READING HABITS AND READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the reading comprehension skills of Hungarian bilingual primary school students in Slovakia. Hungarian is the largest ethnic minority in Slovakia therefore it possesses extensive native language school networks. The purpose of this research is to determine the students reading habits, and to discover the differences between the respondents' self-assessment and their actual performance in reading comprehension.

The survey consisted of two parts. As a method of sociological data collection, we chose a questionnaire of 21 questions in which the respondents were asked about their sociological background, reading habits, and attitude to reading. In the second part of the survey, students completed a reading comprehension test which consisted of three sets of texts and questions. The reading comprehension tests for the two age groups contained different texts, but their structure was the same. Both tests contained three types of texts: a narrative, an expository, and an informative text.

The results of the research are based on a nationwide sample, with a total of 655 participants: 352 respondents from the fourth grade and 303 respondents from the seventh grade participated in the survey. The results obtained show that reading occupies one of the last places in the ranking of leisure activities. Most respondents, regardless of age, say that understanding the text is not a problem for them, they understand everything they read. In contrast, the results of the reading comprehension tests show that students have difficulties in understanding the texts, and the rate of incorrect answers is considerably high when answering questions that require complex cognitive processes. Seventh graders had the greatest difficulty in understanding informative-type texts, which is a problem because this type of text is encountered most often in everyday life.

These results have potential implications for further research to assess the reading comprehension skills of Hungarian students in Slovakia and design reading strategies which will improve their results.

¹ This article is an extended version of the paper titled ‘READING COMPREHENSION: THE IDEA AND REALITY. PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS’ READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS BASED ON SELF-ASSESSMENT AND TEST RESULTS’ originally presented within the 7th SWS International Scientific Conference on Social Science ISCSS 2020 [1].
INTRODUCTION
In everyday life, we encounter a mass of information that appears in various text forms. In our daily verbal activity, we read, listen to, and compose texts. For all these reasons it is extremely important for students to learn to interpret different types of texts properly [2]. The importance of reading comprehension is regularly confirmed by international measurements (PIRLS, PISA); the results of which, from cycle to cycle, indicate that students in Slovakia perform below the OECD average [3] [4]. Moreover, previous studies show that there is a strong correlation between reading habits, reading motivation, and reading comprehension performance. Motivated, well-reading students have better reading comprehension skills than their non-reading peers. Good readers often choose reading as a leisure activity, and a positive attitude towards reading is also supported by the home environment [4].

From functional perspective, the three basic purposes of reading include entertainment, learning and knowledge acquisition. These three types of text also appear in reading comprehension tests of international measurements [5]. Different types of texts, which have different structures, have different characteristics that dominate the understanding of the texts. Each text type differs in the structure, the coherence of the information, the vocabulary, and the presence of the protagonist. Observing the conceptual system of text types, it can be stated that narrative and informative texts are characterized by the dominance of social communication and mostly have several common language concepts. In contrast, expository texts follow the patterns of cognitive-communication and usually contain technical language concepts. Conceptual networks, which are activated during the reading of narrative and informative texts are formed by the thought networks of concepts activated in the background memory, and the content of the read text is reconstructed. This is possible if the reader possesses the meaning of most concepts in the text. In expository text types, the organization of the networks of concepts is created, but usually, this is not a reconstruction, so it does not correspond to the content of the text. In this case, the reader must consciously construct a mental representation of the texts [6]. The comprehension of expository text types is also complicated by the fact that their subject is often unknown, new concepts appear in them, the expressed ideas often appear in complex, abstract logical contexts [7].

This paper presents a recent research focusing on the assessment of the reading comprehension skills of Hungarian students in Slovakia. The aim of this research is to determine pupils' reading habits, and to discover the differences between students' self-assessment and their actual performance in reading comprehension.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Hungarian is the largest ethnic minority in Slovakia therefore it has an extensive network of native language school [8]. The target groups examined in this survey were the fourth and seventh-grade primary school students with Hungarian as the language of instruction in bilingual regions.
in eastern, central, and western Slovakia. The survey was conducted between May and June 2019 and lasted 90 minutes in each class. The respondents were selected based on purposive sampling, choosing respondents from two age groups (fourth and seventh-grade students) and a similar bilingual environment.

The total number of respondents was 655; according to the age distribution, there were 352 fourth grade pupils and 303 seventh grade students. According to the regional distribution, there were 211 (4th grade:117, 7th grade:94) respondents from Western Slovakia, 196 (4th grade:87, 7th grade:109) from Central Slovakia and 127 (4th grade: 69, 7th grade:58) from Eastern Slovakia. Besides Slovakia, a Hungarian monolingual control group of primary school pupils from Hungary also took part in the survey. A total of 121 (4th grade:79, 7th grade:42) respondents from primary schools in Hungary participated in the survey. According to data from the Slovak Scientific and Technical Information Center [9], the number of Slovakia Hungarian respondents (fourth grade: 273, seventh grade: 261) in comparison with the official valid school attendance data in 2018, covers 8% of the fourth grade and 9% of the seventh grade of all primary schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction in Slovakia. The participants did not know about the survey in advance, the tests were carried out anonymously, each respondent was given a numerical code, so we could assign the two parts of the survey.

The first part of the survey consisted of a self-filled sociological questionnaire, in which the respondents were asked about their language use, the cultural environment at home, reading habits and subjective reading comprehension skills. The respondents then completed a reading comprehension test compiled by our research team to determine the actual level of reading comprehension at the research points. The reading comprehension tests contained different texts for the two grades, but the structure of the tests was the same. Both tests consisted of three parts. In the first part, students were given a narrative text. For both groups, the narrative text was a simple, continuous text of 2500 characters. The second text was a continuous expository text. Its length was about 1800 characters. The third text was a mixed informative text with continuous text and pictures or tables. The length of this text corresponded to a standard A4 page, of which a quarter page was devoted to the text and a three-quarter page to a table or a picture. Concerning the level of difficulty of the questions, the reading comprehension test for fourth graders included a total of 26 questions. The test included open-ended and closed-ended questions, including true-false statements, multiple choice, finding the answer in the text and categorizing of the given statements. The reading comprehension test for seventh graders consisted of a total of 21 questions. Most of them were open-ended, requiring short or longer responses, but also true-false choices, categorization of statements were among the tasks. In terms of the level of memory load, respondents were asked to use the text when answering the questions. We explicitly pointed out to them to work with the text constantly. Given the difficulty of reading comprehension, the respondents had to apply various cognitive processes, including accessing and retrieving specific, explicit information, also integrating, and generating inferences, reflecting and evaluating the elements of the text.
The tests were evaluated by assigning a score to the correct answers. For each correctly answered question, respondents received one point. The results were evaluated using the Minitab19 statistics program. Below the selected questions of the sociological questionnaire and the analysis of the comprehension test are presented.

**RESULTS**

Using the sociological questionnaire, we evaluated the respondents’ leisure activities, reading habits and reading comprehension skills based on their self-assessment. Regarding leisure activities, we asked the respondents: “What do you like to do most in your free time?”. Within the question, they had to choose one or more of six options or indicate another option. The following figure (Figure 1) shows the students’ preferred leisure activities.

![THE RESPONDENTS FAVOURITE LEISURE ACTIVITIES](image)

**Figure 1.** The students’ favourite free time activities.

Based on the data, it can be stated that the preferred leisure activities of both age groups include playing with friends (4th grade: 42%, 7th grade: 28%) and sports (4th grade: 40%, 7th grade: 37%). Reading books as a preferred leisure activity was chosen by only a fraction of students (4th grade: 13%, 7th grade: 8%). However, it is noteworthy, that among the leisure activities, reading books occupies a similar place to watching television (4th grade: 13%, 7th grade: 6%) or watching films and videos (4th grade: 13%, 7th grade: 18%) in both age groups.

Regarding students’ reading habits, we asked respondents how often they read. Within the question, they had to choose from six options that characterized their reading frequency. The following figure (Figure 2) illustrates the students’ reading frequency.
Based on the results, it can be observed that fewer fourth grade respondents read more than one hour per day than their older peers (4th grade: 31%, 7th grade: 40%). We also asked students for what reasons they read. The following table (Table 1) illustrates the respondents' motivation for reading.

**Table 1. Students' reading motivation (respondents could mark more than one answer).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading motivation (respondents could mark more than one answer)</th>
<th>4th Grade</th>
<th>7th Grade</th>
<th>Together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MUST (PREPARING FOR CLASS)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUN/ EXPERIENCE</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INQUIRY / OBTAINING INFORMATION</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the results, it can be noted that in both age groups, less than one third of the respondents (30%) answered that they read because they need to prepare for class. It is noteworthy that almost twice as many students in fourth grade (48%) read for fun or experience than in seventh grade (26%). We then asked students whether they preferred printed or paper texts. The following table (Table 2) illustrates these data.

**Table 2. Frequency of reading among students.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference for printed and online texts</th>
<th>4th Grade</th>
<th>7th Grade</th>
<th>Together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRINTED BOOKS, NEWSPAPERS</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEBSITES</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO RESPONSE</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The responses obtained show that although more than half of the students (57%) in the fourth grade prefer to read printed books than websites (37%), this ratio changes after a few years, as almost two-thirds of the respondents in the seventh grade (63%) prefer websites to paper books (32%).

Based on the responses received, one-third of informants (4th grade: 34%, 7th grade: 35%) always read through a book when they start reading it. The proportion of these data is the same in both age groups. However, there is a difference in the proportion of students who sometimes or never finish their books. While in fourth grade more than half of the students (52%) sometimes and 10% never read a book till the end, this percentage shows a slight change after a few years. Less than half (48%) of seventh graders sometimes and 14% never finish their readings. Furthermore, book borrowing behaviour is more pronounced among fourth graders. While half of fourth graders (50%) tend to borrow books, this is true for one-third (34%) of seventh graders.

We asked students how often they see their parents reading. The following chart (Figure 3) shows the frequency with which parents read in the presence of their children.

Looking at the results, we see that in both age groups far more students see their mother reading daily (4th grade: 43%, 7th grade: 43) than their father (4th grade: 34%, 7th grade: 29%). This finding is reinforced by the fact that in both groups the number of informants who never see their mother reading (4th grade: 16%, 7th grade: 12%) was lower than those who never see their father reading (4th grade: 21%, 7th grade: 19%).

To assess their reading habits, we asked students what they thought about reading. Students had to express their agreement with various statements on a four-point Likert scale. The following figure (Figure 4) examines the responses to these statements.
Based on the data collected, it can be observed that there are great differences in the opinions of the two age groups about reading. More than two-thirds (70%) of the fourth graders surveyed, but less than half (45%) of the seventh graders, believe they learn a lot from reading. Nearly twice as many fourth graders (62%) as seventh graders (35%) are happy when someone gives them a book. And while two-thirds (67%) of fourth graders like it, just over half (54%) of seventh graders like imagining other worlds through a book. The truth of these statements is also reflected in the fact that while more than half of fourth graders (53%) ultimately disagree with the statement that reading is boring, this percentage shows a large decrease in seventh grade (37%). Following reading habits, we surveyed the students’ subjective opinions about their reading comprehension skills.

With regard to the self-assessment of reading comprehension, we asked the students: “How well can you read?”. In the question, the respondents had to express their agreement with six statements on a four-level Likert scale. In the following graph (Figure 5) two of these statements are examined. The data obtained show that the majority of both age groups totally (4<sup>th</sup> grade: 52%, 7<sup>th</sup> grade: 40%) or partially (4<sup>th</sup> grade: 28%, 7<sup>th</sup> grade: 34%) agree with the statement that that, “Reading is easy, I understand everything I read”. While with the second question chosen: “Understanding the text is a problem, I am not good at it,” a significantly high percentage of students in both groups disagree totally (4<sup>th</sup> grade: 52%, 7<sup>th</sup> grade: 60%) or partially (4<sup>th</sup> grade: 15%, 7<sup>th</sup> grade: 18%).

After completing the questionnaires, the respondents completed a reading comprehension test. The reading comprehension test contained different texts for the two grades but had the same structure. Both age groups received a three-part reading comprehension test, which contained three types of texts (narrative, expository, informative) and questions that were adapted to the cognitive abilities of the students. In the following, the results of the fourth graders the reading comprehension test and then the results of the seventh graders reading comprehension test are analysed based on statistical methods.
The quartile results of the reading comprehension test of fourth graders (Table 3) show that fourth-grade students scored lowest on narrative texts (Q1: 39%, Q2: 46%, Q3: 62%). Most of the respondents (61) scored 7 points (54%) out of a maximum of 13, and no one achieved the maximum score for this type of text. For expository texts, the fourth graders achieved a moderate performance (Q1: 34%, Q2: 56%, Q3: 67%); the most frequent point being 7 out of 14, so most of them achieved 56% in this part. By contrast, in the case of informative texts, the weakest performance was recorded for all three quartiles (Q1: 29%, Q2: 50%, Q3: 64%) on the narrative text, with the most frequent point being 7 out of 14, so that most of them achieved 50% on the test. For the expository text, the students’ scores show the highest performance (Q1: 34%, Q2: 56%, Q3: 67%); the most frequent point being 5 out of 9, so most of them achieved 56% in this part. By contrast, in the case of informative texts, the weakest performance was recorded for all three quartiles (Q1: 29%, Q2: 50%, Q3: 64%).

The results of seventh graders, divided by quartiles (Table 4), show that the students performed moderately (Q1: 29%, Q2: 50%, Q3: 64%) on the narrative text, with the most frequent point being 7 out of 14, so that most of them achieved 50% on the test. For the expository text, the students’ scores show the highest performance (Q1: 34%, Q2: 56%, Q3: 67%); the most frequent point being 5 out of 9, so most of them achieved 56% in this part. By contrast, in the case of informative texts, the weakest performance was achieved by 5 out of 12, so that most of them achieved 50% on the test. Based on the obtained results, it can be stated that the fourth graders performed best on informative texts (Q1: 55%, Q2: 73%, Q3: 82%). Most of the respondents (74) scored 9 out of a maximum of 11 points so that they achieved 82% in this part.

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CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to assess the reading comprehension skills of Hungarian fourth and seventh-grade students in Slovakia. The survey was a simultaneous
cross-sectional study.

Based on the analysis of the data, it can be concluded that reading does not belong to the preferred leisure activities of the young generation. It is a remarkable result that watching TV, watching videos and films, as well as reading, occupy the last places on the scale of leisure activities. Although the majority of students dislike reading as a leisure activity, the highest proportion of respondents spend more than one hour per day reading. The results also show that the percentage of daily readers is higher in the seventh grade (62%; more than one hour: 40%, less than one hour: 22%) than in the fourth grade (54%; more than one hour: 31%, less than one hour: 23%). This can be partly explained by the fact that students must read every day to prepare for school lessons and that they get to know more and more texts in the different subjects as the years go by. On the other hand, the difference between the two age groups can also be explained by the fact that seventh graders probably already spend much more time on the Internet and encounter different texts there. This can also be inferred from the fact that seventh grade students prefer to read websites rather than printed texts, while fourth grade students prefer to read traditional, printed books.

Students’ perceptions of reading show thought-provoking results as they get older. According to the results, the percentage of students who are aware that they learn a lot from reading and are happy to receive a book as a gift is much higher among fourth graders. Similarly, far fewer fourth graders than seventh graders think reading is boring.

Despite the unpopularity of reading, most students, regardless of age, have positive self-esteem in reading comprehension. There is a significant discrepancy between the subjective reading comprehension skills of the respondents and the results obtained from the answers to the reading comprehension tests we conducted. Based on the answers of the respondents, it was proved that the majority of students, regardless of their age, believe that they have good reading comprehension skills, that reading is easy for them, that they have no difficulty in reading comprehension.

However, it can be stated that these statements contradict the results of the reading comprehension tests we have compiled, and the results of the reading comprehension test are similar to the results of international surveys in that they regularly draw attention to the lack of reading and reading comprehension performance caused by the unpopularity of reading. The results of the reading comprehension test show well that reading comprehension itself is strongly influenced by the type of text. In the fourth grade, reading comprehension of the text of an informative nature proved to be the easiest, while understanding

### Table 4. The results of the 7th graders’ reading comprehension tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>MIN</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2=</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>MAX</th>
<th>MOD</th>
<th>E (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NARRATIV</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPOSITORY</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFORMATIONAL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the analysis of the data, it can be concluded that reading does not belong to the preferred leisure activities of the young generation. It is a remarkable result that watching TV, watching videos and films, as well as reading, occupy the last places on the scale of leisure activities. Although the majority of students dislike reading as a leisure activity, the highest proportion of respondents spend more than one hour per day reading. The results also show that the percentage of daily readers is higher in the seventh grade (62%; more than one hour: 40%, less than one hour: 22%) than in the fourth grade (54%; more than one hour: 31%, less than one hour: 23%). This can be partly explained by the fact that students must read every day to prepare for school lessons and that they get to know more and more texts in the different subjects as the years go by. On the other hand, the difference between the two age groups can also be explained by the fact that seventh graders probably already spend much more time on the Internet and encounter different texts there. This can also be inferred from the fact that seventh grade students prefer to read websites rather than printed texts, while fourth grade students prefer to read traditional, printed books.

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However, it can be stated that these statements contradict the results of the reading comprehension tests we have compiled, and the results of the reading comprehension test are similar to the results of international surveys in that they regularly draw attention to the lack of reading and reading comprehension performance caused by the unpopularity of reading. The results of the reading comprehension test show well that reading comprehension itself is strongly influenced by the type of text. In the fourth grade, reading comprehension of the text of an informative nature proved to be the easiest, while understanding
narrative texts was the biggest problem for the respondent. In the seventh grade, the students had the strongest performance in understanding expository texts, while understanding informative texts presented the greatest difficulty, which is also problematic because this type of text is the one we encounter most often in everyday life.

The analysis of the results suggests that the participants overestimated their reading comprehension skills, and their self-assessments are far below the results of their actual performance. Further research is needed to find out the exact reasons for this, especially to develop the reading comprehension skills of Hungarian students in Slovakia with the help of precisely elaborated methods. The results obtained so far prove that it is necessary to investigate reading comprehension skills in a complex way, so that not only the constant emphasis on the importance of reading comprehension in education is present, but also the actual improvement with and accurate diagnosis is possible. These results have potential implications for further research to assess the reading comprehension skills of Hungarian students in Slovakia and to develop reading strategies that improve their results.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Collegium Talentum 2020 Programme of Hungary. The research on which the study is based was conducted within the framework of the APVV-17-0071.

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