15th International Conference of the Spanish Association of Language and Literature Education, 15th International Conference SEDLL, 19-21 November 2014, Valencia, Spain

Reading literacy as one of the most significant academic competencies for the university students

Elena Delgadova*

Trencianska univerzita Alexandra Dubceka v Trencine, Studentska 2, 91150 Trencin, Slovakia

Abstract

At the Lisbon Summit, the Council of Europe set a highly ambitious strategic goal for the European Union: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. In the process of achieving this goal, education and job readiness have played a critical role. Therefore, one of the strategic and ambitious goals is to attain the best possible quality of teaching and learning processes. One of the key academic competencies generating knowledge for the current information society is the reading literacy. The main goal of our pre-research project is to carry out a pilot study on reading literacy of the first year students at Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin, to identify their reading literacy level, and their ability to comprehend and work effectively with academic texts, and last but not least to identify their reading literacy deficiencies. The pre-research project will serve as a basis for a follow-up in-depth comparative research. In addition, suitability of the research methods will be tested and reliability and validity of the research to be carried out in collaboration with colleagues from the Universidad de Valencia and Universidad Católica de Valencia in Spain will be verified. The research on reading literacy will test Slovak and Spanish first year students studying at public and private universities. Identical texts having intermediate academic difficulty in the students’ mother tongue will be employed in order to identify and compare real competences and the reading comprehension level of university students in both countries. An empirical, analytical and comparative research will be conducted. The results we obtained in the first research phase from testing a small sample of Slovak first year university students indicated reading literacy deficiencies; i.e. students are insufficiently prepared to deal with academic texts of intermediate level of complexity and lack analytical and critical thinking. Students were assigned to write an abstract and a power-point presentation, common and frequently used linguistic genres in academic setting in order to assess their ability to systematize and synthesize written text, and thus to identify their real reading literacy.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +421327430484
E-mail address: elena.delgadova@tmuni.sk

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).
Peer-review under responsibility of the Universidad Politècnica de Valencia, Departamento de Lingüística Aplicada.
1. Introduction

The European Council held in Lisbon in March 2000, agreed a new strategic goal for the EU for the next decade – to build a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy with greater social cohesion and higher employment. A comprehensive strategy designed to achieve the following objectives was adopted: the transition to the economy and the knowledge society (stepping up the process of structural reform for competitiveness and innovation and completing the internal market), modernizing the European social model, especially by investing in people and combating social exclusion, maintaining a healthy economic environment and economic growth by applying an appropriate macroeconomic policies. (Lisbon European Council 2000) The process of attaining these goals was assessed as crucial one for the upcoming period of time by the European Union in 2010. (Lisbon Strategy evaluation document, A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, 2010)

What does it, however, mean for the society and education? To build a competitive knowledge-based society, we need educated, creative and well-prepared human capital able to respond in a flexible manner to rapid societal changes. Are university students well prepared for challenges of higher education? Are they ready to get adapted to all the demands set by the society? The basic academic competencies required for effective learning are reading comprehension and reading literacy.

The goal of our work is to introduce the pre-research project aimed to determine the level of the reading comprehension competence of university students studying at three European universities, namely Alexander Dubcek University in Trencin, Slovakia, Universidad de Valencia and Universidad Católica de Valencia San Vicente Mártir, Spain.

2. Current state of the problem-solving and the research conducted

The issue is primarily examined at primary and secondary levels of education. The fact is backed up by the PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment) triennial international survey coordinated by OECD which aims to evaluate the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students and improve educational policy and education results.

Academic competence refers to a cluster of related abilities, skills, knowledge and dispositions of cognitive and non-cognitive nature that allow university students to perform the necessary activities as required, and thus to graduate and be successful in their career.

As far as relevant changes in the academic education are concerned, those have taken place mostly in the sphere of application of information technologies into academic education, what enabled establishment of different forms of distance education, such as e-learning, online education, virtual education, network education and others. (Krajňáková & Vojtović, 2014)

In addition to professional, technical and other academic competences, reading literacy ranks among the key competences. It is the core academic competence for processing the information gained, innovating it and consequently creating new knowledge. The definition of reading literacy changes to reflect changes in society, the economy, culture and education. Therefore, it cannot be regarded as a simple skill of reading, decoding and comprehension. The current perception of reading literacy involves understanding of not only explicit but also implicit meanings of the read text.

The PISA 2000 definition of reading literacy was as follows: Reading literacy is understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.

The PISA 2009 definition of reading, continued for 2012 and 2015, adds engagement in reading as an integral part of reading literacy: Reading literacy is understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.
Thus, PISA (2009) defined reading literacy as the ability to comprehend a written text, think about it and use for achieving one’s goals; to develop one’s skills, knowledge and potential for active involvement in the society.

Švrčková defines reading literacy as "a functional use of an acquired skill in a particular social context. Being literate means that one has to develop a broader set of skills, which activate functional use of an acquired skill (e.g. language) in everyday life. Hence, reading literacy refers not only to mastering the reading skill, but also the ability to work with texts, communicate in writing, acquire and process information contained in texts." (Švrčková, 2011, p. 13)

According to Holloway (1999), reading skills are essential to the academic achievement of middle- and high school students. Olson (1977a; 1977b) claims that in today’s society, reading literacy introduces a bias because it provides advantages to those who acquire the necessary skills. As the currency used in schools, literacy provides access to literate institutions and has an impact on cognition, or thinking processes (Kern and Friedman, 2008; Olson, 1994; Pretorius, 2000); it also shapes the way in which we think.

Achievement in reading literacy is not only a foundation for achievement in other subject areas within the educational system, but also a prerequisite for successful participation in most areas of adult life (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Smith et al. 2000).

Barthes (2006) claims that modern literary science and semiotics offer readers, contrary to the established ways of the text reception schemes, more freedom in text interpretation. Reading is not merely a source of new knowledge about reality or a matter of aesthetic satisfaction. Reading is often regarded as a source of pleasure originating from the joy of breaking laws and norms of society.

We hold that reading literacy is a comprehensive set of reading skills and abilities that are needed to work with texts effectively. Reading literacy does not refer to a mere speed reading of words, phrases or full texts. What is more, reading literacy refers to being able to comprehend the contents properly, find both explicit and implicit meanings, analyse the content and the information obtained; and being able to interpret the content properly and pass it on. In the first place, however, it is the ability to make one’s own judgments about texts, and apply their content to innovate and create new knowledge as a result of the information received.

We hold reading literacy to be one of the key skills in academic setting, since the vast amount of knowledge is acquired through books, monographs and written documents; and we consider it a core competence in the process of transforming information into understanding.

Some of the main reasons that made us conduct the research include our own experience with the students’ difficulties to decode meanings in academic discourses, low students’ grades in examinations, frequent retaking of examinations as well as low rating of Slovak students in the PISA evaluation (ranked 32 out of 34).

3. Research objectives and methodology

Prior to research, we formulated two hypotheses:
1. There is a correlation between failure and low grades of university students in testing and reading literacy.
2. More than 40% of Slovak university students in their first year of study lack sufficient level of reading comprehension.

The pre-research was designed to test, validate or alter the research methods and procedures. Thus, the foundation will be laid for a deeper, comparative research to be conducted in collaboration with the Spanish colleagues. The comparative research will be carried out on the sample of Slovak students studying at Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin and Spanish students studying at Universidad de Valencia and Universidad Católica de Valencia San Vicente Mártir.

4. Research, evaluation of findings and discussion

It is not an easy task to evaluate the reading literacy level as it is a complex process. There are various testing and assessment methods and it is the researcher who is to consider advantages and disadvantages of any method in question. Moreover, it is the researcher who is to adapt the methodology selected to the particular research objective. In order to determine and assess the reading competence level, we decided to assign students two tasks related to working with the text. We chose an identical text in Slovak and Spanish language titled Gender and Perception of
Equality in relation to of intermediate academic difficulty level. The Slovak version of the text contained approximately 1,300 words and the Spanish version of the text approximately 1,700 words. The difference in the number of words is not relevant and can be attributed to the type of language. The tasks assigned to students were as follows:

- composing a 150-word abstract
- making an 8-slide power-point presentation.

In order to evaluate the research, we used new methods of assessment involving the composition of two linguistic genres, such as the abstract and power-point presentation, which are common in academic setting. Thus, the students’ ability to systematize and synthesize the text read was observed and their real reading literacy was identified.

It is assumed that while reading texts, readers are guided by the text itself and they apply a bottom-up approach to process the information contained in the text. Once they, however, get the gist of the information, they turn on a small amount of data or knowledge schemes that complement the information contained in the text and facilitate sentence comprehension by eliminating variable values (letters, syllables, words, sentences) which could arise from drawing conclusions based on ambiguous aspects of the text. (Alonso Tapia, 1992)

In principle, abstracts represent a key to any academic writing and due to rapid dissemination of scientific information they are becoming the most studied piece of research writings.

We can agree with Prekopova (2008) who says that “writing a smashing abstract takes practice. The best abstracts are those that summarize the study succinctly and persuade readers to read the longer piece of writing for details.”

Writing an effective abstract, i.e. an abridged, condensed, yet accurate content of an article while maintaining clarity and coherence of communicative functions is an intellectual skill closely linked to reading literacy in which analysis and synthesis are backed up by accurate understanding and appropriately selected structure to achieve the greatest possible effect. Thus, reading literacy plays a crucial role in writing an abstract. Similarly, reading comprehension is essential to make an effective power-point presentation. In assessing the two linguistic genres, we focused both on their form and content. In particular, we examined the following five skills of students:

- to identify correctly the information and main ideas contained in the text,
- to adapt and condense the original text while maintaining its coherence and logic,
- to synthesize the text in writing while maintaining its full informative content,
- to select and use adequate language and
- to comprehend correctly the instructions related to post-reading assignments and answer correctly.

The research sample consisted of 22 Slovak students in the first year of the Bachelor program of study. Having evaluated the pre-research results, the sample was augmented by 36 students in the second year of the Master program of study. For the purposes of comparison, 7 Erasmus students of Spanish nationality were also tested. Erasmus students were in their third and fourth year of study, studying at 3 universities in Valencia, two of which will participate in conducting the comparative research. This sample, however, does not provide any relevant results and is provided for information purposes only.

Since this is a pre-research, the results are simplified and expressed in grades used in higher education in line with the Bologna Process and the European Credit Transfer System. In the assessment, however, A-B-C grades are considered satisfactory and D-E grades unsatisfactory. The results are listed in the table below.

Table 1. Research result assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number and nationality of students</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Power-point presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory A-B-C</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory D-E</td>
<td>Satisfactory A-B-C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results given in the table confirm the hypotheses formulated prior conducting the research. The findings are alarming, yet not surprising since reading comprehension deficiencies are frequent in an academic setting.

5. Conclusion

In the following phase, it is planned to make the reading literacy research as objective as possible; and to confirm or disprove the applied methods of assessment. Moreover, it is planned to augment the research sample with more Slovak and especially Spanish students studying at one public and one private university, and to expand the reading literacy research by using a student’s self-assessment questionnaire, academic text assessment (difficulty level and comprehensibility) by students themselves, to compare the research results and propose measures to improve the students’ reading literacy.

New technologies have brought great benefits and opportunities in terms of getting information in a faster and more efficient way. Yet, they hinder the development of reading literacy.

The information society is referred to as a knowledge-based society. Its essence is the knowledge economy, in which the ability of economic entities to assess their knowledge capital plays a crucial role, whereas knowledge capital refers to creating added value through applying commonly acquired knowledge and experience and their further enhancing and exchanging with others. To be informed is of strategic importance to survive in the information society, therefore the ability to identify, acquire and process information intellectually, as well as to apply, enhance and innovate it and consequently create new knowledge is of utmost significance. This is, however, only possible when having the top-level reading literacy.

References


Smith, M. C. et al. (2000), What will be the demands of literacy in the workplace in the next millennium? Reading Research Quarterly, 35(3),