



EFL and the Key Competence-Based Curriculum in Romania. Do Children in Primary School Effectively Learn English?

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Abstract

Our paper presents results from the key competence-based assessment that was carried out in 2019-2020 on a representative sample of grade 4 students at the end of primary education. In the main survey, the assessment instruments consisted of 6 test blocks in Romanian and 3 in English; these were combined in 15 booklets and administered according to a spiral pattern. The items focused on the elementary level descriptors in the Romanian curriculum framework that are derived from the provision in the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2006). The English tests have been calibrated to fit A1 level, as stated in the national curriculum for primary school. The findings indicate that 57% of the students performed the test over the average, with a modal value of 81 points out of the possible 100 points, and 10% of the students who perform at 90% and above. The results from rural schools are significantly lower than the urban ones both as an average (more than 11% less achievement) and per category (10% less achievement in reading and about 14% discrepancy in writing). Very interesting comparisons are to be found between the level of achievement in Romanian and English when it comes to items that focus the learning to learn descriptors and cultural awareness and expression. For instance, self-assessment has similar levels of attainment in both languages. The same is noticed for original visual expression. Such results mark some positive outcomes of the key competence-based curriculum. The research could not unfortunately cover the oral components: the observation grid that had been piloted in the previous stage was not applied in the main survey because of time constraints and the pandemic. Nevertheless, the research offers an important base-line survey with crucial data for both the coming revision of the official curriculum and the innovation of practices to support the effective curriculum.

Keywords: *key competences, language learning, primary education, official curriculum, effective curriculum*

1. Introduction

The Law of Education (2011) had explicitly set the European *Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning* (2006) and the eight key competences [5] at the core of the national curriculum development. Consequently, a Romanian curricular framework has been designed, by specifying the European description of the 8 key competences, in a progression that includes 3 levels of attainment, corresponding to the end of primary, middle, and high school education, respectively.

In 2019-2020, a Romanian team carried out research within the CRED project that has been financed from the European Social Fund. The year 2019 marks the second cohort of students who completed primary education according to the new competence-based official curriculum and the first cohort who studied the compulsory foreign language curriculum covering all the 5 years of primary school.

The research focused on the level of performance for the key competences [5] at the end of primary education. This enterprise is a first in Romania since the implementation of the key competence-based curriculum in September 2013 [2]. There was a small-scale attempt in 2016 that comprised a preliminary pilot study which only targeted a very reduced number of grade 4 students [3].

The results that are presented below are part of this complex research that encompassed integrated tests applied on a representative national sample. The objectives of the assessment targeted the elementary level descriptors of the key competences according to the Romanian curriculum framework.

2. Methodology

Sampling. The study was carried out on a representative national sample; its selection took into account a variety of educational factors, i.e. urban/rural; school status (coordinating school/subordinate structure), type of school (primary/ primary&middle school/ primary&middle&high school), single/multi-grade schools. To match the schools' diversity and the representation of the school



population, the following procedure has been followed: a) all the 4 graders in the sampled school have been tested in the case of establishments comprising 1 or 2 classes; b) the 4 graders from 2 classes in the case of larger establishments with 3 or more grade 4 classes.

Test design and administration. The tests covered: seven of the eight key competences (except for the digital one, because the assessment was paper based), and those specific descriptors in the Romanian curriculum framework that can be focused on written form. The assessment was: adapted to the age of the students (2 segments in each booklet to be administered in 45+45 minutes separated by 10 minutes break); standardized for all the participants by the uniqueness of the tasks, their administration and the coding system that led to a data base that is structured according to the key competences in focus.

For the foreign language there were only tests in English since 87,8% in primary education study English (12% of the children study one of the following: French, German, Italian, Spanish; each of the latter cover less than 5% of the population).

To address all the assessment objectives, there were 6 modules in Romanian and 3 modules in English that were paired in 15 booklets: 9 in Romanian only (with two different modules each, separated by the 10 minutes break), while 6 consisted of a Romanian first part and an English second part. The administration was spiral based at the level of each school and class in a continuous sequence within the representative sample. This algorithm ensures the results reliability: the assessment tasks had been applied by the same statistical population at the level of each class that had been included in the sample as educational environment. The measurement was performed by assimilating the share of tasks correctly solved by the student in the total work tasks of the quantitative scale, with scores 0-100.

The assessment took place in 166 schools and the sample consisted of 3572 students. The large share of multi-grade schools led to the selection of 39 such establishments in the sample. According to the booklet algorithm, the English modules were solved by 1422 students from all the sampled schools. Each module was administered to 475 participants, with a selection error of 4.5% for each.

The modules were developed in accordance with the competences in the national curriculum that strictly target A1 in the CEFR [1] at the end of grade 4. All offer: 1 page of combined linguistic and iconic text that give the context/ pretext for the test questions [6]. The contexts are consistent with the recommended topics in the curriculum.

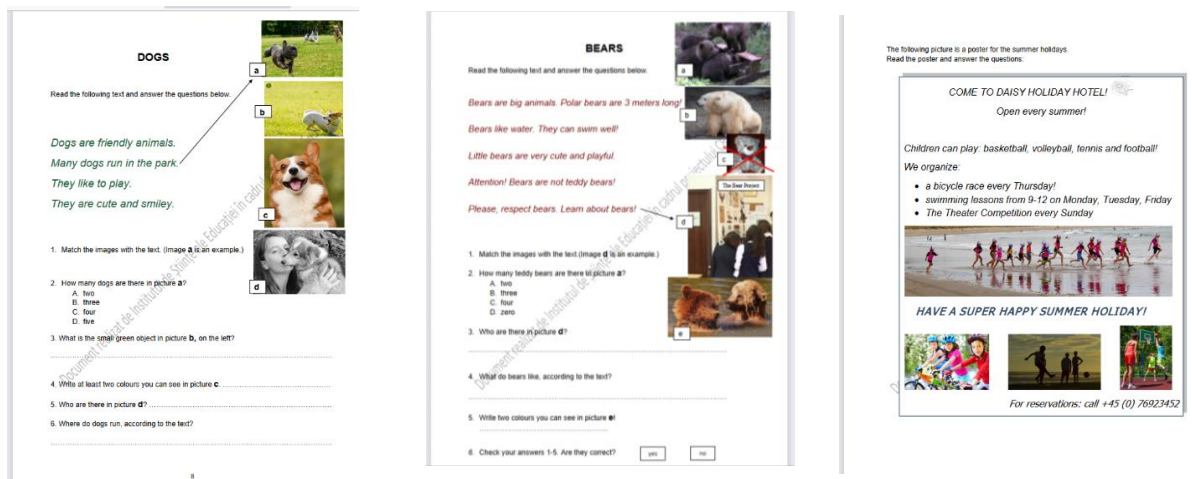


Fig. 1 – The opening page of the English modules

Two of the modules presented simple information text and illustration on animals (dogs and bears, respectively), with a sequence of questions in mirror. The entire presentation has been especially designed to be similar to the way various textbooks in use offer texts and image for reading comprehension. A third module offered a very simple poster with text and pictures that revealed fun opportunities for children on a holiday at a seaside hotel. Even if the complexity of the language remains at level A1 (while the topic "holidays" is also present in the list of recommendations in the curriculum). the form of presentation is nonstandard as compared to what textbooks in use offer. This



design has been chosen to test if familiar/ unfamiliar ways of presenting the assessment context could influence the results.

3. Findings

The following data and discussion derive from the items in the three English modules. Their reference in the Romanian curriculum framework for primary education are:

- express ideas, opinions, emotions in a foreign language in short simple messages in familiar situations (communication in a foreign language – CFL)
- identify simple information in short simple texts in familiar contexts (CFL)
- self-assessment in simple tasks (learning to learn – LL)
- actively look for sources of information (LL)
- explore creative aptitudes in simple designs (cultural awareness and expression – CAE)

The overall results for CFL, in terms of sample distribution, are shown in Fig.2.

The shape of the graph (rather a sinusoid than the ordinary bell!) demonstrates heterogeneous performances. There are actually two groups: low achievers and high achievers, without a representative group with average performance. This means, that for quite a number of students who start middle school, there is no foundation for the development of A2 as stated in the curriculum. For them, English teaching failed in primary school.

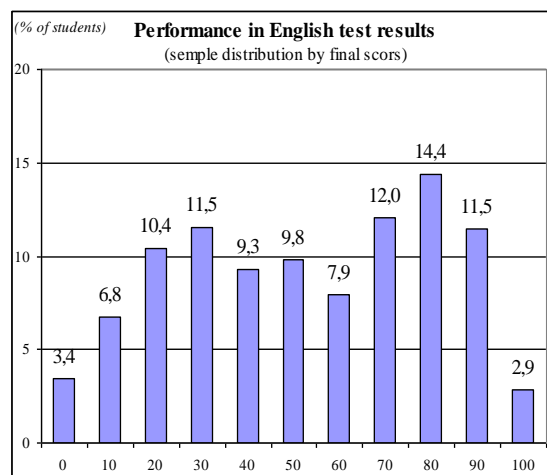


Fig.2. Performance in English (sample distribution)

There are important differences in achievement that are given by the students' residence. The first graph in Fig.3 shows the students' written expression, where the rural/ urban gap (more than 13%) is larger. The second graph shows the performance in reading (10% gap). The conclusion is that 4 graders are better in reading comprehension than in written expression. Not surprising!

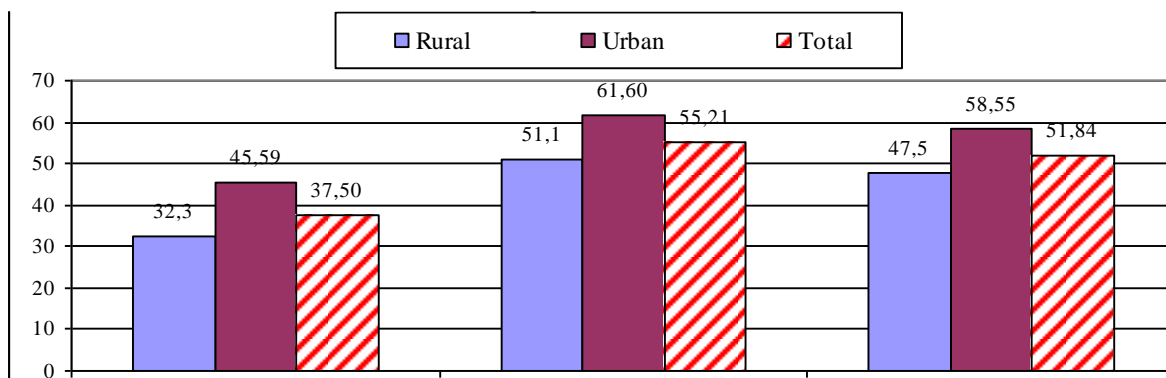


Fig. 3. Performance in English: written expression, reading, CFL overall (rural/urban/total)

The results in both written expression and reading comprehension vary according to the familiarity of the context, but with a little twist! The first graph in Fig. 4 presents written expression in each of the 3 modules and overall. There is a considerably lower performance for the module *Holidays*. Students find it more difficult to express ideas in the context of a functional text than around an information text. Surprisingly, the second graph in Fig. 4 shows that the info in the poster is better understood than the one in the more familiar form of presentation, i.e. short, simple, illustrated information text.

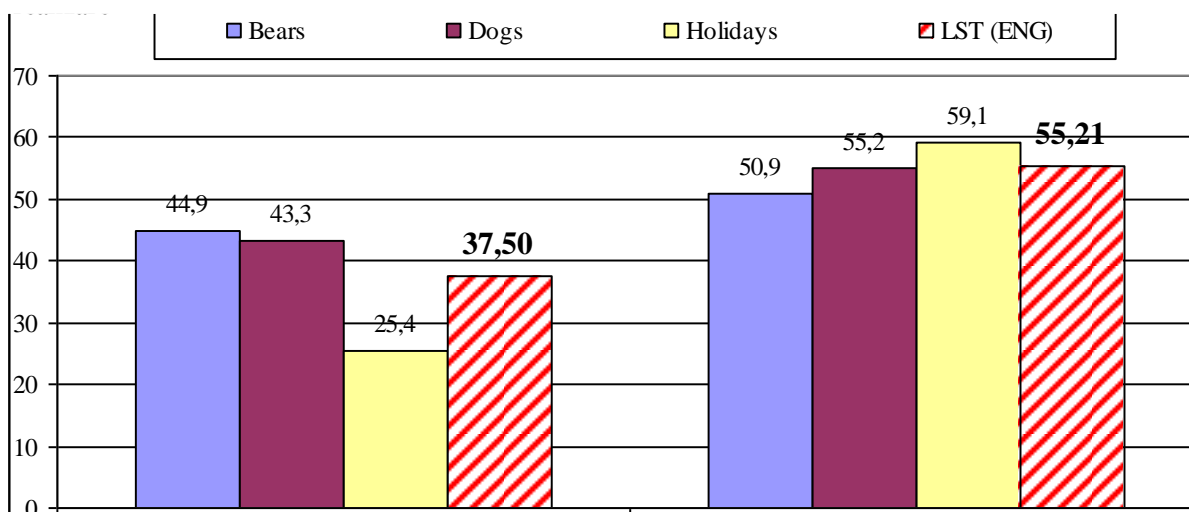


Fig.4. Written expression and reading comprehension across the 3 English modules

The next step in our study is an item by item analysis, that can help with identifying the specific learning difficulties and with inferring on the classroom practice issues that could be involved. The methodology has been previously applied in exploring the Romanian results from large scale assessment (such as PIRLS) [4].

Fig. 5 presents the students achievement for each item in the 3 modules. The first graph shows how identical questions applied on two information texts generate slightly diverse results. Better achievement happens most of the times in *Dogs* but there are a few questions where responses in *Bears* are ahead. We can explain the differences by the degree of the topics familiarity. In practice (for instance, in textbooks) there are more opportunities of communication on dogs than on bears! In the second graph, the curve is clearly different. Assessment tasks belong to the same categories as the ones in the mirror tests but they apply on a functional text. We infer that, despite the curricular provision for functional text, in practice, most students still study illustrated short information texts.

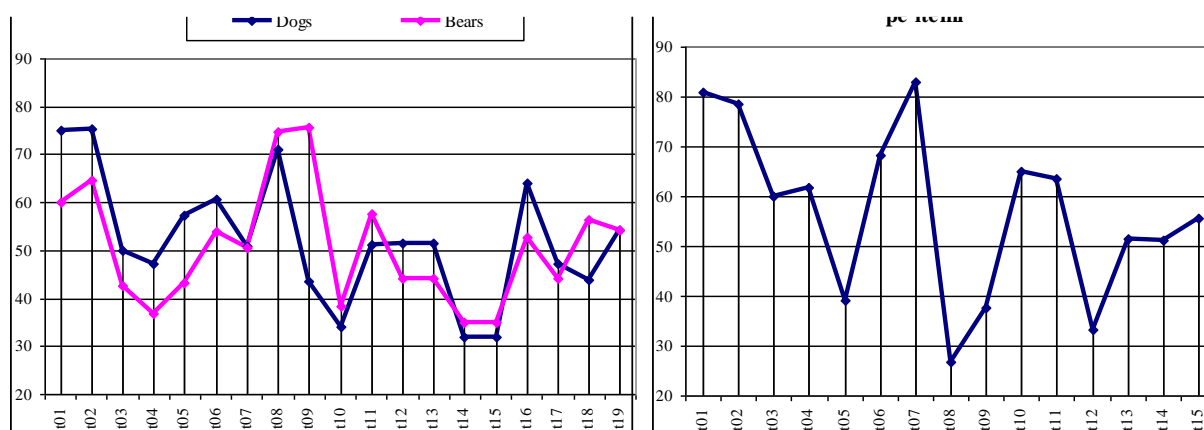


Fig. 5. Students' achievement item by item

Conclusion

To sum up, the lowest scores are in written expression and we infer teachers might expedite writing practice by transferring it into home assignments without too much guidance or individual feedback. Also low scores appear when the question have less or no iconic support. Richer illustration means better scores.

A final remark about the integration of the key competences: In LL (self assessment tasks and identifying sources of information tasks), a comparison between the level of achievement show a 10% gap in favour of Romanian. The gap is much smaller when self assessment is performed (less than 5%). In CAE tasks focusing simple designs the students achievement is the same irrespective of the language that set the context.

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