Languages in Education
Languages for Education

READING

This text has been produced for the *Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education* by

Laila Aase, Mike Fleming, Sigmund Ongstad, Irene Pieper and Florentina Samihaian

READING

This section of the platform provides an overview of reading as a key dimension of language as subject. It considers issues related to what 'reading' means, particularly in the school context and addresses some of key tensions that have to be faced when constructing and teaching the curriculum. The section ends with a series of 'questions for consideration' in order to help readers reflect critically on their own policy and practice.

List of contents

1. Introduction

Reading has long been considered a key area within language as subject. It has gained more prominence since the PISA-studies of the OECD. Curricula usually focus on reading as a specific area of learning or domain of competences, often next to writing, speaking and listening, reflection upon language. Since the 1970s there has been an increasing awareness of the broad contexts of reading within life (in school and beyond) and it has become an aim of formal schooling to cover a wide range of texts. Thus, the domain of reading covers an introduction to the use and understanding of various forms of texts, including expository and literary texts, the media and a wide range of genres. It has, therefore, been acknowledged that the range of texts goes beyond subject boundaries. It has also been recognised that the act of reading always takes place in contexts: what are the aims of readers? what are the experiences connected with reading? how can the development of motivation to read be supported and how can we describe the process of "learning to read" within the process of socialisation in a culture?

Reading can be described as a cognitive constructive process; it is not enough to describe making meaning when reading a text simply as text reception but it is the result of a complex text-reader-interaction. Good readers benefit from meta-cognition that allows them to monitor their understanding. Also, experience with the 'written world' is crucial, not least for the development of favourable attitudes and dispositions.

Research on socialisation in reading and on the acquisition of reading competences has pointed out that there are various agencies that influence the process of becoming a reader. The family is considered a very important environment for decisive encounters with text from a very early age. Nevertheless, formal reading instruction largely takes place in school and it is within language as subject that the aim of sound abilities in the area of reading comprehension is most explicitly addressed. As with writing, language as subject thus has a key function in helping students acquire competences they need across the curriculum (language in other subjects) which of course will also be addressed within subjects themselves.

2. Connections between reading and writing

Although writing is often seen as a specific competence or set of competences within the area of literacy, it is closely connected to reading. Through reading texts similar to the ones they are expected to master in writing, learners can actually learn more than the description of the task requirement can tell them. A text is richer in its specific semiotical character than a set of rules can ever be. This is due to the fact that a number of special traits of texts like style, tempo variation and nuances in vocabulary are difficult to explain and thus to teach. Model texts may convey this implicitly which may have an impact on the reader. Even more efficient for learning however is a methodology using text models for pointing out explicitly traits or details of importance in the specific text. The model texts thus serve as examples, and pointing out details gives an impression of the range of possibilities in writing within a genre. Methodologies based on interaction between receptive and productive language acts are commonly used in language as subject classrooms

3. Learning to read

Text and media are all around us in our societies and thus children make contact with signs and symbols long before school. Research in early reading and writing acquisition stresses specific

insights into communication via written text that pupils may bring along and that help them when getting introduced to formal reading instruction:

● firstly, pupils are aware of letters being symbols that somehow represent spoken language and thus have a notion of a distinction between the spoken and the written

● secondly, pupils discover the communicative function of written language (e.g. via "writing" letters)

● thirdly, pupils already know specific letters, can read and write their name and possibly more.

Whether pupils already bring in these insights very much depends on family background and experiences in kindergarten and pre-school. Where children are read to regularly, it is more likely that conceptions of the written language can be built upon and that pupils already have some genre knowledge, e.g. an implicit knowledge of genres, the notion of rhythm in poetry. The competence to structure words one hears into syllables and phonemes – phonological awareness – is a very important prerequisite for reading acquisition. To offer support to children in these areas seems helpful for ensuring a good start in school.

Various models have been created to describe the development of learning to read. What is usually stressed within early reading acquisition is the necessity to decode words, either via an alphabetic strategy that reads letter by letter or by decoding whole words via sight, a process that is even more complex for children whose first language is not the language of schooling. Accordingly, various methods exist for the first phase of learning to read that have to take into account the specifics of a language (correspondence of graphemes and phonemes), e.g. analytical methods that start with letters/phones; synthetical methods that start with sentences or whole words; analytical-synthetical methods. However, discussions about which method offers best results can be confusing. Empirical studies do not show clear advantages of one method over others. Factors that are less easily fixed (but not dependent on the specifics of the relation between spoken and written language in a language) are important: The personality of the teacher, the students' ways of thinking and learning and the way the methods are applied are crucial. Taking a broader perspective on the learner and his or her aims, a balance between an approach that trains skills and an approach that offers encounters with meaningful texts offers good learning opportunities for most children. Within this line of argument an integrative approach of learning to read and learning to write is often recommended.

Early reading acquisition should normally take place within the first two or three years of schooling – if not in pre-school, the aim being the ability to decode automatically and to read fluently. However, within the last decade the awareness that learning to read is a process that reaches well into secondary education (or even longer) has grown. Thus, many international curricula and other programs deal with reading acquisition well beyond the early stages of school in their attempt to ensure reading literacy.

4. Learning to read in plurilingual contexts

It has long been pointed out that students should all be entitled to sound reading and writing competences. However, for students whose family language is not the language of schooling, questions of how to support their acquisition process are not easily answered. In one way this is not surprising since the methodological considerations do not offer a clear picture even for monolingual children. Still, children who grow up with more than one language may learn the written language of the standard language in a different way. International studies on outcomes like PISA have pointed out that especially children with a lower socioeconomic background

often do not benefit enough from institutional education. One consensus is that the first area of support for these learner groups concerns the pre-school-period: they would benefit from contexts that allow for insights into the sign-system and the communicative function of the written language.

A much debated question concerns encouragement of not only bi- or plurilingualism but pluriliteralism as well. From a languages of education perspective the acknowledgement of pupils' repertoire is an important value – as well as its development and enrichment via schooling. Models that develop more than one language in reading and writing could answer to that demand. Research points out that such an approach also supports the cognitive development of the students and their language awareness. A fruitful approach would coordinate the acquisition processes in both – or more – languages which points to the demand of cooperation in school and teacher training. Moreover, teachers of the standard language benefit from sound insights into the various language families present in their schools. This will help them in diagnosing the so called "faults" children make and see their steps more clearly. However, in some countries more than 20 different first languages will sometimes be present in one classroom which hints at the organisational difficulties involved.

Of course, not only the question of "which language(s) is / are aimed at" needs to be considered. Again, the way teaching is arranged and methods are applied is crucial. Thus, programs that aim at a respectful acceptance and awareness of multicultural and plurilingual learning contexts that manage to cross boarders also of milieus and overcome deficit approaches have been developed.

5. Reading development

A reading-curriculum has to care for the development of content knowledge (genres but also content related to language in a broader sense), the acquisition of procedures and strategies and the development of dispositions and attitudes over the years. The bridge between pre-school and primary and between primary and secondary education needs special attention. Cooperation of the various institutions should allow for smoothing the transition processes by explicitly addressing competences and their acquisition in a cumulative way. However, modelling progression within language as subject is a complex matter: to arrange a reading curriculum in a cumulative manner depends on careful diagnosis and task management. In general the thematic scope as well as the complexity of the texts which are read will differ and broaden. However, text complexity again depends on context and includes factors related to:
- interest and motivation of the reader
- prior knowledge of the reader
- complexity of the theme covered
- complexity of text presentation, of tasks and the aims followed.

One way of qualifying the complexity of tasks is to distinguish between:
- reproduce
- link knowledge items and connect
- reflect and evaluate.

Again, the complexity of the procedures will depend on text and context factors.

Examples of fascinating interactions on complex literary texts even in primary education illustrate how manifold the criterion "text complexity" is. This strongly affects the possibility of assessing outcome through summative assessment.

6. Reading literacy and reading strategies

Especially since PISA the notion of reading literacy has been prominent in Europe and beyond: *"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."* [OECD/PISA]

Accordingly, reading literacy has been named a key-competence within knowledge-based societies. The acquisition of knowledge is very often based on the use of text in a broad sense – including multi-modal texts that operate with different sign systems (combination of text and diagrams, of text and pictures…). A competent reader is – according to the PISA-definition – able to make use of text with regard to goals she or he sets herself/himself including the development of knowledge. She or he can make use of texts so as to be able to participate in society and culture. The contexts of reading are formulated in an abstract manner. Their specific form will depend on individual tasks. A narrow approach which isolates reading strategies from the "what" and "what for" does not cover the whole field of reading literacy. It is especially within language as subject that a broad spectrum of reading activities is aimed at.

The training of reading strategies has become a prominent field within the teaching of reading, partly in response to unsatisfactory achievements especially with disadvantaged learner groups. The term "strategy" is used in various ways for different methodological approaches to texts such as activating prior knowledge, keeping attention to headlines, skim- and scan-reading, marking key-terms while reading, summarising essentials. However, schematic strategies do not automatically lead to sufficient understandings of texts: a central task within the teaching of reading strategies is to enable students to use them in accordance with specific texts and reading goals which have to be set. One of the hardest issues is to work out which tool to use for which purpose. Thus, metacognition, which offers access to experience previously made and to actual behaviour, plays a key-role and some programs even address metacognitive strategies: how to deal with difficult parts, how to secure understanding.

Within the current context it might be worthwhile pointing out that applying strategies is not an aim in itself. It should serve the purpose of the construction of meaning, of making use of texts for other purposes and of allowing for learning via reading. Thus, the balance that was argued for in the first paragraph – offer training and opportunities for meaningful encounters with text with respect to goals and aims – is reinforced.

The notion of reading literacy again points to the key function of language as subject: specific language teaching with regard to language activities across the curriculum. The methodological approach to reading should help learners to deal with different texts in various contexts. Still, there are limits to the contribution of language as subject in this field which concern the domain specifics of learning. Language as subject cannot provide the content nor the critical prior subject specific knowledge which influences the reading process a great deal.

7. Reading for different purposes

Learning to read is often linked to encouraging a range of reading activities beyond school contexts. It is generally accepted that within the subject attempts should be made to encourage students' reading beyond school and for pleasure. Thus, in primary and secondary education pupils should be encouraged to read a wide range of texts both for pleasure and study. They

should gain independence in their choice of books as well as in their reading. Support for reading for personal enrichment also reflects the conviction that reading motivation is an important factor for entering into the process of constructing meaning from text and for the development of reading competences. This also means that a wide range of texts should be offered with regard to both theme and formal features. Thus, it could well be argued that aiming at both pleasure and studying is more adequate as a learner-sensitive approach. It is via emotional and affective responses to a large extent that we develop attitudes and dispositions towards reading and other areas of competences. These dispositions and attitudes will often be crucial for pupils' performances. Depending on their purposes students will read in different ways. Reading modes include an instrumental and selective way of dealing with texts for information as well as an intimate way of becoming immersed in a fictional world.

8. Variety of texts and genres – choice of text

Introducing students to various genres is a common aim of reading education and should enable them to tackle texts in manifold contexts and for manifold purposes more and more independently. Such a variety also reflects the plurality of ways students make use of various media. A distinction between literary and expository texts does not yet cover this plurality. Looking closely at texts in the new media can offer insight into different communicative functions, the informative function being one among others. Contexts of use will have to be considered in order to work out the genre and an adequate mode of reading it.

Making students aware of genre-specifics is an important aspect of reading education from primary onwards. However, a central task is to avoid schematic use of genre-knowledge that does not take into account implications for the communicative, expressive or poetic function and thus does not help the understanding or interpretation of texts.

Offering a variety of genres can serve as one criterion for the choice of text. This criterion also concerns reading competences as a demand across the curriculum: Within a languages of education approach it is necessary to communicate textual demands and genre features from "outside" language as subject and at the same time address other subjects to share in the effort of introducing students to the different and more or less domain specific textual genres explicitly. Other criteria concern learners' fields of interest (possibly gender-specific) and thematic aspects. Then text choice should consider modality and should cover multi-modal texts, too.

"Reading" in this field is a metaphorical denominator of what students do when dealing with films and other media within school: understanding is an important aim and tools for analysis will differ considerably from reading strategies in other contexts. In a similar way as it is the case with reading literature the process also includes aesthetic perceptions and their development to a large extent. In multi-modal texts that combine pictures and writing the interplay of the different semiotic systems contributes to the making of meaning. A traditionally important criterion concerns literary education within the domain of reading and the question of the canon. Fixed canons are often not felt as being appropriate within a multicultural and pluralistic society. However, to introduce students to culture(s) via literary reading of classic and non-classic texts is a valuable contribution to their development and *Bildung*. Another important criterion, often difficult to describe, concerns the diagnosis of the reading demands a text might pose and the notion of progression.

9. Literature

Literature stands as a core of language as a subject, but it is a dynamic field that does not exclude conceptual and methodological tensions. These include: the different visions determining educational policies which may define the role of teaching and learning literature in various ways; the different ways in which teachers themselves understand and approach literature; the proportion between linguistic and literary content elements in the language as subject curriculum; or even the option to split the language as subject curriculum into two different subjects (one for language and another for literature). All these are part of older or recent debates in this domain.

Literature is mainly associated with reading, but reading encompasses more than literature ('literary texts' or fiction) and aims at developing the competence of reading to address a much wider scope. This may include multimodal texts, media or cultural products such as theatre, films or plastic works. However broad we conceive it, literature is meant to bring in opportunities for cultural encounters, for understanding different experiences or different ways of communicating them, for evaluating ideas, for reaching a more profound understanding of the world and of oneself. Studying literature helps learners to develop the strategies for understanding texts and for interpreting them, keeping different perspectives in view. Literature is also associated with speaking about the particular text students are reading or with listening to their classmates' opinions about that same text. The comprehension and interpretation of a literary text is also connected to writing about the text or to developing creative writing activities. We can say that discussing a text is an opportunity for developing skills of oral and written communication competences. Pieces of literature are also a basis for reflection on language: it is sometimes argued that literature encapsulates language in its most subtle and intricate forms where nuances of meaning and ambiguity have to be embraced. But teaching and reading literature is more than developing competences. Reading literature can be a challenge, a source of pleasure and a stimulus to personal development.

Aims for teaching and learning literature in school

The goals for teaching and learning literature in school have a dual purpose: institutional learning should develop reading literacy so that students are capable of reading literary texts among others; it should besides offer opportunities of participating in cultural life and of experiencing literature as personally relevant.

For reaching the first goal, language as subject aims to develop different categories of skills:
- oral skills (participating in discussion, presenting/ interpreting literary texts);
- reading skills (understanding content of written texts, interpreting and reflecting upon literature of all genres, understanding and analysing a broad spectrum of textual forms, communicating reading experiences, learning from written texts);
- writing skills (composing texts for presenting thoughts and meaning, developing a spectrum of writing strategies for different genres and situations).

For the second goal, the aims are: consideration of 'the other'; critical thinking and sound judgement; flexibility in thinking and argumentation; courage to express personal opinions; expressing understanding and experiences; exploring one's own thinking and values.

An integrated aim, including both cognitive and attitudinal dimensions is reflection on language or culture, which may be especially significant in the secondary education.

All these aims contribute to *Bildung*: learning with literature should allow for personal development within a cultural context. The students should be introduced to the cultural life of society and they should be offered opportunities to participate. To offer opportunities to participate then, should include experiences of cultural life in present time and in all parts of society. In this perspective, studying literature means: being able to read and understand a diversity of texts and to benefit from literature for personal development, enjoying reading and participation in the cultural life. To conclude, a key goal of teaching literature is to develop lifelong readers, and participate in cultural life.

A recent document issued by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (LINK: Promoting the teaching of European literature, 2008) hints at *Bildung* in a transcultural perspective of European citizenship, stressing the chance to 'inculcate European citizenship' through offering students at all levels a 'transversal approach to Europe's heritage, highlighting the common link of respect for cultural diversity' and moving beyond an approach to the teaching of literature that is mainly oriented towards the national heritage. The recommendation in this document is 'to present the teaching of European literature as an integral part of education in European citizenship, having regard to cultural diversity, in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights, and to the linguistic pluralism of our continent'.

Curriculum approaches

The curriculum approaches concerning the study of literature in school derive from two main approaches: learning *about* literature, in which the cultural heritage and the discourse about literature are dominant, and learning *with* literature, with a strong orientation towards the process of reading and towards the reader, who has an important role in the construction of meaning. There are at least four different approaches that can be tackled in the process of teaching and learning literature:
- the cultural approach, aiming at the student's cultural development on the basis of the cultural heritage(s) (understood as valid perspectives on the knowledge of life and humanity);
- the linguistic approach, which emphasizes the autonomy of the literary text and is oriented towards the stylistic analysis and the structure of the text;
- the social approach, aiming at developing the students' social awareness through literature, understood as part of reality;
- the personal development approach, which is reader oriented, and informed by the reception theory, stimulating reflection and autonomy of thinking about the text.

The four approaches as theoretic models are not to be seen as exclusive. The dominant perspective or the main focus is important in a curriculum, because it guides the methodological approach of texts in the classroom. The dominant perspective is also important for the texts' selection. Representative texts from literary history is specific to the cultural model; texts relevant for certain genres fit the aesthetic approach; and the thematic selection of texts is appropriate for the social model and for the personal development model.

A tendency to reshape the traditional domain of literature is obvious in recent curriculum developments that promote text diversity – also with regard to cultural diversity – and are mostly reader oriented, focusing on the process of reading during which students can develop

reading skills and interiorize positive attitudes towards reading and interest for the cultural life. A progression from learning with literature to learning about literature is found in many curricula. Learning about literature is an approach found more often in the secondary level of education, where the cultural competence or the ability to contextualize the literary works and artistic movements becomes important. A different focus through the years of school in the field of reading may take the following route: a focus on texts that can be related to students' experience in the primary, a focus on text variety (such as genres, types of discourse) in lower secondary, and a focus on cultural representations in upper secondary.

Deciding on the dominant approach to literature has underlying theoretical and political implications and has implications for the way the literary canon is viewed (see the study on *The Literary Canon: implications for the teaching of language as subject*).

10. Reading as text-reception

As with other aspects of language as subject, the knowledge, skills attitudes and abilities for reading competence need to be viewed in an integrated way. They are presented here separately in order to show the different dimensions.

subject: language as subject	knowledge	Skills (specific methods and strategies)	attitudes and values	learning to learn (methods and strategies; self assessment)
reading (texts and media)	content related to text (various genres; pragmatic and non-pragmatic; various cultural backgrounds; texts from various domains of knowledge; multi-modal texts) - including a broader knowledge of language (grammar and vocabulary)	reading strategies and methods for text reception in a variety of contexts and for a variety of aims	an inclination to reading creatively and with enjoyment; an inquiring, active and critical approach to reading	transferable procedures based on using communication in learning metacognition

11. Questions for consideration

Is sufficient attention given to reading for pleasure with the language as subject curriculum?

Are primary teachers trained to understand strategies to develop advanced reading skills and are secondary teachers trained to support the development of basic reading?

Does the language as subject curriculum embody a sufficiently broad concept of reading, including a range of genres and texts, and the development of reading strategies? Is literature part of a coherent/

balanced language as subject curriculum? Are literature and language/ communication integrated in the curriculum?

Are the aims for teaching and learning literature clearly stated in the curriculum, embracing values as well as knowledge and skills?

Is literature approached in an open flexible manner in the curriculum, so that to leave choices to teachers in choosing texts and methodology?

Are teachers and students supported to deal both with literature as a source for insights into the development of a national heritage as well as for providing into the plurality of cultures, their differences, similarities and interconnectedness?

Is there any progression in the curriculum regarding the literary competence of students?

Does the curriculum enhance metacognition in students as well as reflexion with respect to personal attitude development?