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## **Development of Reading Ability in Childhood by the Example of Georgian Language**

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## **Development of Reading Ability in Childhood by the Example of Georgian Language**

### **ABSTRACT**

Reading as a skill is divided into many subskills, which take almost entire early childhood to develop. Children go through stages of getting comprehension of phonemes and grammar structure until they can connect letters to sounds and read without problems. Learning how to read in second language is usually harder because of new sets of phonemes and differences in alphabet. On the other hand, learning how to read Georgian Language might be easier than most other languages. Georgian Language has 33 phonemes and 33 letters of alphabet, which directly correspond to each other. Reading is straightforward due to no differences between what is written and how it should be pronounced. The article will be covering how reading skill develops in children and how these aspects might be connected to learning to read Georgian.

**Keywords:** *Paremiology; Proverb; Culturology; Onomastics; Kartvelian languages.*

### **Introduction**

Georgian alphabet consists of 33 letters, which correspond to 33 sounds or phonemes in the language. You read out loud what you see on the paper. There is no combination of letters which make other phonemes, therefore reading is straightforward. For example, the issue of phonological awareness may not be a problem for those who speak a transparent language such as Spanish while it is one of the most common problems in less transparent languages such as English. Transparent languages are those that have a direct correlation between the grapheme and the phoneme i.e. there are very few digraphs and diphthongs (Knudsen, 2012). All of this makes reading relatively easy for children as well as for people starting to study Georgian Language in their adulthood.

In schools, children start studying reading as soon as they go to school. The letters are introduced to them gradually, making up words as they go, with the letters they have already learnt. This is a bottom-up processing model of learning a language and has been used in schools for centuries.

Similar method is applied when teaching Georgian as a second language.

In the article below, the reading skill foundations will be discussed to understand, what are the skills necessary to acquire the ability to read and understand what is being read.

### **What is reading?**

Reading is a complex psychophysiological process. Act of reading involves optical, speech-motor and speech-sound processing systems. Reading is a relatively later and complex formation, than speech.

Reading starts with visual apprehension, processing and recognition of letters, based on which letters are then matched with corresponding phonemes and phoneme-forming image of the word is created, in other words, it is read.

For clarity, we should single out two sides of the reading process: technical – which involves associating the visual image of a word to its pronunciation and essential – which involves associating the sound of a word to its meaning. There is a constant and close link between these two sides. Only the meaning of read information is perceived during the reading process of a grown person, while the psychophysiological operation prior to it is realized unknowingly, by itself, automatically.

Another of the popular definitions of reading is “reading is the interpretation of the meaning of depicted symbols” or “reading is a multifaceted skill, that involves decoding depicted symbols in order to find out their meaning”. In order to read these phrases, you simultaneously:

1. Focus on the printed letters and manage the movement of the eye in relation to the paper;
2. Transform letters into phonemes;
3. Construct thoughts and images;
4. Compare information to the information existing beforehand;
5. Memorize thoughts and associations.

For a newbie reader, it is hard to realize all the aforementioned operations, but little-by-little it becomes automatized (Labartkava, 2013).

For a grown person, reading is as much of a formed habit as any other habit and in its process of formation goes through four stages:

#### 1.1. Letter-phoneme depiction learning stage

Letter-phoneme depiction is learned during pre-alphabet and alphabet periods, when children analyze word streams and dissect words into phonemes and syllables. When separating the phoneme from speech, children assign it a specific graphical image – letter. Afterwards, children group letters into syllables and words, when reading. Read words are associated with oral words.

When reading, graphical imagery is first to be visually perceived. Children differentiate and recognize letters, that correspond to their auditory meanings, although recognizing and differentiating between letters is an external side of reading.

In order for the reading skill to form, it is important for a child to understand the relation between letters and phonemes. It should be noted, that a phoneme does not depict a letter - on the opposite – a letter is a symbol, that depicts a phoneme. Thus, letter-phoneme depiction learning process begins with knowledge of the phoneme part of speech, separating and differentiating the phonemes during speech. Then, letters are recognized as visual depiction of phonemes. With all of this, child will correctly and successfully learn a letter when: the child is able to differentiate i.e., it has a strong visual image of the phoneme and the phoneme is not confused with any other phonemes, either from acoustic or articulation point of view.

In absence of a strong image of a phoneme, it becomes hard to associate a phoneme with a letter, same letter may become associated with several phonemes, that a child may not be able to differentiate or vice versa, multiple letters may become associated with the same phoneme. Learning the letters in this case might be slowed.

A child needs to be aware of a generalized part of speech – phoneme. It is known, that a phoneme as a part of a speech and phoneme pronounced alone are different. As a part of speech, a phoneme is characterized by specific physical attribute. One very important characteristic is the distinctive mark of the meaning of phoneme, that ensures conveying the meaning of a word, i.e., the meaning of the word changes with the mark.

Characteristics of a phoneme are influenced by the neighboring phonemes, especially the ones following it. Thus, same letter will have a different phoneme in different words, yet it stays the same. For example, letter “S” is “S” in every word, it doesn’t turn into other phonemes. When separating phonemes from speech a child needs to be able to recognize the static characteristics of the phoneme despite its position in the word, hardness/softness of it during pronunciation, etc. (any changes to its acoustic side). This way the child will need to ignore the secondary characteristics of the phoneme and separate the phoneme. Only in these conditions is it possible learn the connection between grapheme and phoneme.

For a child, which is only starting out reading a letter is not a simple graphical element, but rather has complex graphical composition, contains several elements that are spaced differently, such as “d” and “b” or have different elements, such as “p” – “b”; “i” – “l”.

For someone learning how to read a letter is not a simple graphical element. It is complex in its graphical composition, contains several elements that are spaced out differently.

It is known, that it is easier for a child to notice similarities between different elements, rather than the opposite – to see differences between similar ones. In order for a child to differentiate between various letters, they will need to use optical analysis and acknowledge the characteristics of its parts.

When learning the optical image of a letter on basis of storing and retrieving the visual image in the memory, recognition of the letter, similar to recognition of any other stimuli, happens on the basis of comparison between perceived visual image and the imagined image. Based on this, quick and successful learning of letters is possible based on formation of following functions:

- Phonematic perception - differentiation and distinction of phonemes
- Phonematic analysis - separation of phonemes from speech
- Ocular analysis and synthesis - identification of similarities and differences between letters
- Spatial imagery
- Ocular memory, remembering the visual imagery of letters

#### 1.2. Stages of reading

Before fully learning how to read, children will go through several stages, each with own characteristic features.

#### **Pre-syllable stage**

Reading start with individual letters. As soon as a child learn letters, they move on to syllables and words, but when reading syllables, the unit of visual perception on this stage are letters. At the beginning the child perceives the first letter of the syllable, associates it with a phoneme, does the same for the second letter and then joins them into a syllable. In this case a child reads letter-by-letter and this stage is called a **pre-syllable stage**.

After perceiving and recognizing the letter in the syllables a child will read the syllable in its entirety. This process involves merging phonemes into a syllable and the hardest part of it is for a child to be able to move from the generalized sound of syllables to the sound that a given syllable has in the speech stream.

Reading pace on this basis is very slow and it depends on the complexity of syllables. Reading comprehension is characterized by specific peculiarities. Understanding the word may not correspond in time with visual comprehension of that word. The word is comprehended only after it was pronounced, but this may not always happen, so a child may repeat the word over and over, until they recognize it.

On this stage, it's especially hard to comprehend sentences, since every word of a sentence will be read separately and combining them to derive a meaning may be difficult. Contextual access is almost unused, children only access it, when reading the last part of the word.

### **Syllable reading stage**

At this stage, recognizing the letters and merging them into syllables is done with no problems. Syllables are associated with appropriate phoneme complex fairly quickly when reading. Reading unit is a syllable.

Reading pace at this stage is quite slow. This is explained by the reading process still being fairly analytical. Synthetic reading and a reading flow are still not possible. A child reads syllables, merges them into words and understands the contents of read material.

At this stage a child already uses educated guesses, especially when reading last parts of words. It is characteristic for children to repeat read words. It is difficult for a child to understand, as read word is artificially divided into syllables and unlike the word corresponding to the verbal speech, thus it takes time to recognize the word. Repeating the word multiple times when reading a sentence, lets the child sense connection between words. Reading comprehension still lags behind visual comprehension in time, meaning, that at this stage there is still a problem with synthesis, merging syllables into words.

### **Complete comprehension method formation stage**

This stage is transitional between analytical and synthetic reading methods. Simple and familiar words are read wholly, while complex and unknown words – by syllables.

Educated guesses play an important role at this stage. A child relies on already read information and still struggles with quickly and precisely controlling the reading process, so they frequently change words or endings of words, thus changing the material's contents and making mistakes. Mistakes trigger bouts of frequent aggression. Children use guessing at most to read sentences, not the whole text.

Words are synthesized into sentences at this stage. Reading pace is still slow.

### **Synthetic reading stage**

Characterized by consolidated reading methods – words and word groups. Technical side of reading is not a difficulty anymore, reading comprehension is the priority. Reading comprehension corresponds in time with the comprehension process. At this stage the reader not only synthesizes

words into sentences, but into sentences, phrases and whole context. Guessing is being actively used in a controlled manner; thus, mistakes are few. Reading pace is quite fast.

At this stage, synthesizing words into sentences and reading comprehension could be improved by development of vocabulary and grammar. Main condition for formation of the reading habit is development of verbal speech, formation of phonetic-phonemic and vocabulary and grammatical structures (pronunciation and differentiation of phonemes, phonemic analysis and synthesis). Development of spatial imagery, visual analysis and synthesis, visual memory (Lerner, 1997).

### **Reading components**

Reading is a complex process and involves several components. It does not develop naturally and needs to be learned specifically. As we have discussed, many skills act as a basis for reading, such as working memory, spatial and visual skills, phoneme recognition skills, phonemic analysis and synthesis. In order to read a word, it's necessary to recognize letters, associate them with corresponding phonemes, merge said phonemes, recognize a word and comprehend its meaning. When reading a sentence, each word needs to be stored in memory, in order to connect them with each other, understand and comprehend the contents of the sentence.

Reading skills consists of five main components:

1. Phonological skills;
2. Knowledge of alphabet;
3. Vocabulary;
4. Reading fluency;
5. Reading comprehension and analysis skill (Isakadze, Lomidze, 2020).

In order for the skill of reading to fully develop, it's important to support all aforementioned components.

#### **1.3. Phonological skills**

Development of phonological skills involves development of phoneme recognition skill. After this skill is developed, it's possible to fulfill tasks such as separation of specific phonemes (e.g., first or last) in words, differentiation of words, pronouncing them together, recognition of phonemes in a word, separating words into phonemes and syllables, etc.

Phonological skills are essential, because they are a basis for a young reader to comprehend how letters are associated with phonemes. This is necessary for reading alphabetical writings, where

each letter represents a specific phoneme. Phonological skills are not as important, if the writing is logographic, where one symbol represents one word, not a specific phoneme.

Studies have shown, that it's better to start working on phonological skill development from earlier ages. According to a longitudinal study conducted in Spain, 2017, students, that worked on phonological awareness in kindergarten, have shown better results in reading and writing tests within the first year of school, as compared to the students that did no phonological skill development exercises (Godoy, Pinheiro & Citoler, 2017).

Students, that could not pass the evaluation on their first try, underwent the test next year, for the second time (Darnell et al., 2017). According to a study published in 2019, if the students who did not pass the evaluation on their first try, receive sufficient support (specific interventions aimed at improving phonological skills), they will show the same results 4 years later, as those students who successfully passed the test first time. Alternatively, if the students who did not pass the evaluation on their first try do not receive any support, their results will be worse than the reading standards on second evaluation (Double et al., 2019).

#### 1.4. Knowledge of alphabet

Knowledge of alphabet requires the student to realize which letter is represented by which symbol, recognition of links between letters and phonemes and memorizing them. Development of this skills is showcased by the student being able to find a corresponding letter to a phoneme amongst other letters, recognize and read letters, associating them with corresponding phonemes.

Strong knowledge of alphabet is required for development of the reading skill. Knowledge of alphabet is a limited skill, meaning that in order to develop it, you only need to memorize a certain number of objects (Paris, 1987). In order to know the Georgian alphabet, you need to memorize 33 letters and their corresponding phonemes. There are also limitless skills, that are constantly developed, such as vocabulary.

Development of limited skills, usually has timelines. In order for students to successfully further their academic career, they need to learn the alphabet within the first year of their education. Afterwards, they move on to more complex tasks, such as reading texts, writing, etc. Teaching the alphabet is not a central goal after the first year at school, thus, students that are unable to learn it within that period, will encounter further obstacles within the learning process.

When learning the alphabet, students frequently experience difficulties with differentiating similar letters (e.g. "d" and "b" or "p" and "q"). Mainly, process of learning the alphabet proceeds similarly for all students (Stahl, 2011). Learning the alphabet, mainly, begins at home or in the



kindergarten. Primarily, children have easier time memorizing the first letters of their names (Justice et al., 2006) and letters, that are at the start of the alphabet (a, b, c... Justice et al., 2006). After those, other letters are learned, especially those that are frequently used in writing (Huang & Invernizzi, 2014). Finally, students will learn to recognize all the letters, but they may have easier time recognizing some letters or confuse certain letters (Bowles et al., 2014). Such problems are fixed by aimed interventions during the primary program (Tortorelli, Bowles & Skibbe, 2017).

### 1.5. Vocabulary

A vocabulary is a combination of words, that any given human known, the meaning of these words and the ability to use them. It is possible to enrich a vocabulary by adding, memorizing new words. In order to enrich a student's vocabulary, we could give them tasks, such as describing a picture or a specific action, telling some mundane situation, working on dialogue speech, etc. (Isakadze, Lomidze, 2020).

There is a mutual link between the reading skills and the vocabulary. A rich vocabulary will aid a faster development of the reading skill and vice versa, reading skill and reading will help development of a vocabulary (Frijuniarsi & Marlianingsih, 2016). This mutual connection has been proven my multiple studies. A study conducted in the UK in 2016 has shown a very strong positive correlation between the 6-year-old students' vocabularies and reading skills. Reading skills and vocabularies were evaluated using standard English language tests (Hayati, 2016). A study published in the journal of speech, language and hearing in 2015, has shown, that the students that showed above average reading skills in the fourth grade, also had richer vocabularies than their classmates, in the tenth grade.

These studies have shown, that a rich vocabulary affects the development of the reading skill and vice versa, development of the reading skill will improve the vocabulary. Thus, it's important to actively work at this angle with students who are learning reading.

### 1.6. Reading fluency

Reading fluency means, that a person reads at an adequate pace, with no mistakes or interruptions, with strong intonations, recognizing punctuation and contents. Someone with reading fluency does not need to exert effort on recognition of specific words, the process of reading is smooth and consistent.

There are numerous questions related to component necessary for reading fluency. Traditionally, fluency is defined as a combination of speed and accuracy and is thought of a crucial aspect of

general evaluation of reading abilities (Fuchs et al., 2001). In recent years, certain importance has been attributed to prosody as well, when evaluating fluency, i.e., expressive reading (correct usage of intonation and pauses). Both aspects are important when reading, speed and accuracy and prosody.

According to the theory of automatic information processing in reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), reading is a complex cognitive process, that involves fulfilling multiple tasks simultaneously. Ability to automatically read the word, frees up resources for comprehension. According to this theory, amount of correctly read words in a minute, could be used to evaluate the reading skill of a person (Fuchs et al., 2001). Despite this, some studies imply, that improvement in the reading speed does not automatically improve reading comprehension (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). Thus, it is clear, that prosody is an important factor in fluent reading.

Second approach focuses on importance of prosody. Prosodic reading development aids reading comprehension, as it helps the reader differentiate between syntactic and semantic elements of speech (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). Results of a study conducted on fifth-grade students have shown, that reading comprehension was in high positive correlation not just with the results of reading speed and accuracy testing instruments, but with the multidimensional fluency scale as well (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991), which involved fluent pronunciation of phrases and other elements of prosody.

Based on this information, it is clear that reading fluency is a multifaceted skill and its development is important for reading comprehension.

### 1.7. Reading comprehension and analysis skill

Main goal of developing the reading skill is reading comprehension, ability to analyze contents of the text. Reading comprehension is a thoughtful process and involves formation of the read text in the reader's mind. Thanks to the reading comprehension and analysis skill, a student can envision the read text in their mind, answer questions, create a plotline or a picture, retell a read story, ask questions, use read material in a different context, make conclusions, evaluate the information, analyze it, etc. (Isakadze & Lomidze, 2020).

Reading comprehension is based on several aspects, such as how fast can a person read text and subsequently – how quickly they process received information, how rich is their vocabulary, which means that they will get a higher quality information from read information, etc. Comprehending different types of text requires different strategies. Reading comprehension and analysis skills are developed throughout the life and are affected by four factors: the reader, the text, the goal and situational context/environment (სასწავლო მეთოდოლოგიური რესურსების კრებული, 2015).

The reader is a subject involved in the comprehension and analysis process of the text; text is the material that is being comprehended by the reader. Goal is the task, that is being accomplished by the reason via reading the text (e.g., finding information, making informed decision on current events, etc.). Context is the environment, that the reading process is happening in a collection of educational methodological resources (2015).

Reading comprehension is possible on three different levels: word-by-word comprehension, analysis and conclusion level and critical evaluation level, thus the reader needs to interpret the text from various perspectives. This process requires automatic detection of familiar words and remembering their meanings, quick decoding of unfamiliar words and finding meaning for them, taking in the context clues, associating the information received from the text to personal experiences and using reading comprehension strategies, such as summation, establishing connections between different parts of text, seeing the main idea, etc. (a collection of educational methodological resources, 2015).

Readers with good reading comprehension skills, use various strategies, such as imagining read scenarios, visualization, they come up with questions, have metacognitive skills when reading, can understand what they learned and what they need to re-read, etc. The reading comprehension skill depends on development of other skills necessary for reading and on improvement of cognitive skills.

Overall, based on this information, it is clear, that in order to develop and improve reading abilities, a student needs various basic skills. Reading skill is endlessly improvable and is being developed alongside a student's vocabulary, with new information and cognitive maturation, during life.

### **Reading skill in the Georgian common national study plan**

Development of the reading skill, in accordance with the Georgian common national study plan, happens on the elementary stage, encompassing grades 1 to 6. The Georgian common national study plan was approved by order N40/n "on Approval of the Georgian common national study plan" of May 18, 2016 of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia. Last amendment to it was made on the basis of order N63/n of May 3, 2018.

Learning of the reading skill is focused on by the subject in the State languages group – Georgian language and literature. According to the study plan, in the elementary grades, special attention needs to be paid to these skills:

- Reading fluently;
- Writing out letters;
- Copying;
- Dictation;
- Retelling of contents, based on key-words/illustrations;
- Episodic storytelling;
- Retelling of contents in short and long forms (National study plans, Article 2, general contents and standards, Chapter XI, state languages)

Reading and comprehension skills are evaluated in curriculum of Georgian, as a second language as well. Specifically, here we see following skills:

- Reading and comprehending;
- Reading fluently;
- Listening;
- Verbal communication;
- Written communication.

When teaching Georgian as a second language, in elementary grades, attention is being paid to development of skills, such as: reading aloud, reading silently (independent solving of simple reading tasks), writing out rows, copying, dictation.

Specifically within the standards of Georgian language and literature, reading skill is presented as the main direction of teaching and is described as follows: “Development of the reading skill is a basis of literacy, which is an important condition of raising a full-fledged person. Purpose of this direction is to serve as an introduction to Georgian and world literature; as well as development of skills necessary to read various written texts, comprehend and use the information within them. In the process of studying, students will have to use various reading strategies, in order to choose texts and independently extract the information within them, employ critical reading, use grammar, static and contextual data to gain deeper access to the text; Usage of special indices and lexicons, quick and differentiative reading of texts, treat received information and make conclusions based on data” (National study plan), article 58. Georgian language and literature standard, pp. 2-3).

According to the standard, when teaching reading, it’s important to develop the text deciphering skills in the students. Deciphering means decoding, i.e., transforming a word from graphic image to its acoustic form, associating letters to phonemes, merging phonemes into words. According to the standard, simultaneous work needs to be done to develop the reading comprehension skill, that will

allow students to gain knowledge and information from the texts.

As the ultimate goal of reading, the standard claims reading comprehension. The national study plan standard also references a vocabulary, when talking about reading comprehension, which should also be regarded during education process. The Georgian language and literature standard explains, that aside from oral and written verbal texts, students should also be involved with tasks of reading and comprehending multimedia texts as well, which will help them develop general literacy skills (National study plan), article 58. Georgian language and literature standard, pp. 2-3).

In terms of reading, the Georgian language and literature standard mentions following skills that a student should have, upon finishing a stage:

1. Geo. Element. (I).6. – Reading fluently
2. Geo. Element.(I).7 - Reading and comprehension of various types of texts defined by the standards; Associating verbal and non-verbal information given in texts (e.g. illustrations and texts).
3. Geo. Element.(I).8. - Verbal and non-verbal interpretation of small creative texts; Transforming verbal information into visual and/or vice versa.
4. Geo. Element.(I).9. - Expression and elaboration of own attitude towards read text; Evaluation of the text topic and/or specific issues described in it.
5. Geo. Element.(I).10. - Recognizing organizing elements, structural and composite characteristics of various texts defined by the standard.
6. Geo. Element.(I).11. Observing lexical and semantic sides, language forms of various types of texts defined by the standard.
7. Geo. Element.(I).12. Using familiar reading strategies according to the goal.

Each standard for each class is divided into performance indicators. For example, in grade I, Geo. Element.(I).6. standard specified indicators – separation of syllables in a word, pronunciation, separation of phonemes in syllables, separation of words into phonemes and merging of phonemes into words, reading every letter of the alphabet, effortlessly reading familiar words, etc. Geo. Element.(I).11 standard contains indicators: student can differentiate between sentence modalities; attempts to comprehend unfamiliar lexical units, language forms; recognizes punctuation marks (period, question mark, exclamation mark). Each standard clearly outlines the goals, that students need to achieve by the end of the year (National study plan, Article III, chapter 1. State language, article 1. Georgian language and literature).

Language knowledge and skills contains an outline of lexicology aspect of the language (contribution to the lexical fund, developing a vocabulary, etc.), and grammar aspect (recognizing

and using sentence types, recognizing and using punctuation marks, etc.), although grammar rules aren't focused on too heavily at this age, teaching is done mostly via practical examples. Also given are definitions of concepts such as structure of a word (phoneme, vowel, consonant, letter, syllable), structure of a text (word, sentence, paragraph, etc.), basic concept of literature (author, character, plot, etc.). Explaining such concepts to students, helps develop their phonologic awareness, simplifies the process of reading comprehension and generally improves the reading process.

Based on given information, it is clear, that the Georgian language and literature standard accounts for development of those important five skills, that were described in the earlier part of this work.

The reading skill is not outlined within the National study plan for middle school; thus, it is implied, that student would have fully learned reading by the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and will not be working on further developing the skill (National study plan, middle school standard)

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