LANGUAGE POLICIES APPLIED TO THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: Starting from the idea that global communication is vital in our era and that multilingualism is one of the building blocks of the European Union, this paper discusses the extent to which the Romanian status quo of teaching foreign languages in its public school system is or not integrated in the European setting. Emphasis will be put on drawing a general framework of the European Union's guidelines and legislature and the manner in which they are put into practice in our country. Furthermore, the paper discusses the differences between the foreign languages that are taught in the Romanian public school system, in comparison to the rest of the member-states. Then, an analysis of the languages which are studied will be made, proving once more, the fact that English is without a doubt the 'language market leader'.

Keywords: European Union, legislation, education, foreign languages, public schools

This paper is intended to put light on the extent to which the Romanian status quo is or not integrated in the European setting. Emphasis will be put on drawing a general EU framework and on the extent to which foreign languages are taught in Romania as compared to the rest of the Union. The research and data analysis took place for over two years, in order to take into consideration not only the *status quo*, but also the development of Romania's compliance and adaptation to the Union's requirements.

The emergence of the European Union meant that a plethora of changes had to take place in all of its member states and the states applying for membership. Among the changes, a major role was that of the citizens' ability to communicate among themselves within the EU's extended borders. Since language planning, and hence language policies have traditionally "focused on the actions of governments and similar macro-level institutions. […] The chief concerns were related to issues of creating national unity and developing and

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maintaining effective communication within emerging nations"[1], it became clear that consistency, as well as diversity were about to play a major role in the case of teaching modern languages.

The European Union Framework

Being a member of the European Union, the Romanian state has to abide by its rules and it must implement any and every measure dictated by the EU Parliament. As a freely-constituted association of nations, each with its own national language, the EU recognises as official all the languages of the member states. One of the main issues of such an organism is that of inter-cultural communication and of surpassing the linguistic barrier. Translating and interpreting are the first measures taken by the European Community. Furthermore, the need that European citizens have to learn foreign languages and, subsequently, for them to be taught in schools is continuously reinforced by the Council of Europe. This was the case in 2014, when the Council of Europe stated that "the level of language skills of many young people in Europe could be improved and that, despite some progress in recent decades, there is still considerable variation across countries in terms of access to language learning"[2].

The European Council and Multilingualism

The European Language Policy states the importance of learning foreign languages in various manners – as part of the mandatory curriculum in schools or in any other possible situation. This is an open gate for multilingualism to increasingly take its toll on the members of the European Community. On 23 May, 2008, the Council of the European Union gave a report concerning multilingualism, stating that "as well as contributing to personal and cultural enrichment, a knowledge of languages is one of the basic skills European citizens need to acquire in order to play an active part in the European knowledge society, and one that both promotes mobility and facilitates social integration and cohesion"[3].

This encourages citizens around Europe to learn new languages or to, at least, encourage their children to do so. Furthermore, the Council agrees that "since language needs may vary according to each individual's interests, work and cultural background, the broadest

[1] Liddicoat, A., Richard B. Baldauf Jr., "Language Planning in Local Contexts: Agents, Contexts and Interactions" in Language Planning and Policy: Language Planning in Local Context, Anthony J. Liddicoat and Richard B. Baldauf, Jr., eds., 2008, p. 3
[2] EUR-Lex, Web, 28 Nov, 2015 < http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52014XG0614%2806%29>
[3] EUR-Lex, Web, 28 Nov, 2015 < http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2008.140.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2008:140:FULL >

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possible range of languages should be available to learners, with the support of new technologies, innovative approaches and networking between educational providers"[4].

By remarking that "quality teaching is essential for successful learning at any age and efforts should therefore be made to ensure that language teachers have a solid command of the language they teach, have access to high quality initial and continuous training and possess the necessary intercultural skills"[5]. Thus, foreign language teaching in an organised fashion is clearly supported and promoted by the EU, precisely with the purpose of making it easier for various economic stakeholders to take their business all around the continent, impervious to linguistic differences.

The same report notes that the same stakeholders find that "insufficient account is still taken of language needs in European society". This is clearly proved by the increasing tendency of local multinational companies that are searching to employ personnel that has a proficient knowledge of foreign languages and train them in their future area of expertise, rather than the other way around.

The Romanian School System and the Learning of Foreign Languages

The European Union is one of the major organisms of the modern world that created sustainable language policies due to the increasing globalisation that its existence meant. The manner in which the EU's fervent encouraging of the teaching of foreign languages in primary and secondary education took its toll on member states and implicitly, even before 2007, on Romanian legislation. The actions undertaken by the Union were meant to bring an increase in the quantity and, simultaneously, the quality of the taught foreign languages. The Eurostat platform contains statistics regarding the situation of primary and secondary education language teaching, as well as it evolution during the last years.

The level of interest towards the study of foreign languages appears to grow with time at the level of the EU. Studies have shown the increasing percentages of pupils learning foreign languages during their compulsory education in the member states.

A short presentation of the findings of a study published in 2012 by Eurostat is necessary in order to properly perceive the place that Romania holds in relation to other member states. The study differentiates between primary and secondary education. The first category is explained in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) as beginning between five and seven years of age, being the start of compulsory education where

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

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it exists and generally covering six years of full-time schooling. Secondary education is divided between lower and upper secondary education, the first ending when the pupils reach 15 or 16 years of age, while the latter varying in length from two to five years[6].

The statistic took into consideration only English, French and German for foreign languages taught in schools. If in 2010, the EU average percentage of pupils in primary education learning English was just under 75, the figure for Romania was just under 50%. I must stress the fact that the Union percentage of pupils learning French and German in the primary level is barely noticeable on the chart[7].

The situation improves with statistics related to secondary education curriculum, where the EU average of pupils learning two or more foreign languages has decreased by 2.6% from 2005, reaching in 2010, 59.6%. Romania has improved significantly in this respect, gaining 6.5%, reaching the impressive percentage of 98.3. Again, English is by far the most learnt foreign language across the EU, with 92.7% of the member-state pupils learning it as a foreign language in their secondary education, while both French and German are studied by approximately a quarter of them. Romania is, again, slightly above the EU average in respects to learners of English as a foreign language, with 98.7% of pupils studying it, whereas our remnant Francophile character is still noticeable in the 86.3% of pupils learning it in their secondary education in 2010. Only in respects to learning German as a foreign language is Romania situated below the EU average, with only 11.8% of pupils learning this language in schools[8].

Furthermore, another Eurostat study – 'Key Data on Education in 2012' – shows that for secondary compulsory curriculum, above 15% of it is allotted to the study of foreign languages, similar to that allotted for the study of Romanian language and literature[9].

So, it is safe to say that the Romanian trend is to teach foreign languages in schools more and more extensively. This is most likely due to the fact that knowledge of one or several foreign languages increases the employability chances of the future graduate.

The European Council and Language Competences

[6] Eurostat, Web, 23 May, 2013. < http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Glossary:Primary_education>
[7] Eurostat, Web, 23 May, 2013. <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Foreign_language_learning_statistics#Main_statistical_findings>
[8] Ibid.
[9] Eurostat, Web, 23 May 2013. <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/978-92-9201-242-7/EN/978-92-9201-242-7-EN.PDF>

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Competency in foreign languages is regarded highly by the European council. In the November, 2012 report, 'Language competences for employability, mobility and growth', the European Commission severely criticises the lack of foreign language competency for pupils enrolled in either of the stages of compulsory education[10].

Despite the fact that, as I proved in the previous section, the Romanian school system provides extensive foreign language training, as do all the member states, the Commission has found an astonishing reality:

"The outcome of foreign language learning in Europe is poor: only four in ten pupils reach the 'independent user' level in the first foreign language, indicating an ability to have a simple conversation. Only one quarter attains this level in the second foreign language. Too many pupils — 14% for the first language and 20% for the second — do not reach the 'basic user' level which means that they are not able to use very simple language, even with support. At the same time, almost half of Europeans report that they are unable to hold a conversation in any language other than their mother tongue."[11]

This truly raises a problem: why is the outcome so poor if extensive measures are taken to ensure foreign language teaching from early stages? Most likely, it is due to the lack of proper training of teachers – and this is not necessarily about their scientific, linguistic training. Proper, more attractive and age-appropriate methods must be used in order to get and maintain the pupils' attention.

For languages learnt in school to prove an asset to employability and work-related mobility throughout the European Union, the speaker should reach a high level of usage – B2 or C1 – of the Common European Framework for Languages. Correlated with another statement of the Commission that remarks the necessity of 'proficiency in more than one language' to make a decisive difference in the near future for citizens. The reality is that:

"For the first of the two languages tested in each country, only 42% of tested pupils reach the level of 'independent users' (levels B1 and B2 of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR).

For the second language tested, only 25% reach the same level.

[10] EUR-Lex, Web, 28 Nov 2015. < http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52012SC0372>
[11] EUR-Lex, Web, 28 Nov 2015. < http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex:52012SC0372>

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A source of concern is that a consistent percentage of pupils—14% for the first language and 20% or the second—do not even reach the basic user level (level A1of the CEFR).”[12]

Taking into consideration all these realities, the European Commission advises member states on five key issues that must be taken into consideration if this problem is to be solved. They are: *quantity*, *quality*, *focus*, *guidance* and *monitoring*. The first two refer to the necessity of allotting more hours of study for foreign languages in the compulsory curriculum and providing better training for teachers of foreign languages. *Focus* is aimed at the outcomes of the teaching process, whether or not it provides the learner with the competences required to sustain employability. The latter two issues state that member states should provide pupils and their parents with guidance related to foreign language learning and that they should monitor the developments in learning outcomes, in order to verify if their own linguistic policies are appropriate or not.

By 2014, the situation had improved in some respects. Data collected by Eurostat suggests that the Romanian public schools are trying to adapt to the needs of the citizens, by offering an increasing variety of foreign languages. Furthermore, there is a rather large variety of available foreign languages in the curricula, even if they are not the first choice, as is the case of English. The table below contains data structured from the Eurostat platform, showing the percentage of pupils who were, at that time, studying particular foreign languages, according to their education level[13].

[12] Ibid.
[13] Eurostat, Web, 29 Nov 2015. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/data/database?p_p_id=NavTreeportletprod_WAR_NavTreeportletprod_INSTANCE_LUWsdX8ute5m&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-2&p_p_col_count=1>

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	Primary education (%)	Lower Secondary education (%)	Upper secondary (%)	Upper Secondary – General (%)	Upper Secondary - Vocational(%)
English	69.3	99.4	99.2	99.3	99.2
French	13.2	84.4	87.0	85.2	88.3
German	1.9	10.7	9.1	12.8	6.4
Spanish	0.2	0.5	1.3	2.5	0.5
Italian	0.2	0.4	1.1	1.5	0.7
Russian	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Portuguese	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
Japanese	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
Chinese	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0

Table 1- Pupils by education level and modern foreign language studied - % of pupils by language studied

To conclude, I would mention that it is noticeable how, in the Romanian public school system, there is a trend towards a dominance of English, despite the attempts to diversify the offer of foreign languages, perhaps somehow linked to what François Grin noticed when talking about economic factors in creating a language policy, namely that there is, "in the case of the European Union, the progressive, though presently not official, drift toward the dominant, or even sole, use of English as a working language of European institutions […]."[14]

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