



What Does Reading Mean? An Online Exchange of Teaching Practices to Sustain the Students' Authentic Learning

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Abstract

In 2013 the Institute for Educational Sciences in Bucharest coordinated a blended learning training course for 450 primary and language teachers. The aim of the course was to help teachers improve the students' reading comprehension with a focus on the misconceptions revealed by the Romanian results in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The participants were exposed to the PIRLS requirements and the international data base. They were then challenged to develop reading tasks and tests to motivate students get deeper into their reading.

The present paper offers some conclusions of the research on the online component of this course. Firstly we analyse the reading texts and tasks that the participants planned and implemented in their classes. Secondly we analyse the reading tests the teachers developed and applied. Thirdly we discuss the results from the point of view of meaningful reading and learning.

Our conclusion details the benefits of the online interaction. The platform facilitated the participants' access to other colleagues' teaching experiences, to many students' responses to a variety of reading tasks and texts. The course and the nature of the digital device sustained the teachers in moving on from the single standard to plural reading and towards varied teaching strategies.

1. Introduction

Between 2011 and 2013, the Ministry of Education in Romania, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the Institute for Educational Sciences in Bucharest and Gnosos, a Romanian educational consulting organization participated in implementing the project POSDRU 35279 which was financed from the European Social Fund. The aim of the project was to use the data collected in the two main international studies coordinated by the IEA (TIMSS and PIRLS) in order to improve the students' learning.

We shall further refer to a follow up research that looks into the PIRLS component of the project, and more precisely into the online interaction within the teacher training program of the 450 primary and language teachers who were part of the target group in POSDRU 35279.

The results of the Romanian students in the international study on reading at the end of primary education are among the poorest in Europe and, obviously, below the international average [6]. Several causes have been identified. One of them is the absence of clear curricular provision for the four processes involved in PIRLS namely: *focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements* as presented in the official framework [4;5]. Recent research [2] shows that less than half of the objectives in the Romanian reading curriculum explicitly targets comprehension. Nevertheless, even if, as Mancas [2] points out, the language curriculum is quite vague in this respect, the official document is not restrictive and does not imply mechanical reading. The curriculum is flexible enough to allow both a traditional word-based approach and a communicative comprehension-based one. In terms of declarations at least, the Romanian curriculum promotes the communicative approach. Another explanation lies in the family economic status which is a predictor of low attainment [10]. But countries that have similar economic difficulties and socio-political contexts (e.g. Bulgaria, Russia) score better than Romania in the PIRLS. The theoretical initial teacher education as well as the routine-based language practices in the class represent yet another reason for the poor results [7;8]. That is to say, Romanian students score low in PIRLS because they do not benefit from effective reading practice, throughout primary education at least. This is the reason for which the above mentioned project included a training component and tested new ways to support teachers in the effort to develop the students' reading competences.

2. Structure of the training program and research methodology

The objectives of the program were the following: 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 was organized as a 9-week sequence that included: 22 hours face-to-face, 8 weeks online discussion and classroom application, 6 hours round-up and evaluation sessions [1;6]. The online component provided the opportunity to share reading practices on the forum and to collect best examples of texts, reading tasks and tests in the personal portfolio. The intention was to enhance learning in a community according to Wenger's view [9]. The participants belonged to the same group as in the face-to-face sessions, working with the same facilitator and interacting with colleagues within a group forum. There were 14 simultaneous groups in the spring 2013 and 5 in the fall of the same year. The forums were technically opened for all the participants in the target group. That is, even if the interaction (questions and answers, feedback for the uploaded assignments, comments) mainly took place in the group forum, participants could actually read everything that was posted on the PIRLS section of the platform. Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 below show the PIRLS page with the various groups sections and sample interventions on a group forum respectively.

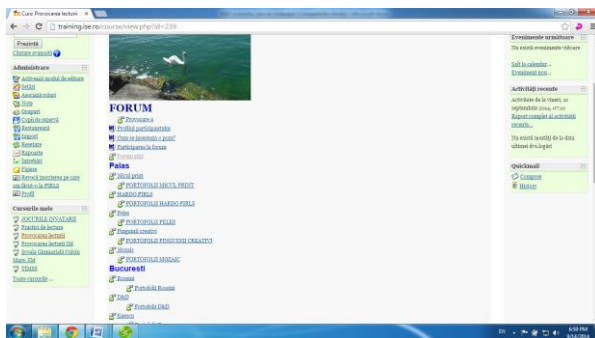


Fig.1 – The PIRLS page on the platform

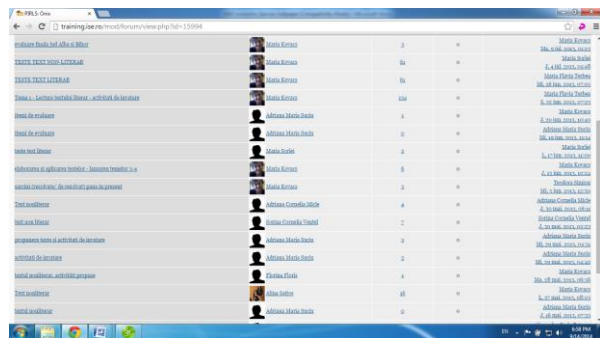


Fig. 2 – Interventions on a group forum

The online assignments included: literary text and reading tasks, information text and reading tasks in order to train the four comprehension processes targeted in PIRLS; reading tests on a literary and information text respectively. The participants had the choice of the grade where to work the applications. The texts in the test had to be necessarily different from the ones given in the reading task assignment. Participants were encouraged to exchange ideas and texts but plagiarism of the tasks and items throughout the PIRLS page was firmly sanctioned.

The facilitators offered feedback for each assignment and demanded improved versions. The personal portfolio was organized by each participant and included the best version of the four assignments, brief self-evaluation, reflective statements, students' artifacts as well as photos from the activities in the class.

We have analyzed the participants' portfolios by category with specific criteria for each category:

- text: literary (canonic or not, adaptation to the students' Erwartungshorizont, imaginative or not, from old or newly published volume); information (origin: schoolbook, internet source, children's magazine, other; adaptation to students' interest)
- task: based on comprehension, based on traditional categories (vocabulary, grammar, beautiful expressions, attention), methodology;
- test: plausible distractors, clear question, clear scoring grid, based on comprehension, based on traditional categories (vocabulary, grammar, beautiful expressions).

We have also observed the reflective paragraphs and the results from the class presented by the teachers. The latter had no given structure. Sample materials from the portfolios are presented in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4.

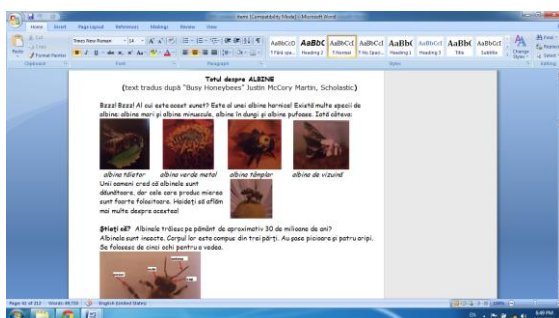


Fig. 3. Reading text from the portfolios.

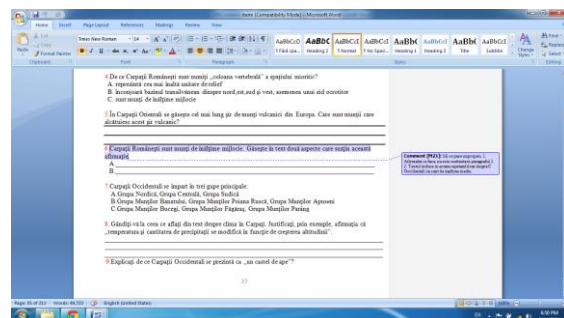


Fig. 4. Test with the facilitator's comment.



If PIRLS is applied on a representative sample, our analysis has not the same generalization effect. The target group of the training program consisted of 450 teachers from the schools in the 2006 PIRLS sample. Nevertheless, the selection of the participants was decided by the school and only complied with the requirements of the project target group. No sampling was carried out. Yet, we developed our research in order to see if the online coaching and interaction is effective and in order to have a base line for future studies that focus communities of practice.

3. Results

Selecting the **texts** for the reading tasks was the first request of the online training. Participants were invited to offer suggestions of literary texts that could be interesting for children and comply with the requirements of the official curriculum (in terms of length and age adequacy).

The first proposals belonged to canonic authors or texts, most of them being picked up from the most widely used textbooks or anthologies. In response, the trainers suggested authors and texts that have been published more recently, that are closer to the students' culture and interests.

The second round of text selection – the one focused on information texts brought about more innovative decisions on behalf of the participants. On the one hand participants already had about 3 weeks' interaction within their group and opportunities to read posts from all the other groups. They could notice a wide range of newly published texts and the encouragement on behalf of the trainers to try them in the class. On the other hand, the work with the information text is less of a routine since it is neither an issue of the initial teacher education nor a part of the traditional practice. Consequently a wide variety of adapted texts from Wikipedia, various sites on the internet as well as from children's magazines or junior edition of the reputed world periodicals (such as National Geographic) appeared on the forum. Interestingly enough there were no proposals of excerpts from the school books used in various disciplines even though such an option was allowed.

After the selection of the text, each participant had to develop the **reading tasks**. This stage expanded the sharing and subsequent interaction since the requirement referred to pre-reading, reading for comprehension (involving all the four processes focused in PIRLS), post-reading. The analysis of the final versions of the reading tasks posted in the personal portfolio showed the following:

- Nearly half of the participants had difficulty in the design of reading comprehension tasks. In this category we could still find the old fashioned technique of reading aloud (the model by the teacher, then the whole class and then excerpts by individual students represent a sequence of activities that can at best train attention and pronunciation).
 - The focus of many tasks remained vocabulary and grammar practice. Requests like: *look for synonyms of ...*, *find the antonym of ...*, *make up sentences/ rhymes with...* (*the newly discovered words*), *underline the verbs*, etc. highlight the use of the text for the traditional purpose of reinforcing the linguistic components and the word-based approach. It is very interesting to note that this practice is more common for the exploration of the literary text. Our explanation is that the reading class has traditionally been based on literary texts. The information texts are a request of the new curriculum (end of the 90s). Consequently, the routine is less pervasive in the newly practiced texts.
 - Other faulty requests derive from an indiscriminate use of new methodology or theories of learning such as: the predictions method used on the board with the whole class; the thinking hats used at the beginning of the reading activities; critical thinking methods i.e the cube, the dials, the clusters, stellar explosion are used to summarise the text.
 - 15% of the teachers could not differentiate among pre-reading, reading for comprehension, and post-reading tasks
- Nevertheless, the other half of the participants show ease in supporting the students to better understand the meanings of the reading texts.
 - When designing a reading task, this group of teachers take into account: the students' experience, the progression of the tasks from the simpler comprehension process to the more sophisticated ones, as well as the object of the process.
 - Other parameters that count in the design of a comprehension task are: the clarity of the request, the time allocation, challenging questions that motivate the students to read, reread and research the text.
 - About 25% of the final versions of the reading tasks that were posted in the portfolios reveal good command of the methodological approaches to the comprehension processes and requirements that can support students improve their search for meaning. Some of these teachers manage really original tasks that are highly motivating for the students (for instance the exploration of a tourist guide as a reading



for comprehension main activity and the development of a promotion flyer for new tourist services as a post-reading).

Most of the items in the reading **tests** focused the four comprehension processes. This is in contrast with the less clear focus for comprehension in the reading tasks that we presented above. Tests were not perfect though: many of the distractors were not plausible (in the literary tests more than 50% of the distractors were quite awkward), some questions were not necessarily relevant and more often than once formulations were ambiguous. This characteristic is also true for the scoring grids. Yet, with very few exceptions, the questions in the tests focused the comprehension processes. This result highlights the importance of time and steady training in order to determine the internalization of the methodology but in the same time the importance of the longer, and probably more trusted, online interaction.

The participants document in their **reflective paragraphs** the students' reactions. To a certain extent many are surprised by the fact that students enjoyed reading in the new formula. This contradicts the common idea that children today are no longer motivated to read. Most of the participants noticed that students were more motivated to read the information texts than the literary ones. This remark highlights an absence in the ordinary practice: the reading class is dedicated to the literary text. Information texts are considered somehow "readable by default". Unfortunately, for many teachers, reading for information happens anyway and if knowledge is not good then the students' abilities are at fault.

The photos that most of the teachers included in their portfolios show colourful, meaningful learning activities with enthusiastic students who present their posters or who are totally absorbed in their group work. This evidence of the activities is probably the best monitor that something authentic took place, and if teachers are not necessarily ready to give up their reading practice, students are very open for genuine reading for comprehension. In the snapped activities children read, learned and had a lot of fun in the process. Actually, the ingredients the children can no longer find in their classes. And we have to wonder why.

4. Conclusions

In the absence of the online component, the progression we showed above could not have taken place. The platform allowed the sharing and the visibility of all the posted experiences. Consequently, teachers could access – by reading! - a variety of strategies, texts and results of reading tasks. At the same time, the facilitators' feedback and comments could be read by other participants than the ordinary recipient. Consequently the opportunities to find out more perspectives expanded.

We can conclude that the online component of the course harmonized with its objectives and highlighted the importance of reading for comprehension as the condition to access and expand knowledge.

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