



К вопросу о развитии когнитивных умений интерпретации художественных текстов

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена формированию умений когнитивной интерпретации художественных текстов. Когнитивная интерпретация художественных произведений (на примере англоязычных текстов) рассматривается с точки зрения ее лингводидактического потенциала. Автор определяет интерпретацию как познавательный и творческий процесс. Приводятся примеры интерпретации студентами художественных текстов на английском языке, их типичные ошибки, а также возможные действия преподавателя для коррекции интерпретационной деятельности студентов.

Ключевые слова: когнитивный подход, когнитивная интерпретация, умения чтения, лингвокогнитивные умения, художественный текст

Для цитирования: Герасимова А. П. К вопросу о развитии когнитивных умений интерпретации художественных текстов // Вестник Московского государственного лингвистического университета. Образование и педагогические науки. 2025. Вып. 4 (857). С. 32–37.

Original article

Developing Cognitive Skills of Interpreting Literary Texts

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Abstract. This article is devoted to developing cognitive skills of interpreting literary texts. Cognitive interpretation of literary texts (English language texts) is considered from the point of view of its language teaching potential. The author defines interpretation as a cognitive and creative process. Samples of students' interpretation of literary texts in English, their typical mistakes, as well as possible ways of correcting students' misinterpretations are provided.

Keywords: cognitive approach; cognitive interpretation; reading comprehension skills; linguistic and cognitive skills; literary text

For citation: Gerasimova, A. P. (2025). Developing Cognitive Skills of Interpreting Literary Texts. *Vestnik of Moscow State Linguistic University. Education and Teaching*, 4(857), 32–37. (In Russ.)

INTRODUCTION

Today we have to admit that interpretation skills, including skills of deducing cultural meanings, analyzing basic concepts of a foreign culture, pointing out axiological foundations of reading matter are not sufficiently developed while training future language teachers. One of the main goals of a language teacher is to show sensible ways to work with literary texts to students in order to develop the above mentioned skills. Unfortunately, we underestimate the role of supporting, educational goals of the foreign language classroom [Фролова, 2022] and our task is to guide our students and to give them a clue to cognitive thinking and interpretation.

It is quite easy to teach students to follow a pattern, a typical model, but it is an exciting challenge to encourage students to think in a creative way. That is why literary texts are a good source for us to teach them to read between the lines.

First of all, if the teacher aspires to develop the interpretation skills of his students, the process of teaching should be based on the main ideas and principles of cross-cultural approach. N. Shatalova describes the following ideas and principles:

- “perception and assessment of the context of intercultural interaction (linguistic, sociolinguistic, historical and cultural);
- identification / self-identification, as well as perception of stereotyping processes in cultures;
- interpretation of the communicative behavior of a partner based on the ideas of the relativity of cultural norms and adaptation of communicative behavior in accordance with the values of a foreign-language society;
- identification of national stereotypes as determinants of behavior in intercultural interaction;
- adequate coding and decoding of information by means of a foreign language” [Шаталова, 2023, p. 62].

In our research we are going to define the notion of interpretation as a cognitive activity. We will also show how students can interpret a literary text or its excerpt and what kind of guidelines a teacher may give to students to help them interpret the text.

INTERPRETATION OF A LITERARY TEXT AS A COGNITIVE PROCESS

As philosophers usually say, for a modern human, the process of thinking implies having an ability to analyze, interpret and adjust to the hermeneutic fields of a wide range of communities, social classes and

groups [Арапов, 2011]. Thus, students are to be able to understand and critically evaluate forms of written speech, including abstract, structurally complex or colloquial or literary texts, as well as to evaluate subtle stylistic nuances and grasp both the implicit and the explicit meanings of the text, which determines the relevance of our study.

Despite a sufficient number of scientific works devoted to the idea of conscious reading instruction, the cognitive approach has various definitions and, moreover, its origin and development pose a problem to specialists. As a matter of fact, there are both supporters and opponents of the approach and its implementation in the system of education. A. Shamov defines the cognitive approach as “methodologically significant in the methodology of teaching foreign languages, corresponding to the modern concept of the student as an active subject of cognition and responding to the general trend of the movement of learning theory in the direction of developing mechanisms for the elaboration and introduction of cognitive activity” [Шамов, 2005, p. 4].

Since interpretation is both a cognitive process and its result, and the student is an active participant of the process of cognition [Шевченко, 2002], who has his interests and a system of cultural and spiritual values, and who is not just a pure object of the teaching activity, any interpretation is based on cognitive psychology. The principle of consciousness in teaching is also to be taken into consideration. Following N. Volodina, we understand interpretation of a literary text as the activity of the interpreter, expressed with a view to extracting personal meaning from the text (element of the text) and producing a creative speech statement containing an interpretation of the theme, content, meaning of the text, as well as an analysis of the means of their expression [Володина, 2002]. As a result, the development of linguistic, sociolinguistic, sociocultural competences as well as communicative skills can be boosted by the interpretation of literary texts.

Russian and foreign experts in language teaching, linguistics and psychology have studied various aspects of reading process and levels of text comprehension and interpretation, including literary texts: the notion of text as an utterance (M. Bakhtin); the structure of a literary text (Yu. Lotman); the concepts of text and discourse (C. Nuttal); linguistic and cultural interpretation of a literary text as a component of professional training of a foreign language teacher (T. Pavlishak); the formation of intercultural competence in teaching understanding of foreign cultural discourse of the modern press (A. Kurkina); methods of teaching the skills of interpreting political discourse (Yu. Dmitrieva).

As a psychological phenomenon, reading may be considered as a process of perception as well as semantic processing of textual information. "As a sociocultural phenomenon, reading, including reading in a foreign language, is a cognitive and communicative activity of active, purposeful transformation of information in accordance with the needs of the subject, i. e., an intellectual creative activity" [Коряковцева, 2023, p. 21]. For our research it is essentially important to stress in this definition the cognitive and communicative aspects of reading.

Interpretation of a literary text is a creative process which requires both a background knowledge, for example, of the time and the setting of the story, and students' own imagination to be able to come up with their own innovative ideas.

Having innovative ideas does not mean the distortion of existing facts or *realia*. Let us look at our teaching experience and quote an example from "Theatre" by W. S. Maugham¹:

"You could have knocked me down with a feather when he said all those things to me. I felt like just Balaam when his ass broke into light conversation".

In this quotation the expression *Balaam's ass* is of special interest. Our teaching experience showed that not all students can detect this biblical allusion and, moreover, often try to analyze the words *Balaam* and *ass* separately, thus, failing to understand the sense of the idiom.

The expression *Balaam's ass* comes from the Bible and usually describes a person who is normally reticent and obedient, but suddenly expresses their opinion. In this excerpt the expression describes the feelings of the main character and her surprise during the conversation with her interlocutor. Some students could not understand whether *Balaam* was an acquaintance or a friend of the main character and why she was compared to him. Besides, they could not see any connection between the two lexical units, *Balaam* and *ass*, and began to interpret *ass* as part of the body. In this example of inadequate interpretation students do not consider religion as part of any culture and, generally, try to interpret each element of an allusion, an idiomatic expression, or a metaphor separately. The task of the teacher is to try to help students find interdisciplinary relations in the literary text they interpret and to use the idiom correctly.

While interpreting texts, three types of cognitive operations are to be performed. Günter Radden and René Dirven suggest the following operations: "the

construal of one's thoughts in speaking, the building of mental spaces in communication, and the drawing of inferences by the hearer. Construals are operations that help select the appropriate structural possibility among various alternatives. Construals are strikingly similar to principles of perceptual organization. Mental spaces are packages of information that are built and evoked in the current discourse. Mental spaces draw upon our wider encyclopaedic knowledge about things in the world. Inferences are cognitive operations in which conclusions are drawn from a set of premises. The hearer's (or, in our case, the reader's / student's) inferential process in arriving at the meaning of an utterance is known as conversational implicature" [Radden, Dirven, 2007, p. 21].

The cognitive operations that are explained above are designed to help students to recognize and arrange culturally important information in literary discourse. When students come across a word or expression they do not know, they learn only their main meanings or, what is worse, they learn and employ the first definition or translation they see in a dictionary. However, culture-related vocabulary is not taken into account. In our opinion, the teacher should introduce the notion of conceptual information, which gives students an opportunity to get into the conceptual space of the text and, at the same time, this methodology will give students the opportunity to interpret it differently. At the same time, students do not have to be afraid of incorrect, or absurd, interpretation, since expression of one's own thoughts is quite subjective, and, therefore, cannot be treated as «correct» or «incorrect», as a result, psychologically, we help students overcome the language barrier.

Let us look at another example. While reading the short story "Groundlings" by J. Gardam² students were asked to analyze the title of the story. One of the students reasonably suggested that if this story was about a person with a fixation on Shakespeare, it was quite sensible to look back at his times and to find an explanation for the title there. The student introduced the idea that *groundlings* might be connected with the types of seats at the theatre which were not very comfortable, and she was quite right. The term *groundlings* presupposes poor theatre-goers who stood in front of the stage and watched the performance as they could not afford expensive tickets. Thus, the student used both her background knowledge about W. Shakespeare and his times and her linguistic guessing based on the meaning of the noun *ground* and its possible metaphorical implications.

¹Maugham W. Somerset. Theatre: Роман / коммент. М. В. Дьячкова. М.: Менеджер, 2006. (на англ. яз.)

²Gardam J. Groudlings // Contemporary British Stories: сб. рассказов / сост. и коммент. К. Hewitt. Oxford: Perspective Publications Ltd., 1994.

We agree with experts who suggest that human communication essentially involves the ability to use semiotic means (such as language) to convey one's "communicative intentions" and the ability to recognize such intentions [Dascal, 2003]. How can students as readers recognize the author's intentions if they are not taught to have a dialogue with the author? Reading and interpretation involve processing the semantic information of the text by the reader in their conceptual system and the verbal expression of the product of interpretation in the secondary text as their own semantic product in a certain dialogue with the original text. We agree with N. Koryakovtseva that reading in a foreign language is a dialogue between the reader and the author as representatives of different cultures, mentality, different social environments, personal experience, cognitive style, etc., i.e., external social, linguacultural and internal personal context [Коряковцева, 2023]. The question is whether two different cultures mean two different mentalities. Is there any difference in their ways of thinking? Do they interpret basic cognitive concepts, such as "soul", "love", "war", etc., similarly or differently?

If the teacher asks his students to interpret, for instance, the quotation from "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" by J. D. Salinger¹, will they be able to see that it conveys not only the cultural realia of beauty contests in the USA, but also the concept of physical beauty opposed to the concept of spiritual beauty and, furthermore, that the word *tramp* possesses obscene meanings which are typical only of American vocabulary? (*He calls me Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948*).

At the same time, the dominance of certain concepts in the authors' idiosyncrasies depends on the personal attitudes and intentions of the author of the work of art. Following the study of O. Timofeeva, it is sensible to mention that the choice of the set and the number of elements which build metaphorical concepts is individual for different authors. The expressive means and stylistic devices the author selects form an individual artistic image. Both basic and occasional metaphorical concepts can be used by the author and they constitute a particular literary text. "In the system of figurative thinking, each element of language, based on associative connections, participates in the creation of a concrete sensory image and cannot be reduced to its semantic meaning" [Тимофеева, 2011, p. 11–12]. The way the author perceives the world originates from the national image of the world and is combined with the individual image. Both images constitute the

ideas of the author, sometimes in an incredible way. A work of art is the result of the vision of the author and his attempts to perceive and organize the world or a particular version of its conceptualization.

For example, while interpreting "Ugly Sister" by J. Harris, the teacher may ask students to find evidence that Cinderella and the Ugly Sister swapped their roles and the Ugly Sister becomes the protagonist and the victim, while Cinderella becomes the antagonist and the villain. Students are to exploit the examples of anonomasia in Cinderella's description (*Miss High and Mighty*), neologisms (*Smuggerella*), ironic use of some expressions (*she always dressed in rags... designer rags which cost a fortune*). These examples may serve as the components of J. Harris's conceptualized world where there is a fine line between the good and the evil.

Taking into account all the ideas mentioned above, we could define interpretation of reading matter as a creative activity which involves such cognitive operations as perception, extraction of information, as well as its interpretation based on linguistic and cognitive skills, discursive, sociocultural and compensatory competencies in which the reader resorts to linguistic, cultural, historical, religious, philosophical, aesthetic experience of people in general and his own experience in particular.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is vital to say that the main challenge of modern multicultural and multilingual education is to «bring up» highly motivated and qualified specialists who will manage to employ their skills of intercultural communication successfully.

Our analysis of academic works reflects that the text (including literary discourse) is definitely the subject of interdisciplinary research. However, it must be stressed that axiological foundations of reading, issues of forming traditional values, analyzing basic concepts, extracting cultural meanings and the worldview of students are not sufficiently developed for language teaching purposes from the point of view of text interpretation.

Taking into account all the above-mentioned, in order to develop linguistic and cognitive skills of students, the language teacher should plan the lesson or lecture reasonably and include literary texts which will contain the food for thought – basic concepts, cultural realia, imagery, language means and stylistic devices as subjects of interpretation as they are indispensable instrument for the author to influence the reader, appealing to emotions, using irony, sarcasm and humour, informal or, on the contrary, formal language, and even sensory images.

¹Сэлинджер Дж. Д. Девять рассказов : книга для чтения на английском языке. Санкт-Петербург: КАРО, 2015.

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Статья поступила в редакцию
одобрена после рецензирования
принята к публикации

08.09.2025
15.09.2025
12.11.2025

The article was submitted
approved after reviewing
accepted for publication