READING HABITS AND SELF-ASSESSMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS AMONG HUNGARIAN STUDENTS IN SLOVAKIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the results of a survey examining the reading habits and self-assessment of reading comprehension skills of Hungarian students in Slovakia. As the largest ethnic minority in Slovakia is Hungarian, it has extensive primary and secondary native language school networks. The purpose of this research is to map the reading habits and self-assessment of reading comprehension skills of students to answer the question how these subjective views of different age groups change and what indicators (social background, school success) they correlate with. We have chosen questionnaires composed of 28 questions as a method for examining the students’ reading habits. The total number of survey respondents was 131. There were 98 respondents from average schools where reading comprehension and reading habits are not taught separately. In that case three age groups were involved: 23 students at a secondary grammar school, 38 pupils in the second stage of primary school and 37 pupils in the first stage of primary school. Interestingly, there is no big difference in reading attitudes among the different age groups. The respondents’ answers prove that only a fraction of students read in their free time. On the other hand, the groups, regardless of age, subjectively claim that they do not have problems with reading comprehension tasks. They claim that reading is easy for them, so they understand everything that they read. It can be concluded that these statements are highly controversial with the results of international surveys. At a later stage of the research the survey was conducted in a primary school where pupils have regularly reading comprehension classes. The number of respondents from this school was 33. There were 21 pupils from the second stage and 12 pupils from the first stage of primary school. Based on the results, there are considerable differences in the answers provided by the two groups. The pupils from the primary school with reading comprehension classes differently judge their level of understanding. These results have potential implications for further research to determine the reading habits and reading comprehension skills of Hungarian pupils in Slovakia.

Keywords: Hungarian language, minority language, reading comprehension, reading habits
INTRODUCTION

According to the traditional view, reading is a thinking-based process led by written text. The ability of reading is the ability to understand the written text [1]. It is the basic tool of education and lifelong learning; besides, books are the most significant means of communication ever invented. [2]. According to Erdem, the basic objective of education is to increase reading habits and to sustain them throughout the whole life. Habit is a learnt behavioral pattern, the habit of reading is not only about enjoyment, but it is a necessity: „The habit of reading is the act of reading being carried out throughout life in a constant, regular and critical manner as a result of it being perceived by the individual as a need and source of pleasure” [3].

The results of international and national surveys suggest that reading habits have changed a lot in recent decades. While 50 years ago, one of the most favorite free activities of students was reading literary works, nowadays interest in reading shows a large downward tendency [4][5]. Many researchers draw attention to the unpopularity of reading and the deficiency in reading comprehension performance related to it. According to the regular international measurements, reading and literacy performance of today’s teenage population in Slovakia is not satisfactory [6]. This is evidenced by the PIRLS and PISA results, according to which students from Slovakia are year by year below the OECD average in reading performance [7][8]. There are not significant differences between the results of students with Hungarian and Slovak nationality, both are below the average. At the national level, reading comprehension is measured by so called Monitor-Testing. According to its results, students from schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction achieved statistically better results in Slovak language than their contemporaries from schools with Slovak as the language of instruction. However, the differences are not significant, and they got a different type of test, it can be stated that the Slovak language skills of students attending Hungarian schools are not poor. However, it is a fact that their language skills are not native, as it is not their native language [9]. There was a research made between the bilingual Hungarian pupils who attended primary schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction and those who attended primary schools with Slovak as the language of instruction. This study revealed serious deficiencies among Hungarian pupils who attended schools with Slovak as the language of instruction. The results suggest that pupils who do not have education in their native language, have difficulties at the basic level of speech perception and comprehension [10]. Many researchers have already dealt with gender differences in reading attitudes. Data shows that girls and boys have different reading attitudes: girls take books to their hands more often than boys, and also have better results in reading [11] [12].

The results of previous researches [13] suggest that there is a relationship between reading approach and reading performance. The purpose of this study is to give an overview of reading habits and self-assessment of reading comprehension skills of Hungarian students in Slovakia and to answer the question how age influences the attitude to reading and reading comprehension.
THE METHOD AND CONDITIONS OF THE SURVEY
The questionnaire survey took place in December 2018. The target groups were the students of fourth and seventh grades of two Hungarian language primary schools and third-grade students of a Hungarian grammar school established in bilingual region in south-western Slovakia. In terms of the bilingualism of the respondents, as members of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, we are talking about one-sided, sequential bilingualism with the dominance of Hungarian. Before the survey, the students did not know that it would take place; it was anonymous, each student received a numerical code to help us to compare their subjective views with the real results during further researches. The survey was set up in the form of self-filled questionnaires in the given schools during one lesson. In the survey, we asked students of different ages about their reading habits, their cultural environment at home, their reading-related relationship to school and parents. Through questionnaires we asked the students, what they think about their literacy, according to their subjective opinion, how they understand the texts what they read. The results of their self-assessment and their actual reading comprehension skills will be compared at a later date. This survey is a pilot test of larger research, and it has not been conducted on a national representative sample yet.

The sample was selected based on purposive sampling, following the strategy of choosing respondents from the same bilingual environment with the same external factors influencing their everyday lives. The questionnaire consisted of 28 questions, it contained six open-ended questions and seventeen closed-ended questions. In one case, there were multiple answers solicited. Two questions were constructed in Matrix Question Format, and in three cases Likert responds categories were used. The questions were focused mainly on home cultural environments, free time activities and reading comprehension skills based on student’s subjective opinion.

The purpose of the research was descriptive, it aimed to assess the reading habits of Hungarian pupils in Slovakia. The results of the survey were evaluated based on statistical calculations, according to univariate analysis. 98 students participated in the survey, according to gender there were 51% boys (50) and 49% girls (48); 23 of which were grammar school students (14 girls and 9 boys), 38 pupils were in the second stage of primary school (20 girls and 18 boys) and 37 pupils were in the first stage of primary school (14 girls and 23 boys). In terms of the place of residence, 51% of students came from villages and 49% from small towns. During the evaluation of the results, we did not distinguish the gender neither the place of residence. We regarded age as an independent variable and reading habits as a dependent variable.

THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY
CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT AND READING HABITS
The first phase of the questionnaire asked about the parents’ highest level of education. Regarding the education of parents, secondary education is prominently represented in all three age groups. In the aggregate, 59% of parents have completed secondary education, concretely 59% of mothers and 58% of fathers. Separating the grades, secondary grammar school students have the highest reported ratio of parents with completed second-
ary education (82% mothers and 78% fathers). Among pupils in the second stage of primary school, only 39% mothers and 39% fathers completed secondary education. Regarding pupils in the first stage of primary school: 67% mothers and 65% fathers possess secondary education. The next question focused on language use at home. The respondents, both collectively and individually (80%), speak Hungarian. Only 20% of the students admitted that they use Slovak in addition to Hungarian in home environment.

In the next section, we assessed the students’ reading habits. We asked whether their preference was given to printed or online texts. 65% of secondary grammar school students and 70% of pupils in the first stage of primary school said that they prefer reading paper books. However, pupils in the second stage of primary school argue that 66% of them prefer reading online webpages.

We asked what kind of genres the students read most often. Respondents could indicate three options out of twelve or indicate another answer. The results of the three age groups show a high dispersion. Each age group has different interests, and therefore, their reading habits reflect these differences. The varieties correspond to their age-specific interests. It is clear from the responses (figure 1) that among the pupils in the first stage, fairy tales were the most popular, while among the pupils in the second stage and students of the secondary grammar school the preference were given to entertaining and action-packed stories. The results show that the favorite genre of grammar school students (44%) is adventure. This genre of novels was also selected by 37% of seventh-grade pupils and by 30% of fourth-grade pupils. The seventh graders chose entertainment stories (66%), while 38% of the fourth grade and only 26% of grammar school students liked them. The fourth-grade pupils’ favorite genre (51%), adequate to their age, were tales, this genre was chosen by 13% of the seventh grade and only by 4% of grammar school students. Interestingly, poems were most liked by the youngest group (fourth grade), 37% like reading poems. However, only 5% of the seventh-grade and 13% of secondary school students have chosen this option.

According to the respondents’ own admission, most grammar school students (57%) always finish reading the books they had started to read. Contrarily, only 35% of pupils of seventh and fourth grade read the books until the end. 63% of the seventh grade and 57% of fourth grade finish their books less frequently. Only a fraction of the groups claim that they read because they must do so (grammar school: 14%, seventh grade: 26%, fourth grade: 19%). 55% of grammar school students stated that they read texts that correspond to their interests. Although only 39% of the seventh grade and 32% of the fourth-grade pupils are interested in their reading.

In the next question, we asked students about their free time activities. We listed six kinds of leisure activities. The students had to choose one of them or give another possibility. In terms of popularity among the various options, the leaders of free time activities are computer activities and sports. Most of the seventh-grade pupils prefer playing computer games, while among grammar school students sports overtake the virtual world. The favorite leisure activities among the fourth-grade pupils are unequivocally playing with friends. We can state that nowadays watching TV is not at all a popular leisure activity for to-
day’s teenagers. Altogether, three of the respondents chose watching television as their favorite entertainment activity. Although reading preceded watching TV, only a fraction of students claim they like to spend their free time by reading: grammar school 13%, seventh grade 8%, fourth grade 10%. However, if reading textbooks and internet usage are also included, 40% of the respondents read more than one hour every day (grammar school: 52%, seventh grade: 40%, fourth grade: 32%).

After that, we surveyed whether the respondents borrow books and if so, where do they borrow them from. Only 35% of grammar school students answered yes, similarly to seventh grade, where the ratio of yeses was 32%. Nevertheless, 81% fourth graders claim they regularly borrow books. Most respondents in the local/town library choose their readings (grammar school: 50%, seventh grade: 38%, fourth grade: 50%). The second most widespread access to books among secondary grammar school students (50%) is borrowing from friends. There is a similar trend among the seventh-grade group (46%), while only a splinter group (6%) of fourth grade students does it. The use of school libraries is particularly low among the seventh grade and grammar school students (15% and 0%), while it is high (44%) among the fourth-grade students.

We also examined whether students talk to someone about their reading experiences. Based on the responses we can say that 50% of grammar school students converse about books with their friends. Therefore, peer-to-peer communication plays a prominent role among this age group. Chatting with friends about books shows a decreasing tendency correlating with decrease in age level. The survey results show only 38% of the seventh grade and only 19% of fourth-grade pupils talk to their peers about their reading. While talk-

1. figure: What kind of books do you read most often?
ing to friends about books is the most popular option among secondary grammar school students, the reverse is true when asked about talking to the teacher. While secondary grammar school students do not share their reading preferences with their teachers at all, 5% of the seventh grade and 34% of the fourth-grade student speak primarily with their teachers about what they have read. 87% of grammar school students and 81% of fourth-grade students are happy to share their reading preferences with someone, but 40% of the seventh-grade pupils do not talk to anyone. A total of 20% of students (mostly in the fourth grade: 20%) talk to their parents about reading, talking to mothers (80%) plays a key role in this case.

Of the external motivational factors influencing reading, a person who reads frequently in the immediate surroundings of the students plays an important role because they effectively influence the children’s future reading habits. In total, 59% of the respondents see their mother reading daily, but only 27% of respondents think their father reads daily. There is a correlation between the students’ reading attitude and the parents’ reading frequency. In 50% of the cases, students who read every day said they see their parents reading at home. Parents’ reading habits have a big influence on grammar school students. Among daily readers, grammar school students see their parents reading daily the most (75%). This percentage shows a downward trend with age, as seventh-grade and of fourth-grade daily readers see their parents reading less often (50% and 41%). Students who have responded they always finish the books they started to read generally do not talk to their parents about their reading preferences, but most of them (76%) see their parents reading at home on daily basis.

Next, we asked the students how many books they have at home on their bookshelves. In summary, only 8% of students said that they have ten or fewer books. 44% of students stated that their home library was huge and estimated there were more than a hundred books in it. We have assessed the students’ relation to the recommended readings at school. First, we asked whether their teachers recommend books to them. Some of the grammar school students (26%) said that their teachers did not recommend any books to them. Everyone else answered yes for this question. In this group, we were interested in relevance of the recommended reading in lessons. For that reason, we asked whether they must read these books because they deal with them during the classes. These types of duty-bound recommendations were prevalent in primary school, even though the grammar school students still indicated a majority (grammar school: 39%, seventh grade: 60%, fourth grade: 68%).

**THE STUDENTS’ READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS, ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN ADMISSION**

We asked the students about their subjective level of reading comprehension. As the chart below indicates (figure 2) each age group claims that reading is easy for them (in total 49%: grammar school: 74%, seventh grade: 24%, fourth grade: 60%). This means they understand everything that they read. 44% of the respondents partially agree with this statement (grammar school: 26%, seventh grade: 53%, fourth grade: 38%). Only seven of the total respondents (7%) partially disagree. Nobody answered no for this question.

According to the respondents’ own admission, 62% of the students do not have
problems with long sentences in texts at all, 18% do not have problems in most cases. Only 19% of students agree completely or partially with the statement that long sentences cause problems in understanding of the texts. 59% of the students disagree or partially disagree with the statement that understanding texts with unknown topics is hard. Each age group predominantly believes that images and other visualizations greatly help to understand the text. There is a clear majority among all age groups that claims they do not have problems with reading comprehension at all (in total 71%; grammar school: 83%, seventh grade: 68%, fourth grade: 67%).

The next question we asked related to students’ attitude towards reading. Most students, regardless of age, agree that they are happy to receive a book as a gift. Similarly, every age group disagrees with the statement that reading is boring. However, there have been various answers to whether they want to spend more time reading. 65% of grammar school students and 49% of fourth-grade pupils want to spend more time reading, but only 13% of seventh-grade pupils answered with a full agreement. Only 36% of the seventh-grade pupils partially agreed with this statement, but the majority (50%) would not want to spend more time on reading (grammar school: 26%, fourth grade: 35%). Most students are also aware of the fact that they are learning a lot by reading and have access to much new information. They like imagining other worlds while reading, and they are also aware that their parents are glad if they read. Finally, we asked the students what they think about reading at school. Except for the fourth-grade pupils (89%), students do not like reading aloud. The views about whether the texts they read at school are interesting are different, but most students totally agree or at least partially agree, that they prefer reading different texts, not those in the textbooks. They also disagree with the statement that
they rarely read at school. All three age groups mostly agree that their textbooks are understandable and that their understanding does not cause them problems.

The results described above are from average schools. At a later stage of the research, the same questionnaires with the same questions were given to pupils from a primary school where they explicitly deal with reading comprehension. In this primary school, each age level has one class per week of reading comprehension. During this class, the pupils learn how to deal with different types of texts and develop their reading comprehension skills. The total number of the respondents from this school were 33; 21 pupils from the second stage and 12 pupils from the first stage of primary school. We asked the pupils the same questions as presented above. The answers for most of the questions about their background and reading habits were similar, but their subjective level of reading comprehension differs. More than half of the pupils (55%) agree or partially agree that difficult and unknown words cause problems in understanding. 21% of them have problems with long sentences, 48% agree that the texts with unknown topics are hard to understand. 67% agree that pictures help them to understand the text.

The respondents’ answers prove (figure 3) that the most significant differences are between the self-assessment of the level of understanding. While 41% primary school pupils with no reading comprehension classes claim that they understand everything, and reading is easy for them, just 33% (seventh grade: 43%, fourth grade: 17%) of primary school pupils with reading comprehension classes suggest the same. 49% of the first group and 24% of the second group of pupils partially agree with this statement (seventh grade: 24%, first grade: 25%). Significant differences can be observed between the answers of disagreement for this statement. Only 9% of pupils from the primary schools without reading comprehension classes expressed partial disagreement, and no-
body answered with total disagreement, so there is a clear majority between these pupils who believe that reading is easy for them and they understand everything they read. On the other hand, 33% of primary school pupils with reading comprehension classes (seventh grade: 24%, fourth grade: 50%) partially disagree and 9% totally disagree with it, so they believe that they have difficulties with reading and understanding.

The results suggest that the pupils who deal with reading comprehension during the classes differently judge their level of reading comprehension. According to the Dunning-Kruger effect, the fewer people know about a particular thing, the more likely they are to overestimate their knowledge. J. Kruger and D. Dunning claim that improving the skills and increasing the knowledge about a given topic helps people to recognize their weaknesses. [15]. So those students who poorly perform or do not have adequate knowledge of a given topic tend to overestimate their abilities, but those who are more skilled can realize their level of competence. This explains the differences in results between the pupils from the schools without and with reading comprehension classes.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to map the reading habits of students and to answer the question of how these habits of different age groups change. There are differences between the three age groups, especially in the use of libraries, talking about books and reading at school.

To conclude there are no big differences in reading habits among the different age groups. Based on the answers of the respondents, it was proved that only a fraction of the students of all age groups read in their free time and reading in each age group is one of the least popular free time activities. On the other hand, the groups, regardless of age, subjectively claim that they have no difficulties with reading comprehension. They claim reading is easy for them, so they understand everything they read. Subjectively, even long sentences or unknown words do not cause them any trouble.

It can be stated that these statements are controversial with the results of international surveys. The reason for this may be that the self-assessment of students’ own knowledge is not always accurate. Scientific researches confirm that students are often unaware of what they really know and what they do not. This explains why students sometimes think before a test, that they have more knowledge than their later performance proves [16]. The Dunning-Kruger effect proves that the fewer people know, the more likely they are to overestimate their abilities. This explains why the pupils from the schools with reading comprehension classes believe that they have weaknesses and limits in reading comprehension.

In this paper, the reading habits and self-assessment of reading comprehension skills of Hungarian students in Slovakia were presented. These answers were completely subjective. At the current stage of the research, we are assessing the real performance of students in reading comprehension. They are given a reading comprehension test with three texts and questions related to them. At a later stage of the research, the students’ self-assessment and their real performance in reading comprehension will be compared.
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