

Ada Pirš

Assessment Papers and National Assessment Papers in the Slovenian Language

Well-developed reading literacy is essential to the successful functioning of individuals in society, in education processes, in the workplace, and in life in general. According to PISA, reading literacy is defined as "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" (Pedagogical Institute, 2016, p. 59).

Therefore, it can be argued that the higher the reading literacy level of an individual, the more successful he or she is in his or her daily life. The prerequisite for achieving reading literacy is reading, which involves many components, two of which are particularly distinct. The first refers to the reading process, which includes the decoding process and the reading comprehension process, and the second refers to the stages in reading development, where the learning to read stage and the learning by reading stage are prominent (Pečjak, 1995).

The transition from the learning to read stage to the learning by reading stage in an average individual is expected to occur between the ages of 9 and 14 (Chall, 1996). This transition covers the period of education of an individual in the second three-year cycle of elementary school and is especially encouraged during Slovenian language lessons.

According to the Curriculum (2018), 175 hours are allocated to teaching the Slovenian language in each class in the second three-year cycle, i.e. 525 hours in total. During these hours, pupils acquire knowledge and skills in the field of language and literature. The accomplishment of curriculum goals, the transition of pupils from the learning to read stage to the learning by reading stage, and the level of reading literacy of pupils in Slovenian lessons are checked and assessed by teachers. In checking and assessing the knowledge through assessment papers, it is important for teachers to draw on the learning objectives and standards of knowledge defined in the curriculum, to direct attention to various cognitive levels according to the taxonomy of cognitive processes, and to prepare a variety of tasks in assessment papers. Tasks differ depending on the type of reply required, and on whether or not they contain introductory text or other content display formats (e.g. graphs, tables, figures).

At the end of the second three-year cycle, in the 6th grade, the attainment of the objectives and knowledge standards laid down in the curriculum, as well as the level of reading literacy of pupils, are also checked by the National Examination Centre using the national assessment papers in Slovenian. According to the data provided by this centre, at the end of the second three-year cycle, i.e. in the 6th grade, sixth graders in the 2021/2022 school year on average achieved only 45.5% of the total points in the national assessment papers (National Examination Centre, 2022a) and 50.5% in the 2022/2023 school year (National Examination Centre, 2023).

In the national assessment papers of the Slovenian language, sixth graders on average achieve only around 50% of the total points. Likewise, the PIRLS 2021 study detected a decrease in the average reading achievement among fourth graders (Klemenčič & Mirazchiyski, 2023), while the PISA 2022 study observed a decrease in the average reading achievement among 15-year-old pupils (Pedagogical Institute, 2023). The above reading levels of pupils are in contrast to a statement made in the *White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia* (Krek & Metljak, 2011), which states that efforts should be made towards the goal of pupils' achievements in basic subjects – such as mathematics, science, and reading literacy – ranking in the top third of the developed countries.



With all of the above in mind, a question arises over the tasks prepared by 6th grade teachers of the Slovenian language in their assessment papers for assessing pupils' knowledge; tasks that result in pupils averaging only about half of the total points in the national assessment papers, while according to international research, pupils' reading achievements are in decline. The aim of this research was therefore to identify similarities and differences between the tasks of assessment papers and those of national assessment papers in Slovenian in 6th grade, according to the cognitive levels and types of tasks. The aim was also to determine the links between different types and cognitive levels of tasks in assessment papers, and national assessment papers in the 6th grade Slovenian language from the point of view of developing pupils' reading literacy.

The research included six 6th grade national assessment papers in Slovenian, obtained from the website of the National Examination Centre, and nineteen 6th grade assessment papers prepared by the Slovenian language teachers from eight elementary schools.

The tasks in the national assessment papers and in the assessment papers were classified according to cognitive level on the basis of Bloom's taxonomy, as well as according to type.

The cognitive levels of the national assessment papers' tasks were adopted from the National Examination Centre, while the cognitive levels of the tasks in the assessment papers obtained from teachers were determined by us. The classification of tasks was based on a four-level assessment scale, which distinguishes the following cognitive levels from lowest to highest: 1 - knowledge, 2 - understanding, 3 - application, and 4 - analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Regarding type, we classified all tasks into tasks related to literature or language; open or closed type tasks, specifying that the open type tasks include tasks requiring pupils to write a longer and complete text, while all other tasks were classified as closed type tasks; and tasks that require reading of the text or other content display formats (e.g. graphs, tables, figures), or tasks where reading is not required.

In both the assessment papers and the national assessment papers, the most common tasks were those that required pupils to demonstrate a comprehension of the text. They accounted for 47% in the assessment papers and 47.1% in the national assessment papers. In the assessment papers, the next most common (24.6%) were tasks at the level of knowledge, which only required pupils to find information that was clearly written in the text, or to rely on sufficient pre-existing knowledge, with higher thinking processes not necessary. In the national assessment papers, the next most common tasks were those that required pupils to demonstrate their knowledge and comprehension in a concrete way, i.e. by using knowledge and comprehension in a new or similar situation. These application level tasks constituted 23.6% of the national assessment papers. Tasks of this level were among the third most common in the assessment papers, representing 22.4%, while in the national assessment papers, tasks that required pupils to analyse a text, compare two texts, or link information from several texts were among the third most common. Tasks at the level of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation represented 21% in the national assessment papers. Such tasks comprised at least 6% of the assessment papers, while tasks at the level of knowledge, in which the pupils looked for information that was explicitly written in the text, were the least common in the national assessment papers, accounting for 8.3%.

Tasks and texts in the field of language were predominant in both the assessment papers and the national assessment papers, although the ratio of literature tasks to language tasks was much

lower in the assessment papers than in the national assessment papers. In the assessment papers, literature tasks represented 16.4% and language tasks 83.6%, while in the national assessment papers 38.2% were literature tasks and 61.8% language tasks.

There were no significant differences in the types of tasks in the assessment papers and the national assessment papers. Both comprised mostly closed type tasks, that is, tasks that did not require pupils to write a longer and complete text. Open type tasks, i.e. tasks that required more extensive writing, represented 3.2% in the assessment papers and 8.3% in the national assessment papers.

A significant difference between the assessment papers and the national assessment papers was noted in terms of whether tasks required the reading of a text or other content display formats (e.g. graphs, tables, figures). The assessment papers mostly included tasks that did not require reading a text or other content display formats, which represented 62.1%, while the national assessment papers comprised predominantly tasks that required reading, representing 73.2%.

There was a statistically significant correlation between a certain type of task and the difficulty level of tasks, as both in the assessment papers and in the national assessment papers, open type tasks and tasks related to texts or other content display formats represented a higher difficulty level.

To increase the consistency between assessment paper tasks and national assessment paper tasks, it would be necessary to increase the proportion of literature tasks and tasks of the highest cognitive level in assessment papers, and to decrease their proportion of knowledge level tasks, as tasks of higher cognitive levels require higher thinking processes, and these lead to the development of reading literacy in general and at higher levels. A greater proportion of higher cognitive level tasks in assessment papers could also be achieved by increasing the proportion of tasks related to reading a text or other content display formats (e.g. graphs, tables, figures) and the proportion of open type tasks, since such tasks, as the research has shown, are mostly higher cognitive level tasks.

The reading literacy of pupils does not develop only in the second three-year cycle of elementary school, or only in the Slovenian language lessons, but also in all other subjects and throughout the vertical of primary education. From the point of view of developing pupils' reading literacy, it would therefore be reasonable in the future to examine assessment papers from other classes and other subjects, depending on the cognitive levels and types of tasks. This would make it possible to prepare sufficiently diverse and demanding assessment papers in other classes and for other subjects, too, which could contribute to raising the level of pupils' reading literacy and at the same time to improving pupils' achievements in both the national assessment papers of the Slovenian language, and in international research in the field of reading literacy.