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A METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING THE READING COMPETENCE OF PUPILS ON THE BASIS OF PROBLEM SITUATIONS

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Abstract. This article elaborates a methodology for developing the reading competence of pupils on the basis of problem situations. The study proceeds from the distinction between reading technique, understood as the fluency and accuracy of decoding, and reading competence, understood as the capacity to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and make use of a written text. The author substantiates a four-component structure of reading competence comprising cognitive, operational, motivational-value and reflexive components, and establishes the correspondence between each component and a determinate class of problem situation. A three-stage methodology is elaborated, comprising the anticipatory stage preceding reading, the stage of dialogue with the text during reading and the interpretive-evaluative stage following it, together with criteria and levels permitting the assessment of results. The conceptual polemic between L. Rosenblatt and E.D. Hirsch concerning the source of textual meaning is subjected to critical examination. The findings demonstrate that the problem situation functions as the mediating mechanism converting reading from an act of reception into an act of inquiry.

Keywords: reading competence, problem situation, reading literacy, comprehension, interpretation, transactional theory of reading, prior knowledge, anticipation, dialogue with the text, reflection, criteria and levels, primary education, reading motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Among the key competences that contemporary education undertakes to form, reading competence occupies a position of unique priority, since it functions simultaneously as an end in itself and as the instrument by which all other competences are acquired. A pupil who is unable to extract, integrate and evaluate information from a written text will encounter an accumulating obstacle in every subject of the curriculum and, beyond schooling, in every domain of social and professional life in which written communication predominates. This recognition has prompted a substantial reconceptualisation of what it means to be able to read, a reconceptualisation reflected in the frameworks of international comparative assessment, which define reading not as the reproduction of a text but as the capacity to understand, use, reflect upon and engage with written material in order to achieve one's purposes.

The theoretical point of departure for the present study is the distinction between reading technique and reading competence. Reading technique comprises the accuracy, fluency and expressiveness of decoding and is measurable by relatively simple instruments; reading competence comprises the capacity to construct meaning from the decoded material, to draw inferences from what is implied rather than stated, to relate the text to prior knowledge and personal experience, to evaluate its claims and to make use of it for a purpose external to itself. The practical significance of the distinction lies in the fact that the two do not develop in parallel: a considerable proportion of pupils who satisfy the normative requirements for reading speed nevertheless demonstrate low levels of

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comprehension, which indicates that competence is not an automatic by-product of technique but requires a distinct methodological provision.

Analysis of the structure of reading competence permits the distinction of four interrelated components. The cognitive component comprises the knowledge upon which comprehension depends, including vocabulary, knowledge of textual genres and structures and the background knowledge of the world without which inference is impossible. The operational component comprises the strategies and procedures by which the reader acts upon the text, including anticipation, the posing of questions, the identification of the principal idea, the drawing of inferences and the verification of hypotheses. The motivational-value component comprises the reader's attitude towards reading, the meaning it holds for him and the disposition to turn to a book independently. The reflexive component comprises the capacity to monitor one's own comprehension, to detect its failure and to take corrective action.

The central methodological assumption of the study is that reading competence in all four of its components is formed only within an activity that requires the reader to do something with the text, and that the problem situation constitutes the most economical and theoretically grounded means of establishing such a requirement. A question whose answer may be located and copied from a single sentence leaves the reader in the position of a recipient; a question that cannot be answered without relating several parts of the text to one another, or without supplying what the text has deliberately withheld, converts reading into inquiry. The problem situation thus functions as a mechanism of conversion, transforming the reader from an object of instructional influence into a subject of cognitive activity.

Several theoretical traditions converge upon this assumption. The transactional conception of reading advanced by L. Rosenblatt holds that the literary work exists neither in the text nor in the reader but in the transaction between them, so that the reader's active contribution is constitutive rather than supplementary. The Vygotskian conception of the zone of proximal development supplies the criterion by which the appropriate difficulty of a problem task may be determined. The account of cumulative advantage in reading development elaborated by K. Stanovich establishes the mechanism by which motivation and achievement reinforce one another over time, and thereby explains why the motivational-value component cannot be treated as a secondary consideration: the pupil who reads more acquires the vocabulary and knowledge that make further reading easier, while the pupil who reads less falls progressively further behind.

In the Republic of Uzbekistan attention to these questions has intensified in connection with the transition to competence-oriented educational standards and with the country's participation in international comparative assessments of reading literacy. These developments have exposed a characteristic discrepancy between the declared aims of instruction and the instruments by which those aims are pursued. Analysis of the apparatus of questions and tasks accompanying reading texts in practice reveals a substantial predominance of tasks requiring the direct retrieval of explicitly stated information over tasks requiring inference, interpretation or evaluation, with the consequence that the very components of competence most in need of development receive the least methodological support.

The scholarly problem of the study arises from this discrepancy. Although the value of problem situations is widely acknowledged in pedagogical literature, their application to the formation of reading competence remains fragmentary: individual techniques are described in isolation from one another, without systematic correspondence to the components of competence they are intended to

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form, without differentiation according to the stage of work with the text and without criteria permitting the result to be assessed. What is lacking, in other words, is not the recognition that problem situations are useful but a methodology specifying which class of situation forms which component, at which stage it is to be introduced and by what indicators its effect may be established.

The aim of the article is to elaborate a methodology for developing the reading competence of pupils on the basis of problem situations. The following tasks were accordingly defined: to establish the structure of reading competence as an object of purposeful formation; to determine the correspondence between the components of that structure and the classes of problem situation capable of forming them; to elaborate the staged procedural organisation of work with the text; and to establish the criteria, indicators and levels by which the results of the methodology may be assessed.

The scholarly novelty of the study consists in the elaboration of a methodology in which classes of problem situation are placed in systematic correspondence with the components of reading competence and distributed across the three stages of work with a text, and in the accompanying system of criteria and levels permitting the diagnosis of results. The findings obtained may be drawn upon in the preparation of methodological guidance for teachers, in the design of the apparatus of questions and tasks accompanying reading texts, in the professional development of primary school teachers and in further research into the formation of reading literacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within Uzbek pedagogical scholarship the theoretical foundation of the present study is supplied above all by the collective work on the methodology of mother-tongue instruction prepared under the direction of K. Qosimova, which has established the conceptual framework within which questions of work with text in the primary grades are discussed. The principal contribution of this tradition consists in the systematic treatment of the development of pupils' speech as the organising axis of primary language instruction, and in the demonstration that comprehension and expression are not separable processes: the pupil who cannot reformulate what he has read in his own words has not in fact understood it. Of particular significance for the present inquiry is the insistence of K. Qosimova upon the necessity of graduated systems of tasks, in which each successive task presupposes and extends the operations secured by its predecessor, since this principle underlies the staged organisation of the methodology proposed below.

The second pillar of the theoretical framework is provided by the research of S. Matchonov in the methodology of primary reading instruction and in the design of the reading textbooks upon which that instruction is conducted. The scholar's work is distinguished by close attention to the apparatus of questions and tasks accompanying literary texts and by the argument that this apparatus determines the actual character of the lesson more powerfully than any declared methodological orientation: where the questions require only retrieval, the lesson will be reproductive irrespective of the teacher's intentions. S. Matchonov's emphasis upon the correspondence between the text selected and the operations it is capable of supporting likewise informs the present study, since not every text affords the semantic resistance from which a productive problem situation may be constructed.

The value and institutional dimensions of the problem are illuminated by contemporary research on education and the formation of worldview. In the work of S. Ergashbaev on the development of the spiritual worldview of young people through the system of continuous education, it is substantiated that value orientations are formed through sustained institutional processes rather than isolated influences, a thesis of direct relevance to the cumulative logic by which the motivational-value

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component of reading competence is built. In a further study by the same author concerning the elevation of the spiritual and philosophical worldview of young people, independent critical reflection is singled out as a central educational outcome, which corresponds directly to the reflexive component of competence. The study by M.M. Mirzaolimjon og‘li and E. Shohbozbek on the educational policy of New Uzbekistan and new models of universities discloses the institutional context within which the teacher of reading is prepared.

Within foreign scholarship the problem has been framed through several competing paradigms. L. Rosenblatt advanced the transactional theory according to which meaning is generated in the encounter between reader and text rather than residing in either. E.D. Hirsch opposed to this a knowledge-centred account according to which comprehension depends decisively upon the background knowledge the reader brings, so that the cultivation of strategies without the accumulation of substantive knowledge is ineffective. K. Stanovich established the mechanism of cumulative advantage by which early differences in reading experience are progressively amplified. L.S. Vygotsky supplied the criterion of productive difficulty in the conception of the zone of proximal development, while the international assessment frameworks elaborated by the PIRLS study group furnished an operational classification of comprehension processes ranging from retrieval and straightforward inference to interpretation and evaluation. Comparative examination of Uzbek and foreign scholarship reveals that the former has elaborated the graduated organisation of tasks and the analysis of the textbook apparatus while the latter has established the theoretical account of comprehension and its operational classification; the gap addressed by the present article is the absence of a methodology bringing these bodies of insight into systematic correspondence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological foundation of the present study is constituted by the systemic approach, which made it possible to treat reading competence not as an aggregate of separate skills but as an integral formation whose components stand in relations of mutual conditioning, so that the weakness of any one component constrains the functioning of the remainder; within this general framework the activity approach performed the leading function, since it established that competence is formed only within activity of the corresponding structure and therefore requires instructional designs that place the pupil in the position of an acting subject. The competence approach was applied in formulating the projected results in terms of demonstrable capacities and in constructing the criteria by which those capacities may be assessed. The theoretical analysis of scholarly and methodological literature served to reconstruct the conceptual history of the category of reading competence and to delimit it from the adjacent notions of reading technique and reading literacy. The comparative-pedagogical method was applied in juxtaposing the approaches elaborated within Uzbek and foreign scholarship and in identifying their points of convergence and divergence. Content analysis was applied to curricula, state educational standards and the apparatus of questions and tasks in reading textbooks in order to establish the proportion of tasks corresponding to each class of comprehension process. The hermeneutic method was employed in analysing the texts of the reading curriculum and in identifying within them the points of semantic resistance from which problem situations may be generated. Structural analysis yielded the four-component description of reading competence and the correspondence between its components and the classes of problem situation capable of forming them. The methods of typology and classification produced the ordered inventory of problem situations and their distribution across the stages of work with the text. Pedagogical modelling was applied in

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elaborating the three-stage procedural organisation of the methodology, and the method of pedagogical design in specifying the concrete algorithms of teacher and pupil action at each stage. Pedagogical observation of reading lessons and the structured analysis of lesson records were used to establish prevailing patterns of questioning and the typical forms of pupil response. Diagnostic methods, including comprehension tasks graded by process and questionnaires directed at the motivational component, were elaborated in order to establish the initial and final states of the competence under formation. The method of expert assessment was applied in evaluating the proposed criteria, indicators and descriptors of level. Elements of the pedagogical experiment, organised in ascertaining, formative and control stages with comparable experimental and control groups, were used to verify the methodology under classroom conditions. Methods of mathematical statistics were applied to the resulting data in order to establish the significance of observed differences and to exclude the attribution of random variation to instructional effect. General scientific procedures including analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, abstraction, generalisation and analogy were applied consistently at every stage of the research and served to secure the logical grounding, the correspondence to empirical evidence and the internal coherence of the conclusions.

RESULTS

The study established a four-component structure of reading competence as an object of purposeful formation and placed each component in systematic correspondence with a determinate class of problem situation. The cognitive component, comprising vocabulary, knowledge of textual structures and background knowledge of the world, is formed by situations of informational insufficiency, in which comprehension of the text requires knowledge that the pupil must first recognise himself to lack and then deliberately acquire. The operational component, comprising the strategies by which the reader acts upon the text, is formed by situations of inferential demand, in which the required answer is present in the text only by implication and must be assembled from elements dispersed across it. The motivational-value component is formed by situations of personal implication, in which the pupil is required to take a position with respect to the events narrated and to justify it, so that the text ceases to be indifferent material and acquires meaning for him. The reflexive component is formed by situations of comprehension failure, in which the pupil is deliberately confronted with evidence that his initial reading was mistaken and is required to identify the point at which the error arose. A second result consists in the elaboration of a three-stage procedural organisation of the methodology. At the anticipatory stage preceding reading, problem situations of prognostic type are introduced, in which the pupil formulates expectations on the basis of the title, the illustrations or an opening fragment, thereby establishing a cognitive commitment against which the subsequent text will be measured. At the stage of dialogue with the text, reading is interrupted at points determined in advance and the pupil is required to verify the hypotheses he has advanced, to revise them and to formulate new ones, so that comprehension is constructed incrementally rather than reconstructed retrospectively. At the interpretive-evaluative stage following reading, situations of the alternative and of interpretive divergence are introduced, in which competing readings advanced by the pupils themselves become the object of joint examination and justification against the text. A third result consists in the elaboration of criteria, indicators and levels permitting the diagnosis of results: the criteria correspond to the four components, the indicators specify observable evidence for each, and three levels were described with reference to the pupil’s capacity to move beyond retrieval towards inference, interpretation and evaluation. A fourth result concerns the differential

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responsiveness of the components: the comparison of initial and final diagnostic data indicated that the operational and motivational-value components respond most rapidly to systematic work with problem situations, whereas the cognitive component is constrained by the slower accumulation of vocabulary and background knowledge, from which follows the necessity of combining problem-based work with the sustained extension of independent reading. A fifth result consists in the identification of the conditions governing the effectiveness of the methodology, namely the selection of texts affording genuine semantic resistance, the replacement of the predominantly retrieval-oriented question apparatus of existing textbooks, the readiness of the teacher to sustain divergent pupil readings without premature correction, and the avoidance of pseudo-problem situations whose answers are contained in their own formulation.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained require to be situated within the most consequential theoretical controversy bearing upon the formation of reading competence, namely the opposition between the transactional account of reading advanced by L. Rosenblatt and the knowledge-centred account advanced by E.D. Hirsch. In The Reader, the Text, the Poem, L. Rosenblatt argues that the literary work does not reside in the printed text awaiting extraction but comes into existence only in the transaction between a particular reader and a particular text on a particular occasion. The text functions as a set of constraints and stimuli; what is realised within those constraints depends upon what the reader brings. From this position follows a distinctive pedagogy: the reader's response is not a preliminary to interpretation but its material, and instruction that suppresses divergent response in favour of a single authorised reading destroys the very process it purports to develop. The implications for the present methodology are direct, since the situation of interpretive divergence presupposes precisely that competing readings are legitimate objects of examination rather than errors to be corrected.

E.D. Hirsch opposes to this an account in which comprehension is determined above all by what the reader already knows. His argument rests upon the observation that texts communicate by presupposition as much as by statement: a passage that assumes familiarity with an institution, a historical circumstance or a cultural practice will remain opaque to a reader who lacks that familiarity, however sophisticated his strategies. From this follows a critique directed at strategy-centred instruction: the teaching of comprehension techniques in the absence of substantive knowledge produces, on his account, the appearance of competence without its substance, and the apparent failure of such instruction to transfer across domains is explained by the fact that what is transferred is not strategy but knowledge. The consequence for methodology is an insistence upon the systematic and cumulative building of background knowledge as the principal instrument of comprehension.

The philosophical substance of this disagreement concerns the location of meaning and, correspondingly, the identification of the principal deficit to be remedied by instruction. For Rosenblatt the deficit is one of permission and opportunity: readers are capable of constructing meaning and are prevented from doing so by instruction that demands a single answer. For Hirsch the deficit is one of substance: readers are willing to construct meaning but lack the material from which it could be constructed. Two further positions bear upon the controversy. The account of cumulative advantage elaborated by K. Stanovich supplies a mechanism that partially reconciles them, since the volume of independent reading, which depends upon motivation and therefore upon the conditions Rosenblatt emphasises, is precisely the principal means by which the background knowledge Hirsch emphasises is acquired. The Vygotskian conception of the zone of proximal development, for its part,

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indicates that the opposition between what the reader brings and what the instruction supplies is unstable, since the assisted performance of today becomes the independent capacity of tomorrow.

The methodology advanced in the present article proposes a resolution by assigning each position its proper domain within the four-component structure. Rosenblatt's account holds with full force for the motivational-value and reflexive components, where the legitimation of the reader's own response is the operative condition of development, and it directly warrants the situations of personal implication and interpretive divergence. Hirsch's objection holds with equal force for the cognitive component, and is confirmed by the empirical finding reported above that this component responds most slowly to problem-based work precisely because it is constrained by the accumulation of knowledge rather than by the organisation of the lesson. The situation of informational insufficiency represents the methodological point at which the two positions meet, since it is designed to make the absence of knowledge perceptible to the pupil and thereby to convert the acquisition of background knowledge from an externally imposed requirement into a recognised need. The controversy thus proves to concern not the nature of reading as such but the relative weight of its determinants at different points of development.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that the development of reading competence requires a methodological provision distinct from that which secures reading technique, and that the problem situation constitutes the most theoretically grounded mechanism of such provision. Its function consists in converting reading from an act of reception into an act of inquiry, and thereby in establishing the conditions under which the components of competence may actually be formed.

First, reading competence was described as an integral formation comprising cognitive, operational, motivational-value and reflexive components, each of which was placed in systematic correspondence with a determinate class of problem situation: situations of informational insufficiency, of inferential demand, of personal implication and of comprehension failure respectively. Second, a three-stage procedural organisation was elaborated, distributing these classes across the anticipatory, dialogic and interpretive-evaluative stages of work with a text.

Third, a system of criteria, indicators and levels was established permitting the diagnosis of results with reference to the pupil's capacity to move beyond retrieval towards inference, interpretation and evaluation. Fourth, the components proved to differ markedly in their responsiveness: the operational and motivational-value components respond rapidly to systematic problem-based work, whereas the cognitive component is constrained by the slower accumulation of vocabulary and background knowledge, from which follows the necessity of combining such work with the sustained extension of independent reading.

Fifth, the conditions governing effectiveness were identified as the selection of texts affording genuine semantic resistance, the revision of the predominantly retrieval-oriented question apparatus of existing textbooks, the readiness of the teacher to sustain divergent readings without premature correction and the avoidance of pseudo-problem situations. These conclusions may be drawn upon in the preparation of methodological guidance, in the design of textbook question apparatus and in the professional development of teachers. The most promising direction for subsequent inquiry may be identified as the longitudinal verification of the proposed methodology across the full span of the primary stage.

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