Teachers' Conceptualisations and Needs in Developing Foreign Language Literacy Skills at Primary Level

Mateja Dagarin Fojkar and Tina Rozmanič
Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

Abstract

As many European countries have introduced English language teaching at pre-primary and primary levels, the need for effective development of foreign language literacy skills has proved to be essential. Traditionally, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write. However, broader definitions include understanding of a wide range of texts and the ability to communicate in multilingual environments. Most teacher education programmes do not provide sufficient training for the development of initial and basic foreign language literacy skills of learners, and teachers feel they do not receive enough support in this area. As a result, Slovenian pupils of English are the least proficient in reading of all the language skills, with 12 % of them failing to reach A1 level in reading and 29 % remaining at this level at the end of primary school (European Commission, 2012).

The aim of the present study was to investigate the perceptions of English teachers (N=112) regarding the development of foreign language literacy skills in Slovenian primary schools. For this purpose, a questionnaire was used to research how teachers conceptualise the development of FL literacy, how they assess pupils' difficulties with reading and writing tasks and the literacy areas in which they think they would need more support in their teaching. A quantitative approach and a content analysis of the open questions were used. The differences between the teacher groups were measured with the Chi-square test. The study indicated teachers' restricted views on the meaning of literacy in the open questions, while the closed questions implied a broader understanding of the concept. Most teachers expressed a desire to gain more professional knowledge in this area. The results of

the study will provide a starting point for developing more effective teacher training programmes in foreign language literacy and for supporting in-service teachers in developing foreign language literacy at primary level.

Key words: *primary education; professional development; reading; teachers' perceptions; writing.*

Introduction

Literacy has been defined in many different ways, however, UNESCO's (2004) definition is the one that has entailed its meaning in the broadest sense, by stating that it is 'the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying context' (p. 12). UNESCO emphasises that '[literacy enables] individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society' (UNESCO, 2004). The significance of literacy for the development of the society has been recognised not only by UNESCO but also by many other experts, including Fu and Matoush (2015) who argue that students need to learn to combine local language literacies with multiple practices and perspectives, as English is used as a means of communication in the globalised and transnational world. They therefore affirm that students should focus on developing their biliteracy skills to be able to engage in literacy practices in the multilingual environments in which they live (UNESCO, 2004). And while first language literacy has been quite extensively researched, there have been far fewer studies on foreign language (FL) literacy (Dorwin & Moll, 2006), resulting in inappropriate approaches to literacy in the FL classrooms.

There is a wide gap in understanding when and how to approach literacy development. Many studies (Cameron, 2003; Garton et al., 2011; Rixon, 2013) show that teachers either introduce literacy before their pupils are cognitively ready for it and/or in a way that does not consider pupils' nature of learning, for instance, an activity called 'children reading out loud' was chosen by the majority of teachers worldwide as the third activity in the 'Top 5' classroom activities (Garton et al., 2011). This gap in the understanding of FL literacy has widened with the decline of introducing FL learning in pre-primary and primary schools (Enever & Lindgren, 2017; Murphy, 2014; Pinter, 2017). In Slovenia (and in many other European countries, e.g. Spain, Austria, Norway, Poland, Italy, France and some others) pupils start formal FL learning at the age of 6, i.e. in the first grade of primary school, although many kindergartens offer some form of early FL learning even before the formal start (Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe, 2017). The Foreign Language Curriculum for the second and third grade in Slovenia (2013) recommends starting the development of reading and writing skills in the third grade and because it discourages the use of course books before the fourth grade, many teachers focus on the development of their pupils' listening and speaking skills in the first three years of FL learning. However, the Foreign Language Curriculum in Slovenia (2013) does not provide much support for systematic practice of

FL literacy skills and thus many teachers use the Whole-Word Approach in developing their pupils' reading and writing skills, through which pupils learn to read by sight and with memorizing the written form of the word (Skela et al., 2009).

As Xu (2012) and Borg (2001) note, it is important to understand teachers' beliefs if we are to improve the educational process, as their beliefs have a great impact on their choice of teaching methods, their attitude to teaching and their response to everyday classroom challenges. Teachers' beliefs also influence their decisions on lesson planning and what should be taught and thus shape the learning environment and their pupils' language achievements (Xu, 2012). Therefore, this study is essential for understanding teachers' views on literacy and the literacy areas in which they believe they need further support.

The study

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceptions of English teachers (N=112) regarding the development of foreign language literacy skills in grades 3-5 in Slovenian primary schools. The main focus of this study was to present teachers' literacy conceptualizations, their perceptions of literacy related to time, location and competences, their beliefs about their pupils' reading and writing difficulties and their needs in developing primary FL literacy skills. The research questions were as follows: (1) How do teachers conceptualise FL literacy? (2) What are teachers' FL literacy perceptions related to time, location and competences? (3) How do teachers assess their pupils' difficulties with reading and writing tasks in FL? (4) What is the teachers' professional development in FL literacy like?

Methodology

A questionnaire was constructed for the purpose of exploring teachers' views on FL literacy. The first set of questions was open-ended and asked teachers how they define and conceptualise FL literacy. The second set of questions was closed, with teachers being asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with statements of literacy regarding the time (when FL literacy should be developed), location (where FL literacy should be developed, i.e. in which subjects) and competences (what skills are involved in FL literacy). The third group of questions was related to teachers' perceptions of their pupils' difficulties in reading and writing in English. Teachers had to choose two most common difficulties their pupils have in reading and writing. The question also allowed them to add difficulties to the list already provided. The last group of questions was related to the professional development of teachers regarding literacy. First, teachers assessed their level of competence in relation to the development of specific FL literacy areas and then listed those FL literacy areas which they felt needed more support in their teaching.

Content validity was ensured by the panel of four international experts. They provided valuable feedback on the questionnaire and information on the scope of the

questions used to measure the construct. After the questionnaire had been revised, a group of teachers who participated in the pilot phase evaluated the questions and provided constructive feedback in terms of clarifying the questions. After the survey, the Cronbach alpha coefficient of reliability for the items of the questionnaire was calculated and was very satisfactory – calculated at .950. The final version of the questionnaire was put on the open source application for Web surveys.

The open questions were analysed using content analysis. They were coded and grouped into four main categories. A quantitative approach employing the SPSS programme was used to analyse the closed question types. The results are presented below, in the form of tables with the mean values, standard deviation and ranking, depending on the type of questions. The differences between the groups of teachers were measured using the Chi-square test.

Participants

The study included 112 English teachers working in grades 3-5 in Slovenian primary schools. The average age of the participants was 36.01 years (the minimum was 24 years and the maximum 55 years). As regards professional experience, the average was 10.24 years (the minimum was 1 year and the maximum 33 years). Out of 112 participants, 5 were male (4.5 %) and 107 (95.5 %) female. Most of the participants were primary education teachers specialised in teaching English (70 teachers or 62.5 %), 3 participants (2.7 %) were primary education teachers and 33 (29.5 %) were English language specialists. The study participants also had to indicate which grades they taught; 80 (72.7 %) participants taught the third grade, 67 (60.9 %) taught the fourth grade, and 64 (58.2 %) the fifth grade.

Results

The results of the study are presented in three sections according to the main research areas. The first section discusses teachers' conceptualisation of (developing) FL literacy, the second section deals with teachers' literacy perceptions related to time, location and competences, and their perceptions of pupils' literacy difficulties. The third, final, section examines teachers' professional development and their needs regarding the development of FL literacy skills.

Conceptualisation of literacy

After analysing teachers' answers (open question) regarding their conceptualization of 'FL literacy', we categorized them into four groups according to their content. The first group contained the answers associating literacy with the ability to read and write (32 answers), the second group included the answers connecting literacy to the development of all four language skills and communication (27 answers), the third group comprised the answers which linked literacy to the development of initial literacy skills (22 responses) and the fourth group consisted of those that defined literacy in

the broadest sense, which entails cognitive processes and the interpretation of texts and images (15 responses).

Some examples of teachers' definitions of literacy related to reading and writing (group 1) were:

Literacy includes:
1. being able to read and write,
2. being able to read and understand English texts and write short texts,
3. all the steps leading to reading and writing,
4. learning how to write letters, words, sentences and reading comprehension,
5. to know how to write correctly,
6. to learn to read and write in L1 and L2.

Some examples of teachers' definitions of literacy related to the development of the four language skills and communication (group 2) were:

Literacy represents:
1. the development of reading and writing skills, including speaking and listening,
2. acquisition of the language skills we need for communication,
3. a long process that evolves through writing, reading, speaking and listening; it is present the whole time that pupils are at school,
4. a process by which a child learns basic communication skills,
5. the ability to read and write, which begins in the early pre-school phase with listening, expanding vocabulary and reading pictures, the development of speaking skills, all of which are part of communication, etc.

Some examples of teachers' definitions of literacy related to the development of the initial literacy skills (group 3) were:

Literacy represents:
1. teaching pupils about the letters of the alphabet,
2. phonological sound awareness, the connection between the sound and the letter, the writing of letters, words and sentences,
3. becoming familiar with the written English words and the different ways in which they are written,
4. learning the spoken and written forms of words,
5. finding rhymes, initial sounds, final sounds, etc.

Some examples of teachers' definitions of literacy related to the development of cognitive processes and a broader understanding of literacy (group 4) were:

Literacy represents:
1. learning to read and write in a narrow sense, and in a broader sense a life process in which an individual is enabled to read, interpret and write various texts that help him or her in everyday life (and he or she knows how to use them),
2. helping children so that they can use all language forms independently,
3. reading, writing, understanding sentences, texts, pictures, etc.

Teachers' literacy perceptions

The second part of the survey investigated teachers' perceptions of literacy. The teachers were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the literacy statements given. The results are presented below in three categories – literacy perceptions related to time and location; literacy perceptions related to the development of different competences; and teachers' perceptions about their pupils' difficulties in reading and writing in English as a foreign language.

Literacy perceptions – time and location

Table 1

Teachers' literacy perceptions related to time and location

		I don't agree at all	I don't agree	I'm undecided	I agree	I completely agree	I don't know	Total
Literacy development is dealt with mainly in the first two years of primary education.	f	18	56	6	28	4	0	112
	f %	16.1	50.0	5.4	25.0	3.6	0	100.0
Once pupils have learnt to read and write we have completed the development of literacy.	f	38	68	3	2	1	0	112
	f %	33.9	60.7	2.7	1.8	0.9	0	100.0
The development of linguistic skills is the aim only of the language subjects.	f	49	54	4	5	0	0	112
	f %	43.8	48.2	3.6	4.5	0	0	100.0
I have books/magazines in the classroom that pupils can borrow and read during the breaks.	f	8	22	9	43	24	2	108
	f %	7.4	20.4	8.3	39.8	22.2	1.9	100.0

Most of the participants (66.1 %) did not agree or did not agree at all with the statement that literacy development is mainly addressed in the first two years of primary education. Most of the participants also disagreed or completely disagreed with the statements that the development of literacy is completed once pupils have learnt to read and write (94.6 %) and that the development of linguistic skills is only targeted in the language subjects (92.0 %). A lower proportion of respondents (62.0 %) stated that they agreed or fully agreed that they had books/magazines in the classroom that pupils could borrow and read during breaks, more than a quarter (27.8 %) said that they had no reading material for children in the classroom.

Literacy perceptions – competences

The second category of questions was related to teachers' literacy perceptions of the competences that play a role in the development of FL literacy.

Table 2

Teachers' literacy perceptions related to competences

		I don't agree at all	I don't agree	I'm undecided	I agree	I completely agree	I don't know	Total
Working on literacy includes teaching the terminology and specific vocabulary of the content subjects.	f	10	45	19	32	4	2	112
	f %	8.9	40.2	17.0	28.6	3.6	1.8	100.0
There are multiple literacies.	f	0	2	9	59	39	2	111
	f %	0	1.8	8.1	53.2	35.1	1.8	100.0
Literacy focuses only on the written text.	f	39	66	3	3	0	1	112
	f %	34.8	58.9	2.7	2.7	0	0.9	100.0
Literacy includes understanding of words, images, graphs and sounds.	f	2	3	0	59	47	1	112
	f %	1.8	2.7	0	52.7	42.0	0.9	100.0

As many as 40.2 % of the respondents disagreed with the statement that working on literacy includes teaching the terminology and specific vocabulary of the content subjects, 28.6 % agreed and 17.0 % were undecided. Most participants also disagreed or completely disagreed with the statement that literacy focuses only on the written text (93.7 %). Most participants agreed or fully agreed that there are multiple literacies (88.3 %) and that literacy includes understanding of words, images, graphs and sounds (94.7 %).

Literacy perceptions – pupils' difficulties in reading and writing in English

The study also wanted to examine teachers' perceptions of their pupils' difficulties in reading and writing in English as a foreign language. Participants had to highlight two main difficulties they believe their pupils had when reading in English.

Teachers believe that their pupils had the most problems with mispronouncing words (74.3 % of the participants), the second most common difficulty was understanding what was read (51.4 %), and the third difficulty was reading very slowly (15.6 %). The least chosen difficulties were engaging emotionally with the text (2.8 %), distinguishing facts from opinions (4.6 %) and sharing their reading experience with others (6.4 %).

Teachers were also given the opportunity to write down the difficulties they saw their pupils experiencing when reading but were not given as an option in the questionnaire. Among these they mentioned: weak reading techniques, even in their pupils' first language; very low self-esteem when reading (no motivation and fear when reading out loud); very few pupils read because they like to read and not because they have to; deducing meaning from the context, etc.

Table 3

Teachers' literacy perceptions related to their pupils' reading difficulties

Reading difficulties	f	f %	N	R
Mispronouncing words	81	74.3	109	1
Understanding what was read	56	51.4	109	2
Reading very slowly	17	15.6	109	3
Thinking critically about the text	15	13.8	109	4
Unmotivated to read	12	11.0	109	5
Extracting key ideas	11	10.1	109	6
Reading monotonically	10	9.2	109	7
Sharing their reading experience with others	7	6.4	109	8
Distinguishing facts from opinions	5	4.6	109	9
Engaging emotionally with the text	3	2.8	109	10

The table below shows how the teachers assessed their pupils' difficulties in writing in English as a foreign language. The participants had to mark two main difficulties they believe their pupils had when writing in English.

Table 4

Teachers' literacy perceptions related to their pupils' writing difficulties

Writing difficulties	f	f %	N	R
Spelling mistakes	68	62.4	109	1
Lacking vocabulary	55	50.5	109	2
Grammar mistakes	49	45.0	109	3
Supporting their ideas	14	12.8	109	4
Coherent organisation of ideas	13	11.9	109	5
Illustrating their ideas	7	6.4	109	6
Use of cohesive devices (linkers, pronouns)	3	2.8	109	8
Distinguishing facts from opinions	3	2.8	109	8
Forming paragraphs	3	2.8	109	8
Punctuation	2	1.8	109	10

The teachers who took part in the survey considered spelling mistakes to be the main writing difficulty of the pupils (62.4 %). 50 % estimated that the main difficulties were also lack of vocabulary and grammar mistakes (45.0 %). The least observed

difficulties were punctuation (1.8 %), distinguishing facts from opinions (2.8 %), forming paragraphs (2.8 %) and using cohesive devices (2.8 %). Some teachers added other difficulties to those listed in the table: very modest texts without depth in their written tasks; very low self-esteem when writing; making the same mistakes as in the Slovenian language (e.g. use of capital letters, punctuation marks); resentment towards writing, etc.

The participants were also asked how much help was offered to pupils at their school if they had problems reading and writing in English.

Table 5

Help offered to pupils who had problems reading and writing

In my school pupils are offered additional lessons if they have problems reading and writing in English.		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
I don't agree at all	5	4.5
I don't agree	20	17.9
I'm undecided	13	11.6
I agree	53	47.3
I completely agree	16	14.3
I don't know	5	4.5
Total	112	100.0

More than half of the teachers (61.6 %) agreed or fully agreed that additional lessons were offered to pupils in their school if they had problems reading and writing in English. A good fifth did not agree or did not agree at all.

Within the scope of literacy perceptions, we wanted to find out whether there are differences between the number of years teachers have been teaching and the way they perceive literacy development.

Table 6

Participants' teaching experience

	Years in categories		
		Frequency	Percent
Valid	1-5 years	45	40.2
	6-15 years	35	31.3
	16 and more	30	26.8
	Total	110	98.2
Missing		2	1.8
Total		112	100.0

In comparing the differences between teachers' experience and literacy perceptions, we followed the categories created by Unruh and Turner (1970), who proposed three main phases in the life cycles of teachers: initial teaching period (about 1-5 years),

period of building security (about 6-15 years) and maturing period (about 16 years and more). Altogether 45 teachers (40.2 %) in our sample belonged to the initial teaching period category, 35 (31.3 %) to the period of building security and 30 (26.8 %) to the maturing period.

Table 7

Differences between teaching experience and literacy perceptions

			Literacy development is dealt with mainly in the first two years of primary education.					
			I don't agree at all	I don't agree	I'm undecided	I agree	I completely agree	Total
Teaching experience	1-5 years	f	2	19	2	19	3	45
		f %	4.4 %	42.2 %	4.4 %	42.2 %	6.7 %	100.0 %
	6-15 years	f	7	19	3	5	1	35
		f %	20.0 %	54.3 %	8.6 %	14.3 %	2.9 %	100.0 %
	16 and more	f	8	17	1	4	0	30
		f %	26.7 %	56.7 %	3.3 %	13.3 %	0.0 %	100.0 %
Total		f	17	55	6	28	4	110
		f %	15.5 %	50.0 %	5.5 %	25.5 %	3.6 %	100.0 %

When measuring the differences between teachers' teaching experience and their perceptions of literacy development, the only statistically significant differences ($2\hat{I}=20,651$, df=8, p=0,008) between different periods of the teacher's life cycle were observed in accordance with the statement that literacy development is mainly addressed in the first two years of primary education. Most teachers with 6-15 years of teaching experience (74.3 %) and more than 16 years of teaching experience (83.4 %) disagreed with this statement, compared to teachers with 1-5 years of teaching experience (46.6 %).

Teachers' professional development in literacy

In the third section of the survey, we wanted to examine the areas in which teachers feel competent to teach FL literacy and in which they feel they would need more support. The participants were asked to decide to what extent they know certain areas of FL literacy development (1 meaning not a lot, 2 a little, 3 something, 4 quite a lot and 5 a lot).

Most of the answers revolved around the medium point of competence (i.e. 3 – I know something about it). The results indicate that the teachers feel most competent when it comes to using literature in the classroom (M=3.33). They also expressed their confidence in creating writing (M=3.32) and reading tasks (M=3.29). They conveyed their uncertainties in the development of literacy projects (M=2.47), writing strategies (M=3.04) and the differentiation of reading and writing tasks for different levels (M=3.09).

Table 8

Teachers' professional development in literacy

Literacy areas	N	M	SD
Using literature in the classroom	105	3.33	0.957
Creating writing tasks	106	3.32	0.900
Creating reading tasks	107	3.29	0.752
Assessing reading skills	106	3.25	0.829
Assessing writing skills	106	3.25	0.895
Developing early/initial literacy skills	105	3.21	.0885
Developing reading strategies	106	3.16	0.852
Differentiating reading and writing tasks for different levels	106	3.09	0.951
Developing writing strategies	106	3.04	0.883
Developing literacy projects	105	2.47	0.931

The teachers stated that 67.3 % of them had attended a course on the development of FL literacy skills as part of their teacher training, while 32.7 % stated they had not had any literacy training within their teacher education.

The participants were also asked whether their schools had a programme or project to develop literacy skills across the curriculum. As we expected, not many schools had such a programme – only 12 of them (11.3 %). Some of these programmes were: reading literacy (various Slovenian projects); reading strategies; literacy self-assessment; literacy development; an internal project dedicated to reading literacy; a programme for the development of functional literacy, etc.

Within the teacher development section, we also wanted to investigate the needs of the teachers in FL literacy teaching and what areas they would like to know more about. Most teachers, i.e. 88 teachers (82.2 %) indicated that they would like to know more about developing literacy skills in English in grades 3-5. They could specify in an open question which areas within literacy they would like to develop more. Some of the areas they named were: development of reading and writing strategies; assessment of reading and writing skills; use of different genres/texts when developing reading strategies; pre-literacy development; creation of appropriate materials for the development of reading and writing skills; development of bilingual literacy in pupils' mother tongue and foreign language, etc.

Discussion

In the following part of the paper, the results of the study will be interpreted and linked to literacy research findings and the theoretical background on literacy.

In section one above we have presented teachers' conceptualisations of literacy. Most teachers defined literacy as the ability to read and write, which is a traditional definition and does not entail all the elements that literacy includes. As Meek (1991,

p. 123) asserts: 'Literacy is too important to be reduced to a set of basic competences to be taught and learnt according to a single pattern of instruction'. Literacy should be perceived as a holistic process that includes all four linguistic skills and the interpretation of texts, visuals, diagrams and the like. Only a few teachers defined it in such a broad sense. Presumably, broader conceptualisations of literacy might affect literacy teaching in the way that it could be taught in a wider context and develop a variety of skills.

In the second section we investigated teachers' perceptions of literacy. The answers in this part showed a broader view of literacy, which may also be due to the fact that the questions were close-ended, and teachers were more aware of what literacy encompasses. Their answers related to time and location revealed their belief that literacy is a long process and that it should not only be developed in language subjects. Nevertheless, the availability of reading materials is still not present in many classrooms, which hinders the development of reading. The importance of exposure to reading materials is emphasised in many studies. Sundeen (2015) argues that pupils read far too little, and instead of completing countless worksheets they should read across the whole curriculum, discuss what they are reading and write much more about it than they do. It is indicated that through these tasks they might develop not only their literacy skills but also their academic skills and vocabulary. Moreover, Krashen's research (2007) showed that students with more access to reading (more titles per student) in school scored significantly better on reading comprehension tests than their peers who did not have access to in-school self-selected reading.

It is interesting to note that more teachers with longer teaching experience indicated that literacy is not developed only in the first two years of primary education, compared to teachers with less teaching experience. We can assume that over the years they have been teaching they have realised how slow and gradual this process is and that it cannot be completed in a mere two years. Hanemann (2015) among others stresses that literacy is a lifelong process and must be perceived as a learning continuum of different proficiency levels.

The next set of questions was related to teachers' perceptions of competences involved in the development of literacy. Teachers broadly agreed with the statements that there exist multiple literacies, that literacy does not focus only on the written text and that it also includes the understanding of images, graphs and sounds. As mentioned above, these deviate strongly from teacher's own definitions of literacy, but this could be ascribed to the different question typology. Weber and Raphael (2016) claim that the way in which literacy is defined has implications for classroom practice and that, in the wake of cultural change, schools need to reconsider perceptions of teaching literacy to include other media, such as diagrams, images and sounds.

Despite teachers' firm belief that linguistic skills should be taught not only in the language subjects but also in other subjects, less than a third of the teachers agreed with the statement that literacy work includes teaching the terminology and specific vocabulary of the other subjects. This could be related to the fact that even though the use of the CLIL approach is recommended for FL teaching in the first years of primary

education by the National FL Curriculum, it is rarely applied in Slovenian schools due to legislation requiring the use of Slovenian language as the official language of schooling. In other contexts, more in favour of the CLIL approach (e.g. Spain), literacy entails working on the academic skills and content vocabulary (see Dobson et al., 2010).

Within the scope of the teachers' perceptions, we also wanted to explore their views on the problems pupils face when reading and writing in English. Teachers selected mispronunciation, reading comprehension and slow reading as the three most frequent reading difficulties experienced by their pupils. These are common problems at the beginning of the reading process, but since the study was aimed at the teachers of grades 3-5, we expected problems that would not be related to the initial reading stages as much. As many as 74 % of the teachers chose mispronunciation as the most common difficulty, which implies that classroom reading is done out loud. Garton et al. (2011) categorize reading out loud as a traditional language learning activity. In their study (Garton et al., 2011), 4.696 primary school teachers from 144 countries chose this activity as the third most popular, while silent reading was chosen by only a small number of teachers. Krashen (2004) and other advocates of silent reading insist that silent reading should be the norm in the classroom as it is a more natural form imitating real-life reading and it creates a reading habit. School-based activities such as Sustained Silent Reading or Free Voluntary Reading (also known as DEAR – ''Drop everything and read'') encourage students to silently read books of their own choosing during a certain time period every day (Krashen, 2011). Setting up a reading corner in a classroom with books, comic books and children magazines also stimulates silent reading.

Pupils who are not motivated to read were also high on the list of common problems chosen by the participating teachers. Cho et al. (2010) studied reading motivation and found that it is related to teacher guidance, materials, student involvement and sociocultural environment. Medwell et al. (1998) placed a high priority on purpose and communication in developing literacy, while Freebody (2007) proposes using more electronic reading and writing materials to improve student motivation. This phenomenon needs further research in the future, as low reading motivation can cause many other problems that are related not only to reading but also to overall academic achievement (Whitten et al., 2016).

Among the most common writing difficulties, the teachers chose spelling mistakes, lack of vocabulary and grammar mistakes. Similar to reading, these difficulties imply a somewhat traditional view on the development of writing skills, with emphasis on correct spelling and grammar. Hermansson and Lindgren (2019) claim that writing tasks should focus on meaning, while form and correctness should occasionally be ignored if we want to make writing meaningful and motivating for learners. Lindgren and Stevenson (2013) showed in their study of 11-year-old pupils that even children with limited knowledge of the language were able to express their feelings and interact with their readers in writing. However, it is encouraging to note in this study that help is often offered to pupils who have problems reading and writing in English.

The final section of the survey addressed teachers' professional development in the field of literacy. Even though teachers did not choose any literacy area in which they believe they have a high level of competence, the results showed that teachers feel most competent in using literature in the classroom (M=3.33). This could be related to the fact that they usually do not use course books in the third grade, therefore they use other materials, such as picture books, stories and songs (Kurež, 2019). Namely, for the first three grades of primary school, the Slovenian National FL Curriculum discourages the use of course books and thus no course book has been validated for this period by the National Education Institute. However, in grades four and five course books are used by the majority of teachers. Immersing pupils in a variety of texts is supported by many experts in developing literacy skills (e.g. Brisk, 2015; Nuttall, 2005). Arnold and Rixon (2014) conducted extensive research with young learners and they claim that relying solely on course books to guide primary school pupils in reading is not providing them with enough anchors. In addition, the texts in course materials are not as engaging as those in real books (Arnold & Rixon, 2014).

The teachers also expressed their confidence in developing literacy tasks and in assessing writing and reading skills. They still feel more confident in creating than assessing reading and writing tasks. Assessment is a sensitive area, and many teachers feel insecure when assessing pupils regardless of the subject. The areas where the teachers expressed the need for more support were the development of literacy projects with pupils, the development of writing strategies and strategies for differentiating literacy tasks for different levels. Drew (2009) reported on a very successful literacy project in Norwegian primary schools that focussed on differentiating groups, tasks and materials. He stressed that there were many challenges in achieving differentiation, primarily the commitment at the school level and the commitment of the teachers who need a high level of expertise to differentiate reading and writing tasks.

The teachers in this study indicated that they would need most support in developing literacy projects. As many as 11 % of the teachers confirmed that they already have a literacy project that is implemented across the curriculum, and these examples of good practice should be recognized at a national level and promoted in other schools. There are some examples of literacy projects developed under Erasmus programmes, e. g. *Growing up with books* in Austria, *Play football and learn how to read* in Germany, *Boost for reading* in Sweden and others (Improving literacy at different ages, 2016). The feedback from teachers and pupils who have participated in these projects is very positive.

Most of the teachers in the current study (67 %) participated in literacy training as part of their teacher training. However, 82 % of the teachers would still like to know more about developing literacy skills at primary level. Arnold and Rixon (2014) expressed concern about the lack of training for literacy development – they reported that of 61 teachers surveyed worldwide, only four had any training in literacy teaching. In the Fernández Fernández study (2020), only 30 % of Spanish teachers had some kind of pre-service training in developing literacy. Some of the issues that teachers wanted to develop further in this study were literacy strategies, literacy assessment, the use

of a variety of genres and texts with pupils and what we have identified as a pressing problem – the development of simultaneous literacy in L1 and FL.

There are two major limitations in this study that should be addressed in future research. First, different study methodology, including interviews and classroom observations, would provide a more in-depth view of teachers' perceptions on FL literacy and their classroom practices. This would provide a clearer outlook on how to assist the teachers in developing their pupils' literacy skills. Pupils' literacy habits and reading preferences would also help us in defining further ways of literacy enhancement. Second, more emphasis should be put on a variety of literacy sources, including electronic sources, which are already used by a high number of students nowadays and will be used even more in the future. Their visual appeal and interactive modes among other aspects contribute to reading motivation and their use for educational purposes should be given a priority in the future studies.

Conclusion

In this study we have tried to shed light on the development of FL literacy skills at primary level. As teachers' beliefs influence their teaching practices, their responses show us how they approach the development of literacy in the classroom, what they believe literacy entails and the issues they face in developing FL literacy skills. Based on this study, we can assume that literacy is still perceived in a traditional sense. This can be detected in teachers' conceptualisation of literacy, their perceptions of their pupils' difficulties in reading and writing in English, and the lack of literacy teaching across the curriculum. Nonetheless, the closed-ended questions showed that teachers believe literacy is a long process involving many skills and competences and that they would like to see it developed in all subjects, not just linguistic ones. They also expressed a strong desire to extend their knowledge of developing FL literacy skills, to gain more knowledge about how to create and evaluate literacy tasks, and to learn more about the differentiation of literacy tasks and leading literacy projects. We strongly believe that teachers should be offered guidance in these areas. As they are busy professionals, assistance in developing FL literacy skills should be efficient and well-organised. Online literacy development courses, workshops offering practical ideas, a repository of high quality materials preferably including good practice videos, promotion of successful projects developing literacy across the curriculum, models of skilful L1 and FL bilingual literacy development and the like are just a few suggestions on how teachers can be supported in developing literacy skills. These measures would not only increase teachers' competences but also enable pupils to become confident and literate language users.

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Mateja Dagarin Fojkar
Faculty of Education
University of Ljubljana
Kardeljeva ploščad 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
mateja.dagarin@guest.arnes.si

Tina Rozmanič
Faculty of Education
University of Ljubljana
Kardeljeva ploščad 16, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
tina.rozmanic@pef.uni-lj.si

Konceptualizacije i potrebe učitelja u razvoju osnovnih vještina pismenosti na stranom jeziku u primarnom obrazovanju

Sažetak

Budući da su mnoge europske države uključile poučavanje engleskoga jezika na predškolskoj i osnovnoškolskoj razini, potreba za učinkovitim razvojem jezičnih vještina na stranom jeziku pokazala se važnom. Tradicionalne definicije određuju pismenost kao sposobnost čitanja i pisanja, a šire definicije pismenosti uključuju razumijevanje širokoga raspona tekstova i sposobnost komunikacije u višejezičnom okruženju. Većina programa obrazovanja učitelja ne osposobljava ih dovoljno za razvoj inicijalnih i osnovnih vještina pismenosti učenika na stranom jeziku, a sami učitelji smatraju da ne dobivaju dovoljno podrške u ovom području. Zahvaljujući tome najmanje razvijena jezična vještina slovenskih učenika engleskoga jezika je čitanje: 12 % učenika ne uspijeva dosegnuti A1 razinu čitanja, a 29 % učenika ostaje na ovoj razini na kraju osnovne škole (Europska komisija, 2012).

Cilj ovoga istraživanja bio je ispitati percepcije razvoja vještina pismenosti na engleskom jeziku učitelja engleskog (N = 112) u slovenskim osnovnim školama. Pri tome je korišten upitnik kojim se nastojalo utvrditi konceptualizacije razvoja pismenosti na stranom jeziku učitelja, njihove procjene učeničkih teškoća u čitanju i pisanju te područja pismenosti u kojima smatraju da im treba više podrške u poučavanju. U istraživanju je upotrijebljen kvantitativni pristup i analiza sadržaja za odgovore na pitanja otvorenoga tipa. Razlike između skupina učitelja izmjerene su Hi-kvadrat testom. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na učiteljsko ograničeno viđenje značenja pismenosti u pitanjima otvorenoga tipa, dok pitanja zatvorenoga tipa ukazuju na šire razumijevanje koncepta. Većina učitelja izrazila je želju za stjecanjem dodatnoga profesionalnog znanja u ovom području. Rezultati istraživanja predstavljaju polaznu točku za razvoj učinkovitijih programa obrazovanja učitelja u području pismenosti na stranom jeziku i podršku zaposlenim učiteljima u razvoju pismenosti na stranom jeziku na razini osnovne škole.

Ključne riječi: *čitanje; percepcije učitelja; pisanje; primarno obrazovanje; profesionalni razvoj.*