whether the teachers themselves are always able to assess pupil's opinion objectively, if their reading comprehension of art works is dramatically different?

## **The fourth and fifth aspects - the basis of scientific analysis in the lesson of aesthetic cycle**

The Literature lesson is originally dual, as it is trying to understand the irrationality of art by rational methods. To keep a balance between the emotional nature of literature and logical analysis is very difficult, especially if it is necessary to diagnose pupils' knowledge by means of tests: «Teaching and learning for life or for examinations (teaching to the test) is still a dichotomy in many countries» (Aase et al., 2009). This is also referred to the work «Pratiques de lecture: quelles voies pour favoriser l'expression du sujet lecteur?» (Rouxel, 2007). In a primary school, the contradiction between the emotional immersion in the art and logical way of its development is perceived by the child much sharper, perhaps unconsciously, as a hidden protest, rejection of the Literature lesson, and then, unfortunately, the process of reading itself.

Modern literary science has made great strides in the detailed characterization of a literary text, in the search for links between other works of the same author, other

authors of domestic and foreign literature, painting and music. The findings of literary scholars are often a role model for literature teachers. The practice of classroom teaching is filled with all sorts of "reminders for analysis", which are essentially the algorithm of analytical activity of pupils.

Programs often contain installation on algorithmization not only, for example, reproductive retelling ("Construction of activity algorithm to reproduce the text" as one of the activities in the lesson), but also creative tasks ("Creation of various texts under the guidance of a teacher on a given algorithm"). In the end, the process of reading is programmed in advance: "At the lessons the learning of productive reading technology takes place that provides a child with the algorithm of independent text acquisition (before reading, during reading, after reading)" (Buneev & Buneeva, 2010).

If at the lesson the analysis, the logic and the scheme come to the fore, so the emotional sphere of a pupil begins to experience intense pressure. If this situation is repeated too often, generally prevailed, the pupil will feel discomfort at the lessons of this type and lose interest. But the lesson cannot be without the analysis at all - otherwise it will not be a lesson, it will not teach to anything.

### **Criteria assessment of creative activity**

One of the mandatory requirements of the assessment procedure is that "the assessment should be based on clear, understandable criteria for a child" (*Criteria assessment at the primary school*, 2012). Among the main subject results of acquisition of basic educational program on the literary reading there are such that are amenable to evaluation by credits: "the use of different types of reading (study, selective, search)"; "Mastery of reading aloud and to oneself techniques, elementary methods of interpretation, analysis and transformation of art, popular science and educational texts using the basic literary concepts." To assess these skills there have been developed criteria, defined quality levels of performance.

Most educational systems, adopted in primary school, provide teachers with monitoring test materials for the diagnosis of literary development of younger pupils. Basically these are tasks, checking the technique (speed) of reading and basic techniques of comprehension. Reproductive questions dominate that ultimately determine the nature of all learning activities: preparing children for such verification work, the teacher could not help building the entire learning process on the same principles.

However, in respect of the literary development of younger pupils the requirement of criteria assessment may not always be fulfilled. Unlike mathematics or the Russian language, the subject of study in the Literature is the artistic image, it has not a logical, but concretely sensuous nature that resists to attempts to spread it on the criteria and measure in credits.

### **RESULTS**

Definitely it is important to work out intentionally with children the tempo and accuracy of reading, the search of required information, answers to questions about the text, matching the content with the title. But all these skills rather should be formed on the basis of educational texts. The work of art, arousing emotions in a child, prevents analysis activities. Metaphoricalness of the work of art can even irritate a pupil whose consciousness is aimed at reaching the formal result. The system of tasks is needed, stimulating the development of the thought processes that are specific to fiction.

Test and assessment tools for literature are focused mainly on checking the level of reproductive assimilation of knowledge and skills. However, such criteria as "the search for information" and "the ability to find an answer on the question in the text", it is advisable to work out not art, but educational texts. Such skills are more likely related not to the subject "literary reading", but to meta-skills, certainly important, but clearly insufficient for proper assessment of competences in the field of fiction.

No less problematic the assessment of such skills as "the ability to express convincingly their attitude to the reads, characters, understand and identify one's emotions; understand and formulate one's attitude towards the author's style of writing." The problem is not in teaching a child to find in the text the evidence of one's suppositions but more often in elementary miscommunication. Sociability and openness are, of course, the positive qualities that cause surrounding sympathy. However, shyness and restraint in expressing feelings also should not become the subject of condemnation, because they are personality traits and are often associated with conditions of upbringing in the family. Nevertheless, such a child at the Literature lesson initially appears at a disadvantage, which necessarily leads to a reduction of cognitive interest, a negative perception of the lesson, the teacher and, the most insulting, to the subject matter - the book.

But in the primary classes there are children capable of independent and deep penetrating into the literary text. These children are endowed, by nature with empathy, a keen sense of the word, associative thinking. Of course, it is difficult to imagine a regulatory document - educational standard or work program, containing words such as "association", "allusion", "experience": all this does not give an unambiguous assessment, it cannot be taught, and thus impossible to require and assess in credits. But the teachers know that one word, which suddenly hooked some student, is able to open in the usual text the unexpected implication, to lead the chain of images and thoughts - and to make the lesson really creative.

Do such students always receive high scores in tests with reproductive and analytical tasks? Not at all. Their focus is usually absent-minded, they seem to be busy with little things, which they tend to overemphasize, associative chains may lead them away from the explored text. And again, it appears that the ability of such a child is not demanded at school, but prevents him/her from being a successful student. Again, creative thinking techniques are superseded by logical modes of action.

## DISCUSSIONS

The reading of a work of art is a process of co-creation. This is the work, in which the child has relative freedom to choose the means and methods of expression. It is a process that is difficult to estimate objectively, because it is valuable, and its results are implicit, often unconscious and delayed. This is partly an artistic activity, which must be free in nature, carried out without rude guidance of an adult: "The literary text should allow everyone to judge independently philosophical, moral and aesthetic concepts» (Dubois-Marcoïn & Tauveron, 2005). Thus, the high assessment in the classroom should receive especially those students who are able to support creative activities on the basis of a work of art, are able to think freely and to speak out.

During the study of a work of art the opinions of students may collide. So you should not avoid or be frightened of it. On the contrary, the ability to look at the text with different philosophical or moral positions should be encouraged: it creates a problematic situation, leads to a productive dialogue or even a debate, and it supports the pupils' interest in reading and the Literature lessons (Wolf, Crosson & Resnick, 2006). Hence, a special positive assessment deserve those students who are able to understand someone else's point of view, including an author and a character of a work of art, classmates, teachers, and participate in discussions (Sarmavuori, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

It is important that the assessment at the Literature lesson to be fair for the students with different levels of language development, with a different type of thinking, emotion, attention, communication skills. The main thing is that the assessment would become the stimulus for reading and awake the desire for culture in pupils.

Literary development of the pupil, as the subject itself - the literature, as a kind of art, should probably be attributed to poorly structured areas, where are used mostly ordinal, rather than quantitative rating scales. Ordinal scales are common in psychological diagnosis: rating scale of motivation, anxiety level, importance of emotions, etc. As an example, there is the rating scale of the attention qualities: «very stable / stable / labile / scattered».

As for the lessons of Literature such rating scale may be the level of approximation to the author's intention, or an accuracy of the determination of pathos, or completeness of the analysis of the art form. And may be the originality of judgment, or an unexpected interpretation of the image, or the subtle observation of artistic expression, or the brightness of the characteristics of the art world. It is important that experts of these assessments would be students themselves, able to note the one, but a very productive remark of some students, or a few, but very significant words, spoken in time and lead the discussion to the right direction, or the constant attention to the author's word usage.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Proposed in this paper reasoning may be useful to everyone who faces the teaching of disciplines of aesthetic cycle: painting, music, literature. The basic principles of work with fiction must be the same for educational institutions of different levels, from pre-school to higher education. Although these forms of assessment require further elaboration.

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