EPC-TKS 2013

Issues in reading practice. A study on how teachers adapt to the processes and topics of PIRLS

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Abstract

The present paper derives from the recent teacher training sessions that took place within a project in Romania that focused on an exploration of the students’ misconceptions as revealed by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and the design and application of improved reading practice. The research strictly refers to how the participant teachers developed their online assignments for the course The Reading Challenge that took place on http://training.ise.ro, within the groups Univers and Ciric and explores the issues in reading teaching in grades I-VIII. The main aim was to analyse how teachers meet the requirements of the reading curriculum and address the learning needs of their students. A particular focus is on the teachers’ ability to select motivating texts for the students, the design and implementation of reading activities in the class and the development of tests which could measure the level of the reading performance.

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Keywords: PIRLS; teaching practice; teaching stereotypes; learning activities; online learning platform

1. PIRLS: Overview and Results of Romanian Students

PIRLS – Progress in International Reading Literacy Study is a comparative study among the participant countries results in reading performance at the end of primary education based on a written test and questionnaires for students, parents, teachers and school heads. The objective is not the hierarchy as such but the support the participant states can get in order to take correction measures to improve reading results starting from a sound analysis of the students’ learning outcomes (Mullis et al, 2007).

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To allow generalizations, PIRLS takes place on a representative sample which is designed by experts in educational statistics. There is absolutely no doubt about the equality of participation given the strict rules that apply to all countries that register in PIRLS.

The administration of the study instruments (tests and questionnaires) is also very strict. The students have each an individual test booklet which is labeled by his/her name. The various tests are spread in a class according to a specific algorithm that limits a possible "inspiration" from peers. In order to reinforce a correct application of the tests there are administrators and monitors who are trained for this specific purpose.

The design of the tests is done by an international group of experts so that items be compatible with the organization of the national curriculum and adequate to all students irrespective of cultural differences. After the tests are developed, the texts and items are translated in the languages of study and checked at the international level to ensure equality of chances for all the students.

PIRLS operates with two types of texts – literary and information texts – which are quite different compared to the ones Romanian teachers usually suggest for the reading practice:

- They are longer – they include a higher number of words than the ones in our textbooks.
- Their topics are more varied – mainly the literary texts in PIRLS have an artistic open feature that invite the readers to step into an authentic literary space of clear aesthetic value.
- There is a clear accent for reading practice in the information and functional texts which is not present in the Romanian primary school.
- There is a frequent use of the iconic element as a complementary component for reading comprehension ordinarily associated to the verbal code in our practice.

PIRLS deals with four processes of reading comprehension (Mullis et al, 2007), respectively:

- retrieve explicitly stated information – students look for factual information in the text, they are to found data that are at the surface of the text
- make straightforward inferences - students find information by connecting ideas that are to be found in a segment of the text
- interpret and integrate ideas and information – students must process the text beyond the level of phrases and paragraphs, they need to look for connections at the level of the whole text
- examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements – the most complex process requires students to elaborate judgements about the style and structure as well as to demonstrate understanding of the language conventions.

When it comes to the results that Romania obtained in PIRLS, we can say that our students are above the scores obtained by their peers in Georgia, Malta, Trinidad Tobago, Azerbaidjan, Iran, Columbia, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Qatar, Oman and Marocco.

However, Romania is below countries like neighbouring former communist Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia (that have a similar cultural heritage) or France, Spain and Italy (Mancas, 2013).

More specifically, if we look at the overall results in the last PIRLS (2011) the following are worth mentioning:

7% of our students are at the advanced international benchmark as compared to 11% in 2001 and 4% in 2006.

This segment is rather small if we think of 24% in Singapore, 19% in Russia or Northern Ireland, 18% in England, Finland or Hong-Kong, 17% in the USA, 16% in Ireland, 15% in Israel (who are all situated at the advanced benchmark).

16% of the Romanian students are under the low international benchmark while in most EU countries the rate for the low level of attainment is between 0 and 5%.

We are below the international average in most of the items.

For a better perspective of the results, the table below shows how we score (%) in the literary and information text comprehension. The results are given for all the four reading processes and the columns show the Romanian students’ results, the international average and the highest scoring countries’ results.
Table 1. Results in PIRLS according to the type of text and reading process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of text</th>
<th>Reading process</th>
<th>Romanian results</th>
<th>Students’ average</th>
<th>International average</th>
<th>Best scoring countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literary</td>
<td>retrieve explicitly stated information</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
<td>92.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>make straightforward inferences</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interpret and integrate ideas and information</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-literary (information)</td>
<td>retrieve explicitly stated information</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>70.2%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>make straightforward inferences</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interpret and integrate ideas and information</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why does Romania obtain poor results in the international studies? What is the reason for the students’ lack of interest in reading? Since the neighbouring countries have better results than ours we cannot blame the failures on the common communist heritage. We might nevertheless hypothesize that the reading practice is not adequate.

Within the framework of the European social fund, the structural project 35279 has had a training component that attempted to make use of the data obtained in the international studies in order to raise awareness about a much needed change in the language teaching as well as to support teachers to design meaningful reading activities for their students’ needs. Starting from this training course and from the experience of facilitating two groups on the elearning platform (http://training.ise.ro), we tried to find answers to the questions above.

2. Research methodology

Our research focus was the participant teachers’ assignments on the platform within the course The Reading Challenge (in Rom. Provocarea lecturii), more specifically the learning communities within the forums: Univers and Ciric. The target group is of 44 teachers (31 primary teachers and 13 teachers of Romanian) both female and male, coming from rural or urban areas from 5 counties (Maramureș, Mureș, Hunedoara, Galați și Vrancea). The participants age is between 28 and 57, with an average of 40. The course covered nearly 3 months and consisted of 3 days face to face input, eight weeks online discussion and classroom application, two weeks for the revision and completion of the online portfolio and one day for a face-to-face round-up discussion and final evaluation. The program focused 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 (Sarivan, 2013).

The research methods we used were: the observation of target group during the face to face sessions and the analysis of the posts on the platform. Consequently, we observed and analysed:

- During the face-to-face component: the development of motivating activities for reading comprehension, identifying solutions to improve reading comprehension, interaction during active group work, the use of various resources, development of items to measure comprehension of literary and non-literary texts.
- During the online component: the selection of reading texts, the selection and application of learning activities, development of tests to check reading comprehension.

The results obtained after analyzing the online activity are detailed in the table below.

Table 2. Reading practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The teachers’ professional experience</td>
<td>Teaching by making use of the textbook is the overall choice of the participant teachers in selecting the reading texts. Most of them do not look for other texts. The reason they give is that they consider the textbook should be followed as it offers the canonic texts. These texts are to develop the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students’ literary culture.

In extra, another practice that highlights a uniform approach is that the teachers do not explore the text from the perspective of the connections it might have with the students’ experiences and do not select it according to the present needs of the students.

Teachers do not approach the literary text from the perspective of critical thinking. The students are taught to be obedient to the standard commentary.

The teachers do not deal with information texts during language classes. They consider that students should read and make sense of these texts in other school subjects. Unfortunately, nobody teaches the students how to explore the meanings of texts so that learning becomes effective. More often than once, students face a double failure: both in terms of the comprehension of an information text (which constitutes a life skill of great impact) as well as in terms of quality learning in various school subjects.

The teachers’ qualification and the way they relate to innovation

Our observations (in the face to face sessions and in the online messages) showed that primary teachers are ready to find out new things about approaches to reading. Yet they are not willing to change their practice (from their point of view a traditional perspective is more effective).

Teachers of Romanian are more open to change, particularly the participants under 35 years of age. The latter apply more easily new approaches and wish their students could read more. They are also the ones who believe that even if new approaches are beneficial for both the students and the teachers, they do not have the time to systematically implement them because of the national testing, the school contests and exams.

School in urban/ rural areas

Teachers in rural areas have problems in working with the internet as a resource for learning. Moreover, participants in the rural areas are not always interested/ ready to access internet. They prefer to use the textbook or the books in the school library or from the personal bookcase. For them the classics are always worthy of study. These teachers seem to not notice the changes in the students’ needs with respect to nowadays reading.

Use of methods and strategies without a clearly defined objective

The participant teachers extensively made use of a variety of methods just for the sake of displaying their knowledge of modern methodology. Actually they centered on their need to show methodological skill instead of focusing the students learning/ reading needs. The most frequent issues we found are the following:

- The theory of multiple intelligences is viewed as a method and is mistakenly applied by making use of the thematic centers of interest.
- The predictions method is also used in a faulty way. The teachers implement it in group work or in whole-class activities at the blackboard.
- The thinking hats method is used in the beginning of activities, throughout the pre-reading; its specificity is not understood and is not used to enhance creativity.
- The cube, the dials, the clusters, stellar explosion are used indiscriminately and very often by two thirds of the participants.
- The participants do not make the difference between worksheets and learning activities. Nearly half of the teachers use worksheets that do not enhance reading comprehension but mere minor aspects of the text (vocabulary or grammar problems).
- The text is approached in an old fashioned way – a model reading by the teacher, reading aloud, chain reading, reading excerpts. All these procedures do not invite the students to refer to the text from his/her own perspective.
- Teachers do not support students to see the text as a whole and state requests like: look for synonyms of ..., find the antonym of ...., underline the verbs, etc. All these instructions have no relevance at all for the decoding of a text if they are not put in the context of reading comprehension.
- Teachers stress the importance of identifying and memorizing ’beautiful phrases’ from the text. The reason for this endeavor is to enrich the vocabulary. In many respects this practice hinders the identification of meaningful details for reading comprehension.

Time

- Teachers wish to see immediate results without stressing the quality of the students’ learning.
- In the beginning of the online interaction, the teachers’ examples revealed most of the above issues. The trainers’ constant feed-back supported the participants to overcome the
3. Conclusions

We may consider that in nowadays schools, the greatest challenge is the teacher’s choice in approaching reading. The teacher needs to support the student to discover what reading can offer with respect to access to various worlds. This can be done by selecting motivating if not innovative solutions. This is not easy to achieve in class or outside school due to factors related to the teacher and to how s/he understands the students’ need to read.

The first step to motivate students to read is a choice of student-centered approaches to make students want to read, to understand the magic of reading and the beauty of a story and the challenge of functional texts. If this is done, then students co-participate in their own learning to read (and reading to learn!) and they get involved in sharing reading experiences. The student-centered approaches have some common features:

- Interaction among students, the development of intellectual and social competences
- Open attitude, initiative-based activities
- Cooperative learning
- Active involvement in solving the tasks
- Exchange of personal reading experiences.

The second step is the selection of attractive, age-adequate texts that belong to the children’s culture and to present society. It is essential that students are interested by the text, discuss it, are creatively involved in it. In this respect it is important that the teacher encourages students to engage in the universe of the text, to read in order to expand knowledge.

These are the main aspects that we highlighted during the Reading Challenge program. Many times, this perspective was met grudgingly or was simply rejected. Nevertheless the constant online feedback and assistance encouraged participants to revise their assignments.

Another issue worth mentioning is the final face-to-face evaluation that offered participants the chance to reflect on their own activity, to view examples of good practice and to understand faulty perspectives in planning reading assignments and assessment. Out of the 44 participants, 4 did not participate online and did not complete their portfolio that should have included the 4 compulsory assignments.

Last but not least, we consider that the most important issue is to manifest a wish to change practice, by better understanding the students’ reading needs, by developing learner-centered assignments and assessments which are adequate to the students’ personalities, age traits, and today’s society.

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