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Assumptions vs the reality – a case study on developing writing in a foreign language at the level of early school education in Poland and Lithuania

Summary

The study aims at providing a potential answer to the question about the extent to which selected currently available ELTs for early school education in Poland and Lithuania allow developing pupils' writing skills in English described in the most recent academic studies and official regulations at both European (e.g. the *CEFR Volume Companion*) and national level (e.g. the *Core Curricula* in the countries in question). The analysis of selected ELTs is performed with the use of a model created by the authors and based on the scientific background and the aforementioned documents. The study demonstrates changes that should be introduced to the content of the examined textbooks in order to make them possibly the most compliant with researchers' stands and valid recommendations, for instance, (1) it would apparently be beneficial to diversify the types of writing activities included in the chosen ELTs, and (2) pupils could significantly benefit from introducing to the analysed textbooks more writing activities referring to their experience.

Keywords: early school education, English language, Lithuania, Poland, textbooks, foreign language writing skills

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja wczesnoszkolna, język angielski, Litwa, Polska, podręczniki, umiejętność pisanie w języku obcym

Introduction

Writing is a vital skill that opens up numerous possibilities for any student. Hence, we have to get our pupils to write more and better from the very early stage of education. Although writing tasks in general have been the subject of various studies, there is still a need for a more detailed account of what types of writing activities exist in English language textbooks (hereafter: ELTs). Hence, the present study aims at:

- providing a potential answer to the question about the extent to which selected ELTs for early school education in Poland and Lithuania allow developing pupils' writing skills in English described in the most recent (2017) official regulations at both European (e.g. the *CEFR Volume Companion – hereafter: CEFR*) and national level (e.g. the *Core Curricula* in the countries in question);
- indicating changes that should be introduced to the content of the examined ELTs in order to make them better compliant with both the most recent academic studies devoted to increasing children's writing abilities and the valid recommendations.

Two EFL textbooks are studied in order to find out what types of writing skills are addressed. They are approved by the ministries of education and science of the respective countries and are popular among EFL teachers in Poland (*Super Sparks 3*; Davies et al. 2017) and Lithuania (*Family and Friends 3*; Thomson, Simmons 2014).

The present paper shows what areas of EFL writing skills are stressed in Polish and Lithuanian primary education. The conducted study can be put into practice and help textbook designers to create versatile writing tasks for English textbooks and perhaps change the focus area of the activities.

Methodology

Following such researchers as Cunningsworth (1995), Richard-Amato (2003), Cutler and Graham (2008), Ur (2012), Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Snow (2014), Swandi and Netto-Shek (2017), or Pinter (2017), the following aspects of ELT evaluation have to be taken into account (adapted from Cunningsworth 1995):

- To what extent does an ELT include guided, semi-free, and free (creative) writing activities?
- Is there an appropriate progression and variety of tasks?
- Are the conventions of different genres of writing taught? If so, what genres are taught?
- Is attention given to the language resources specific to the written form, such as punctuation, spelling, layout, etc.?
- How much emphasis is there on accuracy?

The methodology of this study is grounded in the principles of semantic content analysis. It consists in studying “the thematic content of text” (Brown and Rodgers 2002: 55) and has been used, for instance, by Diaz, Alarcón and Ortiz (2015), who have followed Brown and Rodgers (2002) Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003), or Corbetta (2007). Nonetheless, this method could not entirely be applied to the present research and, hence, it has been modified in order to meet the assumed objectives presented in Point 1. In order to do this, the following steps are to be taken:

Step 1: Determining the official regulations at both European and national level influencing the content of ELTs at the level of early school education in the countries in question on the basis of the specialist literature (e.g. Burneikaitė et al. 2009, Kusiak-Pisowacka 2015). With regard to Poland, Kusiak-Pisowacka refers to the *Core Curriculum* and the

CEFR (2001) (Kusiak-Pisowacka 2015: 67–68), whereas in Lithuania, *The General Curriculum Framework for Primary Education* is developed on the basis of the *CEFR* descriptors (Burneikaitė et al. 2009: 18).

Step 2: Replacing the documents that have been modified with their most recent versions (2016, 2017) and adding these concerning teaching foreign languages to children, as they could potentially be beneficial for the authors of ELTs. Creating the updated list of documents for the purpose of this study.

Noticeably, in the case of Poland, *Collated representative samples of descriptors of language competences developed for young learners aged 7–10 years* (2016) (hereafter *CRSoD*) contains specific indicators for developing children’s skills at a foreign language. Furthermore, it is one of the two most recent satellite documents accompanying the *CEFR* (2001) (the other one is the *CEFR Companion Volume*; 2017). In the case of Lithuania, the *CEFR* descriptors are represented in *The General curriculum framework for primary education* (hereafter: *GCFPE*) (The Ministry of Education and Science 2016).

Moreover, the *European Language Portfolio for children aged 6–10* (hereafter: *ELP*) (Council of Europe/ Centralny Ośrodek Doskonalenia Nauczycieli 2006) and the curricula for teaching English, have been added to the updated lists for Poland and Lithuania. The former is targeted specifically at children at the given age and it is based on “the six levels of communicative proficiency” described in the *CEFR*. Moreover, it concerns “the five skills of listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing” (*European Language Portfolio* 2018).

Step 3: Determining the *CEFR* level that pupils are supposed to reach at the end of early school education in Poland and Lithuania on the basis of the most recent *Core Curricula* – it is A1 in both countries under investigation (MEN 2017: 11; *GCFPE* 2016).

Step 4: Analysing the indicated official documents at both European and national level in view of recommendations for developing pupils’ writing skills – searching the words, such as “writing”, “write”, “written” in the examined documents at international level as well as “pisać”, “pisanie”, “pisemnie”, “pisemny” in the Polish documents, and “rašyti”, “rašymas”, “raštu”, “rašytinis” in the Lithuanian ones. Limiting the study to the level indicated in Step 3, if applicable.

Step 5: Creating a model for the analysis of ELTs on the basis of the recommendations indicated in Step 4. It will be presented in Point 6 devoted to the outcomes of the conducted study.

Step 6: Analysing selected textbooks in accordance with the model created in Step 5.

Step 7: Interpreting the obtained results and pointing out potential changes that should be introduced to the content of the examined textbooks in order to make them more compliant with the most recent academic studies and official documents.

Step 4 – the analysis of documents at European level

As it has been stated above, in the course of the research, the semantic content analysis of the selected documents has been performed. What needs to be underscored at this point is that the descriptors which the *CRSoD* encompasses are based on the *CEFR* and for this

reason, the authors of the former document assigned the word “Relevant” particularly to these that are applicable to children aged 7–10. Thus, only these guidelines have been taken into consideration in the present research.

Noticeably, regarding FL writing abilities, in the case of children aged 7–10 at this level, the most considerable emphasis is placed on interaction and text production. Notwithstanding the fact that the language used by pupils is expected to be (very) basic, the guidelines appear to be oriented towards practice. Namely, children are supposed to be able to write simple postcards, notes, or messages, describe everyday objects as well as provide their personal details in written form. Furthermore, what can be observed is that all the descriptors are grounded in pupils’ experience, which seemingly reflects the holistic approach towards teaching children indicated, among others, by the Council of Europe (see, e.g. <https://www.ecml.at>).

Step 4 – the analysis of documents at national level

Having performed the analysis of the *CRSoD* that is applicable to both Poland and Lithuania, the authors needed to focus on relevant documents at national level. Still, the methodology of conducting the study remained the same as at European level and it was adopted by both researchers.

Poland

The main document in Poland binding for the authors of ELTs is the *Core Curriculum* (MEN 2017)¹, which includes rather scarce guidelines on pupils’ FL writing skills. The only information that can be found is that children finishing early school education should be able to “copy words and simple sentences”, “write single words and phrases”, as well as “write very simple and short sentences both on the basis of the pattern and on their own” (MEN 2017: 8). Aside from that, the basic creative writing is to be grounded in patterns (MEN 2017: 5).

In contrast, the examined curricula for teaching English written by Kębłowska (2017), Bogucka (2017), and Studzińska et al. (2017) comprise more detailed guidelines for developing pupils’ FL writing abilities. For instance, the first author enlists activities that children should complete, including “describing people, objects, and situations”, “writing a letter, a note, an e-mail on the basis of a pattern”, “doing projects” (Kębłowska 2017: 30). Still, similarly to the *Core Curriculum*, Kębłowska’s publication pays particular attention to writing short utterances related to pupils’ life and environment as well as correct spelling (Kębłowska 2017: 35–36).

Regarding Bogucka’s curriculum, the author underlines a limited extent of the requirements concerning both reading and writing at the level of early school education (Bogucka 2017: 16). Nonetheless, children are supposed to increase their FL writing skills gradually,

¹ Owing to the fact that the examined documents in both countries are written in the state languages and no translation into English is available, the authors translated the indicated points if necessary. It is applicable to Points 5 and 6.

starting with single words, through more and more complex phrases, and finishing with filling the gaps and writing sentences on the basis of the pattern (Bogucka 2017: 17). What is missing from the remaining examined curricula for teaching English, albeit included in Bogucka's work, is that writing on the basis of traces ought to be in line with the models of the Polish letters so that children's writing abilities could develop cohesively (Bogucka 2017: 17).

In contrast, what Studzińska et al. put emphasis on is the fact that pupils at this level need to familiarise with both the pronunciation and intonation of a particular foreign language prior to starting writing exercises (Studzińska et al. 2017: 16).

Finally, it ought to be underlined that it is the *ELP* that determines specifically the expectations towards children's FL writing skills at level A1. As it is stated in the document, at this stage, pupils are supposed to be able to "compile a list of things", for instance, a shopping list, "send very simple regards from holidays", "fill in a form with the basic personal details", as well as "write a very short and simple message", such as an e-mail (Council of Europe 2006: 35). Transparently, the given points are oriented towards practical skills, which reflect the approach towards increasing children's FL writing skills adopted in the *CRSoD*.

Lithuania

The General Curriculum Framework for Primary Education: Foreign Languages (GCFPE 2016) is the key document that provides for the level and structure of foreign language teaching and learning at primary level. However, it should be noted that differently from the other three skills (listening, reading and speaking), the aforesaid document provides highly concise and generalised descriptors of the writing skills. The descriptors are limited to such categories as "the ability to render information in writing", which includes the ability "to provide personal information in writing" (GCFPE 2016: 181). Apart from that, it is applicable to "communicate in writing on the outlined topics and in given situations", which are further explicated in such sample assignments as "writing a (e.g. electronic) text-message (a letter)", "writing a note", "writing a postcard", etc. (GCFPE 2016: 182). Moreover, the document also elaborates on the modes of the written assignments, namely "writing on the basis of a pattern", "composing sentences from single words", "ordering sentences into a text considering its communicative purpose", "accomplishing tasks in pairs or groups", etc. (GCFPE 2016: 182–183).

The *ELP* has not been adopted for primary education in Lithuania. Yet, a close analysis of the descriptors of writing skills highlighted in the *CEFR* (2001) and *CRSoD* (2016) allows stating that the *GCFPE*, which lists requirements for EFL writing skills development at the national level, complies with the aforesaid EU documents and is eligible for the study undertaken by the authors of the paper.

Step 6 – the analysis of selected ELTs in Poland and Lithuania

On the grounds of the relevant guidelines described above, the authors have created a model for examining selected ELTs. Due to the pilot character of this study, only one

ELT in each country has been scrutinised. Nevertheless, it has still allowed the researchers to draw preliminary conclusions regarding the manner of developing pupils' writing abilities in these textbooks, especially with reference to the official guidelines, and suggesting potential solutions to the indicated issues.

It is worth clarifying that the ELTs for the analysis were chosen on the basis of the agreed criteria, that is 1. they were expected to be as recent as possible; 2. they were to be targeted at the last year of early school education owing to the fact that, for instance, in Poland, only at the third grade, teachers ought to focus on increasing pupils' all four basic skills, that is listening, reading, speaking, and writing (e.g. see Bogucka 2017: 16); 3. the selected textbooks were supposed to be written by the local authors in order to make them possibly most adjusted to the context in a given country, which can be regarded as scarcely applicable to ELTs utilised across Europe.

Poland

In Poland, the textbook entitled *Super Sparks 3* (Davies et al. 2017) has been subjected to the examination as it fulfils all the aforementioned criteria. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that despite the educational reform in Poland in 2017, in the school year 2017/2018, so at the time, when the present paper was written, ELTs for third-grade pupils were the same as before the reform. Hence, the analysis of the selected ELT is justified. For illustration purposes, a part of the study is displayed in Table 1 whereas the most significant observations are indicated below it.

Table 1. An illustrative part of the analysis of *Super Sparks 3* (Davies et al. 2017)

European level		National level	The analysed ELT
Overall written production	Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences (Council of Europe 2016: 49)	Can write very simple and short sentences on the basis of a pattern and alone (MEN 2017: 8)	Correcting sentences on the basis of the pattern (Davies et al. 2017: 11) Writing a few sentences about a monkey on the basis of the pattern (Davies et al. 2017: 11) Writing in which room some furniture is located on the basis of the pattern (Davies et al. 2017: 21) Describing the pictures on the basis of the pattern (Davies et al. 2017: 32) Writing how much money each person has on the basis of the pattern (Davies et al. 2017: 45)

Table 1. cont.

European level		National level	The analysed ELT
			Writing at what time certain daily activities are done on the basis of the pattern (Davies et al. 2017: 53) Writing sentences about each person's eating habits (Davies et al. 2017: 55)
Orthographic control	Can copy familiar words and short phrases e.g. simple signs or instructions, names of everyday objects, names of shops and set phrases used regularly (Council of Europe 2016: 56)	Can copy simple, familiar words on the basis of a pattern (Studzińska et al. 2017: 16)	Copying single words connected with the development of a caterpillar (Davies et al. 2017: 14) Completing the sentences with the given words linked with the weather (Davies et al. 2017: 36) Matching the days of the week with the dishes (Davies et al. 2017: 54) Labelling countries on the map (Davies et al. 2017: 58) Matching dishes with countries (Davies et al. 2017: 58) Matching descriptions with pictures (Davies et al. 2017: 70)

Source: own elaboration.

On the basis of the obtained data, a few observations can be made. First of all, no progression is visible in the examined ELT with regard to developing pupils' writing skills as each unit seems to contain writing activities of the same type and is organised in accordance with the same scheme. Furthermore, the given textbook is deficient in activities dedicated to creating projects, which can profoundly influence the increase in children's FL writing abilities.

Apparently, in the examined textbook, the greatest emphasis is put on pupils' copying short words and writing simple sentences on the basis of the pattern, which is reflected in a considerable number of activities of this kind. Nevertheless, with regard to creative writing, it is visibly much more restricted than the aforementioned type. If such activities are included in the selected ELT, they mainly concern describing a picture and only two of them refer to pupils' experience. For this reason, pupils are not given the opportunity to describe people or objects encountered on a daily basis, either. What is also missing from the textbook subjected to the analysis are activities in which pupils could practise writing their personal details, like in the case of completing forms. Finally, children are

not provided with a chance to learn, how to create texts of various genres, such as e-mails or postcards, whatsoever, even though such guideline is indicated at both European and national level. Arguably, the displayed issues can hinder the development of pupils' FL writing abilities and, hence, they may require taking corrective actions that will be suggested in the final part of this paper.

Lithuania

According to the *Report on the Current Situation of the Use of School Textbooks² (Ataska ita apieda... 2014)*, the most favoured EFL textbook used in Lithuanian primary schools is *Family and Friends* (2014). It is noteworthy that the list of the proposed ELTs for primary schools has not been changed after the educational reform in Lithuania, which started in 2016. The ELT taken for the analysis is still on the top list of ELTs offered for Lithuanian primary education; therefore, its choice for the present study is justified. Likewise in the case of Poland, for illustration purposes, a part of the results of the analysis presented in Table 2 while the remaining points are demonstrated below it.

Table 2. An illustratory part of the analysis of *Family and Friends* (2014)

	European level	National level	The analysed ELT
Overall written production	Can give information in writing about matters of personal relevance (e.g. likes and dislikes, family, pets) using simple words and basic expressions. (Council of Europe 2016: 48)	4.1.1. Can provide basic personal details in written form (GCFPE 2016: 189)	Describe a person (Thomson, Simmons 2014: 10, 16, 38, 44, 54, 60, 88, 110)
Orthographic control	Can copy familiar words and short phrases e.g. simple signs or instructions, names of everyday objects, names of shops and set phrases used regularly. (Council of Europe 2016: 56)	Can copy letters and simple, familiar words on the basis of a pattern (GCFPE 2016: 182)	Complete the words (e.g. k_t_kite) (Thomson, Simmons 2014: 17, 39, 71, 111) Write punctuation marks (Thomson, Simmons 2014: 25) Match and write (w + all – wall) (Thomson, Simmons 2014: 33, 45, 61, 89, 105) Write the speech marks (Thomson, Simmons 2014: 41) Write a word that rhymes (Thomson and Simmons 2014: 111)

Source: own elaboration.

² The title of the Report has been translated by the author due to fact that it is available solely in Lithuanian.

The General Curriculum Framework for Primary Education: Foreign Languages (GCFPE 2016) provides very concise and generalised descriptors of the writing skills to be developed at primary education level. Moreover, no clear progression can be observed in the examined ELT with regard to developing pupils' writing skills, as the majority of the units follow the same type of activities and the pattern of their organisation within a unit. Noticeably, the greatest emphasis is put on copying short words and phrases from a box or a short text, as well as writing short sentences following the provided pattern or model. Besides, a considerable number of writing tasks are related to orthographic control and punctuation, such as word completion (filling in letters), matching, filling in punctuation marks, capital letters, etc. Writing tasks seem to follow the same pattern over the whole Class Book, focusing primarily on the use of grammar structures and patterns rather than developing pupils' creative writing skills. As for the written projects, the selected ELT does not contain such a rubric.

Noticeably, pupils are hardly familiarised with writing genres (e.g. letters, lists), except for a few cases (two emails, a postcard, an invitation, and an instruction (recipe)) in the ELT under investigation. Finally, the textbook contains insufficient number of activities, in which pupils could practise writing their personal details. Hence, it is assumed that the presented issues can prevent pupils from developing their writing skills in a consistent way, which in turn may lead to deficiencies in their EFL literacy development.

Having analysed the selected ELTs, a few issues common to both textbooks have been discovered as well as correspondent corrective actions have been proposed. Summing up, it should be highlighted that the writing tasks outlined in the analysed ELTs tend to focus on general mechanics and accuracy rather than stimulating pupils' creative writing. Besides, both ELTs generally contain guided tasks, in which a particular model or pattern is offered for pupils to follow in their writing. Apparently, the textbooks under investigation are deficient in creative writing tasks and project assignments. Neither are pupils familiarised with the diversity of short written forms, such as notes, text-messages, invitations, postcards, etc.

Step 7 – suggesting potential solutions to the indicated issues

Having identified a few issues presented above, it is worth suggesting potential solutions to them. Hence, in the case of the textbooks subjected to the analysis in both Poland and Lithuania, it would apparently be beneficial to diversify the types of writing activities included in it, namely adding more of these providing children with opportunities for creative writing. Aside from that, pupils could significantly benefit from introducing to the selected ELT more writing activities referring to their experience, such as filling in forms with their personal details, as currently such exercises are absent from the textbook, in spite of the official guidelines indicated in this paper. What could also be modified is the number of activities allowing children to create descriptions, for instance, of the objects

they can encounter on a daily basis or people they live with. Such diversification would enable pupils to increase their FL writing skills more comprehensively.

Another change could consist in introducing to the examined ELTs activities allowing pupils to learn explicitly the basic features of short forms, including notes, invitations, or postcards, which is currently completely missing. Furthermore, adding activities devoted to creating projects could be found useful. Finally, all the aforementioned types of activities would need to be ordered progressively, in a manner enabling children to increase their FL writing skills gradually.

The introduction of these changes in the ELTs could facilitate not only the development of pupils' EFL writing skills, but also contribute to the improvement of the content and task arrangement in the ELTs themselves, as well as their compliance with the most recent academic studies and official documents at the European and national levels.

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