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Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Romanian Primary Education

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Abstract

This paper aims at briefly outlining recent European trends in foreign language teaching and, from this perspective, to analyze current curricular documents that regulate foreign/English language teaching in Romanian primary education, in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the ongoing programs. In addition, based on the findings of our analysis, the paper further investigates the situation of teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Romanian primary education by conducting 7 stakeholders interviews (three teachers, two parents and two students) so as to attempt to describe the state of things and, if necessary, to suggest some improvement guidelines.

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1. Introduction

Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 resulted in the European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, where communication in foreign languages is defined as one of the 8 lifelong learning key-competences, sharing “the main skill dimension of communication in the mother tongue: it is based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts (in education and training, work, home and leisure) according to one’s wants and needs”. As a consequence, in order to attune to European trends, communication in foreign

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languages has acquired an important status in the Romanian National Curriculum, and, starting with 2006, new competence-based subject curricula for foreign languages have been gradually designed for Romanian lower and upper secondary education. As for primary education, reform starts with the 2012-2013 school year.

Taking this into consideration, this paper aims at describing current TEFL situation in Romanian primary education from two points of view: the curricular documents’ and the stakeholders’. In part one we briefly outline Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and its direct relation with the Common European Framework of References for Languages – Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEF), so that in part two we may have a theoretical basis to comparatively analyze the foreign language/English subject curriculum to be used in the preparatory grade with the ones for grades 3-4; we focus on possible similarities and differences, mainly in point of structure and content, in order to be able to predict if English language teachers will have any problems with implementing the newly designed subject curriculum for the preparatory grade. Then, in part three, we concisely present the stakeholders’ view on and experience with English language teaching, trying to relate interview data with the findings of our analysis whenever possible. The final part deals with the conclusions of our investigation and introduces possible solutions for the problems that have been identified.

2. Brief Outline of CLT and CEF

Theories in education, linguistics and psychology have marked the evolution of foreign language teaching. The basic shift from traditional approaches to communicative language teaching is from grammatical competence to communicative competence. As Richards and Rodgers [1] point out, the communicative movement began in the 1970s and it was mainly driven by advances in (applied) linguistics and by Council of Europe’s concern with teaching foreign languages. Within this framework, fluency replaced accuracy, word and grammar-lists graded across levels were exchanged for functional and skill-based teaching and controlled practice and oral drilling were substituted by interactive small-group work. In order to achieve communicative competence, communicative methodology and syllabus were needed. Consequently, new techniques and activities were developed, teachers and learners acquired new roles in the classroom and the new syllabus comprised topics, functions, notions, situations, as well as grammar and vocabulary.

The early work of the Council on foreign language teaching was carried further through the 1980s and 1990s as new member states from Central and Eastern Europe became involved in its activities. The 2001 CEF could be considered the ‘high-end’ product of this 40-year endeavor to find a way to compare the objectives and achievement standards of learners in different national (and local) contexts. According to Morrow [2], CEF “is a descriptive framework, not a set of suggestions, recommendations, or guidelines”, and Heyworth [3] further outlines that “CEF provides a comprehensive account of an approach to language education which language teachers, teacher trainers, and academic managers need at least to consider, together with a set of resources which can have practical applications in the planning and delivery of language courses”. Rather, CEF undertakes the difficult mission of raising awareness by emphasizing the educational value of language learning for personal development.

By describing the aims of language learning, the approach to be used in order to achieve those aims, the attainable standards, the learner’s competences, the methodological issues related to language learning and teaching (closely examining tasks and their role in language teaching), the options for curricular design, the curriculum scenarios, as well as the issues involved in the assessment of learners, CEF proves to be a complex and, sometimes, criticized document. As Morrow suggests [2], using the map-metaphor, “one of the potential difficulties with the CEF is that the map is so detailed that you may not always be able to see the wood from the trees – but at least you should avoid getting stuck in a rut!”

As already pointed out, CLT and CEF have a lot in common. Nevertheless, CEF has a wider scope, especially by relating communicative competence with the competences learners developed in the course of their previous experience and by emphasizing the further development that arises from this juxtaposition. Therefore, as far as
curricular integration is concerned, CEF acquires a special role as it might provide a model for the design of frameworks describing the other seven lifelong learning key-competences.

3. Comparative Quantitative Analysis of the Current Foreign Language/English Subject Curricula

Theoretically, in the current Romanian compulsory educational system, students can start learning a foreign language since preparatory grade. Due to the ongoing reform, in the 2012-2013 school year, in primary education, there are three situations to be considered as far as foreign language teaching is concerned:

- **Preparatory grade** – the foreign language as elective subject, part of the school-based curriculum, comprised by the Curricular Area Language and Communication, competence-based subject curriculum centrally developed by the Romanian Education Ministry (MECTS), common for all the foreign languages to be taken at this level. Number of hours per week: 0-2. According to the curriculum framework in force, the maximum number of elective subjects for the preparatory grade could be 4, and the minimum 1, so foreign language learning/teaching might have some competition. But, though elective, the education minister’s order no. 3654/29.03.2012 recommends that at least one hour per week should be devoted to learning a foreign language, therefore changing the status of the subject, as it becomes rather compulsory to our opinion.

- **Grades 1-2** – the foreign language as elective subject, part of the school-based curriculum, comprised by the Curricular Area Language and Communication, to be developed by the foreign language class teacher and submitted for approval with the county inspectorate. Number of hours per week: 0-2. The maximum number of elective subjects for grades 1-2 could be 4, and the minimum 1, so, from this point of view, the preparatory grade situation repeats here. Nevertheless, in contrast with the preparatory grade, no official curricular documents are available, only some general guidelines for the elective subjects in the school-based curriculum are provided, so it is difficult to analyze the situation from this perspective. We rely on the interviews to identify the features of TEFL in grades 1-2.

- **Grades 3-4** – the foreign language as compulsory subject, part of the core curriculum, comprised by the Curricular Area Language and Communication, objective-based subject curriculum centrally developed by MECTS, especially designed for each foreign language. Number of hours per week: 2-3.

Therefore, given the current situation, our comparative analysis can only focus on the foreign language subject curricula for the preparatory grade and grades 3-4. The foreign language subject curriculum for the preparatory grade is made up of presentation, general competences, specific competences accompanied by examples for learning activities and methodological suggestions. There is explicit evidence in its presentation that it has been developed taking into consideration the European Language Portfolio (ELP), a document which closely related to CEF. Consequently, one cannot question the direct indebtedness of the current foreign language subject curriculum for the preparatory grade to CEF, as well as dependence on the European Reference Framework for Key-Competences for Lifelong Learning, on which the 2011 Romanian Education Act was grounded (art.68). Apart from the aim of harmonizing the Romanian foreign language subject curriculum with the ELP levels, this subject curriculum for the preparatory grade also clearly emphasizes that its goal is to familiarize students with another form of verbal communication than the one in their mother-tongue. The result is that, for the first time in the Romanian National Curriculum, there is only one foreign language subject curriculum, the same for all the languages to be elected, as the focus is on the students’ communication competence and not on some specific linguistic content.

As for grades 3-4, the current subject curricula are specific for each foreign language to be taught, and since our interest is in TEFL, our analysis confines to the English subject curricula. Both English subject curricula for grades 3-4 are made up of presentation, framework objectives, reference objectives (accompanied by examples for learning activities) and content, except for an extra section in the 4th grade subject curriculum that stipulates the curricular standards for performance to be attained at the end of the primary stage. To a certain extent in
contrast with the educational goal pointed out in the foreign language subject curriculum for the preparatory grade, the principles underlying the subject curricula for grades 3-4 can be traced back to the 1998 National Curriculum Framework, which is mainly grounded on the objectives model. Nevertheless, there is explicit indication that framework objectives and reference objectives are to be common for all foreign languages that are to be taught using the communicative-functional model. Moreover, it is even mentioned that the performance levels specified in the CEF are to be gradually assimilated, suggest the A1 level at the end of the 4th grade.

In point of structure there are two significant differences between the two types of subject curricula. The first one is that only the subject curriculum for the preparatory grade includes methodological suggestions, by briefly describing the necessary techniques for teaching preparatory grade students and by giving details on the targeted competences and assessment. The second structural difference refers to the content specifications (topics, communicative functions, grammar and vocabulary) available only in the subject curricula for grades 3-4. If lack of content specifications in the preparatory grade subject curriculum could be easily explained, by pointing to the impressive number of detailed examples for learning activities and to the targeted level (below A1), lack of methodological reference in subject curricula for 3-4 is difficult to account for. To a certain extent, it may be argued that the 2004 grade 3 and the 2005 grade 4 English subject curricula represent transition curricular documents, revisions of the former subject curricula designed after the educational reform initiated in 1998, which contain methodological suggestions. Nevertheless, there is no such reference in the current English subject curricula for grades 3-4, and, for beginner-teachers, this lack of methodological guidance might prove puzzling.

Taking into consideration their status, elective vs. compulsory, the foreign language/English subjects might weigh differently in their relation with the primary education curriculum. However, as already outlined, the tendency is to include a foreign language in the primary education timetable since preparatory grade, following the MECTS recommendation, and to continue studying it throughout grades 1-2, also as elective subject. Thus the elective character of the subject up to the 3rd grade is rather formal, 3rd grade students practically being expected to be at least familiar with the foreign language/English subject. As far as multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are concerned, all the subject curricula in our analysis share the features specific to the integrated curriculum model, though English subject curricula for grades 3-4 to a lesser extent, given to their transitory quality, and, gradually, they will probably be replaced to comply with these new requirements.

In conclusion, the outlined differences between the recently developed subject curriculum for the preparatory grade and the older subject curricula for grades 3-4 indicate that, due to the ongoing concern for development and improvement of education in general, and foreign languages, in particular, the former CLT principles have not been rejected, but they have been refined. Hence, foreign language/English language teachers should have no difficulty in applying the subject curriculum for the preparatory grade.

4. Stakeholders’ View

This is not meant to be a comprehensive, overall characterization of the TEFL in Romanian primary education. It is rather a subjective way of drawing a small-scale portrait of the current situation through the eyes of some of the stakeholders – the teachers, the parents and the students – by means of qualitative research. Therefore, we rate this as preliminary research, which definitely needs further, deeper and wider investigation. While acknowledging the limitations of our field research, we consider that our biographical-narrative inquiry, conducted by semi-directive interviews, could enable us to get some insight and allow us to tentatively answer the question: What happens during an English class in Romanian primary education?

In teachers’ interviews there is one recurrent theme: methodology. They stress the importance of the methodological approach when teaching children, as lack of appropriate methods and techniques could result in class management problems, overloaded and irrelevant content. T1 and T2 (both primary school teachers, Bachelor’s Degree in Education, English Teaching Qualification) suggest that one possible solution to these
problems might be allowing class teachers that are qualified in teaching English to teach the English class up to the 3rd grade, when this subject becomes compulsory. To support their opinion they argue that age is a major factor when deciding about how and what to teach and that, based on their experience, more often than not (probably with few exceptions) the age factor is neglected, especially with the elective English class for grades 1-2. Much too often, conversation is replaced by vocabulary and grammar lists that students are asked to memorize, and written assessment, instead of oral assessment, is preferred, thus disregarding the CLT or CEF principles. T3 (English teacher, Bachelor’s Degree in Philology – English-Romanian, Master’s Degree in Philology) agrees with T1 and T2, emphasizing that English teachers first need to get to know the children, in order to develop good relationships with them. Therefore, according to T1, T2 and T3, successful lessons and activities are those that are tuned to the learning needs of the primary students, rather than to the demands of textbook or to the interests of the teacher and one could achieve this if teachers were to receive adequate initial or in-service training.

As for parents and students, we have two mothers and their children. The two interviewed mothers pointed out to the English teachers’ lack of interest with adapting their teaching style to the primary students’ needs. In both inquiries, English teachers mainly focus on pronunciation, on asking students to solve textbook activities individually, on using metalanguage when providing explanations, conversation, hence communicative activities are being left aside. The result is that children got scared with this attitude and the solution, both M1 and M2 finally accepted, was private tutoring with the English class teacher. Thus, although the class situation repeats in private tutoring, their children feel more comfortable as far as the teacher is concerned. Both children are 4th grade state school graduates (age: 11). Their experience is a bit different as S1, a girl, attended a private school in the 1st grade, where she had 6 hours of English a week (e.g. Math was taught in English). Therefore, she has a reference point, which she uses to make some practical suggestions: more conversation, group work and projects, English competitions at class level and not only. S2, a boy, considers that the English class could be more fun if the English teacher drew on what the students already know (the competence concept) and did not focus on verb conjugations, for example. Moreover, both of them denounce lack of interesting activities (too kindergarten stuff for S1, no practicality of the activities for S2), which is well-grounded if we consider Harmer’s characterization of young children, especially those up to the ages of nine or ten: “Their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear and crucially, have a chance to touch and interact with” [4].

5. Conclusion

Methodology seems to be the watchword when it comes to teaching EFL in Romanian primary education. English subject curricula could partially help English teachers overcome this problem by providing methodological guidelines, and appropriate initial and in-service training could enable English teachers acquire the necessary skills, evoked in our interviews. Therefore, centrally developed foreign language curricula for grades 1-4, following the preparatory grade model might prove useful, since, as mentioned earlier in the paper, the elective-compulsory boundary is rather blotted out by recent recommendations. Moreover, allowing primary class teachers with English qualifications to teach the English class might be a viable solution since the main goal is effective communication, and they know best how their students may achieve that.

References