

# The reading practices of Bulgarian students (at home and abroad)

Research Group: Philology

Research field: Teaching Methodology

## Project guidelines

The project is motivated by the need to find out the real situation of the reading practices of Bulgarian students - those who live and study in Bulgaria and those who live and study abroad but attend Bulgarian school on weekends. The essential questions are how much, what and how contemporary Bulgarian students read, in what language and on what medium they read; why they read or do not read, what place in their reading practices is occupied by compulsory school literature and readings in social networks, literature they choose to read themselves and publications in traditional media; do the quantity and quality of their reading depend on the cultural and educational environment and the type of medium (paper or screen).

The aim of the project is to create tools that neither oppose nor ignore the reading interests, preferences, attitudes of students, but to develop them in optimal directions for personal development and public interest. Models of learning and teaching language and literature can be developed that are relevant to students' needs, interests, and motivation to read, while developing established reading skills and the expansion of digital technologies into all spheres of life. The big question is how, alongside the preservation of good educational traditions and the cultivation of functional literacy in reading, to cultivate in Bulgarian students a sophisticated aesthetic taste and deep reading comprehension skills that would enable them to experience the pleasure of reading.

Publications on the project topic:

- Damyanova, A. (2023). Toward Re-Founding The Learning of Literature FN The Competence Approach, Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Angel Petrov. A. (2023). Reading Educational Texts In Bulgarian Language Classes In Secondary School (Methodological And Technological Aspects), Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Radkova, A. (2023). A Model For Reading Instruction To Students With Limited Proficiency In Bulgarian Language, Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Vasileva, D. (2023). Conversations About Reading (Analysis of Data From Interviews With Students), Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Hristova, N. (2023). Why Do We (Not) Read Literary Texts?, Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Mavrova, A. (2023). Students' Attitudes Towards Reading Through Teacher's Point of View, Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Padeshka, M. (2023). Reading Attitudes And Practices: The Italian Experience (Overview Of Statistical Data), Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Milanova, E. (2023). Interaction Between Language Dicipines In Secondary School To Improve Students' Reading Skills, Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Elenkova, V. (2023). Up The Staircase of Reading, Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).
- Ivanovaq N. (2023). Mastery of Reading Strategies, Through Which Students' Creative Thinking Is Developed, Bulgarian Language and Literature, 65(6s).

## Introduction

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 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.



## Methodology



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.

### 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. 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. 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.

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.

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.

## Conclusion

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.

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## Results

### 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. There is a preference for reading articles (electronically) that relate to issues of '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. The focus is mainly on reading media texts on issues of interest to students (combustion engines, fashion, religion).

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. Fantasy and science fiction texts are preferred. Occasional mention is made of texts with philosophical content or crime novels. 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 ready-made 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. One significant observation concerns the reluctance and stated inability to check the source of information, regardless of the nature of the information presented. 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..

### 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. 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.

## Conclusion

Decentralization and diversification of educational services are also highlighted among the reasons for educational inequalities in Bulgaria, which are supported by the grading system. 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 lack of additional support, in the lack of sufficient social cultural life, . 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. 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.