Transcription as a Tool for Deep Reading and Teaching of Folklore

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Abstract

The paper outlines initial experience of using transcription as a tool to promote deep reading and understanding of cultural heritage. The experience is a side activity of a project, which aims to improve the database of Latvian folk songs. Use of transcription appeared beneficial not only in terms of elaborating a data base, but also for stimulating deep reading and comprehension of folk songs. The analysis of experiences shows the benefits and challenges of using transcription as a tool for working with students in humanities and arts.

Keywords

Transcription, deep reading, digital tools in education,, digital humanities, cultural heritage, folk songs

1. Introduction

The development of digital technologies over the last decades has contributed to various changes in social habits and daily routines. Along with technologies that impact and improve the everyday life in general, opportunities for pedagocial methods have also considerably changed. The aim of this paper is to share the first findings from a pilot study on the possibilities of using transcription as a tool to promote critical thinking and deep reading practice, as well as to stimulate students' interest and contribute to their knowledge on cultural heritage.

Various digital media, on the one hand, ensures access to different kinds of texts. On the other hand, studies carried out in the last decades [1, 2, 3, 4, 5] show the development of trends of fragmented reading, i.e., scanning and skimming for information, problems in perceiving long, 'monolith' texts, understanding subtext and poetics. Focusing on fragments, avoidance of the whole context combined with a lack of analysis of the text, leads to the risk of superficial conclusions. Thus, when choosing an instructional model, i.e. complex of lesson structure and methods, for teaching of reading, it is essential to choose those that contribute to the development of deep reading: ".. an instructional routine in which students are guided in their understanding of complex texts. (..) Texts that do not give up their meaning easily and quickly." [6] Methodologically, the instructional models that stimulate deep reading consist of two parts:

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(1) reading (re-reading) followed up by (2) interaction with text individually (e.g., annotation, answering questions) or in group (e.g., discussions, sharing impressions) [7].

Annotation as a reading tool that stimulates analysis of text is among the most frequently used in instructional models of pedagogy, whereas text transcription is not so often mentioned in this context. A study on the role of audio transcription in scientific data processing shows that "..analysis takes place and understandings are derived through the process of constructing a transcript by listening and re-listening, viewing and re-viewing. (..) [T]ranscription facilitates the close attention and the interpretive thinking that is needed to make sense of the data." [8] Also, if the transcription is used to 'digitalize' handwritten text, it involves more then only technical repetition of a written text.[9] It can be suitable for the learning goals through deep reading, especially when dealing with the intangible cultural heritage.

2. Context of the Case Study

The pilot study was a side activity to the work on the database of "Latvju dainas" (Latvian Dainas) [10]. This database includes all Latvian folk song texts from the first comprehensive publication of the printed version of folk songs "Latvju dainas" [11] each linked with a scanned paper sheet of "Dainuskapis" [1]. The database was created more than 20 years ago and due to updates and modernisation has become erroneous and functionally dissatisfying, however, still available publicly at the website www.dainuskapis.lv. A project aiming to fully transcribe the scanned texts in addition to correcting errors and implementing other improvement work was initiated by the Archives of Latvian Folklore, the preserving authority of the original collection and the database, in 2019. The aim of this initiative was targeted at making all the material searchable, thus enabling further processing and analysis of the collection by computational methods.

Folk songs are considered to be one of the cornerstones of Latvian traditional culture. The idea expressed by German philosopher J. J. Herder that folk songs are the archive of the people, the repository of the knowledge of their forebears and of religious, theogonic and cosmogonic understanding, a representation of events in their history and their soul [12], was the inspiration for the 19th century movement aimed at collecting Latvian folklore, especially folk songs. The publication of "Latvju dainas" ca. 1900 symbolically embodied the unity of Latvian people in terms of language, history, and a world perception, thus contributing to the formation of national consciousness [13]. The published folk songs reflect the editor Krišjānis Barons's efforts to compactly publish a huge volume of texts, yet at the same time it includes his understanding of what folk songs should serve for, i.e., as a source of folk history, ideals and experience [2]. It is

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[1]Dainuskapis (the Cabinet of Folksongs or the Cabinet of Dainas) is a wooden cabinet, where manuscript sheets of Latvian folk songs published in "Latvju dainas" are stored. Each folk song is written on 3 cm × 11 cm paper sheets in handwriting. Almost 218 thousand texts are held in 70 drawers with 20 sections each. Dainuskapis was designed by the Krišjānis Barons, the editor of "Latvju dainas". Since 4 September 2001 Dainu skapis is inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World list. For more, please see Archives of Latvian Folklore, URL: http://en.lfk.lv/collection/folksong-cabinet.

[2]The influence by K. Barons corrections on the development of the literarised form of Latvian folk songs can be noticed from the marks on sheets stored in the Dainuskapis. The sheets processed so far show corrections in more than 60% of the folk songs.

the publication and repeated publications of "Latvju dainas" that promoted the literarisation of the form and expression of folk songs thus distancing them from the 'living', context-dependent tradition.[14, 15, 16, 17] Folk songs still form part of the Latvian cultural environment, for example, in the repertoires of amateur art groups (choirs, folk dance groups, etc.). At the same time, however, there is a tendency to use a uniform repertoire, which is readily available in publications of selected folk songs, as opposed to improvisation and 'live' performance.

Apart from the importance of the cultural heritage value for this study it is essential to note that the text of folk songs is short, mostly four lines long, seemingly easy to read, yet the ideas the folk songs contain are expressed as a metaphorical and symbolical concentrate and it requires specific knowledge of the tradition and the genre.

3. Participants

The pilot study involves students of various Latvian higher education institutions specialising in humanities, culture and art, as well as students of pedagogy specialising in teaching methodology of Latvian language and literature. The choice of this target group was determined, first of all, by the fact that, in the course of their studies, students learn both printed texts in Gothic script and handwritten manuscript reading, which are the skills necessary for the execution of the task in this project. Secondly, it can be expected that students of these specialisations should have a relatively better understanding and deeper interest in Latvian cultural history, folklore, language, etc. Thus, less time should be spent instructing them, explaining grammar, general cultural context. Thirdly, exercise would provide practice for students at the Archives of Latvian Folklore (Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia), thus giving a greater comprehension of the academic environment as a possible career path.

Calls for participation in the project were made three times during 2020–2021. For the first time, emails were sent through university administrations, thus reaching students of a very wide range specialties. Out of the 840 people who received information, around 3% responded to email, participated in the first seminar on engagement, tried the exercise, but not always continued engagement. The most responsive students were specializing in cultural studies. They were followed by the students of philology with specialization in Baltic languages and literature. Such a proportion is due to the higher number of students studying in culture related area. At the same time, the proportion changes when it comes to students who chose to continue the task. Out of the 26 who tried to perform task for once, 34% decided to continue: half of them philology students, the rest – students of cultural studies and pedagogy. Second and third recruitment was performed in face-to-face meeting solely for students of philology. "Success rate": 1 and 2 people accordingly from 2nd and 3rd recruitment or around 10% of the group applied for the task and proceeded with engagement. Unsurprisingly, three participants, who were recruited via complement by the existing team of 11 students already employed in the project, chose to continue their engagement in the task regardless of their field of study.

To step back shortly, for those students who responded, the seminar with participation information on the opportunities for involvement was provided in the Zoom, or face-to-face presentation, followed by selection of candidates. Analysing the data of students involved in the task, it can be seen that the wide range of recipients of the 'first call' provided an oppor-

Approved	No.	Text of "Latvian dainas"	Text in dialect	Text on sheet	Image of sheet	Source No.	Source info	Orig.No	Row count	Barons edited	Published in LD	Basic text	Repository	Language	Category
⌄										⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	
Nē	80-2	Lai rāj kungi, ko rādami, Jaunu meitu nenorāja: Lai tās gana piekusušas, Tās nogāja dziedadamas Tās nogāja dziedadamas Garam kunga stikla logu.				88c	Skaits: 1300 Rajons: C Vieta: Liezere Gadi: Avots: Neimans Jānis			Nē	Jā	Nē	ZK	lv	1.1.5. Iedzimta līgsma daba un dziesmu prieki jaunībā.
Nē	80-3	Rūja kungi, kū nūrūja, Meitu kungi nanūrūja: Meitys gōja dzidōdamys Par kundzeņa pagalmeņu.				424a	Skaits: 1495 Rajons: Vieta: Barkava Gadi: Avots: Smelters P.			Nē	Jā	Nē	V	lv	1.1.5. Iedzimta līgsma daba un dziesmu prieki jaunībā.

Figure 1: Screenshot from the folk song data base

tunity for the pilot study to reach different groups of students, thus manifesting the interest of students from different backgrounds in traditional culture and obtaining a variety of data. At the same time, presentations to smaller groups of students of philological studies appeared more successful in terms of students' involvement and continued engagement.

4. Description of the Task

The task/ exercise takes place in a computational system developed by the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia. As mentioned before, a new database or a 'tool for improvement' was created for the project, importing information from a database created 20 years ago. It is an integral part of the Digital Archive of Latvian Folklore (garamantas.lv), thus the data structures, user monitoring, accessibility that had already been developed were applied. The data has been systematised based on individual folk songs published in "Latvju Dainas". The texts are sorted according to the order used in the publication. Due to the variety of errors, all metadata and the text itself have been made correctable. In particular, it is possible to correct the order number, the source, etc. As a novelty compared to the previous database, the system includes the possibility to specifically identify texts written in a dialect that differs in spelling from the standard Latvian. The system includes options to add various attributes, such as whether the published text is/is not with a different layout than the original, the status of the song – basic or a variation, etc. It is also possible to add notes, i.e., to transcribe the editor's notes left on sheets (see Figure 1).

Corrections are made via a pop-up window, individually for each folk song. To make the user's experience more efficient, the scanned sheet is also displayed in this window and a transcription window is placed next to the published texts (see Figure 2).

Corrections can also be made individually – for a specific data item in a column. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the computational system provides two steps: 1) data input and accuracy check by a participant student; 2) review and approval by an editor – a folk song specialist from the Archives of Latvian Folklore. The tool is accessible only to users who have been granted special access rights, albeit the result of the project will be openly accessible to anyone. All activities are recorded in a database log journal allowing to monitor user performance.

Labot   ✕

Nr

31

Oriģinālnr

Latviju daina   Latgaliešu teksts   Oriģinālteksts

Bij man (Man bij) dziesmu vācelite
Smalkâ lazdu (lagzdu) krūmiņâ;
Kad es gribu, tad es dziedu,
Labas vien lasidama.

Avots

93a

Piezīmes

                                                                      Saglabāt

Figure 2: Editing window in folk song data base

To monitor students' activities and to ensure that the task is performed correctly giving support-ing information where necessary, a personalized approach is needed. The exercise for students includes checking the text version published in "Latvju dainas" (version corrected by the editor) and transcribing the 'authentic' text of the manuscript sheet (scanned files), adding attributes, notes, etc. Apart from the possibility to use these attributes in automated data processing, especially comparison of both versions was used to promote deep reading. Such interaction elements as re-reading, paying attention to changes in text semantics by variations of words (or word forms) stimulate the understanding of the changing nature of folk songs, and thus folklore in general, as well the influence of literary tradition on perception of vernacular practices and historical perception of what a folk song text should look like.

To ensure that students are properly instructed for this task, hands-on workshops for each

recruitment group (two for the first call) were organized. During the seminars, along with detailed instructions shortly described in the previous paragraph, more information on the meaning and context of the publication "Latvju dainas" was provided. At the same time, students also received written guidelines from the editors and were individually supported whenever the necessity arose.

5. Method

To observe changes in the understanding of folk songs by the project participants, feedback on the completed work and interviews were carried out. The feedback was obtained after the participants had transcribed and processed the first 50 folk song texts. It was performed via e-mail asking students to comment on the task, its complexity, and their attitudes towards folk songs in general. There were 14 replies received, along with the 4 oral conversations that constituted 56.2% of the students that tried the exercise. All the students that later continued the exercise provided their feedback.

In addition, 10 interviews in the duration of at least one hour were carried out involving students who continued the transcription activities. Interviews were conducted from September to October, 2021, when most of the students had been engaged in the activity for at least a year and/or had transcribed at least 5000 folk songs. A few more interviews were carried out with those students who had to suspend their participation due to personal reasons. Thus, in total 75% of students who continued the transcription were interviewed.

In the interviews, students were encouraged to share their childhood and school experiences of learning and using folk songs, including participation in various interest groups (choir, dance, folklore clubs) and involvement in traditional cultural practices, such as celebrating folk festivities, etc. The second group of questions was related to the transcription task, asking students to describe their experience on the engagement and share conclusions on differences between published and manuscript texts. These questions were aimed at finding out whether and how the comprehension of folk songs has changed over time. The third set of questions included an assessment of the existence of textual differences in a broader cultural and historical context.

Combining surveys and interviews, along with the individual consultations during the project allows us to see the impact of the transcription process in a relatively short, yet dynamic perspective.

6. Results

Surveys show that participation in the project was seen by all the participants as an opportunity to try something new. Willingness to take part in the exercise is also explained by the following: 50% (or 9) of the students indicated an interest in traditional culture, folklore, including folk songs and an opportunity to explore this topic further. Mostly it was mentioned by philologists, e.g.: "I had a study course in folkloristics at the university, we read folklore texts. I wanted to learn more about how this cultural heritage can be applied in practice." [18] In addition, 27% (5 students) referred to the responsibility towards safeguarding cultural heritage and supporting

research. At the same time, 33% (6 students) were motivated by the fact that the offer was received through study administration/lecturers, highlighting the aspect of internship and further career.

The surveys, as well as the analysis of the task show that those involved in the disciplines of philology and pedagogy coped with the task better. Most of them described the task as exciting, educational, linguistically enriching, requiring to follow the details, etc. Positive responses correlate with the data showing that 8 out of 11 of philology students continued engagement. Similar correlations can be seen also in group of students, who left the project. In particular, 11 out of 14 students studying culture (cultural management, intercultural relations, dance, photography etc.) did not continue their involvement; only 2 out of 11 students who left the project reported reasons for this, such as the lack of adequate knowledge of grammar, handwritten texts being difficult to read, and the work being too monotonous and technical. The quality of the work done by the 10 students who did not participate in the survey, leads to note similar reasons for leaving the assignment. However, there are 3 cultural studies students that continued engagement, despite the same difficulties in terms of knowledge, e.g., one of the students asked for individual consultations in grammar and dialects.

As regards students' exposure to traditional culture before the project, their childhood and school knowledge of folk songs are also found as important aspects for the results of the project (see Figure 3).

The data shows that all the interviewed students were familiar with folk songs in school , where folk songs were included in the curricula. Participation in various festivities is also often linked to the events organized by the school as part of the learning process. At school, the basic method of learning folk songs was learning by heart, reciting them, and, in senior years, analysing them as examples of a tradition, ancient world view and partly also of history. The other practices in which students were engaged, such as singing in a choir, where folk songs are also seen as reproducing a particular text and melody, not involving improvisation or similar creative expressions. 11 out of 12 participants indicated that folk songs had become ingrained in their consciousness, quoting the student A: "..a folk song is a perfect poem, where words are put in a precise rhythm of trochaic in 4 feet, having poetic expression, consisting of stable combinations of words often even considered as formulas used in various folk song texts, all together voicing ideals and values of the past." [19]

Three students admitted that they had come into contact with folk songs in their families. Two of them recalled that they had editions of Latvian folk songs at home, which were rarely read on special occasions, creating "respect and reverence for the book, thus promoting the idea of folk songs as something special and sacred" [20]. Using the printed text is similar to the approach to folk songs practiced in schools – there is no room for variation. Only one students of the whole group [21] indicated that her family took active part in different activities related to traditional culture in the folklore community. This experience had led her to see folk songs as a 'living' tradition, in which it is possible to improvise, substitute certain words or word combinations, and adapt them to the performance situation. This student was also the only one who pointed out that folk songs can also be a part of contemporary cultural activities, and not merely as an ancient, historical value that is not relevant for today.

When asked about the discoveries experienced during the transcription process, respondents implicitly indicate the development of a deeper understanding of nature and functioning of

Areas/ activities related to folk songs in childhood indicated by students
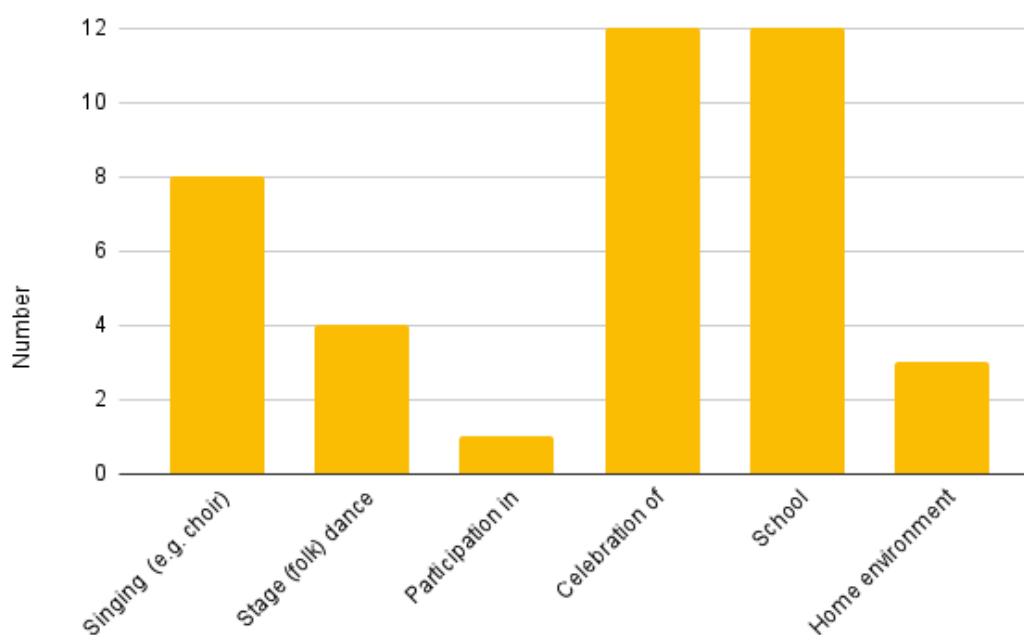
Figure 3: Occasions of experience with folk songs in childhood

folk songs. 13 out of 16 of students reported an improvement in vocabulary, especially in the use of different synonyms. Several students [19, 22, 18] admitted that they had gained new knowledge of Latvian cultural history by trying to find the meaning of archaisms and it felt like a 'detective story', where you chase your own history. All the interviewed admitted to being surprised by how different the original manuscript texts were from the printed ones, stressing that manuscript texts are far from perfect, ideal. At the same time, loss of perfection gives a feeling of something 'natural' or 'alive', a song that better reflects the soul of folk.

However, when asked which of the forms seemed to be 'closer to heart', the students' answers were split 50:50. In the group that preferred the printed, literarised version of folk songs, the students described their involvement in choir singing at school. In this group 5 out of 6 students study philology. It should be noted that the students in this group worked more individually, they were less engaged in group discussions, asked questions about the meaning of the transcribed texts, etc. Speaking about the change of attitude, a special attention should be paid to a participant who was involved in folklore community activities. Her revelations during the work were linked to an awareness of literary tradition and the influence of print.

It is also important to mention that this project has motivated the students to connect their academic thesis with folk songs. 4 of the participants study folk songs in their study programme

at bachelor's or master's level, 2 participants study other folklore genres.

7. Conclusions

The pilot study of learning through digital deep reading was based on a relatively small sample, involving a group of students who had to perform a transcription task and compare two versions of one and the same folk song text. Nevertheless, the results of the study are promising to indicate the usefulness of transcription as a method of deep reading that considerably contributes to a better understanding of a particular cultural heritage among students. However, this study shows that better results can be achieved by combining transcription with other forms of activities, such as detailed exercises on the transcribed text, discussions on the transcribed text, etc.

Web-based transcription is an activity that requires a specific technological solution. The necessity to use it in the educational process might require even additional investment in adapting or developing IT tools.

In the project, the participants represented different fields of culture and art. The research shows that such a task can be attractive not only to philology students but also to students of different specialties, like students of photography, cinema, music, culture management, pedagogy, etc., albeit all of them are still students of humanities or arts. The most important motivators for engagement are related to general interest in folk songs and folklore, however other factors can be motivating as well, for example, a willingness to get involved in a joint activity, gain research experience, etc. [23] Another important motivational reason mentioned by students is an advantage to work with 'exclusive source' that is continuously highly valued in the society, as well as to work for the common benefit, including contributing to the preservation of cultural values. Especially for philology students, exploring internships and further career opportunities was an important motivating factor. The reputation of the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Arts at the University of Latvia for academic excellence should also be considered here, since it also played a role in the attractiveness of a potential workplace. If the topics of the study work, bachelor's and master's theses chosen by the students are seen in the context of the project results, it can be concluded that the task has stimulated interest in folk songs and folklore as an object of research and made the students consider research as a future career.

The study shows that the transcription task is strongly related to the skills and competencies of participants. Transcription as careful reading-through-typing activity is affected by the same factors as overall comprehension of text, i.e., variability of reader, text, activity, and context [24]. As already mentioned, the difficulties to read the handwriting and Gothic script, and insufficient knowledge of Latvian grammar were important reasons why some students decided not to participate in the project, even though they had received training and started to work on the task. At the same time, students who had already acquired skills in similar work as part of their studies, especially philologists, did not mention these aspects as a problem. The few students from cultural and artistic fields who continued with the assignment could be seen as a coincidence of circumstances, not a trend, where previous experience, character traits and interest played a role.

Reflecting on the importance of the reading context, it should be noted that students' experiences

at school and home play an important role in their perception of Latvian folk songs. In fact, most students were not involved in the folklore movement during their childhood or later; it strongly influenced their perception of folk songs as static and outdated, a genre that is only preserved in books or archives. In-depth learning about the history and details of the folk song publishing process allowed students to recognize their own stereotypes and improve knowledge about folk songs and folklore in general. However, additional learning methods such as group discussions, access to additional information, exploration of the personalities behind the publication and original manuscript (folk performers, collectors) and cultural historical context of the epoch, as well as history of folkloristics could further contribute to increasing knowledge.

Serious attention must be paid to the selection of the texts to be transcribed. They should be clear, preferably without deletions. Structured and detailed guidelines form an essential aspect of the exercise, and it should be noted that even seemingly obvious issues, for instance, the rules of grammar, should be explained. It is important that all these details are discussed in the beginning of the task, addressing each point individually. The students should be encouraged to make explanatory notes in the editors' guidelines, so that they avoid making mistakes when they are already doing the task individually.

Overall, the first results demonstrate benefits and challenges of the project. As the database improvement work is nearly half-way, further research by increasing the sample group, adjusting the task to be suited for pupils of younger age, with less knowledge etc. will continue. An instrumental model for using transcription as a task to promote deep reading will be developed, hopefully leading to a better understanding of cultural heritage.

8. Acknowledgements

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