

## Through the PIRLS Looking Glass: Perspectives in Reading Literacy in Romania

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### Abstract

*The paper starts from an analysis of the Romanian four graders' results in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). This shows rather low scores as compared to the international average in all of the the four reading comprehension processes, namely focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements.*

*An analysis of the curricular provision for reading has also been carried out in order to determine to what extent the PIRLS comprehension processes represent targets for the students' learning in primary education. The results of this analysis highlight a gap between the Romanian curriculum in a broad sense - official provision and classroom practice - and the competences involved in reading literacy.*

*In order to bridge this gap the paper highlights new perspectives to approach reading comprehension with 10-11 year olds. Firstly, the students are offered one of the literary texts from the previous PIRLS cycles so that they become familiar with contemporary children's literature. Secondly, they are challenged with the inquisitive questions that target the four comprehension processes. Thirdly, they are involved in interdisciplinary projects which mainly focus the text interpretation and the evaluation of textual elements, as the scores of the Romanian students are particularly low in these two processes. On the basis of observation grids, the paper shows how the students improve their comprehension processes and they become more motivated for reading.*

Key words: processes in reading comprehension, interdisciplinary projects, traditional /vs/ innovative approaches to reading, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

### 1. Results in reading comprehension. Unflattering comparizons

The starting point of my paper lies in a thorough analysis of the results of the Romanian 4 graders in the Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS). In an overall perspective, these results are situated below the international average, as shown in the international database [4]. Nevertheless if action is to be taken in order to improve the reading performance of our students we need to answer more specific questions, such as: How do students score within the various reading processes? (keeping in mind that the PIRLS study targets four reading processes: *retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements*); How are our results compared to countries of similar socio-economic and historical background (neighbouring former communist countries for instance)?

In order to answer these questions I compared the results in the four released tests of the PIRLS 2006 study. The selected countries for my comparizon were – besides Romania – the first in the hierarchy, the last in the hierarchy and two other former communist neighbours who are also EU members of recent date (just like Romania) – Hungary and Bulgaria. I drew tables of scores for all the items in the four released tests. As an illustration, the table below (see Table 1) shows the results of the countries selected according to the provision above for an item that looks into the second reading process (i.e. *make straightforward inferences*) [7]

Country	Correct answers (%)
Hong Kong	81.6%
Hungary	80.8%
Bulgaria	73,8%
<b>Romania</b>	<b>63.9%</b>

Marocco	49.2%
South Africa	32.7%
International average	66.3%

Table 1 – Scores for 'make straightforward inferences' – first and last ranking countries, Romania and neighbours

In the above presented case, The Romanian students' results are far lower than our neighbours's, slightly lower than the international average and not so far away of the last ranking countries. When it comes to the last two processes (*interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements*) which require a deeper understanding, a genuine active reading, the results become even worse. As shown below (see Table 2), only 8% of our students were able to show full understanding while more than half were not able to grasp any meaning at all.

Country	Full understanding (%)	Average understanding (%)	Limited understanding (%)
Hong Kong	48.0%	22.5%	13.7%
Hungary	46.1%	28.3%	19.2%
Bulgaria	26.8%	23.6%	26.7%
<b>Romania</b>	<b>8.8%</b>	<b>11.3%</b>	<b>24.8%</b>
Trinidad Tobago	7.5%	8.0%	23.0%
Qatar	0.5%	18.4%	3.9%
Marocco	0.3%	0.2%	6.9%
International average	15.8%	15.5%	28.4%

Table 2: Scores for 'interpret and integrate ideas'- first and last ranking countries, Romania and neighbours

The data show that Romanian students (unlike Bulgarian and Hungarian students with whom they share a common history and similar socio-economical contexts) have huge problems to interpret and integrate ideas from the texts they read. They are not able to reflect upon the reading, to give personal answers to the challenges of the text. They cannot find evidence in the text in order to identify the characters' features or to motivate a description.

The conclusion I drew from the compared analysis of the students' results in PIRLS is that we lack a quality reading training in primary school (and if we correlate these results with the ones in PISA, in secondary education as well!).

The next question to ask is if the curricular provision and the subsequent reading practices are at fault.

## 2. The reading curriculum. Possible explanations for the results in PIRLS

I analysed the reading curriculum in grades 3 and 4 in order to see what the objectives are [6] and how these converge towards the four reading processes mentioned above. The curriculum seems flexible enough so that many innovative strategies can be implemented. But beyond the declarations and the good intentions phrased in the foreword of the official document, the actual statements of attainment hardly invite to critical thinking and active reading. While analysing the results of the Romanian students, item by item, I tried to correlate the curricular objectives with the items and processes. This was quite difficult since reading comprehension is dealt with in a general way and there is hardly any clear correspondence between the Romanian curriculum and the PIRLS provision. I list below the only curricular objectives (all found in the grade 4 reading curriculum) that can be connected to the PIRLS processes:

- select the main ideas and details from a literary/ non-literary text

- manifest interest and initiative to read various literary/ non-literary texts
- identify the characters' physical and moral traits

The conclusion of my analysis is not very flattering for the national curriculum. The provision for reading does not offer a clear vision for the reading for comprehension processes. The poor results in PIRLS are actually the consequence of too loose curricular provision as well as of the traditional practice which does not value critical thinking and the reader's personal involvement [3].

### 3. Reading as a challenge. Strategies to enhance better reading

If the national curriculum is not very generous with highlighting the reading competences, it nevertheless sustains both traditional and innovative strategies. A (very) loose curricular provision allows teachers to innovate, despite the lack of vision. In this perspective, I list and illustrate below various reading for comprehension catalysts that could support students to become more active and proficient readers

#### 3.1 Reading markers. Making use of emoticons or other conventional signs

The first encounter with the text is always very important. I suggest to start by making use of a system of conventional signs. This can be agreed upon at class level and displayed in the room as well as at the front of the students' Language notebook.



Fig. 1 Pencil in hand: first encounter with the text

In order to make reading more motivating I borrowed the emoticons that are so very familiar to nowadays students. Here are some basic reading conventions that we use:

- 😊 loved it, found it interesting
- 😞 couldn't get it
- 😕 haven't thought of it, that's strange, humm etc

The "code" can be extended according to the level of the class, the students' interests and creativity. The more detailed the better, since the students get to display more specific reactions – cognitive replies as well as emotions – to the first encounter with the text. Students are also encouraged to write comments that are connected to their personal experiences or other readings.

After a first individual reading, students are asked to work in pairs and then in groups of 4-5 in order to share about their reactions. They can discuss about the signs they used and why they did it. They can also assess the individual comments that the members of the group made throughout their reading.

#### 3.2 The graphic organizers

The graphic organizers are really effective to facilitate the development of the first two comprehension processes (retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences). The organizers in Fig. 2 highlight important issues of the text that students should refer to by giving a personal answer. In order to fill in the blanks, the students must go back to the text to check ideas and / or details. Consequently such organizers not only make students familiar with the main questions they must address when they read, but they also train them to give a second read in order to specifically look for certain type of information according to given criteria.



The graphic organizers can be used in individual or group work. With younger students it is nice if the shape illustrates the concept/ the topic / the focal point of the reading (see the example on the left in Fig. 2).

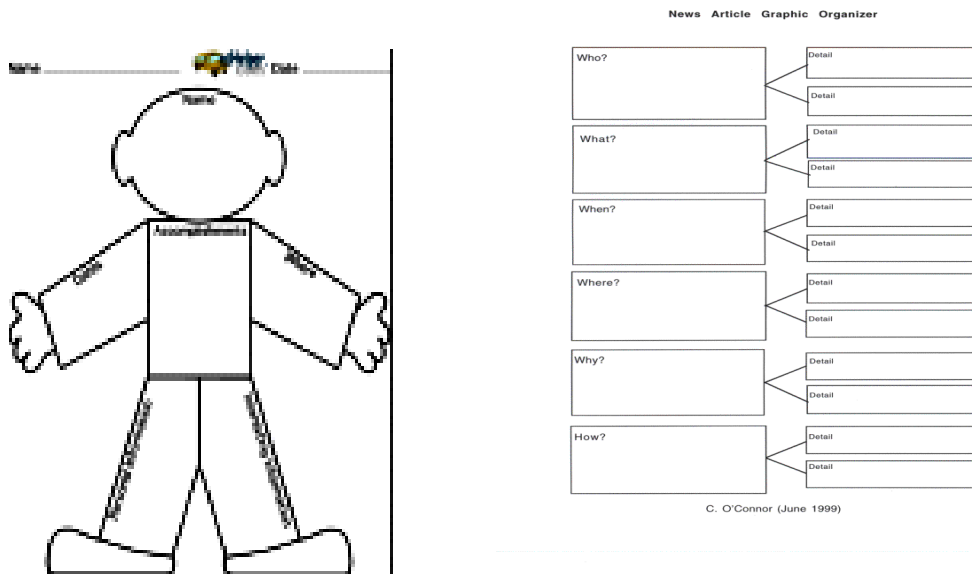


Fig. 2 – Graphic organizers to support reading for comprehension

### 3.3 Meaningful questions ... are simple and smart

One of the most rewarding reading activities is the planning and implementing of interdisciplinary projects that follow the main issues in a narrative by addressing the simple questions of the perfect inquirer: Who? What? Where? When? Who's telling the story? [2]. When students are allowed to give their answers by making use of multiple representations (a drawing, a model, a song etc.) the reading becomes highly motivating, the students are fully immersed in what they do and the artefacts reveal their understanding of the text [1;5]. In Fig. 3, the poster on the left illustrates a map that chart the perceived space and a time axis that reflect the students' deep understanding of a reading from Roald Dahl. The students' representation shows a profound interpretation of the space and time in the narrative.



Fig. 3. Reading project results

### 3.4 Posters to promote reading

A challenge that I often address to students is to find ways to promote what they read among other schoolmates. This is how they get to develop reading ads in the shape of a poster which they often combine with drama, monologues, music and film clips. The posters are developed in teams by making use of the collage technique and the students become very creative to find and recycle various



materials (just to mention a few: disposable plastic caps, different seeds, nut shells, sea shells, pieces of fabric). When the students work in this kind of reading projects they are allowed to freely use their imagination. The only request is to prove understanding of the text, to respect the project terms of reference and to have a persuasive presentation. Altogether this brings a lot of fun! (see Fig. 3 on the right).

#### **4. Brief conclusion**

If we offer reading tasks, perspectives to the texts, activities that are meaningful for the young readers, their approaches to the reading will target comprehension and deep understanding. Moreover, the meaningful reading will trigger meaningful learning and will become part of the natural way of being of the youth. It will motivate them for what happens beyond the school perimeter. A bonus (an expected one for the moment!) will be better results in the international tests – with a flavour of the old Latin saying: *Non scholae sed vitae discimus*.

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