Scaffolding the Eight Key Competences:
Meaningful Language Learning in Primary Grades

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Abstract

In 2013 the Romanian new curriculum for primary education was designed to gradually develop the key competences from the EU Recommendation for lifelong learning. The Institute for Educational Sciences in Bucharest together with partnering organizations have initiated a research aimed at determining the effects of the new curriculum, namely the development of the key competences. We are currently in the stage of piloting the research instruments: achievement tests for students, grids for classroom observation and project work, questionnaires for children, teachers and school heads.

Our paper presents a part of the pilot effort that looks into the development of tests that integrate communication in the foreign languages, competences in math, science and technology, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression, learning to learn and digital competences.

So far we designed and applied three integrated pilot tests in English. The results show that even at A1 level, students in the Aletheea pilot school, who are at the end of grade 4 or grade 5, can use elementary English in context and solve various problems that are traditionally separated within the school subjects boundaries. There are some negative surprises concerning the use of digital devices and the choice of mimicry when it comes to creative expression. Nevertheless, in terms of an overall performance, the students did very well and managed oral and written comprehension as well as writing in order to successfully solve the items.

The paper will present the structure of the test and the results of the English pilot.

1. Some recent curricular history: rhetoric and facts

As early as 2003, Romanian experts in education and decision makers were involved in the development and consultation of the European documents that contributed to the first drafts of what we now commonly call the *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* [1]. Back home, the same people were also involved in a revision of the Romanian curriculum, which at that time was objective-based in primary and low secondary education and competence-based in high school. With a true desire for innovation and a good heart, the experts and decision makers tried to apply the new European perspective on the key competences in the new version of the Romanian curriculum (primary education in 2003-2005 and middle school in 2008-2009). The result was a mixture of new rhetoric and disguise that reproduced nevertheless the same teaching approach. The key competences were presented in the foreword of all the subject curricula, the European documents were declared as foundational for the curricular change, but little – if any! – had been truly transformed in the official provision. The rhetoric of the key competences further expanded in the teachers' jargon while the student achievement continued to drop, according to TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA results, [7], [8]. At the same time, a number of studies revealed the state of the arts as well as possible solutions in curricular development and school practice [5], [9], [11], [12]. The TALIS results [13] (where Romanian teachers rank among the most satisfied in Europe) widens the gap between the declarations in the policies documents and the teachers' beliefs on the one hand and the true results in the school practice on the other hand. Sometimes cultures (and the Romanian one is no exception) tend to apply labels in order to reproduce a good image [3]. This is probably the case with the paradox in our education system: among the lowest results in student achievement in Europe and the best teachers' self image.

In this context, the Law of Education 1/2011 tended to reframe the curricular development and reset the eight key competences as the actual foundation of learning standards and school practices. Consequently, a new effort to revise the national curriculum was in place between 2012-2014 (for primary education) and is currently ongoing for middle school and high school. In order to better highlight the key competences at the core of the curriculum development, the experts developed a *students' profile* that is defined in progression and details the expected outcomes for each school

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level. Basically, the provision for the eight key competences, as stated in the European recommendation, has been further described per school level so that curriculum developers and practitioners alike could benefit from a set of reference points in terms of learning outcomes to orient their activity. These descriptors derived from the European provision are also important in the assessment process since they clearly indicate outcomes in terms of key competences at the end of each school level that are the real targets for current practice and not mere rhetoric [2].

As a result, the new primary education curriculum is more clearly linked, in terms of official provision, to the *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. Each subject curricula defines specific competences for each grade in order to meet the students' profile described outcomes at the end of primary education. Moreover, it offers a generous section of methodological suggestions to support a broader view on student achievement that progressively structure learning outcomes which are transferable in new situations in school, at home, in the community and the future workplace. But is that enough to improve school results? How long does it take to really apply the official curriculum in school practice? These are legitimate questions mainly when we look at our recent history of mismatching rhetoric and facts.

2. Research methodology

The Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) benefits from extended experience in the administration of large scale assessment (TIMSS 1995-2011 and PIRLS 2001-2011) and the interpretation of respective data. In the light of this expertise, a research team from the IES and some partnering organizations have recently developed a project whose aim is to answer questions like the ones stated above. The research objectives are:

- to measure the level of performance for the key competences at the end of primary education, according to the descriptors in the students' profile;

- to identify context influences on students' achievement;

- to compare results vertically from one cohort to another;

- to promote solutions for policies and practices in order to improve the development of the students' key competences.

Data will be collected from a nationally representative sample of 150 schools (around 4500 students) from all over Romania. For the time being, our target population is 4 grade graduates currently enrolled in grade 5. These students are the last ones who follow the old curriculum (the one which includes the 8 key competences in the rhetoric of the foreword). The first measurement will constitute a base line to compare results with the next cohorts that study according to the new curriculum. Our research instruments are the following:

- Achievement tests in Romanian and in one foreign language (English or French since the number of students studying other languages is too small for the sample). The tests integrate items that target part of the descriptors of the 8 key competences in the *Students' Profile*. The tests are organised in 16 brochures that combine eight blocks and are administered in a spiral model. Students work in two sessions of 45 minutes with a 10 minutes break.
- Grids for classroom observation, students' project work and other artefacts. These focus the descriptors that cannot be met by pencil-and-paper assessment (such as attitudes, oral expression and interaction)
- Questionnaires for school head teachers, teachers and students (to discover the context of learning)

We shall further detail the structure of the integrated test in the foreign language:
- it is organised around a topic that we considered of interest for the children to explore;
- it uses simple A1 language;
- it transfers some of the methodological suggestions in the curriculum;
- it includes 12-15 questions that focus: listening comprehension (from a short clip on the internet), reading comprehension from short excerpts offered on paper (text and image), looking for images on the internet and posting one by using an app they choose, very short verbal expression (according to A1 level), creative expression by means of a drawing/ collage, math and science simple explorations, meta cognitive simple questions; the test also includes at least one question regarding risk taking and one on civic awareness;

Figure 1 presents some items from one of the English pilot tests:

Watch the following clip from the film The Good Dinosaur: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50dGjKa3730

1. At the very beginning of the film you can see:
   A. Two eggs of similar size
   B. Two eggs: a small one and a large one
   C. Three eggs: two large ones and a small one
   D. Three eggs: two small ones and a large one

2. Who is Arlo?
   A. The little brother
   B. The big brother
   C. The father
   D. The mother

3. Where do the dinosaur family live?
   A. In the mountains
   B. In a forest
   C. On a farm
   D. In a zoo

4. a. Do you like this dinosaur family? ....
   b. Why?

Read the following:

Dinosaurs are extinct[1]. Today you can see these animals in museums, in books or in films.

The image on the right shows a very big dinosaur. It is in the New York Museum. But the skeleton comes from Argentina!

Look carefully! The body of the animal is in one large room and its neck and head are out! This is BIG indeed!

8. What do you like or do not like in this image?
   ....
   ....

9. How tall is the dinosaur in the image?
   A. about three times taller than a man
   B. about five times taller than a man
   C. about seven times taller than a man
   D. about a hundred times taller than a man

If you need more information about the dinosaurs, where do you look for?
....

The images on pages 3 and 4 can become a puzzle[2] game. What do you need in order to make a puzzle?
   ....
   ....

Are there any risks involved when you use these objects?
Explain..
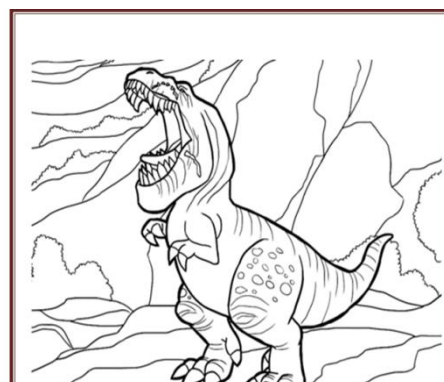   ....

Fig. 1 – Excerpts from the *Dinosaurs* test

The items in the foreign language test as well as the ones in the mother tongue test focus problem solving and exploration that might engage the children. They are complementary in terms of targeting the descriptors in the *Students' Profile*. That means each language is a vehicle to perform tasks that relate to the eight key competences in contexts that are meaningful for the students (i.e. they belong to the youth culture or they refer to everyday issues). The interest is to see how students use the language in order to communicate about matters of concern, when they deal with situations that are not traditionally the "school business" or are separated within the school subject boundaries.

3. Results

Three English pilot tests have been designed and applied in a pilot private school as well as in a public school. In terms of performance, the children's answers show the following:
- reception and production in English have been performed adequately, with language mistakes in the verbal expression;
- meta cognitive skills are not well structured;
- math and science explorations prove to be difficult outside the ordinary algorithms from the textbook
- students are not familiar with digital devices in the classroom even if they extensively use apps in the rest of the time (which is strange for digital natives [4], even if the behaviour has been observed before among Romanian young adults [10]);
- instead of creative skills they use mimicry or cliches;
- the public school students were quite engaged in performing the tasks (Fig.2).

Fig.2. Students performing the test

These results made us redesign some items for the main survey (October 2016).

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