

WHAT DO ROMANIAN LANGUAGE TESTS DESIGNED FOR MINORITY STUDENTS ASSESS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT?

Szántó Bíborka

Assist. Prof., PhD, "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: In Romania the basic competencies (reading and writing in the student's mother tongue, mathematical literacy) of students at the end of the 2nd and 4th grades of primary education are assessed starting with the school year 2013/2014. The level of communication in Romanian language is also measured in the case of students studying in minority schools. The present study analyses the tests of the national assessment designed and applied in the 2013/2014, respectively 2014/2015 school years to measure the level of Romanian language knowledge. The analyses highlights that the tests are suitable only for the evaluation of reading and – to a certain extent – writing competences in Romanian language of minority students, but they are not capable of evaluating speaking and listening comprehension. The paper also discusses that the analysed tests are inconsistent with the new, communication-focused curriculum for students attending schools teaching in a minority language, whose mother tongue is other than Romanian.

Keywords: evaluation, assessment of competencies, communication, Romanian language, minority education

Introduction

The aim of the present study is to analyse some aspects of the assessment within the domain of the Romanian language in the case of primary school-aged children attending schools teaching in Hungarian language in Romania. Hungarian children have the possibility to acquire the official language of Romania as second language in formal and non-formal linguistic

environment. Primary school children can learn Romanian language three or four classes a week in state schools, private schools and schools supported by foundations. Depending on region, the formal acquirement of the Romanian language may be completed by informal language learning. However, the probability to acquire Romanian language informally is very low in the case of a child living in Harghita or Covasna county, where 84,61, respectively 73% of the population is Hungarian speaking. In the light of this, the first section of the study analyses those educational documents which regulate the acquisition of the Romanian language in formal learning environment. The second section of the paper analyses the structure of the tests designed to measure Hungarian primary school children's level of Romanian language competency in the framework of the national assessments. The paper concludes with the *Conclusions*.

1. Teaching the Romanian language in the primary level as shown in the national educational documents

Communication in the mother tongue and communication in foreign languages are two of the eight key competencies defined for lifelong learning by the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning* (2006, 13).¹ The document defines the above mentioned competencies as follows:

- **communication in the mother tongue**, which is the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and to interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of societal and cultural contexts;
- **communication in foreign languages**, which involves, in addition to the main skill dimensions of communication in the mother tongue, mediation and intercultural understanding. The level of proficiency depends on several factors and the capacity for listening, speaking, reading and writing (2006, 14–15).

The Romanian Educational Law from 2011 – in article no. 68, paragraph (1) – states that the national curriculum for primary and secondary school is based on eight key competences, which are almost identical with the key-competences defined by the European Parliament and

¹According to the document, key competencies are a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. They are particularly necessary for personal fulfilment and development, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment. In addition to communication in the mother tongue and communication in foreign languages, the recommendation defines six key competencies: mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression (2006, 13).

the Council.² The only difference between them can be identified exactly in the key competences regarding communication competence:

- **communication in Romanian language, respectively in the mother tongue** in the case of national minorities
- **communication in foreign languages.**

Although the document of the European Union makes a categorical difference between the terms mother tongue and foreign language, based on the text of the Romanian Educational Law, the Romanian language cannot be categorized as either of them, it appears as a third category when talking about communicative competence. According to the text of the law in the framework of formal education on primary and secondary level children belonging to national minorities have to master communicative competencies in two “mother tongues”: in Romanian language and their (real?) mother tongue.

According to the Educational Law, learning Romanian language (as the official language of Romania) in school is compulsory for the citizens of Romania. Hence, the curricula have to allocate the precise number of Romanian classes necessary and sufficient for acquiring the Romanian language.³

The General Education Plan published by the Ministry of Education for primary education in minority schools⁴ concretizes the regulation formulated in the Educational Law. The number of Romanian lessons in primary minority schools are reported in Table 1. as specified by the General Education Plans from 2004, respectively 2013.⁵

Table 1. – Romanian language lessons in the General Education Plans from 2004 and 2013

² Curriculumul național pentru învățământul primar și gimnazial se axează pe 8 domenii de competențe-cheie care determină profilul de formare a elevului: a) competențe de comunicare în limba română și în limba maternă, în cazul minorităților naționale; b) competențe de comunicare în limbi străine; c) competențe de bază de matematică, științe și tehnologie; d) competențe digitale de utilizare a tehnologiei informației ca instrument de învățare și cunoaștere; e) competențe sociale și civice; f) competențe antreprenoriale; g) competențe de sensibilizare și de expresie culturală; h) competența de a învăța să înveți (Legea Educației Naționale 1/2011. ART. 68 (1).

³ Învățarea în școală a limbii române, ca limbă oficială de stat, este obligatorie pentru toți cetățenii români. Planurile de învățământ trebuie să cuprindă numărul de ore necesar și suficient învățării limbii române. Autoritățile administrației publice asigură condițiile materiale și resursele umane care să permită însușirea limbii române (Legea Educației Naționale 1/2011. ART. 10 (3).

⁴ Planul-cadru de învățământ pentru învățământul primar în limbile minorităților naționale

⁵ ANEXA 1.2. la Ordinul Ministrului Educației și Cercetării nr. 5198 /01.11.2004, ORDIN nr. 3.371 din 12 martie 2013 privind aprobarea planurilor-cadru de învățământ pentru învățământul primar și a Metodologiei privind aplicarea planurilor-cadru de învățământ pentru învățământul primar

Content area/Subject	Class				
	Preparatory	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th
Language and communication					
Romanian language and literature/ GEP 2013	3 lessons/ week	4 lessons/ week	4 lessons/ week	4 lessons/ week	4 lessons/ week
	102 lessons/school -year	136 lessons/school 1-year	136 lessons/school -year	136 lessons/school 1-year	136 lessons/school ol-year
The number of Romanian lessons during primary education according to GEP 2013	646 lessons				

According to the General Educational Plans from 2004 and 2013, 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade primary school children attending schools in which teaching language is Hungarian, have 4 Romanian lessons a week. In preparatory class children have 3 Romanian lessons a week. In 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade children spend 136 hours/school-year learning the Romanian language only in school, in preparatory class this amount of time is 102 hours. This means that during primary education – which comprises 5 years –, primary school children have 646 Romanian language classes. The number of hours that primary-school-aged children spend with acquiring the Romanian language in the framework of formal education is high. The time expended on learning the Romanian language in school is completed by language learning activities at home (doing homework, memorizing new words and expressions, reading etc.). In the light of the above mentioned data we can conclude that children whose mother tongue is other than Romanian, learn the Romanian language intensively in formal learning environment. In spite of this, looking across the results of national assessment 2013/2014, it can be stated that students' average achievement within the domain of the Romanian language is low: it situates around 57% (1st version), respectively 51% (2nd version) (see Table 2.).

Table 2. – Results achieved by counties (2014)

County	1 st version	2 nd version
Bihor	57,04	54,23
Cluj	70,96	65,64
Covasna	47,66	41,03
Harghita	48,38	38,17
Mureș	57,77	53,32
Sălaj	61,38	54,08
Satu-Mare	56,80	56,9
AVG	57,14	51,91

The results also show that the counties that show relatively low performance are Harghita and Covasna counties, where students learn Romanian language mainly in school, because they have less opportunity to acquire it from their environment (Szántó, 2015).

The National Educational Law prescribes that the school subject *Romanian language and literature* is taught – during pre-university education – using curricula and textbooks elaborated especially for the respective minority.⁶ The new curricula regarding the teaching of the Romanian language at primary level approved in 2013 (preparatory, 1st and 2nd grades)⁷, respectively 2014 (3rd and 4th grades)⁸ brought a revolutionary change in the concept of teaching the Romanian language. The new curricula introduce a new perspective in teaching the Romanian language to students whose mother tongue is Hungarian: they adopt the communicative–functional language-teaching model. This means that language-teaching focuses

⁶ Disciplina Limba și literatura română se predă pe tot parcursul învățământului preuniversitar după programe școlare și manuale elaborate în mod special pentru minoritatea respectivă Legea Educației Naționale 1/2011. ART. 46 (2).

⁷ Programa Școlară pentru disciplina Comunicare în limba română pentru școlile cu predare în limba maghiară Clasa pregătitoare, clasa I, clasa a II-a, aprobată prin ordin al ministrului nr. 3418/ 19.03.2013.

⁸ Programa școlară pentru disciplina Limba și literatură română pentru școlile și secțiile cu predare în limba maghiară Clasele a III-a – a IV-a, aprobată prin ordin al ministrului nr. 5003 / 02.12.2014.

on using language as a tool of communication. In this way the main axe of language-teaching is verbal communication manifested in different speech acts based on everyday communication situations. Text is used as a platform for communication and not a content that has to be memorized. The process of teaching-learning-evaluating regards the child as an active user of the Romanian language.⁹ The teaching methods, strategies and activities recommended by the curricula follow the principles and steps of foreign language teaching, therefore they are suitable for teaching Romanian language as a second language.

In the curricula there are accentuated methodical principles which are indispensable in the learning-teaching process of a language other than the learner's mother tongue, such as: communicativity, pragmatics, gradation, functionality and interactivity.

The new curricula bring about the elaboration of language books and textbooks which are consistent with the new – communicative – approach of the curricula. There are two textbooks for 2nd grade students which were elaborated according to the requirements of the new curricula. The textbooks for the 3rd and 4th grade are presently in process of elaboration and evaluation.¹⁰ Communicativity, pragmatics, interactivity constitute an important part of the textbooks, too: exercises aiming listening and speaking are also present in the textbooks besides exercises that are designed for developing reading and writing skills.

The structure of the tests assessing communication skills in the Romanian language

According to the National Educational Law tests within the domain of Romanian language as school subject for children whose mother tongue is other than Romanian, have to be

⁹ Prezenta programă își propune să introducă o nouă abordare a studierii limbii române în cadrul învățământului în limba maghiară: adoptarea modelului comunicativ-funcțional. Această abordare pune accent pe utilizarea limbii ca mijloc de comunicare, astfel, comunicarea orală, realizată prin diverse acte de vorbire, bazată pe situații trăite și întâlnite în viața de fiecare zi, capătă o pondere mai mare, iar textul este utilizat ca pretext pentru comunicare și nu pentru a fi însușit ca atare. Activitățile de predare-învățare-evaluare plasează elevul în situații de utilizator activ al limbii române (Programa Școlară pentru disciplina Comunicare în limba română pentru școlile cu predare în limba maghiară Clasa pregătitoare, clasa I, clasa a II-a, 2). Cadrul comun pe baza căruia a fost elaborată această programă accentuează aspectul comunicativ-funcțional al învățării limbii și literaturii române în contextul actual. Această abordare pune accent pe utilizarea limbii ca mijloc de comunicare. Activitățile de predare- învățare-evaluare plasează elevul în situații de utilizator activ al limbii române (Programa școlară pentru disciplina Limba și literatură română pentru școlile și secțiile cu predare în limba maghiară Clasele a III-a – a IV-a, 2).

¹⁰Karp Ágnes – Makai Emese-Márta: *Comunicare în limba română pentru școlile și secțiile cu predare în limba maghiară* and Tankó Veronika-Zita – Farkas Tünde-Jolán: *Comunicare în limba română pentru școlile și secțiile cu predare în limba maghiară*.

elaborated based on special curriculum.¹¹ The document also prescribes that at the end of 4th grade has to be organized an evaluation of the basic competencies acquired by the end of primary level.¹² If we look at the tests of the assessment within the domain of the Romanian language, we see that they are inconsistent with the linguistic approach and the general, respectively the specific competencies of the curriculum. As I presented in the second section of the present paper, the curriculum developed for children whose mother tongue is Hungarian, adopted the communicative–functional language-teaching model, which focuses on using language in different communication situations in the process of language-learning. Nevertheless, the tests of the national assessment are suitable for measuring only reading comprehension and – to a certain extent – writing skills in the Romanian language.

According to the government decree no. 3334/24.04.2014, respectively no. 5123/15.12.2014 regarding the organization of the assessments, the knowledge of the Romanian language of the 4th grade minority students was assessed by text comprehension, and the students had 60 minutes at their disposal to solve the tasks connected with the unknown text. The tests meant to assess Romanian language competency were indeed developed based on models used in international evaluations (e. g. PIRLS)¹³ as stated in the National Educational Law. However, these international test-models were tests designed to measure reading achievement in the student’s mother tongue. As such, the tests designed within the domain of the Romanian language, assessed 4th grade students reading literacy in Romanian language. As a result, Romanian language tests used in the national assessment were designed similarly to the tests measuring reading literacy in the mother tongue: they were structured similarly, i.e. the same types of comprehension processes were used in the assessment in developing the comprehension questions.

¹¹ Testele la disciplina Limba și literatura română se elaborează pe baza programei speciale (Legea Educației Naționale 1/2011. ART. 46 (4)).

¹² La finalul clasei a IV-a, Ministerul Educației, Cercetării, Tineretului și Sportului realizează, prin eșantionare, o evaluare la nivel național a competențelor fundamentale dobândite în ciclul primar, după modelul testărilor internaționale, pentru diagnoza sistemului de învățământ la nivel primar (Legea Educației Naționale 1/2011. ART. 74 (3)).

¹³ The Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) was developed to help improve the teaching of reading and the acquisition of reading skills around the world, and was approved by the IEA General Assembly as an essential component of the IEA’s regular cycle of core studies, which also includes mathematics and science (known as TIMSS).

Tabel 3. – Reading tasks according to the comprehension processes in Romanian tests for Hungarian students (2014)

Comprehension processes	1 st version	2 nd version
Retrieve explicitly stated information	7 (1., 2., 4., 5., 6., 9.)	5 (1., 2., 3., 4., 5.)
Make straightforward inferences	7 (3., 7., 8, 10., 11., 12., 15.)	7 (6., 7., 8., 9., 10., 11., 12.)
Interpret and apply creatively in a new context ideas/data of the text	2 (13., 14.)	3 (13., 14., 15.)
Total	15	15

As data reported in Tables 3. and 4. suggests, assessment tasks and items related to evaluation and assessment within the domain of Romanian language measured reading comprehension along three reading processes (retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and apply creatively in a new context ideas/data of the text). One item is capable of assessing the writing skills of students (1st and 2nd testversions 14. in the test of the 2014/2015 assessment)¹⁴, where students have to give a different ending of the story.

Tabel 4. – Reading tasks according to the comprehension processes in Romanian tests for Hungarian students (2015)

Comprehension processes	1 st version	2 nd version
Retrieve explicitly stated information	7 (1., 2., 4., 5., 6., 7., 9.)	6 (1., 2., 4., 5., 6., 9.)
Make straightforward inferences	6 (3., 8., 10., 11., 12., 13.)	7 (3., 7., 8., 10., 11., 12., 13.)
Interpret and apply creatively in a new context ideas/data of the text	2 (14., 15.)	2 (14., 15.)
Total	15	15

¹⁴*Scrie un alt final al poveștii!*

Communicative competence – in any language – can be described by broad language modes or domains: as the ability to speak, listen, read and write. As we have seen, item level testing may not be capable of or suitable for handling all of the complexity of language competencies. In its simplest formulation, assessment provides information on whether teaching/learning of text comprehension has been successful at the end of primary level. An ideal assessment system would reflect the full complexity of Romanian language as school subject, even if speaking and listening is extremely difficult to assess (because performance varies with the theme, context and level of motivation).

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that there can be observed inconsistencies on several points between educational documents and the tests of the national assessment designed for measuring language competency of Hungarian speaking students within the domain of the Romanian language. The common European recommendation defines (foreign) language competency as the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The curricula and the textbooks follow a communicative-functional language model in teaching the Romanian language for students whose mother tongue is Hungarian. In spite of these, the tests of the national assessment do not correspond to these educational documents: they measure mainly text comprehension, modeling tests that were meant to evaluate reading competence in the students' mother tongue.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. **Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning [Official Journal L 394 of 30.12.2006].
2. **Legea educației naționale Nr. 1 din 5 ianuarie 2011
3. **ANEXA 1.2. la Ordinul Ministrului Educației și Cercetării nr. 5198 /01.11.2004
4. **ORDIN nr. 3.371 din 12 martie 2013 privind aprobarea planurilor-cadru de învățământ pentru învățământul primar și a Metodologiei privind aplicarea planurilor-cadru de învățământ pentru învățământul primar
5. ** Programa Școlară pentru disciplina Comunicare în limba română pentru școlile cu predare în limba maghiară Clasa pregătitoare, clasa I, clasa a II-a, aprobată prin ordin al ministrului nr. 3418/ 19.03.2013.
6. **Programa școlară pentru disciplina Limba și literatură română pentru școlile și secțiile cu predare în limba maghiară Clasele a III-a – a IV-a, aprobată prin ordin al ministrului nr. 5003 / 02.12.2014.
7. SzántóBiborka (2015): National Assessment of Competencies in Elementary School with Special Regard to the Assessment of Minority Students' Reading and Writing Skills in the Romanian Language. The Alpha Institute for Multicultural Studies (ed.): *Discourse as a Form of Multiculturalism in Literature and Communication*, Arhipelag XXI Press, Târgu Mureș, 363–376.