Teachers' Perspectives on Language Learning:
the Results of the Online Consultation Regarding the New
Romanian Curriculum

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Abstract

The Law of Education promoted in 2011 launched a revision of the national curriculum with the aim of better adapting the school learning offer to the students' profiles and aspirations as well as to the needs of the contemporary society. As a step in this effort, the new curriculum for grades 3 and 4 was developed and submitted for consultation in 2014. Our paper discusses the results of this process by answering the following questions: 1. what are the teachers' opinions with respect to the provision of the new curriculum for languages? 2. what are the teachers' needs for an effective implementation?
The consultation took place online by means of a questionnaire on SurveyMonkey that focused the on: a general perspective on the curriculum (contribution to the students' profile, the approach to learning, the integration of conclusions from the national and international assessments, age relevance), the specific competences (clarity, coherence, progression, relevance for students and academic subject), examples of learning tasks (usefulness, adaptability, student-centeredness), concepts (usefulness, balance, relevance, accessibility, updating), methodological suggestions (variety, if supportive for planning and assessment, adaptability to students' profiles). The questions requested a degree of satisfaction to be ticked out and they also included an open-ended field for comments.
Nearly 9000 users logged on and offered replies. More than one third of the participants in the survey chose to express their opinions for the mother tongue curriculum (more than for any other subject in the curriculum). We will discuss the degree of satisfaction with the curricular provision and also the comments the participants offered. Even if these comments are not very numerous they are nevertheless mostly valuable since they reveal the main issues that could delay a renewal of the classroom practices, irrespective of the curricular innovation.

1. Introduction

In 2011 a new Law of Education brought about provision for a renewal of the national curriculum, from the perspective of the key competences for lifelong learning_[1].The issue was not tremendously innovative. In the late 90s, a first version of such a curriculum for high-school had been developed [2]; within the curricular revision of 2003-2005, the *key-competences* were already part of the educational policies rhetoric (and present in every introduction to the official subject curricula!) even if, at that time, the European document was still in consultation [3,4]. Nevertheless, the classroom practice had hardly adjusted to a new perspective. Moreover, in primary education the curriculum had remained untouched for a decade and by 2012 was still fully defined in terms of objectives and lists of syllabi. This whole context led to poor results in the international studies [5, 6].

Starting with 2012, in the light of the new law, the primary education curriculum entered a process of reconstruction. The curriculum developers addressed several issues: the state of the art (in order to ensure continuity); the results and frameworks of the international studies (to tune the national curriculum to the current tendencies in education); the key competences (to respect the law and support the students' sound acquisition for lifelong learning); a new simpler curricular configuration that include: the *general competences* of the school subject (to be developed throughout primary education); the *specific competences* (the expected learning results at the end of a school year, that are derived from the general competences);*examples of learning tasks* for each specific competence (in order to show ways to structure that competence);*methodological suggestions* (to support teachers with explanations, examples of good practice) [7].

In this perspective, the development of the curriculum for mother tongue aimed at placing the communication competence at the very core of the process. In terms of declarations, the mother tongue curriculum embraced the communicative approach in the 1998 version, but the provision had remained quite vague. In the 2014 document, which is intended for grades 3 and 4, the communicative approach is unequivocal. The curriculum translates the components of the key competence "communication in the mother tongue" for the 3 and 4 graders' needs and developmental

stage. As a result, the curriculum highlights a functional approach where communication is both an *object of learning* and *an instrument of learning*.

The communication contexts are taken from the contemporary age and reflect the real world (with a variety of categories of information and functional texts: poster, flyer, table/ graphic organizer, card, invitation, email, map) or the imaginary world (short narratives or poems). Simple language functions are recommended to be trained. The grammar categories are object of intuition, the students being challenged to notice regularities and infer rules [8].

In the terms of the common educational rhetoric, the 2014 mother tongue curriculum for grades 3-4 is not highly innovative, but when it comes to the actual provision, the change of perspective is important. Our concern was to see the extent of this perceived change in the teachers' representations and to identify ways to support the implementation of the curriculum.

2. Methodology

Our research starts from the following questions: 1.*what are the teachers' opinions with respect to the provision of the new curriculum for Romanian language, grade 3 and 4? 2. what are the teachers' needs for an effective implementation*? The last question is of the utmost importance since the curriculum as an official document is lifeless in the absence of correct implementation (i.e. it does not enhance the intended transformation in the students' minds if teachers fail to facilitate such process). In our recent history, we have had more than once situations where, irrespective of the curricular provision, the common practice preserved the status quo by reproducing the teaching routines [5,6].

In order to answer the above mentioned questions we made use of the consultation process which is mandatory to take place before the document becomes official. Thus we submitted a questionnaire on SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was intended to collect data for all the subject curricula, was opened to everybody, and focused on the curricular components (see entries in Table 1).

The respondents had to tick on a scale of satisfaction and could fill in an open-ended field for comments. In terms of identification data the items referred to: the respondents' status (primary/ secondary teachers / "other"); the county; rural/ urban residence.

3. Results

The online consultation took place in October 2014. 8952 users participated. The greatest interest was for the mother tongue curriculum (Romanian) which attracted more than one third of the respondents, namely 3190. Math came second with 1967. All the other subjects have far less interventions. These results bring no surprise. Romanian and Math are considered the "main" subjects by teachers and parents. Despite the rhetoric of the personal development and the valorization of individual talents and aspirations, primary teachers (and parents) still believe that all the other school subjects are somehow "complementary" to mother tongue and math.

A surprise in the structure of the respondents' profile comes from the numbers of participants from rural areas. Out of the 3190, 56.23% came from villages and 43.77% from towns. It has been long believed (based on previous surveys) that teachers in the rural areas are less connected to information and have less access to innovation. The results from the consultation indicate that in the digital era this belief is a cliché.

Another surprise comes from the overwhelming uniformity of the respondents' status: 99.20% of the participants are primary teachers (the 0.8% belongs to "other" categories than teachers). It is sad to see that none of the secondary teachers of Romanian were interested in the grades 3-4 mother tongue curriculum. To a certain extent this situation can be explained by the absence of educational teams in schools. Moreover members of the teaching staff are quite unwilling to communicate with one another.

Table 1 below synthetically shows the satisfaction the respondents declared with respect to the various issues the items dealt with. The results indicate a high level of satisfaction with respect to the mother tongue curriculum (over 80%) in all the tested categories. For two thirds of the questions, there is even a higher result: over 90% positive responses.

Table 1 – The results from the consultation on the mother tongue curriculum, grades 3-4, Oct.2014

Questions	% Response
General opinion on the curriculum	
- it contributes to the structuring of the students'profile at the end of primary school	96.82
- it values modern perspectives and approaches concerning learning	97.34
- it values conclusions from the national and international studies on primary education	87.43
- it corresponds to the 3 and 4 graders' age and cognitive level	88.24
Do the specific competences in the curriculum respect the following criteria?	
- they are clearly stated	96.70
- they can be structured by the end of the school year	87
- they are derived from the general competences of the school subject	98.48
- they ensure progression from one grade to another	95.64
- they are relevant for the school subject	95.09
- they correspond to the time provision in the curricular framework	84.67
-they are relevant for the students' needs and interests	86.49
Do the examples of learning tasks respect the following criteria?	
- they are relevant for the specific competences they are suggested for	97.21
- they are realistic (can be easily applied in the classroom)	80.07
- they can be adapted to various categories of students	84.87
- they are centered on the student's direct involvement in learning (explorating, experimenting, problem solving etc.)	95.77
- they create premises for the students' creativity and autonomy in learning	93.68
- they encourage collaborative learning	95.86
- they cover a wide range of categories of activities	93.81
Does the knowledge stipulated in the curriculum respect the following criteria?	
- it is useful for the development of the specific competences	97.13
- it is in a good ratio with the set of specific competences	86.01
- it is relevant for the respective domain of knowledge	94.92
- it is relevant for the present day and age	96.07
- it is necessary to the students	93.82
- it is accessible for the students	84.60
Do the methodological suggestions respect the following criteria?	
- they offer varied examples of strategies, methods, techniques	95.73
- they support planning	95.5
- they offer ideas and examples for assessment	94.92
- they are flexible/ adaptable to various categories of students	85.84
- they are harmonized with modern approaches and methods in education	96.39

For each category, the participants could fill in a field with personal comments. Most of the participants chose not to do it. Only 5-12% of the respondents commented in the open questions. Even if these comments are not very numerous, they are nevertheless valuable since they reveal the main issues that could delay a renewal of the classroom practices, irrespective of the curricular innovation. For instance, an important highlight is that most of the comments are recorded in the knowledge category. This highlights that knowledge is still the priority and students need to take it. Many of these comments refer to traditional grammar. Teachers offered concern over the very light approach to the language system. Another matter of concern was the rather short list of recommended Romanian authors which in the document offered for consultation was very similar in numbers compared to the list of world literature. Even more, some teachers expressed concern that some very important literary excerpts (from the Romanian canon) have been "eliminated" from the curriculum. Other participants noted the absence of vocabulary and spelling practice.

3. Conclusions

The interpretation of the consultation data shows us that the teachers' opinions on the new mother tongue curriculum are positive despite the change in perspective it brings about, with its unequivocal stress on the communicative approach. Even if we did not have a representative sample (and this is a serious limitation of our research) the large number of participants with highly positive appraisal allowed the Ministry of Education to approve the new curriculum.

The consultation showed no serious resistance to the competence-based mother tongue curriculum. As presented above, in the discussion of the respondents' comments, very few teachers were

explicitly against the student-centered perspective that values the children's aspirations and needs of communication in this day and age. The desire to keep the old teaching pattern was expressed by very few and their comments helped us see what the teachers' needs are for a good implementation of the curriculum.

As of September 2015, the Curriculum Department in the Institute of Educational Sciences uploaded on its website examples of detailed learning tasks to address the very issues of concern that were expressed in the comments [11]. Our intention is to enlarge this set of digital resources following new feedback from the online visitors.

References

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