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READING COMPREHENSION – A PROBLEM FOR THE PEDAGOGICAL STUDENTS

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Abstract. The article raises the question of the reading literacy of the pedagogical students, future teachers in the initial stage of the primary-school education. It is a natural continuation of a study on the reading literacy of mature students who have crossed the threshold of the higher school. The skills to read and interpret scientific texts related to the work of the future teacher are discussed. Their skills for tabular presentation of text information, as well as the skills for its interpretation according to the PISA levels are also studied. Correlations are sought at the high levels of understanding related to the analysis and subsequent reflection on a given text.

Keywords: reading comprehension; scholarly text; PISA; pedagogical students

After numerous studies of the reading literacy of Bulgarian students in the context of PISA, it was decided to also raise the question of the reading literacy of the pedagogical students, future teachers in the initial stage of the primary-school education, trained in the specialties of Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy, Primary School Pedagogy with a Foreign Language and Special Pedagogy which specialties are taught in the Faculty of Education at Trakia University – Stara Zagora. It is a natural continuation of a study on the reading literacy of matriculation students who have crossed the threshold of the higher school. The study was conducted with 128 students – full-time, third-year students who have been admitted to study with their mark in Bulgarian Language and Literature at the matriculation exams or that in a candidate-students' exam which they have sat.

In the conducted study, the final results shown by the students were analyzed and summarized according to the PISA criteria for the levels of reading literacy. And although these are designed to measure the performance of 15-year-old students (ninth grade), the fact that even at the university, at the age of 20 – 22, at the literacy criteria for 15-year-olds in the world, our students do not show a better level of reading literacy.

The observations and conclusions made about the reading literacy (rather, the lack of one) for over 39% of the prospective pedagogues is likely to be found astounding.

1. First criterion – finding and extracting information

Applying for admittance to a Higher School is based on the results of an exam which the candidates sit or a positive result from the state maturity exam in Bulgarian Language and Literature. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to think that there should be no university students who have not reached at least the second level of the criterion for finding and retrieving text information. And the international studies of 15-year-old students have found out that the second level is critical and the adolescents remaining under it can be identified as *secondarily illiterate*. If this level is not reached, it can hardly be said that the student will be able to study in bachelor programs, especially in pedagogical specialties.

High-school education is working to achieve the third and fourth levels of the first criterion. At the end of the period, students who are unable to find and extract information from an unrecognized text with unknown content and format and without knowledge of combining information from a discontinued and uninterrupted text, are advisedly not admitted to the matriculation exams. These levels should be considered an educational minimum, as absolutely indispensable for anyone aspiring to a „maturity certificate“, as was formerly called the secondary education diploma.

The fifth and sixth levels are achievable for students who are systematically trained in finding and extracting text information in all subjects in the primary school. R. Neminska calls such training to be interdisciplinary. She argues that the development of these levels can be achieved through the so-called interdisciplinary educational technology. In her view, learning through interdisciplinary technologies leads to „a deeper understanding of academic resources, methods of analysis, problem solving through research, theory, design, assessment“ (Neminska, 2015).

They are trained to find and combine elements of implied information, to get one outside the body of the text, and to navigate even when the information is deliberately misleading (e. g. in a test question that starts with „Where there is NOT a mistake?“).

Therefore, at the end of the high school stage of their education, the graduates must have a reading literacy that fully meets the criteria for finding and retrieving information from a text, regardless of its type, length or style.

In practice, however, of the students who enter Trakia University only 26% of students have reached the fifth and sixth level of extracting text information. It should also be kept in mind that the texts are not strictly scientific, they are rather more scientifically popular and do not require handling the tricks of the artistic style. What presents a particular difficulty is to retrieve information from an interrupted text, which additionally causes complications at the solving of textual tasks.

2. Second criterion – summarizing and interpretation of the information in a text

Unfortunately, the work on the second criterion – summarizing and interpreting, the reaching of the second and third levels, should be seen as the minimum

necessity for the interpretation of text information. Students should easily be able to define the main ideas in a text, to analyze and make simple conclusions even without obvious information. This is imperative in view of the complex scientific texts that are taught in the different school disciplines. It also requires skills to combine parts of a text, explain more complex relationships in the text, compare information across multiple criteria. Unfortunately, the ability for active reading of the students seems to have died (at the expense of the reading on the Internet), being replaced by reading and mechanical learning of the information provided by the authority of the habilitated lecturer. In order to be successful, they must continue to develop their reading literacy. Thus, their skills should be focused on more complex activities related to the rationalization and application of the studied categories in a not-studied text and making conclusions about it. Students are often given the task of independently working with texts, extracting, summarizing and interpreting information from them to be presented before colleagues or in other learning situations. In the performance of illustrations in artistic and documentary texts, A. Zlateva highlights the opportunities offered by the teaching tasks in the integration of the verbal and visual arts for the purpose of learning to develop more complete and concrete imagery ideas in the learners. "The images they create are saturated with the most accurate information obtained when reading the work, that is, they have tried to achieve precisely this translation of the text into the image Shapiro speaks of. The verbal descriptions „unlock“ and reinforce the imagery of children when they focus on the visual „characterization“ of a particular literary text“ (Zlateva, 2006). The fourth level here shows a good level of reading literacy but as excellent achievements should be categorized those reaching the fifth, a large part of them the sixth, level of summarizing and interpreting text information.

It is clear that the types of activities which should be used in order to reach these levels have to be tailored to the capacities of today's students. These are summarized by R. Nemeska as „simulation-based pedagogical training“. „Simulation-based pedagogical training is an instructive strategy that focuses on developing a learning environment for the development of pedagogical competencies in students“ (Neminska, 2015).

But if we are to commensurate with the highest achievements of young people, transferred to PISA's criteria, it is hardly possible for the university to work on a deeper understanding of the text – including knowledge of the nuances in the language of the text, skills for application of the learned criteria to an unstudied text with the aim to draw examples and conclusions from it. Skills to find and comment on the links between parts of the text, handling ideas contrary to expectations, etc. For now, only a small number of the graduates have the ability to interpret a text and make exhaustive and accurate conclusions on it. The Ministry of Education and Science suggests work on a specific excerpt and examines the abilities of the graduate students to use the information, combine it, present their own ideas and interpretations, no matter how abstract they are. However, this task proves to be

impossible for more than 70% of those sitting the state matriculation exams in Bulgarian Language and Literature, and thus universities end up with students who are yet to be trained in summarizing and interpreting the information from the studied scientific texts. Zl. Zhelyazkova stresses the necessity for „the algorithmization of the learning process and automation of skills“ to be starting from the earliest stages of learning: „the automation of skills that is aimed through multiple exercises is most often defined as the ability to recall knowledge for as short a time as possible.“ Automatism, according to the same author, is the achievement of such a level of speed and ease in which tasks or skills can be used with minimal mental effort (Zhelyazkova, 2018: 3). It is only at a later stage that the desired ability to interpret, analyze and summarize information from different sources would be possible.

3. Third criterion – comprehension and evaluation of a text

It turns out that this is the most complicated criterion to be covered by the pedagogical students. Is it because the system of rationalization and evaluation of texts in our country is not clear enough (where and how to build such competencies) or there are other reasons? These are questions which it is high time for an answer to be looked for.

For the absolute minimum in student achievement, the third and fourth level of the PISA criterion should be met. Life experience and accumulated knowledge are sufficient to allow a student educator to find connections and evaluate more complex and lengthy texts on a known problem, be it by combining various knowledge. These will also enable them to use what has been learnt in order to form a hypothesis and critically evaluate the text, regardless of its complexity. For the time being, these levels are covered by only 15% of the students who have completed their secondary education in specialised high schools and who also come with second and third levels acquired at the primary school. Along with listening comprehension, reading with understanding is a so-called „receptive communicative skills“ (contrasted to the productive ones) and is an essential part of the students' communicative competence. In the receptive use of language, a number of strategies of speech practice are used consciously or subconsciously, which strategies could be distinguished as: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, communicative and compensatory (Zhelyazkova, 2018: 4). A. Zlateva suggests that „the acceleration of aesthetic education and training of the pedagogical students could partly correct the gaps in this field from the primary and the main stages of education. In this more mature age the formation of aesthetic thoughts and tastes, according to her, help to permanently form the emotional world of the young person and serves to strengthen their mind and the spiritual development of their character“ (Zlateva, 2013).

The pursuit of the students in the university should also be directed to the fifth and sixth levels because they are most closely related to the assessment of the reading literacy of the young person, which will be particularly necessary for a good

realization in the modern society. Higher levels of reading literacy require from the students to have the ability to formulate a hypothesis based on specialized knowledge and a deeper understanding of long and complex texts. It is possible that this text contains statements contrary to expectations. The student should be able to critically analyze and evaluate these contradictions, and to seek links between them and their own knowledge beyond the text. The formation of a hypothesis (basic thesis) and its complex defense on several criteria and different proofs, as well as the correct assessment of the specifics of the text according to its purpose, show a very high reading literacy. Such students write essays, hold debates, win competitions... and unfortunately they find their realization abroad.

In the first high school stage, the following objectives are specified as language-specific:

- Developing the skills of students to search, extract, process and use information from different information sources in order to solve communicative tasks, as well as the skills to use different types of information according to specified parameters;
- Acquiring skills for comparing and analyzing different problems when participating in a discussion, as well as skills for producing oral and written texts

And here are the PISA requirements that appear as:

1. Socio-cultural competences: refer to the students' ability to distinguish the types of functional styles (conversational, artistic, scientific, formal-business, publicistic); to understand the relationship between speech behavior and the specifics of the certain communicative situation; to evaluate ideas, these and arguments according to their experience; ability to search, extract, process and use information from various information sources in order to solve communicative tasks; present different types of information according to specified parameters.

2. Communicative competences, such as: listening – comparing and analyzing various problems when engaging in dialogue and discussion; reading – comparing and analyzing problems in texts from different functional styles; speaking - preparing and presenting a public statement on various issues – on a moral issue, on a life issue, on a civic issue; writing – creating in a written form the following: an e-mail, a summary of a scientific text, a summary of the media text, a statement, a business letter, a CV, an essay on a moral problem and an essay on a civil issue.

Despite the assurances of the Ministry of Education and Science that high-school graduates should have well-developed skills, that apart from the main goals, the students develop skills for creating texts with a certain communicative purpose, to the sociocultural competences are added such requiring comparisons, argumentative justification and explanation of their own position, as well as the ability of the young person to find, select, retrieve and process information according to several criteria and from different sources in order to perform a specific task – creative, interactive or on a research project – this proves an impossible goal for more than 75% of the pedagogical students.

Conclusion: It is clear that students entering the pedagogical specialties can hardly be defined as „literate in reading“ according to PISA's high thresholds.

The PISA criteria test poses many questions that seek an answer: Which prerequisites play a key role in achieving a qualitative assessment of reading literacy in the Bulgarian educational practice?; How to achieve a reliable reading literacy in the training of students – future pedagogues ?; What key goals in preparing the future teachers should the university solve in order to stop the decline in reading literacy of the younger generation? If the right management decisions are taken, the quality of education may indeed become a priority.

The research also showed another fact – it is necessary to rethink the presence of reading as an activity in the Bulgarian educational system. Moreover, there is sufficient and authoritative international and Bulgarian research to make this possible.

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