Monitoring the use of innovative psycho-didactic processes in reading literacy development

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Abstract

The text will present the ways of a development of reading literacy at the Czech primary school. The first part presents the trends of the innovative process at school on the field of reading literacy. The second part includes the results of the wide research organised at the Czech primary school in 2001/2. The similar research was organized in 2002 for the first time. The results of the both researches have been compared in the end of the second research. The results of comparison inform us about the real situation at the school teaching process on reading.

Keywords: reading literacy; initial reading literacy; school curriculum; development of reading literacy

1. Literacy, Reading Literacy, Reading

1.1. Literacy

The issue of literacy of individuals and specific social groups is one of the current society-wide issues. An adequate level of literacy level is considered one of the necessary preconditions for lifelong learning, economic welfare and in general aspect also for the functioning of the individual in society. In this context, it is obvious that the term “adequate level” is rather relative, influenced primarily by socio-cultural and economic factors, but also historical tradition, regional aspects, etc.

In Czech technical terminology, the term literacy appears at the end of the nineties of the 20th century in connection with international surveys on reading and functional literacy. It was the findings of these surveys that drew Czech experts’ attention to the fact that Czech pupils (in the surveys on functional literacy – Czech adults) significantly fall behind their peers from other monitored countries in the level of reading literacy. These findings were examined in detail with the aim of finding the causes of this state and ways of its improvement. In
connection with these activities, the term “literacy” has become embedded in the Czech technical terminology and began to be further explored and defined by means of research methods.

The beginning of the new century is marked by rapid development of various literacy fields. Besides reading literacy, we could mention mathematical literacy, environmental, information and communication literacies, but also e.g. financial, ecological literacy, etc. Due to the fact that all these literacies are built on the skills developed through reading literacy, it is this literacy that can be considered as a central core of the cluster of literacies for an individual and thus as a base of one’s lifelong learning. We may hence presume to a certain extent that reading literacy level significantly affects the extent and level of other literacies as well.

In specialized literature we may encounter a number of structuring and classifications of literacies. For the purpose of our paper we choose the ontogenetic viewpoint of classifying reading literacy, which is the focus of our interest. Applying this viewpoint we distinguish pre-literacy (developing literacy at pre-school age), basic literacy (developing literacy skills during compulsory school attendance), and functional literacy (developing adults’ literacy skills – from the age of 15).

A distinctively specific period and also a period which is paid a special attention to nowadays is the period of building “the foundations” of literacy, which is in the context of reading literacy marked as the period of initial reading literacy.

1.2. Reading literacy and reading practice – definition, concept

In the previous part of the text it was stated that reading literacy is considered as a base of the cluster of individual’s literacies and hence as a base for their lifelong learning (education).

When following home and international sources, we come across a wide range of definitions of reading literacy varying primarily in the point of view, from which reading literacy is explored (e.g. linguistic, sociolinguistic, or socio-cultural view).

Defining reading literacy from a didactical and psycho-didactic point of view meets the purpose of our text. Their common denominator perceives reading literacy as an ability to understand, use and react to the stimuli gained through written language in order to pursue an individual’s personal and social fulfillment.

PISA 2000, an international survey on reading literacy, defined reading literacy as an ability to “understand, use, and reflect on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to actively participate in society “.

1.3. Reading literacy in school education

Reading literacy development is one of the fundamental objectives of education provided by compulsory schooling. This general objective is common to European countries as well as the Czech Republic. Although the Czech Republic has always traditionally paid special attention to reading development, international surveys on reading literacy showed that on one hand, Czech pupils have good reading skills and that they read quite often, on the other, they struggle with completing reading tasks involving understanding the links in the text, locating pieces of information and their critical evaluation, constructing their own texts etc. When investigating the reasons for this state, school reading instruction was analysed and it was found out that it is too much centred on initial reading instruction (primarily the reading techniques) and comprehension, i.e. on the development of the lowest levels of reading literacy. Higher levels – metacognition, extracting meaning etc. are involved insufficiently in instruction, often they are missing completely. When analysing textbooks used not only for reading but also for the instruction in other educational areas, it was found out that this type of tasks is completely absent and therefore pupils’ reading literacy is developed insufficiently in this area.

Reaction to this situation involved several levels:
At the declaration and decision-making level, it gave rise to a two-tier participation model of curricular documents - Framework Educational Programme for Elementary Education (FEPEE) and its follow-up school educational programmes. The FEPEE defines key competencies for the Czech Language and Literature, which pupils should achieve at the end of each educational period. Yet, these competencies are defined rather vaguely and reading literacy development, primarily at its “higher” levels, can only be deduced intuitively. The authors of this nationally binding document supposed that the specifications of reading literacy development with the focus on the development of all levels of reading literacy will be included in school educational programmes. Some research findings point out that these specifications are missing or are too general in school educational programmes. Likewise, the FEPEE supposed that reading literacy will be developed through trans-curricular approach. However, nor this appears in school educational programmes. The Czech Language and Literature instruction thus involves primarily a traditional way of developing reading and its school “use”.

The introduction and completion of a wide range of courses in further teacher education represented another level of school instruction reforms in terms of reading literacy development. They aimed to train teachers in different ways of working with text, which they could put to use in school instruction. These courses were and still are very much sought-after by teachers since they can be seen as one of the few possibilities of inspiration for innovative development of reading literacy (mainly at lower-secondary schools).

The third level concerned exchanging practical experience and mutual inspiration through methodology portals, special workshops, peer observations, working on various regional and nation-wide projects etc.

Despite the above mentioned measures introduced into schools during the reading instruction reform, Czech pupils’ results in international reading literacy surveys have not improved since the year 2000. It turns out that tackling this issue calls for wider support of all target groups (teachers, prospective teachers, pupils’ families, school equipment etc.)

2. The survey on reading literacy development in the first grade of Czech primary school

2.1. The focus and aims of the empirical survey

In 2002 – 2003, an extensive empirical survey was carried out in 250 first grades of primary schools. It sought to monitor the development of reading literacy in school within the innovative processes introduced after 1997 into the Czech school system, both from the pupils’ viewpoint (their reading performance and their attitude to reading skills were monitored) and teachers’ viewpoint.

After ten years, we carried out a similar survey again with the aim of exploring reading instruction in action after implementing all measures and applying various innovative trends. Again we focused on pupils and their reading skills development and on teachers and their methods during reading instruction in the first grade.

A great amount of data, which will be gradually processed and analysed, were collected during the survey.

Our intention for this paper is to focus only on monitoring teachers’ methodology and its changing after ten years of intensive innovative experiments.

Teacher’s teaching strategies were monitored in the following didactic categories:

- Goal (setting pupils’ individual goals, reading technique to reading comprehension ratio etc.)
- Teaching methods (diversity of basic teaching strategies, active teaching methods, pupils’ cooperation etc.)
- Lesson organisation (reading to writing instruction ratio, integrating reading into other subjects etc.)
- Assessment (individualised assessment, motivation value, forms of assessment etc.)
- Textbooks, teaching materials (a way of selecting textbooks, combining materials, use of a classroom/school library, ICT in instruction etc.)
• Cooperation with parents, specialists (forms of cooperation, efficiency etc.)

2.2. **Survey Organisation**

2.2.1. **Sample**

242 first-grade teachers, out of whom 82% were women, took part in the survey. 53% of teachers had a more than 5-year teaching experience with first grades. The group of teachers was categorized according to the location of their school (3 town categories according to the number of inhabitants) and according to the school organisation (larger schools, small schools teaching mixed aged groups). Teachers participated in the survey voluntarily.

2.2.2. **Research Methods**

The survey aimed to obtain as much “objective” information as possible about reading instruction in first grades from the viewpoint of teacher’s teaching strategies. Therefore more methods were used and these were combined as necessary. The research methods involved a structured interview with a teacher, a structured questionnaire and lesson observation (6 times with every teacher). At the same time, interviews with randomly selected parents or pupils were carried out. In some cases, the survey included the analysis of video recordings of lesson observations. The research team was instructed and trained during methodology meetings.

2.2.3. **Survey timeline**

• May 2012 – June 2012 – research team training
• September 2012 – May 2013 – the realisation of the survey
• May 2013 – November 2013 – survey data processing, conclusions

2.2.4. **Research findings**

Due to the fact that the research was completed in May, not all data have been processed yet. In our paper, we will focus on the analysis of the teacher’s methods and teaching techniques not taking into account school location and its organisation. A detailed analysis will be carried out in the second half of the year 2013. For the purpose of clarity, teacher’s work will be assessed according to didactic categories determining teacher’s methods. The figure represents percentage taking into account all of the teachers monitored in 2012 (the brackets give a similar figure from 2002 for comparison).

Goal: 36% (26%) of teachers are able to define appropriate ratio of reading technique to reading comprehension, 36% (51%) of teachers prefer only reading technique in reading instruction. As few as 31% (23%) of teachers can set pupil’s individual reading goals during instruction.

From a viewpoint of goal assessment, we may conclude that there is a significant positive shift in the preference for developing reading comprehension. Setting individual learning goals for pupils remains an issue.

Teaching methods: 87% (66%) of teachers are able to vary basic teaching strategies, 77% (70%) of teachers implement active teaching methods into instruction regularly, 32% (19%) of teachers support teamwork among pupils. Teaching methods showed a positive qualitative shift in all monitored factors. We may thus conclude that about 75% of first grades show varied and active work.

Lesson organisation: 68% (54%) of teachers make use of the possibility of varying reading and writing instruction from a viewpoint of organisation structure (typical dividing of Czech lessons into reading and writing.
part do not prevail anymore, on the contrary, both skills are developed jointly and effectively) 74% (56%) of teachers are able to effectively integrate reading into other subjects.

The possibility of varied structuring and effective integration is noticeably preferred in lesson organisation. Assessment: 47% (31%) of teachers prefer individualised assessment, 62% (42%) of teachers use positive-motivation assessment, 27% (23%) of teachers base pupil’s evaluation on pupil’s self-assessment, 35% (23%) of teachers implement into assessment innovative forms (portfolio, sound recordings, etc.).

Overall we may conclude that the only positive change in assessment is wider use of positive-motivation assessment. The use of the following is insufficient: Individualised assessment, innovative forms of assessment, and utterly insufficient is pupil’s self-assessment. It is necessary to direct the innovative processes primarily into these areas.

Textbooks, teaching materials: 39% (11%) of teachers are able to combine various sets of textbooks and teaching materials, 67% (23%) of teachers use effectively classroom/school libraries in reading instruction, 37% (5%) of teachers implement ICT into instruction. This area shows a markedly positive development, especially taking into account limited financial resources for purchasing textbooks and teaching materials that a number of schools have. Likewise, the access to ICT tools is rather limited in a number of schools. The use of libraries, which gradually become an integral part of reading instruction, can be also perceived as positive.

Cooperating with parents and specialists: 47% (32%) of teachers prefer informal cooperation with parents, 67% (56%) of teachers find the cooperation with specialists effective.

This field requires more intensive and long-term development. The cooperation with parents is highly significant, however a question is to what extent the parents themselves are interested in this cooperation. Counselling will probably show a slight improvement. This may also be due to the fact that a number of schools have their own school-based specialists.

The results above, their comparison and brief conclusions can be considered only as partial in the whole survey. As stated above, detailed results to formulate general conclusions will be available at the end of the year 2013.

3. Conclusion

Our paper intended to provide a brief explanation of the issue of reading literacy from the theoretical point of view. Alongside this, we suggested direction of innovative processes and their impact on school learning. At this moment, it is not possible to formulate general conclusions and recommendations for further possible ways of innovative processes of initial reading skills development. Therefore we provide a more general conclusion, which could be put to use instantly as one of the inspirations.

Monitoring the situation in European education systems could be this inspiration. When analysing curricular documents we may find that in majority cases reading literacy development is one of the priorities and even at the level of nation-wide documents it is of great importance. Likewise, attention is paid to the factors affecting reading literacy development – ranging from working with pupils with special educational needs, multicultural individuals to school equipment and extracurricular work with parents. The latest EU document - Teaching Reading in Europe (EURYDICE, 2011) provides a detailed analysis of curricular documents of member states from the standpoint of reading literacy development including recommendations for the optimization of this development.
References


