



INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION
QUALITY AND EVALUATION

Recommendations for improving reading literacy



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1. Introduction

“Reading is the art of interpreting printed and written words... Continuous and systematic reading improves readers’ intellect, affects emotions, and provides opportunities for further cognitive progress of readers” (Ismail, Ahmad & Ahmad, 2013). Only with an understanding of the role of reading in the development of each individual can we accept responsibility for fostering reading and reading comprehension skills. Written words are the world that surrounds us, so we can consider reading a fundamental skill that is much needed in all segments of life.

Encouraging and developing reading skills and competencies at a younger age (preschool and early school) is extremely important for the later achievement of almost all goals in adulthood. We can confidently say that the acquisition and development of reading skills during childhood and adolescence are crucial because it is the foundation of a child’s education. **Reading** is a process of thinking, evaluating, making judgments, imagining, reasoning, and solving new situations (Mihanović & Markotić, 2016).

“Reading plays a central role in the learning process at school. Reading and understanding orders and texts is a basic prerequisite for success in any school subject. However, the ability to read does not cease to be important even after the completion of formal schooling. It is important in all training areas, facilitates active participation in the wider context of lifelong learning, and contributes to social integration and personal development” (European Commission, 2001).

A wide range of reading skills is necessary for the education and personal development of each individual, his social development and active participation in society, and the understanding and use of all civil rights. They are also the skills necessary to enter the labor market and advance. In essence, acquiring the ability to read is a prerequisite for fulfilling the social and economic needs of the 21st century.

One of the eight key competencies for lifelong learning of the European Reference Framework (2018) is literacy competence. From learning to read (initial literacy) to learning through reading (reading to learn), children/students go from decoding text to understanding and applying information from the text. Most students master word decoding after the third grade of elementary school. However, without understanding what is read, reading is a meaningless activity. Along with the skill of reading and understanding what is read, the term functional literacy often appears, which implies the ability to use and understand language and other forms of expression in the appropriate context. There are several definitions of reading literacy or reading competence in the literature and practice. Since the Recommendations refer to pre-university education, we rely on the definitions of reading literacy developed within the framework of the PIRLS and PISA international surveys that examine students’ competencies up to 15 years of age. Data from national and international evaluative reading surveys show a high correlation between literacy levels and various indicators of social affirmation. According to the results of international and national studies and research, a strategic approach is necessary for developing reading literacy as a fundamental prerequisite for a better quality of education.

2. The concept of reading literacy

PISA is an international examination of educational achievements carried out in three-year cycles whose goal is to evaluate educational systems worldwide based on assessing the competencies of fifteen-year-old students.

Students' literacy is measured in three main domains: mathematics, natural sciences, and reading, and the emphasis is on functional knowledge.

In PISA, it is customary to use the term literacy or competence instead of the term knowledge to indicate that it is about the pieces of knowledge that are considered educational capital. That is necessary for the student to continue his education and successfully manage personal and professional roles in which they will find themselves in adulthood. Being competent in the context of PISA achievement does not mean only that someone has acquired the appropriate knowledge but also that he knows when and how to apply it (OECD, 2007; 2009; Baucal & Pavlović-Babić, 2010a; 2010b).

The concept of Reading Literacy on which the PISA project is based relies on cognitivist understandings that emphasize the interactive nature of the reading process and the constructivist, creative nature of the understanding process. The essential characteristics of reading literacy in the PISA study are the text, aspects, and situations. Competencies required for solving tasks are presented as aspects of the text, and they are one of the critical characteristics around which the concept of reading literacy is organized (see Baucal & Pavlović-Babić, 2009). These are, in fact, mental strategies, approaches, or intentions that the reader uses in the encounter with the text in order to successfully solve the tasks he encounters. Three basic categories can be distinguished: accessing and finding information within the text, connecting and interpreting information within the text, and reflection and evaluation, while in the fourth category, all these three processes are combined, which is why it is called a complex category (Baucal & Pavlović-Babić, 2010b; Pavlović-Babić & Baucal, 2009). The determination of reading literacy in the PISA study emphasizes the importance of reading in active and critical participation in society, thus promoting the student's ability to critically consider the information read and use it for different purposes. The PISA project developed the following definition of reading literacy: understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts to achieve personal goals, develop knowledge and potential and participate in community life (Kirsh et al., 2002; OECD, 2010).

Serbia participated in the PISA study's 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2018, and 2022 cycles. The last published results from 2018 indicate that 38% of students do not reach average reading literacy, 40% mathematical, and 38% scientific literacy. According to the results published by the OECD, students in Serbia achieved 439 points in reading literacy, 448 in mathematics, and 440 in science, while the average is 500. In all cycles in which Serbia participated, the achievements of our students were statistically significantly below the average. The data on the percentage of students whose achievements are below the basic level of competence in reading literacy is particularly worrying. Every third student does not reach the basic literacy level (38% on the reading literacy scale, 40% in mathematics, and 38% in science). It is believed that these students will have difficulty responding to the challenges they will face in continuing their education, employment, professional advancement, and finding their way in the modern world.

PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) is an international examination of children's reading literacy development in the fourth grade of primary school (children aged 10). It was implemented for the first time in 2001, and more than 60 educational systems participated every five years; in Serbia, it was imple-

mented for the first time in 2021. The fourth year of schooling was chosen as the focus of PIRLS research because it is a significant turning point in the development of children's reading competencies. Fourth graders have already learned to read and continue to read to acquire new knowledge and skills. "Reading literacy in PIRLS refers to the ability to understand and use the written language forms that a society requires or that individuals support and respect." IEA, 1991 PIRLS tasks examine four comprehension processes:

1. Recognition and use of explicitly stated information from the text.
2. Making clear conclusions.
3. Interpreting and integrating ideas and information given in the text.
4. Evaluating and criticizing content and textual elements.

3. Analysis of the situation

Curriculum reforms in the Republic of Serbia began after 2000. Curricula become programs of teaching and learning. They rely on the learning process rather than the learning content. The teaching content serves the development of competencies. Competences represent a set of related knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal characteristics that enable a person to undertake an appropriate activity in a given context, in a given situation, and to perform it correctly, successfully, and efficiently. One of the key competencies for lifelong learning is communication in the mother tongue. The measuring tools for evaluating competencies are outcomes and standards. The establishment of the Institute for Education Quality and evaluation in 2004 marked the beginning of standardization in education and evaluating the quality of education. Learning outcomes or learning outcomes are clear descriptions of what the student should know, understand and be able to do upon completion of learning, i.e., at the end of each grade of all three cycles of education. So, the outcomes are the expected results of learning, the foundations of competence development. The standards define the expected achievements of students based on subject and cross-subject competencies at the end of each educational cycle. Through standards, educational goals and objectives are translated into much more specific language that describes student achievements, acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities. The first general achievement standards for the end of primary education in the Republic of Serbia have been used since 2009. The focus is on fundamental knowledge divided into five areas: Speaking culture, Reading skills and comprehension, Written expression, Grammar and lexicology, and Literature. In the general achievement standards for the end of secondary school (2013), there is a competence approach through the two areas of Language and Literature. In 2022, new achievement standards for the end of primary and secondary school were developed based on a new conceptual framework: competency approach to standards, development of standards, the vertical connection of standards, horizontal connection of standards, and reform potential of standards.

The final exam at the end of primary education is the only instrument currently used to measure the educational achievements of the student population in the Republic of Serbia. The final exam at the end of primary education has a certification function (students receive a certificate of completion of primary school), a selection function (the result of the final exam affects the further education of the student), and an evaluation function (the degree of achievement of educational standards at the end of primary school is checked at the final exam) education and upbringing). The final exam is taken by all students who complete the eighth grade of primary education and upbringing and adults who acquire primary education following the law regulating adult

education. The Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation has published the Report on the Final Examination Results every year starting from 2011. One of the three knowledge tests on the final exam is a test in Serbian, i.e., the mother tongue. Kindergarten test for the 2021/2022 school year. The year contains 20 tasks grouped into four areas. Most of the tasks (9) are from the field of Grammar, lexicon, vernacular and literary language, followed by Literature (6), three tasks are from Written Expression, and two are from the field of Reading Skills and Reading Comprehension. According to the level of achievement, most tasks are from the basic level (nine), seven tasks belong to the intermediate level, and four to the advanced level. Students were expected to choose one or more of the offered answers in 17 tasks, while in three tasks, students gave a short answer. The average achievement of students on the Serbian language test is 12.59, while the percentage of students who solved half or more (from 10 to 20) tasks in the Serbian language is 73.6%. According to educational standards, the basic level of achievement is reached by about 80% of students, intermediate by about 50%, and advanced by about 20%.

PISA research focuses on core school areas - reading, mathematics, and science. It determines whether students can reproduce knowledge and how well they can apply that knowledge in unfamiliar situations both in and out of school. The Serbian score is below the OECD average in all three domains. The achievements of our students in 2018 were lower than the average of OECD countries by 48 points in the domain of reading, 41 points in the domain of mathematics, and 49 points in the domain of natural sciences. Let us consider the fact that empirically, one year of schooling in OECD countries was obtained at an increase of 30 points. The achievement of Serbian students corresponds to the achievement of students from OECD countries who are almost a year and a half younger. (PISA 2018 Report for the Republic of Serbia)

In 2020, a trial PIRLS test was carried out; the preliminary test was held in 2021, while the national Report will be published in 2024. The PIRL tests examine two overarching purposes of reading in and out of school: experiencing a work of literature (in literary texts), gathering information, and applying information (in informational texts). Each of the 6 test booklets has two short texts, one literary and one informative (scientific-popular text). Serbian language teaching and learning programs contain numerous literary texts, while informative texts are few. In addition, the informative texts in the PIRL test booklets are linear and non-linear. The above texts contain representations such as diagrams, graphs, illustrations, photographs, and tables. The range of materials includes scientific, ethnographic, biographical, and practical information and ideas. Students in the 4th grade of elementary school have only two informative texts in the program, so the questions related to the informative texts caused difficulties. Furthermore, students had difficulties finding specific information in particular texts, then often making immediate conclusions was challenging in other types of texts; interpreting and connecting information and concepts for some students was a factor that influenced them to give up trying to give answers to the questions.

4. Objectives and measures

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1.

Establishing an effective social framework to support reading.

Measure 1.1.

Creation of a national strategy and action plan for improving reading literacy.

Measure 1.2.

Cross-sector connection and cooperation.

Measure 1.3.

Organizing thematic conferences and expert meetings.

Measure 1.4.

Media campaign and promotion of reading literacy.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2.

Developing reading literacy and encouraging children and students to read actively.

Measure 2.1.

Creation and implementation of training for educators in preschool institutions to encourage reading in children of early and preschool age.

Measure 2.2.

Creation and implementation of training for classroom teachers to improve students' reading literacy.

Measure 2.3.

Creation and implementation of Serbian language teacher training for the second cycle of primary education and upbringing (from the 5th to the 8th grade of primary school) to improve students' reading literacy.

Measure 2.4.

Creation and implementation of Serbian language teacher training in secondary schools to improve students' reading literacy.

Measure 2.5.

Creation and implementation of teacher training in supplementary schools abroad to improve reading literacy.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3.

Encouraging and ensuring inquiry and interdisciplinary research that will result in the collection of knowledge necessary for encouraging reading.

Measure 3.1.

Testing of reading competence at the level of text structure and vocabulary structure.

Measure 3.2.

Examining reading habits in practice.

Measure 3.3.

Examining reading for pleasure in teaching practice.