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Reading literacy as one of the most significant academic competencies for the university students

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Abstract

At the Lisbon Summit, the Council of Europe set a highly ambitious strategic goal for the European Union: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. In the process of achieving this goal, education and job readiness have played a critical role. Therefore, one of the strategic and ambitious goals is to attain the best possible quality of teaching and learning processes. One of the key academic competencies generating knowledge for the current information society is the reading literacy. The main goal of our pre-research project is to carry out a pilot study on reading literacy of the first year students at Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin, to identify their reading literacy level, and their ability to comprehend and work effectively with academic texts, and last but not least to identify their reading literacy deficiencies. The pre-research project will serve as a basis for a follow-up in-depth comparative research. In addition, suitability of the research methods will be tested and reliability and validity of the research to be carried out in collaboration with colleagues from the Universidad de Valencia and Universidad Católica de Valencia in Spain will be verified. The research on reading literacy will test Slovak and Spanish first year students studying at public and private universities. Identical texts having intermediate academic difficulty in the students' mother tongue will be employed in order to identify and compare real competences and the reading comprehension level of university students in both countries. An empirical, analytical and comparative research will be conducted. The results we obtained in the first research phase from testing a small sample of Slovak first year university students indicated reading literacy deficiencies; i.e. students are insufficiently prepared to deal with academic texts of intermediate level of complexity and lack analytical and critical thinking. Students were assigned to write an abstract and a power-point presentation, common and frequently used linguistic genres in academic setting in order to assess their ability to systematize and synthesize written text, and thus to identify their real reading literacy.

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1. Introduction

The European Council held in Lisbon in March 2000, agreed a new strategic goal for the EU for the next decade – to build a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy with greater social cohesion and higher employment. A comprehensive strategy designed to achieve the following objectives was adopted: the transition to the economy and the knowledge society (stepping up the process of structural reform for competitiveness and innovation and completing the internal market), modernizing the European social model, especially by investing in people and combating social exclusion, maintaining a healthy economic environment and economic growth by applying an appropriate macroeconomic policies. (Lisbon European Council 2000) The process of attaining these goals was assessed as crucial one for the upcoming period of time by the European Union in 2010. (Lisbon Strategy evaluation document, A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, 2010)

What does it, however, mean for the society and education? To build a competitive knowledge-based society, we need educated, creative and well-prepared human capital able to respond in a flexible manner to rapid societal changes. Are university students well prepared for challenges of higher education? Are they ready to get adapted to all the demands set by the society? The basic academic competencies required for effective learning are reading comprehension and reading literacy.

The goal of our work is to introduce the pre-research project aimed to determine the level of the reading comprehension competence of university students studying at three European universities, namely Alexander Dubcek University in Trencin, Slovakia, Universidad de Valencia and Universidad Católica de Valencia San Vicente Mártir, Spain.

2. Current state of the problem-solving and the research conducted

The issue is primarily examined at primary and secondary levels of education. The fact is backed up by the PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment) triennial international survey coordinated by OECD which aims to evaluate the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students and improve educational policy and education results.

Academic competence refers to a cluster of related abilities, skills, knowledge and dispositions of cognitive and non-cognitive nature that allow university students to perform the necessary activities as required, and thus to graduate and be successful in their career.

As far as relevant changes in the academic education are concerned, those have taken place mostly in the sphere of application of information technologies into academic education, what enabled establishment of different forms of distance education, such as e-learning, online education, virtual education, network education and others. (Krajňáková & Vojtovič, 2014)

In addition to professional, technical and other academic competences, reading literacy ranks among the key competences. It is the core academic competence for processing the information gained, innovating it and consequently creating new knowledge. The definition of reading literacy changes to reflect changes in society, the economy, culture and education. Therefore, it cannot be regarded as a simple skill of reading, decoding and comprehension. The current perception of reading literacy involves understanding of not only explicit but also implicit meanings of the read text.

The PISA 2000 definition of reading literacy was as follows: 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.

The PISA 2009 definition of reading, continued for 2012 and 2015, adds engagement in reading as an integral part of reading literacy: Reading literacy is understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.

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