

## EARLY LITERACY RESEARCH IN POLAND – CONDITIONS, AC- QUISITION, CONTEXTS. EDITORIAL

ELŻBIETA AWRAMIUK\* & GRAŻYNA KRASOWICZ-KUPIS\*\*

*\*University of Białystok, Poland*

*\*\*Educational Research Institute, Warsaw, Poland*

It is with great pleasure that we present the L1 readers with the first special issue devoted to teaching Polish as a native language. Our aim is to draw the attention of non-Polish readers to research conducted in Poland (namely research on acquiring one's native language) and to show differences and similarities in chosen topics and the ways to approach them.

With a high probability, it can be assumed that for numerous L1 readers it will be the first contact to Poland. That is why we suggest a short introduction into the Polish education system and into the characteristics of the Polish language and orthography.

In recent years, the Polish education system has been reformed. This includes i.a. changes in the school and preschool entrance age. The age at which children start a compulsory annual preschool education has been decreased to 5 years olds (before it was 6 years old), and compulsory school education starts now at the age of 6 (it was 7 previously). The changes are introduced gradually. They now mean an absolute preschool obligation for all five-year-olds, which can only be realized in kindergartens or special school units that are adapted to it in an appropriate way. When it comes to compulsory school education, until 2014, the decision on whether to send a six-year-old child to school is to be made by the parents. In such circumstances, in present first grades, there are both six-year-old children and seven-year-old children. The situation will change in September 2014, when all six-year-olds will have to start their school education in the first grade. The aim is that five-year-old children attend mandatorily an annual school preparation course, and

then – at the age of six – continue their education at the first grade of primary school.

The results presented in the special issue of L1 *Early literacy in Poland* come both from the period of introducing the above-mentioned reform and from earlier time, which is clearly indicated in the texts.

The three first grades of primary school (the first level of education) include early school education, where formal division into school subjects does not apply and where it is generally one teacher that works with children. The teacher is the one deciding on how to distribute the time and does not have to conduct classes in the form of separate lessons. The second level of education includes the next three years of primary school. Children learn various subjects during 45-minute classes taught by different teachers who specialize in particular subjects. Middle School (Polish: *gimnazjum*), the third level of education, incorporates youth at the age of 13 to 16 and is the last stage of compulsory education for every Pole. After that, young people usually decide to continue their education in secondary schools (the fourth level of education).

Every level of education finishes by an exam, which is identical for all students and is organized by Central Examination Commission. Students of sixth grade of primary school take an exam testing their knowledge and skills, which does not influence the graduation of primary school or being accepted to local middle school. Students of the third grade of middle school take an exam, the results of which are taken into consideration when applying to the next school, whereas secondary school finishes with a “maturity exam”, which opens the possibility to take up studies at the university. It is worth mentioning that the majority of schools also organize tests after early education stage, so called OBUT (which stands in Polish for: National Study on Third-graders’ Abilities).

The texts collected in the current issue relate to children attending preschool and the first level of education. The general aim of the preschool in Poland is to develop social skills of children by forming their ability to communicate with both the adults and children, fostering their development. The early school education is integrated. It combines the contents of particular elements of education in a way enabling children to gain knowledge and skills that form a whole and are not separate from one another. The primary aim is to foster the child’s overall development.

Within the annual preschool course, apart from numerous social, emotional and cognitive skills, readiness for reading and writing is developed. The core curriculum assumes that during this time, reading, writing, letters etc. are not yet taught, but some exercises are introduced, and namely exercises improving the organization of perception field and eye-hand coordination (which is needed for drawing, cutting and learning to write). Also, the interest in reading and writing is developed, as well as the ability to construct sentences, segment sentences into words and isolate sounds in words of simple phonetic structure.

Within school education at the level of integrated teaching, the teaching of native language in the first grade includes verbal expression, the culture of language and initial reading and writing education. When it comes to reading and writing, the student finishing the first grade knows i.a. all the letters of alphabet, can read and write simple, short texts, cares for the esthetics and graphic correctness of writing, can use the following terms with understanding: word, sound, letter, syllable, sentence. At the end of the third grade of primary school, the student can read, understand, analyze and interpret texts for children at the first educational level, is sensitive to esthetics, broadens his/her vocabulary by contact with literary works and art for children. In addition he/she can write in a clear and esthetic manner, cares for grammatical and orthographical correctness and punctuation and does his/her homework on his/her own if possible.

Moving to the characteristics of the Polish language, it is necessary to start with the indication that Polish belongs to the group of West Slavic Languages, which is a part of the Indo-European language family. According to the comparative typology it is described as morphophonemic, inflectional, consonantal language. This means that it is a language, in which numerous morphological alternations take place and consonants form over 70% of the whole phonological system. Graphic variability of words is the effect of morphological alternations, which has significant consequences for literacy education. In learning how to read and write, the global method is not very effective. Analytical-synthetic methods turn out to be much better and they are dominant in Polish schools. Writing cannot merely rely on auditory experience, because Polish spelling codes both phonological and morphological information. In addition, Polish inflection results in multifunctional grammatical word endings and allows for relatively free word order.

In order to code 37 phonemes, 44 graphemes are used in Polish, because apart from single letters, 12 complex graphemes are used (e.g. RZ, SI, DZI). Among Polish graphemes there are pairs which denote the same phonological unit (e.g. Ó – U, Ś – SI). Due to the fact that Polish orthography allows for relations among various phonic realizations of the same morpheme, almost each letter may correspond to two various phonemes and almost each letter may occur in a position, which is pronounced in accordance with the spelling. The Polish writing system is a system with average transparency. The relationship between grapheme and phoneme is not as clear as it is in Finnish, but it is not as irregular as in English.

This lack of transparency poses greater problems in writing, as in many cases the written representation of a word is not compatible with its pronunciation. This is connected to the phenomenon of devoicing that is a result of the phonetic neighborhood (e.g. in the word *ławka* 'bench' [v] becomes voiceless because of the neighborhood of [k] and the whole cluster is realized voiceless [fk]) and to the rule of voiceless final position (e.g. *kot* 'cat' – *kod* 'code' sound identical). The basic problem of a person speaking Polish is not how to read a word that he/she sees, but rather how to spell the word that he/she hears. Due to the transfer of morphological information by writing in the Polish language (as in many other alphabetical

scripts), the relation *grapheme - phoneme* is more logical than the relation *phoneme - grapheme*, which means that knowing the basic rules, it is easier to read a given word than to write it.

The issue of *Early literacy in Poland* was aimed to form a research landscape on teaching and learning of reading and writing in Polish in kindergarten and at the first stage of education. Certainly, the presented texts cannot show the full picture of the Polish scientific activity in this area, however, they might give an idea of topics of the research conducted, methodologies used and show that Polish researchers conduct studies in international teams.

Researchers from various scientific centers in Poland (Warsaw, Krakow, Poznan, Katowice, Lublin, Bialystok) and from abroad (Cork), representing diverse specialities (educators, linguists, psychologists, psycholinguists and teachers of native language), present articles that describe various conditions of the process of acquiring early literacy skills, the ways of fostering these skills, as well as communicative contexts of native language teaching.

Joanna Kamykowska with an international team describes results of study on the effectiveness of *Graphogame PL* – a computer game for learning letters intended for six year old children with reading difficulties. Janina Uszyńska-Jarmoc and Monika Żak present the results of study on advantages of a programme that allows younger school children to create their own handbook. Magdalena Trysińska shows which communicative and linguistic patterns are copied by young children from cartoon characters. Anna Guzy and Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska report on research, the aim of which was to determine relationship between the level of imagination and spatial thinking and the level of language skills of children aged 6-10. Elżbieta Jaszczyszyn shows how the model of reader education preferred by the teacher influences the willingness to read and reading skills of six-year-old children. Sławomir Jablonski presents a report on interesting empirical research, embedded in theoretical framework of Lev Vygotsky, concerning a specific cognitive function, an executive function that is associated with reading, which is inhibitory control. Krystyna Sochacka describes the results of studies on the diversity of achievement in reading in Polish children depending on gender. Katarzyna Wiejak is searching for the relationship between understanding of metaphors and figurative language in children with their reading skills, including reading comprehension.

The volume finishes with a text by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis that presents a model of literacy mastering by Polish children, based on psychological and linguistic research carried out by the authors in the recent years.

## ARTICLES IN THE DOUBLE ISSUE

[Kamykowska, J., Haman, E., Latvala J.-M., Richardson, U., Lyytinen, H. \(2013\). Developmental changes of early reading skills in six-year-old Polish children and GraphoGame as a computer-based intervention to support them. Contribution to a double special issue on Early Literacy Research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, 13, p. 1-17.](#)

[Uszyńska-Jarmoc, J. & Żak, M. \(2013\). The First Schoolbook – the Tool of Reproducing Culture by the Child or the Tool of Child's Participation in Culture? Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, vol.13, p. 1-18.](#)

[Trysińska, M. \(2013\). Kind and unkind communicative behaviour of cartoon characters as a source of language competence for young children. Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, vol. 13, p. 1-15.](#)

[Guzy, A & Niesporek-Szamburska, B \(2013\). Relations between children's spatial thinking and their linguistic and communicative skills. Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, 13, p. 1-28.](#)

[Jaszczyszyn, E. \(2013\). Initial learning to read in kindergarten – formal and research perspective. Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, vol.13, p. 1-16.](#)

[Jabłoński, S. \(2013\). Inhibitory control and literacy development among 3- to 5-year-old children. Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, vol.13, p. 1-25.](#)

[Sochacka, K. \(2013\). The stability of gender-related differences in early reading development in Polish children. Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, vol.13, p. 1-18.](#)

[Wiejak, K. \(2014\). Recognition of figurative language and reading ability in Polish school children. Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, vol.14, p. 1-14.](#)

[Awramiuk, E., & Krasowicz-Kupis, G. \(2014\). Reading and spelling acquisition in Polish: Educational and linguistic determinants. Contribution to a double special issue on Early literacy research in Poland, edited by Elżbieta Awramiuk and Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis. \*L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature\*, vol.14, p. 1-24.](#)