

Looking for balance in early literacy education in Slovakia

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One of the most important tasks of early literacy education in Slovakia, and the core of the problem that the Slovak Reading Association has been dealing with since it was established, is to bring to Slovak schools a variety of developmentally and individually appropriate teaching approaches and methods, along with a variety of reading materials and real books to be used and integrated in a balanced fashion, in order:

- to give teachers an opportunity to approach children differently
- to meet children's needs and respect their previous knowledge, interests and literacy experiences
- to help children to progress further and continue their early literacy achievements, and
- not to stop or interrupt children in their natural literacy development, or even to push them back to the "zero" level of literacy

In other words, what we need most is to keep a balance between teaching and learning, between the amount of textbook exercises and classics of children's literature used, between classroom work and learning on one hand and the joy and pleasure of reading on the other, in order to gain and keep children's interest in and love for reading.

The traditional approach to reading instruction

When trying to identify the main obstacles and barriers to meeting the above needs, it is clear that a considerable part of the problem is connected with traditional teaching

methods and attitudes that we can call a "basal-reader approach" to reading instruction, considered as an inevitable first step to literacy. The basal-reader approach to beginning reading instruction has been used since the 19th century and today remains the predominant teaching strategy. Regardless of its credibility, our parents, grandparents and even great-grand parents were introduced to reading in this way, using similar teaching materials. Accordingly, they all began their personal reading history with texts similar to those children read in school nowadays.

To understand its possible consequences better, we will briefly describe the main points of the "**Phoneme-analytic-synthetic method**" of beginning reading, which is built on:

- the phonemic analysis and blending of 38 sounds corresponding to 38 letters
- a whole procedure that follows a prescribed letter-by-letter sequence lasting about 8 to 10 months on average during the first year of school (ages 6-7). It is worth mentioning that some intellectually superior preschool age children are able to cope with this, if capital letters are used, within a week.

On the other hand,

- first-grade children have to learn four different letter shapes (upper and lower case letters, each in printed and handwritten form)
- the performance criteria are very high – the formal criteria of accuracy in reading and writing have been overvalued at the

expense of their meaning and use

- to meet these criteria requires a lot of training (**predominantly** reading aloud and writing exercises, repeated reading and sounding out words and sentences, repeated writing – as in mechanical copying or dictation, etc.)
- These activities occur to the detriment of more important tasks connected with comprehension, understanding and thinking, relying on the meaning and context. Important reading tools and strategies are neglected, such as guessing, predicting, negotiating, group discussion, interaction, transaction... Meaningful writing activities involving personal expression are equally forgotten.

To summarize the consequences of such an approach we can say that using the meaning and context cues in reading is neither supported nor expected, and therefore not used at all by children. This inevitably results in children forming attitudes to reading and reading activities – reading is seen as mechanical, meaningless, passive and, with respect to the basal-reader text materials, also boring and useless. Moreover, teachers cannot use (and actually seem unable to imagine using) any additional attractive reading materials, books or journals, etc., until the basal reader is finished. Thus, the literacy environment is rather impoverished. In addition, children's previous knowledge (i.e. capital letter knowledge, writing vocabulary), is neither respected nor assessed. Reading and literacy assessment (at school entry) do not

occur. If any assessment does occur during the first year of school it tends to be aimed at the performance criteria of the skill of reading.

The characteristics and limits of the approach to reading instruction described above, along with a lack of assessment tools and instruments at the beginning period of literacy development raise doubts about the possibility of the individualisation of teaching and learning. Leaving aside the small group (about 5 %) of children with reading difficulties and disorders who have always been treated individually in specialized counselling services, the individualization of learning in primary school literacy education does not currently exist. However, the major group (the other 95 %) of children without disabilities or disorders are far from being solidly competent or even functionally literate readers - or at least, the scale of reading competencies, reading habits and interests of those who "can read" is extremely wide, and the number of those whose literacy level (functional or cultural) is questionable seems to be increasing.

Thus, many of the circumstances of early literacy education reviewed above may contribute a great deal to contemporary reading and literacy problems.

Resistance to change

In spite of the fact that many of the problems have been recognized, described and repeatedly discussed, teachers seem unwilling to change. Traditional attitudes to beginning reading that depend on traditional methods are very strong. One likely explanation for the reasons behind this phenomenon comes from the character of the Slovak language, in particular its orthography.

However paradoxical it may appear, the transparency of the orthography – an almost 100-percent letter-to-sound correspondence within the Slovak language, — and the ease with which these correspondences can be explained, taught and learnt are probably the main reasons that teachers do not question the

traditional method they have used for ages. The accuracy criteria on the one hand, and the real possibility of meeting these criteria even without exploiting the meaningful context of reading on the other, allow teachers to neglect the most important aspects of the joy and pleasure of real reading. We assume that the easier the language and its orthography are to learn, the less effort needs to be devoted to looking for different ways of attracting children's attention, gaining their interest and fostering a love for reading. By contrast, the more difficult the orthography, the more creativity and flexibility is required from teachers in order to keep children's attention and motivation to read.

Naturally, a lot of work has been done with respect to this area and many inspirational ideas are coming from reading research and practice from different language cultures with opaque orthography. We believe that taking advantage of both the relative ease with which the language can be learned on the one hand, and the plurality of available methods and approaches to reading on the other should bring children the benefit they may rely and build on, rather than limiting their literacy development. Trying to guide teachers through this rich and valuable resource of ideas and experience is the current challenge.

Contemporary attempts at change

Among many activities in the field of teacher education aimed at widening teachers' insight and knowledge of reading and literacy, several attempts have been made to support the use of a wider range of beginning reading methods and teaching strategies. Different "code-oriented" reading instruction materials have been developed based on different principles and/or phonological units, such as the Rebus Reader (Zápotočná & Kožíková, 1994) or the Elkonin Phonemic Awareness Training Programme (Mikulajová & Dujčíková, 2001). In addition to an explicitly code-oriented teaching method, recent efforts have been aimed at the renewal and

publication of several abandoned teaching strategies and methods (known from the history of teaching reading in Slovakia) based on implicit learning (via discovery, guessing-games, meaning and context-oriented strategies, etc.), such as the global "whole word" reading method of Vaclav Příhoda (1934), or the "Genetic" or "Writing to read" approach to reading developed by Jozef Kožíšek (1929) both distinguished psychologists. Nonetheless, their acceptance and use within a school context remains limited as the school culture seems strongly "addicted" to the particular basal reader approach prescribed by the compulsory national curriculum.

Ongoing projects

Finally, we would like to describe two ongoing literacy projects both aimed at contributing to the balance in early literacy education in Slovakia. Specifically, the common goals of the two projects are to:

- reduce the limits of the above-described traditional code-oriented approach
- dispense with prejudiced attitudes to teaching reading
- bring to schools a variety of reading texts, genres, materials, books, etc.
- support meaning-oriented activities at the beginning of reading instruction
- offer children positive experiences and pleasure from reading
- build from the previous knowledge of individual children
- and individualise teaching and learning.

The main assumptions underlying these projects are simple:

1. First we need to break the barriers limiting teachers in their work and preventing them from adopting and implementing meaningful and important activities. This goal may be achieved by the development of the **New Basal Reader** (Project # 1: the "Barrier-breaker").
2. Provided that there is time for implementing more meaningful activities, we should find the way to show teachers what they

could do and why. The second project, the **Early Literacy Assessment Project** (the “Eye-opener”) attempts to achieve these goals via authentic literacy assessment. Its main objectives are to develop the Slovak language version of the well-known M.M. Clay *Observation survey of early literacy achievements* (2002).

New Basal Reader Project

In general, the New Basal Reader (NBR) (Štefeková & Culková, 2001) represents the traditional method but is free from its main limits, because of the following features:

- It starts with capital letters only – many of which children have already learned.
- All the letters are available at the very beginning and remain present on every page of the reader along with the pictures representing the corresponding initial sound.
- The simple principle of initial sound identification and letter correspondence is explained and children are trained in a preparatory period.
- Children can use this key whenever and to the degree they need it (individually, independently, etc.)
- Text materials need not be limited to a few letters only (as they usually are in other readers, resulting in limited vocabulary, unnatural artificial sentences, etc.)
- Texts differ in difficulty – some are limited to the letters systematically practised, but some are not. Teachers (as well as children) can choose what is appropriate for a particular child. In addition, having the key available, they can use any other reading materials (books, journals, magazines or newspapers).
- Many games and problem solving tasks are included, and understanding is naturally required and supported.

In summary, the Basal Reader offers the opportunity for levelling

the text difficulty according to children’s abilities and needs, enabling the individualization of learning, widening a variety of reading materials, and bringing children a lot of pleasure and fun.

The NBR was used during the last school year (2001/2002) in 16 first-grade classrooms in 16 schools around Slovakia. More than three hundred pupils have been taught and tested several times during the year and compared with a similar group of children from the parallel classrooms working with traditional reading methods. Teachers have been meeting regularly with authors of the NBR (themselves experienced elementary school teachers) during the year to share their experiences and knowledge. Final testing of reading skills and reading comprehension has shown good results. The report (Mancová & al., 2002) has been submitted to the Ministry of Education for consideration. Provided that the Ministry approves the NBR and gives it the necessary certificate, including financial support, it could be implemented on a large scale in elementary schools, hopefully in the coming school year.

Early Literacy Assessment Project (ELAP)

ELAP is an international project supported by the EU-Comenius Socrates programme (Hobsbaum, 2001). The main coordinator of the project is Ms. Angela Hobsbaum at the Institute of Education, University of London. Other partners are the Royal Danish School of Education, Copenhagen, the University of Granada – Faculty of Psychology and Education – Spain, Muintearas – Ireland, and the Department of Social and Biological Communication SAS - Bratislava, Slovakia. The main objective of the project is to redevelop four (Slovak, Spanish, Irish and Danish) language adaptations of the Observation Survey (OS) of early literacy achievements by M.M. Clay (2002).

The most important features of the OS assessment are:

- The complexity of the assessment and observation within a

context of school setting. (It consists of 6 subtests: Writing Vocabulary, Reading Vocabulary - Word test, Letter Knowledge, Concept About Print, Dictation Task, Running Record of Reading)

- Orientation to progress – it follows the change and learning progress; aims at the individualization of teaching and learning.

Reading assessment in OS is based on:

- Using the texts of three different levels of difficulty¹. The main objectives of this leveling the text difficulty are to observe the child in three different situations and to estimate the degree to which s/he is able to integrate and use his/her knowledge within the task s/he has been practicing and is acquainted with; to see how and to what degree s/he can do this in situation when new and unknown tasks are included; as well as to see where are his/her limits. In other words, the assessment is aimed at identifying the range (ceiling and floor) of the child’s reading potential.

¹ The “easy text” – represents the level of difficulty the child has already been exposed to. It may be the text already known or the text including language tasks the child has been practicing and taught. The child is expected to cope with the easy text at the 95-100 % of accuracy level.

The medium or “instructional text” is to some degree above the level of what the child has been taught and trained. Usually, it is the unknown text or the text including some new language tasks exceeding the child’s knowledge and experience. The expected reading accuracy of the instructional text ranges between 90 and 95 %. According to M. Clay this level of difficulty represents an optimum material for reading from which the child profits and makes the progress in his/her learning.

The “hard text” is even more difficult, contains a lot of new tasks the child has not experienced yet. The expected accuracy level is below 89 %.

- The difficulty level of texts for testing reading is individually chosen according to the child's actual knowledge and ability.
- It results in a choice of the next step for teaching and learning, for example, the choice of reading materials of appropriate difficulty.
- Strategies used by children are the most important object of analysis and source of information about the child's competences, problems and needs (miscue and self-correction analyses point to the degree to which the child can pick up information from the meaning and context, language – syntactic structure of the sentence, or visual information).
- Its "cross-checking" strategies show the degree to which the child is able to integrate information from different sources, etc.

In summary, we believe that many of the above requirements of the OS assessment and observation of children's reading and literacy behaviour, including systematic recording, analyses and interpretations, can change teachers' attitudes to reading and literacy education.

Their experience with OS can give teachers different views of and deeper insights into the learning process as well as make their teaching more meaningful and naturally balanced, using and integrating different and individualized methods, approaches and reading materials.

Conclusion

"Looking for balance in early literacy education in Slovakia" in our view means, first of all, removing the barriers, limits and obstacles hindering teachers in their task of teaching children individually and appropriately, i.e. making room for widening their repertoire of teaching methods to be integrated and balanced. It also means showing or helping them to see, what they could – should – and have to do, or what is most important to do in early literacy education and why.

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