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**IN THE FACE OF CHANGES. AN ATTEMPT TO ADAPT THE LANGUAGE CLASS
TO THE NEW TRENDS THAT SHAPE EDUCATION**

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Abstract:

In this paper, I have tried to capitalise on a recent OECD survey on education. I have focused on three of the areas mentioned in the OECD material trying to determine the extent to which some economic and social factors have an impact on education. Taking four of the OECD questions as reference points, I have also illustrated how language teachers can adapt their teaching materials to meet the demands of their students' future career and help the students develop a professional behaviour able to cope successfully with a changing world.

Key words: education, trends, language, innovation, career

Introduction

A recent study (2010) carried out by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), under the auspices of OECD, emphasizes the idea that the changing of the global economic, social and political context has had a serious impact on education. This is a direct consequence of a number of factors such as *dynamics of globalisation, new social challenges, new patterns of work, transformation of childhood and a new generation of ICT* (OECD, 2010, p.13). As it is stated in the referred material, any analysis of the present state of education will have to take into account the influence of these factors on the educational opportunities for young students and adults at both individual and institutional levels: *“The wording <shaping education> is deliberate – these are developments in the wider context that impact in many ways on education, from provision aimed at young people to that for older adults. But it would be artificial to understand them as something apart from education. These trends are themselves shaped by education and manifest within it. They are intended to offer a valuable complement to the educational statistics and indicators that measure the developments taking place within education and training systems themselves.”* (OECD, 2010: 13)

Therefore, all those working in education (policy makers, advisors, researchers, leaders of educational institutions, teacher educators and teachers) have to reflect on the way in which these trends may affect the long-term development of education, the strategies they make for their institutions, the type of professional

development programmes they offer to the teaching staff and the teaching methodology, instruments and materials they select to be used in the classroom.

Education in the face of changes

Though the OECD survey is based on observations made on the educational systems of the OECD countries only, it has two remarkable merits: it enables valid generalisations and at the end of each chapter focused on a certain type of trends, it comes with a set of questions that education specialists will have to answer to or take into account before they decide which way education should take in the future.

In accordance with the general purpose of my paper, in this chapter, I will take into account three of the areas whose trends have a direct and deep impact on education: *dynamics of globalisation*, *social challenges* and *the changing patterns of work*.

The *dynamics of globalisation* brings into evidence a multitude of aspects, out of which the growth of population, excessive urbanisation, migration of population, global environmental challenges, the gap between the rich and the poor, the occurrence of new economic powers (like China and India) may be considered as important trends that are influencing and will continue to influence education. As a result, education will be faced with a number of essential questions such as:

- "Are governments investing enough to reach the Millennium Goal of primary education for all, given that the world population is set to rise a further 3 billion up to the middle of the 21st century?"
- How can school, vocational and tertiary education cope with the problems of overcrowding and overstretched infrastructures in the urban areas affected?
- How can we guarantee access to quality education services in emptying rural areas ?
- Are educators equipped to incorporate cultural diversity and social inequality?
- How can students deal with culturally diverse environments?
- What is the role of formal education in creating responsible citizens, with civic values, critical skills and sustainable consumption habits?
- For the less developed regions, education plays a key role in their economic and social development, but how can education be realised under conditions of (extreme) poverty? " (OECD, 2010: 17-32)

Recent changes in the social field do represent serious challenges to education, beginning with the changing shares of national income devoted to educational expenditures and continuing with the changing patterns of age, persistence of poverty and extremely varied levels of life satisfaction. If some of these issues may depend on governmental decision, others are addressed directly to the educational system, especially those deriving from the changing age structures. The education system is expected to come with some special programmes so as to meet the learning and cultural needs of some older members of the society who may be still active mentally and physically after retiring. And no doubt the most serious problem related to the changing age structures refers to the way in which education may attract and retain sufficient numbers of teachers and academics while the education workforce is aging in line with the general population.

Another painful point is income inequality that affects education. On the one hand, education stimulates social mobility and professional opportunities and, on the other hand, it may „reproduce inequalities when the already-privileged have better access to education.” (OECD, 2010:39). Therefore, a legitimate question is whether education and lifelong learning will be able to help people get rid of poverty by providing them with the necessary skills for the labour market. Since social actions aim at attaining social welfare, the OECD survey shows that education should identify which of its aspects may influence the level of life satisfaction.

It is already known that, in general, the measures leading to people’s well-being are primarily focused on economic aspects, while the social and psychological ones are often postponed, if not neglected. It would be particularly useful if education could find a balance between the two categories of goals. Significant influences come also from the *changing patterns of work*. There are changes in the life cycle patterns reflecting variations as regards to the number of years devoted to education prior to entering the labour market, years spent out of employment, in employment, and retirement for both men and women.

The trends illustrating the present labour market flexibility (continuity in a certain job or part-time working), knowledge orientation of certain economies (increasing role of the R&D activities; number of researchers employed), massification and internalisation of higher education, female employment will definitely signal education that the „world of work” is changing. Consequently, social integration and professional success require educational programmes promptly and carefully adapted to the new characteristics of the labour market. It is therefore useful to reflect and decide whether the increasing period of time spent in education by young people is sustainable, if there are proper conditions for people to take part in educational programmes at different times over the life course, or if there are employment regulations to enable recurrent participation in education.

Re-shaping language classes to meet the students’ future career demands

Thinking of my students’ future career challenges, in the light of the ideas presented above, I have come to the conclusion that the students of Public Management and Administration will probably be the most exposed to the winds of change when they start their career. They will be indeed faced with almost all the trends of a changing society, as described in the OECD survey referred above. There will be many questions for them with reference to education as a part of the community’s life and activities they will be responsible for, as members of various local authorities, but there are many questions as well for me now, as a teacher responsible for giving them a good direction in their future career.

Going back to the OECD material, I have selected some questions to guide me in the endeavour to adapt my classes to the students’ future career demands. Here is the set of questions I have chosen:

- a. *What is the role of formal education in creating responsible citizens, with civic values and critical skills (....)? (p. 23)*
- b. *Increasing competition on global markets has promoted the widespread belief that countries need constant innovation to maintain position. Does education nurture the creativity necessary to be innovative? (p.27)*

- c. *Education and training systems have traditionally been strong bastions of national decision-making. Do these systems provide students with the necessary outlook and skills, including language skills, for successful international co-operation? (p.27)*
- d. *Should these economic shifts contribute to fundamental rethinking of the nature of schooling, vocational education, tertiary education and lifelong learning and innovation policies? (p. 29)*

I have found these questions very useful to re-design some activities in the textbook I usually use as a basis for my teaching to the first year students of Public Administration. For instance, to develop their ability to make correct judgement and help them make responsible decisions on moral issues that may occur in the public administration field, I have adapted a short text in the textbook (Ghiga, G., I. Stamatescu, R.N. Serban, 2005: p.83), originally planned as a reading activity, into a speaking activity for solving a dilemma.

The situation the students had to consider was briefly given in the textbook as follows: „When state prisons are crammed with convicted prisoners, should the state release some of them to create more room for others?” (version adapted by the author of the unit from „Rethinking the Identity of Public Administration”, by Eran Vigoda, *Public Administration and Management. An interactive Journal*, www.pamij.com).

The speaking activity (based on role playing) has been divided into three stages:

Stage 1 – Individual work - in the classroom. Students had to analyse the situation and come with suggestions, possible solutions for solving the respective dilemma.

Stage 2 – Group work – in the classroom. Groups have been formed according to the following roles: supporters of the idea to release some prisoners; opponents of the respective; a group of jurors, whose members had to consider the two positions and choose the most appropriate one and a group of observers who had to analyse the interaction and make recommendations to individual students for improving their communication skills.

Stage 3 – Group work. Preparation for a classroom debate – individual and group work, outside the classroom. The students had to build their argumentation, select spokespersons, come with practical ideas for implementing the solution they propose. Library search for understanding the debate mechanism, public speaking pattern and some specific juridical procedures was also recommended.

Stage 3 – Performing the debate - classroom work

Stage 4 – analysing the results – large group discussions in the classroom. In this stage, the students have been encouraged to discuss all aspects of the debate, including the jurors’ decision. They have also been advised to make a list of the most interesting ideas that have come into the debate, the strongest arguments presented by the participants in the debate (taken or not taken into account by jurors) and select the most appropriate set of solutions that could be implemented in real life situations, in Romanian society. This discussion could adjust the jurors’ decision and provide feedback to the students who had played this role. Feedback on the quality of interaction has been given by observers.

Stages 3 and 4 have been generous in ideas and productive in communication. They have revealed to what extent the first year students of Public administration are individually responsive citizens with civic values

and how well they are inclined to make objective analyses. Some cultural biases and an uncertain pattern of critical skills have also come out sporadically. The teacher has made notes with regard to the communication skills that have to be developed and the language problems to be eliminated so that to help the students improve their fluency and accuracy in spoken English.

Conclusions

1. Willingly or unwillingly, education is influenced by the changes in other fields, especially by those in the economy and in the social areas.
2. Irrespective of the discipline they teach, teachers should be permanently connected to society, so as to detect the changes with possible negative impact on education, to try to diminish the undesirable consequences of such factors and to help the students take the right direction in their profession.
3. In the new context of the modern society, strongly marked by globalisation, language teachers are directly involved in helping young people to acquire not only good communication skills, but also proper conceptual and critical thinking skills in order to become recognised professionals.
4. As far as the questions (a–d, p. 4 above) are concerned, after practising the re-designed activity with various groups of students of Public Administration, I can give a clear positive answer to questions b. and c., on the condition that the teacher is seriously anchored in their profession, in society as a whole and likes to respond sustainably to the challenges that might come from these directions. Not only may teachers stimulate creativity and innovation in their classes, but the results of such attempts may become a source of innovation for the teacher themselves for other future activities.
5. The role that formal education may take in order to develop responsible civic behaviour in young people is that of a perseverant facilitator. Positive results may occur even faster than we expect. Young people have a justified and admirable desire to live well in a healthy society.
6. The answer to question d. is more complex. It is difficult to say if economic issues should make us re-think education **fundamentally**, but educational programmes usually aim at preparing people to fit various professions and this depends indeed on the economic context.

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