

Proposal for the modernisation of the Hungarian system of reading education

Following the publication of the 2023 PISA results, the Presidential Committee on Public Education of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences called for the establishment of a committee to analyse the current status of teaching reading comprehension and developing first language literacy skills within the Hungarian education system and to outline a proposal for the suggested directions and area(s) of improvement as well as critical intervention points. As we believe the proposal might evoke broader professional interest and can be interpreted both as debate material and a starting point for dialogue in the professional and public spheres, the proposal is published below.

Reading comprehension in the school system: suggested areas for improvement and the current state of affairs

The following section contains a list of proposed points aiming to modernise the teaching of reading comprehension in the Hungarian educational system focusing mostly on the crucial intervention points due to constraints in length. We also outline key contextual details to serve as basis for proposing improvement in the system. We believe the suggestions below can be interpreted as a starting point for a more detailed study covering each professional aspect, and a study that presents a system of teaching reading comprehension which allows for a more successful attainment of life-long learning outcomes both within the school system and society in general.

Proposal points

1. Attitude and paradigm shift
2. Improving targeted teaching of reading comprehension; a more thorough and conceptually driven skill development process for 8th graders, later extended to 12th graders (Figure 1)
3. Prioritizing personalised and differentiated reading instruction
4. Initial improvement of first language skills within the school system with a more pronounced focus on phonological awareness, vocabulary and listening comprehension in lower primary grades
5. Integration of reading and writing education, developing reading comprehension with diverse text types including texts from internet/digital sources to enhance digital reading skills
6. Establishing, developing and validating a comprehensive system of diagnostic screening tests for speech and language therapy.
7. Increased focus on contemporary children's literature in addition to the classics
8. Multi-faceted and personalized improvement of reading motivation; introducing and using diverse text types in the school system
9. Teacher training and education at pre- and primary-school level: modernising content based on international research findings and contextual and national experiences

10. Teacher training: integrating the teaching of learning from texts and subject-specific elements of reading comprehension into training in teaching methodology in all relevant majors; integrating the methodology of reading education into the methodology of teaching general knowledge-area subjects

	KG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Pretending to Read	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Supported Reading	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Fluent/Independent Reading	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Strategy-oriented Reading	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Adaptive/Critical Reading	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█

Figure 1

Optimal presence of reading education in relation to school years (Garbe et al. 2010; Steklács 2018a)

Current state

Changing requirements, reading skills and definitions

Reading comprehension is a key component of education. The reading comprehension skills of students define their academic success and the efficiency of school systems, strongly affecting the rate of economic development. Comprehension skills influence satisfaction levels in everyday life, the skills to gather, systemise and process information, and professional performance at work. As a consequence of rapid technological development, the social role, importance and function of reading has drastically changed, and hence the importance of reading has increased at all levels of every day communication (Steklács 2018b; OECD 2019, 2023a, 2023b).

Consequently, the fact that the level of reading ability amongst a quarter of Hungarian 15 year-old students does not reach the bare minimum for everyday usage is an issue of extremely high concern. Young people are likely to leave the school system as functional illiterates and experience difficulties in the labour market. According to the 2018 PISA assessment, the ratio of underperformers in reading comprehension was 25,3% (30,1% among boys and 20,5% among girls), and based on the 2022 PISA data, the ratio of underperformers was 26%, while the ratio of overperforming students was very low on an international scale, a mere 5% (OECD 2023a).

The scientific definition of reading is becoming increasingly wider and is shifting towards digital literacy, used much more often in everyday life, instead of written, printed and graphically encoded language. Digital literacy manifests in the integrative system of information search, information processing and information systemization; a system where it is more effective to use different reading strategies for various purposes (Mullis–Martin 2019; OECD 2023a; 2023b). The characteristics of the time and quality of reaction to social phenomena mentioned beforehand are important factors determining the success of education systems. In terms of the resilience of an educational system, important factors are the reaction time to act on changes and the scale of modern and evidence-based approach to respond to social changes.

Writing, reading, foreign language skills

First language reading skills and underlying first language knowledge play crucial roles in the success of foreign language learning (Cummins 1979; Kormos–Ratajczak 2019; Grabe–Yamashita 2022). Foreign language skills are essential for the improvement of Hungary’s competitiveness and productivity. Any effort taken to improve first language literacy skills benefits the development of foreign language skills. First language reading skills are closely related to both first language (Fitzgerald–Shanahan 2000) and foreign language (Kormos–Bartha, in preparation) writing skills. These skills are indispensable in the current Hungarian labour market as well.

Reducing drop-out rates and supporting individual development paths

In accordance with the tendencies outlined above, we have experienced a wide range of innovation and changes on an international scale, which have shaped the methods of literacy instruction in line with traditions and specificities of language, society and culture. National studies focusing on the development of specific reading techniques have pointed out that there are significant differences amongst students even after finishing the first grade: some children lack appropriate reading skills and reading strategies that can support text comprehension, which are not likely to develop without a targeted development of reading fluency (Sipos 2022, 2023; Steklács 2024; Steklács et al. 2025).

Overall, it can be said that there is no systematic and continuous reading instruction within the context of other school subjects after the first few grades. Students struggling with reading skills receive no assistance with their difficulties; and there are limited opportunities for them to develop their subject specific knowledge, skills and interests due to insufficient text comprehension skills, often resulting in underwhelming performance in a range of school subjects. As a consequence, school leavers often fail to secure positions that would require higher level qualifications (Csapó 2015; Fejes et al. 2022).

Within the field of improving the system of reading education, we also need to consider neurodiversity and deal with the increasing differences between the skills of these children and their peers. We need to devise early intervention programs that prevent that they fall behind in the early stages of literacy development. There is also a need for the extension of the preparatory stages of literacy instruction in the first grade and foregrounding differentiation at each stage. It would be crucial to integrate evidence-based methodologies of reading instruction with modern approaches into the pre- and in-service training of teachers and kindergarten teachers. Furthermore, modernizing the methodological training of teachers and placing more emphasis on reading comprehension skills after lower primary grades would support long-term literacy development.

Reading is a cross-curricular task

Significant change in reading education is available through an approach that views it as a cross-curricular task and believes that the process does not end once children finish lower primary school. The EU ADORE project between 2006 and 2010, which proposed initiatives for the minimization of drop out rates among the countries of the European Union, recommends a structure for reading education stages shown in Figure 1 (Garbe et al. 2010). Explicit national reading education clearly focuses on lower primary grades, while the Finnish system, which has long performed outstandingly in PISA assessments, explicitly develops reading skills up until the end of compulsory education (age 18).

The tasks of upper primary grades

The focus on upper primary school should be more on the development of efficient reading and listening comprehension strategies and further efforts should be made to develop the comprehension of scientific, literary and everyday texts. At this age, it would be essential to teach digital and multimodal reading

comprehension and writing skills in an integrated way, as these skills are necessary in the 21st century labour market and everyday life. Research shows that a mere 1% improvement in reading and writing skills is associated with a 1,5% growth in GDP (Cameron–Cameron 2006). Reading comprehension is of utmost importance in health care and increasing life expectancy. In upper primary grades, the knowledge base of science subjects could be taught in an integrated manner with reading skills, which would increase health as well as scientific and technical literacy.

Integrating reading instruction into general knowledge subject education can greatly contribute to maintaining the motivation to read in upper primary grades (Fejes et al. 2022). Research from recent years shows that there is a need for pedagogical practices which can be integrated into everyday teaching activities and can support students finding the goals, meaning and opportunities of reading in order to become efficient readers who are confident, successful and use reading as a means to achieve personal goals (van der Sande et al. 2023; Szenczi et al. 2024a, 2024b). According to relevant Hungarian studies, teachers would need professional support to achieve this; therefore, the targeted training of teachers is of great importance (Tóth 2015; Szabó–Szinger 2020).

Educating readers

Educating readers should begin with the familiarization of contemporary children’s literature in lower primary grades, with a focus on making students enjoy reading. At this stage, we have to put emphasis on multimodal (auditory and written) and both written and digital, visually illustrated reading comprehension. Children at this stage develop at different pace due to their individual characteristics as well as social and economic status, hence there is a clear need for differentiated instruction, creating personalized learning paths and defining flexible exit goals.

Long-term education policy

Taking a look at the reading comprehension results of the 2022 PISA assessment, only two European countries can be found amongst the top ten: Ireland (2nd place) and Estonia (6th place) (OECD 2023a, 2023b). There were two common components of the education policies of these two countries during the last decade. Firstly, there was a modernisation initiative based on the content framework of PISA after the country’s underperformance in previous PISA assessments; secondly, they created long term education policies in which the teaching of reading skills was responsive to social needs and developed skills accordingly (Coolahan et al. 2017; Tire 2021; OECD é. n., 2023a, 2024). The examples of these two countries, which are similar to Hungary considering opportunities as well as cultural, societal, historical and economic backgrounds, prove that we do have a chance to grow and improve following their footsteps.

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