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How to Improve Students' Reading? Assessments Should Help…

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Abstract

Reading competences are highly important for overall school performance as well as lifelong learning and social inclusion. Therefore, improving reading performance is crucial for quality learning, in school and beyond. In this context, assessment is relevant from at least two perspectives: 1) It identifies the levels of attainment by examining students' results. 2) it highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching practices when looking into the assessment design and corroborate it with the results. On that account, our study aims at answering the following research questions: What does the assessment target? What categories of ítems and what types of texts are used? How does assessment influence reading practices? We thus analysed the reading component in the grade 8 Romanian national assessment and in PISA. Both assessments are administered to 14-15 year olds: the first is technically an exam that establishes a hierarchy with an important role for admission in high school, the second is a comparative large-scale assessment. A thorough analysis of the Romanian assessment syllabus, the reading PISA framework, and the subsequent assessment tasks and texts reveal the roots of the little performance variation throughout the years despite various curricular changes that took place. While the 8th-grade Romanian national assessment made small steps towards innovation and thus kept the reading practices within clustered traditional patterns, PISA renovated its assessment design to fit the current reading habits and digital challenges. Our conclusions identify ways to fill this gap from the perspective of teaching strategies and formative assessment.

Keywords: *Reading performance, national assessments, large scale assessment, backwash effect*

1. Introduction

Studies have shown that reading is a prerequisite for success in school [1], with competent readers having a lower dropout rate [2]. At the same time, when school dropout is associated with suicide [3], there is a clear link between 15-year-olds with poor reading skills and suicide attempts. This highlights that reading is important not only for cognitive access to relevant knowledge but also for social inclusion and for coping with everyday challenges.

The problem is that our students do not read well: In the PISA 2022 reading test, Romania ranked in a not-so-flattering place with 428 points (the same score as in 2018) [4]. Located below the OECD average (469 points), the second last among the EU countries, Romania only managed to surpass Bulgaria (404 points). A mere 2% of Romanian students demonstrate sophisticated reading skills (compared to the OECD average of 7%), while most of them, 58%, are situated at level 2 out of the six PISA reading levels [15]. And this is not just a pandemic-related accident: The PISA trend 2006-2022 shows that Romanian students have poorer scores compared to the EU average or the other former communist countries [14].

How could we explain these data? Research highlights the need to study correspondences between curriculum, assessment, and instruction, in order to ensure the quality and relevance of the teaching act [5]. Likewise, it emphasizes that the assessment test determines to a greater extent than the curricular provision what should be learned in school and how[6]. Therefore, we decided to carry out a thorough analysis of the way in which reading assessment is performed in the PISA test and in the Romanian grade VIII national assessment (or "EN VIII", our common acronym for it, and later on used as such in this paper).

2. Methodology

Our paper aims at a comparative study between two reading assessment systems: EN VIII and PISA. EN VIII is the only national, summative, external assessment of the students' acquisition during secondary education. Every year, the Ministry of Education organizes it free of charge at the end of 8th grade, in all the public and private schools that study the Romanian curriculum. It is taken by all

graduates, including those with special needs. EN VIII paper-based tests consist of: Romanian language and literature, mother tongue and literature (for minority students), and mathematics. EN VIII results have high stakes: the ensuing ranking decides if students are admitted to high school or vocational education! The assessment tasks are developed according to the EN VIII official syllabus [7]. Reading is represented by the first 9 items, out of the 18 that are included in the Romanian language and literature test. For greater predictability, on November 1st every year, a sample subject is published on the official website www.subiecte.edu.ro. In addition, during February-March, *the national simulation* is carried out under conditions similar to the main assessment.

On the other side, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is the largest international educational assessment in which over 90 countries and economies participate. It has been applied every three years, allowing a longitudinal perspective on the outcomes. The PISA tasks ask students to transfer what they know in new situations, beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Thus, PISA examines how students apply knowledge in real life [8]. The tests refer to reading, mathematics, science and one innovative domain (a new one in each cycle). PISA is applied on a national representative sample, identified on the basis of validated criteria at the international level. Thus, the conclusions of the study can be generalized for the entire 15-year-old school population. Romanian students usually do not prepare in advance for the PISA reading test, even if the released items are published on the National Center website https://www.ise.ro/itemi-pisa .

In order to conduct the comparative study, we formulated the following research questions: 1) Which are the reading skills/ the processes that EN VIII/ PISA target? 2) What categories of ítems and what types of texts are there used? 3) What marking schemes and procedures are there implemented in order to objectively measure the students' reading performance? Therefore, three important themes are in focus: (1) the purposes of reading assessment (reading processes and skills); (2) the typology of items; (3) the measure of the students' performance (grades/scores). The paper is based on document analysis, relying on primary sources: the syllabus for EN VIII for Romanian Language and Literature [7], the PISA 2018 assessment and analytical framework [8], the PISA new reading released items [9], the 2025 EN VIII test for Romanian language and literature [10] and its associated marking scheme [11].

3. Results

3.1 *Targets of Reading Assessment*

EN VIII aims at measuring reading comprehension by targeting the "specific competences" that are stipulated in the national curriculum. The syllabus [7] includes a list of eight reading competences that are taken/ adjusted from the Romanian Language and Literature National Curriculum [12] as well as lists of content-based components associated with the reading domain. There are over 60 elements, such as time, space, instances of narrative communication: author, narrator, characters; means of characterization, third-person and first-person narration etc.

When it comes to PISA, the assessment focus is given by the cognitive processes. In the PISA framework, these are not simply listed but are presented in detail, with the teacher benefiting from clarifications, definitions, and extensions regarding the scope of each process. The table below summarizes the correspondence of focus in each assessment.

Table 1. Focus of reading assessment items – National Assessment and PISA

Specific competences in EN VIII	Cognitive processes in PISA	
1.1. Identify important information, themes, main/secondary ideas in literary and non-literary, continuous, non-continuous and multimodal texts	Access and retrieve information within a text	Locate information
1.2. Correlate explicit and implicit information in literary and non-literary, continuous, non-continuous and multimodal texts	Search for and select relevant text	
1.3. Pinpoint ways in which information is organized in literary and non-literary, continuous, non-continuous, and multimodal texts	Represent literal information	Understand
1.4. Present personal, critical, or creative responses to various texts	Integrate and generate inferences	
1.5. Compare different points of view expressed on various texts	Assess quality and credibility	Evaluate and reflect

1.6. Compare at least two texts in terms of theme, ideas and structure	Reflect on content and form
1.7. Evaluate information and communication intentions from literary, non-literary, continuous, non-continuous and multimodal texts	Detect and handle conflict
1.8. Argue points of view on two or more texts of various types, taking into account the possibility of multiple interpretations	

When we compare the two types of focus, we notice they lead to the development of a wide range of items, from those involving basic reading operations to those requiring sophisticated reading. The three main categories: *locate, understand, and evaluate&reflect* are well represented both in the EN VIII syllabus and in the PISA reference framework. In addition, in both situations, the focus is appropriate for reading multiple and varied sources. In the case of EN VIII, there is no possibility of work on dynamic texts, which require complex organization and navigation, given the paper-based assessment features.

There are also elements that differentiate the focus in the two assessments: there is a tendency towards theorization in the EN VIII which is noticeable both in the list of content-based components as well as in the competence *1.3 Pinpoint ways in which information is organized in literary and non-literary continuous, non-continuous and multimodal texts*. This tendency contradicts the curriculum according to which, at least at a declarative level, the assessment should be competence-based. In contrast, the PISA cognitive processes never target reproduction. In this case, the focus refers to cognitive operations that are needed by the readers nowadays when they approach one or more texts simultaneously.

In addition, given that the competencies in the EN VIII syllabus are cut from the national curriculum, and the criteria according to which these cuts were made are not transparent, some essential operations in reading, such as paraphrase, summarize, formulate a title/main idea in a fragment, are poorly represented. These are partially included in competence 1.1. Other elements that are relevant to reading in contemporary life are absent, e.g. digital reading, identify and handle conflict among texts, assess the credibility of a text. This is a clear distinction from the PISA framework which balances, within the list of cognitive operations, the basic ones that are essential in carrying out any type of reading, and the inclusion of new types of reading given the pluralization of codes which is increasingly present in life.

3.2 Types of Items

The reading requirements of the EN VIII test refer to the comprehension of two given texts: text 1 is literary and continuous, and text 2 is non-literary and continuous [10]. The texts are part of the Romanian cultural heritage [13].

The reading items are divided into three categories. The first five, although varied in terms of structure, target low levels of reading processing, i.e. the student needs to identify explicit or implicit information from the text. The sixth item (I.A.6) is included among the reading items, but it actually measures the learning and reproduction of content components such as: means of characterization, features of textual patterns, figures of speech, type of narrator, role of stage directions, etc. The next three items are composite items which, according to the specifications of the Ministry of Education and Research [13], involve the assessment of reading skills and intercultural expression skills. Item I.A.7 requires the presentation of a content element that is common in the two given texts, by capitalizing on a relevant part/ segment. Item I.A.8 involves the expression and justification of an opinion by capitalizing on a fragment from one of the two texts. Item I.A.9 requires the presentation of a value that is present in text 1 but also in another work (a text chosen by the students among those they studied in class).

A PISA assessment unit is based on the following elements: cognitive processes, scenarios, and reading texts. If the unit involves working with two or three texts, the students initially receive the first text and a series of questions about it. Later, they receive the second text, respectively, questions about it; (then the third, if the case), and, finally, students receive questions that require the integration of information from all the texts. Scenarios open each PISA unit and familiarize the students with a situation, with a specific reading context that stimulate them to achieve a purpose in their reading, for example, locating information on a train ticket to tell a relative of a plausible time when they will have to be at the station; understanding information on a tourist website to decide which excursion suits them best, etc.

Reading tasks are organized around one or more texts, which must contain sufficient information so that a competent reader can understand the material and solve the problem in question [8]. Although very diverse, the texts proposed in the PISA reading assessment do not include literary texts, but very marginally.

Table 2 compares the reading items in EN VIII and PISA according to tasks, text typology, contextualization, and difficulty. Some of the (sub)criteria are borrowed from the PISA framework, some are proposed by the author.

Table 2. Reading items: a comparison between EN VIII and PISA

		EN VIII reading items	PISA reading items
Tasks	Focus	Simple and multiple: items that focus on one competence AND composite items that focus more competences (reading, writing, language)	Clear connection between each item and the cognitive process it is focused on
	Task distribution	Unbalanced: The test includes tasks that require basic levels of reading processing as well as composite items.	Balanced and coherent with the framework: locate info 25%, understand 50%, evaluate and reflect 25%
	Predictability	High predictability: tasks are similar or identical to model samples published on the official site or those used in simulation or previous exams	Low predictability: the released items are samples that only showcase the items categories. The PISA items are confidential.
Texts	Source	Multiple	Simple/multiple
	Format	Continuous/mixed	Continuous / non-continuous / mixed
	Organization and navigation	Static	Static/ dynamic
	Text structure	One literary and one non-literary text: narration, description, argument, explanation	Non-literary texts to a very large extent: narration, description, exposition, argument, instruction, transaction; functional texts
	Theme	Canonical, predictable, and adapted to the students' age	Adapted to the students' age and interests
Context		No context is provided	Scenarios bring about the context
Difficulty of the test		Reading multiple sources, theorizing, clichés, composite items (reading, writing and grammar in one item), language barrier (archaic and regional vocabulary in literary texts)	Reading multiple sources, sophisticated reading processes, complexity of organization and navigation, challenging contexts

In terms of the items' design, the two assessment systems differ in several respects, such as the distribution of the items, their focus, the type of text, and the contexts of the reading activity. In PISA, the reading items target all the cognitive processes, including the sophisticated ones, following an algorithm mentioned in the analytical framework. In EN VIII, the items either target only lower-level reading skills or are clichéd and predictable, with students confusing reading with the reproduction of interpretation templates. In terms of types of texts, EN VIII particularly values literary ones, while PISA uses a very varied range of non-literary texts, with exciting themes that are interesting for the students of our day and age. PISA also uses scenarios to motivate and orient students towards the achievement of a reading objective. EN VIII does not have a strategy in this regard. In the first situation, students are involved in problem-solving through reading, the scenario being a device that challenges them and ensures their active participation in the reading activity.

Both tests present elements of difficulty. PISA has tasks that target sophisticated reading processes, which students can solve only if they are competent readers. On the other hand, in EN VIII, the variety of the literary texts makes the test difficult. The deep understanding of the ideational universe (especially in the case of poems), the linguistic barrier created by archaic or regional vocabulary, the reference to obsolete aspects the student is not familiar with, can constitute obstacles in the correct item response.

3.3 The Measure of Student Performance

Both PISA and EN VIII use a digital marking system, but in different ways. The National Assessment is delivered on a paper booklet, which is scanned in front of the student and then fed into the digital application. After this stage, it is assessed by teachers who are selected based on certain criteria, with priority given to those who are part of the Certified Teachers Assessment Board. The PISA test is taken by the student on a digital delivery platform. The closed answers are marked directly in the system, while the constructed responses are coded by experts appointed by the PISA National Centre.

3.3.1 Training for the Assessment of the Students' Responses

The teachers who assess the students' responses in EN VIII have to attend the training session organized by the National Center for Curriculum and Assessment in order to apply the marking scheme. This form of training is limited, both in terms of the delivery method (online lecture), and of the volume of topics covered in a single session. The expert trainer tries to provide as many instructions as possible for standardizing the assessment in one training session. Considering that there are 18 items and that it is addressed to all the teachers who do the EN VIII assessment and marking, at the same time, the training is superficial. In contrast, PISA places particular emphasis on the coders' training: a general international training including 5 Q&A sessions following an individual asynchronous pre-assessment of selected responses; multiple national item-by-item training sessions (devoted to each item before the coding per se). It is mandatory that the coders should obtain a high reliability score for each item (85% per item and 92% overall). If the reliability score is below the limit, the team must resume coding, starting with a new training and continuing with deleting codes and assigning new ones to obtain a satisfactory score. Unlike EN VIII, the training of PISA coders is intensive, long-term, and carried out according to OECD standards in all the participant countries.

3.3.2 Assessing and Marking the Responses

The EN VIII marking scheme [11] is a synthetic document that specifies some ways to correctly solve the tasks and issues related to the allocation of points. In the case of objective items, the assessment is carried out without difficulty: the scheme indicates the correct answer and mentions that any other correct solution will be marked with the same number of points. Nevertheless, for the semi-objective items (structured questions) or the subjective item (structured essay), the marking scheme offers imprecise, superficial indications that can lead to assessment errors. For example, in assessing the students' responses for item I.A.7 *Present, in at least 30 words, an element of content that is common to both texts, capitalizing on a relevant fragment from each text* [11], the teacher has to – arbitrarily – determine whether the element of common content is presented adequately or whether the response is a mere attempt at presentation. In this case, the scheme only mentions that 1 point is given for adequate presentation and no points are given for the attempted presentation. Consequently, the assessors are left to weigh by themselves *how much is enough* for an "adequate presentation" in order to mark 1 point. Another aspect that deserves special attention is the allocation of points, which, in the case of some items (I.A.6, I.A.7, I.A.8, I.A.9), is done arbitrarily. Although these items aim to assess reading and intercultural skills according to the specifications of the Ministry of Education [13], the scheme specifies that points are also given for linguistic elements, writing, and framing within a minimum word limit. In other words, the answer to these tasks may show the comprehension of the given texts, but may, according to the marking scheme, receive points for correct writing. As such, given the predictability of the items, the answers to these questions have been clichéd and, currently, do not measure the level of performance for reading comprehension, but rather the student's ability to reproduce the previously learned commentary. For illustration, Figure 1 shows an excerpt of the marking scheme for item 8.

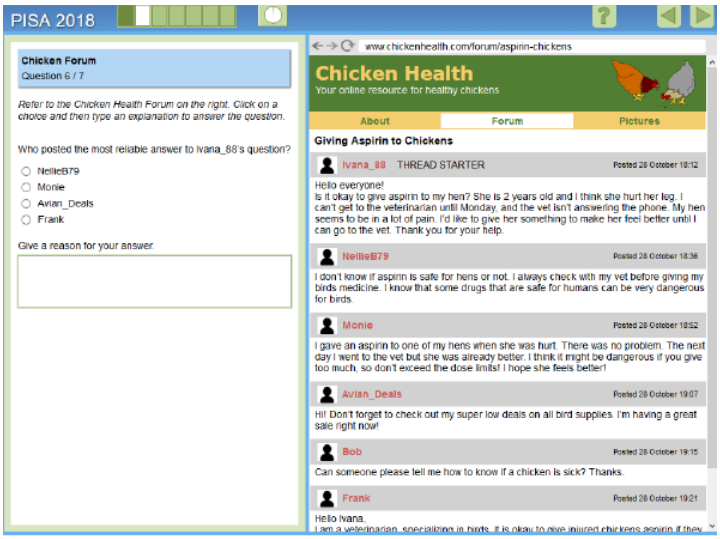
Fig. 1. Marking scheme for item 8, EN VIII, 2025. See English translation below.

8. Motivarea răspunsului la întrebarea dată **6 puncte**
– menționarea răspunsului la întrebarea dată – 1 punct
– motivarea răspunsului menționat (motivare adecvată – 1 punct; încercare de motivare – 0 puncte) – 1 punct
– valorificarea textului indicat (valorificare adecvată – 2 puncte; încercare de valorificare – 1 punct; lipsa valorificării – 0 puncte) – 2 puncte
– respectarea normelor de exprimare, de punctuație și a ortografiei (0 – 1 greșeli – 1 punct; 2 sau mai multe greșeli – 0 puncte) – 1 punct
– încadrarea în numărul de cuvinte indicat – 1 punct

8. Motivation of the answer to the given question --- 6 points. The student:
-mentions the answer to the given question –1 point
-motivates the mentioned answer (adequate motivation –1 point; attempt to motivate –0 points) –1 point
-exploits the pinpointed text (adequate exploitation –2 points; attempt to exploit –1 point, lack of exploitation –0 points) –2 points
-respects the norms of expression, punctuation and spelling (0-1 mistakes – 1 point, 2 or more mistakes –0 points) –1 point

The coding guide for the PISA reading units is an extensive document, consisting of clarifications, examples of responses, and specific codes, corresponding to each open-ended question. The coding of the answers generally involves a dichotomous allocation of the score: 1 (achieved)/0 (not achieved), with the possibility of detailing the degree of achievement: 0 (not achieved: no credit)/1 (partially achieved: partial credit)/2 (fully achieved – full credit) [14].

Fig. 2. PISA released item for the *Chicken Forum* unit



The PISA guide is a real support in leading the coders towards the reasoning they need for adequately judging the students' response: The coding instructions start by explicitly stating the relationship between the item and the cognitive process it is focused on. For instance, released item 6 from the *Chicken Forum* unit is focused on *assessing the quality and credibility*. It specifically asks the student to refer to the series of interventions on the forum and choose whose answer received by Ivana_88 is the most credible. A reason for the answer should be written as a constructed response. Out of the four answer options, three are adequate possibilities provided the motivation is plausible (in accordance to the ideas offered in the guide). For the sake of illustration, Figure 2 shows a released PISA item and below there are excerpts from the coding guide [9].

*"**Full Credit***

Code 1: Selects or responds NellieB79 explicitly or implicitly AND states that NellieB79's answer implied that Ivana_88 should check with her veterinarian before giving any medicine to her hen.

• [NellieB79] Nellie said she asks her vet first.

• [No selection] NellieB79 didn't tell Ivana_88 what to do, but she said she checks with her vet before she gives medicine.
OR: Selects or responds Monie explicitly or implicitly AND states that Monie gave aspirin to her own hen, and the hen recovered.
• [Monie] Monie gave aspirin to her hen, and the bird got better.
• [Monie] Monie has a hen that recovered when she gave her aspirin.
OR: Selects or responds Frank explicitly or implicitly AND states that Frank is a veterinarian/bird specialist or has knowledge about treating birds.
• [Frank] He's a veterinarian.
• [Frank] Frank specializes in birds.
• [Frank] Frank knows the dosage guidelines for chickens.
• [No selection] Frank talks about a book about bird medicine. " [9]

To sum up, the comparison of the two systems indicates a gap between the EN VIII reading assessment and the national curriculum provision, which in turn manifests as backwash, at the level of the reading practices in class. The trend of low achievement in the PISA reading test is explained by the EN VIII inconsistencies at the level of: item focus and highlight on mere basic reading skills, the composite items and their predictability, the marking scheme specifications for semi-objective and subjective items. All these influence teachers to reproduce these inconsistencies in their classroom practices instead of implementing the national curriculum, and thus, an updated perspective on 21st-century reading.

4. Solutions for Improvement

This analysis aimed to compare two reading assessment systems in order to identify areas for improvement, both in terms of the reading test design and of reading learning and assessment practices, given the backwash effect exerted by summative assessment. Although both the specific competencies in the national curriculum (and to a large extent the assessment syllabus) and the cognitive processes in the PISA framework stimulate students' engagement in solving a variety of reading items, only the PISA reading test does what it promises, i.e. establishes the level of reading performance, starting with the basic skills and ending with the most sophisticated ones, following a pre-established algorithm for distributing items according to the targeted cognitive processes. EN VIII reserves a place of little importance for reading within the test and consequently generates superficial classroom practices.

Moreover, the EN VIII Romanian language and literature test does not provide accurate feedback to the student regarding the level of the achieved reading competence. Consequently, an assessment paradigm shift is necessary. In turn, this would generate a restructuring of reading teaching practices in the classroom. EN VIII reading items design should change so as to also allow the assessment of higher-order reading operations in an authentic way, through new challenging questions and more varied texts, which are more adapted to the students' needs. Thus, the reading exercise can become a priority for practitioners and can truly facilitate the students' social and professional integration, becoming a key element for a better future.

It is also necessary to leave behind models that facilitate a satisfactory grade by reproducing content, which is more and more irrelevant, in the context of technological development and the easy use of AI. Nowadays, if there is access to efficient and updated models of reading assessment, the teachers really need to stimulate the development of valuable reading activities in the classroom such as digital reading practice, exploring the conflict between texts, assessing the quality and credibility of a text, reading processes that the student is meant to carry out in order to face the challenges of today.

Although the students must frequently decode non-literary texts in everyday life, EN VIII pays special attention to literary texts. Archaic, regional language, elements of an old world that are no longer relevant to our students, become the challenges of the test, given that such highlights do not stimulate authentic reading practice. Under these conditions, it is necessary to increase the share of tasks that are appropriate to non-literary, varied texts, relevant in everyday life today.

Other directions for improving our assessment system include: conducting relevant, long-term training sessions for teachers who participate in EN VIII, which would bring clarity in the students' response assessment; improving the marking scheme, which is currently an inconsistent instrument, sometimes ambiguous, and involves the arbitrary allocation of points. More specifically, the response assessment must be improved through clearly motivated scoring allocations, by eliminating ambiguity, and by providing multiple examples for both correct and partially correct or incorrect answers. Otherwise, assessment remains opaque instead of providing the needed clear feedback for the students'

achievement, and a learning obstacle instead of a factor that could boost reading competence improvement.

Limitations of the Research

PISA offers limited item data: very few released items are available for public presentation. There is also a possible bias on behalf of the researcher, who might be expressing her own perspectives and assumptions in interpreting the data. However, the study makes important contributions regarding possible reading assessment architectures, highlighting possible reasons for the superficial reading teaching practices in Romanian schools, in the context of the backwash effect of summative assessments**.**

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