QUALITY AND INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS IN ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:
Quality has always been one of the most important objectives in Romanian education at all levels, crossing through and uniting the whole process. Even the multiple changes taking place in this field, some not very inspired, let alone inspirational, are, perhaps, the very proof of genuine preoccupation towards bettering things, which means basically a preoccupation towards quality.

The paper focuses on some qualitative aspects in the Romanian tuition system from a multicultural perspective provided by both Romanian and foreign students studying together in ASE. The data was collected by means of questionnaires and direct observation during Business English seminars.

Key words:
Education, quality, intercultural aspects, study of foreign languages.

1. Introduction

Investing in education actually means investing in the future of a nation. Wise people realize that the 'now' of today will soon be the 'then' of tomorrow, so there is no time to be wasted. Education is one of the fields in which most investments are for the future and the outcome is in the long run. It is rather frustrating to know that what is being consumed now will have no immediate, let alone palpable, results. In a society when "buy now, pay later" has become almost a *modus vivendi*, it is increasingly hard to "pay now" and "hopefully see your kinds prosper". By all standards this looks like bad business. However, what can be more deceiving than appearances? Actually, not only is this not bad business, but exactly the way in which big businesses are done.

2. Foreign Language Teaching in the European Union

In Romania, the study of foreign languages has an average representation as compared to other education systems in the European Union member countries. Children start the first foreign language when they are in the 3rd grade, around the age of 8, and the second foreign language at the age of 10; both languages are compulsory subjects of the curriculum until graduation, which means either 16 years of age or 18, depending on the number of years spent in upper secondary education[1]. As we can see in **Figure 1**, the number of hours allotted for language study doubles when the second foreign language is introduced, the sum total being

[1] The Romanian tuition system comprises ten compulsory grades, and only those students who go up to the 12th grade are 18 when graduating.

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472 hours to be taught for the first foreign language over eight years, and 354 hours for the second foreign language, over six years. The situation is very different form one European country to another, even as far as studying one or more foreign languages is concerned. There are countries like Denmark, Spain, and Belgium (the French community), where only one foreign language is studied[2].

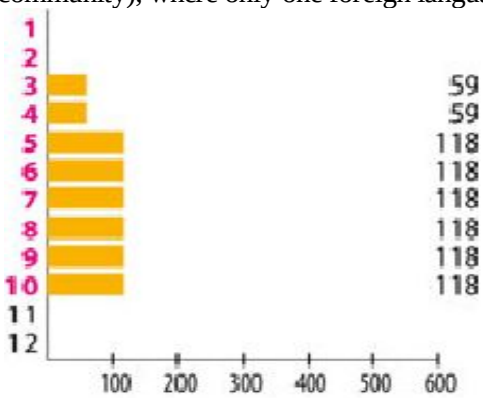


Figure 1: Recommended minimum annual taught time for foreign languages as compulsory subjects in full-time compulsory general education, 2010/11
Horizontal axis: Number of hours per school year
Vertical axis: Grades
Source: Eurydice (2012, p.113)

Actually the number of hours allocated to the study of foreign languages is rather small in comparison with the interest Romanian people in general, and especially young people have towards learning foreign languages, English ranking first in their options. The reality is that the official compulsory education system in Romania unfolds against the background of a solid private tutorial system, mostly unofficial and scarcely controlled by state authorities. A private official education system also exists, but quite insufficient, sometimes even prohibitive as far as costs are concerned. The existence of this parallel tuition system, partially explains why Romanian students are relatively proficient in foreign languages.

According to the same European report, the proportion of foreign languages out of the total curricular subjects is, in Romania 4.7% for primary school and 14% for secondary schools, as compared to Luxemburg with a percentage of 40.5% in primary school and 35.7% in secondary school[3]. Although Romania ranks close to the European mean, the difference between the highest position and

[2] EURYDICE EUROSTAT, 2012, "Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe", at: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/143EN.pdf (retrieved 26 February, 2013),.p. 114
[3] Eurydice, 2012, p. 122.

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the rest is impressive, which actually shows that the issue is not legally regulated at the European level, but each country is given complete freedom of choice.

The number of students in a class is another element that greatly differs from one European Union country to another according to the same data source. In some countries the number of students admitted in foreign language classes is not the same as in the rest of the classes, where other subjects are taught. The minimum number is in Slovakia (17 students – for foreign language classes) and the highest in United Kingdom, Scotland (33 students – for all classes). In Romania the number of students allowed in a class is also regulated, maximum 25 for primary school and maximum 30 for secondary school, for all classes[4].

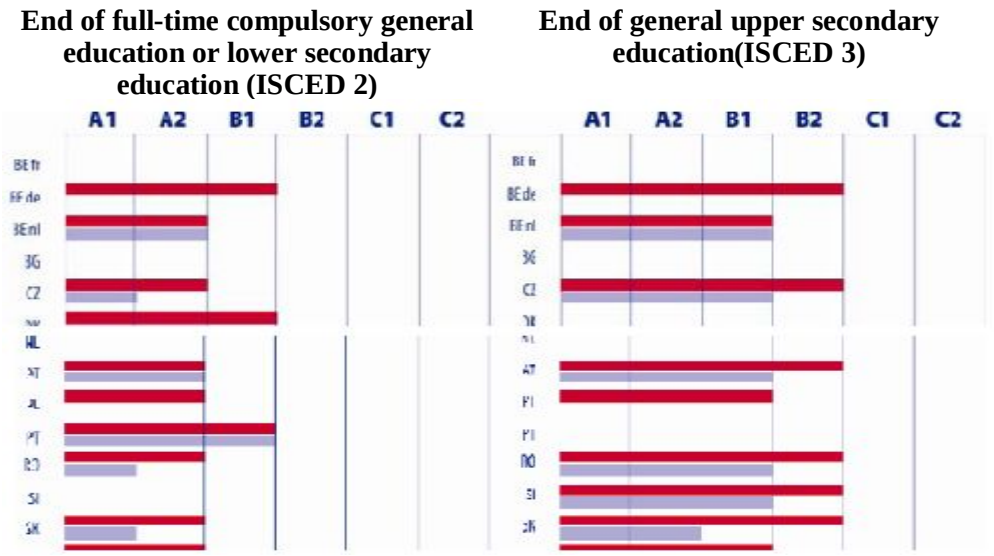


Figure 2: Expected minimum levels of attainment based on CEFR for the first and second foreign language(s) at the end of full-time compulsory general education or lower secondary education (ISCED[5] 2) and general upper secondary education (ISCED 3), 2010/11

First foreign language

Second foreign language

Source: Eurydice (2012, p. 131).

As far as assessment is concerned, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), published by the European Council in 2001, is used in Romania as a most important tool in establishing a minimum level of

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 123.

[5] International Standard Classification of Education.

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knowledge when evaluating language proficiency. The minimum attainment levels apply at the end of the compulsory tuition cycle and, as we can see (**Figure 2)**, in Romania, the two levels differ from one language to another, the first foreign language having a higher evaluation standard. In the majority of the EU countries, Romania included, the first foreign language which is studied is English, and the minimum level to be attained is higher than that for any other foreign language studied as first foreign language. However, at the end of the compulsory general education, no language certificates of international recognition are awarded, in Romania as well as in a few other EU countries, like Spain, the Low Countries and Scotland. The general tendency is, therefore, that Romanian students enroll for Cambridge examinations, usually the advanced level. On the other hand, such certificates are not valid for ISCED 5 or 6, that is at tertiary level, first stage and second, respectively. Foreign language study at tertiary level is entirely regulated by each institution of higher education, according to its own needs and policies. Although this sometimes leads to gaps and interruptions in the students' preparation in foreign languages, it is at this level that most Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) Programmes take place, both in the bachelor and master cycle.

3. Student Perception of Quality in Romanian Higher Education

The previous part of the present paper has been devoted to some aspects concerning the Romanian tuition system before tertiary education, and especially the study of foreign languages. The next pages will take the insight one step further by focusing on higher education, as seen through the direct experience of those involved.

For this purpose, in October 2012, I organized a survey among four groups of mixed students, Romanian and foreign. In the survey participated 71 students from ASE, Bucharest, most of them studying in the Bachelor cycle, the second year, at the Faculty of Business Administration. There were also 13 first year students comprised in the Master Programme Business Communication in English which unfolds within the Faculty of International Business and Economics. Both programmes, the bachelor and the master one are taught entirely in English, therefore it is here that we can find the largest number of foreigners studying in ASE.

Out of the 71 participants, 55 were Romanian students and 16 were foreign ones. The majority, very young students, with the age comprised between 20 and 22: 44 students of 20, 5 students of 21, and 12 students of 22. The extremes looked as follows: two foreign students aged 18, one Romanian and one foreigner of 26, one master student of 28 and one of 44 and 4 students who chose not to mention their age. If we express these figures in percentages, we can see that 85.9% of the students interviewed were between 20 and 22 years old.

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3.1 Survey results of foreign students

The questions addressed to foreign students focused both on the Romanian tuition system, of which they were part, and the cultural environment as seen from their own point of view. Most of the foreign students questioned were full-time students, only two of them belonging to Erasmus mobility programmes, and I believe that this detail is worth mentioning as their opinion was largely based on first impressions gathered in a relatively short period of time, rather than on filtered experience.

Most of the foreign students who answered the questionnaire came from Arab countries, like Syria, Jordan, Iraq, The United Arab Emirates, as well as from China, Turkey, Bulgaria, Lithuania, France and the USA.

The reason for which they chose to study in Romania, which appeared as the second question in the questionnaire, was mainly because they came with their family who was working or doing business here. In the case of Erasmus students, it was either at the advice of friends who had been here before and recommended the country, or simply because of the difference in cultures, which aroused their curiosity. Another reason for which they chose to study here was because they consider the Romanian tuition system to be most accessible, as far as money is concerned. By comparing the academic level of tuition to the fees, the rapport obtained is quite encouraging. On the other hand, the opinion of Romanian students as to the fees for foreign students was totally different, which speaks a lot as to the living standard of the average Romanian as compared with the above mentioned countries.

The most relevant question for the present study was: *How would you characterize the Romanian tuition system?* Five students chose not to answer this question, while most of the answers were positive, describing the Romanian education system as "fair"[6], "professional", "efficient", "based on logical explanations", but also "cheap", affordable", the last two having also been mentioned before, but not by the same students, as one of the reasons for choosing to study in Romania. It is to be noticed that most of the positive feedback was given by the foreign students who were actually raised or born in Romania, and who were, therefore, rather accustomed to Romanian realities and had already spent some time in the Romanian tuition system. Even though it is very likely that most of them were rather familiarized with the private one, the mere fact that they had been in contact with Romanian teachers and students helped them become better acquainted with a totally different cultural environment.

Most of the negative remarks pointed to the lack of "practical exercises", "too much theory", "not efficient when it comes to paperwork" and "old facilities",

[6] The words in inverted commas are quoted from the students' answers.

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the last remark belonging to a master student. The harshest criticism came from the Erasmus students, who, as I have mentioned before, at the time of the enquiry, had not been long in Romania. They were absolutely baffled by the new system and described it as "weird", "strange" and "very bad organized". I need to mention the fact that after this first "cultural shock" passed, things seemed to become smoother. By the end of the semester, one of the Erasmus students mentioned above gave most positive feedback, during an oral presentation, as to his Romanian experience, both in terms of how he related to people here and how he benefitted professionally.

The way in which the foreign students perceived the Romanian people in general also differed greatly. For instance, to Turkish students, as compared with their own people, Romanians seemed "more calm", and Romania "a very peaceful country with a low level of stress". Some other students labeled Romanians as being "so hospitable" (Azerbaijani), "nice and always help me" (Chinese) even "very helpful" (Jordanian), "more romantic, nervous" (Bulgarian), "more open, more talkative" (Lithuanian). On the other hand we find quite the opposite, "some of them are not friendly" (Iraqi), "so cold, they don't like to talk, to be more open" (Palestinian), "agitated and stressed"(Jordanian-Romanian). Many comments remarked on a different kind of attitude and state of mind as well as with a different hierarchy of values, by "different" implying "needing reassessing, readjusting".

These answers prove that there is a great difference between the Romanian cultural environment, even seen from the educational perspective, and the one in the country from which the interviewed foreign students originate. The degree in which they manage to relate to an alien cultural environment has to do with their age, the time spent there and, of course, with their own personality. Even if some of the answers seemed critical, sometimes rightfully so, the general impression that these students give when working together with their Romanian colleagues is one of complete cooperation. From my teaching experience I could actually say that mixed groups work much better than those one hundred percent either Romanian or foreign.

3.2. Survey results of Romanian students

The majority of the Romanian students surveyed had never studied abroad, but, in most cases, this experience was part of their future plans. Out of 55 Romanian students only 5 had studied abroad. This means that an overwhelming 90% of the students interviewed had never experienced, first hand, another tuition system, but the Romanian one. As to travelling abroad, only 18% of the respondents (10 students), had never been abroad, which means that the majority of the Romanian students interviewed had been in touch with other cultures through direct experience. Actually, according to their answers, the main benefits from travelling abroad had to do with the cultural aspect: "learn about new

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cultures", "I saw new people and different mentalities", "talking to people that were raised in a different culture and learning things from a different point of view", to quote just a few.

Many answers focused, as well, on the language benefit, especially English. However, the main accent was laid on the cultural differences and how encountering new people and new cultures can change people for the better, either by discovering new things about yourself and your own country by becoming detached from the daily routine, or simply by learning how other people deal with similar problems and, thus, improving your own *modus operandi*. Whatever the way in which the answers were formulated, the content showed a great propensity towards finding new things, adopting what was good and paying attention to different approaches, basically, changing attitudes and ways of thinking.

The most relevant question for the present study was: *In what does the Romanian tuition system differ from the one in other countries?* In order to answer this question the students were asked to either use their personal experience where the case, or other sources, if first-hand experience was not available. The answers of the students who had studied abroad were, as expected, to the point, actually comparing the two tuition systems in terms of information content, way of assessment, financing, teacher-students relationship.

The students' opinions can be summed up as follows: the information content is more relevant in foreign universities, the assessment is based more on projects, therefore, the number of exams is lesser than in Romania, there is a state supported system for student loans, with lesser or no interest, and, finally, there is more interaction between students and teachers during courses. With regard to the last topic I would like to mention that some of the foreign students remarked on the fact that in universities abroad students are more respectful towards their professors.

The majority of the students whose answers were based on indirect sources remarked on the theoretical aspect of the Romanian tuition system, as compared to the more practical one in foreign universities. Some of the comments were neutral in tone, but the majority read dissatisfaction in connection with this topic. Not many examples were given, but the one that outranked by far all the others was the USA education system.

Second came the remarks on affordability, this time the Romanian tuition system having an advantage. We consider these answers to be positive, but only in an indirect way. Most of the other remarks were negative and focused on the rigidity of the system, sometimes doubled by that of the teachers, the outdated technology and information content as well as the lack of investments in education. There were also students who declined to answer by arguing they knew very little on the subject, or simply did not answer at all.

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On the whole, the general perception was far from being a positive one, actually if we look at the corresponding percentages we can see that 45.4% of the respondents produced negative, or indirectly negative comments, while only 12.69% of the students made positive, or indirectly positive remarks. However, the predominant feeling was not of disappointment, but rather of objectivity.

3.3 Final results and personal remarks

After quantifying the results of this survey the situation looks as follows:

Perception	Romanian students	Foreign students
negative	25.4%	18.75%
indirectly negative	20%	6.25 %
neutral	21.8%	-
no answer	20%	31.25%
positive	3.6%	43.75%
indirectly positive	9.09%	-

According to the final results, it is the foreign students who have a more optimistic view when it comes to the Romanian higher education, the positive answers representing a percentage of 43.75% as compared to the Romanian students with only 3.6%. Hopefully, this critical attitude of our young generation will turn into critical thinking and, later on, into positive changes.

Another remark would be on the 'more to the point' answers given by the foreign students who were quite specific about their opinions, the percentage of 'indirectly positive/negative' being much lower or even nonexistent than in the case of Romanian students.

Personally, I believe that working with culturally mixed groups has become increasingly challenging, as well as rewarding. A possible explanation may lie in the fact that the number of foreign students has grown as compared with ten years ago. This fact alone would not be capable of making a difference, however its being accompanied by a corresponding increase in the quality of the students does make a great difference.

In recent years the foreign students with whom I have had the chance to work have become more receptive to the academic work discipline, while the Romanian students have become more involved and responsive to the content of seminar activities. As I watch them work together during the seminars, I have noticed that there is a constant and, at the same time, subtle transfer of information, approach and attitude between Romanian and foreign students. They manage to complete each other in a most impressive way, capitalizing on each others' pluses. What Romanians lack in spontaneity, they can add in accuracy. Foreign students are more familiar with the functional aspect of a foreign

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language, therefore more comfortable with oral productions and communication techniques in general. On the other hand, Romanian students are more oriented on language accuracy and precision of message, being better equipped for written productions. To paraphrase a famous saying about the difference between managers and leaders, I could say that foreign students are mostly focused on transmitting the right message, whereas Romanian students are preoccupied with transmitting the message right. As far as language is concerned I strongly believe that both approaches are needed and that no delimitation line can be drawn between the two.

4. Conclusions

The paper focused on some quality aspects concerning the Romanian tuition system, especially in higher education, as seen through the eyes of those directly involved. The fact that they happened to belong to different cultural environments was a welcome addition to the study because it offered the necessary detachment and an augmented perspective on the matter.

Tertiary education is an ongoing process, which is both preceded and followed by other layers of education. That is the reason why the present study highlighted some aspects in primary and secondary school, with an accent on language teaching. As we could see, before enrolling for university, students are supposed to have a CEFR B2 level in English, which is unlikely to be achieved by all the students comprised in formal education. The tuition process in Romania may be unitary, but hardly even throughout the country, the reasons being diverse and not always objective. Therefore, more than once have we seen that the merit of high language achievers rests not as much with the school, as a system, but with the parents and their private initiative.

The prevailing negative tone in which our youth perceive the Romanian tuition system in general is hardly encouraging, however this very perception may constitute the inception of optimism, because it denotes awareness. The fact that Romanian young people are extremely open toward other cultures, as well as interested in self-development and constantly measure up to what is happening internationally is, by all standards, positive. Of course this existing propensity needs to be better supported at institutional level.

In conclusion, there is no denying that many things need to be changed so that the Romanian tuition system should grow in quality but, it is equally true that the system has already produced the premises to become better: the current generation of students.

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