

From Key Competence-Based Language Curricula towards Meaningful Assessment: A Case of Washback in the Romanian Lower Secondary Education

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A photograph of a desk with various school supplies like books, pens, and papers, partially obscured by a large green curved overlay that contains the text.

Context

June 2021 = The first cohort of students who studied according to the new key competence-based curriculum had the national assessment (NA) at the end of lower secondary education

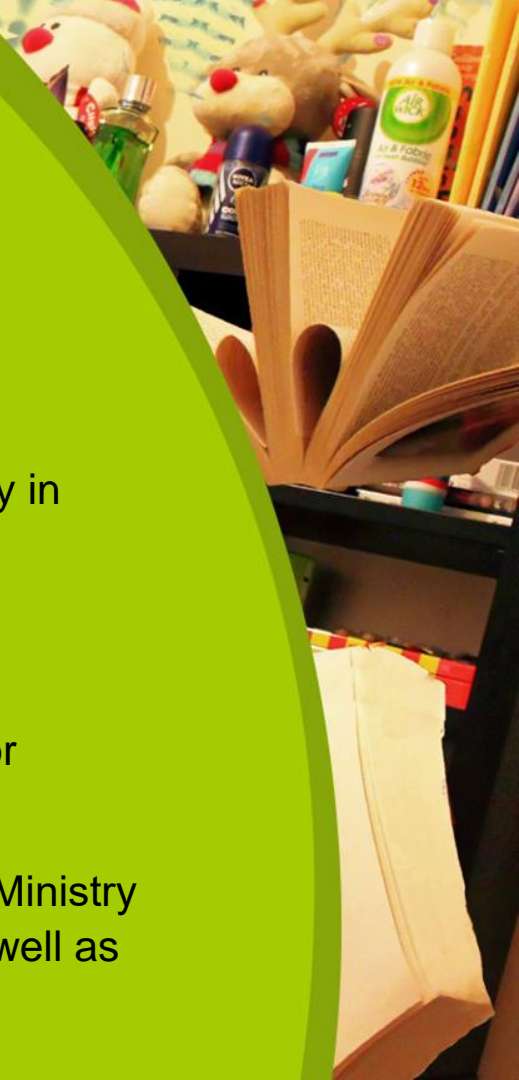
The national assessment at the end of lower secondary education: some facts

The NA consists of:

- Romanian test (PBA) - the focus of our study!
- Math test (PBA)
- Mother tongue test (PBA) (only for minorities students who study in their own language)
- Average of the school results (in grades average/ year) in lower secondary education

There is a final average for the above that counts in the hierarchy for highschool admission.

There is an “assessment methodology” approved each year by the Ministry of Education that stipulates the technicalities of the assessment as well as the syllabi for Romanian, Math and Mother tongue.





The new key competences-based curriculum: some facts

- The language curriculum is developed according to the Romanian key competences' framework of reference, based on the European Recommendation for key competences for life long learning
- i.e. The official learning provision in languages is agency-oriented.
- It highlights 5 domains of competence: reading comprehension, written expression, effective use of language, cultural awareness, oral interaction. With the exception of the latter, all are measurable in PBA.
- The curriculum describes the competences in progression from one year to another, within each of the 5 domains



Objectives of the research

- to analyse how the new curriculum is translated into the compulsory assessment tasks and scoring grids
- to explore how the actual national test results could highlight the students' needs in terms of more meaningful performance in language learning.

The research includes:

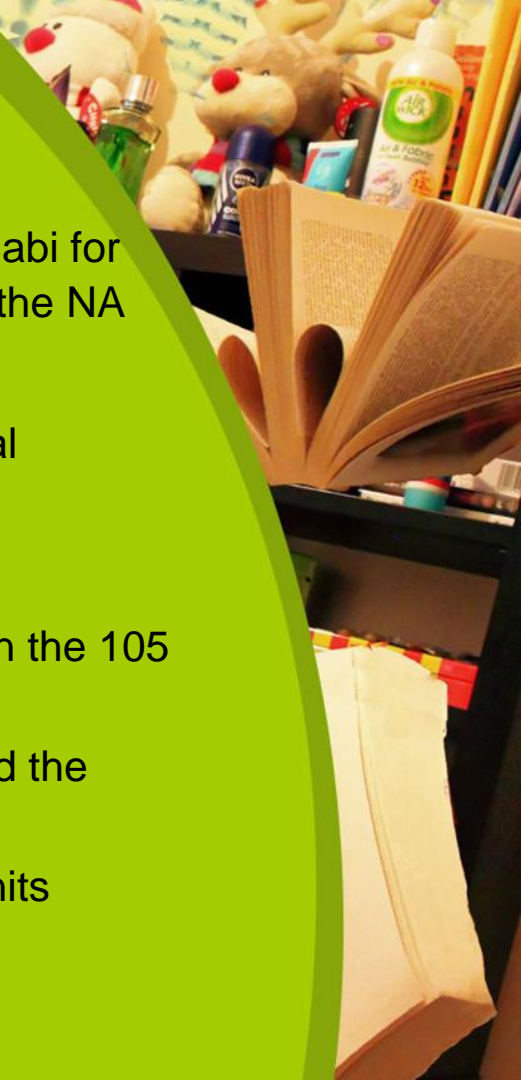
- an analysis of the official documents (curriculum and syllabi);
- an analysis of the national test and the scoring grid applied in 2021;
- a comparison between the students' results and their reporting and the expected curricular outcomes as well as the needs for further learning in high school

Methodology

- text analysis (official national curriculum for Romanian, official syllabi for Romanian in the NA 2021, the Romanian test and scoring grid in the NA 2021)
- analysis of the students' results in the Romanian test on a national representative sample

Sampling data

- Total: 131180 students from 5581 schools; the tests were scored in the 105 local assessment units
- A selection by double stage clustering according to school size and the diversity of scorers (4 papers per scorer at the most)
- Representative sample = 765 papers from 56 local assessment units scored by 418 teachers (blind double scoring)
- Selection error – 3.5%



Results (1) - Curriculum and syllabi: a competition of texts?

- the curriculum is focused on competence development, in progression from one year to another (competence=structured set of knowledge, skills, attitudes). Knowledge is operational and is not a learning goal *per se* (it should not be reproduced or assessed in isolation)
- the syllabi derive from a selection of various competences and a large corpus of knowledge from the curriculum of each year (without mentioning any degree of complexity of the assessment tasks). There is no explanation of the selection, which already produces washback. Moreover, the document explicitly states that the assessment is focused on competences and knowledge (a reminiscence of the old curriculum!)

Consequences for the practice: Teachers focus on the syllabi instead of the curriculum (a large part of it is neglected!), i.e limitations for the teaching practice and the competence-based curriculum implementation!

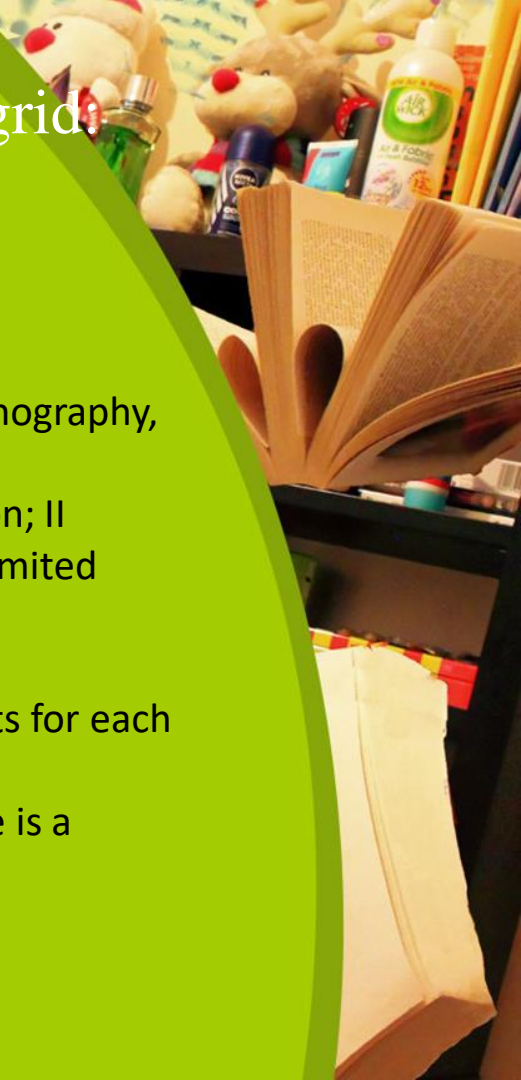
Results (2) The 2021 Romanian test and its scoring grid rhetoric/vs/facts

- the test has 3 parts: IA (reading comprehension), IB (grammar), II (written expression)

BUT, IN FACT – IA combines reading with written expression, orthography, punctuation, presentation in a limited number of words; IB combines decontextualized grammar, written expression, orthography and punctuation; II combines written expression, orthography, punctuation, presentation in a limited number of words

- the scoring grid specifies – in a very analytical manner - a number of points for each item and various categories within the item.

NEVERTHELESS – for one single category (e.g. punctuation) there is a variable number of points in the 3 parts of the text



Consequences

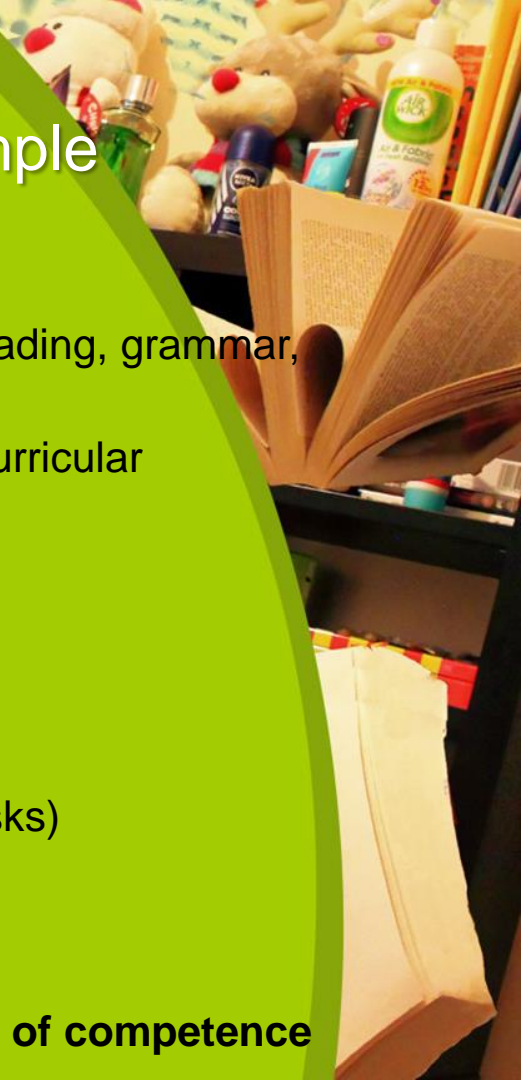
- scorers are confused: The grid does not mention the competence the item is focused on; thus the scorer has no path of understanding the question intent and the student's answer in terms of cognitive processes that might be involved; moreover, points in the grid vary for the same scoring category
- students are sanctioned several times for the same type of mistake (e.g. they lose points if punctuation is not correct in all the 3 parts of the test)
- the results do not show the level of attainment in terms of competences. They just lead to a number of points that is later converted into a final mark

The students' results on a representative sample

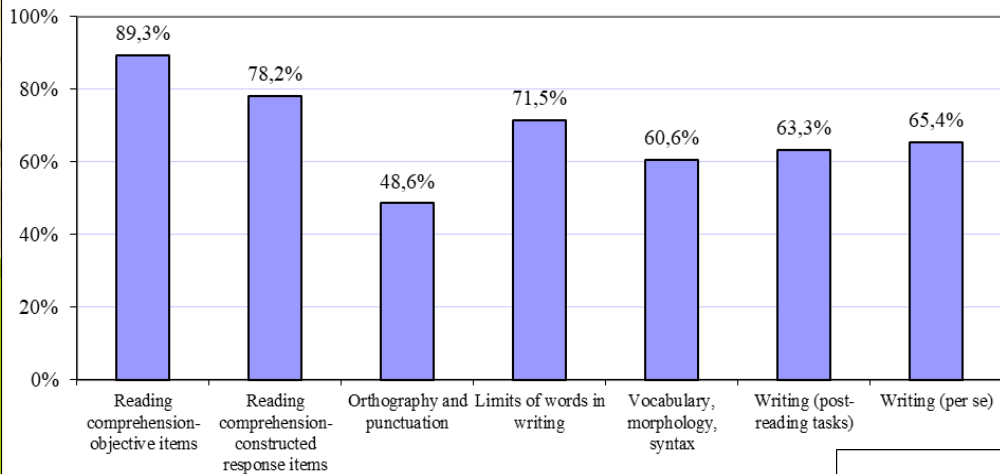
The students' results are discussed according to the following:

- objective/ constructed response items
- the 3 parts of the test (corresponding to the traditional categories: reading, grammar, writing)
- clusters of items according to analysis categories derived from the curricular components
 - **Reading comprehension** (objective items)
 - **Reading comprehension** (constructed response)
 - *Orthography and punctuation*
 - Limited number of words in written expression
 - Vocabulary, morphology , syntax (decontextualized grammar tasks)
 - Writing (post-reading tasks)
 - **Writing per-se**

The categories in bold correspond to curricular domains of competence

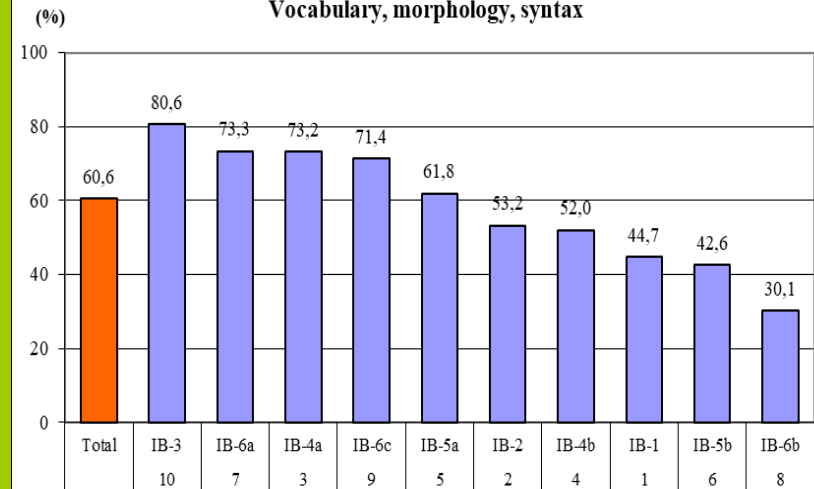


Achievement according to analysis categories

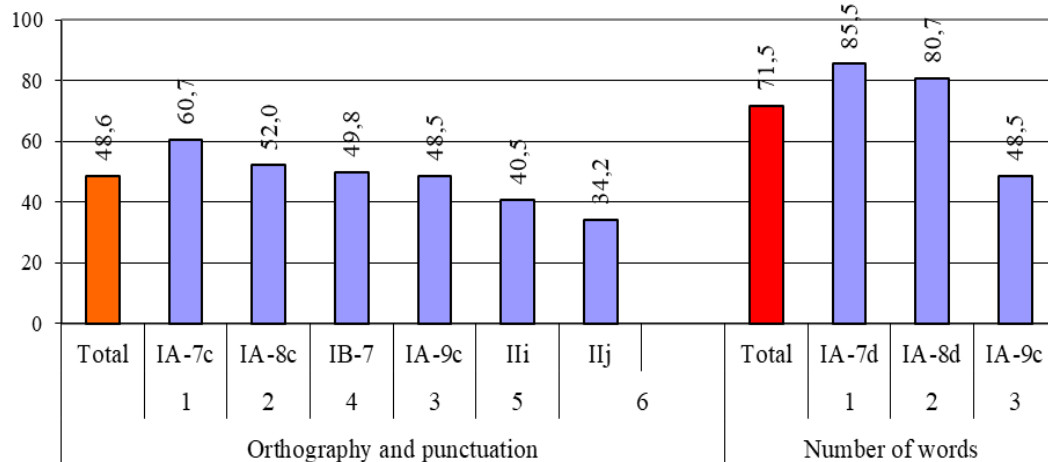


The final mark is influenced by the scores in decontextualized grammar tasks and the recurrent markings for punctuation and orthography. These results do not give any measure of curricular achievement

Vocabulary, morphology, syntax



(%) Orthography and punctuation results



Powerful washback

- The selection of the curricular components in the syllabi set
- The focus on the traditional tasks (reading, grammar writing) instead of competences
- Confusing scoring grid for the scorers – it leads to subjective appraisal, disconnected from the curricular provision (it distorts both teaching and assessing practices)
- Mixed items and scores – it leads to faulty understanding of the students' acquisition

THANK YOU 😊