

INITIAL TEST IN SERBIAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE CLASSES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Abstract: Starting from the premise that initial assessment within school subjects is defined by the Rulebook on Student Assessment in Elementary School and is mandatory for every subject, we were interested in understanding how much importance students attach to this type of assessment, given the fact that it is not graded. We also aimed to explore how important the results of the initial test are to them, considering that the outcome of this test serves the teacher as a tool for planning future lessons and monitoring student progress.

In line with this, the objective of the study was to determine the significance of applying the initial test in the subject Serbian Language and Literature among upper elementary school students. To achieve this goal, we conducted a survey among students to examine their attitudes toward the results of this test. Statistical analysis indicated that, regardless of the test's purpose, there is no significant correlation between the initial test results and students' final academic achievement.

The conclusion of the study suggests that students perceive the test as a mere formality, do not dedicate enough attention to it, and that its effectiveness and purposefulness in the teaching process are therefore questionable.

Keywords: *initial test, Serbian language and literature, elementary school.*

Field: Social Sciences and Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Testing students is an integral part of the process of acquiring knowledge and checking student's achievement. Testing and checking student's knowledge is an integral part of the teaching process and every assessment is most often connected with grades (Grandić, 1999: 186). Grading can be formative- by monitoring student's work with a recommendation for improvement, and summative- by giving grades to students which is, as stated by Grandić, a relationship between "the acquired knowledge and desired results" (Grandić, 1999: 186).

The application of testing in assessing student achievement requires providing test standardization which includes metric characteristics in terms of validity, discriminativeness, reliability and objectivity (Jeremić, 2023: 288). In practice these are often non-standardized tests, i.e. informal tests that don't have all the metric characteristics, "but they meet the requirements of standardization in a narrow sense" (Jeremić, 2023: 288). Tests that teachers make and apply independently belong to the category of those tests (Rudner & Schafer, 2002 according to Jeremić, 2023: 289). The initial assessment, within the subject of teaching Serbian language and literature, is defined by the Rulebook on Student Assessment in Elementary School: "at the beginning of the school year, as a rule by the end of the third week since the beginning of the school year, the teacher assesses the student's previous achievements within a certain area or topic, which are of importance for the subject (hereinafter referred to as initial assessment) in that school year" (The Rulebook). The authors Antonijević and Radenović (2022) call it pre-assessment (Antonijević & Radenović, 2022: 36).

The achievement results on the initial assessment serve the teacher to plan further work and follow the progress of students. Their evaluation is not in the form of numerical rating, but rather a percentage with a recommendation which areas of the test need to be reviewed and improved. The feedback that is given should be incentive support for the student and for his self-regulation of learning, and automatically generated feedback content is increasingly being used (Cavalcanti et al., 2021), with the note that an individual approach to each student should be respected.

In various foreign literature this initial test is also known as placement test, basic test, pre-test, diagnostic test etc. (Oliveira et al., 2001; Berry, 2008; Skibickij & Bucior, 2012; Delucchi, 2014; Burkholder et al., 2020; Giannoulas et al., 2025). The initial test checks previous achievement and further work with the student is planned accordingly. Diagnostic test is a progress test and serves to identify the weak points of the test taker (Oliveira et al., 2001: 134). We can say that the initial test is the combination of the placement test and diagnostic test. Although there are slight differences in the types of these tests,

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their goal is the same: determining the level of knowledge within the field/course content and accordingly assigning students to different course levels, i.e. adjusting the method and content of work- individual approach to working with students. In the available literature addressing the use of initial testing in the Serbian education system, the topic has been insufficiently explored. Therefore, we decided to conduct a pilot study in order to identify the reasons behind students' underachievement on this type of test compared to the expected results.

2. METHODS

We applied survey testing of students in order to examine students' attitudes about the importance of applying initial testing, considering the fact that the students of the older grades of elementary school mainly study for the current grade, and this type of test is not graded, so the students lack motivation for permanent acquisition of knowledge.

The authors Pejić and Radivojević (2017) state, based on the research conducted in 2011, that school tires students and that knowledge is not a measure of success (Pejić & Radivojević, 2017: 3), which is also shown by the answers of students conducted in our survey. The results of our research were obtained and interpreted using the survey method, as well as the descriptive method.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the initial test of students (N=62) in the seventh grade of the school year 2024/25 showed that students did not do the test with dedication (70%), and that they did not care (69%) how they would do the test, because it was not graded. Also, they showed that parents were not interested in the achievement of students on this type of test (71%). Furthermore, students didn't care that this test was taken (47%), but they didn't worry about how they would take it (67%) and they didn't do the test with dedication.

74% of students believed that it was not important to them what results they would achieve on the initial test, given that it was not graded. 68% showed indifference as to whether they would remember/know the answers to the questions of the material from the previous year Table 1.

Table 1. Initial Test in Serbian Language and Literature

		f	%
I do the initial test with dedication.	Completely correct	8	8
	Correct	22	22
	Incorrect	52	52
	Completely incorrect	18	18
When a test/assessment is announced, I worry about how I will do it.	Completely incorrect	9	9
	Correct	24	24
	Incorrect	31	31
	Completely incorrect	36	36
Before the test, I revise the previous material that the teacher pointed out to me.	Completely correct	18	18
	Correct	22	22
	Incorrect	48	48
	Completely incorrect	11	11
I don't try to do well because it isn't graded.	Completely correct	18	18
	Correct	56	56
	Incorrect	15	15
	Completely incorrect	11	11
I know it is evaluated descriptively, so I don't really care.	Completely correct	13	13
	Correct	40	40
	Incorrect	40	40
	Completely incorrect	7	7
I wish there were no such tests.	Completely correct	11	11
	Correct	13	13
	Incorrect	23	23
	Completely incorrect	53	53
My parents/guardians monitor my test results.	Completely correct	14	14
	Correct	15	15
	Incorrect	32	32
	Completely incorrect	39	39
I believe that I will remember most of the content of the material.	Completely correct	8	8
	Correct	24	24
	Incorrect	52	52
	Completely incorrect	16	16
I care how I will do the test.	Completely correct	8	8
	Correct	23	23
	Incorrect	40	40
	Completely incorrect	29	29

Source: Authors research

In support of the students' answers we received, we noticed that the initial test 1) had no effect on the student's final grade in the subject, regardless of the individual approach to working with the student, 2) that entered as a percentage formative monitoring of student knowledge at the beginning of the school year did not give a prediction of what the student's final grade or further progress would be. On the initial test, the maximum was 17 points, and the student's achievement showed a result of at least 1 point to a maximum of 12 points. The correlation of student achievement on the test and the final grade was 53.0%, which indicated the fact that such tests were not a good indicator of student language skills and knowledge in the field of Serbian language and literature. Also, they pointed the fact that it was difficult to determine the language competence of students through this kind of assessment, and that the results obtained in this way were not reliable. The correlation of students' final grades between classes was 89.1%, which indicated the mentioned fact that students studied for grades, not for knowledge. We were aware of the fact that for students, grading was an indicator of their achievement and success (Antonijević & Radenović, 2022: 35), to which the authors Antonijević and Radenović warned that "it was harmful if the rating [it] became the main goal for students" (Antonijević & Radenović, 2022: 35).

The initial assessment, in whatever form it was, although it was legally required, did not motivate students to devote themselves to it, and the results obtained from this assessment couldn't serve to improve future work and indicate weak points and potentially less acquired areas. Therefore, it was necessary to find a model to satisfy the legal obligation, and to motivate students for the sake of determining current and previous knowledge.

Teaching language and literature included knowledge of three areas: language, language culture and literature. It was clear that in the initial tests the structure of the tasks was largely reduced to the characteristic concepts of each area for the given age. In order for the test to be valid, it was important that it was well designed, that the tasks were set clearly and unambiguously, that they were positioned from easier to more difficult ones and that most of the tasks were at intermediate and basic level, and that there were the least tasks of advanced level of knowledge. The tasks were divided according to the well-known Bloom's taxonomy - from tasks of recognition, knowledge, understanding, to the level of analysis and synthesis (Bloom, 1981 according to Jeremić, 2023: 289). "Although the content and metric characteristics of tasks were of crucial importance for their quality, it was undoubtedly important to think about the form of tasks as an aspect of their quality" (Jeremić, 2023: 290). Also, the validity of the test was ensured by the fact that the test was done in the real immediate environment of the student, and not in electronic form. Amultairi (2023) emphasized the fact that taking the test electronically brought a low level of reliability and validity.

4. CONCLUSION

1. We conclude that the initial tests are the legal obligation of teachers working in Serbia, but that the results they show are not significant for further teaching work with students.

2. The question of assessing the student's language level, as well as the knowledge of literature in one class, can hardly be used to classify students by knowledge level, taking into account the fact that students do not take the initial tests seriously and do not devote themselves to testing, because such tests are descriptively evaluated, and do not affect the final grade of the student in the subject.

3. It is necessary to design a different knowledge assessment that will not be formal but purposeful and that will encourage students to review important areas of language and literature, and to thoroughly and permanently acquire knowledge in the area of language, language culture and literature.

4. A possible method of initial assessment would be about different checking methods that, when cross-checked, would give a more complete picture about student's knowledge.

5. Examples of initial tests:

i) Presentation of language tasks of a given area, sorted by levels, focused on outcomes (maximum 5 tasks);

ii) In the second test sequence, students would complete the sentences and thereby check the area of language culture (maximum 5 representative tasks);

iii) Writing a short-written task about a literary work, given by random choice, and that with written guided reflection (Deti et al., 2023), which allows the student to articulate knowledge from literature and at the same time renew the techniques of creating a written composition and language culture, and (self) assess the level of achievement according to predetermined criteria.

6. It is also possible to consider a shorter oral test of knowledge in the form of one student's answer, and assessment of the level of the answer by other students.

7. Improve the feedback so that the student will also participate in the evaluation of achievements,

the student will record the information and record his/her progress in the work in potentially weak or strong areas, and if necessary, the student will strengthen the knowledge in weaker areas with supplementary work.

8. Individualization of the teacher's evaluation and (self) monitoring of the student's work is necessary for the development of quality teaching.

9. Development of a research action plan (Stamatović & Zlatić, 2019) in each school for the purpose of improving the results and approach to the implementation of the initial assessment.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This pilot survey is important to point out the need to change the attitude towards the initial test in Serbian language and literature, and, in general, the initial test in other subjects. Checking the metric and validation characteristics of the test, cross-referenced with the stated attitudes of the students should contribute to changing the attitude about the initial test, and therefore its structure. It is necessary to avoid mere formalism in conducting the test and focus on the cognitive, emotional and perceptive characteristics of students at the beginning of the school year, and the purpose of the given test. In the case of ensuring its effectiveness and evaluation, the students' attitude towards it would also change. Examining a larger sample of students and demonstrating the impractical procedures of creating and implementing the test would indicate the importance and consequences of the formalistic approach in the implementation of the initial assessment, the legal obligation of the teacher.

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