

## LANGUAGE COMPETENCES AND LABOUR DEMANDS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON READING COMPREHENSION IN SLOVAK AND SPANISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

*One of the strategic objectives of the European Union is to achieve the best possible quality in the teaching-learning processes, and the ability to read is one of the most important competency for the current information society. The definition of reading competence has been subject to constant modifications to reflect changes in societies, economies, cultures and education levels. It is a complex and functional skill, covering processes related to the decoding and comprehension of the text. With this work we intend to comparative approach to the reading competence of first year students from Alexander Dubcek University of Trenčín and from University of Valencia, and to detect and identify their main problems with academic texts commonly used in their studies. We will start with a questionnaire with a series of basic questions, a work from a text and in-depth interviews with selected students, in order to obtain conclusions regarding their reading ability.*

### Key words

*reading comprehension; language skills; classroom research; university students; literacy.*

**JEL Classification:** M53, Z13, I25

### Introduction

The notion of academic competence refers to a set of skills, knowledge, cognitive and non-cognitive dispositions that allows the students of higher education to carry out the necessary activities to graduate and succeed in their careers. The attitude of reading, along with professional academic skills, technical and others, is among essential skills in an academic environment. The definition of reading competence is subject to constant modifications to reflect the changes in societies, economies, culture and education. Therefore, the reading competence is not a simple skill that covers the processes of reading, decoding and comprehension.

Reading and writing means to develop a broader set of skills, which activate the functional use of an acquired ability (for example, language) in everyday life. So, “the reading competence refers not only to the domain of the ability of reading, but also to the ability to work with texts, communicate in writing, acquire and process the information contained in texts” (Svrcková, 2011:13).

According to Holloway (1999), reading skills are essential to the academic achievement of students in high school and in higher education.

Olson (1997) states that, today, reading competence, introduces a bias, since it gives benefits to those who acquire necessary skills. Since, written language is used as a vehicle for the rest of knowledge, literacy provides access to culture and has

an impact on the thought processes (Kern and Friedman, 2008; Olson, 1994; Pretorius, 2000); the achievement in reading competence is not only a basis for the achievement in other areas within the educational system, but also a requisite for a successful participation in most areas of adult life (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). Barthes (2006) claims that modern science and literacy semiotics offer to readers, against the established forms of captioning texts, more freedom in the interpretation of the text. Procházcová (2006) points out that the results of the researches indicate difficulties in study and employability in the job market. Achieving an optimal level of literacy is also a requirement for the development of skills related to academic, professional and personal development of everyone.

Among the different previous studies on reading competence in university students, we follow Gonzalez Moreyra (1998), Echevearría and Gastón (2002), Brito and Angeli (2005), and Arrieta and Meza (2005), who agree on most of their conclusions and also with those that we will get in this first approach to our project.

We believe that the reading competence is a wide set of reading skills and skills necessary to work with texts in an effective manner. This does not concern a mere reading of the speed of the words, phrases or full texts. Reading competence implies being able to understand the content correctly, find the explicit and implicit meanings, analyse the content and the information obtained; and being able to correctly interpret the content and pass it on.

First, however, is the ability to take students' own decisions about the texts, apply their contents to innovate and create new knowledge because of the information received. The ability to read is one of the key skills that are required in an academic setting, because much of the knowledge is acquired through books, monographs and written documents; and we believe that it is a basic competence in the process of transforming information into knowledge. As De Brito Cunha and Angeli Dos Santos:

At University, it is important to have adequate reading skills to access to scientific production, retrieve the information accumulated historically and use it for an efficient practice. At University is, almost always, the last formal opportunity of teaching, which can guarantee the student the recovery and development of the habit of reading and comprehension of texts, essential to the level of schooling that we propose to form (2005:4).

## Goal and Methodology

The main reasons for the investigation were our own experience with students (difficult to decipher the meaning in academic discourse, low qualifications of students in exams and low qualifications of Valencian and Slovak students in the PISA evaluation (Program for International Students Assessment). There has been, however, a lot of research on the validity of such studies. Thus, found that many factors, such as translation, familiarity with the content of the items, the differences between curricula, the motivation of the student, the anxiety, the structure of languages, cultural differences, etc., can have an impact on the validity of these studies (Kreiner and Christensen, 2014) there are six types of problems, identified by Arffman (2010) that endanger the equivalence of the PISA reading texts.

To analyse the reading competence, we proposed two tasks:

- a) A series of questions (in a Likert type scale) about the habits of students when reading academic texts and their own perception with respect to reading.
- b) An identical text in the L1 of the student (Slovak, Catalan or Spanish) entitled Gender and perception of equality in relation to education, with an intermediate level of difficulty. Students had to compose an abstract of 150 words and a 8 slide PowerPoint presentation or similar.

The research sample consisted of 50 students from the University of Valencia and 49 from the University Alexander Dubcek in Trencin, in both

cases registered in the first courses. We sought then, contrasting the self-perception of students (with the initial questions) and the objective results from later textual analysis (Echevarría and Gastón, 2002:65). In a next phase of the study interviews will be carried out in depth with students, and it will also be deepened during the comparison between the results obtained in Spain and Slovakia.

## Findings

### 1.1 University of Valencia

The results are not surprising, since reading comprehension problems are often found in an academic environment. In what refers to the speed in reading the texts, even though most of the answers are mid-point, it is important the number of students (23%) that consider they read so slowly or very slowly. In a next phase of the research, we will contrast this data with an exercise about objective reading speed.

Forcefully call attention the number of students receiving academic texts as little or nothing difficult (32%), and also the fact that none of them has claimed to find difficulty in the texts proposed from the different subjects. This contrasts strongly with the objective results that have been obtained through other systems for the collection and analysis of data. It is important to note that nearly half of students (46%) says not to use dictionaries or use them rarely. On the other hand, only 1% recognizes to use these tools to answer their doubts about lexical aspects.

When we ask them to say approximately how many words per page do not understand in academic texts, 80% declares to understand the meaning of all the words of the texts, or at most unaware one or two. We understand that it is an excessively high percentage, that could be denied by different studies and we will try to confront with the results obtained by other analysis tools.

In what refers to strategies of understanding, at this point it should be noted that one third of the respondents stated resolve their doubts by asking their peers. Also, interestingly, the high percentage (64%) claiming to use always or sometimes the dictionary, would be contradictory with the results of other questions.

Altogether, half of the students considers that the texts used by choice (fruit of their searches in libraries or on the internet) have little or no difficulty, compares with 6% who considers them quite complicated or very complicated. Again, we observe an inconsistency with what the results of other investigations show, and we will try to deal with through successive phases of our investigation.

The production of a summary on medium difficult text and the preparation of a presentation with *PowerPoint* was a problem for the 49% of students, and highlighted difficulties in:

- Summarizing the contents of a text.
- Extracting the relevant ideas for developing an effective presentation.
- Bringing prior knowledge on the subject obtained through other channels and connect them to the new information; making use of intertextual relations.

### 1.2 Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin

Following previous researches of Delgadová, Gullerová & Oltra (2016), the findings in the questionnaire containing self-assessment items confirm the hypotheses formulated prior conducting the research on reading literacy. Reading comprehension problems are frequently encountered with in an academic setting. It was found that 38% find their reading rate moderate, i.e. their reading rate is neither quick/easy nor slow/laborious. The results also showed that 58% of the students have some difficulties to understand the content of texts on their reading lists. Serious reading difficulties have 4% of the students.

Unfamiliar words represent a major challenge when reading academic texts. The research findings indicate that 39% do not understand approximately 3 words in one print page of their reading lists. In that respect, 46% of the students sometimes check the meaning of unfamiliar words in a dictionary and 40% always use dictionaries to deal with unfamiliar words. Concerning the use of dictionaries, 35% almost never, while additional 35% almost always use dictionaries while reading.

Regarding the *PowerPoint* presentation, 59% of the students faced problems in writing a *PowerPoint* presentation. The data found indicate that students lack a competency of reproducing main ideas as well as structure of the original piece of writing in an accurate manner.

## Conclusion

## Literature

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The main purpose of the work was to observe the reading competence in students of the first year of University of Valencia and the Alexander Dubcek University in Trencin, based on the aptitude for the reading as one of the necessary basic skills, not only in the academic field, but also in professional life.

In what refers to the initial questionnaire, it should be pointed out the perception of students' own reading aptitude as superior to the results obtained when faced objectively to academic texts.

It seems disturbing that almost half of the students (in other studies between 40% and 80%) presents any deficiency when faced with the usual written texts in their studies. Conversely, students presenting an appropriate level would be around 20% on average.

More activities of real practice of the language are necessary in our university students, allowing them to develop skills related to reading comprehension and appropriate to the level of demand for university studies. This contradicts, however, the idea that university students have already acquired skills related to the written language during high school. The solution to the problem involves not only teachers of languages, but the whole of the teaching staff.

Therefore, we can see that the difficulties related to literacy in PISA texts continue persisting in higher education. We deal with important skills in today's information society, since they are considered as effective tools to acquire, organize and apply the information in various domains.

However, technology and applications do not seem to favour the development of reading competence. Capabilities related to written texts are of strategic importance to survive in the information society, therefore, the ability to identify, acquire and process information, as well as to apply, improve, innovate and create new knowledge is so important. This is, however, only possible when you have an aptitude for higher level reading.

Finally, institutions of higher education should integrate different skills in word processing and strategies, as well as, the linguistic disciplines in their programmes in order to build the domain of the aptitudes for reading in their students. It is the only way to prepare students for the challenges of the future, becoming productive citizens and thriving in the global job market.

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