READING COMPREHENSION IN NACIONAL AND INTERNACIONAL PROGRAMS OF EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The article's main goal is to identify different educational assessment programs, both national and international, and describe their general characteristics. Likewise, it analizes the way in which reading comprehension is conceptualized and assessed. Lastly, this paper shows the results that Argentina has achieved in this area. The programs which have been analized are: Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE, Segundo Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo), and specifically in our country, the National Evaluation Operatives (ONE, Operativo Nacional de Evaluación) and the Program of Evaluation of Educational Quality of Buenos Aires Province (Programa de Evaluación de la Calidad Educativa de la Provincia de Buenos Aires). These different studies are of importance in reading comprehension since it is a "competence for life" necessary to acquire other learnings, to achieve an active participation in society and to be connected to the possibility of planning for a better future. The reports show differences between the results of the various countries and their provinces. The development of unequal competences is like a challenge both nationally and internationally, since it is an important indicator of the critical situation in which a significant number of children and teenagers are placed in.

Key Words: Programs; Assessment; Education; Reading

Introduction

In the last few decades there has been a major concern both in the national and international spheres, in sectors connected to education and in society as a whole, about the learning that students gain in top priority areas such as Mathematics, Language and Natural Science after a relatively long period of schooling. Froemel (2000) describes three stages in the orientation of Latin American educational politicies for the last fifty years. In the first stage, located between the end of the fifties and the beginning of the seventies, educational politics' emphasis has been placed on the achievement of equal opportunities to access education. The main concern was that school age children had the possibility to attend school, that is to say, to guarantee a place for everyone in the educational system. The assessement during this stage was mainly of a product and its primary role, the certification. In a second stage, between the beginning of the seventies and the end of the

eighties, the great interest was learning to be accessible to all through individual and personalized teaching. The assessment was focused on the classroom and it primarily turned into a formative assessment. A third stage wich starts in the nineties and lasts until today, emphasizes the fact of not just considering students' individual differences but compensating for such differences. In this context, numerous assessment programs or operatives of students' learning have been developed so as to identify factors which affect them in order to implement strategies that improve educational results. Although, in general, these programs differ in the way in which what is going to be assessed is conceptualized, in the age groups that they form, in the areas of application, in the samples that they define; they all coincide with the neccesity of current educational systems to produce significant knowledge in the users of their services. In this paper we will refer to four of these assessment operatives in which Argentina has participated in order to show their main characterictics: the program set in motion by OCDE in 1997: Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE) organized and coordinated by the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE) and, mainly in our country, the National Evaluation Operatives (ONE) and the Program of Evaluation of Educational Quality of Buenos Aires Province. Also, the results obtained by our country will be reintroduced in one of the respective areas which can be generically called reading comprehension.

PISA project

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is an asessment proposal promoted by the Organization for Economic Co-operative and Development (OCDE). Its goal is to assess if 15 year-old students are ready to face their future challenges. It points out to produce indicators for students' performances which are relevant to educational policies and which allow the comparison among the educational systems of different countries through any time periods set out beforehand. The age of 15 years old has been chosen because in the majority of the countries that are OCDE(1) members, students of that age are near to the end of compulsory education. Therefore, an asessment made at such time enables us to have an approximate idea of the knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through a ten-year educational period. Three areas are assessed in triennial cycles: reading comprehension, mathematics comprehension and scientific comprehension. In each cycle one of the three areas is analized in depth and a summary profile for the other two is constructed.

Though not an OCDE member, Argentina together with other countries undertook the assessments carried out in this project, in 2000(2) and 2006. In 2003 Argentina decides not to undertake the assessment claiming budgetary and operating restrictions (Rodrigo, 2006). The Argentinian sample, in the 2000 PISA assessment, was made by 3983 students and 156 schools.

Considering the aim of this paper, theoretical considerations and results referreing to our country in the reading area in PISA 2000 will be primarily analized, since that is the year in which such area is defined as priority.

Reading comprehension: theoretical considerations

Reading comprehension is understood in the PISA project as *"the capacity an individual has to comprehend, use and analize written texts with a view to reach his/her own goals, develop his/her knowledge and possibilities and participate in society"* (OCDE, 2002, pag. 22).

Reading comprehension is assessed considering three aspects:

1) Text format

In the program a distiction is made between continuous texts, which are those with which students' reading comprehension is usually assessed, and discontinuous texts. The first are texts which are normally made up of a series of sentences which, in turn, are organized into paragraphs. Continuous texts are usually classified by the text type. Thus, we can differentiate the narration, the exposition, the description, the argumentation and the instruction, among others. PISA also adds discontinuous texts where information is presented differently, such as lists, forms, graphics, diagrams, tables and certificates.

The inclusion of a great variety of texts is based on the principle that a person during his/her adult life comes across different kinds of written texts and therefore, it is not enough to read a limited number of text types as those which are found in the school environment.

2) Reading processes (aspects)

Basic reading skills are not assessed since it is taken for granted that 15 year-old students have already acquired them. PISA assessment measures five processes which must take place in order to fully comprehend a text:

▪ *Information acquisition:* it means to obtain certain information and specific or isolated data from a text.

▪ *Development of a general comprehension:* this aspect forces the reader to judge the text in a globally. For instance, to identify its main topic or to explain the purpose of a map or graphic.

▪ *Interpretation production:* it requires readers to broaden their first impression on a text in order to reach to a more specific or complete comprehension of what they have read. That kind of tasks require the comprehension of the textual cohesion.

▪ *Reflection and Assessment of the text content:* it requires readers to link the information which the text contains to knowledge from other information sources. For instance, presenting an argument or proof which is outside the text, or assessing different informative or proving elements.

▪ *Reflection and Assessment of the text format:* this aspect implies the reader to step back from the text, judge it objectively and assess its quality and relevance. It is important at this stage the familiarity with texts' structures, registers and genres.

3) The situations

The situation can be understood as a text general categorization according to the use intended by the author, to the relationship with a third party who is implicitly or explicitly related to the text and to the general content. Four situation variables have been identified: reading for a private purpuse, reading for a public purpose, reading for a professional puspose and reading for educational purpose.

Reading comprehension assessment results

Reading comprehension assessment results have been summarized through a scale with an average of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. Students' performance is also presented through five subscales: three process subscales («information acquisition», «text interpretation» and «reflection and assessment») and two text format subscales (*continuous and discontinuos texts*).

In the 2000 PISA study the complete scale and each of the subscales are divided in five levels. Chart 1 includes the five levels with the grading associated with them and the percentage of Argentinian students which stands at each of the levels in 2000 PISA. A level under 1 is included inasmuch as more than 20% of our students got results under 335 points.

In the reading comprehension area Argentina has attained an average grading of 418 points, with an standard deviation of 109, standing at level 2. This grading gets Argentina closer to other Latin American countries such as Chile, Brazil y Mexico. As a whole, these countries stand at almost 100 points of the international average.

If the percentage of individuals who stand at each level is considered, it might be noticed that almost 70% of Argentinian students stand under the average of 500 points. It is worrying that only 43,9% of almost a 4000-individual sample masters the most basic aspects associated with reading comprehension (level 1 and lower than level 1).

This implies, in terms of the comprehension, that such percentage equals almost 1800 individuals of the sample:

- in the information acquisition subscale only one criterion can be used in order to locate explicit information in the texts;
- in the text interpretation subscale the individual manages to recognize the main theme only when it is similar to a familiar theme being outstanding the information provided by the text;
- in the reflection and assessment subscale, the individual can only make a simple connection between the text information and everyday or common knowledge.

On the contrary, the highest levels are characterized by demanding skills like locating non explicit information in unfamiliar, complex and long texts, reaching a deep comprehension of such texts that will allow to infer useful information required to resolve the reactives and lastly, connecting significantly the information provided by the text to specialized information.

It is important to take into account that *"Students who reach the highest mastery levels of PISA have a great probability to improve the talented heritage of their country. The current student proportion that stands at these levels can also influence the contribution that such nation will make in the future to the heritage of high profile employees in a global economy. Therefore comparing those proportions of students that reach the highest mastery level in reading competence is, as such, of great relevance"* (OCDE, 2002, pag. 41). Level 5 is made up in some countries of a bit more than 15% of the individuals and less than 5% in others. PISA data place Argentina in this last group, with a reduced percentage of individuals in the curve' top end. Generally speaking, those countries which have the highest percentages of individuals who stand at level 5 also have the lowest percentages in level 1 and less.

Rodrigo (2006) analizes a series of factors which are usually associated with students' low performance. Amongst them the author stresses the socioeconomic family background, considering at this point parents' educational and occupational level, the resources destined to education and education politicies, mainly refering to formal organization of education systems. In her analysis the author emphasizes the fact that although these variables have a relationship with the results, they are unable to explain them by theirselves. She also introduces as an essential factor school, pedagogicalal practices'

and teachers' characteristics. At this point she introduces as a key factor the low level academic demand Argentinian students have to respond to at their schools. The author considers seven indicators for this low level demand 1) indicators related to the student's academic path (the amount of hours devoted to studying, the grades the student got); 2) indicators related to schooling conditions (the number of classes during the year, the school day duration, the number of students per class); 3) indicators related to school activities (activities for the school, the amount of books the student have read); 4) indicators related to the school climate; 5) indicators related to teachers' characterictics (training, the time of dedication); 6) indicators related to assessments practices (assessments frequency and type, their use) and 7) indicators related to institutions' characterictics (school resources use, extracurricular offers).

Another important issue that is explicitly remarked in the PISA report is that countries not only should encourage high students' performance but also should work to reduce internal inequalities. The distance which exists between high and low level performance students within each country provides useful information about equity. One way to obtain information regarding this point is to consider the standard deviation value or to analize the distance which separates the grading rank attained by the central half of the population. In most of the countires, students' grading rank in the central half exceeds the range of a performance level (72 points), even though in some countries it doubles such magnitude. In our country such difference is of 151 points, which accounts for the fact that the problem is not only students' low performance but also learning inequalities.

The Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE)

SERCE is a student's performance assessment carried out in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is organized and coordinated by the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE) and it is set within the global actions of UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC/UNESCO Santiago). The main activities of such study took place between February 2004 and June 2008. Its immediate precedent is the First Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (PERCE) which took place in 1997. SERCE assesses the performance of Latin American Third and Sixth Grade Primary Education students in Language (Reading and Writing) and Mathematics, whereas Natural Science assessment only takes place in Sixth Grade Primary Education students.

Also, SERCE collects background information on students and their families, school teachers, directors and schools, in order to identify and gain insight into the factors that have the strongest influence on student performance.

Sixteen countries participate in this study. Argentina participated in SERCE with 167 schools which have been included in the study. 6663 Third Grade students and 6595 Sixth Grade students were assessed.

Characteristics of the reading performance assessment for Sixth grade Primary Education students

To assess students' performance, SERCE uses tests based on curricular elements known to be common to the region and the UNESCO's life-skills approach. The latter considers that schools should promote abilities, principles, values and attitudes which ensure students their full and active participation in society, both as actors and citizens. In order to set up common contents, there have been analized each countries' curriculum, main school texts and assessment instruments which are used in the different countries that participate in the study.

In the curricular revision made by SERCE with respect to reading, it has been observed that the different curriculums mainly stress text comprehension (associated with communicative competences) and textual diversity. That is why, the reading test is based on what it is considered a life macroskill: *"that is to remarkably interpret and resolve communicative problems through written information located in authentic diverse texts"* (UNESCO/SERCE, 2008, pag. 87). The life-skills concept, first originates associated with health care abilities, and then its meaning extends to other areas. As Atorresi (2005*)* states *"it refers to those capacities necessary—abilities, principles, values, attitudes— to successfully face everyday-life challenges (private, professional and social life) and exceptional situations, and also to continue learning and to project a better future".*

In SERCE Natural and Social Science texts are used to assess textual comprehension. It is suggesed the reading of different types of authentic texts and also of different activities which can be done based on the reading. The tests involve a mastery, what has been read, and a process, the reading.

What has been read refers to the text characteristics: its length, its type and the discursive genre it belongs to. The length refers to the untis which make sense that make up a text. The type refers to the text structure or general format. Text types are the narration, the description, the explanation, the instruction, the argumentation and the conversation. But text types are materialized in different discursive genres, characterized by a more specific structure, style, purpuse and context. Reading refers to the act or process of reading and, as a consequence, to the cognitive skills that students come into play when they interact with the text in order to do the assignments that they were suggested. Reading processes are classified into: general processes, (typical of every reading act), processes related to

specific texts (to particular types or genres) and metalinguistic processes. The latter require to focus on the language in order to recognize and designate text properties and characterictics.

SERCE establishes four performance levels for each Grade which has been assessed in the Reading area, with its respective cut points. Sixth Grade students who stand at Level I are able to locate information with only one meaning, in a central or prominent place of a short text (the beginning or the end), which is literally repeated or reapeted through synonyms and isolated from other pieces of information. Students who stand at Level II, apart from doing what has already been mentioned in the previous level, locate information in the middle of a text which must be distinguished from some other located in a diffrent segment; they also integrate information from graphic and verbal codes and differentiate one-meaning words. Sixth Grade students who stand at Level III, apart from what has been covered in the previous levels, locate information and distinguish it from other pieces of information conceptually closer and interpret paraphrase and synthesis. They also integrate data distributed in a paragraph, link two texts, fill in implicit information in a paragraph, reread to look for specific data, distinguish a certain meaning in words which have many, and recognize the meaning of word parts basing on the text. Students who are grouped at Level IV for Reading performance, apart from what has already been enumerated, integrate, prioritize and generalize information.

Reading performance in Sixth Grade students assessed by SERCE

SERCE introduces the reading performance of students in two ways. On the one hand, it is shown students' average grading and standard deviation by country. These gradings are offered in a scale with an average grading of 500 points and a standard deviation of 100. On the other, the results are presented based on the performance level distribution by country. Through the analysis of the results obtained by SERCE's participanting countries, it is possible to distinguish three groups: those which the average grading exceeds the regional average, countries which the average equals the regional average and lastly, those which are placed under the average. Argentina is the only country which is in the second group previously described. On the other hand, the inequality in terms of grading among individuals who stand at opposite percentiles is in our country between 206 and 259 points.

Argentina has significantly lower grades (506,45) than those obtained by students in Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, Uruguay and in the Mexican State of Nuevo Leon; and a significantly higher grading than those obtained by Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala,

Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Dominican Republic. There are no significant differences regarding the average of Brazil and Colombia.

Regarding performance level distribution SERCE's report shows that there are important variations among the countries. Taking into account our country data, 19,22% of the students stand at Level IV, 25,48% at Level III, 35,59% at Level II, 17,93% at Level I and 1,78% under Level I. Chart 2 summarizes this information together with the cut points corresponding to each performance Level defined.

It is interesting to note the analysis SERCE introduces about the relationship between the countries' economic production and students' performance. The study shows that the higher the inequality in the income distribution, the lower the average grading.

Students' performance is positively associated with internal production per capita of each country. However, such as SERCE expresses, this association is statistics which should not lead us to think that a certain production level necessarily implies an average grading performance. In fact, there are countries which have a performance level higher than the one expected in accordance with their internal production and vice versa. Argentina is located within the group of countries (together with Panama and Dominican Republic) which performance level is lower than the expected taking into account its internal production level per person.

SERCE report then concludes on this point that the data introduced seem to show that although the economic production is a key factor, this variable combines with other contextual variables. This, in turn, leads to different averages of academic performance given a constant income per capita.

If the relationship between the performance average and the income distribution is considered (Gini coefficient), it is observed that the more unequal the distribution, the lower the performance. It is worth mentioning that in the Reading area the lowest association between income distribution and performance is observed. In the Reading area for Sixth Grade, Argentina is placed in the country group which performance average is in accordance with what is expected in reagards to its income distribution. In an analysis of the factors associated with students' performance, SERCE shows that school climate is the main performance variable. This factor considers the aspects related to the pleasure and calm that the student feels when he/she is at school, the sense of belonging towards the institution, and the relationship with his/her schoolmates. Also, in Sixth Grade, it includes the dedication and attention which the student feels his/her teachers give to him/her, the students' dicipline (order) in the classroom and the verbal and physical violence which takes place in the institution. This provides relevant information about the importance that harmonious and positive human relations have for learning.

The second variable, which happens to be the most important to explain students' performance, is schools' average socioeconomic and cultural background. The measure of SERCE students' socioeconomic and cultural family background was named socioeconomic and cultural status index (ISEC). Reading is the area where there is a higher inequality in students' performance which is attributable to ISEC, whereas in Science there is the lowest. This might mean that in this latter area results, to a greater extent, depend on what the school and its teachers are able to do during the teaching-learning process.

Lastly, and to a lesser extent, they are also positively related to performance: the school infrastructure, basic services, school library books and teachers' experience.

One of the conclusions which the study reaches to is the great diversity in the learning quality of the students in the area. Countries can be organized in four groups depending on the distance from the average. In a *first group*, there are those which students exceed counties' average for more than one standard deviation (they obtain more than 600 points). A *second group* is made up by countries with gradings higher than the average, but for less than a standard deviation distance. The *third* one corresponds to those countries with an average that equals the average, whereas in a *fourth group* there are countries with average performance lower than the countries' averages, but at less than a standard deviation. Argentina, in the Reading area for Sixth Grade students, is in the third country group.

On the other hand, SERCE, in its study regarding the associated factors, has been able to verify that schools can have an important effect on student performance. Even beyond socioeconomic factors, variables associated with school can contribute significantly to reducing the learning gap associated with social inequalities.

National Evaluation Operatives (ONE)

Assessment operatives started in Argentina in 1993, where the areas of Language and Mathematics were assessed in Seventh Grade Primary Education students and Fifth Year Secondary Education students (IIPE, 2001). Initially, this operative depended on the Educational Department until the National Agency of Information and Evaluation of Educational Quality (DiNIECE) was created in 2001, an agency now independent of such Department. The assessment process takes place through ability tests in the Language and Mathematics areas. Also, students, principals and teachers are administered questionnaires which goal is to collect information about the contextual factors related to teaching and learning.

In the ONE of 2003, Third, Sixth and Ninth Grade Primary Education students, and students who are finishing High School were assessed in Mathematics and Language, except for students from Neuquen Province since it did not participate in the Operative. The Operative coverage was higher than 80% in all the levels and areas assessed.

Ability tests are designed to determine to what extent students have incorporated certain abilities and contents. Contents are defined as the relevant knowledge which students must learn and teachers must teach. Cognitive abilities have been defined as those "mental operatives which the individual uses to look at the relationship with and among objects, situations and phenomena. They are achieved through the learning and teaching processes and are assigned meaning in accordance with the establishment of socially relevant and highly significant contents, in the presence of which they come into play and through which they develop" (Education Department, DiNIECE, Gossary, 2201).

In the Language area, each student had to take a test made up by 26 items in 60 minutes, which assessed two different abilities: 16 reading comprehension items about two text types, a narrative short story and an informative text (with multiple choice answers) and 10 reflection items about Language facts. In the first case, there were included normative notions and morphosyntactic and semantic relations. In the second case, reading comprehension and the contents which were assessed were coherence, cohesion, recognizing implicit information, recognizing textual relations, vocabulary and adjustment to the communicative situation.

In the 2003 ONE report, results are introduced in terms of percentages of correct answers and they show in the reading comprehension area a 48,1% of correct answers and a 55,2% in the reflective ability regarding Language facts. Regarding the narrative text, the percentage of correct answers was 49,3% and regarding the informative text 46,8%.

The report stresses the necessity of a more precise analysis in the last year of Primary Education teaching since it seems to be the case that the achivements in the Reading comprehension area should be better than the ones in Reflection about Language facts. That is based on the fact that curricular designs of most of the jurisdictions emphasize comprehension over normative, semantic and morphosyntactic issues.

Likewise, the grades of the reading comprehension of narrative texts are higher than the ones obtained in the reading of informative texts. Even if, in general, it is accepted that narrative text comprehension is easier than the informative text one, it is precisely at the school where children and young people learn to read informative texts and where they develop the abilities required for that.

Program of Evaluation of Educational Quality of Buenos Aires Province

The Program of Evaluation of Educational Quality of Buenos Aires Province started in August of 2000 under the responsibility of the Provincial Agency of Planning and Evaluation of Educational Quality. At this stage, eighty-five thousand Seventh Grade Primary Education students were assessed. This figure means 30% of the complete Seventh Grade roll. The main goal of the program implementation is to collect information that will allow to reorient pedagogical tasks and educational politicies to improve educational quality.

The provincial assessment system understands that educational quality can only be analysed taking into account populations' and institutions' unequal origins. Therefore, educational quality should be referred to the level that each school –according to their specific conditions– manages their students to reach to given their initial situation, which is necessarily different. This leads to assess the same students in two consecutive occasions to be able to document the changes: one when students are in Seventh grade and another when they are in Ninth, to observe the conditions when they end Primary Education. In this sense, it can be stated that this methodology called of "progress" or of "added value" considers modifications which are produced in learning between an initial situation and a second assessment moment. The exhaustive analysis about value-added assessments associated with the study of "efficient schools" and "school effects" exceeds the purpose of the this paper. To that purpose, Froemel (2000) and Aguerre (2003) articles can be looked up.

On the other hand, the assessment operative includes instruments that enable to investigate different dimensions: the teaching job, the management job, schools' infrastructure conditions and, as far as students are concerned, sociodemographic background and the learning in different areas such as: Language, Mathematics and Human Formation. In the Language area, three of the four basic communicative competences pointed out in Buenos Aires curricular guidelines are explored: listening, reading and writing. The speaking assessment, the fourth of the competences which have been mentioned, was not explored because there was not an accurate methodology assessment. The reading investigation was conducted through a news paper, called "La Posta", specially designed for the assessment, on the basis of the idea that this text carrier enables to include a variety of authentic texts, that is to say, such as the real ones. The news paper included different sections, each of them was represented by a text type: The Cover Page Story, Information, Opinion, Culture, Entertainment, Humor. There were different text types: a news story, two encyclopedia entries, a scientific article, a comic strip, three short opinion texts and a short story. Based on the reading, students had to answer an a multiple choice question which explored different competences: local and

global comprehension; knowledge of structural, morphosyntactic, semantic, pragmatic and normative aspects; knowledge of text types and discursive genres.

In the definition of the operative conceptual framework, the importance given to reading comprehension and its teaching at school is stressed "it seems necessary that schools set as a general and common goal in all the areas the systemic promotion of texts' reading comprehension. On the one hand, this implies assuming responsibility to devise a teaching method for reading strategies appropriate to different levels and years –a responsibility that, of course, concerns the Language area. But on the other hand, this implies admitting that for those strategies to come into play, all areas have to be concerned, i.e. teaching situations which entail a reading process must tend to reinforce reading skills' adquisition and to multiply reading competences" (Tercera serie de documentos, Document 1, pag. 16).

Summary of the main results obtained by Seventh Grade Primary Education students in the 2001 Operative

In this section the results obtained by students in non fiction texts are mainly analized: the news story, the encyclopedia text, the opinion texts and the scientific article. Texts are here classified according to the discursive genre they belong to. In the report, results are expressed in terms of percentages of correct answers, which is considered an indicator of the level of difficulty of an item or item grroup. This does not allow us to know, such as it is expressed in the other reports, the percentages of individuals placed according to different performance levels.

The news story is in second place taking into account the percentage of correct answers. Its a simple genre which transmits data about a specific fact in a narrative sequence.

The encyclopedia entry is a discursive genre which students are usually exposed to since it turns up early in school years and it is crosscurricular. Even if the comprehension of this genre still presents difficulties, it is in the first place among non fiction texts.

The scientific article comprehension was in the thrid place. Such as the result's report stresses, it is possible to detect difficulties to identify explanatory strategies, to make a connection between parts of the text and to identfy graphics' function.

Opinions are argumentative texts. In this case, the lowest number of correct answers is observed. Students were able to acknowledge that the texts were opinions and identify the function of linguistic marks which expressed subjectivity. On the other hand, they had difficulties to acknowledge the writer's opinion, the different steps in the argumentation process and the statements which imply a controversy, as well as to infer the general idea on which the writer bases his/her statement.

Likewise, the result's report analyses reading styles and Seventh Grade students' abilities and skills.

Reading styles refers to the fact that a competent reader does not read all texts similarly but he/she modifies the way that he/she analyses the text according to a number of variables: the discursive genre, the text type, the reading purposes, etc.

In order to do the test, students mainly had to adopt two reading styles. A superficial and quick reading style and an intensive reading style.

In the first case, it means to have a look at the text, observing the paratextual elements, such as titles, subtitles, the type of font, the underlined words, etc. This allows the reader to activate the previous knowledge stored in his/her memory. In the assessment, students obtained good results in the paratext reading. The result's report adds that the school, apart from teaching to pay attention to these elements which guide the reading, must teach to "mistrust" them since many times they do not refer to the central theme covered later in the text.

The intensive reading is a linear type of reading, which takes place in an orderly fashion from left to right without skipping information and it looks for specific information or data in the text.

Based on the results' analysis, in general terms, two students' groups are distinguished: those who do a superficial or intensive text reading and then answer the items without looking at them again, and those who do a superficial or intensive reading (or both) and then, faced with specific doubts which arise when trying to answer the test, go back to the text, reread it and just then answer.

Regarding the previous knowledge, there were analysed in the Operative the way in which the knowledge of the world, of the language system, of the relationship between verbal and visual codes, of the text types and discursive genres influenced reading comprehension. There has been observed a tendency for students to answer based on their previous knowledge instead of based on the information that the text provides. That is, even though previous knowledge in general helps comprehension, it can also turn into an obstacle, in the sense previously expressed.

In reference to knowledge of the language system, special emphasis was put on grammar aspects connected with word classes (if a word in a sentence or phrase functions as a noun, adjective or verb) and word formation through composition and affixation. Results show that students "answer satisfactorily when they are inquired about the word in isolation and when in the test question or the options paratextual elements are used in order to guide students' reading observation as if they were clues which consciously or unconsciously students can follow. On the contrary, performance drops when they have to

answer without using those paratextual elements and even more, when what they should do is to use their grammar knowledge like reading strategies for the whole text. That is, when they have to set relations between words in the text itself in order to achieve comprehension" (Informe de resultados, Operativo 2001, pag. 28).

Regarding knowledge of text types and discursive genres, 56,28% of the students acknowledged that the radio drama belonged to the science fiction subgenre. On the other hand, only 37,96% is able to acknowledge the short story fiction nature, which will be showing a difficulty to identify the connection with reality which the literary text makes. In identifying the opinion text, students got 66,91% of correct answers.

It is interesting to consirer the reading skills analysed in the results' report. On the one hand, it is included the ability to identify explicit information and on the other, the ability to draw inferences. A high student percentage (80,51%) answered correctly the items which required identifying explicit information. In regards to drawing inferences, when the text's macrostructure was attempted to be inferred, half of Seventh Grade students were unable to identify among several outlines that which adequatly represented the thematic organization of the text that they had to read. The "good readers" chose the correct option in this item, whereas inexpert readers gave a similar percentage of answers in each of the options which proves that the organization into a hierarchy does not seem to be something to be taken into account: they read the outlines like theme lists and, considering that the themes are the same, any of the options makes no difference.

In one of the items which required students to infer the text's global theme, more than 60% of the students failed to draw that inference. In a report analysis of the incorrect options which has been chosen the most by inexpert readers, there is a trend towards a superficial analysis of the text which tends to coincide with previous knowledge.

Another kind of inferences are those which require to set non explicit causal connections in the text. Also here, lots of students encountered difficulties (almost 60%).

The results' report includes a table which analyses the achievements and difficulties detected through the assessment operative in Buenos Aires Seventh Grade students. In Chart 3, the latter has been transcribed since it adequately summarizes the kind of information which the analysed program provides.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, there have been introduced different programs or operatives of evaluation of students' learning, which have been organized within the context of the current concern about the abilities and competences which children and teenagers acquire along their educational path in formal institutions. The goal of this educational assessment is not only

to offer elements for a decision making process but also to improve the knowledge of educational processes. It has been considered, in particular, one of the areas assessed in such studies: reading comprehension. In general terms, and on the basis of the analysis of the different curricular designs, the importance of reading comprehension is stressed, mainly in advanced school levels, such as the last years of Primary Education and Secondary Education. In the different reports which have been consulted, the way in which reading is conceived moves away from the old idea that simply associated it with decoding the written material and literal comprehension. In this sense, it is stated that "literacy teaching, or reading training, implies people's skill to use written information in order to attain their personal goals and complex modern societies' skill to use written information and therefore work efficiently" (OCDE/INCE, 2001, pag. 31). This way of conceiving the mastery of reading and writing is in accordance with the concept of life-skills stated by UNESCO, within which literacy teaching "is no longer merely defined as reaching the basic threshold of acquiring the reading and writing tools, but as the possibility to develop socially, to attain personal goals, and to develop one's own abilities and others' abilities throughout the whole life, based on written information" (Atorresi, 2005, pag. 2).

Regarding the results obtained by Argentinian students in the PISA study, the average numbers indicate that they stand at a relatively low level. It is observed that 70% of the individuals get grades under the international average and that almost 45% of the students who were assessed only master the most elemental aspects of the reading competence. This is pointed out again in ONE and the Evaluation Operative of Buenos Aires Province reports. In the latter, it is explicitly stressed the difficulty of many students to make different kinds of inferences. It is important to consider that drawing inferences is a cognitive and linguistic activity essential in the process of constructing the meaning of a text.

Even though a percentage of the students reaches a high level, that percentage is meager and does not go beyond 5%. On the other hand, PISA shows that it is a challenge for our country not only to improve students' performance quality, but also to reduce internal inequalities. This point is also stressed by the SERCE report, since it points out the great diversity in the learning qualities of the students in the area.

It is usual to associate students's performance with certain social and economic variables. However, Argentina, according to SERCE, is in the group of countries (together with Panama and Dominican Republic) which performance level is lower than the one expected taking into account its internal production level per person. SERCE analyses a number of indicators which enable to characterize the social and educational contexts in

which students of the different Latin American countries learn. Argentina, comparatively, has positive values in all these indicators. Thus, for instance, it is the Latin American country which generates the highest wealth level in a year and has a high human development index.

It is interesting, in this sense, to go back to Rodrigo (2006)'s analysis which has already been mentioned in the previous section. The author indicates that even if socioeconomic family backgrounds and the resources destined to education are related to students' educational results, they are unble to explain them by themselves. She emphasizes, as a key factor, the low level academic demand which Argentinian students face at their schools. We consider that this is an interesting point since it is an argument which downplays a certain tendency, most of the times present in education speech, that attributes the cause of learning difficulties to certain individual characterictics or conditions, such as students' aspects (like for instance certain psychological and developmental characteristics) or family or social background aspects.

This approach gives the school a central role as a social institution and defends the fact that we should not feel despair since children and teenagers are able to learn even in poverty conditions. However, this should not lead us to ignore the necessity of improving their living condition.

Notes

1. The countries that are OCDE members are: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Spain, United States of America, France, Greece, Holland, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, United Kindom, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Japan, Finland, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Czech Republic, Hungary and Korea.

2. The 2000 assessment was undertaken by Argentina in 2002 together with Albania, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Israel, Lithuania, Macedonia, Peru, Romania and Thailand.

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