

## ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A COMPETENCE BASED CURRICULUM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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**Abstract:** The article deals with examining the new competence based curricula that have been introduced in the Republic of Moldova responding to the demands of the contemporary information / knowledge based society. The curricula content is participatory, contextualized, process-oriented, dynamic, interdisciplinary and adaptable to changes and advances in the pedagogical disciplines as well as in society at large. However, implementing the curricula demands a lot of commitment from all participants. Teachers mainly need to develop clear understanding of ‘competence’ and revise the teaching–learning process in order to develop and consolidate their students’ competences.

**Keywords:** competence, curriculum, fair assessment, skill

Since the Republic of Moldova got its independence, there have been numerous reforms in education aiming at aligning it to the international quality standards. Starting with 1995, when the first reform took place, there have been developed various laws and regulations reflecting the specifics of the Moldovan educational ideal. A significant reform of the education system in Moldova relates to embracing a competence based approach in teaching and evaluation. Two National Curricula were developed to offer the necessary methodological support; the first was issued in 2000 and its modernized, focusing on competencies, version was issued in 2010.

The significance of these Curricula, according to the authors, is huge as it reshaped education in Moldova, reflecting a rigorously ordered scientific vision on the new objectives, contents and educational technologies for a contemporary school. It should be pointed out that the earlier versions of Curricula for the foreign languages stipulated / prescribed the overall goals of the foreign language discipline and training of various types of competences (linguistic, discursive, cultural, methodological, attitudinal etc.), relying heavily on the Curriculum for bilingual French classes (CFCB) of Moldova (2008), which described a wide range of skills (competences) valid for training in the linguistic field.

The 2010 Foreign Languages Curriculum for the primary and gymnasium cycle was reviewed and modernized to respond to the transition need of shifting the curriculum design model focused on objectives to the competency-based model, i.e. on the outcome or on the final product of the teaching-learning-evaluation pedagogical relation. The development of the 2010 curriculum has also taken into account the principles of formative, polycentric and dynamic education centered on pupils and competences, the teacher having the role of coauthor and active and competent co-organizer of the teaching-learning-evaluation process of the foreign language.

Although it has been several years since the concept of 'competence' was introduced, there is continuous necessity to clarify its meaning and the meaning of some other terms described in both curricula. At this point, it should be emphasized that key competences were introduced in the 2010 Curriculum despite the fact that the Education Law, in force at that time, did not explicitly state the formation and development of competences. The key competences definitions were adapted from the recommendations of the European Union. Subsequently, they were explicitly included in the Education

Code since the end of 2014, and in the new 2010 Curriculum version. In the absence of an explicit regulatory and legal framework on competences and common academic visions on how to define and formulate competences, the Moldovan teachers and heads of the educational institutions feel confused to the present day. An additional constraint is related to the competence assessment.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language provides six meanings to the word ‘competence’. Relevant to the purpose of this research are entries under the numbers 1) a. The ability to do something well or efficiently; b. A range of skill or ability: *a task beyond his competence*; c. A specific ability or skill: *a surprising competence in dealing with animals*; and 5) Linguistics: the knowledge that enables one to speak and understand a language. Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary describes ‘competency’ as a synonym for ‘competence’ (less frequently used) and defines ‘competence’ as the ability to do something well; *to gain a high level of competence in English, professional/technical competence*. These definitions provided by dictionaries highlight the concept of competence in terms of ability or skill to do something well or efficiently. In education, however, ‘competence’ acquired a much wider meaning.

The 2010 Curriculum for the first time describes the term ‘school competence’ (competență școlară) as “an integrated system of knowledge, skills, habits and attitudes acquired by pupils through learning and activated in specific contexts of realization tailored to the pupils’ age and cognitive level in order to solve some problems they can face in real life”. We assume that, when providing their definition of school competence, curricular developers relied on The European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (OJEU, 2006), which defines key competences as knowledge, skills and attitudes applied appropriately to a given context (Pepper, 2011). The research report *Key Competence Network on School Education* (2012) refer to Weinert (2001) who relates the term to the Greek notion of arete, meaning excellence, in the sense of being the best; also with the Latin term *virtus*, a kind of moral excellence. The same report explains the confusion generated by the existence of a variety of terms (competence / competency) which are often used interchangeably. This use neglects the large variety of meanings of ‘competence’, that can be captured by the terms ‘ability’, ‘aptitude’, ‘capability’, ‘effectiveness’ and ‘skill’. Resulting from this overgeneralization, the

notion of competence, and its plural ‘competences’, has been replaced by the narrower version of ‘competency’, or the plural form ‘competencies’ recently. The latter denote discrete skills and activities that individuals can perform.

For a better understanding of the concept of ‘competence’, teachers should view it as a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values and attitudes. Teaching for competences means a change of the teaching and learning setting, shifting the emphasis from content to purpose. The teachers’ role changes too, as they focus on their students’ learning outcomes covering not only the cognitive domain, but also the attitudinal and affective domains. They will observe and encourage their students’ achievements of tasks, in our case these are related to foreign language, as well as their personal relationships, willingness to participate, take an attitude, create and evaluate. In such a way, competence implies a sense of activity, accomplishment and value.

It is worth pointing out that curricula developers admitted that “the creation and finalization of an effective set of competences is a long-lasting process of complex, interdisciplinary and / or transversal nature”, so that the formation of competence would be more real for the end of a school stage, while within a lesson, or unit of learning it would be fair to undertake sub-competency training supported by the former benchmarks (obiective de refetrinta).

The Oxford Reference Dictionary of Education (2009) connects competences to the vocational training where they were initially implemented and provides a description of what we call ‘subcompetență’:

“...In National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) statements of competence are broken down **into their constituent parts**, the smallest of which is **an element of competence**. It is against these elements of competence that the NVQ candidate is assessed. A number of elements make up a unit of competence. Units, but not their constituent elements, may be awarded separately as part of a process of credit...”

Hence, the primary purpose of implementing a competence based curriculum becomes obvious – to provide more accurate measurable tasks and thus insure a more objective and fair assessment of the students’ progress in learning.

Teachers of English who teach at the primary level were probably happy to get familiar with a new Curriculum for the primary school

(approved by the National Council for Curriculum on July 2018). The novelty of this Curriculum lies in the fact that it specifies the notion of competence, redefines and articulates specific competencies from the perspective of the pragmatically functional approach, and, most importantly, introduces the concept of ‘unit of competence’ to substitute the term ‘sub-competence’. In addition, the new curriculum focuses on the development of four specific competences related to A1 level:

1. The linguistic competence: Discrimination of the linguistic elements through simple, short and correct message forms, showing curiosity for the value of language as a system.
2. Sociolinguistic competence: The use of language elements, demonstrating creativity for the functioning of the language in a social contact.
3. Pragmatic competence: Adaptation of linguistic elements to common / familiar contexts, proving correctness and coherence in structuring the message.
4. Cultural (pluri / inter) competence: The appreciation of specific elements of culture of the foreign language studied, expressing interest and respect for the values of another culture.

The curriculum for foreign languages for the primary level recommends training the pupils to acquire the initial competences of receiving and producing simple sentences (expresii si fraze simple) for daily use on familiar topics (oral and written) being supported by basic cultural competences as the foundation for their further development at the gymnasium level [“formarea la elevi a **competențelor** inițiale de receptare și producere a unor expresii sau fraze simple, de uz foarte curent pe teme familiare în formă orală și scrisă, asistate de competențele culturale începătoare, în calitate de fundament pentru dezvoltarea lor ulterioară la nivelul gimnazial”]

As it can be seen, the curriculum in Romanian uses the terms ‘competenta’ and ‘sub-competenta’ or ‘unitate de competenta’ which is being translated as ‘competence’ and sub-competence’ in English. Having included the rubric ‘unitate de competenta’ in the Curriculum, should facilitate, to a certain degree, teachers’ development of short-term and long-term planning.

Implementation of a competence based curriculum means involving teachers in action research leading to diversifying their teaching toolkit. The teaching methods should be outlined for the production of key and specific competences and will be oriented

towards interdisciplinary, cross-subject teaching, team oriented learning, individualized approaches (e.g., individual study plans) and project-based work (Gordon, Halasz, Krawczyk et al). There are three distinct ideas that teachers should bear in mind while teaching to achieve the established students' competences. First, teachers should not put the main emphases on knowledge of certain rules, definitions, grammatical forms; it is much more important for students to be able to apply the knowledge in context or real life situations. Next, teachers should be able to formulate clear and measurable units of competence for each of the lessons and design appropriate assessment tools. For example, unexperienced teachers may often set as a unit of competence 'learn irregular forms for simple past' while a really measurable unit of competence should be "students will use past tense when talking about their weekend". Finally, aiming at developing competences, students will learn the language through the use of authentic situations. In the age on information it is especially significant for students to know why they learn certain rules, vocabulary, etc. Instead of using drills to prepare students for the Baccalaureate exam, teachers should develop and consolidate competences for life such as communication, collaboration and critical thinking.

Transition to a competence-based teaching / learning requires significant changes in how teaching is done, affecting methods of instruction, testing, grading, etc. Descriptors based evaluation has already been implemented in the primary school in the Republic of Moldova since 2016. The previously used 10-point grading scale has been replaced with brief descriptive statements, phrases such as *can do a task independently, guided by teacher, or needs much help*. Such type of descriptors is commonly used in competency-based instruction. In addition, diverse forms of assessment are encouraged to determine whether students have achieved (linguistic, pragmatic, cultural) competence, including strategies such as demonstrations of learning, learning pathways, personal learning plans, portfolios, rubrics, and peer and self-evaluation, to name just a few.

To sum up, a competence based curriculum provides the necessary guidelines for learning achievement based on students demonstrating that they have acquired knowledge and skills as well as positive attitudes and understanding of themselves in relation to the world around them. Students continue to form and consolidate competences

as they progress through their education. Related to language learning, a competence based approach should motivate the primary function of language in a society, that of communication and should justify the major purpose of foreign language teaching - to teach students to participate in conversations on varied topics related to their interests and needs, to enable them for a simple and direct exchange of information and open access to further academic success.

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