

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT READING (ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS)

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Abstract. The problem of developing students' reading skills has been extensively discussed in the scientific literature. The statements are diverse—from the conviction that Bulgarian students do not read enough or do not have sufficiently developed skills, to the opposite opinion that reading has not been ignored, but the approach, patterns, and ways in which it is carried out have changed. The article presents data from a qualitative study on five group interviews, with six students participating in each. The data obtained are heterogeneous. Factors such as family environment, type of school, family reading practices have a significant impact on students' attitudes towards reading and their reading practices. Differences are observed in terms of students' motivation to read and educate themselves, in terms of the type of school, in attitudes towards reading. The data show that students do not prefer fiction, but choose short texts with more visual content associated with easy to perceive and process information.

Keywords: interview; students' reading practices; educational inequality

The problem of developing students' reading skills has been discussed on multilayered in the scientific literature. Analyses and claims about the reading practices of the Bulgarian students are multidirectional – from the conviction that Bulgarian students do not read enough or do not have sufficiently developed reading skills, to the contrary opinion that reading has not been ignored, but the approach, patterns and ways of its realization have changed. A key question, however, is how we understand the scope of the concept: as reading for the purpose of absorbing information, as reading for the purpose of making sense of a text, as reading for pleasure and entertainment, as reading for learning, and so on. Factors such as motivation, social context, interests, etc. influence the outcome of reading practices.

In the Bulgarian language curriculum for the lower secondary stage, working with text is an essential activity in learning. “An element of the methodological concept of the programmes is the understanding that Bulgarian language classes

in grades XI and XII are dominated by activities related to reading texts from various sources, with the aim of developing students' skills to extract, make sense of, understand and apply the information to solve a variety of communicative tasks (i.e. to improve their functional literacy and develop their critical thinking skills)" (Petrov 2022, p. 42). An essential role is given to working with media and scientific texts in order to explore not only their characteristics but also the possibilities for developing reading skills. However, one of the main questions raised in this text is how to make the prescribed curriculum work in the reality of levels of educational inequality and an increasingly uncertain struggle to motivate students to read, to overcome the possibly conflicting co-existing patterns of reading in terms of prestige, purpose, form, etc.

In this article, we present data from a qualitative study conducted through five group interviews, each involving six students. Two interviews were conducted in Sofia with students of grade 12 from secondary schools with a foreign language profile in the capital (traditionally among the most desirable schools). The other three groups were conducted in a vocational high school in a small town in the country, with students in the following groups: in the first group, students of grade 9 (vocational high school); in the second group, students of grade 10 (vocational high school); of the third group, students in grade 11 (vocational high school). The objectives of the interviews are: to find out when, how and why the interviewees read; to find out the preferred reading materials; to determine the frequency of reading; to investigate the reading habits and practices of the interviewees. The resulting data is extremely heterogeneous. Factors such as the family environment, type of school, family-based reading practices significantly influence students' attitudes toward reading and their reading practices.

Structure of the interview

The interviews are structured in three main groups of questions: "What do you read?", "How often do you read?", "What are your reading preferences?". The first group includes the questions "What type of literature do you prefer to read?"; "Do you read fiction, scientific literature, literature from websites?"; "How much do you enjoy reading novels, poetry, etc.?"; "What is the topic of the texts you prefer reading?"; "What attracts you to this topic?"; "What is the last book you read?". The purpose of the questions in the first group is to obtain data on the students' experience of fiction and, mostly, their preferences in terms of format (on screen or on paper), genre, genus, etc. Next, the preferred reading environment as well as the issues of interest to the interviewees are explored.

The second group covers the main questions: "Do you read for pleasure?"; "What do you read for pleasure?"; "Do you read with learning purpose?"; "What type of literature and how often?"; "Do you reread books you have already read? If you do, why?"; "How often do you read for pleasure?"; "How often do you read

for study?"; "How often do you read per week, at what times?"; "Does reading for pleasure coincide with reading for study?"; "When you read, what techniques do you use (highlighting, generalization, summarizing, transcribing important passages)?". The second group of questions is oriented towards the reading practices applied, motivation for reading, the students' absence or awareness of the difference between reading for recreation, reading for study, etc.

The third group covers the questions, "What medium do you prefer to read in? Why?"; "When do you read on paper and when on screen?"; "Is there a difference in the way you read on paper and on screen?"; "What digital devices do you prefer?". The third group of questions refers to the type of medium. The aim is to find out what the differences are in the choices that students make when reading on screen and when reading on paper, i.e. what texts (according to their functional-stylistic varieties and themes) they prefer to read on screen or on paper (traditional book body) and what motivates this difference.

The groups of questions presented are also the basis on which the results of the interviews are systematized, presenting data that are not directly related to reading issues, but which present additional factors related to constructed attitudes toward reading, education, learning, and outlining directions of value attitudes of the students interviewed.

What do students read?

Students' attitudes towards fiction remain contradictory. Interview data conducted in a small town in the country demonstrate a definite refusal to read fiction. According to the first participant, fiction is considered distant, "unrelated to life and current issues." There is a preference for reading articles (electronically) that relate to issues of 'society'. However, when asked further, the student failed to explain what it means for topics to be related to society. For the second interviewee, the focus was on reading media texts, but there was no evidence of any selection in terms of topics and content. The only thing the student specified was his interest in the issues. For the third respondent, the focus was firmly on reading media texts, with fiction remaining on the periphery of choice. There is a stated interest in reading about current topics from the country and the world, love stories shared on the internet claiming to be authentic, articles about the love lives of celebrities, but a definite refusal to read fiction. Interest is also shown in texts about personal and career growth, which is not surprising given the age group – 11th grade ("I'm more into personal and career development stuff. For personal development, I read about stocks and cryptocurrencies"). In an additional question, it turns out that the student does not plan to continue his education, so career guidance turns out to be essential. The same tendency towards refusal to read fiction is also observed in grade 9 students from the small town. The focus is mainly on reading media texts on issues of interest to students (combustion

engines, fashion, religion). In some of the answers, there is also a clear refusal to read any texts. One of the students shares that the only text she reads is the subtitles of films. Students prefer videos with short content, visual aids, quick pictorial information that requires modest resources of time and concentration and that offers quick forms of perceptual gratification.

Data from interviews conducted with students at a language school in Sofia show the same tendency towards reading fiction. It is left on the periphery of the experience, although it is not completely ignored ("I certainly prefer to read not fiction but scientific literature"). Fantasy and science fiction texts are preferred. Occasional mention is made of texts with philosophical content or crime novels. However, students can name specific authors whose texts they have read recently, e.g. Dan Brown, Rick Riordan, Franz Kafka, Plato. Along with this, they list all the authors whose texts are studied in the compulsory preparation in both high school stages. Often, the screened versions are taken as the source, which changes the original perception of the literary text. However, lack of depth, rapid saturation of information, non-detailed insight are among the possible reasons for choosing the screened version over the reading of the fiction text (whether read on screen or on paper). A readymade image has a stronger impact than the imagination. The screened version provides the quick, ready-to-consume faces, plots, and settings that the reader of the fiction text is expected to acquire. This explains the almost unanimous conviction of interviewees that they would prefer the screened to the traditional (text) version of the fiction work.

The reading of media and scientific texts is given priority, also not noticing a pre-stated problematic, but rather focusing on the possibilities of the publication to arouse the reader's interest. Here again, political issues remain neglected by the students' experience (only one respondent was observed to focus on political issues). Everyday topics ('about the traffic situation', 'about people's lives') are of interest.

One significant observation concerns the reluctance and stated inability to check the source of information, regardless of the nature of the information presented. According to interviewees, only information that is too shocking can provoke hesitation. In most cases, however, they accept to trust the information, sharing the lack of time, the lack of opportunity, the constant state of anxiety as the main factors for the lack of a sufficiently reflexive and measured attitude towards information sources.

A generation is observed that is show-oriented, that is excited by texts with quick consumption, that do not take much time to read, and in which spectacle, the exposure of the private life, is part of the model for living, and the overexposure of the private world is thought of as a natural state, where feelings and sensations, rather than the rational, lead the way. The depiction of reality is too general, too schematic. There is a lack of awareness of reality as a "mélange", and the only

interpretation of it is in terms of the positive and the negative, of “I like it”/ “I don't like it”. With extreme ease, students dismiss opportunities to interpret or talk about topics that do not pique their interest. There is a rather schematic, contained state which affects their attitude towards school, the world and literature. This paradox emerges against a backdrop of exalted talk about open borders, about the availability of a lot of information that is no longer clear whether it is a benefactor or an enemy for the construction of students' values. Screens and picture-switching are much more tempting because they don't involve specifically learning how to watch television, whereas reading involves an intellectual crisis, the education of the practices of reading. “ The current media environment also develops quite different receptive attitudes from those associated with reading books. If the act of reading is in principle the result of one's own choice, things are quite different when it comes to watching television [...] The viewer actually has very limited choices. If one does not like the book one is reading, one usually puts it down or moves on to another book one likes, whereas, as numerous surveys attest, viewers often find themselves unable to stop watching television even when they do not like, do not approve of, what they are watching (Hristova-Peeva 2021, p. 124).

Preferred reading language

The data of the students from secondary schools with foreign language profile in the capital show that they predominantly choose to read fiction literature in Bulgarian, but media and scientific literature in a foreign language (English), and the arguments given in favour of this are the following: the higher degree of trust in foreign sources; the lack of sufficient freedom of speech in Bulgaria; distortion of information; insufficiently good translations of scientific literature into Bulgarian; shorter and more schematically presented information in English-language websites. When reading fiction in a foreign language, this is usually explained by a pragmatic aim – to expand the vocabulary.

One of the students chooses to read media texts in English because he is interested in sports, following profiles of athletes and accepting that sports journalism in this country does not provide enough comprehensive information about sports worldwide. The source of this information is usually social media. One interviewee said that when he reads fiction in the original language, he prefers to do so in English because he distrusts translations and shows an understanding that any translation is a 'rewriting' of the text.

Data from students at a vocational high school in the small town show that students prefer not to read in a foreign language, insofar as this is a result of poor foreign language proficiency (according to interviewees' self-assessment) and a refusal to read fiction. They say that they read subtitles and short texts in a foreign language on social networks, but do not mention, for example, the use of

educational videos in order to master the language.

Habits and time of reading

Reading habits show a tendency towards preferred social media reading, which takes place continuously throughout the day and often interrupts other reading practices or definitively replaces reading for study and reading for pleasure (an observation shared by reading students in Sofia and from the small town). Reading for learning purposes is limited to preparation for tests, examinations or other types of assessment and is usually only actively pursued as the term approaches. Three of the interviewees (Sofia) said that they read regularly for study purposes every day in a period of about 5 hours. Reading fiction is left to the time freed from social contacts and social media interaction, usually is in the evening, is short and irregular, which means that there are no clearly established habits for reading fiction. Students read more actively in the summer, which can also be explained by their engagement during the school year, when free time is expectedly scarce. This is not surprising given the rest of the students' responses and the outright refusal to read fiction. Students spend at least 2 hours a day on social media. Only one of the interviewees shows a refusal to be on social media regularly. The presence of multiple distractions makes fiction unattractive. No mention of reading fiction online either. Students read, but rarely and sporadically ("I mainly read textbooks for three hours a day; subtitles and social media for about 3 hours, I hardly read fiction"; "I read mainly in the summer, but more subtitles, game articles, videos. I only read fiction for two hours, only in the summer. For study purposes I read 1 – 2 hours a day. I read subtitles every day for about 40 minutes"; I don't read subtitles or media. Mostly I read for study – 10 hours a day. Outside of exam preparation, I study 5 hours a day and read fiction 5 hours a day (3 times a day); "Minimum 4 hours of social media, minimum 2 hours of subtitles, fiction alone two to three months a year (less than an hour a day), I read 3 books a year"; "I hardly read fiction, but I spend 5 hours a day on social media, I only prepare for school if I have homework or an exam, otherwise I wouldn't sit down to prepare, but whatever it is, I make sure it doesn't exceed two hours because I can't keep my attention longer than that. With studying it's even harder to concentrate").

The time for reading fiction for small-town students is limited to Bulgarian language and literature classes at school, and the activity is more like listening to the text or parts of it read by the teacher. It is impossible to speak of established practices in reading fiction for pleasure. Reading for learning purposes is not observed, with respondents saying that they spent no more than 10 minutes a month preparing for school, reducing this type of activity to minimal levels. The essential problem is that there are no established practices of learning, there is not enough engagement with the learning process outside of school time, which can

be attributed to many factors: lack of interest, reluctance, lack of concentration, lack of motivation, deemphasizing the role of school as such. It may be that school as we know it now only oscillates around 'old capital', it moves according to tradition, but the devaluation of education leads to the formal presence of students in it.

For both groups of interviewees, the preferred reading is of film subtitles, which occurs in the evening, and the motivation is watching films and series, which action displaces reading fiction.

Another aspect of reading practices relates to the coincidence of reading for pleasure with reading for academic purposes. In the case of the first interviewee from a metropolitan school, reading for pleasure coincides with reading for academic purposes when it relates to preparing for entrance examinations for his field of study. The same person claims that he reads the pre-requisite texts in literature if they are prose but does not prefer poetry. He reads with interest *The Ballad of Georg Henich* and *Song of the Wheels*. They were read not of his own volition but as a result of discussions about them in literature classes. For the second interviewee from a metropolitan school, reading for pleasure and reading for academic purposes do not match because even when "interesting," texts from the literature curriculum do not match students' choices. The main resistance is against the compulsory reading of certain literary texts. In the case of the third interviewee from a metropolitan school, reading for academic purposes matches one's own interest only in the subjects of biology and chemistry. Attitudes towards the works of fiction included in the curriculum are strongly influenced by the way they are discussed in Bulgarian language and literature classes. The student specifies that he does not read them in advance, but if the discussion about them arouses his interest, he chooses to read them independently. For the fourth interviewee from a metropolitan school, reading for pleasure coincides with reading fiction from the compulsory curriculum only if it is prose and if it refers to the authors Viktor Paskov, Elin Pelin, Yordan Yovkov. In the case of the fifth interviewee from a metropolitan school, reading for academic purposes is related to the own selection of scientific and media literature. The interviewee states a categorical refusal to read on issues outside his own interests. Some of the students insist that the works included in the literature curriculum represent a canon that has been selected, evaluated and therefore chosen as reading. The same students argue that compulsory texts should be studied, but along with this students can be given choices. The sixth interviewee from a metropolitan school shares the view that some of the works of literature were interesting and their compulsory presence motivated students to read them, which they would not have done otherwise. In terms of reading for academic purposes, the choice of profiling subjects appears to be a good solution, as the student chooses according to his interests. In the case of the seventh interviewee from a metropolitan school,

the presence of compulsory literature makes reading undesirable, although texts that arouse interest are mentioned – “The Peach Thief” by Emilian Stanev, stories by Elin Pelin. In the case of the eighth interviewee from a metropolitan school, texts from the compulsory curriculum coincide with reading for pleasure, which began under compulsion but ended with desire.

The 9th grade students interviewed from a small town state a categorical refusal to read the texts from the compulsory curriculum even after they had been commented on in literature classes. One of the arguments for the refusal is the nature of the compulsory texts to be studied. Students said that the language and content were distant and incomprehensible to them (“No, because it's not interesting. If it's not interesting to you, how are you going to read it?” (9th grade), “The language is strange. There are non understandable words” (Grade 9), “In my free time I do something other than reading. Otherwise, I read texts from compulsory literature because I have to” (Grade 9); “I can't be grabbed by anything in fiction, I can't sit down to read it” (Grade 11); “I don't read fiction either because it doesn't hold my interest, because it's long. My interests are different from that” (Grade 11). For the Grade 11 students surveyed, there is a hesitant interest in reading fictional works of required literature, again occurring immediately after being introduced to texts in literature classes (“I was also grabbed by The Iron Oil Lamp and I watched it on the screen but I didn't read it. I liked the whole story with the family and how things developed. It's sad how things turn out in the end in the family, but the story is enlightening. I read it after we took the class. The lady-teacher was talking about it and it lit me up” (11th grade); “I like it, but I don't have time. So I want to read more in the summer. I make a list and read for school. Otherwise, I like short stories more because they can show you more things than real life, and poetry is unreal to real life” (11th grade).

Preferences to reading format (on screen or on paper)

The widespread claim that students prefer reading on a screen to reading on paper has been proven false and speculative. Reading on paper still remains the preferred source for academic reading and for fiction. Screen reading is a relevant factor when spending time on social networks, when reading articles for entertainment, news and current scientific information (“I prefer to read scientific literature on paper because it's easier to remember that way, fiction too because it's comforting. Media information I prefer to get from electronic devices because at any moment the information is up-to-date”; “I prefer to read on paper because the book stays and you can open it at any time”; “I prefer to read fiction on paper because it's easier. If I have to watch a movie, I choose on my phone”; “I prefer paper for fiction. Articles and scientific texts – on phone”). Students recognize the existing difference in perception between screen and paper, with

the majority reporting that they concentrate more when reading on paper, read more thoroughly and retain more information, whereas when reading on a screen they experience distraction, poor recall, uncertainty when reading and an attitude of consuming information quickly. It has been observed and argued that there is no difference between the perception of information on paper and on screen, which is not surprising in the hybrid situation of having different forms of text delivery. Students who do not register differences in the two types of reading are likely to have well-developed electronic reading skills.

Some additional observations and conclusions

The issue of educational inequalities clearly emerges in the focus group samples presented. It is commented in a study conducted by Valentina Milenkova, who defines “elite” schools as “a social order of elite formation and socialization” (Milenkova 2011, p. 82). Decentralization and diversification of educational services are also highlighted among the reasons for educational inequalities in Bulgaria, which are supported by the grading system (Deyanova, 2020). At the same time, this system is not valid in small towns where the number of students applying after grade 7 exactly covers, and may be lower than the number of advertised vacancies. The evidence presented shows that there is a difference between the economic and social profile of parents in different schools, with parents of pupils in 'elite' secondary schools predominantly of higher social and economic status. The data issues described in this article relate to a division based on school type, not on school location. Students in vocational schools (in the context of this study in a small town) demonstrate lower levels of knowledge skills and deficits in reading practices. The reasons for this can be found in different ways: in the lack of motivation to learn, in the low score with which students are admitted to the vocational high school after grade 7; in the lack of additional support, in the lack of sufficient social cultural life, in the lower number of classes in Bulgarian language and literature compared to those in high schools with a language profile. Students interviewed in a small town say that they have never attended extra classes (e.g. in private schools and education centres) as their admission was assured due to the small number of students applying for the school in question. The inequality is expressed in the contradiction between the competition that students in large cities are subjected to in admission after grade 7 and the absolute lack of it in small cities. This leads to demotivation of students and a breakdown in the desire for self-development, self-directed learning, etc., which also affects the development of reading skills. Low levels of cognitive and metacognitive learning and reading skills, however, imply a low socio-economic status in the future.

Students who express an interest in reading share about a significant number of books available in their homes, as well as about reading practices of their

parents. Interest in books is born not so much within the school as in the family environment, therefore teachers, independently and without the support of parents, would not be able to awaken interest in reading. The essential problem facing our society is not what the Bulgarian student should read, but how to awaken interest in the book and how to educate the student in a patient and consistent attitude towards reading.

The lack of reflection on the sources of information is problematic, because the interviewees share that they rarely check the sources of information and usually trust what is written on the Internet. Also worrying is the fact that the author of media texts and scientific articles is irrelevant to students who rarely read and check other texts by the same author. The projects for building intercultural competence, understood as “knowledge and skills acquired in a learning environment, on the basis of which conditions are created for the formation of such relations to the native culture (...), necessary for building qualities of the “intercultural personality” of the student’ (Mavrova 2016, p. 218), remain neglected.

Texts with political content remain outside the interests of students, which increasingly shows that the project of civic education has not taken place, because according to the confidence of the students themselves, they live in a society in which their opinion is irrelevant and does not influence the ongoing political processes.

Limits

Interview research does not allow generalizations to be made about general trends in reading practices. In subsequent studies, the number of interviewees could be expanded and a more in-depth comparison of demographic factors could be made, covering a different type of school (primary and secondary) in the country to define a wider perimeter of analysis.

The object of comparison can also be secondary schools with a language profile in Sofia and in the big cities compared to vocational high schools.

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