

Reading Preferences of Younger Learners in Slovak-Czech-Polish Comparison

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Abstract

The aim of the study was a comparative analysis of reading preferences of elementary school younger learners in Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland. A questionnaire of own design was used, based on an initial exploration by means of focus interviews. Respondents were divided by their reading levels. The research sample consisted of 693 Slovak, 254 Czech and 248 Polish learners. Findings indicated similarities, but also considerable differences offering a possibility to draw knowledge on international research of learners' reading preferences. The most important finding was the difference of the Polish sample correlating with the best results of Polish learners in international measurements.

Key words: younger learners, learner reading preferences, international comparison of results, learners' reading in Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland.

Introduction

Reading is considered an indicator of educational results and a requirement of lifelong education. Reading as a research variable is closely connected with reading literacy. The National Strategy for Increase of Level and Continuous Development of Reading Literacy (2016) identifies weaknesses in the development of reading literacy: a lack of strategy for its development at many levels. There is a lack of research into related phenomena. Our investigation pursued reading preferences of 10-investigation to 11-year-old learners. International comparison should

answer the questions about how the preferences of Slovak, Czech and Polish children differ. Comparison in the PIRLS measurements of learners' reading literacy in the countries studied shows an apparent shift of Polish learners from the 29th to the 6th place over 10 years. The rise is considered an excellent result. Genres and contents in reading preferences of younger learners change. The results of our research (Babiaková, Kasáčová, 2019) show that younger learners prefer stories from children's lives, fantasy and sci-fi literature more than in the past. In contrast to the 20th century, today's children prefer mainly translated literature as their leisure-time reading. The character of the preferred literary hero changes, too. The authors of other researches have arrived at similar findings.

R. Natov (2017) focuses on the way children's imaginative engagement with the child hero figure can open them up to other people's experiences, developing empathy across lines of race, gender and sexuality.

Already in 2003, B. W. Sturm in his research in North Carolina analyzed two thousand open-ended answers from children 2 to 18 years old. The results indicated the following trends in reading preferences. Younger children preferred themes such as: animals, science, sports, and literature; older children opted for, biography, history, computer, careers, the library collection, and transportation (Sturm, 2003).

According to the Australian research (Australian Kids and Family Reading Report, 2016), the reasons for children's reading preferences can be characterized as follows: they amuse them and make them laugh – 54%; let them use their imagination – 47%; have a mystery or a problem to solve – 42%; have characters children wish they could be like – 38%; tell a made-up story (fiction) – 36%; teach something new – 35%; let them forget about real life for a while – 35%; tell a true, a bit scary story – 28%; they are about things children experience in their lives – 24%; have characters who are in love – 18%; have characters who look like them – 14%. However, other researchers have found out that adults have misconceptions about the reading of young people. Their attention should focus on the meaning of reading in children's lives (Manuel, Robinson, 2002).

Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland were chosen for the comparison because they are socially and culturally close. Their starting point at the period of curricular reforms was similar. The population density and the average life expectancy in the countries are comparable. A significant difference is that the average number of younger school-age learners per teacher is 10 in Poland, 15 in Slovakia and 19 in the Czech Republic (PIRLS, 2016). This may have an impact on education.

Slovakia achieves approximately the same level in the 5-year PIRLS testing cycles. In 2016 PIRLS measurement of reading literacy, Poland achieved the best

results – 565 scale units, the Czech Republic – 543, and Slovakia – 535 – ranking the lowest of the compared countries (PIRLS 2016). This finding was an inspiration to conceive our research plan.

Methodology of Research

The study presents partial findings of a quantitative-qualitative empirical research¹. It was carried out in three phases:

Phase 1 of the problem initial exploration was carried out by focus interviews with relevant participants. The focus interviews resulted in the formulation of grounded theory that there are three determinants in children's reading: a) personality context, b) social context, c) individual reading preferences. Next, four levels of readers were identified based on their personality characteristics: A, I, G, N:

- Enthusiastic Readers A – actively seeking books, choosing literature consciously, and who prefer reading in their leisure time.
- Interested Readers I – can choose texts according to their own interest; cope with compulsory learning texts without difficulties. They need advice, help and motivation to read.
- Non-Readers without Problems G – they are indifferent, not “illiterate”, they can read; they do not read of their own will or interest.
- Non-Readers with Problems N – they have serious difficulties with literacy and they find reading stressing and upsetting. When they do not have to, they do not read, when they have to, they suffer a lot.

Phase 2 consisted in designing and using a structured research tool and obtaining research data. Basic tests divided respondents into four reading levels A, I, G, N.

Phase 3 focused on two comparison types: ontogenetic comparison of 10- and 13-year-old respondents and international comparison of three national samples. The study presents the results of the international comparison of younger learners' statements about their reading choices in terms of genres, contents and formats.

Research sample

All three national groups of respondents (N 1195) were divided depending on how assigned to reader sub-groups by the criteria of the second group of items.

¹ This text was created under the project VEGA No. 1/0455/18 titled „Research and Development of Reading Enthusiasm with Younger School-Age Learners”, principal investigator doc. PaedDr. Simoneta Babiaková, PhD.

The research sample was obtained by convenience sampling initiated by direct contacts with teachers or through interested students. The limit was class teachers' willingness to participate in the research.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Slovak, Czech and Polish samples

4 th Grade	A Enthusiastic Readers n %		I Interested Readers n %		G Non-Readers without Prob- lems n %		N Non-Readers with Problems n %		Total N %	
	SK	309	44.59	268	38.67	110	15.87	6	0.87	693
CZ	76	29.97	120	47.24	54	21.26	4	1.58	254	100
PL	46	18.55	114	45.97	82	33.06	6	2.42	248	100

Methods

A questionnaire, designed on the basis of qualitative research, was used. The first group of items compiled data about respondents and schools whereas the second group of items determined readers' characteristics. The items distributed respondents to four reader sub-groups (A – Enthusiastic Readers, I – Interested Readers, G – Non-Readers without Problems, N – Non-Readers with Problems). The third group of items pursued the social context of respondents' reading, and the fourth their reading preferences. The initial analysis of research findings of a descriptive character about reading preferences in the national groups identified phenomena that were subsequently statistically tested. Since they were categorical variables, hypotheses were tested using Pearson's chi-squared goodness of fit test. All combinations of national pairs were compared. Statistical data are presented where a statistical significance was determined. Partial comparison used extreme values.

Research questions:

- What are the national groups' specifics in terms of the preferred literary genre?
- How do the national groups differ in their content preferences?
- What are the differences between the national groups in their preferences of texts enriched by illustrations?
- Which of the national groups prefers audio-books over reading books?
- Are there differences between the national groups in their preferences of reading formats other than printed books?

- How do the national groups differ in their preferences of reading books over watching films?
- How do the national groups differ in their relationships to extra reading?

Results of research

We were interested in the **preference of literary genres**. We asked whether there were significant differences between pairs of the national groups. Three hypotheses were formulated. They were tested by Pearson's chi-squared goodness of fit test because of the measuring method in the given hypothesis item.

H1: It is assumed that there is a difference between PL and SK respondents in their choice of literary genres. The biggest difference showed in the overall comparison of Polish and Slovak learners' preferences of literary genres ($\chi^2 = 66.95758$ df = 6 p = 0.000000).

H2: It is assumed that there is a difference between PL and CZ respondents in the choice of literary genres. Also significant, but a little smaller difference showed between Polish and Czech learners ($\chi^2 = 23.07295$ df = 6 p = 0.000773).

H3: It is assumed that there is a difference between SK and CZ respondents in the preference of literary genres. Comparison of the Slovak and the Czech sample showed differences, however of lower significance ($\chi^2 = 20.04246$ df = 6 p = 0.002722).

In terms of preferred literary genres, Polish children differed from Czech and Slovak children. They read less fairy tales and considerably more poetry, short stories novels. It is explained by the fact that Polish literature focuses on children's prose both from the present and from Polish history (Konopnicka, 2013). Czech learners chose poetry the least of all groups. Slovak children preferred encyclopaedias and short stories less than Czech and Polish children (Table 2).

Qualitative analysis of actual titles was published (Babiaková, Kasáčová, 2019).

Table 2. Preferences of genres

Genre	Q I most like to read						Write their titles %	N /% in national groups
	Fairy-tales %	Short stories %	Novels %	Encyclo-paedias %	Poems %	Other %		
A	32.88	8.71	6.61	18.02	11.11	13.81	8.86	309
I	33.88	5.75	4.52	19.92	9.45	12.94	13.55	268
G	32.57	7.43	5.14	16.57	8.57	17.71	12.00	110

Q I most like to read								
Genre	Fairy-tales %	Short stories %	Novels %	Encyclopaedias %	Poems %	Other %	Write their titles %	N /% in national groups
N	44.44	11.11	11.11	11.11	11.11	11.11	0.00	6
SK	33.28	7.48	5.68	18.47	10.17	13.99	10.92	693/100
A	28.57	18.05	9.77	9.77	5.26	15.79	12.78	76
I	33.16	14.74	6.32	8.42	6.84	18.42	12.11	120
G	32.84	8.96	4.48	5.97	4.48	31.34	11.94	54
N	28.57	0.00	0.00	14.29	14.29	28.57	14.29	4
CZ	31.49	14.61	7.05	8.56	6.05	19.90	12.34	254/100
A	14.81	19.44	15.74	5.56	16.67	17.59	10.19	46
I	20.67	22.60	11.54	4.81	17.79	14.42	8.17	114
G	21.37	15.38	5.13	2.56	22.22	17.95	15.38	82
N	30.00	20.00	10.00	10.00	10.00	20.00	0.00	6
PL	19.64	19.86	10.84	4.51	18.51	16.25	10.38	248/100

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

The content categories arose from categorization on the basis of focused interviews. They were the basis for creating the structure in the item: “What do you like most to read about?” The most frequently chosen content was *real life stories* – they were reported by Polish learners less than by Slovak and Czech learners. *Fantasy and sci-fi* literature was preferred by the most by Czech readers. *Detective stories and biographies* were read the most by Slovak children. Their open-ended answers revealed that they were biographies of current pop-culture, modelling and sport “celebrities”. Magazine articles were read the least by Polish children. Magazines were preferred by Slovak non-readers of the G level, while preferred by Czech interested readers (Table 3).

Table 3. Preferences of contents

Q What I most like to read about								
Genre	Real life stories %	Magazine articles %	Fantasy or sci-fi %	Detective stories %	Biographies %	Other %	Write their titles %	N/% in national groups
A	25.32	9.84	22.10	19.19	11.61	8.39	3.55	309
I	28.79	9.67	19.78	14.95	11.65	9.01	6.15	268

Q What I most like to read about								
Genre	Real life stories %	Magazine articles %	Fantasy or sci-fi %	Detective stories %	Biographies %	Other %	Write their titles %	N/% in national groups
G	25.71	12.00	17.14	13.71	17.71	9.14	4.57	110
N	42.86	14.29	0.00	0.00	28.57	14.29	0.00	6
SK	26.73	10.10	20.45	16.79	12.57	8.75	4.61	693/100
A	28.57	6.72	30.25	18.49	2.52	10.08	3.36	76
I	29.73	12.97	25.41	14.59	7.57	7.57	2.16	120
G	26.23	8.20	36.07	4.92	14.75	4.92	4.92	54
N	20.00	0.00	20.00	0.00	0.00	40.00	20.00	4
CZ	28.65	10.00	28.65	14.05	7.03	8.38	3.24	254/100
A	28.40	2.47	23.46	18.52	7.41	12.35	7.41	46
I	22.78	4.43	30.38	12.03	12.03	12.03	6.33	114
G	17.00	5.00	23.00	14.00	13.00	17.00	11.00	82
N	16.67	16.67	50.00	0.00	16.67	0.00	0.00	6
PL	22.32	4.35	26.96	13.91	11.30	13.33	7.83	248/100

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

Attractiveness of graphically enriched texts was also the subject of our interest.

H4: It is assumed that there are no differences in preferences of books enriched by illustrations.

The assumption was confirmed. There was no statistically significant difference in strong consent between any pair of the national groups. Illustrated and graphically enriched books were equally attractive. They were preferred by readers and non-readers of all groups (Table 4).

Table 4. Attractiveness of graphically enriched texts

Level	Q I am attracted by a book with illustrations, pictures, schemes, graphs or photos.											
	I agree very much			I agree			I do not agree			I do not know how to answer		
	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %
A	36.89	38.16	36.96	41.75	44.74	32.61	13.27	10.53	19.57	8.09	6.58	10.87
I	28.36	29.17	30.70	43.66	38.33	43.86	13.81	20.00	14.04	14.18	12.50	11.40

G	21.82	25.93	36.59	40.91	33.33	34.15	16.36	18.52	8.54	20.91	22.22	20.73
N	16.67	0.00	16.67	33.33	0.00	33.33	0.00	0.00	16.67	50.00	100.00	33.33
Total	31.02	30.71	33.47	42.28	38.58	38.31	13.85	16.54	13.31	12.84	14.17	14.92

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

Preference of books or e-formats was of our interest in connection with the current reading trends. Respondents preferred printed books over e-formats. They did not care for either e-book readers or iPads. It was evidenced by more than a half of disagreeing answers. However, there was also a high number of answers in the option *I do not know how to answer*, indicating that many children did not know what an e-book reader and iPad is or they had no access to them (Table 5).

Table 5. Preference of books or e-formats

Level	Q I prefer reading in the e-book reader, iPad over reading in books.											
	I agree very much			I agree			I do not agree			I do not know how to answer		
	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %
A	3.88	3.95	4.35	11.33	6.58	6.52	70.87	73.68	78.26	13.92	15.79	10.87
I	6.72	9.17	7.89	18.66	14.17	7.89	49.25	52.50	56.14	25.37	24.17	28.07
G	5.45	16.67	13.41	17.27	7.41	10.98	47.27	31.48	32.93	30.00	44.44	42.68
N	0.00	25.00	0.00	16.67	0.00	0.00	16.67	0.00	0.00	66.67	75.00	100.00
Total	5.19	9.45	8.87	15.15	10.24	8.47	58.30	53.54	51.21	21.36	26.77	31.45

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

Preference of reading on the Internet was also investigated.

H5: It is assumed that there is a statistically significant difference between the national groups in their preferences of reading Internet sources. The hypothesis was not confirmed (SR vs. PL $\chi^2 = 0.320$; SR vs. CZ $\chi^2 = 1.318$; PL vs. CZ $\chi^2 = 0.346$). There was no statistically significant difference between any pair of the national groups. Most learners in the national groups did not agree with the statement. The preference of reading on the Internet correlated negatively with the reading level in the national group. Already the characteristics of A, I, G, N readers revealed that the higher the reading level the higher the preference of books over other media (Table 6).

Table 6. Preference of reading on the Internet

Level	Q I prefer reading on the Internet.											
	I agree very much			I agree			I do not agree			I do not know how to answer		
	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %
A	1.94	1.32	8.70	9.71	7.89	6.52	78.96	82.89	76.09	9.39	7.89	8.70
I	12.31	10.83	10.53	16.79	15.00	10.53	51.12	66.67	59.65	19.78	7.50	19.30
G	14.55	22.22	19.51	19.09	25.93	10.98	36.36	27.78	34.15	30.00	24.07	35.37
N	0.00	0.00	0.00	16.67	0.00	16.67	50.00	25.00	16.67	33.33	75.00	66.67
Total	7.94	10.24	12.90	14.00	14.96	10.08	61.18	62.60	53.23	16.88	12.20	23.79

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

Preference of listening to an audio-book over reading

H6: It is assumed that there is a statistically significant difference between the SK and the PL group in their preferences of audio-books. The hypothesis was confirmed in favour of the Polish group ($\chi^2 = 10.220$ df = 3.841 p<0.001). There were considerable differences between the national groups. A descriptive view showed that listening to audio-books was rejected by 64% of Slovak, 53% of Czech and only 34% of Polish readers. Listening was preferred at both levels of consent by more than 45% of Polish and 31% of Czech children (Table 7).

Table 7. Preference of listening to audio-books over reading

Level	Q. I prefer listening to an audio-book over reading it											
	I agree very much			I agree			I do not agree			I do not know how to answer		
	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %
A	2.59	6.58	4.35	6.47	11.84	10.87	79.29	68.42	65.22	11.65	13.16	19.57
I	10.45	12.50	19.30	10.45	16.67	26.32	60.82	60.83	32.46	18.28	10.00	21.93
G	15.45	33.33	41.46	21.82	18.52	19.51	30.00	20.37	19.51	32.73	27.78	19.51
N	0.00	25.00	33.33	33.33	0.00	33.33	0.00	0.00	16.67	66.67	75.00	16.67
Total	7.65	15.35	24.19	10.68	15.35	21.37	63.64	53.54	33.87	18.04	15.75	20.56

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

Preference of reading over film watching

H7: It is assumed that there are differences between the national groups in their preferences of reading over film watching. The hypothesis was not confirmed. Nevertheless, the differences in the results of the national groups were interesting. 27% of Slovak readers, in the sum of both levels of agreement, preferred reading over watching films, while only 17% of Czech readers and 19% of Polish readers did. The overall Polish sample preferred films in 60%, Czech sample in 66%, Slovak sample in 49%. In all national groups, there was a difference in the level of disagreement especially between enthusiastic readers (A). The Czech sample of enthusiastic readers (A) reported considerably lower strong agreement (9.21%) against the other two samples. The preference of films clearly prevailed in almost 93% of Czech learners who were non-readers without difficulties (G) (Table 8).

Table 8. Preference of reading over film watching

Level	Q I prefer reading books over watching films											
	I agree very much			I agree			I do not agree			I do not know how to answer		
	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %
A	14.24	9.21	19.57	31.39	31.58	28.26	29.13	35.53	30.43	25.24	23.68	21.74
I	4.10	0.00	2.63	9.70	9.17	11.40	62.31	75.00	60.53	23.88	15.83	25.44
G	2.73	1.85	4.88	5.45	0.00	6.10	73.64	92.59	74.39	18.18	5.56	14.63
N	0.00	0.00	0.00	16.67	25.00	16.67	66.67	25.00	83.33	16.67	50.00	0.00
Total	8.37	3.15	6.45	18.76	14.17	12.90	49.35	66.14	60.08	23.52	16.54	20.56

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

Compulsory and recommended reading

The wording of extra reading differed in the national terminology. While for Slovak and Czech learners it was recommended literature for reading in addition to the school reader, the term *reading in addition to textbooks* was used in the Polish context.

H8: It is assumed that there are significant differences between national groups in the relationship to extra reading. The hypothesis was confirmed. There was a statistically significant difference between the Slovak and the Czech group in favour of Slovak learners ($\chi^2 = 27.800$ df = 3.841 p<0.001). There was a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 16.840$ df = 3.841 p<0.001) between the Polish and

the Czech group in favour of Polish learners. There was no significant difference between Slovak and Polish learners. Czech learners reported the strongest aversion to extra reading (66%). The aversion was rising with the falling level of reading. Slovak enthusiastic readers (A) differed from Czech and Polish readers in the fact that 87% of learners enjoyed reading recommended books. The interest in reading recommended titles correlated with the reading level (Table 9).

Table 9. Compulsory and recommended reading

Level	Q I enjoy extra reading.											
	I agree very much			I agree			I do not agree			I do not know how to answer		
	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %	SK %	CZ %	PL %
A	50.16	9.21	28.26	36.57	31.58	43.48	4.21	35.53	10.87	9.06	23.68	17.39
I	19.40	0.00	21.93	44.03	9.17	48.25	19.40	75.00	10.53	17.16	15.83	19.30
G	9.09	1.85	19.51	27.27	0.00	36.59	30.00	92.59	19.51	33.64	5.56	24.39
N	0.00	0.00	33.33	0.00	25.00	0.00	16.67	25.00	0.00	83.33	50.00	66.67
Total	31.31	3.15	22.58	37.66	14.17	42.34	14.29	66.14	13.31	16.74	16.54	21.77

A Enthusiastic Readers, I Interested Readers, G Non-Readers without Problems, N Non-Readers with Problems

Discussion

We are aware of the limits of our investigation, caused by some methodological phenomena. The national groups were not of the same size; distribution of the reading level inside the samples differed, too. The tool used had a nominal character, which limited the choice of procedures for statistical processing. The strength of the research is in its authentic nature, since the research tool was developed on the basis of the problem initial exploration by a qualitative strategy based on interviews with focus groups of children.

The significance of our research is mainly in the context of international comparison. Investigation of learners' reading, including the view on traditional and modern formats, is important for both modernization of education and everyday life. It presents a fundamental theme in innovation of educational sciences.

There are considerable differences between Slovak, Czech and Polish younger learners. The differences found out by our research certainly have also a wider

social and cultural context. There are significant differences in the preference of literary genres. Polish learners are art oriented and interested in experiential contents, Slovak learners prefer encyclopaedias. However, the results of PIRLS measurements show that Slovak learners' achievement in informational reading is worse than in literary reading. The finding should be examined further. There is also a significant difference in the preference of listening to literary texts (audio-book), preferred by majority of Polish learners. Here, too, their different reading culture is manifested. For decades, many Polish teachers have systematically encouraged children's relationship to reading also by listening to literary texts. Teachers read learners mainly shorter prose at school (Konopnicka, 2013). Yet, the Polish curriculum has the lowest number of instruction hours allotted directly to the mother tongue and literature (PIRLS 2016). Poland has applied the concept of integrated curriculum content in primary education, which could be reflected also in the results of the reading literacy measurement. Reading is the goal and means not only of literature classes but it is incorporated in all subjects.

There is no difference between national groups in their preference of printed books over the Internet sources. All national groups prefer books, which does not support the frequent assertion that generation Z rejected the traditional reading format. All three national groups prefer films to books. A descriptive analysis of the data shows clearly that only enthusiastic readers prefer books to films. All respondents, regardless of their reading levels, are attracted by graphic designs of books. Czech learners resent compulsory reading the most; Slovak and Polish learners approve of it depending on their reading level.

As recommended by W. Martino (2001), when developing learners' reading skill teachers should get inspiration from published researches. It is also the intention of our research findings processed from data from 1200 learners. Information of the scholar community certainly helps to improve the knowledge about children's reading.

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