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Content Considerations for a Framework of Reference for Language(s) of School Education

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Abstract

When speaking about a curriculum for Language(s) of School Education (LE), we have to integrate the content elements of its three components: Language as a Subject (LS), Foreign Language (FL) and Language across the Curriculum (LAC) in terms of both vertical progression and horizontal correlation.

The focus on communication / communicative competences and attitudes is what connects the three components and this may be the starting point for identifying any other convergence of aims, content and methodology.

An integrated communicative approach to language and literature could be a common curricular option for LS and FL and also an opportunity for developing plurilingualism. Identifying the overlaps of the three components of LE and the specificity of each of them as regards content can offer a basis for such an integrated vision. Various possibilities for structuring content in an LE curriculum, the tension between language and literature in LS or FL, and different ways of defining linguistic or cultural competences are also discussed below.

Progression in aims and content in an LE curriculum can be important for the coherence of the proposal and for students' learning and development. An illustration of this concept is also offered as a possible starting point for discussion.

A general problem in education today is that a competence-focused curriculum implies an essential shift in methodology and understanding of teaching and learning in relation to certain well-defined goals. The ways of approaching content in LE need to be based on a common philosophy of learning and this implies a certain continuity and coherence in methodology in all three components of LE as well as in other subjects. Methodological recommendations regarding the translation of a philosophy of 'Bildung'[1] into teacher training and teaching practice may also be considered as necessary steps in developing a framework of reference for LE.

In order to design a coherent LE project we have to take into consideration the general aims of education formulated within European education policy documents so as to select the content and the methodology that are relevant not only for LS or FL, but also for communication within the curriculum as a whole (LAC).

[1] *Bildung* (in German) means developing and bringing out the full potential of a human being, based on his/her nature, but stimulated and structured by education (nurture). This dynamic concept encompasses both the product or relative state reached by a human being as well as the process of becoming educated/becoming one's own self. During this process the mental, cultural and practical capacities as much as the personal and social competencies are being developed and continuously widened in a holistic way.

1. A general perspective on content in an LE curriculum

1.1 Ways of understanding content

Content can be defined in terms of elements of knowledge recommended for teaching/learning by a curriculum. Each school subject has some specific content (in LS, for example, there is content related to language and to literature; it may belong to phonetics, morphology, syntax, or to genres or to concepts of literary theory). There are also content elements common to more than one school subject. This is the case with the knowledge of the sequence of tenses (which follows different rules in different languages) or with the narrative or descriptive discourse (which may have different structures and functions in different types of texts – fiction or non-fiction).

In order to better understand the role of content in curriculum design, we have to use a broader contextual perspective. From this point of view, selecting content is related both to the aims of teaching and learning and to certain methodological approaches. In other words, content is defined in terms of means of attaining certain aims by using a methodology that fits the general philosophy of education reflected in a curriculum.

Many countries today have competence-focused curricula. This means that content is selected and understood as a basis or means for developing certain competences derived from the general aims of education. But defining competences may turn into a controversial discussion. This is why we shall use the definition formulated in *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework,* in *Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union*. In this document, competences are understood as involving knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be developed in eight 'Domains of key competences'. Some of these domains are related to some specific subjects (for example, *communication in mother tongue* or *communication in foreign languages,* which are basically the fields of LS and FL respectively), but there are also larger domains (*learning to learn*, *cultural expression, entrepreneurship*) that imply transferable competences. This perspective illuminates the fact that the educational process is not seen merely as a purveyor of knowledge and procedures, but also as playing an important role in shaping students' personality, in stimulating them to gain autonomy for both personal growth and social and cultural participation. From this point of view, the general aims of education are stated as "personal fulfillment, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment" (*Key Competences for Lifelong Learning…, Brussels, 11 November 2005)*.

In the Council of Europe *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*[2]*,* which brings us closer to our field of investigation, four general competences are identified: declarative knowledge (savoir), practical skills and know-how (savoir-faire), ability to learn (savoir-apprendre), and existential competence (savoir-être). Besides these general competences, the CEFR defines three types of communicative language competences: linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic. We shall refer here to the four general competences mentioned in the CEFR as they are also adequate for describing the field of LE.

In spite of the recent focus on competences, a strong tradition of knowledge-focused curricula has nevertheless its echoes in teachers' or curriculum designers' mentality. This implies a focus on the content itself, and also a rather narrow definition of competences, conceived mainly with respect to acquiring knowledge *about* the

[2] Council of Europe. 2001, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available on line: www.coe.int/lang

language or *about* the masterpieces of the national literature. This perspective puts a respectful distance between the students and what they learn and does not make an explicit point on the benefit of what they learn in school.

In fact, at the core of human education lie values of truth, goodness and beauty – this applies both to knowledge- and competence-focused curricula. However, we relate education to these values in different ways: we may see them as immutable and historic, or as opening a challenging dialogue with the present. It depends very much on the way teachers approach curricular content in school, and on the methodology they choose to use.

Some *pros* and *cons* for the two types of curriculum can be listed as follows:

Knowledge-focused curriculum	Competence-focused curriculum
- Focus on certain content elements and on exemplarity – this implies a rather easy job for both students and teachers; this vision highlights a prominent informative (encyclopaedic) perspective on education. - Focus on traditional / canonic values – students become aware of a cultural heritage; they ignore the present-day literature and arts or other means of communication. - Focus on categories of language or genres – students memorise some information, but they are not necessarily supposed to apply this in real-life situations. - Passive attitude of the learners – many students enjoy this attitude, as there is little pressure on them; this attitude has no formative explicit dimension. - Academic discourse of the teachers – many teachers feel comfortable with it; teachers cannot have an immediate feedback from students. - Focus on memorising and reproducing – for some students this is an easy job; for others this is meaningless.	- Focus on competences and utility – this implies a formative approach; utility and pragmatism in education can be seen as vulgar and limited. - Focus on the dynamics of current values – this perspective can motivate students' interest for learning; this can be seen as a danger for the traditional values as they have less space in the curriculum. - Focus on language in use – practising communication in a variety of contexts, students are better prepared for their own fulfilment and for social inclusion; students have rather poor academic knowledge. - Personal involvement of the learners - this gives students an opportunity to learn by experience and to demonstrate their competences; many students feel pressure in having to be ready to react on something they learn at any time. - Teachers guide and facilitate learners' activities – teachers receive an immediate feedback from students; it poses challenges for class management. - Focus on creativity, autonomy of thinking, personal responses – for some students it is motivating; for others this implies considerable effort.

1.2 Aims and content in an LE curriculum

As Laila Aase points out in her paper, *(Aims and Objectives for Teaching/Learning Language(s) of School Education)* the aims of LE are equivalent to the notion of plurilingualism as it is described in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)*[3].

In very general terms we may draw the following picture of pluringualism:

LS	(1) ‘national’ language /main language of instruction regional or social varieties of that language (2) a regional or minority language (students receiving – all or a proportion of - instruction in their mother tongue, which is not the ‘national’ language; they study the ‘national’ language as well; they are at least bilingual)
FL	One or more foreign languages with different competences mastered to a certain level
LAC	Different languages of instruction (when mother tongue is a language other than the official language) Specific / specialised language(s) for different domains of knowledge

A discussion is necessary at this point concerning students whose mother tongue is a language other than the dominant ‘official’ language. As is the case in many eastern European countries, minorities have in fact two school subjects which we can call LS: their mother tongue, which may be the language of instruction as well, and the ‘official’ language which may also be the language of instruction for some school subjects. A comparison between migrants and minorities concerning the learning of the ‘official’ language and culture may reveal different viewpoints on this issue.

The aims for an LE curriculum may be generated from the general aims of education: mediating knowledge, developing skills, promoting certain existential values, and strenghtening learning/study skills. The common basis for all these aims is **communicative competence,** which is central to all the three components of LE (LS, FL and LAC). Many LS and FL curricula today are based on a communicative paradigm.

1.3 Possibilities of organising content elements in a curriculum

The content of a school subject curriculum has two important dimensions: one is the knowledge encapsulated in the subject, and the other is the relevance of that knowledge for broader contexts, and also the formative effect that a discussion on that specific knowledge can provide to the students (clarifying their own values, examining attitudes, learning to learn, etc.). This assumption implies choosing elements that could stand for larger categories of knowledge. For example, is it better to put an emphasis on exploring types of discourse (narrative, argumentative, descriptive etc.) or literary / non-literary genres (drama, novel, poetry, media etc.) than to focus on specific texts or authors? Again, is it better to recommend topics (as is the case in FL) instead of naming certain texts or authors? A challenging curriculum may have a focus on targets to be attained and give examples of general content.

Organising the content in modules provides flexibility in a curriculum as compared to an analytical list of elements. We stress this concept because many eastern European

[3] Op.cit

countries have been used to this second kind of analytical approach. For LS and FL, elements of content may be classified as belonging to some areas of knowledge, according to the object of study: ‘language and communication’, or “language” and “communication”, and ‘literature / culture / culture and civilisation’ etc. Accordingly, for LAC, the content elements may belong to various domains, such as ‘science’, ‘arts’, ‘sports’, ‘technologies’ etc. Content items can also be associated with specific communicative activities: ‘listening’, ‘speaking’, ‘reading’, ‘writing’, or ‘reception’, ‘production’, ‘interaction’, and ‘mediation’ (as in the CEFR*)*. This second approach to content specification is a more dynamic one and has the advantage that it fits all three components of LE (LS, FL and LAC). A third possibility is to subordinate elements of content to certain contexts in which communication is practised. For example, the following ‘domains of language use’ are referred to in the CEFR: personal, public, occupational, educational. Another option is to formulate general topics such as Childhood, Leisure, Adventures, Travels, Friendship, etc.

The last two ways of categorising content are specific to FL, but they are also present in some LS curricula (especially the last one). In LS there is a well-established tradition of a chronological structuring of the literary / cultural content (mainly in upper-secondary education). A combination of two or more different perspectives on certain elements of the same curriculum is also possible.

1.4 Learning to learn

Below is an attempt to present a synthetic perspective on the overlaps and the specificity of the three LE components. This is only an example of how we can try to produce an integrated vision of an LE curriculum:

	Knowledge	**Learning to do**	**Learning to be**	**Learning to learn**
LE	(content elements)	(specific procedures and strategies)	(values and attitudes)	(transferable procedures and strategies + self-assessment)
LS - focus on the ‘national’ language and culture	Content related to language and text (Grammar and vocabulary, literary and non-literary texts, genres and species, literary history, specific concepts etc.)	Rules and strategies for using the knowledge of language and text in reception and production of texts in a variety of contexts (dialogue, monologue, relevant points in analysing a text, rules of composition etc.)	Contexts of learning that have a potential for encouraging creativity and responsibility, for developing critical thinking, and for participation in various interactions (debates, intercultural dialogue, creative writing, reflexive diary etc.)	Transferable procedures based on using communication in learning (taking notes, looking for sources, problem solving, working with others for a common goal, argumentation etc.)

FL - focus on a particular language and culture	Much the same as in LS	Much the same as in LS	Contexts of learning that have a potential for stimulating the interest for “others” and for intercultural communication	Much the same as in LS + Language awareness
LAC – focus on the specificity of each subject	Specific content and specific genres	Much the same as in LS and FL (but applied in subject specific contexts)	Contexts that stimulate students’ interest for knowledge; content that can be a basis for personal growth and social and cultural participation	Transferable procedures and strategies of learning from and for all school subjects

There may of course be different levels of attainment expected from students in the activities of text reception or text production in LS or in FL. Nevertheless, as we can see, the general points common to LS, FL and LAC reveal the centrality of communication in all three.

2. Content in LS curricula

2.1 Linguistic and cultural content

An LE curriculum encompasses two major content dimensions: a linguistic, and a cultural one. This double focus triggers two very important questions for LS:

- What is the right proportion between linguistic and cultural content elements?
- Do we need two separate school subjects (one for language and another for literature/culture) or do we need to integrate the two kinds of content and two sets of aims in one single school subject?

Many countries have solved this problem in their own way. Some have two different school subjects and separate textbooks for each (language, on the one hand, and literature or culture, on the other hand), others have one single school subject (language and literature / culture, called simply Polish, Dutch, etc.).

We shall not discuss here these options, but rather examine the possibility of an integrated vision of linguistic and cultural competences. Both linguistic and cultural competences can be viewed as part of communication ability. Students learn linguistic categories in order to better communicate their ideas, feelings, and reactions. At the same time, their cultural competences are based on communication skills (strategies for reading and expressing their ideas) and attitudes (interest in what they read, critical thinking, etc.). This means that communication could be a suitable ‘umbrella’ for the two types of competences. And this also means that linguistic and cultural content may be integrated in the process of teaching and learning. In other words, when discussing a text (whether fiction or non-fiction) we meet a certain linguistic and discoursive structure, which implies some meanings. In order to make sense of what they read, students activate various knowledge and competences, including linguistic competences. In the process of reading students bring in their ideas, feelings and experiences, the need to share them with others, and the interest in the way others react to the same text.

The real dilemma for selecting the content elements for a curriculum is not deciding on the communicative approach of the discipline (which is rather common in today's curricula), but deciding upon the extent to which we want to develop the cultural competences. This is crucial for both LS and FL curricula. But this also depends on the way we understand and define cultural competences.

- We can define cultural competences adopting a pragmatic view of 'cultural literacy'. This will refer to reading, understanding, reflecting and interpreting a variety of texts and genres: fiction (among which some representing the canon), and non-fiction, media and arts.
- If, based on tradition, we prefer to define cultural competences as meeting the representative values of a certain culture and as contextualizing them within the specificity of that culture, the task of defining relevant content is very difficult. Not only because there can be a lack of consensus on what is / is not representative in a culture, but also because there would be a greater focus on those content items as such. The second understanding of cultural competences would imply a special focus on *knowledge,* with little space for *learning to do, learning to be together or learning to be.*

Another difficulty is how to teach and learn linguistic categories not for themselves (that is, not as descriptive categories), but as a functional grammar in a language-in-use approach. How much linguistic theory and how many specific grammar or vocabulary categories does such a perspective need? The answer depends mainly on the specificity of the language (a thorough study of the orthography is a must, for example, for French; a stress on morphology is needed in the case of analytical languages, etc.). Grammar specialists and teachers may go for different options concerning what is important and functional for the students. Nevertheless, they have to decide together, starting from the aims of teaching and learning, on a core of relevant content and also on ways of approaching those content elements in school. Learning some grammar rules or understanding different genres should lead to using that knowledge in new and different contexts. This is a challenge not only for LS and FL teachers, but also for all other teachers. They have to focus not only on the competences students have in the field they teach, but also on the way students communicate their knowledge, skills and attitudes in a specific domain.

2.2 Vertical progression within the content

A coherent curricular project has to organise content elements in a progression from the primary to the upper secondary school. We shall illustrate the idea of progression in content for LS, having in mind the four important types of communicative activities:

	Primary ***Personal response*** *Immediate environment*	**Lower secondary** ***Procedures*** *Discourse variety*	**Upper secondary** ***Strategies*** *Cultural context*
Listening	Exercising attention and understanding oral messages Recognising the 'sound' of a language (phonetics and intonation)	Active listening Adequate reading of the non-verbal and paraverbal elements in a communication	Practising critical thinking while listening
Speaking	Focus on the oral dimension of communication as a means of expressing immediate environment	Focus on procedures of oral communication (dialogue, monologue) adequate to a certain communicative context	Focus on structured personal response in argumentative discourse
Reading	Focus on texts that can be related to their experience	Focus on text variety (such as genres, species, types of discourse)	Focus on cultural representations (representative texts, their place in a certain cultural paradigm or socio-historic context)
Writing	Focus on personal response to stimuli	Focus on procedures and substance of ideas	Focus on autonomy of judgement and fluent original expression

Each of these aspects can be viewed again from the perspective of the possible distribution of the relevant content elements. For example, the lines of oral communication can be:

- from verbal expression to non-verbal means of communication
- from monolocutive forms to interaction
- from narrative and informative to descriptive and argumentative
- etc. etc.

Of course, there are many differences with respect to each country regarding these three levels of schooling. In any case, a vertical distribution may follow more general cycles of education (such as those based on the students' intellectual and psychological profile at certain stages of schooling).

2.3 What kind of texts?

The *types of texts* we recommend in a curriculum can give rise to controversy. From this point of view, it is important to decide upon the general perspective. If it is a communicative one, a largely semiotic approach is appropriate. This means that students need to be able to understand the signs of the world around them. And the signs may be encrypted in various codes and forms of communication and may belong to various fields of knowledge or arts. This is the reason why the concept of ‘text’ is today much broader than the traditional view. In fact, a better term to cover this variety would be ‘messages’, which can be oral or written texts, fiction or non-fiction, media, multi-modal texts. This enlarged perspective on ‘text’ is common both to LS and FL and is a point of convergence with LAC as well. Again, oral or written messages can be very differently expressed in different contexts. The same message can be expressed in a formal or informal manner, can reveal a literary standard language or regional varieties of a language etc. In so far as this variety of productive communication is part of our world, school is expected to encourage an interest in it.

Is it necessary to have *a canon of authors or of literary texts*? This is another dilemma that has received various responses. Much energy has been devoted to trying to establish a canon of authors for LS in many countries. It is obvious that there is a gap between the canon established by literary historians and critics and the school canon. Nevertheless, school has to reduce this gap and come closer to the present cultural phenomenon. As we claim that our students should become readers for life, contemporary literature and art is an offer that cannot be neglected in school. They cannot participate in the cultural life of their time if they do not know anything about it. Education has to make room for the contemporary artistic discourse as it has made room for modern technology that supports students efforts in finding and structuring information. A recommended canon gives a certain rigidity to a curriculum and also puts a pressure on assessment. *What we intend to assess* is another question which brings us back to the aims of teaching and learning. Is it important that students demonstrate their knowledge of literature or is it important to measure their proficiency in reading? Or perhaps both, and if so, to what extent?

Is it important for students to study texts from the *universal literature* or from the *literature of the minorities / migrants*? Dialogue with other cultures can offer students the opportunity to develop a positive attitude to intercultural communication, and to accept multiculturality as a reality of the present time. To meet others’ literatures (implying various ways of understanding the world and the individual, or various aesthetic views) may also offer students a better understanding of their own literature and culture and of themselves.

3. Content elements in FL curricula

Many issues discussed in the previous part are common also to teaching/learning of FL. We shall focus here mainly on the differences. The communicative approach is more prominent in FL and the reasons are obvious. A common categorisation of content in FL curricula frequently includes topics and communicative activities. A controversial issue in FL is the understanding of cultural competence and the balance between linguistic and cultural competences, especially in upper-secondary education. Many countries have made a radical change in their FL curriculum: new types of texts (media, multi-modal texts, and different non-literary genres) give little space to literature. In this perspective, speech acts to be performed in real-life situations seem more important than the ability to comment upon a literary text or to be familiar with a certain culture. At any event, the concept of a literary canon may not be as relevant for FL. A vertical progression of FL content elements will place literature not in the first years of study, but somewhat later.

Specific difficulties in maintaining the overall coherence of a curriculum are triggered by introducing a second / third language. This raises two important questions: when, at what level is it appropriate to do that, and what is the correlation (concerning aims and content elements) that can be made with other FL, with LS or with LAC?

4. Content elements in an LAC description

As opposed to LS and FL, the problem with LAC is the fact that the linguistic competence of students may not necessarily be a concern of all teachers. Many teachers, focused on what students know or can do with their knowledge in a certain subject, are not aware or interested in the difficulties students may have in reading and understanding different genres (a scientific discourse, a map, a synoptic table, etc.), or in using the adequate expression (code, vocabulary and concepts, genres) of a certain domain of knowledge. In fact, they ignore the importance of communication for their own subject, as they consider that communication involves implicit knowledge and competences that students already possess. Nevertheless, there is a strong relation between the students' receptive and productive competences and their understanding of a certain subject. 'Academic discourse competence' is not supposed to be developed only by LS, but in all school subjects.

In order to change the common perspective on this issue, a different approach to initial teacher training is needed. A communication module to be followed by all future teachers could provide a common basis for dealing with communication barriers and communicative strategies specific to different domains of knowledge.

5. How to approach content?

"Many of the competences overlap and interlock: aspects essential to one domain will support competence in another. Competence in the fundamental basic skills of language, literacy, numeracy and ICT is an essential foundation for learning, and learning to learn supports all learning activities. There are a number of themes that are applied throughout the Framework: critical thinking, creativity, initiative taking, problem solving, risk assessment, decision taking, and managing feelings constructively play a role in all eight key competences." (*Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework…).*

A general problem in education today arises from the fact that a competence-focused curriculum implies an essential shift of methodology and understanding of teaching and learning in relation to certain well defined goals. This is a particular difficulty in those countries where initial teacher training continues to follow a traditional approach.

A 'Bildung'-oriented philosophy of learning[4] is based on: active learning, cooperation and interaction, focus on students' needs and interests, differentiated learning, transparent assessment, critical thinking, experiential learning or teacher-student partnership. An LE curriculum brings to this general framework some specific approaches derived from the communicative paradigm, such as:

- practising communication as a transferable competence;
- exercising communication in all its dimensions (reception and production of oral and written messages, mediation, and interaction);

[4] See footnote 1

- practising diverse modes of communication (verbal, non-verbal; language-based, image-based, sound-based or mixed);
- discussing a large range of texts: artistic (literature, film, theatre, music, fine arts) or non-artistic (mass media);
- identifying different functions of communication (to inform, to explain, to provoke or share aesthetic pleasure, to persuade, to manipulate etc.);
- working with different types of discourse (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, informative etc.);
- applying grammar rules in different 'language-in-use' contexts - formal or informal, standard or regional language, etc.;
- identifying and understanding major or particular aspects of a certain culture;
- raising students' interest in intercultural dialogue and in the values of multiculturality;
- provoking a dialogue between the reader and the text – which implies a personal response by the student;
- provoking critical autonomous thinking by students concerning any kind of message they receive or produce;
- assessing skills and competences of oral and written communication;
- observing and discussing students' values and attitudes related to communication and to culture;
- developing strategies of self-assessment both for teachers and for students.

6. Conclusion

In order to design a coherent framework of reference for LE we have to take into consideration the general aims of education as formulated within European education policy documents in order to specify the content and the methodology that are relevant not only for LS or FL, but also for communication within the school curriculum as a whole (LAC). From this point of view, communication is what connects the three components of LE and this may be the starting point for identifying any other convergence in aims, content and methodology. An integrated communicative approach to language and literature could offer a common curricular option for LS and FL. The ways of approaching content in LE need to be based on a common philosophy of learning and this implies a certain methodological continuity and coherence in all three components of LE.