DEVELOPING LIFELONG LEARNING COMPETENCES THROUGH LITERACY

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Abstract: In the post-modern knowledge based society, we are still having a quite big percent of the youth that are having social integration difficulties due to poor writting-reading and communication competences. The problem is a global one and it is affecting, according to OECD studies, 20% of the European younth and 40 to 50% of the Romanian one, reason for the European experts to talk in their Report of 2012 about a literacy crisis and for insisting on taking immediate measures for fighting this scourge.
Starting from the belief that today's school's mission is to prepare students for active integration in social life and lifelong learning, as teachers' trainers, we often ask ourselves: What is the teachers' role, when and what strategies are more efficient in increasing the youth education level?
This study is proposing solutions for teachers of all specialities at developing students' competences on comprehending, interpretating and reflecting on literary and non-literary texts, using active reading and meta-cognitive techniques.

Keywords: literacy, active reading, metaknowledge, teacher's training, lifelong learning, key-competences

Introduction

Functional illiteracy, a very controversed matter, is considered a socio-educational problem, that is affecting people of all ages, not only students, as one might think. The term is applied to people that, despite having a formal education, haven't reached a competence level in reading or writting, that would afford them to satisfy their needs in everyday's life. There is a difference between illiteracy – defining the person that doesn't know to read or write, an functional illiteracy – used by UNESCO, in 1978, to define a person that "doesn't have the knowledge to start those activities that allow them to function in their belonging group or community, with the purpose of self-development and social integration." It reffers to people that aren't able to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level.

Studies show that the problem is affecting all countries and all educational systems, but in different rates: according to UNDP (Human Development Reports) studies from 2009, on population of 16 to 65 age, the rate of functionally illiterate people is of 47% in Italy, 43,2% in Mexico, 23% in USA, 21% in U.K., 17% in Australia, 7,9% in Norway, 7,5% in Sweden.

The OECD reports from 2013, regarding education on a global level and the students' results on math tests have placed Romania on the 45th place among 65 world's states. According to these studies, 40,8% of the romanian students had poor tests results, and only 3,2% very good results. In evaluating reading competences, the score placed Romania on posision 50 from 65, and at sciences on 49 from 65.

After analysing the Romanian students' results on their participation to the PIRSL tests (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) in 2001, 2006 and 2011, the Center for Educational Assessment and Analysis published a study and concluded: "Currently, 42% of the students are functional illiterate, meaning they aren't able to make basic reasoning, do not know to use elementary mathematical operations when faced with a situation in daily life."

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The opposite of the notion of *functional illiteracy* is a new concept, *functional literacy*. Unlike literacy, which refers strictly to the ability to write and read, the concept of functional literacy refers, among other things, to the acquisition of computer skills, abilities to use the basics of banking infrastructure, driving license or knowledge of at least one foreign language of international circulation.

Causes of functional illiteracy

The causes of this phenomena are multiple. According to researchers, the most common causes are the learning disabilities, cognitive deficits (deficits related to numerical abilities and dyscalculia). It is obviously also affecting students with normal cognitive development, but with poor socio-economic situation: from disadvantaged environment (such as isolated rural regions), students that have difficult acces to education facilities (they live away from school, have no acces to computers or books), or students that have to work to support their families. The low educational level of the parents and the lack of support offered by them to their childrens' studies is another problem generating functional illiteracy.

A very interesting and controversed CEAE study from 2012, showed that: sub-performance on creative problem solving tasks such as problem solving is correlated in Romania, in the 15-year-olds, only to a moderate extent with socio-economic and demographic factors. OECD studies show a correlation of only 19.3% between the socio-economic status of Romanian pupils and their performance in the PISA mathematics test. That means, this problem can't be solved only by reducing the number of cases of school dropout or by supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In other words, the lack of education of those young people is not exclusively a consequence of poverty and poor social conditions, but rather of the inability of the Romanian education system to develop such skills for students.

Key-solutions

As seen above, the functional illiteracy is a global problem, affecting many students and requiring immediate intervention. The European Commission has set the decrease of functional illiteracy as it's main education related priorities. The EU average is now 20% and the target is that functional illiteracy will fall to 15% in 2020. (Strategic framework - Education and training 2020). From this point of view, the European Commission also proposes a number of concrete reform steps to help reduce functional illiteracy:

- Using student-centered innovative pedagogical approaches (such as differential training) and a curriculum design aimed at a graduate profile compulsory education with the following characteristics: the graduate is creative, thinks critically, solves complex problems in unexpected situations, etc. Active teaching-learning methods have great efficiency in this respect.
- Creating an infrastructure for lifelong learning where teachers can acquire the skills and knowledge required to teach basic reading and writing skills, maths and sciences to students.
- Completion of a framework of teachers' competences to assess the quality of their work Introducing standardized national assessments; thus, assessments from different years can be brought to the same scale. They also have the function of diagnosis for individual school progress, with the aim that each child can be later supported in acquiring basic skills (through differentiated training teachers).
- Elaborating evaluation tools to allow an objective assessment of skill levels reached by pupils throughout their schooling. Such an instrument could be the Item Response Theory.

- Developing decentralized school management to stimulate competition between schools and good educational practices.
- In order to take these steps, it is of course necessary to attract good teachers and managers in the public education system and to stimulate them.

We think that the Romanian education system has to go through a real reform process regarding the school curricula:

- the re-organising of all school subjects, so that a real selection of useful and practical information is made;

- to explicitly state the ways of applying the studies informations in practice and everyday life, and to have more hours dedicated to applications;

- to put accent on teaching-learning strategies that involve students and put them in the position to operate with information, not just to memorize and reproduce. For this, it is absolutely essential to respect the psychological time required for students to aquire knowledge, as well as the differentiated and individualized approach of each, in accordance with individual particularities.

Any qualitative change needs clear, long-term policies that lead to the expected results. In the same way, we believe that the initial teacher training education system should go through a reform process, so that the number of pedagogical practice hours is significantly increased, and their theoretical training include practical solutions for intervention in problematic educational situations.

A valid solution, that can be opperative in any education system, involves developing at students the necessary skills *to learn how to learn*. The European Key Skills Document contains the following definition of learning to learn: "Learning to learn is the ability to persevere in learning, to organize your own learning, including through effective time and information management, both individually and in groups. This competence includes awareness of the learning process and needs, identifying the opportunities available, and the ability to overcome obstacles to learning successfully. This competence means the accumulation, processing and assimilation of new knowledge and skills, as well as the search for and use of counseling and guidance. Learning to learn leads learners to start from their previous knowledge and experiences, so that they can use and apply their knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts: home, work, education and training. Motivation and trust are crucial to this competence." (Recomendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, Brussels, 2006)

From our point of view, this implies, on the one hand, developing those personal capacities that would allow the acquisition and selection of new knowledge, as well as the learning of efficient study techniques. Out of the range of possible action directions, we have therefore focused on developing metacognitive skills and active reading techniques.

The term "metacognition" derives from the concept of "cognition", to which the prefix"meta" is added, indicating a higher reference level. The prefix "meta" can also be taken in the sense of change, the intervention of the subject in order to transform the conditions of its own knowledge or learning (Cerghit, 2002). Metacognition therefore refers to knowledge about knowledge, reflection on how to produce knowledge, knowledge and experiences of self-regulation or management of mental processes.

Numerous studies indicate the effectiveness of developing the metacognitive level of students on their learning and problem-solving ability. So:

• Metacognition is extremely useful in mathematical activities, for problem solving;

• Metacognition brings efficiency in reading: language skills and text-based skills;

• Metacognition has an important role in global learning activities: it is responsible for the effective use of cognitive, emotional and motivational resources.

Romanian professor Ioan Cerghit, proposes a series of procedures, which cand be used by all teachers, in developing students' metacognitive competences (Ioan Cerghit, 2008, p. 252):

- **confronting oneself processes**: verbalizing thinking, thinking aloud; the inside monologue *(what do I know ?, what are the obstacles ?, why I am wrong ?, what can I do to understand better?)*; checking your own understanding during the activity; personal reflection on the states and abilities of knowledge (*what do I know, how do I think/ when and why to apply knowledge and strategies of learning?*);

- **active procedures**: verifying the solutions for the performed exercises; solving problems; learning by discovery; information processing through drawings, schemes, graphics; Computer aided learning;

- **interactive procedures:** learning in pairs, in a team; learning by changing roles;

- **procedures for self-appraisal of the degree of acquisition of matter**: self-encouragement processes, continuous emphasis on self-progress, self-confidence.

Many studies on efficient learning styles make the distinction between "deep learning" and "superficial learning". Superficial learning is associated with non-critical assimilations of facts and opinions while deep learning is associated with critical thinking. In our experience, if every learning stage is being followed by reflection, the students learn better and in a critical manner, allowing them to develop metacognitive competences. There are many reflection tehniques, that help students focus on questions as: *What part of what we've learned can be usefull? What's my position regarding the learned ideas (agrree/dissagree)?,* so on.

Another way to achieve a *deep learning* level is by using *active reading.* Through active reading, a conscious reading is carried out in which the student's thinking processes and affective processes are engaged, thus contributing to a nuanced and sensitive understanding of the text.

Some useful strategies of active reading, that any teacher should use with their students:

- **pre-reading questions**: *What do we know about this subject? What do we want to know?;*
- **reading with a purpose**: rather than tell students to "just read" (which results in low recall), teachers should say, "Here's your mission as you read. Look for..." They can be reading closely in search of: main ideas, author's purpose, facts, confusion, and context clues for new words.
- **identifying and defining any unfamiliar terms**: in order to fully understand the meaning of a text, we have to understand all the words in the text. Students should be habituated to work with dictionaries and write in their notebooks the sense of the unfamiliar terms. This would also lead to their active vocabulary development;
- **identifying the main ideeas or thesis of the reading**. It is usefull to habituate students to highlighter those very important ideeas in the text, and also to rephase those ideeas in their own words;
- **chritical analysis of the text's ideas**. Students should write questions on the margins of the text and then try to answer those questions. It's important for them to make a critical observations on the text. Some usefull questions: *Is the ideea correct? Do I agree with it? Is it correctly argumented? What is the context of the speech?/ Can this problem be analysed from a diferent point of view?;*
- **writing a summary of an essay or chapter in their own words**. This would develop student's abilities to re-interpretate a text and to express their own ideas, even crtical ones in an argumented speech.
- **write their own exam question based on the reading**.
- **paired learning** - a great way to active learning is to teach what you have learned to someone else. Research clearly shows that teaching is one of the most effective ways to learn. If one tries to

explain aloud what they've been studying, the information will be transferred from short-term to long-term memory, and they'll quickly discover what they understand and what they don't.

Conclusions

In a pertinent analysis of the future of school, Alvin Toffler said that *"Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the one who can't write and read, but who will not learn how to learn."* Paraphrasing him, we can say that tomorrow's illiterate will be the one who does not know how to use the computer, because we live in a technologised era, in which we use digital competences in all areas of everyday's life. The Romanian student's results on language, math and sciences revealed a great problem, a problem common in most EU countries: functional illiteracy.

The main focus of the school is to prepare the young generation for active integration in social life. For achieving succes in any field, people will have to improve their knowledge and skills, by lifelong learning. Learning to learn thus becomes one of the key-priorities in education, and teachers should be well prepaired with techniques to develop this competence for their students. Metacognitive strategies and active reading can be part of the solution for teaching students to understand and interpretate an information, and thus develop their functional literacy.

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