

## Homo Zappiens Challenges Language Education

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### Abstract

*When Wim Veen and Ben Vrakking published Homo Zappiens in 2006 I had already had a long (yet not necessarily successful) history of challenging the old pencil-and-paper view in language education in Romania. My student teachers remained clustered in the descriptive grammar paradigm despite the curricular and methodological reform and beyond the declared rhetoric of the learner-centered approach. Could a radically new perspective on knowledge and learning refuel the attempt to renovate language teaching? Was such change too big for our state of the arts?*

*My paper highlights an attempt to apply a "Homo Zappiens"- based approach to language education as a way to relate to a new generation of students and their needs.*

*Firstly I shall present a number of dangerous methodological stereotypes that Romanian (prospective) teachers inherit from their primary and secondary education: grammar drills, decontextualized assignments, translation to check/enhance comprehension, limitation to the linearity of the (text)book.*

*Secondly I shall make a portrait of nowadays students and their communication needs in the digital era.*

*Thirdly I shall compare two approaches to the "Homo Zappiens" phenomenon. One is a superficial understanding of the ICT benefits in the language class and in the training of language teachers which does not change very much the old pattern of misled communication. The other is a whole different approach to the cognitive abilities as they are fashioned by the digital media. The non-linear streams of information, the combination of a variety of symbolic codes in the cognitive process, the multi-tasking and collaborative habits of the new generation offer the teacher and the teacher educator an opportunity to facilitate deep understanding and effective language learning.*

*Last but not least I shall present some of the successes and failures of such an approach in teacher training programs.*

### 1. Romanian Student teachers' clichés

When 19 year old Philology students enrol in the "Psycho-pedagogical module" (which allows them to become language teachers upon graduation) their connection to education is one sided: they know what school is about from the student's perspective. They have their own experiences of effective and ineffective learning. They can draw portraits of good and bad teachers. They are ICT literate and far more skilled in the use of the new media than most of their professors at the university. Yet they do not transfer their ICT competence to improve their approach to learning. They actually separate communication and learning. They believe their school was boring. They assume playing cannot connect to learning. They are not aware of how much they reproduce the counterproductive approaches to education they were subject to and they disliked when they were pupils [3], [4]. These are general conclusions from the focus-group at the beginning of year 2, when they start the course in language teaching methodology. There are also more specific issues that arise from the focus-group and that relate to the philology students' perspective on what and how they should teach in the language class.



For 12 years I have carried out a focus group with each group of undergraduates and their replies constantly belong to the following same categories:

- We should teach pupils grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary.
- We should teach words and structures and help pupils use these in written statements of their own.
- We can use games, to a certain extent, in order to help them master grammar structures. Not too many games though – because we lose focus. Besides, school is not about playing it is about learning.
- We must use translation in order to make sure they understand the text they read.
- We assess the pupils' progress by written tests.

The above perspective is inherited by student teachers from their own teachers. Whether these teachers were role models to them or not, they clearly left an imprint on the next generation. Such a perspective was adequate to an era which is no longer in place. It belongs to a settled and conformist society and a school that was not student-oriented. From a Romanian point of view that was the uniform, communist school. Paradoxically the model of that school is accepted by nowadays prospective teachers who grew up in a quite different world, a definitely more open, dynamic digital world.

## 2. “Digi”-kids and ICT kits

According to Wim Veen and Ben Vrakking, “homo zappiens” is the emblem of a generation of children who were born in the mid 90 of the last century and who have never known a world without the internet and technology [5]. They are not yet of the age of the present prospective teachers, but they are very near to it and they are in school right now. Their cognitive approach is quite different from the classical “sapiens” pattern. The main feature of “homo zappiens” is of course the skill that comes along with the “zapping” i.e. a skill to build meaningful knowledge by making use of discontinuous streams of verbal and non-verbal information. Obviously, this feature changes the approach to learning. The table below, which is adapted from one of Wim Veen’s presentations [6], contrasts two learning approaches. The third column marks language teachers’ reactions to “zappiens” behaviour as mentioned in a focus group.

<b>Homo Sapiens -</b>	<b>Homo Zappiens -</b>	<b>Language teachers' reactions to the "zappiens" perspective</b>
starts learning by making use of reading competences	starts learning by making use of iconic competences	<i>Language class is all about language! so they need to read. This is not the Art class.</i>
uses a linear perspective (a book-type perspective)	uses a non-linear perspective (a link-type perspective)	<i>They are superficial. They need to read from left to right.</i>
is mono-tasking (one thing at a time)	is multitasking (can listen to favourite music, explore content on the internet and participate in a forum – all at a time!)	<i>They don't concentrate!</i>
learns in isolation	learns in a community	<i>They copy from one another!</i>
is competitive	is collaborative	<i>They all want good marks!</i>
learns by absorbing (what the textbook/ teacher says)	learns by exploring/ searching	<i>They need to listen to the teacher, how can they learn otherwise?</i>
separates playing and learning	understands playing and learning as synonyms	<i>School is about serious matters!</i>
learns by internalizing reality	learns by externalizing fantasy	<i>Learning is not about fantasy.</i>

Table 1: Approaches to learning in the "sapiens" and "zappiens" modes

In the digital era, more than in other societies, communication and learning are overlapping within a pattern that is fashioned by the new media gadgets – both in terms of hardware and in terms of software. In such circumstances, the very praised traditional approach that is based on the descriptive grammar and structural drills is no longer operational. In Romania, there is quite a number of newly developed materials on DVD which copy the old grammar textbook. If the teachers still offer these, the gap between the students' world and the school will further expand.

Let us think of a simple example: 20 years ago it was profitable to teach about letter writing in the language class. Today this is totally outdated. Nobody is going to write a personal letter. If we are to teach something useful, we should probably update ourselves to the SMS-style of conveying as much information as possible in as few characters as possible. Is it a heresy whether in the language class students discuss about their favourite emoticons and the acronyms they use?

If we neglect such features of present day communication the students will consider our class CWOT (a complete waste of time!), and they will not grant us a CU I8r (see you later)! They will probably know more than the teacher in this respect. But is this a disgrace?

What do students take from a language class? They need guidance to concentrate on the adequate performance of a number of language functions. They need support to go deeper into topics they become interested in. They need help to select and synthesize information. They also need challenging assignments for their fantasy. They need to be challenged to verbally interact in both face to face and online environments. They need meaningful assignments and projects so that school becomes relevant and a part of their lives.

The whole point with the adequate input in nowadays language class is not the technology as such. A grammar drill on a computer screen is still boring and decontextualized even if it is vividly coloured and makes use of ICT. A traditionally organized test is still dull whether it is pencil-on-paper or click-on-the screen. The need for change is by far deeper than a new interface. Teaching, learning, assessing are to be reconsidered with a focus on the different cognitive structures the "digi"-kids operate with.

### 3. ICT for meaningful learning

"A school director of a secondary school recently talked to his son who had just finished school and decided to enrol in a university course. He said: Well dad, it's not the school building that's wrong, nor the teachers. Many of them try to do their best and are quite OK. But what is wrong is that school is so dull, the content, the curriculum, really sucks" [5, p. 49]. Can we change the curriculum? How could we transform the official curriculum so that it appeals to the "digi"-kids? If we look again at the features of the "zappiens" generation we can select some meaningful traits for the language curriculum and methodology.

#### 3.1 A link-style curriculum

Homo zappiens exhibits a non-linear perspective to knowledge and learns by externalizing fantasy. In this respect the best solution is to let students develop their own language curriculum. The idea is not innovative. To give an Italian example, the kindergarden in Reggio Emilia, which is considered the best in the world by a famous psychologist [1], has always developed the curriculum with the young children, by starting from their questions and interests. If the young children are interested in rainbows for instance their teachers are to guide them and support them by developing meaningful learning experiences about this theme.

If the official curriculum is flexible enough then the implemented curriculum can be developed in a profitable partnership between the teacher and students. In the Romanian curriculum for instance, the topics that provide the communication contexts are broad enough to allow a lot of innovation at class level. The problem here is not the curriculum but, as we mentioned at 1., the routine in reading and interpreting a flexible curriculum in an old-fashioned way. Teachers prefer to stick to "the method" and even use an innovative competence-based resource in order to practice drills in the class.

In a small experiment, a group of high school students were asked what they would like to explore in the English class. We used the "snowball technique" in order to synthesise the selections the individual students made. The snowball stages are roughly the following: each student gives two options, then four or five students come together and try to categorize all their options under no more than two headings, then two groups of this kind come together and categorize their four headings under two more general ones. The results are further discussed on the class forum and the students decide on the next theme they want to study.

In our experiment the selected theme was *adventure*. Within this theme the students had options to watch some video clips uploaded on you tube:

- about a plane landing in the Hudson river, respectively an interview with the members of the crew <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w93ulvTpajE&feature=related> or
- about a famous cat and his adventures <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8nSg8oxrFA> or
- an adventure in the canyon <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/38054231#.TmSUKGqt2OI> or
- any other you tube clip of 6-9 minutes presenting an adventure

The students had the chance to explore an adventure and to investigate more about their specific event in the video by searching extra connected contents on the internet. They had the opportunity to practice their listening skills starting from a set of structured questions, their reading competence as they had to look for at least one verbal source about the event and summarize it for the class, their interaction as they worked in groups. As a closure to their group-selected theme the students created their own video about an adventure.

The "adventure" was a curricular selection by students that helped them improve their communication skills without even knowing it. They worked with video materials which they are very fond of and looked for contents they were curious about.

As shown in the example above, the news represent great opportunities to stimulate students interfere with the official curriculum and even create their own language curriculum. The news connects to the real life experience and contextualizes learning in the class but also beyond it. With guidance from the teacher, the students can benefit from their externalizing fantasy, iconic skills and collaborative features as "digi"-kids.

### 3.2 Learning communication by immersing in the new media

The digital experience is more real for digi-kids than whatever we, seniors, might believe life is. Consequently, as teachers, we should profit from their immersion in the new media as they provide us with both meaningful contexts for communication and learning strategies, collaboration and exploration opportunities.

Homo zappiens plays a lot. Is there a better occasion than games in order to have a simple dialogue about the favourite characters they identify with, the LAN party they participated at during the weekend or the latest developments in the World of Warcraft? The students are more eager to communicate about all these than about any other issues in the textbook! There is an excellent teaching strategy about the use of games in the language class: "Play and tell me about it!". This is a very simple strategy, yet extremely daring if one belongs to the large majority of teachers - young or old - who assume that school and learning should keep their distance from playing!

Discussing with the students on a digital channel, be it: email, chat, blog, a social network or skype also enhances good communication and better relationships among the dialogue partners. Teenagers consider their teachers are cool if they interact on a digital channel. But as important interaction and improved relationship might be, the learning of communication is the most valuable asset, mainly as it takes place without any effort in environments that are familiar to the students.

Where is grammar in all that? Well, with good "choreography"[5] on behalf of the teacher language awareness is enhanced and students observe, apply and internalize the regularities in a natural way - in fact this is exactly *the way* grammar experts followed when they classified the language phenomena!

The new media can help us teachers to offer a new range of meaningful assignments to our students. Instead of being looked upon as "the ordeal" that has nothing to do with the students' needs and wishes, a digital assignment is part of their search and/or play. Among the possible assignments that motivate students are the following: guided or individual visits in the virtual museums (an excellent opportunity to become aware of cultural issues), writing blog entries, develop visual materials (see above the video clip exploration and production) including slides to illustrate something they found out and would like to share with their peers (see Fig. 1).

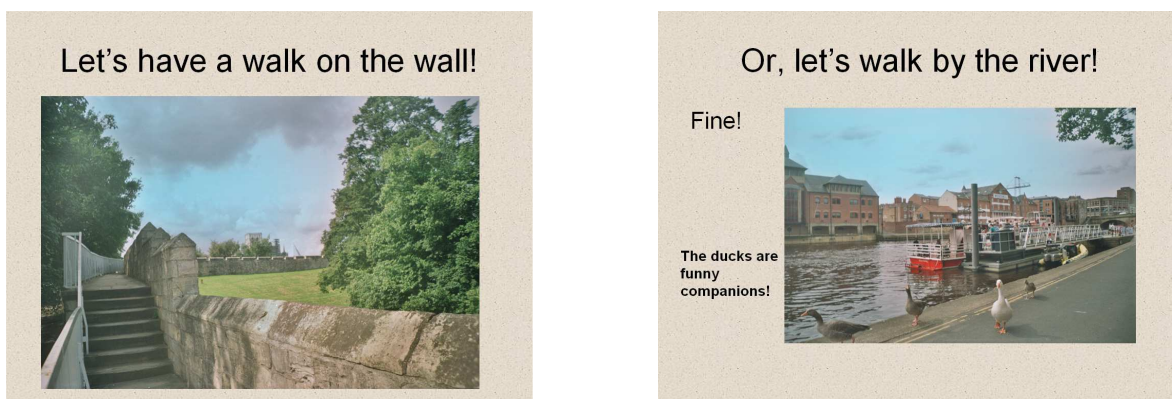


Fig. 1 - Sample slides from presentation about York in a lower intermediate class

We notice that in the example above, the language is minimal. Nevertheless, the group of students was able to describe a few facts they discovered while exploring the web for information about York.



The content exploration as well as the endeavour to develop a PowerPoint presentation sustained their learning in the language class much more than a classical reading - post-reading assignment.

#### 4. The need to upgrade

Technologies are always subject to upgrading. So are participants in the digital era, teachers included or, perhaps, mainly teachers! We are definitely slower than our students in updating to the games, gadgets, sites, networks that are available. Consequently, one of the major challenges for teachers nowadays is to accept the digi-kids' approach to knowledge; moreover, to learn from them when it comes to ICT updates. But let us state this clearly: The students still need teachers to guide them in the learning adventure. Otherwise Homo Zappiens remains in an unschooled version. The upgraded version would mean a deeper understanding in learning. For the unschooled digi-kids the answers to all possible questions are touchable via their smart phones. And in terms of factual knowledge this is true! Yet no blackberry can connect anyone to the really important questions and subsequent answers. Which is then the Homo Zappiens upgraded version in the language class? S/he plays within a project that involves communication, cultural issues, role play. S/he communicates easily and meaningfully, constructively, looks for pertinent data to answer a BIG question, accepts challenges from a creative teacher that nurtures his/her fantasy and becomes a partner in a learning community. The issues that were presented in 3 above, were quite successful with the digi-kids in schools and far less with prospective student teachers. Hence a need to further challenge language education - since the digital experiences will continue to play a major part in our lives and professions [2] and, consequently we will need to adapt and upgrade.

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