Language learning in preparatory classes in the Romanian educational system

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Abstract

The democratization of the Romanian society and the Romania’s integration in Europe have led to major changes in the Romanian educational system. Romania adheres to the European educational organization, and consequently, starting with the school year 2012-2013, the preparatory class will be introduced to the primary level of education. In order to promote the national policies in line with the European guidelines, at the level of the development of language skills, we consider it is imperative to find in the curriculum for the preparatory class, the study of international languages with the status of obligation. This study concentrates on the analysis of the European reference documents regarding early language learning, the emphasizing of the importance of language learning for children of school age (six years old), and the developing of the implementation recommendations, at the preparatory class level, of a curriculum for language learning, respecting children’s psycho-pedagogical features and in agreement with the European policies.

The application of the new curriculum for foreign languages will produce changes in the fundamental activity of the students, leading to the development of cognitive, linguistic, creative skills, it will also lead to qualitative changes on the system of relationships and the social integration of children, leading to the formation of a free, creative, responsible personality, connected to the national and European values.

Keywords: early language learning; preparatory class; curriculum.

1. Introduction

The main idea of the paper is the need for compulsory status for foreign languages studied in preparatory classes in the Romanian educational system.

In the first part of this paper we propose an analysis of the European and Romanian language policies on early language learning, an analysis of the current official provisions in the foreign language learning to the level of the preparatory classes in the Romanian educational system, and in the second part, we propose to develop some recommendations of implementation, to the preparatory class, of a curriculum for foreign language learning, respecting children’s psycho-pedagogical features and in line with EU policies, with variants for the training of each type of linguistic skills in the studied foreign language.

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2. Analysis of reference documents at the European level, of language policy on early foreign language learning

The reference documents for the European language policy insist on creating an educational model that places in the center of its network training, the foreign language knowledge to which they assign the responsibility for the social integration of an individual and his/her professional success. Thus, in the Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe: from linguistic diversity to plurilingual education (Beacco & Byram, 2007), an analysis tool that serves as a framework in developing and reorganizing the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the European Union member states (mainly, in educational systems) it is outlined, in terms of educational language policies, the importance of knowing several foreign languages in a lifetime: „The acquisition of a plurilingual repertoire throughout life is thus associated with the development of an awareness of the cultural complexity of the environment, particularly evident in and among European countries. This awareness can also be associated with changes in cultural competence. Individuals may become able to live with others in new linguistic surroundings, and may be able of understanding the values and behaviour of other groups as a consequence“.

In recent years, early foreign language learning has become a priority on the EU agenda by promoting multilingualism, the attention paid to develop intercultural skills and their contribution to building the European citizen, the insistence on the concept of lifelong learning, as a key concept in the new European educational policies (Calabrese & Dawes, 2008).

The European Commission strongly supports the teaching of modern languages to young children, for them to develop language skills, and a sense of belonging and a sense of citizenship and community, making them aware of the opportunities offered to them in a multilingual Europe.

3. Formal provisions on foreign language teaching in the preparatory class in the Romanian educational system

Studying a foreign language in the preparatory class represents an initial stage of the students’ familiarization with another form of communication than the mother tongue, which will allow them a proper further development during the school. In the framework-plan for primary education in Romania (Annex I to OMECTS no. 3654 of 29.03.2012), for the optional subject modern language, there are provided 0-2 hours / week, with the recommendation of the allocation of at least one hour in the schedule, to study a foreign language.

In the presentation note of the curriculum for the optional subject Communication in modern language (1), approved by the Minister Order no. 3656 / 29.03.2012, it states that the modern language is an optional subject in the Basic acquisitions cycle, included in the curriculum area of Language and communication. The curriculum was structured for 1-2 hours per week.

The same presentation note shows that in developing this curriculum, it was intended to provide a coherent curriculum route, connected to the needs and concerns of school children, which is why it has been tried the compatibility with the age features of the students, the European Language Portfolio, especially with the self-evaluative statements in the Linguistic Passport, component part of the Portfolio which is a reference document at the European level for reporting the acquisitions of communication in foreign languages.

It is specified that it has been accomplished the compatibility of the curricular offer for Modern Language 1, undifferentiated by the chosen language of study, with the European Language Portfolio levels, so, by the end of the second grade, the students will have reached A1 partially, without specifying the level reached by pupils at the end of the preparatory class.

In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment, (CEFRL, 2001) there are presented the performance descriptors for each language skill of the common reference level A1 (breakthrough) as it follows:
| UNDERSTANDING | LISTENING | I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly. |
|---------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| READING       |           | I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.                                                                                          |
| SPEAKING      | SPOKEN INTERACTION | I can interact in a simple way, provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say.  
I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics. |
| SPEAKING      | SPOKEN PRODUCTION | I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.                                                                                                                          |
| WRITING       | WRITING   | I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings.  
I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.                                                                     |

These are the descriptors that are aimed to be reached by a student by the end of the second grade, but we consider necessary to be made a division of these descriptors for the preparatory class, the first grade and the second grade, separately, and to be presented in the curriculum for the preparatory class, the descriptors that are aimed to be reached, to not leave room for doubt from the part of the teacher. These details should appear, given the fact that, at this level, the writing is hardly to decode and produce even in the mother tongue.

The CEFRL offers also qualitative aspects of spoken language use:

| RANGE | Has a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations. |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACCURACY | Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorised repertoire.       |
| FLUENCY | Can manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communication. |
| INTERACTION | Can ask and answer questions about personal details.  
Can interact in a simple way, but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair. |
| COHERENCE | Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like „and” or „then”. |

It has been done only one curriculum for the Modern language 1, in harmony with the formulations of the European Language Portfolio, as the levels in the Language Passport are defined taking into account the acquisition of communication on a specific skill, and not on the language specificity. This organization is a novelty in the curriculum design in the Romanian educational system that emphasizes once again the focusing on communication skills rather than on the specific linguistic content.

The syllabus for the optional subject Communication in modern language includes:

a. - the presentation note;

b. - the general skills pursued throughout the Basic acquisitions cycle. These skills are aimed at reception and producing of simple messages in common situations, in contexts of the reach of students:

1. Reception of simple oral messages,
2. Oral production in situations of usual communication,
3. Reception of simple written messages,
4. Writing simple messages in situations of usual communication.

c. - the specific skills that are derived from general skills and are targeted during the preparatory class (one hour per week provided);

1. Reception of simple oral messages.
   1.1. Providing a proper response to greeting and to a question / a short, simple, spoken clearly and very slowly instruction, that is accompanied by gestures of the speaker.

   1.2. Recognition of the names of the objects from the immediate universe in messages clearly and slowly articulated.

   1.3. Manifestation of curiosity towards global significance notification of movies and songs for children in that modern language.

The ability to listen is an essential part of the skills necessary to foreign language learning, it places in center the auditory memory and it requires attention and focus from the child. Listening can be learned. So, during the foreign...
language lessons, the teacher should provide moments of listening that will allow the student to learn to focus to listen better and to understand better.

The activities of auditory discrimination proposed during the foreign language class, touch other areas of learning: the musical field, the discovery of the world of sound, the development of the phonological awareness.

2. Oral production in situations of usual communication.
   2.1. Reproduction of information / songs / short and simple poems with the teacher support.
   2.2. Providing basic information, punctual about self (name, gender, age) with support from the interlocutor.
   2.3. Naming objects in the immediate universe.

We make the following remarks on the development of communicative skills: learning a foreign language is not learning to repeat like a parrot some greetings, stereotypes questions and answers in a communication devoid of content. The teacher should make possible that the student learn the use of a language which, in various situations, serves as the mother tongue to do things with words.

3. Receiving simple written messages.
   3.1. Manifestation of curiosity for decoding of short, simple written messages in the immediate universe.

Students’ abilities on reading in their native language are developing and therefore it is preferable only to achieve a rather attitudinal skill.

4. Writing simple messages in situations of usual communication.
   4.1. Participation in group projects / to the classroom level where to develop short messages with support.

It is noted that these skills of simple message writing require the realization of posters, for example, the poster of the month – students draw or bring images that reflect the acquisitions and they stick labels provided by the teacher for each drawing. It results into written messages developed by students, with the teacher’s support and opportunities to read labels (Curriculum, OMECTS nr. 3656 / 29.03.2012). Note of inadvertence: while in the mother tongue lesson, in the preparatory class, students only recognize letters, how could they read written messages in a foreign language?

d. - examples of learning activities that develop specific skills;

e. - methodological suggestions – to guide the teacher in organizing the teaching approach.

A first methodological suggestion refers to the use of non-verbal to intuition for concepts, whether it is about names of objects or actions, or about communication filters such as language functions, speech acts.

Another suggestion involves playful approach - everything it happens at the modern language class, should be run as a suite of games and fun workouts. It is also very important the learning in the context. (OMECTS no. 3656 / 29.03.2012)

The systematic reproduction activities that we notice that are being insisted on in the preparatory class curriculum do not allow the communication development. It is important for the students to be able to perform complex tasks using the foreign language they are learning, and not just training tasks, even if they are indispensable.

We therefore suggest the introduction of complementary approaches to those proposed in the curriculum, developed also by Hélène Vanthier (2009):

- the pluri-sensorial approach. The teacher must address a pluri-sensorial learning that appeals to visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic perceptions, for the exploring foreign language to be in harmony with body language. A series of sensory-motor activities would provide a learning context which brings in presence the language learning with the experiential learning: to look, to touch, to listen, to see, to feel, to say, to mimic, to draw.

- an intercultural approach that allows students to compare their experiences with those of other children in the world and to discover cultures that are part of the language studied. Examples of content: the schedule of the children in other foreign countries, the subjects that they study, dietary habits, holidays, stories, riddles, games, even if the discussions raised by these topics will be in their native language.

- an interdisciplinary approach. At this age (6 years old), we must overcome the idea of a language course designed as a separate/special course. Learning a foreign language is not only to learn that foreign language, but to learn in that foreign language, using approaches and cognitive activities specific to other subjects: to observe, to analyze, to sort, to categorize. This interdisciplinary approach is possible at an early age as language learning will coincide with the conceptual learning. So, learning a foreign language is constructed in relation to other subjects:
The young age learner is not an exclusively cognitive student because he/she reacts with all his/her personality, perceptions and emotions. He/she understands and learns with the others, starting from situations in which he/she is involved and which make sense to him/her. So, the teacher will have to propose situations and activities with concrete tasks in which perceptions, body, emotions, and cognitive abilities are involved.

A competence is recognized in action, a competence means knowing how to act in a given context. The key point for achieving a skill is the student activity placed in a contextualized task.

4. The benefits of early foreign language learning

The current educational theories focus on language as a communication tool. In this context, specialists insist on beginning the study of a foreign language at an early age. Specialized studies in the ages’ psychology field (Gesell, 1956), show the benefits of the early initiation of studying a foreign language on the reading and speaking performance of the children in their mother tongue (Garfinkel & Tabor, 1991; Armstrong & Rogers, 1997).

Arnold Gesell pursues the child development from birth and develops one of the first development inventories divided into areas of development. According to Gesell’s concept, the development is divided into: the motor field, the cognitive-sensorial field, language and communication, autonomy and self-service skills. Gesell monitors the baby’s evolution based on growth and maturation of the nervous system correlated with the process of psychological acquisitions.

Recent cognitive theories show that language is a factor in the cognitive development of children, but also an object of knowledge. Early teaching of modern languages is built on the intellectual and audio-phonetic malleability of the child who, in his early years (up to six or seven years old) is more apt to get a good understanding and a good pronunciation in a foreign language because the brain is still growing, and, according to Troubetzkoy, the „phonetic filter“ of the mother tongue does not completely erase the hearing capacities.

In 2002, Johnstone gives an answer to the question which is the best age to start foreign language learning? and he identifies the gains of a child who begins to study at the age of 5 or 6 years old (or even sooner) comparatively with one who starts at 9-10 years of age:

- the younger is likely to find it easier to acquire a good command of the sound system of the language, not only the pronunciation of individual sounds but also patterns of intonation;
- the younger is likely to be less „language anxious“ than many older learners and hence he/she may be more able to absorb language rather than block it out;
- the younger is likely to have more time available overall. If young beginners (5 years old) are compared with older beginners (10 years old), after one year, the older group is likely to be ahead. However, if both groups are compared at the age of 14 years old, the younger beginners stand a better chance of being ahead, in part because of the greater amount of time available overall;
- an earlier start enables productive links to be made between first and additional languages, which can have important benefits for a child’s language awareness and literacy;
- a range of acquisition processes can come into play, e.g. largely intuitive processes at an early age, complemented by more analytical processes later. This potentially allows the additional language to become more deeply embedded in the person;
- there can be a positive influence on children’s general educational development (e.g. cognitive, emotional, cultural) and on the formation of a multilingual and intercultural identity.“

The advantages of introducing foreign language learning at an early age are also highlighted by Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg (2009):

- the positive impact on children’s intellectual evolution,
- the development of flexible thinking, of the acoustic sensitivity towards the language,
- the improvement of the identity report between the child and the language,
- the opening of the channels of communication with individuals belonging to other linguistic and cultural systems,
- the increase of the self-confidence and of the confidence in the formative-educational potential of the school,
- the increase of the chances of professional success.

Specialists as Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek (2006) consider that the age is only one of many determinants of early initiation efficiency in learning a foreign language and that it is beneficial if added by the fulfillment of conditions such as:
- the existence of an appropriate learning environment,
- the interactive character of the classes,
- the quality teaching provided by teachers who have the necessary knowledge and skills.

5. Conclusions

We must specify that the period of the early age school which begins at 6-7 years old, is characterized by a remarkable development of the sensitivity and sensorial receptivity. The child feels a „thirst for impressions“, shows a „sensorial curiosity“, on which base he/she gathers increasingly more information and perceives more details of the reality. The special development of the sensorial capacities can also demonstrate the possibility of various stimuli reception. Although the early age learner faces some difficulties specific to the age, we must have in mind that the theory of development of the proximal zone of Vigotsky, applied in the case of foreign language learning, argues that what it is happening in the school with the child has only the gift to ensure his/her development.

Given the brain plasticity specific to early childhood that mediates spontaneous learning, but also the systematic learning, it is considered that from the age of 3-4 years old, it is recommended the initiation of the approach of foreign language learning because the familiarization with a foreign language creates an elasticity in communication, which will determine a much easier adaptation to the problems specific to the school period.

Other benefits identified: the positive impact on children’s language development and on their intercultural awareness, but also the easier introducing of the second language in subsequent classes.

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