

## The Role of Student'S Pre-Knowledge When Studying Postmodern Poetry

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**Abstract:** The topic of this paper is on the border between the pedagogy and the science of literature. Nowadays it would be very important to take the pre-knowledge of students into account while teaching postmodern literature. In the author's opinion, with the respect of pre-knowledge of students, the process of interpretation of lyric poetry would be more effective. This paper is trying to explain this using poems of contemporary poets who paraphrase poems of other poets from previous centuries. Why do I think it is important to respect the pre-knowledge of students when interpreting postmodern lyric poetry? Because in this way, the incomprehensibility of postmodern literature could be stopped. The job of literature teachers is to build the proper intertextual background and to help the students interpret the postmodern poetry in the right way.

**Key words:** pre-knowledge, consideration of pre-knowledge, "incomprehensibility" of postmodern literature, teaching of postmodern poetry, unconcern of students for postmodern literature

### 1. The Background

Motto:

*"If I was to narrow down the psychology of education to one single principle,  
I would say: the factor with the greatest influence on learning is  
what the student already knows. We need to learn what this knowledge is,  
and teach the child accordingly."*

(David Ausubel)

We are faced with the fact each and every day that the relation of reader and reading is changing from one day to another, especially as we live in a medial world. We have got mobile phones, computers, we may contact one another via the Internet. At the same time a growing disinterest of students towards literature is to be observed in Hungary, and possibly in other countries of the world as well. I asked myself the question, what could be the reason behind students isolating themselves in such great extent. Through my research, as of this day, the main reason in the case of Hungarian secondary school students is that they do not have an appropriate level of pre-knowledge which would enable them to interpret a given piece of literature in the right way, especially postmodern poetry. Due to the linear curriculum-setting, secondary school students are less able to recall what they have learnt earlier, as they do not have a systematic overview of what has been covered regarding certain periods of literature. There is far too great emphasis on facts and lexicality, thus the ability to discover connections, processes, and relationships is underdeveloped in Hungarian secondary school students.

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As part of my research, I concentrated on the question what a secondary school teacher could do in order to resolve students' unconcern for literature. As a first step, it would be useful to stop mechanic teaching, free from all kinds of creativity, and would be effective to teach the individual periods of literature from a net-approach, and not only to apply linear arrangement of the curriculum. Last but not least, students' pre-knowledge should be taken into account, they should be made to realize why their pre-knowledge is important and how it could be made use of.

I sincerely trust that literature teachers, literature-pedagogy experts, and didacticians will welcome my suggestions and ideas for activating pre-knowledge, drawn up in the light of the results in Hungary, and find them useful and suitable for consideration.

### **1.1 Selection and arrangement of curriculum for Literature in Hungary**

The selection and arrangement are curricular matters. In Hungary, it has been argued for years whether the Literature curriculum could be reduced, and along what principles—alternatively, what could be done against the growing negative attitude of secondary school students towards Literature and reading.

“The reason why it is necessary to think about the possible models of selection and arrangement of curriculum for teaching Hungarian Grammar and Literature in Hungary today is that in the past decades, from 7th grade on (that is, from the age of 12) literature teaching has been characterized by chronological arrangement. In the 4-year secondary schools—apart from some marginalised attempts—chronological selection and arrangement of curriculum is exclusive. This absolute dominance of the chronological approach contradicts the practice of most developed literature teaching systems in the world, and, in my opinion, contradicts the demands, the conditions, and the crucially significant aim of educating future readers which characterize the areas of writing and understanding texts in Hungary.” (Arató, 2006; p. 113).

Unfortunately it is still a common approach of literature teachers in Hungary that we have the intention to teach with a sense of completeness, and are less able to make a selection. “Teaching of Hungarian literature is still under the charm of the curriculum and completeness. We are afraid that if a writer or a literary work is not taught in public education, they will be lost from the national canon and literary culture.” (Arató, 2006; p. 114) There might be some truth in that, but it is also important to see that the world around us has changed and shaped significantly, which also means that the canon for (teaching) Literature may also be modified to some extent.

Another problem is that, as teachers, we are not trying to help our students view literature as an exciting world, which connects at various points like a network, and is not merely a linear timeline. The former view is, and would highly needed to be strengthened in Hungarian secondary schools today, as students encounter more and more works of postmodern poetry (even at the final exam) that are paraphrases or transcripts of poets of earlier periods. In order to be able to interpret such postmodern poetry, secondary school students would need to be able to use their pre-knowledge to recall earlier poems, as a simultaneous teaching of these texts could present a unique intertextual connection, that is, the dialogue of texts could enhance interpretation. “On the other hand, the dialogue between the literary works themselves, along with the works and contemporary readers, are none the less important than understanding the connection between a literary work and the time it was written in. Older and more recent works arranged in the same teaching unit enhance better interpretation of each of them, as if shedding new light on one another. Books in the library of mind do not follow a chronological order, in fact, we often read earlier works through the ‘eyes’ of later ones.” (Arató, 2006; p. 114)

An important aspect to consider for curriculum-arrangement is that it might be worth following a slightly reverse chronology and teach contemporary writers first, and connecting earlier works to these later. This way, the process of educating students to become readers could be more effective, as a secondary school student may be more likely to start reading a postmodern piece of literature than one dating from the 16th–17th century. The idea

of reverse chronology is not new, János Arany<sup>1</sup> had a similar view on the issue of teaching literature.

In his study, László Arató refers to how János Arany first taught the latest period of literature to his students at the 6th grade of the 8-year grammar school, followed by the earlier periods. János Arany also believed that this way it was easier for students than starting with works of earlier periods with a vocabulary and language-use stranger to them and difficult to understand (Arató, 2006; p. 114).

It is obvious that several issues need to be considered when selecting and arranging the curriculum. However, solving these issues is urgent, as the results of my micro-research, shown by the present study, will present.

### **1.2 The Frames of Interpretation of the Definition of Pre-Knowledge, as Used in My Research**

There are two possible ways for interpreting pre-knowledge—with respect to teaching literature. First, when students' pre-knowledge **has to** be taken into account, and second, when their pre-knowledge **could** be built on. In the first case, previous knowledge of literary history, of literary pieces, and of the given text, as well as the ability to recognize a poem are meant by pre-knowledge. Here, pre-knowledge has to be considered because without it certain works of literature (such as postmodern poetry) are difficult, or even impossible to understand. In the second case, pre-knowledge as a motivational power could be used during literature class—and here pre-knowledge covers not only the pre-knowledge of literature, but, for example, students' knowledge of informatics could also be defined with this term. In this interpretation, pre-knowledge also means an interdisciplinary approach, as pre-knowledge connected to any other school subject or area of education could be used as a source of motivation.

In the present study I wish to emphasize the interpretation of pre-knowledge where teachers have to build on their students' pre-knowledge in literature when interpreting a new literary work. By ignoring pre-knowledge we will repeatedly be hindered by students being at a loss when facing a piece of postmodern poetry, which, for instance, builds on the motives, vocabulary and contents of a previous piece of poetry. Without being able to recognize or recall the poem from earlier times, students will fail to understand the real meaning, message of the postmodern work. Our task is to make our students feel that a postmodern poem does not stand by itself in the world of literature, but is connected in hundreds and thousands of ways to previous centuries, to poems and poets of earlier ages. We have to teach our students how to read between the lines, and how to see the possible parody or reinterpretation of the past in the postmodern. Our ultimate aim is to make students understand that hypertextuality does not only exist in the world of computers and the Internet, but also in literature. What makes this essential is that no literature textbook will contain footnotes for each and every piece of postmodern poetry to refer students back to their pre-knowledge of earlier poems that are necessary for a successful interpretation.

I would like to show this opportunity, that is, the importance of recalling and applying pre-knowledge, through the poems of a contemporary poet, András Ferenc Kovács, who paraphrased works of poets from previous centuries, e.g., in his volume *Aranyos vitézi órák*<sup>2</sup> (*Golden warrior hours*).

After an introduction to the volume and the micro-research connected to it (both linked to Hungary), my attempt is to come to such general conclusions and suggestions for mapping and applying secondary school students' pre-knowledge that literature classes, both in Hungary and other countries, could benefit from.

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<sup>1</sup> Arany, János (1817–1882) an outstanding Hungarian poet. He wrote lyric and epic works. He worked as a teacher in a renowned secondary grammar school in Nagykőrös 1851–1860. He even wrote a Literature textbook for his students, as he could not identify with the textbook of the time.

<sup>2</sup> KOVÁCS András Ferenc, *Aranyos vitézi órák* (Versek: 1998–2002) [Golden warrior hours (Poems: 1998–2002)], Mentor Kiadó, Marosvásárhely, 2002. ISBN 973-599-021-0.

## 2. A Short Introduction to the Bases of My Research: The Poet<sup>3</sup> and the Volume

### 2.1 A Short Introduction of the Volume *Aranyos vitézi órák* by András Ferenc Kovács

The volume was published in 2002, and contains poems from the period 1998–2001. This volume is rather a book or an album. Even the order of the poems within the volume is significant and carries a message. Some poems are illustrated by Goya's etchings (the question may arise, whether the order of the pictures was first created, followed by the poems, or vice versa, that is, which brought about the arrangement of the other). These etchings are scary pictures, but good examples of contemporary society and moral standards of our days.

The volume is a mixture of various genres (paraphrases mostly) and various topics. András Ferenc Kovács plays daring tricks with the Hungarian language. The volume recalls the past, at the same time brings something new. Examples of limerick: *Urbi et orbi*, *Millenáris*. András Ferenc Kovács transcribes, or rather, "writes apart" the lines of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Attila József, Mihály Babits, Miklós Zrínyi and Gyula Illyés (*Ezredévi ódákok*, "*Ember és polgár leszek*", *Fársángthól búcsúvétel*, *Nem lesz elég*) [*Odes from the Millennium*, "*I will be a man and a citizen*", *Farewell to the Carneval*, *It won't be enough*]. In his poems, Kovács writes about the contemporary society, the power of media, and the complaints of the poor little theatre director (*Fársángthól búcsúvétel*, *A szegény kis színidirektor panasza*). [*Farewell to the Carneval*, *The complaints of the poor little theatre director*]. The words "gold", "warrior", "hour" play important roles as motives through the volume, re-appearing in several poems, and bearing with a wide range of meaning: *Óarany óda*, *Aranyos vitézi órák*, *Ezredévi ódákok* (*Old golden ode*, *Golden warrior hours*, *Odes from the Millenium*).

## 3. The Model, Method and Aim of the Research

The research presented in this study is not yet completed, I intend to carry it out with a greater sample. Yet I believe that the results of this present micro-research could be considered as representative, concerning the fact that I took my sample from all secondary school types of public education in Hungary (4-year, 6-year and 8-year grammar schools, secondary technical school and vocational school). I trust that in the light of the results, experts of Literature-pedagogy from other countries will consider these issues as useful and worthy of further deliberation.

### 3.1 The Model and the Method

In the spring semester of the academic year of 2008–2009, I carried out a survey with 12th-graders. My goal was to have students from different types of schools filling in my questionnaire. Altogether I handed out 80 questionnaires, 76 of which were returned. The ratio of the students were as follow: 10 vocational school-students (with 3 Hungarian Literature classes per week), 18 from a 4-year grammar school (5 Literature classes per week, preparing for advanced level final exam), 11 from a 6-year grammar school (5 Literature classes per week, preparing for advanced level final exam), and 25 from an 8-year grammar school (3 Hungarian Grammar and Literature classes per week). The reason behind my choice of 12th-graders was that in the spring semester they are already revising for the final exam, and I thought that during this time there was hope of their pre-knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> Kovács, András Ferenc, born in 1959 in Szatmárnémeti. Studied Hungarian and French, worked as a teacher; now a poet and literary translator. Lives in Marosvásárhely, Romania, works as the editor in chief of the *Látó* periodical. In his poetry, he realizes the dual presence of innovation and tradition. He is greatly devoted to form. For him, form is not restriction, but liberation. In his poems he keeps to hexameter and the exact rhyme structure. In his diverse use of genres (limerick, haiku, paraphrase) he could be compared to Dezső Kosztolányi and Sándor Weöres. Kovács's goal is nothing less than to make the traditional author's position uncertain, or even to eliminate it. Ultimately, he is questioning the literary text's original linguistic and intertextual mode of existence.

being fresh, and the actual recalling of paraphrases could be realized. Furthermore, by the 12th grade they have already received a thorough overview of literary history, owing to the literature classes.

I met the students personally when having the questionnaires filled. They were not allowed to use any kind of help. They had a maximum of 45 minutes for the questionnaires.

The research-document consisted of a questionnaire, a task sheet and a background-questionnaire. In the first part of the task sheet, the students had to guess the titles and writers of poems paraphrased by our postmodern poet, András Ferenc Kovács (all paraphrases were taken from the volume *Aranyos vitézi órák*). In the second part, students were given a table, which contained single stanzas from Kovács's poems, as well as the originals of these paraphrases. The task was to match each stanza with the name of the original poem's writer. The third part of the research-document was a background-questionnaire, aimed at providing me with information about the school-leavers' opinion of these postmodern works of poetry, whether they had heard of such poems during their course of studies, and if they managed to find the connection between contemporary and earlier poems, what elements of their knowledge helped this process.

In the first part of the task sheet students had to guess the originals<sup>4</sup> of the following paraphrases by András Ferenc Kovács: *Messzebb...messzebb*, *Nem lesz elég*, "Ember és polgár leszek...", *Ezredévi ódák*, *Fárságtól búcsúvétel* (Further...further away; It won't be enough; "I'll be a man and a citizen..."; Odes from the Millennium; Farewell to the Carneval). For the sake of clarity it is worth mentioning that, with the exception of Mihály Vitéz Csokonai<sup>5</sup>, the authors of the originals are among the requirements of the Literature finals, even at intermediate level. On the task sheet students could see the exact title of Kovács's paraphrase alongside the whole text of the poem. Based on these, they had to guess the original of the paraphrase.

In the second part of the task sheet, the 12th-graders had to match stanzas with poets. This task was easier than the previous one as students could see both the paraphrases and the originals poems. In my view, Kovács's paraphrases were revealing in respect of language use. But this opinion of mine was not proved, as most students either did not pay attention, or did, in fact, not recognize the revealing features of vocabulary and idioms.

The third part of the questionnaire was aimed at background information. Students had to answer four questions altogether. As a researcher, I was delighted that the school-leavers made an effort to answer all questions. None of the questionnaires was returned without answers to the background-questionnaire, or in a form impossible to evaluate.

### 3.2 The Aim of My Research

Taking the first steps of the present research, my aim was to draw a map of school-leavers' ability to recognize intertextual connections and dialogues. I was also curious to see the extent to which, approximately two months before the final exams, students are able to recognize poems. I had the idea that any mistakes on students' part may serve as valuable lessons for the teachers, as they show which skills need to be improved, and where to put greater emphasis in the course of their work. The results may also prove helpful when considering which poems provide the teacher with an opportunity — and how —, for combining contemporary poetry with the works

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<sup>4</sup> The originals of the paraphrases: *Messze, messze* (*Far, far away*) by Mihály Babits; *Nem volt elég* (*It wasn't enough*) by Gyula Illyés; *Kedves Jocó!* (*Dear Jocó*) by Attila József; *Magyarokhoz I.* (*To the Hungarians I*) by Dániel Berzsenyi; *A fársáng búcsúzó szavai* (*Carneval saying farewell*) by Mihály Vitéz Csokonai.

<sup>5</sup> Mihály Vitéz Csokonai is among the topics of the oral final exam only if the Hungarian Literature department of the given school decides to include—not a compulsory topic, and is usually included as part of the *Culture of the region* category at the finals only if the poet had some connections to the region the school is located in.

of poets from earlier centuries.

Among my aims was to give new proof of how inappropriate the exclusively chronological Literature teaching is—as in such cases students will have a high level of factual knowledge, but they will not be able to apply their knowledge when the task is to recognize or analyze a poem. However, at the final exam they face such tasks. In the course of the new, two-level final exam, students encounter unknown texts by known authors in the majority of cases. Since 2005 (when the new final exam-system was introduced), results have shown that school-leavers have difficulties with the exam tasks, because during their secondary school studies they often mugged interpretations of poems from the textbook, and had never learnt really to interpret and explain literary texts. With the changing of output requirements, the methodology of literature teaching, as well as the selection and arrangement of curriculum should be reconsidered, or even changed. The result of this micro-research is one of the messengers urging the need for such a change.

#### **4. Results of the Research**

I tried to systematize the results along various points, always bearing in mind what changes these results could encourage teachers to carry out, and what help these could offer in the process of reforming and changing principles and customs of selecting teaching methods, selecting and arranging the curriculum.

I am going to discuss the results separately, depending on the task they are connected to, and finish with explaining and supporting these with the answers to the background-questionnaire, as well as interpreting those answers.

##### **4.1 Results of the First Part of the Tasksheet**

###### **4.1.1 The ratio of recognizing the title and the poet**

I arrived at thought-provoking results while evaluating the tasksheets. Students of the 8-year grammar school did best in recognizing the title and the writer of the poems. They knew 31% of the paraphrased poems' title and writer. The ones who knew the name of the poet imitated in the paraphrase were not the 8-year grammar school students, but the 6-year grammar school students: 29% of their answers were correct. The 8-year grammar school students were left behind only slightly, they got 27% of the poets' names right. The worst results, however, came from the secondary technical school, where only 2% of the students recognized the title and the author of the poems. In recognizing the poet imitated in the paraphrase, the vocational school students got the worst result: 10%. There were only 18% among the 4-year grammar school students who knew at least the name of the poet imitated. This is all the more interesting if we consider that these students have two more Literature classes per week, and are preparing for a higher level final exam. It is also worth examining, how many of the students knew at least the title of the given poem. In case of the technical school and the 6-year grammar school there were not any students, who gave only the title of the poems in their answers. 8% of the 4-year grammar school students knew at least the title of the poem, while 2% of both the vocational school- and the 4-year grammar school students got the titles of the poems right.

Based on the results we can say that, independent of the type of school, 33% of school-leavers did not recognize the poem imitated, nor its author, 26% gave wrong answers, 22% knew at least the name of the poet, 16% recognized the both title and the poet, and 3% knew only the title of the poem. In the light of the results we may want to think about students' abilities of recognizing poems, not long before the final exams, and how they had learnt about those poets a postmodern writer of lyrical poetry imitates. I have a notion that in many cases their

studies only meant cramming poem-interpretations, and not developing practical skills to understand and interpret poems. "One of the biggest mistakes of the teaching practice that does not take pre-knowledge into account is that learning becomes cramming. In this case it is not the system of pre-knowledge which is transformed or changed, but a superficial knowledge is created that only lasts for a while." (Nahalka, 2001; p. 61). Even though the results of the 8-year grammar school students were relatively good, a question arises: if their previous knowledge had not properly built into their system of knowledge, then how will they be able to correctly interpret postmodern poetry? What would be the suitable way? "In such cases a new system of interpretation is developed in children, demanding a place in information processing, and the mind deals the cards again." (Nahalka, 2001; p. 66)

#### 4.2 Results of the First Part of the Tasksheet

##### 4.2.1 Wrong answers and some consequent questions

Correct interpretation of the selected works of postmodern poetry is only possible with the help of intertextuality. When, due to a lack of pre-knowledge, intertextuality is not realized, it is worth examining what text the students believed to have discovered in the background of the postmodern poems. In case of the vocational school students 12% gave an answer completely different from the correct solution. It is interesting to note that with one exception, all vocational school-students wrote *Szózat (Appeal)* by Mihály Vörösmarty, when the correct answer was *Nem volt elég (It wasn't enough)* by Gyula Illyés. The reason, I suppose, could have been that the name and works of Gyula Illyés had come up only briefly (or not at all) during Literature classes. This way, they could not be part of students' pre-knowledge, unlike the *Szózat (Appeal)* with a very similar vocabulary. For the third question one student gave Hobo Blues Band's song, *Rózsadomb (Rose hill)*, yet the answer is not considered completely incorrect. There is an identity of texts, but the imitated poem is *Kedves Jócó! (Dear Jócó)* by Attila József. Hobo's adaptation had already been a kind of paraphrase. However, this one example of such a mistake actually shows how important it is to involve contemporary arts (music, painting, etc.) in Literature classes, as these sister arts could greatly enhance the process of interpretation.

48% of technical school students gave a wrong answer for the paraphrased poem and its writer. Some of their solutions were: *De szeretnék gazdag lenni... (I wish I was rich...)* by Attila József, *Szeptember végén (End of September)* by Sándor Petőfi, *Alföld (Great Plain)* by Sándor Petőfi, *Himnusz (National Anthem)* by Ferenc Kölcsey, *Szózat (Appeal)* by Mihály Vörösmarty. Students gave the greatest possible variety of answers for the second question. Petőfi's *Alföld*, Vörösmarty's *Szózat* and Kölcsey's *Himnusz* all came up here. It is clear that Gyula Illyés's poem is not part of secondary school-students' pre-knowledge, rather the poets and their works listed above. It was also true in the case of the third poem that students wrote *De szeretnék gazdag lenni...* by Attila József, that is, their answer was wrong- a fictional title, based on the first line of the (correct) poem. However, it is worth mentioning that even though most students did not know the correct title, that one single line was somehow still part of their pre-knowledge.

37% of the 4-year grammar school-students gave wrong answers. I would like to highlight the answers to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th poems. *Szózat* by Vörösmarty came up again in case of the 2nd poem, and *De szeretnék gazdag lenni...* by Attila József for the 3rd. Again, it is the first line of Attila József's poem which appears. It is really interesting that Gyula Illyés comes up in connection with the 4th poem. Instead of Berzsenyi's poem, students wrote *Haza (Homeland)* and *Ezredévi Ódák (Odes from the Millennium)* by Gyula Illyés and *Szigeti veszedelem (Disaster of Sziget)* by Miklós Zrínyi as answers.

Only a small ratio (15%) of 6-year grammar school students gave wrong answers — if they were not sure,

they did not write anything at all. For the third poem, they, too, wrote *De szeretnék gazdag lenni...* by Attila József, and for the fourth, they wrote Gyula Illyés, or *Forr a világ (The world is raging)* under the name of Mihály Babits—the latter being a factual mistake.

Similarly, a small proportion (17%) of 8-year grammar school students got the answers wrong. Some of their solutions were: *Puszták népe (People of the Puszta)* by Gyula Illyés, *Hazám (My Homeland)* by Attila József, and *Pusztta télen (Pusztta in winter)* by Endre Ady for the second poem. I found the latter rather intriguing. First, it is a factual mistake, as *Pusztta télen* was written by Sándor Petőfi, moreover, it is hard to relate to the second poem on the task sheet. Instead of the Gyula Illyés-poem, Attila József's *Hazám* could have occurred to students mostly because of the paraphrased poem's vocabulary.

Summing up the conclusions from wrong recognition of poems, the following remarks must be made: every incorrect recognition creates a new intertextual connection between the original poem and its supposed paraphrase. Each intertextual connection could have different bases. As the questionnaires show, this cohesion is mostly due to the similar vocabulary of poems.

It is also worth examining which school-type gave the best results. With the ratio of 63% correct answers, the 8-year grammar school students came first in recognizing the titles and the poets—followed by the 6-year grammar school students (17%), the 4-year school students (14%), the vocational school students (5%) and finally the technical school students (2%). In recognizing the poems' title, 63% of 4-year grammar school students gave a correct answer, and 27% of the 8-year school students. In this category, even the vocational school students' results were assessable, as 9% recognized at least the titles of the paraphrased poems. When guessing the names of the poet imitated, the 8-year grammar school students proved to be the best again (42% correct answers), followed by the 4-year and the 6-year grammar school students (both with 19%), the technical school students (14%), and the vocational school students (9%).

#### 4.3 Results of the Second Part

From the second task it turned out, regardless of the school-type, Attila József's poem was the easiest for students to recognize. In case of this poem, the ratio of wrong answers was: 7% for vocational school students, 8% for technical school students, 5% for the 4-year, 2% for the 6-year, and 4% for the 8-year grammar school students. Based on these results we could state that a great proportion of 8-year grammar school students managed to recognize the paraphrase of Mihály Babics's *Messze... messze... (Far, far away...)*. The reason behind this (as the answers for the background-research also revealed) was that these students were taught about Kovács's paraphrase when learning Babics's poem. The results of the 8-year grammar school students for recognizing Csokonai's poems were worse. As for the other poems, students of different school-types gave approximately similar results. From the results it seems obvious that Miklós Zrínyi and Gyula Illyés are only slightly part of students' pre-knowledge, as opposed to Attila József and Mihály Babits. However, what is worthy of notice here is that "Miklós Zrínyi and his oeuvre" is one of the final exam topics even at intermediate level, just like Gyula Illyés at the advanced level. It makes us think that school-leavers, 2 months before their final exams, could not recognize the first stanza of *Szigeti veszedelem* by Miklós Zrínyi, that is, knowledge and recognition of a text does not form a part of their pre-knowledge — even though knowledge of the text of literary works would be a significant part of the two-level final exam.

#### 4.4 Results of the Background-Questionnaire

The third part of the task sheet was a background-questionnaire with 4 questions. I wanted to know if they



had heard about András Ferenc Kovács's poems before; if yes, when, and if not, would they have loved to learn about them. I also asked that if they managed to recognize the paraphrased poems, what helped them. My final question was if they appreciated postmodern poetry, and what they thought a 21st century poet's goal could have been with such paraphrases.

In my present study, I would like to highlight the results of the answers to the second question. I considered this question important, since it revealed how the process of recalling from pre-knowledge actually took place. 40% of students wrote that they tried to recognize the poems based on their content. For 33%, the structure was the best hint. Both the symbolic use of consonants-vowels and the language use/vocabulary were mentioned by a mere 11% of the students. Only 4% of students found the title of the paraphrased poems helpful.

These results give ground to further questions. 40% of school-leavers say that they try to recognize paraphrases based on the content. Similar content could mean similar vocabulary as well. This confirms the idea that some mistakes followed from the similarity of vocabulary.

33% of students claimed to have recognized the paraphrases based on the structure of the poem. Yet, as the results show, students' recognition-skills based on the structure did not work. I would like to bring one example: Berzsenyi's *A Magyarokhoz I. (To the Hungarians I)* was written in hexameter, and Kovács's paraphrase thoroughly follows this structure. Hexameter is one of the basic forms taught to secondary school students, so they should be expected to be able to recognize it. Yet, the majority of students matched Kölcsey's *Himnusz* and Vörösmarty's *Szózat* with this paraphrase. Consequently, if students' ability to recognize poems was enhanced by the structure, they should have recognized this basic structure.

In fact, students could identify hexameter as a concept, but could not link it to actual meaning in the given poems. They have the name of the concept crammed in their mind, but failed to apply in practice what they had learnt.

The remarks that students made about A. F. Kovács's poems are also worth mentioning: they found the poems interesting, and said they would like to learn about postmodern works. When selecting the Literature curriculum, giving greater scope to contemporary writers should be seriously considered. One of the basic pillars in educating children to become readers is to give them guidelines and a system of values to contemporary literature.

## **5. Ideas and Suggestions for Exploring Students' Pre-Knowledge — Based on the Results of My Research**

As teachers of literature, we have numerous creative options we can apply to explore the pre-knowledge of our students in connection with a given topic. Thinking these through is a crucial part of preparing for our lesson. It is practical if this mapping process takes place one or two lessons before we plan to start the related new unit of our curriculum. This planning ahead-strategy is necessary because otherwise we cannot actually build on elements of students' pre-knowledge, as we do not have an overview of our class's previous field of knowledge. If we plan our lesson after having explored students' pre-knowledge, we will in fact be able to differentially deal with students, depending on their pre-knowledge, that is, see what students actually know already, and what needs to be confirmed or supplemented. In my view, mapping pre-knowledge is most useful when carried out beforehand, in writing, as this way we can develop a strategy for processing the new subject-matter that requires the recalling of pre-knowledge.

A tried-and-tested task for exploring students' pre-knowledge is a short assignment of making a web-page. Of course, they do not have to make a real web-site on a computer, only on paper. Let us consider the following:

in connection with a given topic, students will need to recall a poem they learnt earlier. They have to make the web-site on paper in such a way that they design menus and descriptions based on our questions. It is important that the questions and task descriptions are given precisely, as the answers and menus will thus give us a true reflection of the level of pre-knowledge each student has. My suggestion is that the instruction should also ask students to take a moment and imagine they live at the time of history when the given poem was written, and the web-site is intended to popularize this specific poem. I have applied this task several times with 11th-graders and 12th-graders. The designs provided me with an accurate picture of what elements of pre-knowledge I could actually build on when teaching specific postmodern poems, and what still had to be clarified.

Another method for exploring students' pre-knowledge is to have students draw a mindmap related to the poem. In this case, we have to decide whether or not we give students starting points, or allow for a free flow of thoughts. In my view, it is more practical not to give starting points, as this way we get a much wider picture of the elements of knowledge we can count on, as well as what needs to be clarified.

A reverse approach is when we make students recall the title of the poem in a riddle—another task for processing pre-knowledge. Here I think a crossword-puzzle is the most useful. Students have to write in the lines of the crossword-puzzle the definition of concepts, names, ideas, and structure related to the poem. It is a good idea to put together the lines in a way that a precise solution of the puzzle is the title of the poem.

When exploring students' pre-knowledge, it is important never to use a form resembling a test. To my mind a life-like, creative way of recalling what has been learnt earlier is much more effective. Test-form may block students in actually recalling all they know in connection with a poem.

With those groups where the recalling process is slower, my opinion is that a short overview of the earlier poem should take the first place in the learning process. If even the basis of the what has been learnt earlier is uncertain, building new knowledge on it cannot stand firm either.

## **6. Consequences Based on the Results**

Summing up the results and drawing conclusions significant for teachers of Hungarian Grammar and Literature, it could be stated that the way Literature teachers convey the intertextuality between contemporary poets' works and the paraphrased poems of earlier centuries within the framework of Literature classes plays an outstanding role. It is a question whether students' pre-knowledge actually includes those poems that the contemporary one refers to and builds on. This question is multi-level: what direction does the process of interpretation take if the student's pre-knowledge includes the necessary information—and what if it is not included? In the first case a further question is, if students' pre-knowledge includes both the poet and the poem paraphrased by the contemporary author, will they be able to activate these elements? In the second case the question we should ask is how the contemporary poem could be interpreted without the required pre-knowledge?

The main reason why I think pre-knowledge should be taken into account when interpreting postmodern poetry is that I am not convinced that pieces of postmodern poetry should have to be labelled as “nonsense” — in Hungary and other parts of the world. As teachers of Literature all we would need to do is create an intertextual background that could facilitate students' interpretation of postmodern poems.

The question of pre-knowledge leads us to another question of great importance, worth considering. At

present, our students know the poems of János Arany, Dániel Berzsenyi, and other poets of earlier centuries<sup>6</sup>. Will this be the same in the future? What will happen to the texts? Will people in the future have such a level of pre-knowledge in literature and history which is essential for maintaining the real literary values of various literary works? Yet another question is, which texts will survive as parts of *cultural memory*<sup>7</sup>? If we fail to admit that we need help to arouse the interest of the youth towards literature, several pieces from our literary canon might be completely forgotten — and simply because the readers' pre-knowledge was not at the required level, or not wide enough to make the interpretation possible. "For memory, which is practically inseparable from perception, switches something from the past into the present, merging various moments of the content into one single view, and through this two-fold function causes us really to perceive the matter into ourselves where, inevitably, we should be perceiving inside it." (Kulcsár Szabó, 1994; p. 164)

Studying the results of the micro-research we can see that an exclusively chronological approach to teaching literary history is not to be maintained in the practice of teaching Literature in Hungary. If Hungarian students would rank first at international tests we could say that this method of teaching Literature works well—but the overall picture is different. Hungarian students do not get good results at PISA tests, reading seldom appears among their freetime activities, and Hungarian Grammar and Literature does not rank good on the subject-attitude tests (Arató, 2006).

As teachers of Literature we should not forget that Literature as a subject does not stand by itself, but is connected to literary theory, pedagogy and textology in a thousand ways. Professor József Zsolnai put this thought in one of his studies as follow: "The discipline of the pedagogy of literature is not to be mixed with the terms "pedagogy of the subject of literature", the "methodology of literature", "literature instruction", "teaching literature", or "literary education". The pedagogy of literature is an applied discipline, set in the cross-section of literary theories, textologies, culturology and pedagogy. The basic problem of the pedagogy of literature is this: what application of literary theory or textology could be considered as a suitable basis for the pedagogy of literature at the beginning of the 21st century. That is, in this particular time in the history of science, when we can witness the co-existence of premodern, modern and postmodern literary theory, as well as the bloom of empiric researches, the re-interpretation of reception-aesthetic experience, and the devaluation of literary history..." (Zsolnai, 2006; p. 93).

It is not an easy task to reform deep-rooted methods of teaching Literature, and give them a new direction, however, it is necessary. In the 21st century we should not use the methodology of the past for teaching Literature. As teachers of Literature it is our responsibility to arouse or students' interest for the subject we teach, for reading, to keep improving and shaping their abilities, relating their taste in literature to a system of values, and help them in the process through which they learn to appreciate literature. To achieve this, it is probable that we will not need to cover the complete literary canon during our classes. In the winding road of educating students to become readers, utilizing elements of pre-knowledge during the process of interpreting a postmodern poem or two may have a greater motivating effect than chronological literary history. This is shown by the motto of my study, a quote by David Ausubel — that is, the greatest influencing factor in learning is what the student already knows. We need to learn what this knowledge is, and teach children accordingly.

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<sup>6</sup> Here I took Hungarian examples, but with international reference I meant poets who are considered to be the bases of national literature in any country, or are parts of the literary canon.

<sup>7</sup> I use the concept of cultural memory as defined by Assmann.

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