

Danijela Djukic,

Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, Belgrade,

ddjukic@ceo.gov.rs +381648665059

Dr Branislav Randjelovic

Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, Belgrade

bane@ceo.gov.rs +381691045949

PIRLS 2021 IN SERBIA – FIRST EXPERIENCES FROM PILOT RESEARCH, A FEW REMARKS AND DETECTED PROBLEMS ¹

Summary. The international research on the development of reading literacy PIRLS², designed to improve the learning process in reading and acquiring reading competencies, covers more than 60 educational systems³. The research is dedicated to improve the teaching process and a process of reading comprehension in fourth grade students.

During this PIRLS cycle, Serbian educational system is participating for the first time⁴. It is expected to receive internationally comparable data on the reading competencies of 10-year-old students, that are in the fourth grade of primary schools. This age was chosen as the focus of PIRLS research because it is an important milestone in the development of children's reading competencies. Fourth graders have already learned to read and they read in order to acquire new knowledge.

The purpose of the overall analysis is to present the testing process, to detect and list its key characteristics, as well as to provide a basic overview of testing instruments without going into a deeper analysis of individual content, or comparing international results.

The starting point for the analysis of tests in our paper is the comparison of the contents given through the texts and the offered items in the Test booklets.

1. Introduction

In this section, we introduce some basic facts about PIRLS research and current issues in this analysis. PIRLS provides a number of relevant information and experience students at home and in school in the process of reading learning based on the following instruments:

- The reading questionnaire collects data related to the experience of students in reading before leaving school, with an emphasis on acquiring the skills of early literacy and participation in preschool education.

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² <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/pirls/2021>

³ <https://timssandpirls.bc.edu>

⁴ <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/srbija-ce-po-prvi-put-ucestovati-u-pirls-istrazivanju-u-martu-2021-godine/>

- Questionnaires for students, teachers and school focus on issues such as school safety, educational achievements, schools and school classroom resources, use of information and communication technologies and efficient teaching strategies.

Since this study is a key notion of reading literacy, we believe that it is very important to define it and show in the continuation of work (BC, 2018).

Reading literacy includes thinking about the read content and implementation of new knowledge in achieving individual and social goals in everyday life. In other words, it is crucial to create functional and useful knowledge. For the purposes of interpreting the notion of reader literacy in PIRLS, the definitions are used since 1991. General study: "Reading literacy in PIRLS refers to the ability to understand and use the written language forms that some society requires or supported by individuals" (BC, 2015). Reading literacy in PIRLS refers to the ability to understand and use written language forms that some society requires or which individuals support and respect. It also implies the ability to understand different types of texts, as well as reader habits and attitudes that encourage reading throughout life. Thus, at the basis of this determination of literacy lies understanding that reading is not a unitary skill, but the process of access and skills that vary depending on the reader, as well as the goal or situation in which it is read.

This definition implies a wide range of situations in which the ability to understand a read play, starting with individual aspirations, to make more specific ones, such as meeting with modern society in order to enhance and improve the quality of life. In accordance with different contexts in which reading takes place, the evaluation of reading literacy implies the use of the entire scope of different types of texts, from the repertoire of those who students themselves choose to read or from those who are obligatory.

The importance that reading has not only in the education of an individual, but also for different competencies needed for successful functioning in modern society, can hardly be overvalued (EU, 2011).

In this paper, we do not deal with the analysis of achievements of individual students, but we analyze instruments, testing procedures and overall achievements. We also deal with how many our students have a positive attitude towards reading and how capable they are to learn from different types of passages.

One of the important issues for consideration is also the ability of our students to collect information from passages, that appear in many different forms in today's use of information, the possibility of invertebrity and and enjoying them. We also consider, as very important, how much our students are capable of learning and acquire knowledge from different types of texts.

In this paper, we discuss how many students understands the meaning of passages, from various perspectives. On the other hand, we are analyzing how actively participating in students in testing and motivation of students, a special requirements in this process are set. We investigate and evaluate two comprehensive readings in school and out of the literary parties (in literary passages) and information collection and information (in informative passages).

2. Research

The National Center for the implementation of evaluation in Serbia is the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation. In March 2020, despite unexpected issues related to

COVID19 epidemics, pilot PIRLS 2021 testing was organized in selected most of the schools in Serbia.

Serbian sample for pilot testing consists of a total of 36 schools, throughout Serbia. All sampled schools accepted to participate, although participation was on a voluntary basis, so schools were highly motivated to participate. According to actual legal documents, laws and regulations, and ethical standards in Serbia too, it was necessary to ensure the consent of parents for participation in research. 97.2% of parents agreed with participation of their children.

However, due to the current situation in Serbia related to COVID19, testing process was completely conducted in 19 schools.

3. Analysis

The entire material finally consisted of 6 test-books and 4 questionnaires. There are 12 passages - 6 literary and 6 informative. In addition to the purpose of reading and the student's active participation and motivation, we will explore and evaluate two comprehensive reading purposes in and out of school (in literary passages) and collecting information and the collection of information and information (in informative passages).

Students om Serbia do not have opportunity to meet informative passages. In the curriculum for 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade of primary school, it states that student should study popular and informative texts, as well as a selection from illustrated encyclopedias and magazines for children (MoESTD, 2004). The curriculum for the 3rd grade of primary school states that the introduction of the youngest students into literature but also non-literary passages (science, informative), is an extremely responsible task (MoESTD, 2017).

Exactly at this level of education, some basic and significant knowledge and habits are already established. Interpretations of literary and informative texts are based on reading, experiencing and understanding. Most of the issues related to the information passages caused some difficulties to students.

The following types of items were represented:

- *Open type*. The student have to formulate a longer answer. Very different types of answers and different views are expected in relation to this type of question. Very often, it is required that student ideas or information from the text with one's own experience and attitude. In most of these requirements, part of maximal points, for answers that are partially accurate, or that are based only on literal text interpretations.
- *Limited open type (Closed-Constructed Response)*. The student is constructing short response, but the number of possible correct answers is very limited.
- *Short answer*. A short answer is expected, but the range of possible answers is large. The evaluation and marking is envisaged for these type of questions.
- *Complex multiple choice*. Here students have requirements with a series of answers, most often alternative choices. There is always one correct answer in each pairs.
- *Multiple choice*. Student choose one answer, out of (mostly common) five or (sometimes) four offered answers.

In this sense, reading literacy related to the ability to understand different types of texts, as well as reader habits and read-related properties clearly reflects the differences in student achievements between literary and informative passages.

Students have had difficulties finding specific information in individual passages. Immediate conclusion was more difficult in other type of passages. Interpreting and connecting information and concepts was, for a number of students, factor for giving up. In just a few cases, a national specific answer appeared in only 2 texts, so scorers had to agree on how to act when scoring.

There were no students who returned blank booklet. Some number of students did not know some answers to several questions that were not related to other. There were more accurate answers on multiple choice items. Out of most student answers we can notice that students mostly remembered and reproduced actions, events and feelings.

Conclusions about individual properties and qualities of the main characters and their feelings were mostly immediate and direct. Students most often gave simple explanations, without getting deeper into conclusions and explanations. Most answers indicate that students who participated in testing could respond to two or three information from the text, but not more!

It is concluded that students do not have extensive experience and thus not show high results in terms of search for information, when they comes to texts with more subtexts, with different subtitles.

Students mostly ignore framed texts or illustrations, if the issue is not explicitly conceived so that is accurately stated the place to search for an answer.

Also, by comparing the material and student responses, we can conclude that students understand literary passages more, but they prefer informative passages.

Regarding student motivation, we realize that some students are motivated for reading because they simply like to read, while other students do not have high motivation for reading. It is probably possible to raise students' motivation to read, by introducing some new, interesting and more modern texts (as additional motivation), having in mind that students declared that their find informative texts more interesting. Students like to read texts that makes them thinking, they like texts with fantasies about other worlds, etc. Students understands that reading is important for learning, but a small number of students read for fun.

4. Conclusions and Remarks

One reliable way to make students have better achievements in such and similar testing is through organizing training for students.

Furthermore, it is possible to raise the level of reading competencies of students, through direct work with teachers. Teachers can raise competencies of their students and monitor progress and achievements, using non-specific homework, that includes search for information. Informal knowledge assessment, during classes, involving work on such and similar texts, allows the teacher to recognize the needs of each student or to determine the rhythm of introducing various terms and teaching materials.

Based on formal standardized exams (for example national testing) or tests designed by the teacher, usually the competencies of students can be assessed and to find out some important facts regarding curriculum.

Different types of issues that leads students to judging, thinking, seeking information in order to find solutions, written or oral exminations, allow students to use their functional knowledge that they previously acquired through specially applied methods and work strategies. For example, teachers can ask questions about different information from the text, such as facts, ideas, motivation of characters, but in order to compare with other texts or their own experience. Teachers can use different forms of items, from multiple choice, to tasks of essay type.

Finally, in order to have better student achievements in this and such testing in future, it is necessary to conduct a number of measures and activities, some local, and some perhaps at the system level, with students and with their teachers. Of course, a better score on this testing and better rank compared to other educational systems in the world is not only goal, but it is one way to get our children better understand the text read and so gain better functional knowledge.

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