



‘The Reading Challenge’: A Teacher Training Program to Improve Reading Competences

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Abstract

The paper presents the design and results of an in-service teacher training program that aims to improve the students’ reading competences. The program was developed starting from the data in Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) that explores the students’ reading comprehension at the end of primary school. The PIRLS data base has been analysed in order to identify the students’ misconceptions and also to compare the scores of the young Romanians with the ones of the highest ranking countries, the lowest ranking countries, the neighbouring countries and the international average. The research results constitute a core of valuable data for the development of the training curriculum which is designed so that it should challenge unproductive teaching practice and stimulate a reading for comprehension-based approach in the class.

“The Reading Challenge” teacher training program includes a face-to-face component where participants become familiar to the PIRLS data, type of texts and items; compare them with their classroom practice; and look for solutions to reduce the students’ failures. The program also comprises an online component that offers four topics of discussion during eight weeks of distance learning which are meant to stimulate: innovative applications in the classroom, an exchange of motivating reading texts and strategies among participants and the development of a virtual collection of reading best practices for both primary and lower secondary education.

As of June 20th, 2013, 300 teachers from almost all the counties in Romania participated in the program. The results show the weaknesses of the current teaching practice, some successes in overcoming these, good quality outcomes from the groups of students where reading for comprehension strategies have been used. The online collection of reading practices that was developed throughout the training – with the good examples and the less good – will be used for the next series of the program which is scheduled for the fall 2013 as well as for the development of a reading for comprehension teaching guide.

Key words: reading competences, blended learning, students’ misconceptions

1. How good is our reading?

Upon admission in the European Union (2007), Romania received special funding in order to promote and implement innovative initiatives to address a variety of issues. Within the framework of the European Social Fund a lot of projects that focus the development of human resources have been carried on since 2008. Among them, Project POSDRU 35279 analyses the students’ results in international comparative studies - *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)* and *Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)* – and looks for possible solutions. More specifically, the project explores the students’ misconceptions as revealed by the answers to the international tests. On this basis, unproductive teaching routines are identified and more profitable strategies are tried and promoted within an inservice teacher training program. A special attention is paid to the teachers’ attitudes toward more pragmatic approaches to education that highlight the needs of nowadays society, as featured by the international studies.

Romania scores low in all the major international studies - PISA, PIRLS or TIMSS - despite the changes towards a flexible modern student-centered curriculum that took place in the past 15 years. In the first PIRLS study (2001), Romanian students were below the international average, among the last third of the participants, while the results in the second PIRLS (2006) show an even worse students attainment. In the last PIRLS (2011), Romania ranks at 33 out of 45 [5]. Since Romania joined the EU in 2007, it is either the lowest scoring country or the second lowest scoring country in Europe. The figure below (Fig. 1) shows the distance between the low attainers in Romania and the EU low attainment average as shown by the PISA results 2006, 2009.

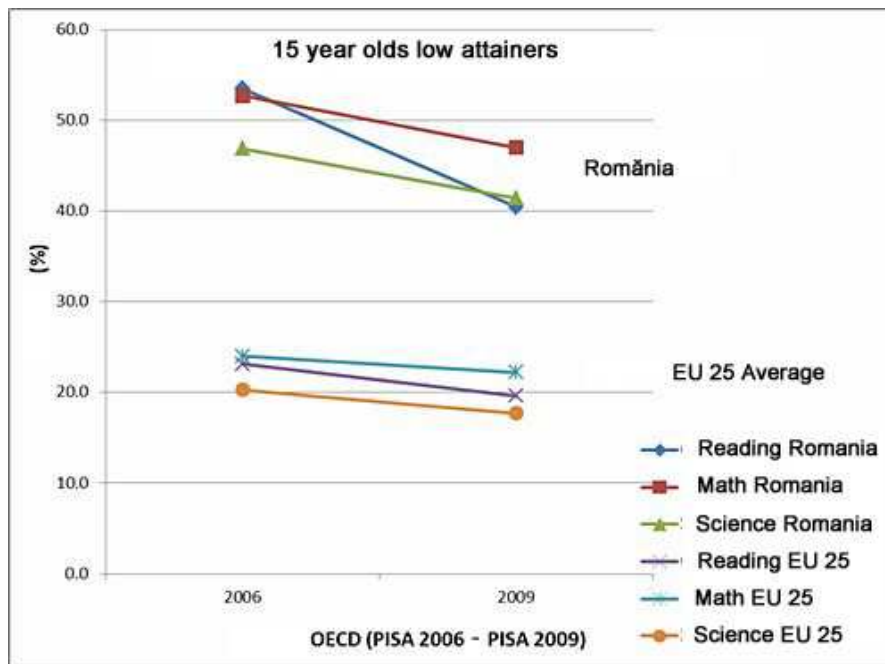


Fig.1. PISA 2006, 2009 low attainment rates in Romania and EU (Source: OECD)

PIRLS measures the reading performance at the end of primary school and it targets the following processes: focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements [4;5]. PISA looks into the reading comprehension of 15 year olds. The fact that both studies highlight the Romanian students' low scores means that at both level of instruction there is no adequate reading provision.

In Romania, initial teacher education has not changed significantly for the past 20 years. The courses that student teachers take are general and abstract with little relevance for the classroom practice. Teachers of languages for instance have just one-term course in Language 1 education and another one in Language 2 education out of the six courses in the "psycho-pedagogical module 1" which is mandatory for teachers who teach at primary and low secondary level. There is no extra course in Language education within the "psycho-pedagogical module 2" (compulsory for graduates who wish to also teach in high schools). Many young teachers complain about the poor initial education they receive [8;10]. Once in schools they try to do their job to the best of their ability, which more often than once means to either go back in the past and reiterate practices they were subject to when they were pupils themselves or to stick to the textbook as if it were the Holy Bible. Both approaches are tradition-based. Few Romanian textbooks really embraced the communicative perspective. Textbooks use mimicry in their foreword and so do many teachers when they talk about new approaches to communication [6;9]. Beyond the fashionable communicative rhetoric, reading is understood in an upside-down perspective. It appears to be a means to better grasp vocabulary and grammar concepts instead of being a target while the teacher gradually helps the student to understand the deeper meanings of the written text. Most reading tasks in the textbooks practice grammar instead of focusing the reading processes. When teachers are asked what the point of reading is, their first selection in a multiple choice is "to enrich vocabulary", as if the priority for the students were to know words instead of comprehending the text.

Another problem in the reading practice consists in the use of old literary texts that hardly motivate present day students as well as the very rare use of texts for information. Neither teachers nor textbooks manage to adapt the reading offer to the needs of nowadays students, who most of the time read the same excerpts their teachers used to read 20-30 sometimes even 40 years ago (when they were pupils themselves!). No matter how valuable the literary canon might be, an update of the corpus of texts is more than necessary in the internet era [3]. Last but not least, the approach to reading is linear and uniform. Little attention is paid to the students' cognitive profile and their cultural experiences [2].



2. Could we do any better?

In order to address the above mentioned issues we developed a blended-learning 9-week inservice program that comprises: 22 hours face-to-face, 8 weeks online discussion and classroom application, 6 hours round-up and evaluation sessions. The program focuses on the following objectives: identify the students' misconceptions in reading, explore the PIRLS released items, develop and apply learning activities that support the reading comprehension processes, develop and apply items that measure the students' reading competence. The program is called "The Reading Challenge" since all language teachers complain about their students' lack of interest in reading. So everybody agrees that reading is a challenge! In the same time, the program is also a challenge for the teachers' routine approach to reading. The teachers cannot ignore the blunt results: Romanian students score much lower than Bulgarians or Hungarians or Russians. Why is that? Obviously our children are not more stupid and they come from similar economic, social, cultural backgrounds (former communist countries who struggle to develop democracy). So, one could blame the system, poverty, ideology, but is it the case? The scientific data lead us to other perspectives – more constructive ones: stop blaming the system or who ever else, analyse the present situation, identify what is wrong and try to do it better.

In the design of the program we took into account *how people learn* [1] and attempted to use the irrefutable evidence of the PIRLS results so that to support the teachers to "convert" to the communicative approach to reading. A recipe-based perspective (these are the steps, now apply that!) has been avoided. Throughout the course, participants are invited to work with the text and tests, to interpret (answer the *why-s* and *how-s*) and reflect on the students' results and needs [7]. The program main stages are the following:

- A face-to-face stage when the participants become acquainted with the PIRLS framework (large scale assessment features, definition of reading, purposes of reading, processes and main categories of items and questions), some released tests and the results. The perspective is not at all theoretical, just a few hints that come out from exploring the texts and tests. There are several questions to be addressed: *where do children fail in reading the PIRLS text and test? How can we help them do better? What reading activities can be helpful to stimulate the four processes? How could we assess the reading progress?* The participants discuss in groups what could a 10 year old find difficult when s/he reads an information text, for instance *Antarctica: Land of ice* [11]. The teachers come out with a first list of possible misconceptions which they compare with the students' actual scores to the *Antarctica: Land of ice* test. At this point they are invited to explore and discuss the scoring grids and identify what really matters in reading comprehension in that particular case. The next step is to revise the misconceptions list and to look for teaching solutions to overcome these. The participants are offered resources and support from the trainers in order to plan a sequence of activities on an information text to target the four reading processes from the PIRLS framework. They are invited to role play the activities for the other participants who step into the shoes of students. A similar set of training activities is dedicated to the literary text. The final part of the face to face component is focused on writing items to test reading comprehension and on becoming familiar with the learning platform

- An online stage when participants apply a reading for comprehension approach in their class. There are four online topics: reading activities for information texts, reading activities for literary texts, items for information texts and items for literary texts. More precisely, the participants select texts, develop reading activities, write items, submit them on the forum and receive feedback, apply the activities and then the items in their school, present the results (see example in Fig. 2).

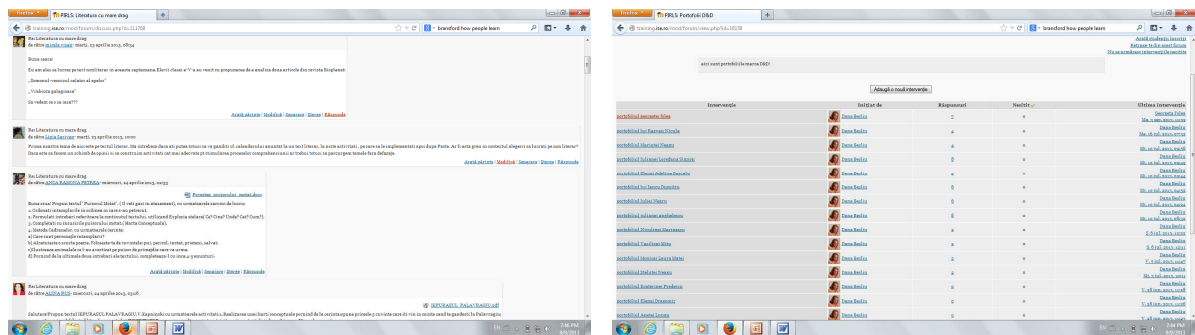


Fig. 2. Illustration of online discussion (left) and excerpt of portfolios list in a group (right)



- An online portfolio. After 8 weeks of online discussion and classroom application, the participants are invited to select their best personal learning results and include them in a portfolio. The facilitator offers feedback and all the other participants are invited to do the same (see example in Fig. 2).
- Round up discussion. Upon completing the portfolio the participants are invited again face to face to present their experiences with a focus on what could be done better in the future and the needs to be addressed next.

3. What is the result of the challenge?

According to the ID 35279 project, mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the target group for the PIRLS training component consists of 450 primary teachers and mother tongue teachers from 150 schools. As of June 2013 nearly 300 teachers from almost all the counties in Romania participated in the program. By July 2013, 242 completed the online portfolio and by September 10th, 200 participated in the final evaluation (July and Sep 2013), the participation in the final evaluation is conditioned by an acceptable portfolio upon appraisal by the online facilitator. The program has been implemented by 15 experienced trainers/ online facilitators. The size of one group was of about 20 members, both primary and mother tongue teachers – a configuration that supported a fruitful dialogue which is not quite ordinary in school life in Romania. Another innovation of the program is the strong student-centered perspective it sustained, since all the interventions are derived from the actual results of the students in a representative sample. Nobody can say: *This is not my case. My method is good and my students are bad.*

From the participants' perspective – who filled feedback sheets at the end of the face-to-face training days and a final questionnaire at the end of the program – a reading for comprehension approach that stimulates the four reading processes is quite difficult to implement (extra planning, search for more motivating texts, effort to develop inquisitive questions). Nevertheless, the majority admit that the program has been challenging and useful for their daily teaching. It has been very successful in the class i.e. students were indeed interested in what they were reading. Nearly all the participants in the final evaluation were positive about having a permanent forum on the platform where they could share experiences about the language class and ask questions / receive answers, feedback about specific issues. For most of the participants the round up discussion was a delight and encouragement for their future work.

From the trainers/ facilitators' perspective – who completed their training reports and participated in round-up discussion – the *Reading Challenge is a challenge.* The first two days of face-to-face activity are exhausting given the resistance to change of the participants and their superficial approach to the subject matter: some of the trainers received more questions about the credits and schedule than about the activities as such. Throughout the online component about 50% of the participants find it difficult to give up a teacher-centered perspective, highlighting methods instead of reading processes-focused activities. These participants have been requested to revise the planned activities to be implemented in the class. Another big issue was the attempt to copy/paste from somebody else's work: some teachers confused sharing experiences with plagiarizing lesson plans. But despite all these problems, the trainers consider the program to be worthy. All those who participated in the final evaluation are aware of the need of a reading for comprehension approach. This has been made clear by their applications and the children's reaction to a new perspective on reading. Some of the assignments selected for the portfolio are remarkable. It has not been easy to select the top 10 participants' proposals to be included in the methodological guidelines that are to be published within the project. There are nearly 250 portfolios, each including 4 assignments. From a total of nearly 1000 activity proposals the top 10 was a tough selection as there were indeed many excellent assignments. In the words of one of the trainers: "Obviously there was not any tsunami of change, yet a light wave is present in all the classroom applications we analysed. And some are simply beautiful".

4. What is the next challenge?

As of September 2013, the project team are carrying out the face-to-face training for the last 150 participants in the target group, preparing the online training of the latter as well as a "follow-up" forum and a "second chance" forum: the first to support the participants who completed the course in better adapting to the reading needs of their students and the second for the participants who did not manage to finalize the online component and the portfolio.

The previous in-service training experiences [10] show that in the absence of sustained support after the program is completed, very few participants continue to implement the new approaches. These



are the creative, inquisitive teachers who dare for more and are not uncomfortable to contact a former tutor/ trainer/ facilitator to ask about a learning issue in their class. If we stimulate this tendency by inviting participants to share their successes and problems online we could mobilize more teachers to keep on trying to adapt to the Facebook-era students. One of the issues the trainers would like to explore in the follow-up forum is the use of ICT to stimulate the students' reading as well as the transfer of mind and brain studies in the language class. As for the second chance forum, two facilitators are to offer extra help and feedback to all those who wish to complete the program.

We are also developing a set of recommendations for changes in the initial teacher education in Romania since no matter how innovative an inservice program is, it cannot replace sound foundations of teaching to be set in initial professional development. If good foundations are built, then teacher education can expand towards life long learning experiences.

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