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Reading literacy skills in the new external exams in Poland

ABSTRACT
The way reading literacy is conceptualised has changed over the last decades. Regarding comprehension as deep processing, in which skimming or scanning neither encourage the reader to engage in texts nor lead to the expected levels of understanding has influenced the way reading literacy is taught and assessed. The aim of the article is to analyse new task types introduced to the external exams as well as to provide evidence that the changes in the exam format reflect the way reading comprehension skills have recently been conceptualised. The analysis of the exam tasks is preceded by an overview of the recent trends in conceptualising L2 reading literacy.
Keywords: reading skills, reading processes, literacy, reading assessment, external exams

1. Introduction

The recent years have witnessed a shift from spoken to written communication. It is mainly due to the prevalence of digital devices, which results in general preference for written messages (Gernsbacher, 2014). As Britt, Rouet and Durik (2018) put it: "[I]n post-industrial societies, the uses of print are pervading people's activities throughout the lifespan, from school learning to job finding, to communicating with friends and relatives, shopping online and participating in society. Consequences of being literate […] are increasingly concrete and important" (p. 1). Such a growth in the importance of reading literacy could not go unnoticed in the academic field, where researchers and theoreticians have set out to design what might be called new reading literacy, which undoubtedly influences the way in which the receptive skill in question is developed and evaluated.

The article begins with an account of three major trends that have shaped the way reading comprehension is perceived in L2 pedagogy.

2. From product to process approach

A traditional way of looking at receptive skills is from the angle of its final outcome, namely comprehension, and many a practitioner tend to focus excessive attention on the product of reading in the form of answers to comprehension questions, whose design requires grasping merely an overall gist of a text and often test the recall of the text content (Field, 2008; Norrington-Davies, 2018). For the last two decades we have witnessed a general departure from the comprehension approach, as scholars began to notice that the answers to comprehension questions cannot be regarded as evidence of text comprehension. Hence the product approach towards the skill of reading has been replaced with the process approach and it has become common in the second language acquisition literature to divide the skill into a number of component processes, which in turn constitute a framework for investigating, developing and assessing reading comprehension.

Many researchers conceptualise the process of reading comprehension through the sub-processes that it entails. The very definition of reading provided by Grabe and Stoller (2013) underlines the fact that the ability to understand texts is a complex phenomenon, comprising several subordinate processes, each of which contributes to final understanding. Similarly, Grabe (2014), who draws on the psychological model of reading comprehension by Kintsch (2012), points to a set of common underlying processes which are activated as we read (see Table 1).

Table 1. Processes underlying reading comprehension (Grabe, 2014).

LOWER LEVEL PROCESSES	HIGHER LEVEL PROCESSES
(a) fast, automatic word recognition skills (b) automatic lexico-syntactic processing (c) semantic processing of the immediate clause into relevant meaning units (or propositions)	(d) form main idea meanings (e) recognize related and thematic information (f) build a text model of comprehension (an author-driven summary understanding) (g) use inferencing, background knowledge, strategic processing and context constraints to create a preferred personal interpretation

It needs to be emphasised that there is a general agreement among researchers as to how these two groups of processes operate – they are all activated simultaneously and interact with each other while the reader is making sense of a text (Grabe, 2011). While the interactive nature of reading sub-processes raises little controversy among researchers, there seems to be little unanimity concerning the level of difficulty of the sub-processes. Grabe (2014) points to the fact that these two groups do not really constitute a continuum in terms of complexity, i.e. the lower level processes are not easier than the higher-level ones. In fact, in some

respect, the former might be much harder to develop for L2 readers than the latter. Hudson (2007), however, notices, that in L2 reading pedagogy, developing reading skills implies a shift from lower- to higher-lever processes, which clearly implies that there does exist a hierarchy of reading skills to be worked on.

A similar process approach is also taken by Dakowska (2015), who notes that the processes underlying reading comprehension are usually referred to as bottom-up and top-down processes, depending on how the reader attends to the meaning of a text, beginning with either extracting information from the input and integrating it with the elaborate knowledge system, or with predicting possible meaning on the basis of prior knowledge and interpreting the input in the light of the created expectations (see Table 2).

Table 2. Processes underlying reading comprehension (Dakowska, 2015).

BOTTOM-UP	TOP-DOWN
refers to the information derived from the text and its context	refers to the various knowledge sources in the reader's memory, especially concepts and schemata relevant to the task at hand
initiated and dominated by the textual information on the printed page	knowledge sources in the reader's mind used to narrow down the expectations towards the text to be comprehended

Dakowska (2015), however, suggests yet another process approach to reading comprehension, in which she adopts a more communicative perspective towards text processing. She understands it as "a process of computing the writer's intention from his/her detailed instruction in the form of a text" (p. 250) and outlines the following processes: 1) parsing, 2) semanticising, 3) reconstructing the communicative intention, 4) personalisation and evaluation. It is mandatory to underline that the researcher points to the fact that we do not engage in these processes in a linear manner or in isolation; rather she focuses on the interactive nature of the whole process.

Clearly, in order to fully understand a text, a reader needs to perform a number of mental operations and engage in a set of processes comprising what is popularly referred to as reading comprehension. Such an outlook on reading bears a significant influence on reading pedagogy and evaluation, in which answering a number of closed questions following a text is no longer tantamount to successful text processing.

3. Defining the new skill
New technologies have been proved to considerably alter the ways in which people read and exchange information (Carr, 2010). While in the past the predominant interest in student reading literacy proficiency was the general understanding of

a text, it is now believed that proficient reading requires an array of minor skills to be flexibly applied in the process (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). For a number of years now, researchers have examined reading as a complex process, which comprises:

- the ability to understand, interpret and reflect upon single texts;
- the ability to analyse, synthesise, integrate and interpret relevant information from multiple text (or information) sources;
- the ability to effectively search, organise and filter a wealth of information (OECD, 2013).

Such a viewpoint has necessitated an improved and expanded explanation of reading and, consequently, a new definition of reading literacy has been put forward:

> Reading literacy is understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society. (OECD, 2018, p. 11)

What should be emphasized is that the definition encompasses higher-level reading skills through which the reader arrives at the meaning of a text and is able to respond to its content by using previous knowledge and situational clues. The new framework for reading literacy, reported in the PISA document of 2018, which takes the definition above as a starting point for discussing the domain of reading, assumes that a competent reader utilizes a whole range of processes, sub-skills or strategies for locating information, monitoring understanding, as well as validating the relevance of information (Richter, 2015; van den Broek, Lorch, Linderhorm & Gustafson, 2001).

In the light of the new developments, reading literacy is undoubtedly a multifaceted process, which depends on deep processing of texts and engagement in the written discourse. There is an evident departure from the shallow kind of reading, built upon such activities as skimming and scanning. The fallacy of these has been brought to the attention of language educators, as there appear to be mental operations which do not contribute to the development of reading proficiency as we know it from the latest research findings (e.g., Kerr, 2009). As Thornbury (2011) puts it, "teachers were misled into thinking that, by having students skim or scan texts, they were developing the skill of reading" (para. 6). Another relevant argument against engaging learners in skimming and scanning comes from Kerr (2009), who points out: "[p]erhaps the most eloquent commentary on skimming and scanning is the complete omission of these terms from the index of Grabe's *Reading in a Second Language*" (p. 28). Again, the new reading literacy seems to rely much more heavily on thinking about and engaging in the content of texts, and thus encourages the use of higher-order thinking skills (Norrington-Davies, 2018).

4. Mediation and text processing

One final trend in ELT which has greatly influenced the reading comprehension task design is the concept of mediation. It is mandatory to explain that while the concept has only recently grown in popularity in ELT pedagogy, it in fact dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. In psychology, mediation originates from the Social Development Theory by Vygotsky and aims to explain how social interaction influences the development of cognition (Aimin, 2013). In second language acquisition, mediation is central to the socio-constructivist, or socio-cultural view of learning, and accounts for the dynamic nature of meaning, which is co-constructed through both the social and individual dimensions in language use and language learning (Lantolf, 2011).

In L2 pedagogy and assessment, mediation received a lot of attention after the publication of the new version of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* by the Council of Europe in 2018. While mediation appeared in the former versions of the document and defining mediating activities as those which "[i]n both the receptive and productive modes, (…) make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24) was widely accepted, the document was criticized for the limited attention given to the idea and the omission of illustrative descriptors (Komorowska, 2017; North & Piccardo, 2016). As a result, mediation processes in the 2018 edition of CEFR received due attention and became complementary to reception production and interaction, with a set of elaborate descriptors for each of the mediation activities and mediation strategies presented in Figure 1.

From the perspective of the present article it is mediating texts, i.e., "passing on to another person the content of a text to which they do not have access, often because of linguistic, cultural, semantic or technical barriers" (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 106), that seems the most relevant for developing and evaluating a student's text control. Similarly to how reading literacy is viewed in the light of the process approach or how it is conceptualized in the PISA document, mediation in text comprehension entails a considerable shift from answering closed comprehension questions in favour of greater engagement in the text. As it is stated in CEFR (2018):

> [p]rocessing text involves understanding the information and/or arguments included in the source text and then transferring these to another text, usually in a more condensed form, in a way that is appropriate to the context of situation. In other words, the outcome represents a condensing and/or reformulating of the original information and arguments, focusing on the main points and ideas in the source text (p. 110).

Such an approach makes it essential for exam tasks to involve such literacy subskills as summarizing, clarifying the content of a text, giving a personal account of what has been read, analyzing or interpreting certain aspects of the written discourse, to name just a few.
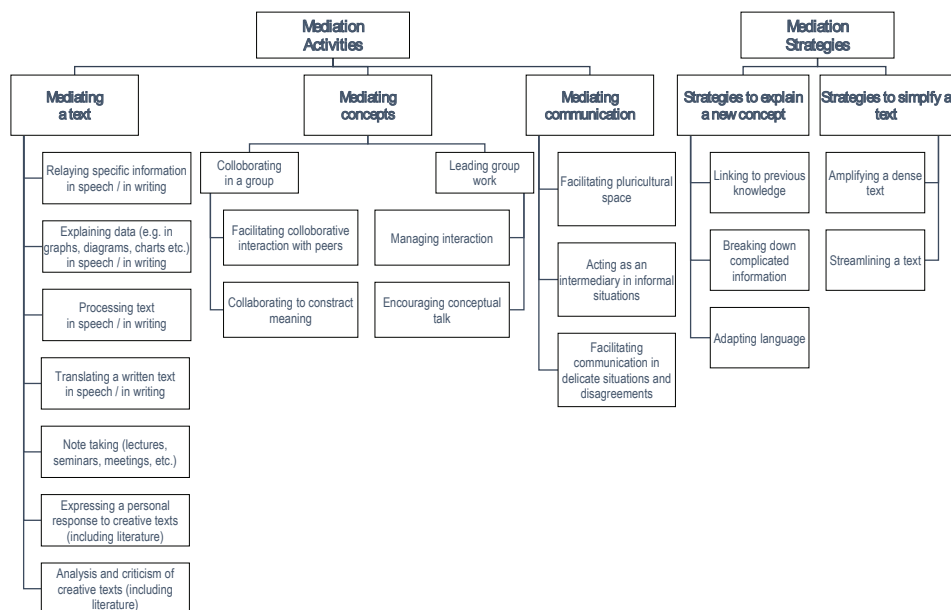
Figure 1. Types of mediation activities and mediation strategies (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 104).

5. Reading tasks in the new exam format

As it has been asserted above, the importance of receptive skills, especially reading, received due recognition in the latest version of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, which has proposed detailed band descriptors not only for reception but also mediation activities and strategies, clearly linked to various aspects of reception. Much in the same vein, the Polish Core Curriculum for Foreign Languages (Ministry of National Education [MEN], 2017a) acknowledged the significance of reception in that the projected levels of foreign language proficiency at each educational level for receptive skills are higher than for productive skills[1]. Also, similarly to CEFR, the core curriculum makes an explicit reference to mediation skills as one of five areas of general language competence (the remaining three being the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, listening and reading – reception, speaking and writing – production, and using language functions – interaction).

The significant change in the way reading (or, for that matter, receptive skills in general) is currently operationalised is also noticeable in the Exam Information Booklet for the new eighth grader's exam, administered for the first time in April

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[1]   For example, the anticipated proficiency level of primary school graduates with respect to productive skills is A2+, while for receptive skills it has been defined as B1.

2019 (Central Examination Board [CKE], 2017a). The array of tasks presented in the booklet clearly shows that the testing of expeditious reading operations, defined by Hughes (2003) as fast and efficient reading taking the form of skimming, search reading and scanning, has been heavily supplemented by test tasks tapping more careful reading operations and tasks requiring mediations skills, i.e., understanding the content of a text (or texts) and presenting or relaying it in a modified form. This, in turn, has led to introducing a significant number of open, productive tasks, which are expected to constitute no less than one-fourth of all tasks in the reading part of the exam. The open task formats for testing receptive skills are a relatively new element in the Polish system of external exams, especially at the upper primary level, and as such are believed to constitute a challenge for test takers. Owing to the fact that the open tasks presented in the documents issued by the Central Examination Board differ in terms of specific abilities which students are expected to demonstrate, as well as in terms of text type and response attributes (all of which contribute to the general perception of task difficulty), selected examples of exam tasks will be presented and analysed below. It is mandatory to underline at this point that the selection to follow is rather limited due to the scarcity of exam papers issued so far by the Central Examination Board and therefore some of the reading subskills outlined in section 3 of this article cannot be exemplified.

One of the main sources of difficulty, which is common to many task types presented in the official exam documents, is that they require the employment of mediation-related skills. Mediation itself is a complex construct which consists of a number of subskills and components. As far as mediating texts in writing is concerned (which is specifically the kind of mediation activity the new exam involves), it can take a number of forms. These include, among others, summarizing, commenting on texts, reporting, translating and paraphrasing. The last of these literacy subskills is tested in the exam task presented in Figure 2 below.

The task in question requires that test-takers convey the meanings embedded in specific fragments of the text in their own words, as the prompts in the task are provided in the form of unfinished sentences eliciting responses in which using the words from the text verbatim is blocked. The ability to paraphrase texts is thus based on two essential elements: adequate understanding of the content of the source text and a large enough productive vocabulary to present the meanings effectively. Clearly, such new testing techniques require adopting a more conscious approach to teaching both the language subsystems and the language skills, in which integrated practice of various elements of language competence is introduced. Therefore, as far as teaching paraphrasing skills is concerned, first of all, it seems justified to expand students' productive lexicons and raise awareness of language idiomaticity. Additionally, it is claimed that paraphrasing skills develop best when practised at the interface between reading and writing,

THE MYSTERY OF THE REAL ROBINSON CRUSOE

Everybody knows the story of Robinson Crusoe, a sailor who lived on a desert island near South America. Not many people know, however, that there was a real person who had inspired Daniel Defoe, the author of the book. The real Robinson was a Scotsman named Alexander Selkirk. He was born in a small village near Edinburgh. His father was a shoemaker.

The boy was interested in the sea and wanted to become a sailor. Selkirk had a difficult character and often got into trouble. When he was only seventeen, he ran away from home and became a pirate. He often disagreed with the crew. One day, after a fight with the captain, they decided to leave Selkirk all alone on a tropical island near the coast of Chile. He was hoping for a quick rescue. Unfortunately, only Spanish ships came to the island. The Spanish were enemies and Selkirk was afraid of them. He spent four years and four months   on the island before an English crew arrived and he was able to leave the island with them.

Na podstawie: www.telegraph.co.uk

9.1. Daniel Defoe was inspired by the story of a real man who came from _____.

9.2. Selkirk's dream was to _____.

9.3. He was left on the island because _____ with the captain.

9.4. Selkirk was saved by _____.

Figure 2. Example of a reading task involving paraphrasing skills (CKE, 2017b, p. 9).

especially when achieving academic success is one of the goals of language instruction (e.g., Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Hirvela & Du, 2013).

The exam task shown in Figure 3 above is an example of a task in which summarising skills pay a central role. Similarly to paraphrasing, summarising skills entail both good understanding of the text (preferably involving deep level of processing) and a rich enough vocabulary to be able to present a single unit of meaning in different words. What makes summarising more difficult, however, are the necessary composing skills (e.g., Grabe & Zhang, 2013), which can be quite limited as far as foreign language context and age of learners are concerned (in the case of the present exam, the age of students is 13-14). While the task presented above is an example of a structured summary in that students are only expected to finish sentences with their own words, summarising one paragraph of the text in each sentence, it can be speculated that exams at higher educational levels may take summarising skills further. What should be emphasised here is that summarising skills involve higher-level processes, as defined by Grabe (2014), as in order to summarise, the reader has to build a text-model of comprehension. Furthermore, summarising often entails changing the style or form of the text,

A CLEVER GIRL

The young mother needed a few minutes of relaxation after a long day at work. However, her young daughter had other plans for her mother's time. She asked her mom to read her a story. "Give Mommy a few minutes to rest. Then I'll read you a story," said the mother and started to read a magazine.

The girl didn't want to wait and started to cry. The mother thought for a while and found a way to keep her daughter busy. She tore off the back page of the magazine she was reading. There was a full-page picture of the world. Then, she cut it into several pieces and asked her daughter to put the picture together. She promised to read her a story when the picture was completed. She hoped to have at least half an hour for herself.

The little girl finished the task after a few minutes. Her mother was really surprised when she saw the picture of the world perfectly arranged. "How did you do it so quickly?" she asked. The girl explained that on the other side of the page there was a picture of a little girl. "You see, Mommy, when I got the little girl together, the whole world came together."

Na podstawie: www.bizmove.com

17.1. What did the daughter want her mother to do?

The daughter wanted her mother to _____

_____.

17.2. What did the mother do to keep her daughter busy?

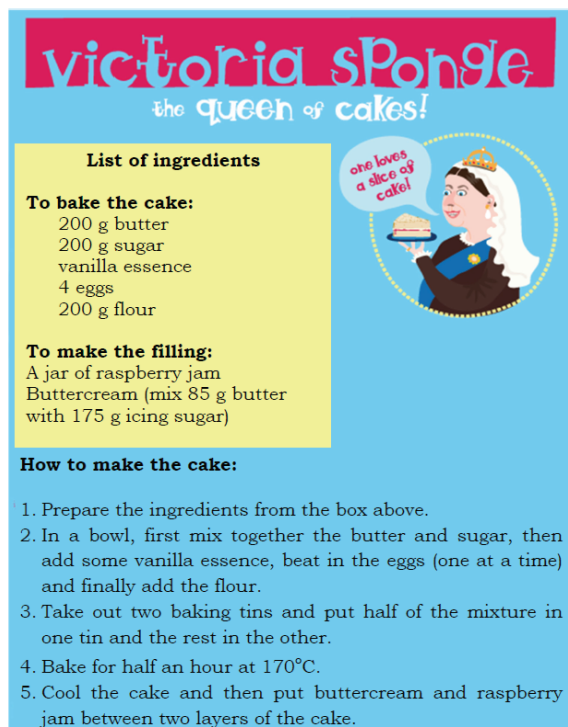The mother _____

_____.

17.3. Why did the daughter complete the task so fast?

The daughter completed the task so fast because _____

Figure 3. Example of a reading task involving summarising skills (CKE, 2017a, p. 43).

for which constructing a situational model is required. This seems to support the claims put forward in the theoretical part of the present paper and prove that the current operationalisation of reading skills for the purpose of testing corresponds with the descriptions of the skill presented in the latest literature in the field.

One of the most popular mediation skills, which used to be commonly (and wrongly) identified as the main type of mediation, is translation. The exam task in Figure 4 shows how translation has been incorporated into the reading section of the eighth grader's exam. It needs to be emphasised that while translation on the word and phrase level is an established vocabulary presentation and practice technique in many foreign language classrooms, translation on the text level has not been practised widely so far. This is mainly due to the fact that this skill has been absent from the previously administered external exams and as such has not received due attention from both teachers and learners. An additional difficulty of the task shown above results from the fact that test-takers will need to depart from the traditional linear text processing and be able to operate on two texts simultaneously, drawing comparisons between text content and format as well as across languages. While in the example provided in Figure 4 there are two texts to

Na podstawie: www.clairemurray.co.uk

Figure 4. Example of a reading task involving translation (CKE, 2017a, pp. 39-40).

be tackled, that the new exam may also feature tasks requiring reading three texts at the same time. The information contained in two of them is to be synthesised so that examinees are able to complete the third text (in English or in Polish) with the missing information. This task format undoubtedly poses a challenge and demands that students engage in deeper text processing and employ higher

level reading processes. An important aspect of text comprehension in this case is determining a coherent and structured set of propositions typical of a recipe, which will enable the reader to establish a semantic structure of the text (Kintsch & VanDijk, 1978).

The last task which seems interesting from the point of view of task design is the one in which examinees are to put the sentences in the correct order. While the task in Figure 5 below is an example of a selection task in that students are to choose the correct answer rather than formulate it on their own, it still requires more than shallow reading or employing such subskills as skimming and scanning.

11.4. **The correct order of the sentences in the message is**
    A. 3-1-4-2
    B. 3-2-4-1
    C. 2-4-3-1

Figure 5. Example of a receptive reading task requiring deep processing (CKE, 2017a, p. 33).

The task demands deeper processing of the information provided as there is no text proper which students are to read. In fact, in the process of ordering the pieces of information they create the text on their own. Despite the fact that the text appears rather short and uncomplicated, the task still creates opportunities for higher level reading processes to appear.

6. Conclusion

Having analysed the exam tasks as well as the sub-skills lying at the core of the test tasks specifications, it can be unequivocally stated that the changes in the core curriculum and the evaluation of key skills are congruent with the current trends in L2 reading theories.It needs to be underlined at this point that all the

examples provided above originate from the exam administered at the end of primary education. It can be forecast, however, that similar tasks will appear in the new version of the Matura exam, which secondary school graduates will take from the year 2023. In fact, it might be speculated that reading literacy skills will receive a lot of attention in that exam and will shift even more towards higher-level processes. Such speculations are based on some important notifications in the Core Curriculum for Secondary Education (MEN, 2017b). Firstly, the document points to reading literacy as one of the three main goals of education in general, which is unlikely to go unnoticed in the new exam. Secondly, the specific goals for text comprehension include some meaning-building processes, such as interpreting, inferencing or recognizing information expressed indirectly. Clearly, the new exam after secondary school will also follow suit when it comes to the general trends in evaluating reading literacy.

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