

**Vida Medved Udovič**

## **ON THE WAY TO LITERACY**

### **Ścieżki do umiejętności czytania i pisania**

Autorka tekstu wskazuje, że podczas czytania ze zrozumieniem rozmaitych tekstów literackich uczeń rozwija swoje umiejętności czytania i pisania jako podstawowe narzędzia działania we wszystkich segmentach współczesnego życia. Strategie czytania opierają się na działaniach z tendencją do kompleksowego rozwoju umiejętności ucznia. Dla niniejszego opracowania przeprowadzone zostało badanie z udziałem studentów czwartego roku studiów pedagogicznych kierunku: Wczesna edukacja, prowadzonych na Wydziale Edukacji Uniwersytetu w Koperze. Celem badania było ustalenie sposobu wyjaśniania uczniom mniej znanych słów oraz podejścia dydaktycznego w dyskusji nad tekstem literackim. Wnioski z przeprowadzonych badań dowodzą, że w procesie kształcenia kandydatów na nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji należy zwrócić szczególną uwagę na rozwój nowoczesnych strategii w pozyskiwaniu różnego rodzaju tekstów literackich z książek dla dzieci i młodzieży. W rozwoju komunikacji i literackich kompetencji uczniów oraz podczas doboru odpowiedniej metody nauczania ważne jest, aby wybrać teksty z literatury dla dzieci i młodzieży, które mają oczekiwaną jakość i właściwe przesłanie. Należy jednocześnie pamiętać, że podczas czytania dobrze dobranych tekstów literackich uruchamiają się różne drogi przeżywania, rozumienia i plastycznego myślenia o tekście. Jest to także sposób zachęcania uczniów do budowania własnych ocen, do wyciągania wnio-

sków, a tym samym do rozwoju czytania ze zrozumieniem, które należy do głównych mankamentów nauki czytania w szkole podstawowej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** umiejętność czytania i pisanie, mniej znane słowa, sposoby nauki czytania, sposoby wyjaśniania

## Introduction

Approaches to teaching reading literacy include motivation for learning, social interaction, and usefulness of true-to-life learning contents. Texts selected with deliberation and diverse didactic materials can also co-create cultural or intercultural dialogue and contribute to eliminating stereotypes in the classroom. By reading literary texts young readers acquire the experience of assessing the conduct of literary persons from different cultural environments. With critical reading non-literary texts they develop their functional literacy as the basic tool to operate in all segments of modern society. There is no point to expect cultural stereotypes will be eliminated only with reading; we are certain, however, it is literature precisely where their destructive action reflects, which allows young readers a better understanding of themselves and of their attitude towards otherness<sup>1</sup>.

Too great enthusiasm just for work with non-artistic texts already in early learning of Slovenian contributes to unbalanced engagement with different kinds of texts—as well as with artistic and graphic messages—in preschool and in school. The goal of innovative curricula is thus the shaping of a didactic model of developing literacy in the broadest meaning of the term in preschool and in school period also in reference to the set curricular goals of language education; i.e. not only in the language, but also in other subject areas<sup>2</sup>.

Crucial for efficient reading literacy are the knowledge of various reading strategies of textual and of graphically designed messages, taking account of individual capabilities of young readers, and shaping a positive reading environment in preschool and in school periods<sup>3</sup>. To children in preschool and in school age art represents an important contact with their cultural or multicultural environment, which no doubt is also influenced by media and diverse forms of popular culture. Quality art enables the child a deeper understanding of human potential, so the child's dialogue with arts in preschool and in school period is a key component in shaping his aesthetic sensitivity and not the least in its evolving humanity. The process-developmental approaches and the tendency towards

<sup>1</sup> V. Medved Udovič, *Prehod med vrtcem in šolo, pot k bralcu in bralki*, [in:] *Razvijanje različnih pismenosti*, eds. M. Cotič, V. Medved Udovič, S. Starc, (Knjižnica Annales Ludus), Koper 2011, pp. 37–45.

<sup>2</sup> Givon, *The Literacy Network: An Outline of Multi-Literacies*, [in:] *Education and the challenge of Time*, izd. E. Paldi, Tel Aviv 1997.

<sup>3</sup> S. Pečjak, *Osnove psihologije branja: spiralni model kot oblika razvijanja bralnih sposobnosti učencev*. Ljubljana 1999; M. Bešter Turk, *Sodobno pojmovanje pismenosti in pouk slovenskega jezika v šolah v Republiki Sloveniji*, [in:] *Slovenski jezik, literatura in kultura v izobraževanju/39. seminar slovenskega jezika, literature in kulture*, 30 June – 19 July 2003, Ljubljana.

holistic development require a balance of the areas both in receptive and in productive creative activities linked with different ways of expression. The design of teaching literature in Slovenian basic schools is comparable to the European Literary Framework for Teachers in Secondary Education<sup>4</sup>, where focus is on: discussing literary, popular genre and non-literary texts in consistence with pupils' interests; expressing personal response and comparison to one's own experience; knowledge of contemporary youth literature; comparing literary and media presentations; learning diverse narrative techniques, etc.

The dialogue of today's children with juvenile literature raises a number of questions that need to be considered also in dealing with literature in preschool and in school. In preschool and in early school period written, spoken, and visual texts serve an important contact of the growing-up to their cultural and multi-cultural or intercultural environment. As early as in preschool period children have encounters at least with visual texts in picture books and in cartoons and with spoken texts through listening. They learn reading in the sense of decoding relatively very fast at the beginning of schooling; while the child only gradually reaches the reading ability that means a more developed level of reading through constructive dialogue with the text. Adults have the important role of transmitting both the textual and the non-textual (visual) parts of books. For experts research in textual and in non-textual or visual parts can represent a basis for the investigation of children's literacy, where emphasis is on understanding what has been read, verifying reading comprehension, checking the understanding of culturally specific and socially important contents<sup>5</sup>. In his classical work on the didactics of Slovenian language and literature *Posebno ukoslovje slovenskega učnega jezika v ljudski šoli* J. Bezjak already presented in detail the process of literary education in lower grades of primary school<sup>6</sup>. According to Bezjak preparation for reading should be planned for the discussion of any literary text. He writes among the important principles of preparation for reading "preparation shall arouse interest and get pupils into the right mood"<sup>7</sup>. He emphasises also no literary text should remain without preparation and that one should never start reading right away. "1. The teacher narrates (or recites) the reading; 2. then he reads it exemplarily; 3. then the pupils read it; 4. the reading is followed by the explanation of unknown and unclear words and expressions, sayings and images, things, conditions, and other circumstances; 5. finally deepening into the text and analysis are carried out"<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Evropski literarni okvir* = Literary Framework for Teachers, 2013, [www.literaryframework.eu](http://www.literaryframework.eu) [accessed: 5.02.2015].

<sup>5</sup> V. Medved Udovič, *Z recepcijo slikanice do učinkovite pismenosti*, "Sodobna pedagogika" 2005, Year 56, special ed. 80–95.

<sup>6</sup> J. Bezjak, *Posebno ukoslovje slovenskega učnega jezika v ljudski šoli*, Ljubljana 1906.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.

## Explanation of less known words

For the teaching of Slovenian, which is not necessarily the mother tongue of all pupils, in our schools we need (methodological) guidelines or premises for efficient teaching of all groups of pupils, culturally and socially diverse or vulnerable groups. The Council of Europe project Policies and Practices for Teaching Sociocultural Diversity thus tries to answer the questions such as “how to prepare children (as well as adults) for daily confrontation with increasing diversity in contemporary multicultural societies and how to create educational conditions that would prevent the emergence of discrimination, exclusion, violence, and conflict”<sup>9</sup>. Among the main goals of the project there are integration of intercultural dimensions into the areas of education in social sciences, artistic expression, and religion. With elements of intercultural dialogue such as interaction, exchange, and reciprocity the framework was set for all future projects, not only in the area of education, but also in the areas of culture, heritage, and youth<sup>10</sup>.

We are going to present a minor research about the explanation of less known words, which represent a precondition for the development of reading competence both with literary and with non-literary texts with children from intercultural environments. We will build on the data acquired with the survey questionnaire about the ways of explaining less known words. We had noticed insufficient understanding of words is a critical obstacle in the discussion or reception of all types of texts with young readers. We believe light should therefore be shed on the teaching strategies that contribute to efficient explanation of the latter more precisely.

For the present paper a survey was carried out with (44) students of primary school teaching in year 4 of the Faculty of Education in Koper<sup>11</sup>. We wished to acquire their opinion about the explanation of less known words, listening to peers’ reading, and the type of literary didactic approach in the discussion of a literary text. In the year preceding the survey all the students involved in the study taught literature in the first and in the second education cycle of basic school in the framework of guided teaching practice and performed the exemplary appearance of teaching Slovenian in front of pupils in the classroom. In the article we will only lean on the acquired data about the ways of explaining less known words.

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.mvzt.gov.si/fileadmin/mvzt.gov.si/pageuploads/MSZS/slo/znanost/pdf/programi.doc>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> The survey questionnaire was adapted composed by Dr Daliborka Purić (Faculty of Education Užice of the University in Kragujevac, Serbia, working materials), with which we acquire data on the explanation of unknown words in Slovenian and in Serbian preschools. For the purpose of our study the questions were adapted for the use in school discussion of literary texts and two essential questions added about the didactic approaches in dealing with literary texts in the first and in the second education cycle of basic school.

### Explanation of the meanings of less known words in a literary text

Three possibilities were provided to the question when in their opinion is the most appropriate to talk about the meaning of less known words in a literary text with the pupils. The students were also allowed to add their own. The following data were obtained:

Table 1. Explanation of less known words with types of literary text

Prose text		Poetic text		Dramatic text	
Assertions	%	Assertions	%	Assertions	%
Before listening to the text	6	Before listening to the text	14	Before listening to the text	20
During listening to the text	6	During listening to the text	2	During listening to the text	9
After listening to the text	86	After listening to the text	84	After listening to the text	71
<i>Depends on the case, possible before listening, mostly after _____</i>	2	_____		_____	

From Table 1 it is evident that students, future teachers of primary education, consider explanation of less known words *after listening to the text* as the most appropriate for all three types of literary texts, namely 86% in prose, 84% in verse, and 71% in dramatic texts. With prose texts one of the students also added his (her) own justification of the choice, suggesting the teacher ought to adapt the explanation according to the selected text, in most cases, however, the explanation should follow the listening. *Before listening* a larger number of students would explain less known words in dramatic texts (20%) than in lyrical (14%) or prose (6%) texts; the distribution of decisions for explanation of less known words before listening in all three types of literary texts was the following: 6% with prose, 14% with poetic, and 20% with dramatic texts. Less often the students would explain less known words *while listening*: 6% with prose, 2% with poetic, and 9% with dramatic texts.

How often they would intervene by explaining less known words while listening to or reading a literary text is the question the students answered as follows:

Table 2. Explanation of less known words while listening to or reading a literary text

First education cycle		Second education cycle	
Assertions	%	Assertions	%
a) always		a) always	
b) often	34	b) often	9
c) seldom	32	c) seldom	45
d) never	25	d) never	30
e) I do not know	9	e) I do not know	16

While listening to or reading a literary text the students would explain less known words *often* 34% in the first education cycle and 9% in the second; *seldom* 32% in the first and 45% in the second cycle; 25% would *never* explain while listening to or reading a literary text in the first and 25% in the second cycle; while 9% of students do not yet know how they would act in the first cycle, and 16% in the second cycle. In the first education cycle 66% of students would explain less known words *often* or *seldom*, while in the second cycle as many as 75% of students would *seldom* or *never* explain less known words, compared to 57% of students in the first cycle. Students believe therefore, in the first education cycle it is reasonable to explain unknown words *while listening or reading*, although from among the choices when it is the most appropriate to explain unknown words (Table 1) they selected such way as follows: 6% for poetic text, 2% for prose, and 9% for dramatic text.

### Ways of explaining less known words

The students could decide in what way they would explain less known words by marking the most appropriate way for an age group (younger than 7 years, 8 to 9 years, older than 9 years) with number 4 and the least appropriate way with number 1.

Table 3. Ways of explaining less known words

Explanation of less known words	Pupils younger than 7 years				Pupils in the age of 8 to 9 years				Pupils older than 9 years			
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
word – picture (object)	100	0	0	0	43	18	23	16	14	11	18	57
word – word	0	41	23	36	34	25	16	25	36	6	44	14
word – word family	0	30	54	16	9	43	30	18	11	55	25	9
word – text	0	30	20	50	14	14	34	38	39	16	36	9

All students (44, 100%) selected explanation with the support of a picture or of an adequate object as the most appropriate (marked with number 4) way of explaining less known words to less than 7 years old pupils, which at this level corresponds to the development stage of children (concrete logical operations). Such way of explaining less known words to 8 to 9 years old pupils was selected by 43% of students and to more than 9 years old pupils by 14% of students.

Explanation with word as the most appropriate (marked with number 4) way of explaining less known words to 8 to 9 years old pupils was selected by 34% of students and for pupils older than 9 years by 36% of students. We had expected such way would be selected by a larger number of students, as at this stage pupils are already relatively good readers and it is with words exactly that explanation of less known words in the selected literary texts is already given in their readers.

Explanation of less known words with word family was selected as the most appropriate for 8 to years old pupils by 9% of students, and for those older than 9 years by 11%. According to the opinion of a majority of students such way of explaining is not the most appropriate; we believe students do probably not yet have the experience or cannot imagine in what ways the process of such explanation would be carried out, so examples of good practice would be needed, based on which they would be able to acquire the adequate procedure.

Explanation of less known words with text as the way of explaining less known words was selected by 14% of students with 8 to 9 years old pupils and with more than 9 years old pupils by 39% of students, which had been expected, as pupils are already relatively good readers also of longer texts and are thus able to get the meaning of less known words faster also from the context. None of the students, however, decided to select the explanation of less known words with text as the most appropriate for pupils younger than 7 years. The least often (number 1) as many as half of the students—50% of them—would select explaining less known words with text as the most appropriate way for less than 7 years old pupils. With picture or object 16% of students would explain the least often to 8 to 9 years old pupils, and 57% to pupils older than 9 years.

With word 36% of students would explain less known words to less than 7 years old pupils, 25% to 8 to 9 years old pupils, and 14% of students to pupils older than 9 years. With word family 16% of students would explain less known words to less than 7 years old pupils, 18% to 8 to 9 years old pupils, and 9% to more than 9 years old pupils.

With text 14% of students would explain less known words to 8 to 9 years old pupils, and 39% of students to pupils older than 9 years. As the least appropriate way of explaining less known words explanation with text to pupils younger than 7 years was selected by 50% of students and for 8 to 9 years old pupils by 39% of students. Reading text with understanding is still a very demanding activity for beginning readers, so students' decisions do not come as a surprise.

### Explanation of the meaning of designations for nouns, verbs, and adjectives

The students decided in what way they would explain the unknown designations for nouns, verbs, and adjectives by selecting numbers in the range from 4 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest). The table below outlines the ways of explaining for individual designations.

Table 4. Ways of explaining designations for nouns, verbs, and adjectives

<i>Method of explanation</i>	<b>Nouns</b>				<b>Verbs</b>				<b>Adjectives</b>			
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
word – picture (object)	87	0	6	7	30	18	22	30	16	16	14	45
word – word	5	37	18	40	27	30	20	23	50	20	20	14
word – word family	2	36	52	10	16	32	25	27	16	39	32	23
word – text	6	27	24	43	27	20	23	20	18	25	34	18

The most frequently (ranked the highest – 4) the students selected the following ways of explaining less known designations: for explanation of less known words belonging to nouns as many as 86% students selected picture (object), which to a certain extent is appropriate with the explanation of designations for concrete objects, while such method of explaining is especially far less efficient with explanation of concepts.

Half of the students, i.e. 50%, would explain the adjectives the meaning of which is unknown to pupils with another word (a synonym). We believe namely for many an adjective also the explanation based on word family or text can be appropriate.

To explain unknown designations for verbs the students selected the possibilities in approximately equal proportions: 30% would explain unknown meanings for verbs with picture (object), 27% with word or text, and 16% with word family.

The least often (ranked the lowest – 1) the students selected explanation of unknown designations for nouns with word – 41%, and text – 43%. They would explain adjectives the least often with picture (object), i.e. 45%, and with word family 23%, and they would not explain verbs with picture (object) – 30%, and with word family – 27%.

They would almost never, rarely (marked with number 2) explain the designation of nouns the meaning of which is unknown to pupils with word family, i.e. 52% of students which is slightly surprising, as it is precisely designations for nouns that can be reasonably explained with word families.

## Findings in conclusion

To develop active use of productive linguistic and literary didactic methods for work with children in preschool and in school period is one of the most important tasks of preschool and of school teachers, so the acquisition of more up to date premises about early literacy, among which there certainly also is the strategy of explaining less known words, requires a separate professional discussion.

The findings brought by the data from the survey questionnaire indicate in educating future teachers special attention should be dedicated to developing modern strategies in the acquisition of all kinds of texts. In the development of communication and literary competence of children and in the selection of appropriate teaching approach it is essential to select quality texts from juvenile literature. At the same time in reading activities open ways for experiencing and understanding all layers of text more deeply are encouraged, as it is only in this way they will become able to assess, draw conclusions, evaluate, and thus develop critical reading—the latter namely is one of the major shortcomings of teaching reading in basic school. The above findings are determined by the National Assessment of Knowledge of Slovenian in Basic School and by the Progress in International Study of Reading Literacy of fourth-grade pupils<sup>12</sup> and fifteen years old learners<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> PIRLS, *Mednarodna raziskava bralne pismenosti PIRLS*, Ljubljana 2011, <http://www.pei.si/Sifranti/InternationalProject.aspx?id=20> [accessed: 5.01.2015].

<sup>13</sup> PISA, *Prvi rezultati*, Ljubljana 2009, [http://www.pei.si/UserFilesUpload/file/raziskovalna\\_dejavnost/PISA/PISA2009/PISA2009\\_prviRezultati.pdf](http://www.pei.si/UserFilesUpload/file/raziskovalna_dejavnost/PISA/PISA2009/PISA2009_prviRezultati.pdf) [accessed: 4.01.2015].

