

UNDERSTANDING CURRICULUM ISSUES IN L1 EDUCATION THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON: THE CASE OF THE V4 COUNTRIES

Book review

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Abstract

In this review, I will discuss the academic monograph *Teaching of National Languages in the V4 countries* edited by M. Pieniżek & S. Štěpáník (2016). The review discusses the value and quality of the book, and at the same time tries to identify issues in L1 education that can be of interest to readers outside the Central European context. In reviewing the monograph, I will attempt to illustrate that many of the issues that the V4 countries are dealing with are in fact of a more universal nature. In doing so, I argue that the book may be seen as a good starting point for a detailed international comparison of L1 curricula and the challenges associated with them.

Keywords: language education, curriculum development, V4 countries

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Throughout the world language education faces many challenges, which are arguably of a similar nature, regardless of individual differences between languages and educational systems. In fact, it is this very realisation that led to the founding of the research journal *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* (see <http://www.arle.be/journal.html>). Although many books on language teaching still remain limited to individual countries, the book *Teaching of National Languages in the V4 countries* tries to look beyond individual problems in a similar spirit to the *L1* journal. It attempts to arrive at a detailed comparison of four curricula for language education, all situated in central Europe: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Together, these countries are also known as the 'V4 countries' or the Visegrád group, a political and cultural alliance established in 1991.

The book is a monograph (funded by the Visegrad Fund), synthesizing research findings from educational research. Its aim was to '[...] analyze the role of national languages in maintaining the cultural identity in the V4 countries, and to compare and contrast the conceptions of teaching national language and literature in the V4 countries' (Pieniżek & Štěpáník, 2016, p. 180). To achieve this goal, the book starts with two short introductory texts providing context of the project from which the monograph originated, followed by four chapters, each discussing the issues pertaining to language education in one of the V4 countries. Each of the chapters follows a similar structure, addressing political, historical and curricular aspects (curriculum, textbooks, practice in schools, standardized tests, and examinations). The chapters also deal with teacher training and L2 education. At the end of each chapter, a short discussion is presented. The book concludes with a brief general discussion and conclusion (pp. 171-179) in which most of the synthesis of the research findings takes place. The book is peer-reviewed by two independent experts from the region and written by authors from all countries involved.

In my view, the book is a valuable addition to the literature on language education, which will hopefully inspire more international-comparative research. This hope is shared by the authors, who state that 'T[he] project [...] could be of fundamental importance for further research on teaching national languages in Central Europe' (p. 15). Its influence might even reach beyond that region, because, as I will try to illustrate in this review, many of the issues that are being raised in this work also apply to other educational jurisdictions. Given the lack of literature on language teaching comparing the curricula of different countries, the V4-book might inspire scholars outside the V4 region to conduct similar research. In that sense, the book may indeed be of 'fundamental importance'. Most of the scholarly work on language education that appears in international peer-reviewed journals does not deal with the Central-European context, but relates to, amongst others, Anglo-Saxon contexts. It is refreshing to acquire a sense of what language education encompasses in this

part of Europe, especially in comparison to other research traditions. That too is a positive aspect of the monograph.

However, the global reader not familiar with the local context will experience a few idiosyncrasies in this work, most notably the authors' obvious (emotional) involvement in affairs that relate to L1 teaching. While reading the book, it becomes apparent that the authors are deeply concerned that the national languages of the V4 countries are seriously threatened by the increasingly globalised world. As is pointed out in the introductory text (p. 16):

The main aim of the research was to focus on the role of the national languages in *maintaining* the cultural identity in the V4 countries. The reason for the study is the *alarming lowering* of the rank of national language teaching in general education in Poland, and the growing dominance of English in the cultural environment. (Italics by JvR).

The italicized phrases indicate a level of personal evaluation, a tone that is not uncommon throughout the monograph. For example, one might find statements such as 'I noticed *the dangers* for the *survival* of Polish culture, *deterioration* of the Polish language status in schools [...]' (p. 18) or, on the same page: '[...] I was not looking at the Anglo-Saxon humanistic tradition to find the inspiration to stop *negative changes*'. Although the authors present figures and references that seem to support these claims later on in the book, this adds a rhetoric flavor to the monograph that is hard to distinguish from the academic description of the content. In itself, this is not necessarily problematic if the research that lies at the base of the work is done adequately. However, it is not always easy to ascertain this. The authors state that in comparing the curricula and educational practice of the V4 countries they made use of several research methods, such as document analysis, historical analysis, textbook analysis, curriculum analysis, observations in class, interviews, and finally, analysis of resources and specialized literature in the four languages involved (cf. page 17). They also underline the importance of 'delimitating common methods of research' among themselves (p. 14). However, no details are given on the methodology used: It remains unclear how any of the research instruments were implemented and why. More importantly, no insight is given into the comparability of the research methods across the various V4 countries. That way, the method of classroom observations in Poland might differ greatly from observations conducted in Hungary. This makes comparing the educational practice of the four countries a difficult task, virtually impossible to replicate and equally impossible to interpret adequately. This lack of methodological rigor combined with the at times subjective tone gives the academic reader a slight feeling of uneasiness. On the one hand, one feels sympathetic towards the authors' apparent (and probably justified) emotional involvement (which might appeal to the teachers reading the monograph), but on the other, the scientific reliability of the data analysis cannot be properly assessed.

Although the book has made it much easier to compare language teaching in the V4 countries, it fails to deeply connect this knowledge to aspects of language curriculum development on a more international scale. This choice can be understood and respected in itself because such a broader perspective would seriously alter the

scope of the monograph, but at the same time, it leaves open a number of issues that could have been interesting to discuss, hence generating a more complete understanding of the issues that language education deals with, both from a perspective of curriculum development and from a perspective of actual classroom practice. Ironically, the book itself raises questions on why a more international perspective is lacking. For example, in the introduction, it is stated that the Anglo-Saxon tradition was not turned to for 'inspiration' (without adequately explaining why). Similarly, on page 14, it states that 'The Visegrad group may prove to be a strong actor in creating the new humanistic ideas that would be able to compete with the Anglo-Saxon concepts, often imposed without reflection to Central European cultures and systems of educations.' This statement raises a few questions, such as 'Which humanistic ideas?' 'Is there a need for new humanistic ideas?' 'Why and how could they compete with Anglo-Saxon concepts?' 'What kind of concepts do the authors mean, and how do these relate to humanistic ideas?'. Unfortunately, none of these questions are addressed in the monograph. The book does however offer an (albeit incomplete) reference to a presentation that compares the curricula of the UK, the USA, the Czech Republic and Poland (p. 22), but it does not go into detail about such matters itself.

The monograph is fairly detailed in some paragraphs, but at the same time, limited and rather general in others. For example, the book goes into much detail on matters such as political and legal aspects related to the curricula, whereas it lacks depth and nuance in others. For example, in the chapter on the Hungarian context, a brief and general overview of the textbooks used is given, along with a short characterization of the textbook market. This section concludes by stating: 'Although 'the backwind' of the central publishing house is tangible, the high quality of the books is obvious' (p. 80). No evidence is presented for this qualification of textbooks, however. Such a statement therefore lacks justification, which presumably could have been provided fairly easily. More detailed discussions about the application of the research methods used and the results that they have generated could have solved this problem.

The book offers a number of interesting insights, especially for an 'outsider', who is not as familiar with the cultural and educational history of the V4 countries. I will discuss some of these briefly and point out areas that are of a more general interest as well. I will try to show that even though the Visegrad countries have their own cultural history and language education issues, many of these are in fact of a more universal nature.

Firstly, the monograph makes it very clear that the collapse of the iron curtain in 1989 has had a major impact on the educational curricula in the Visegrad states. Prior to the fall, communist ideology exerted a dominant influence on the mother tongue curricula of the V4, imposing limitations on liberal and critical thinking and the countries' own national heritage. After the fall, thinking about the curriculum changed dramatically. According to the authors, this led to strong political pressure on L1 teaching (encompassing both language and literature teaching) to 'form opinion' and

present 'correct' viewpoints (p. 173). The authors characterize the period after 1989 as a period in which the own national identity is strongly emphasized in L1 education, making knowledge of the national language, upholding the correct language norm and reading domestic literature the number one priorities of language education. Until this day, the influence of politics on the educational agenda can therefore be considered substantial in the V4 (p. 172-174). The authors conclude that 'educational reforms serve more the political aims than the educational ones' (p. 174), pointing out the dangers of ill-conceived and poorly thought-through policy. The dangers of such a policy have been illustrated before, for instance for the UK context by Cajkler (2004), who shows how 'English national strategies maim grammatical parts'. Although the English and V4 contexts differ, the issue of (poorly informed) political involvement is very similar. By pointing out such universals in curriculum development, the monograph could have positioned the Visegrad region more clearly on the international stage.

In the 1970's, the international emergence of the communicative paradigm (cf. Bonset & Rijlaarsdam, 2004; Sawyer & Van de Ven, 2007) apparently affected educational ideology in the V4, in the sense that attention shifted from grammar to more general communication. The authors observe that this change remains mostly restricted to ideology (the *intended curriculum*, in terms of Van den Akker's (2003) curriculum typology), as opposed to classroom practice (*the implemented curriculum*, *ibid.*, 2003), which remains considerably more traditional until the present day. The dichotomy between the intended and the implemented curriculum is an educational issue that can be observed all over the world. In the Netherlands, for example, the intended curriculum emphasizes communicative goals as well, but in practice, the school subject Dutch Language and Literature is considerably more traditional (Hulshof, Kwakernaak & Wilhelm, 2015). To some extent, the same can be said for the Australian curriculum, in which functional goals stand at the center of the intended language curriculum, even in grammar teaching (e.g., ACARA, 2009). In everyday practice, teachers resort to much more traditional types of grammar teaching, however (see e.g. Jones & Chen, 2012).

The monograph makes it possible to understand in greater detail the extent of this mismatch between the intended and the implemented curriculum, but it could have provided more insights into the phenomenon in the broad sense by comparing it to other curricula, for instance to the curricula in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, to which the monograph sometimes refers.

Given the international nature of the mismatch-phenomenon it is perhaps unsurprising that the Visegrad countries all struggle with the implementation of communicative goals from the intended curriculum. However, these countries seem to have their own reasons for struggling with this implementation. From reading the book, one gets the idea that the emphasis on communicative goals is seen as conflicting with the preservation of the cultural identity of the nations involved. The latter is predominantly shaped in the V4 language education by fairly traditional types of content knowledge (e.g. traditional grammar, classical literature, composition, etc.),

which is considered a direct opposite of the ideals from the communicative paradigm. In various chapters, the importance of adhering to a communicative approach is underlined, for example in the monograph's conclusion: 'Yes, language is a system of certain elements that work according to certain rules—but these elements and rules serve certain communication purposes—and it is exactly this that should be taught in the language classes' (p. 177, italics by JvR). This might seem like a progressive point of view, but the danger of positing it is that such an ideal could lead to problems in language teaching as well. An overt focus on communicative skills without sufficient background knowledge of language and literature is sometimes criticized for being too shallow. This matter is at the heart of educational discussions and reforms of the language curriculum in the Netherlands (cf. Neijt, Coppen & De Glopper, 2015). Given such debates, it might be more recommendable for the V4 to try to arrive at a language curriculum in which knowledge of language and literature on the one hand and communicative or functional goals on the other are equally balanced. This way, cultural identity might be preserved in these countries whilst at the same time, language education becomes more communicative in the implemented curriculum. This calls for a 'scientifically substantiated approach' (p. 179), which raises questions about the way educators, teachers and researchers view the relationship between the school subject and the academic discipline (cf. Van der Aalsvoort & Kroon, 2015). These questions cannot be answered here, but they might be a relevant topic for future study in the region.

Although the editors of the book have done a good job in structuring the different chapters in the same fashion, which is a difficult enough task in itself, the use of English can sometimes be a bit shaky. While the majority of passages has been written in an acceptable style, the monograph would have benefited from more extensive proof reading by a native speaker of English.

In summary, the monograph *Teaching of National Languages in the V4 countries* offers a welcome overview of the status of language education in the Central European countries. It allows for a comparison between these four states, partly due to the structured way in which the book discusses the relevant issues. An important obstacle in this comparison lies in the monograph's scientific value, which is not as substantial as it might have been if much more detail was given to the methodology that was adhered to. Even though the book offers some opportunities to directly compare the V4 language curricula to those of countries outside of this region, several interesting differences and similarities between the V4 issues and more universal issues remain undiscussed. The book therefore might be seen as a good starting point to inspire more international-comparative research on language curriculum development. This is arguably the most valuable asset of this monograph.

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