

READING ACTIVENESS AND READING PREFERENCES OF THE 6TH GRADE STUDENTS OF BASIC SCHOOL IN ESTONIA

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Abstract

Reading skills, reading interest, understanding of text and other aspects connected with reading have been researched quite a lot during the last decades in Estonia. A number of studies have reached the conclusion that basic school students in Estonia are rather good readers. However, teachers often claim that teenagers tend to read less and less and also in newspapers there are complaints about bad reading skills of youngsters. One of the reasons of the above mentioned attitude is that we tend to define the concept of reading differently and if somebody complains because of students' low reading interest, he/she mostly refers to reading belles-lettres or fiction.

Living in the 21st century demands much more from teenagers as readers than it did in the past century and many well-known reading researchers stress the need to be able to properly do our jobs, and simply, to live and manage an everyday life. In these two areas we need to be able to understand what all kinds of written messages are about.

The content of the broader meaning of reading and the concept of reading literacy is discussed in the current article. Also an overview of the results of the study about reading activeness and reading preferences, the goal of which was to find out what kind of texts are authentic for the students and to start a larger study for analyzing the amount of time teenagers spend with reading, what they read etc., is given in this article.

Based on the results of the study it became evident that students read quite a lot, but they rather read newspapers and magazines than belles-lettres or fiction. The most frequent texts that students read in the newspapers are news. Also comic strips, TV-programs and book reviews are read rather often. A positive finding was that a large proportion of students read belles-lettres quite often.

The results of the conducted questionnaire provided the basis for improving and completing the questionnaire for a larger study as well as food for thought about broadening the assortment of reading materials for students and for making Estonian language lessons more pragmatic as well.

Key words: *reading, reading skills, reading activeness, functional reading, reading literacy.*

Introduction

Reading and understanding texts of all kinds form a basic competence for participating in social and cultural life and for being successful on a job. The PISA-surveys have shown that, alt-

though most European adolescents have adequate reading competences at their disposal by the end of school, about a quarter of them cannot meet the minimal standards. Not only has the European Commission failed in decreasing the numbers in this risk-group of low achievers in reading, (a goal aimed at in the Education Benchmarks), but the rate of low achievers has even increased since 2000. For this reason, the improvement of reading literacy counts among the 5 Education Benchmarks for Europe defined by the European Commission in the framework of the Lisbon-Strategy (European Commission 2008: 92).

Reading skill, reading interest, understanding of text and other aspects connected with reading have been researched quite a lot during the last decades in Estonia. During the last decade the Institute of Educational Sciences in the Tallinn University has conducted about twenty studies aimed directly at reading activeness, reading interest, understanding of text, etc. and a number of these have allowed to draw the conclusion that basic school students are rather good readers, although some of them prefer watching TV or using the computer over reading (Jukk, 2009; Lutsepp, 2004; Niit, 2002; Perovskaja, 2003; Piir, 2003; Põldsalu, 2002). A larger proportion of these studies have focused on one or two aspects of reading (Harmipaik, 2000; Ratasep, 2006; Sikk, 2005) or on the issues of understanding the text (Metsla, 2001; Kulderknup, 1999; Lillepea, 2001).

In the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) survey in 2006, which primarily measured the skill of functional reading, Estonian students were very highly ranked. When we consider the number of students, whose results were on Level 3, 4, or 5, then among the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries Estonia held the 13th position. But when we look at the number of students, whose knowledge corresponded to or exceeded Level 2, then Estonia held the 8th position (Henno et al, 2007, 124–125). Thus, Estonia belongs among the countries, whose results are statistically significantly higher than the average of all the countries.

Since 1998 nation-wide placement tests in Estonia have been carried out among the students in Grades 3 and 6 to determine their level of reading skill; the main stress of the tests is on applying the skills of understanding a text. Additionally, the placement tests also measure the constituent skills of the Estonian language (reading, writing, listening). Some exercises concerning the language are also included. The focus is on reading and understanding different types of texts. The results of the placement tests have showed that students have average skills in reading (Pandis, 2006).

Thus, complaining about students' poor skills in reading seems to be unfitting. Nevertheless, in Estonian press and among teachers the concern about students' insufficient interest in reading, which compared to the past has considerably decreased, is very frequent, because the overall opinion is that students tend to read less and less (Hein et al, 2007; Hint, 2008; Vaher, 2008).

Interpreting the Notions of Reading and Reading Skill

The problem, at least partly, lies in the fact that *reading* and *reading skill* are often interpreted in different ways. Participating in the international project ADORE – Teaching Struggling Adolescent Readers proved our opinion that approaches to the notions of reading and reading skill (or at least the conception of the most important aspects or indicators of reading skill) are somewhat different also in other European countries. One third of the project was spent on the discussion, which aimed at reaching a common understanding on who is an adolescent with reading disabilities. The researchers from Norway and Finland (the countries had very good results in PISA-surveys) stress the critical importance of understanding the text in explaining the notion of reading, and that the meaning and importance of reading have changed during the last decade. Victor van Daal (2007) first points out the importance of reading in acquiring education and in coping well in everyday life. In Daal's opinion reading books for one's own interest is a sphere, where understanding the text is a „bonus“ for the reader.

There is a quite unanimous opinion about the fact that understanding the text that is being read is to great extent dependent on certain automatic processes (Kintsch & Rawson, 2005). As automa-

tic processes the authors see such processes, the performing of which do not require intentional effort, such as the listening skill (in case of material presented in the native language). Another automatic process needed for understanding the text that is being read is undoubtedly recognizing words (i.e. mechanical reading skill), which provides the first means to understand what a text is about (Van der Leij & Van Daal, 1999). Thus, listening skill and the skill of reading words are unquestionably highly important at the initial stages of learning to read.

Perfetti, Landi and Oakhill (2005) reached the conclusion that essential constituent skills that children should acquire are 1) apprehending and understanding the meaning and the form of sentences in a text; 2) composing situation models; and most importantly 3) drawing conclusions, i.e. making a text coherent/understandable, because there is not a single text that is completely explicit. The skills that support the before-mentioned understanding processes include 1) general knowledge – knowledge about the world and how things function in the world, etc.; 2) linguistic knowledge – being aware of phonology, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics; 3) vocabulary – the vocabulary, which consists in words the meaning, but also the phonological, orthographic and syntactic features of which are known (Mikk, 1980; Perfetti, 1985).

The Estonian specialists of reading Mare Mürsepp (1995) and Meeli Pandis (2001) have explained in brief the skill of reading as comprehending the written language and responding to it, interpreting symbols, and the communication between the writer and the reader. Stereotypically, reading is regarded as the mechanical reading skill (Jürimäe, 2001). Another stereotypical conception about reading expresses the opinion that reading (also the skill of reading) means reading fiction. Despite of the demand of the new curriculum (2002) to look at the concept of reading and writing from a much broader viewpoint, there are still many teachers who define reading mostly as reading of classical literature. Hence the claim that teenagers read less generally means that in the speaker's opinion they no longer read (enough) fiction. This was one argument that the native language teachers used to justify their wish to see literature as a separate subject in the curriculum from Grade 5 onwards. Wanting to talk about reading in a broader sense people tend to use the expression *functional literacy*, which in everyday language is rather uncomfortable to use.

Functional Reading or Reading Literacy

Living in the 21st century demands much more from teenagers as readers than it did in the past century (Dillon, O'Brien & Heilman, 2000; Hoffmann & Pearson, 2000). Lauren Resnick (1987) has noted that the skills and abilities that employers demand today are at least those demanded for college entrance just a few years ago, and she has argued also that in the near future the entry level jobs will require reading skills equivalent to those of today's college sophomores.

Educators have increasingly come to recognize that being literate requires the readers to have the ability to deal with all kinds of texts, including for example media and on-line texts. With more students having access to home computers and more and more schools providing Internet access in the classroom, media and online resources are likely to become an authentic literacy material used far more extensively in contemporary reading instructions even at school (Labbo, 1996).

In Finland and other countries the former notion of *functional literacy* has been replaced with the notion of *reading literacy*.

Reading literacy is a person's skill of using various kinds of written texts (also tables, diagrams, posters, etc.) to achieve one's aims: a person masters reading and writing on the level, which enables him/her to live a full life in a social environment (Must et al 2001). A noted Finnish researcher of reading Pirjo Linnakylä (2000) adds the cultural environment to the social environment and recognizes that recently the constructivist approach has been expanded so that the process of understanding reading is approached from the *socioconstructivist* or the *sociocultural* point of view.

The socioconstructivist point of view stresses that the reader's interpretation is not influenced simply by his/her personal expectations, knowledge and intentions, but also by these that originate

and arise in socializing with other readers. However, the sociocultural point of view rather stresses the culturally authentic (true, original) real-life texts and the processes of understanding, where the surrounding community and the cultural context have an important role in developing a meaning.

It is completely different, whether the same text is read for one's own pleasure or for a class discussion, and the process of reading probably greatly varies in either one of them. Even when the idea of a text is created individually, it is nevertheless socially grounded and influenced by cultural interpretation (Linnakylä, 2000; Langer, 1995).

The aforementioned proves that talking about reading, reading activeness or interest of students in the 21st century should largely be based on the *socioconstructivist* or *sociocultural* standpoint. In other words, taking into account the types of texts students regard authentic at a certain age or what they daily read in case of need or wish, reading should not be limited simply to reading fiction (Ehala, 2009).

Methodology of Research

The above discussed theoretical standpoints and participation in the ADORE project in 2006–2008 provided the opportunity and the need to thoroughly research the reading problems of adolescent readers and delve more deeply into the notion of reading, which excited interest in and prompted to launch a broader survey on reading activeness and interest in reading of the 6th grade students in basic school.

The quantitative research method in the form of questionnaires was used, which included open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The survey was conducted by post (questionnaires were sent by post), when personal contact with the teacher of the class that participated in the survey was not reasonable in this time period, and with the help from distance learning student teachers, who conducted the survey in the school where they were teaching. The schools in the survey were selected randomly by the principle that most of the regions of Estonia and both types of schools (basic schools and gymnasiums) would be represented. All the schools that participated in the survey are ordinary public schools.

227 respondents from 14 randomly selected schools participated in the survey. 116 of them were boys and 111 were girls.

The questionnaire included 24 questions that covered the following topics: a) general information about the student; b) student's attitude towards reading and his/her reading skill; c) frequency of and preferences in reading fiction, media texts, study materials, television, and computer texts; d) the bases of choosing the reading material; e) general reading activeness. Drawing up the questions was based on the key elements of good working practices promoting the skill of reading, which turned out during the ADORE project, and the interviews of sociological surveys conducted in Estonia and Finland (ADORE-Project: Executive Summary, 2009; Hansson, 2009; Linnakylä et al, 2000). In this paper the focus is only on general aspects of literature and media reading and on reading on the computer. Data processing and analysis (percentages, frequencies of answers) were conducted by using MS Excel.

The questions about the frequency of reading fiction treated in the article include:

- When and why did you last read a book of fiction?
- Try to remember the number of books you have read in the last 12 months (textbooks and obligatory literature do not count).

In case of reading media texts the following aspects are analyzed:

- How often do you read media texts?
- What do you read in newspapers/magazines?

In case of reading texts on the computer the following questions are discussed:

- How much time do you spend using the computer?
- What do you mostly do on the computer?

- What kind of texts do you read on the computer?

As one of the aims of the survey described in this article was to map general tendencies and to give general overview about reading habits of adolescent readers for preparing a larger future research, it is practical to confine in the article only to percentages and frequencies of answers.

Results of Research

Reading fiction

As already mentioned before Estonian teenage students are seen as modest readers of fiction. However, the results of the survey showed that 66% of the participants were reading a book of fiction at the time of the survey or had finished reading such a book only recently. 19% of the respondents had last read a book of fiction the month before and 7% in the previous semester (see Figure 1). Thus, most of the students had read a book of fiction during the previous six months.

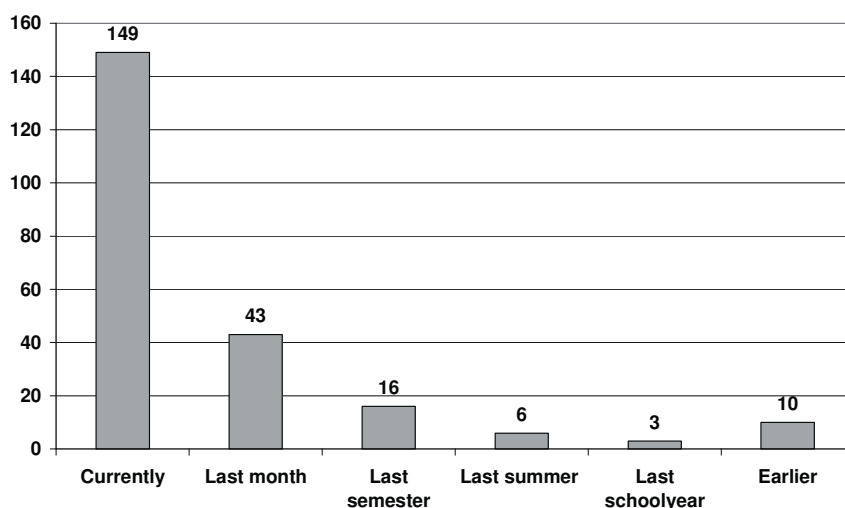


Figure 1. When was the last time students read a book of fiction (absolute frequency of answers).

A more in-depth analysis showed the decrease in reading interest in Grades 5 and 6 and this mostly applied to boys. The same tendency could be seen in all the countries participating in the ADORE project. Students mostly (75%) read for school purposes, either prompted by the teacher or on one's own initiative. This means that teachers play an important role in encouraging and guiding students' reading interest. 25% of the respondents read on their own initiative.

The results of the survey showed that the students in the 2nd stage of studies mostly read 3–9 books a year (53% of the respondents) (see Figure 2). 21% of the respondents were able to read only a couple of books a year. 14% of the students read 10–19 books and 8% read even more than 20 book a year. Naturally there were students, who had read no books in the last twelve months. At least this was the answer provided by 7 students (3%). However, it seems slightly unbelievable that one could cope at school without reading any books. The most probable explanation would be that these students were not able to remember any books they had read.

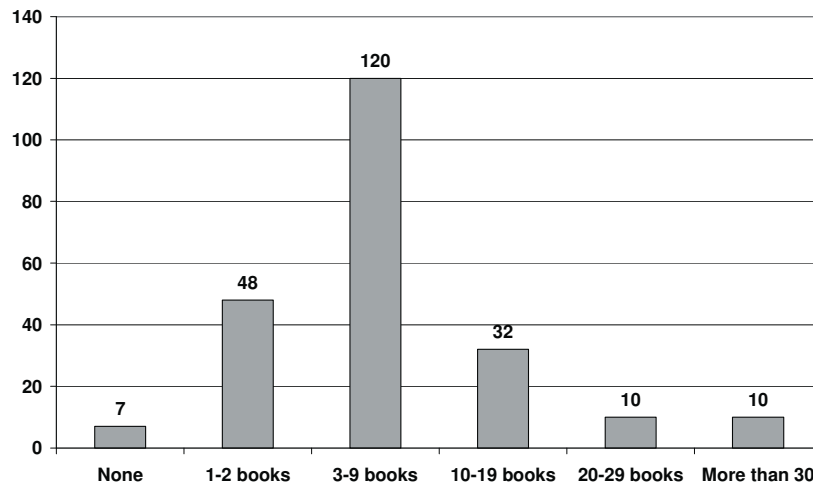


Figure 2. The number of books read during the last 12 months (absolute frequency of answers).

In the questionnaire the answers provided by students with very good reading skill were clearly recognizable, because their argumentation and explanations were more precise. Good readers, who read a lot, marked that they had read 10–19 books or more in the previous year. The students who do not like reading, read 1–2 books a year. This is understandable. Those who do not like reading hardly wish to spend time with books.

Reading media texts

During the ADORE-project it was discovered that adolescent struggling readers benefit from texts that are authentic, or interesting and relevant for them. One type of such texts for them is media texts.

A very large proportion of the students who participated in the study (41%) claimed that they read media every day or at least once a week (31%) (see Figure 3). This shows that the students in the 2nd stage of studies are eager readers of media. Thus it is clear why in a number of European countries (e.g. Finland and Germany) media text were used as reading materials in the lessons observed within the ADORE project.

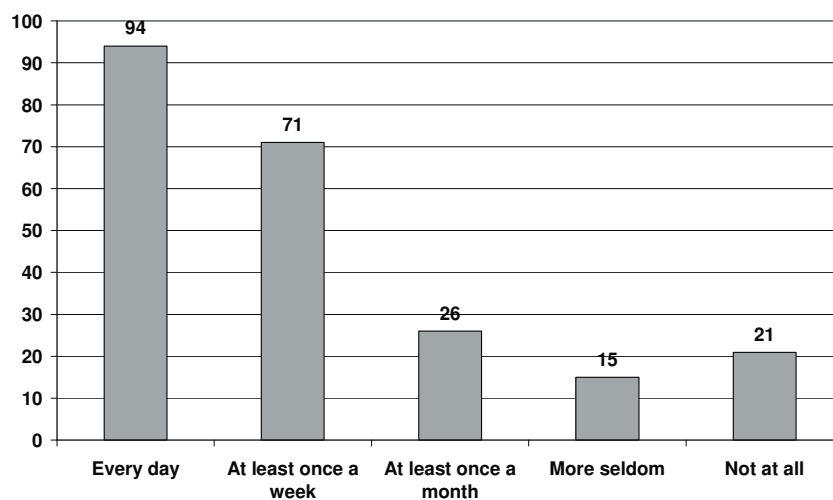


Figure 3. How often do students read newspapers and magazines (absolute frequency of answers).

What do students read in newspapers and magazines? News was most frequently mentioned (61 times) along with the topics that interest the students (45 times). These were followed by comic strips (32 times), ads and advertisements (20 times). Additionally, girls in Grades 5 and 6 also read news of beauty and fashion (18 times), while boys read sports news (15 times). Also hot gossip on celebrities is popular (12 times in all). Students are also interested in horoscopes, weather forecast, anecdotes and TV program; they do tests and solve crossword puzzles, look for recipes, read book reviews, etc. Students also noted that they look for and read news and information regarding the local life and school. They also read magazines and articles touching their sphere of interest quite a lot. Three students marked that they look at the pictures and read the titles. This shows that students are rather versatile readers of the media, because they have mentioned almost all the sections.

Both the male and female readers equally read news and TV programs. It is only delightful that teenage young people are highly interested in what is happening around them.

Reading on the computer

Talking about students' reading habits and activeness one tends to forget (or one does not think about it) that in the 21st century students read a lot of texts on the computer.

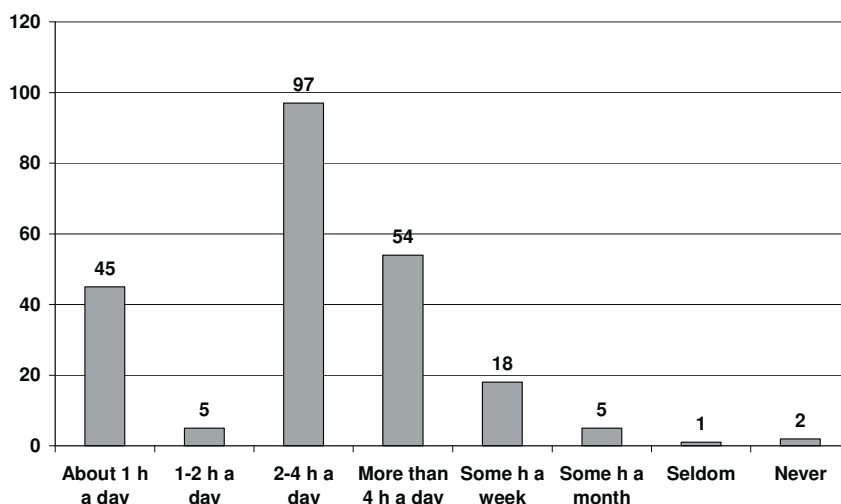


Figure 4. Time spent on the computer (absolute frequency of answers).

43% of the students who participated in the survey believe they spend (about) 2-4 hours on the computer and 24% believe they spend more than 4 hours. Thus, 2/3 of the students are engaged with different activities on the computer two or more hours a day, which is a rather long period considering that more than half of the day students normally spend at school. 20% of the students claimed they spend about an hour a day on the computer and the remaining 10% use the computer rather seldom.

On the computer students mostly communicate with their friends in MSN and other social utilities and in chat-rooms (noted 176 times). Also playing computer games is very popular (noted 148 times), as well as looking materials of interest (59 times) and reading the news (51 times). However, compared to adults students write and read e-mails (noted 51 times) and look materials for school on the Internet (41 times) less frequently. Thus we have to start thinking on how teachers could guide students' habits in using the computer and use it for influencing their reading activeness and reading interest.

Furthermore, even many of the students were not aware that also while using the computer they actually get most of the information through reading. Only 21% of the students noted that they spend most of the time on the computer reading.

Discussion

The Estonian society and therefore also Estonian teachers expect high-level performance from every student in almost every field of studying, including reading and writing. At the same time they do not realize quite well, what kind of skills or knowledge certain “high level performance” actually has to include. In this respect reading is not an exception. It is a rather general opinion among the teachers in Estonia that teenagers are bad readers, because they do not read enough, whereas recently they mostly refer to reading fiction. But nowadays reading literacy does not refer only to the ability of reading texts of certain type or with a certain function, but rather to the ability to cope also with media and on-line texts in everyday life as well as in the future work life.

The results of the reading activeness and reading interest in the students of the 2nd stage of studies in basic school confirmed the need to base the notion of reading on the socio-cultural point of view and also gave food for thought in respect to making teaching reading more viable.

The students who participated in the study saw themselves rather as average readers, who do not read very much, whereas self-assessment decreases by age and the self-assessment of boys is lower than that of girls. However, Estonian students read quite a lot, but they do not read so much fiction than newspapers and magazines. Most of the students, who participated in the study, read the latter almost every day. In respect to reading media texts teenage readers do not differ significantly from adult readers: of the latter more than 80% of the respondents read newspapers every day or at least a couple of times a week (Mürsepp, 2009). As a positive result we can note the fact that teenage students are very interested in what is going on in the country at the moment: news were noted as the most frequently read media texts. Naturally, students also read comic strips, TV programs and commercial texts.

Also the Finnish researchers had the same result (Linnakylä, 2002). The questionnaire carried out in Finland within an international survey showed that reading media texts male and female readers tend to have somewhat different preferences (Linnakylä et al, 2000). In that respect the Estonian and Finnish results were similar. Female readers in Finland prefer copies and articles about home, health and fashion, and horoscopes, while male readers rather like to read comic strips (in the given survey comic strips were the type of text that was very frequently read), news on sports and economics, and editorials.

The situation with reading fiction is not as bad as it is believed to be. The survey introduced in the article showed that more than half of the respondents read a book of fiction several times a month. A larger part of the students reads at least 3 books each year (and many of the students read even more). Knowing that students spend an average of 2–4 hours communicating with friends, playing games, and looking for materials on the Internet, the number is not so small. Even most of the adults read less fiction compared to students (Mürsepp, 2009). Young people need to have time to spend also on other things.

Comparing the issue of reading fiction with the results of the corresponding survey conducted in Finland we can state that based on the given results Estonian students read more fiction than their peers in the neighboring country. Linnakylä (2000) study showed that 53% (41% of girls and 12% of boys) of 15-years-old students claimed that they read fiction several times a month (Estonian results 66%). However, on their own initiative Finnish students read considerably less fiction compared to other texts (e.g. newspapers and magazines).

Conclusion

An important goal of the questionnaire treated in the article was getting a general overview of the reading activeness and reading preferences of teenage readers and based on the results changing the teachers' attitude towards students as readers and preparing a broader research for getting a scientific base for introducing changes in developing literacy. It was equally important to support

the opinion that the didactic specialists of the Estonian language hold: it is time to start broadening and modernizing the selection of reading materials and to make teaching Estonian more pragmatic (Ehala, 2009).

The results of the preliminary research on the reading habits of adolescent readers in Estonia convinced researchers of the urgent need to strive for achieving the above-mentioned goals.

Also the results of the Adore-project confirmed that one of the key elements of increasing teenage readers' motivation to read is teachers' knowledge on literacy instruction and choosing engaging reading materials. In terms of instructional practices and reading materials supporting reading engagement and motivation, it is important to promote real-world interaction by providing students with hands-on activities and personally relevant and interesting text. It can be said that the 2nd stage students of basic school benefit from texts that are authentic, or interesting and relevant for them. Since individual students' interests may vary considerably, it is wise to let students choose their own reading materials whenever possible and provide them with a wide selection of texts (Adore-project, 2010).

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