

# Introduction

## 1. Reading in the heritage language: possibilities and challenges

That people should be able to read and write in their heritage language, native language or first language is important and self-evident; those who lack these literal skills inevitably remain illiterate in their first language. They lose the connection to its written culture, and their bicultural-bilingual-biliteral development is seriously jeopardized. On the other hand, those who possess literal skills in their first language as well, will have access to rich and numerous possibilities. These range from access to the literature of one's own people and the possibility of participating in its written culture from the migration, to obtaining information in books and electronic media, and to complement and perhaps increase one's professional opportunities.

At least with those languages that use the Latin alphabet, one would not expect at first sight major problems in terms of reading. Quite wrong: problems and difficulties do indeed exist. These can be summarized in three groups:

### a) Problems with grapheme inventory (special letters and accents) and the sequence of the letters.

Most languages have special characters (ë, ç, đ, č, š, ğ, ı, â, æ, ã etc.). These graphemes are not being taught as part of literacy training in regular classroom instruction in the immigration countries. The same holds true for different phonetic values of individual graphemes (example: <z> has the phonetic value of ts in German, whereas in most other languages it signifies the voiced s; <c> has the phonetic value dsch in Turkish, in the Slavic languages it has the phonetic value of ts and in German the phonetic value of ts or k). Many phonetic values are described differently, depending on the language. Thus, the German sound [ʃ] corresponds to <sch> in English, for example, and is rendered as <sh> in Albanian, in Turkish <ş>, and in the Slavic languages as <š>, etc. The sequence of letters in dictionaries is not identical everywhere either; for instance, the letters ö and ü in Turkish follow the o and u- words, whereas they are integrated with them in German, and do not exist at all in English and Portuguese. The children have to learn all these special features at home or in HLT, if they want to read and speak fluently in their first language. In order to avoid confusions when learning the language of the host country, many HLT instructors introduce these special features only at the end of the first year of classes or at the beginning of the second year. In the case of the non-Latin alphabets, the entire alphabetization has to occur in the first language, of course.

### b) Problems with the standard variation of the first language:

Many children and adolescents speak their first language at home only in a dialectal variant. This may at times vary greatly from the standard language (e.g. in many South Italian or North Albanian dialects) such that it may pose serious problems with reading. (This is a lesser issue with writing, as one can write in dialect as well). A careful introduction into the standard and written language is one of the most important tasks of HLT when it comes to preserving the access to one's own written culture. This is especially important for children from educationally disadvantaged families who have little or no contact from home with the written or standard variant of their language.

### c) Problems in conjunction with lacking reading tradition and parental support.

This dimension of difficulties and problems is not just inherently specific for HLT, but rather depends on the parental educational advantage or disadvantage. Overall, it can be said that children and youths who are accustomed to reading books and dealing with writing are much better positioned for success in our written and text-oriented schools and societies than those who lack these important prerequisites. This pertains particularly to reading in the first language, whereas reading in the school language is actively practiced in regular classroom instruction for years. HLT can play an important role in compensating for these deficits. This is all the more significant as the acquired competences benefit the respective students not only in HLT, but also in their regular education classes. More detailed information about this issue can be found in the handbook "Foundations and Backgrounds", chapters 1, 2 and 8, also in Sträuli et al. (2005), pages 130 ff. and in Bibliomedia, QUIMS (see bibliography).

In answer to the question "What are the students' main problems in terms of reading in their first language in HLT?" we conducted a small survey among HLT instructors prior to the publication of this issue. The answers correspond to the above three categories, as evident from the following examples:

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- "The students are unable to clearly distinguish between the pronunciation of the letters q, ç, gj, xh, sh, etc. in Albanian, and they also have problems with our standard language".
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- "The students have difficulties with the special characters of the Turkish language. Furthermore, they do not recognize many words, as their vocabulary is very small".
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- "One problem are the uncertainties with the special letters of our language and the pronunciation of the different letters. Naturally, the students have not learned these differences in regular classroom education. I have to teach and practice this very carefully with the little ones, otherwise they continue to make mistakes in their pronunciation or they confuse many letters".
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- "The low number of weekly hours and the students' diluted contact with the standard language renders learning to read more difficult. Most of the students speak dialect at home and are barely supported by their parents".
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- "Reading in the first language is a problem, as most of the students only do it in HLT, but rarely ever at home. Another difficulty is that they only speak dialect at home. Therefore, they have difficulties with reading and understanding of words in the standard language, which they partially don't understand".
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- "The students' main problems are the near absence of reading practice. There are various reasons for this:
    - a) The parents also read very little; the children rarely ever see them reading.
    - b) Stories are not read to, or rarely ever read to, the children.
    - c) During their stays in their country of origin, they mostly use oral communication".
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- "The students are generally poorly motivated for reading. It is even lower for reading in their native language, because they have difficulties with it".
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Reading competences (as well as writing competences and other learning techniques and strategies) are not bound to a certain language. Once they are acquired, they can be easily transferred to a person's other languages as well as used in these languages. It is for this reason that HLT efforts to further students' reading abilities in the first language also serves them well in their regular education classes. It would therefore be highly desirable that HLT and regular classroom education cooperate as closely as possible in order to build up students' reading competence. This aspect, too, is referenced in our survey:

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- "Students who read well and fluently in their school language, also read better in their first language. The reading competences transcend languages."
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- "Reading is a technique that has to be practiced. A person who has mastered this technique in one language will be able to use it as well for any other language. Moreover, if a child likes to read s/he likes to read in all languages. (...) It is important to link global, purposeful reading with all languages and to practice it in all languages. It must be clear to the instructors and students that they can apply most of the reading strategies and techniques in all languages".
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- "A close collaboration between the teachers of HLT and regular school would be of great advantage. This way, both could work specifically and efficiently to support the students in the area of reading".
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