

Global overview of the educational system in the French speaking Community of Belgium

P; schillings, C. Gabelica

In 1997, a major decree for education has been promulgated : the *Décret Missions*¹. This one defines the main missions to be realized by each educational organizing authority, with a strong emphasis on some equity objectives.

This decree also introduces an important curriculum reform for all types of schools, all schools and all grades. It defines some *Socles de compétences* (Standards of Competencies), that is to say the basic competencies to be acquired at the end of the first eight grades of compulsory education. Approved unanimously by all the democratic parties of the French Community Parliament, the standards constitute the basic contract between school and society.

La compétence, selon la définition proposée par le Décret Missions, est « l'aptitude à mettre en œuvre un ensemble organisé de savoirs, savoir-faire et attitudes permettant d'accomplir un certain nombre de tâches » (art.5, §1).

As shown in the table here below, the education system aimed at by the Standards of competencies is structured into **5 training cycles** and **3 training phases** and its objective is to enable the pupils to get the mastery of the basic competencies. These competencies are certificated at the end of the cycle 2 (grade 2), at the end of the cycle 4 (grade 6) and at the end of the cycle 5 (grade 8, secondary education). The competencies developed from grade 9 to grade 12 of secondary education are defined by the Final Competencies and the knowledge (skills ?) required in French and certificated at the end of grade 12.

Phase I			Phase II				Phase III					
Pre-school education			Primary education				Secondary education					
Cycle 1		Cycle 2		Cycle 3		Cycle 4		Cycle 5				
Grade 1 of pre-school	Grade 2 of pre-school	Grade 3 of pre-school	Grade 1 (Primary educ)	Grade 2 (Primary educ)	Grade 3 (Primary educ)	Grade 4 (Primary educ)	Grade 5 (Primary educ)	Grade 6 (Primary educ)	Grade 7 (Secondary educ)	Grade 8 (Secondary educ)	Grade 9 (Secondary educ)	Grade 12 (Secondary educ)
			Certification		Certification		Certification	Certification				

¹ Décret du [24 juillet 1997](#) définissant les missions prioritaires de l'Enseignement Fondamental et de l'Enseignement Secondaire et organisant les structures propres à les atteindre

Summary of the national reading curriculum for the primary and the first cycle of secondary education

The *Socles de compétences* (Standards of Competencies) (1999), which are the same for all types of school, define three competence areas in the French curriculum : reading, writing and speaking and listening. On the other hand, study programmes are particular to each type of school and, consequently, are distinct one from the other.

According to the *Socles de compétences*, "*Reading is building some meaning as a receptor of a written message. That meaning is determined by the message features, the reader's knowledge, the situation characteristics in which the message is considered (treated) by the reader.* "

Orientations linked with the reading learnings are mainly developed in the reading part of the French (as mother tongue) lessons. However, some indications are given with the aim of facilitating the development of cross-curricular competencies in line with the various domains (school subjects). The cross-curricular competencies that are particularly aimed at in the reading domain are directed towards the information processing that can be made in the various other subjects.

- *The practice of reading once again to strengthen the comprehension.*
- *The analysis, aiming at taking out the main ideas, ordering them, linking them together and perceiving their specific importance.*
- *The synthesis, in order to report briefly the main ideas.*

These competencies are to be built in the context of educational activities linked with the various learning domains.

As far as **reading competencies** are concerned, the *Socles de compétences* (Standards of Competencies) are structured into seven specific competencies. These ones are in turn organized in sub-competencies which define in more precise terms the Standards directions. More precisions are presented according to the training phase that is considered. That is the reason why the same competence will be differently worked on, according to the phase, the first or the second one, in which this competence is involved (needed).

The following table (Table 2) presents the expected specific competencies for the three areas of competence *in the Socles de compétences*. The table 3 shows the expected sub-competencies in the reading curriculum.

Table 2: Competence areas and their specific competencies in the Socles de compétences

READING	WRITING	SPEAKING AND LISTENING
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Directing one's reading according to the situation of the communication ;</i> 2. <i>Building some meanings;</i> 3. <i>Drawing the organisation of a text;</i> 4. <i>Detecting the cohesion between sentences and groups of sentences in the whole text;</i> 5. <i>Taking the grammatical units into account;</i> 6. <i>Processing the lexical units</i> 7. <i>Detecting the interactions between the verbal and non-verbal elements</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Directing one's writing according to the situation of the communication</i> 2. <i>Building some contents</i> 3. <i>Managing the organization and the cohesion of the text</i> 4. <i>Using the grammatical and lexical units</i> 5. <i>Managing the presentation</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Directing one's speaking and listening according to the situation of the communication</i> 2. <i>Building some meanings</i> 3. <i>Managing and stressing the organization and cohesion of the message</i> 4. <i>Using and identifying the non verbal elements</i>

Table 3: The expected sub-competencies in the reading curriculum of the Socles de compétences for students concerned by ADORE (12-14 years old)

Directing one's reading according to the situation of the communication		
	End of grade 6 (primary education)	End of grade 8 (secondary education)
Finding some book references	Certified	Training the competence
Selecting a document according to one's reading intention	Certified	Certified
Anticipating a document content by considering the internal and external indications	Certified	Certified
Understanding the author's intentions	Certified	Certified
Adapting one's strategy according to the project	Certified	Certified
Defining an appropriate reading speed	Initialisation	Certified
Building some meanings		
Processing the explicitly stated information	Certified	Certified
Detecting the implicit information	Certified	Certified
Testing the hypotheses, either personally suggested or proposed	Certified	Certified
Understanding the global meaning, to be able to - tell the story back, respecting the chronological order, the logical links	Certified	Certified

- reformulate and use some pieces of information	Certified	Training competence the
- reformulate or execute a sequence of directions	Certified	Training competence the
- draw the thesis and identify some arguments	Initialisation	Certified
Distinguishing the real from the imagination	Certified	Certified
Distinguishing the real from the virtual	Certified	Training competence the
Distinguishing the likely from the unlikely points	Initialisation	Certified
Distinguishing the true from the false	Certified	Certified
<i>Drawing the organisation of a text</i>		
Recognizing a variety of documents by identifying the major structure	Certified	Certified
• narrative,		
• descriptive,	Certified	Certified
• explicative,	Initialisation	Certified
• argumentative,	Initialisation	Certified
• dialogue (talking) structure	Certified	Certified
Detecting the indications of the global organization	Certified	Training competence the
• paragraphs (various signs used to distinguish the groups of paragraphs, indented lines and/or double spacing, titles and subtitles),		
• layout	Certified	Certified
• text organizers	Certified	Certified
• verb moods and tenses	Certified	Certified
<i>Detecting the cohesion between sentences and groups of sentences in the whole text</i>		
Detecting the cohesion factors	Certified	Certified
• words or groups of words used to connect the sentences		
• repetition of some piece of information from one sentence to another	Certified	Certified
• tense organization	Initialisation	Certified
• thematic progress	Initialisation	Certified
<i>Taking the grammatical units into account</i>		
Understanding the meaning of a text:	Certified	Certified
• using the punctuation and the grammatical units		
• identifying the grammatical signs (from the nouns and verbs)	Certified	Certified
<i>Processing the lexical units</i>		
Understanding by suggesting some hypotheses about the meaning of a word on the context.	Certified	Certified
Understanding by confirming the meaning of a	Certified	Certified

word		
Understanding by connecting the words that are linked together: families of word, synonyms, antonyms	Certified	Certified
Understanding by identifying the elements making up the word: prefix, suffix, root	Initialisation	Certified
<i>Detecting the interactions between the verbal and non-verbal elements :</i>		
Joining a text to non verbal elements	Certified	Certified

The seven specific reading competencies organized in the *Socles de compétences* are as follows:

1. ***Directing one's reading according to the situation of the communication :*** that competence is organized into six sub-competencies, each one of them directed towards the work which has been done before the reading activity but which conditions it (finding some book references, selecting a document according to one's reading intention, anticipating a document content by considering the internal and external indications, understanding the author's intentions, adapting one's strategy according to the project, defining an appropriate reading speed).
2. ***Building some meanings :*** that competence refers to the processes the reader needs to implement when he/she is reading in order to get a sharp comprehension of the text and react to it appropriately. That competence is organized into eleven sub-competencies and their content is not so far from the strategies needed for the appropriation of an "expert " reading approach.
3. ***Drawing the organisation of a text :*** that competence focuses on the text structure (narrative, descriptive, ...) and on the signs of the global organization (layout, sections, textual organizers). Nine sub-competencies are grouped under that specific competence. These prove to be of major importance in the definition of a reading intention and in the selection of the strategies the most appropriate to the type of text concerned.
4. ***Detecting the cohesion between sentences and groups of sentences in the whole text:*** this competence is organized into four sub-competencies directed towards the identification of the cohesion factors in the text (anaphora, textual organizers, pronouns, subject progression, ...). Identifying the idea articulation, the chronology, the pronominalisation rules (or substitution by another term, ...) are all competencies needed to increase the reading fluidity, the sharp comprehension of the text and of the relations between its different components.
5. ***Taking the grammatical units into account:*** that competence is parted into two sub-competencies, one of them directed towards the punctuation and the grammatical units (organization and syntactic structure), and the other one towards the recognition of the noun and verb grammatical signs (gender and number of the words, (person and time of the verbs). These competencies are of major importance in the reading process : *in fine*, the trainee reader must be able to detect the influence of a syntactic organization and of the grammatical links on the text significance.
6. ***Processing the lexical units :*** this competence is made up of four competencies directed towards the strategies needed to clear up the meaning of a word by means of suggesting hypothesis, using the context and/or the dictionary, the synonyms and antonyms, and the different parts of the word (root, prefix, suffix).

7. *Detecting the interactions between the verbal and non-verbal elements* : this competence only covers one sub-competence which encourages the use of non-verbal elements available for the reader in order to clarify one's reading (illustration, scheme, typography, key, ...).

The reading competencies are defined in a framework, which is relatively specific. However, this subdivision between the various axes is only superficial (theoretical?), since they must be processed together in different learning activities.

At the end of grade 6, most sub-competencies are assessed with a view to certification. The certification at the end of the second phase concerns the mastery of the competence considered in the first phase as much as the enrichment that has been brought up in the second phase.

At the end of primary education, children are thus supposed to master the most competencies that help them to be autonomous and to adopt efficient reading strategies when they are confronted with a diversified range of supports and reading situations.

Summary of the national reading curriculum for the secondary education

Reading, writing and oral communicating (speaking/listening) competencies are only distinguished for a clarity and methodological precision concern. These competencies that, in reality, are almost never parted, will be, as much as possible, linked together and associated in the classroom activities, such as suggested by the numerous **cross-checks between the various sections of the present document**.

Furthermore, these competencies are not developed or assessed out of context (in the absolute), but always according to the **situations of communication**, real or potential, where they can be needed and interact. Thus it is needed to organize the training of these competencies in more and more complex didactic sequences, according to the learning process.

READING	WRITING	SPEAKING/ LISTENING
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Directing one's reading according to the situation of the communication 2. Building some meanings a) the literal meaning b) the inferential reading 3. Having a critical mind 4. Acquiring knowledge 5. Identifying, understanding and interpreting various types of text. 6. Decoding pictures and audiovisual productions 7. Developing a critical reflection about one's own reading 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Directing one's writing according to the situation of the communication 2. Producing various types and forms of text. 3. Implementing the writing process phases 4. Using in writing the techniques of conviction 5. Linking writing to other supports 6. Developing some creativity through writing 7. Reflecting on one's own way of writing 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Directing one's speech and listening according to the situation of communication 2. Taking part in various situations of communication 3. Building some meanings 4. Using non verbal means on the basis of one's own linguistical and body profile 5. Building personal relationships that are fruitful and harmonious 6. Using in one's speech some conviction techniques 7. Reflecting about one's own way of speaking and listening.

The French curriculum also defines three types of disciplinary knowledge that must be acquired at the end of secondary education :

A. KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE LANGUAGE

B. KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LITERATURE AND ART

- 1) Important past and present literary and artistic trends
- 2) Major literary and artistic references (myths, stories, works, characters, authors, ...) as the contemporary cultural ground
- 3) Conceptual knowledge

C. KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE HUMAN BEING AND THE WORLD

The following table (Table 4) presents the expected specific competencies for reading competences that are required at the end of secondary education.

Table 4: The expected sub-competencies in the reading curriculum of the *final competencias* for students concerned by ADORE (14-18 years old)

1. Directing one's reading according to the situation of the communication

	1 st D.	Term.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking into account the factors influencing the reading : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The reader's project (inquiring, understanding, understanding the directions, enjoying , being sensitive to somebody else's feelings); * The reader's personal experience and knowledge (for instance, about the types of text, the author, ...) * The information presented on the front and back covers (paratext) 	* c	* C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting one's way and speed of reading according to the text particularities and to the objectives of the reading. 	c	C

2. Building some meaning

a) The literal meaning(s) : what is explicitly stated in the text

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detecting the visual organizers of the text : titles, introductory paragraphs, sections, graphs. 	c	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detecting the unknown words and suggesting some hypotheses about their meaning on the basis of the context and perhaps using a dictionary. 	c	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving some meaning to the sentence sequences in order to give some cohesion to the text. 	c	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ordering the information according to their importance. 	c	C

b) The inferential meaning(s) : what the text does not state explicitly

	1 st D.	Term.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being aware that, in most cases, the literal meaning is not enough. 	c	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying some parts of the text where problems may appear and that require making some inference, some interpretation : non explicitly stated or presupposed actions or feelings, ellipses, metaphors, enigmatic wordings, irony, ambiguities, non explicitly logical links, ... 	c	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpreting the text using some internal information (titles, arguments, ...) and some external information (language, global, literary and artistic knowledge). (To get more details, see the "Disciplinary knowledge" section) 	c	C

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Detecting, on the basis of the knowledge listed here above ,some allusions, some stereotypes, some parodic methods.		S
---	--	----------

3. Developing one's critical mind

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguishing : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * the aspects of major interest from others of minor interest * the real from the imagination , * the likely from the unlikely points, * the fact from the opinion, * the real from the virtual, 	c c c c c	C C C C C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selecting and using various criteria to evaluate the work, depending on the reading project and on the type of text (for instance, respect of the type rules, originality, emotion, neutrality) 		C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying the narrator of the text, and his or her point of view (naïve, critic, ironical, ..),as well as the person it is addressed to. 		C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying the values inherent to the text (by instance : middle-class values, Judeo-Christian values, ...) and its potential underlying ideology (racism, colonialism, communism, ...). 	Aues	S

4. Developing some knowledge

	1 ^{er} D.	Term.
Acquiring through reading some conceptual and cultural references (see for instance the section " Disciplinary knowledge ") which could help to better read, better think, better act and take part to a shared culture.	S	S

5. Identifying, understanding and interpreting different types of text

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a text, identifying some distinctive elements (features) : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * narrative, * poetical, * argumentative, * dramatic. 	c s c s	C C C C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking a text with a trend, an aesthetic current, a period, including in some cases, with an author, on the basis of generic, lexical, thematic, rhetoric or syntactical criteria of identification. 	a	S
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detecting in the same text occurrences of different textual types (narrative, poetical, argumentative, ...) or of different genres (ex. : detective, fantastic, biographic story). 	c	C

6. Decoding pictures and audiovisual productions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying the features particular to the pictorial language (comics, drawings, paintings, photos) and to the audiovisual language (movie, television). 	s	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysing the relations (repetition, opposition, complementarity, ...) between the various visual, written and hearing elements. 	s	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detecting some hearing and visual parameters directing the point of view. 	s	S

7. Developing a critical reflection about one's reading

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and justifying one's own reading hypotheses, the difficulties of comprehension and interpretation felt, the type and speed of reading adopted, the enjoyment or non-enjoyment felt, the values projected about one's reading. 	Adding hypotheses	S
---	----------------------	----------

Didactic methods or supports for reading

Presently in Belgium, there is no compulsory didactic methods or supports for reading teaching. The selection of the manuals varies according to the teachers. They take some exercises, texts from different manuals, newsletters, reviews and documents intended for them in some stores or in their system of education.

A new official directive (May 23, 2006) is likely to change these practices by focussing on a major use of school manuals, school software and other educational tools in classrooms.

The Government of the French Community of Belgium has decided to grant to schools some new financial aids specifically devoted to school manuals and software purchase. From 2007 on, only the manuals that will have received the indicative conformity agreement should be acquired with these subventions. The conformity agreement will be granted according to ethical criteria – respect of equality and non-discrimination principles – as well as educational criteria – conformity with the Standards of competencies, the competencies and skills, and with the other decree requests.

Proportion of struggling readers in the French speaking Community

Distribution of the students at each level of proficiency (percentage)

In the French speaking Community of Belgium, the percentage of students of level 1 is much higher than the OECD mean. The proportion of students below 1 is also very important (16%). Analyses made to draw the profile of this group showed that boys are over represented (60%). 80 % of these students are in a lower grade than the modal grade. Most of them come from lower social backgrounds and half of them are from immigrated backgrounds. The parental education level is globally low (50-60 % of the parents have a level of education that is not higher than lower secondary education).

	Level of proficiency						
	Below level 1 (less than 335 points)	Level 1 (from 335 to 407 points)	Level 2 (from 408 to 480 points)	Level 3 (from 481 to 552)	Level 4 (from 553 to 626 points)	Level 5 (greater than 626 points)	TOTAL
French speaking Community	12,3	15,9	20,0	24,0	20,4	7,5	100%
Mean OCDE	6,0	11,9	21,7	28,7	22,3	9,5	100%

More than the achievement mean, the most striking feature in the French Community of Belgium is the wide range of the results. With a standard deviation of 111, the French Community of Belgium has, together with Germany, a school system where the heterogeneity of the results is the most important.

Without any risk of error, we can suggest that this achievement disparity is linked with the structure of our education system (which shares some common aspects with the German education system) : high rates of grade repetition, hierarchical school tracks, strong disparity between the various schools, and effective segregation according to the social and ethnic backgrounds contribute to produce homogeneous groups of students.

FIGURE 8. PROFILS DE LECTEURS ET PERFORMANCES EN LITTÉRATIE EN COMMUNAUTÉ FRANÇAISE, EN FONCTION DU SEXE DES ÉLÈVES. SOURCE PISA 2000.

