

Aspects on the implementation of GK4

An empirical qualitative study

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Abstract

Although English has still to be established as a mandatory school subject in Austrian primary schools, it is expected that pupils receive a sound foundation in the target language. In order to fulfil this stipulation, GK4, the “year-four-competences” have been developed. They equip pedagogues with a framework of proficiencies every pupil should attain within the first four years of education in English. Since the target users are hardly familiar with the concept of GK4, this study aims to highlight the key factors for the implementation of this educational innovation and to describe possible challenges that may occur during the process of diffusion. In order to provide an insight about the motivation for developing GK4, co-editor Carla Carnevale, has been interviewed within the course of the empirical research carried out for a doctoral dissertation. The findings suggest that an extensive implementation requires legal measures as well as the support of school authorities. However, it remains open whether this “top-down-approach” will meet its objectives and whether the target users approve of this innovation.

Zur Implementierung der GK4

Eine empirisch qualitative Studie

Zusammenfassung

Obwohl Englisch an Österreichs Volksschulen noch nicht zu den Pflichtgegenständen zählt, wird erwartet, dass die Schülerinnen und Schüler mit anschlussfähigen sprachlichen Kenntnissen und Fertigkeiten für Englisch in der Sekundarstufe ausgestattet werden. Um diese Diskrepanz zu überbrücken, wurden die GK4, die „Grundkompetenzen Lebende Fremdsprache 4. Schulstufe“ entwickelt. Sie geben Pädagoginnen und Pädagogen eine Orientierung, welche Kompetenzen Kinder nach vier Jahren Englisch in der Volksschule erworben haben sollten. Da das Konzept der GK4 noch kaum angewendet wird, ist es Ziel der Studie, jene Kriterien aufzuzeigen, die die Implementierung dieser Innovation im Bildungswesen beeinflussen. Um einen Einblick in die zugrundeliegende Motivation für die Entwicklung der GK4 zu gewinnen, wurde Carla Carnevale, Co-Autorin und Projektleiterin der GK4, im Rahmen der empirischen Untersuchungen für eine Dissertation interviewt. Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass eine umfassende Implementierung der Unterstützung der Schulaufsicht sowie rechtlicher Verordnung bedarf. Ob diese von „oben“ erwirkten Maßnahmen eine effektive Implementierung bewirken, und wie sie von der Zielgruppe wahrgenommen wird, bleibt zu untersuchen.

Keywords:

GK4
English at primary school
Implementation of innovations
Competency oriented education
Primary school pedagogy

Schlüsselwörter:

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1 Introduction

In conclusion to an enquiry conducted by the European commission in 2002, the European Union stipulates that every European national should speak more than two languages additionally to their native tongue (Presidency Conclusion of the European Commission, 2002, p. 8). With reference to foreign language procurement and education, English is set as a priority due to the fact that it is globally used as a lingua franca and is considered to be the most important language for international, political, and commercial communication (Harmer, 2007, pp. 14-18). Consequently, the ability to articulate in English both competently and confidently is implicit worldwide.

Pupils in Austria are expected to have achieved proficiency level A1 of the CEFR (which is the abbreviation for "Common European Framework of References for Languages", an internationally recognised guideline that interprets the level of a learner's proficiency in a foreign language) in English by the end of their first year of secondary education. Therefore, it is imperative learners are introduced to the target language as early as possible and basic competencies are founded during their period of elementary schooling.

In the course of educational reforms in Austria at the beginning of the new millennium, a committee comprising of representatives from the ministry of education and school governance had been working on the development of competency standards in key subjects. In 2004, this cooperation led to the publication of educational standards in mathematics, German and English for students in their eighth learning year. In relation to mathematics and German, standards have also been edited for grade four pupils, but there are, however, no such standards for English in early school education. This phenomenon may be explained by the fact that English at a primary level has not been established as a compulsory school subject yet, but is one of eight mandatory exercise courses in a foreign language („Verbindliche Übung Lebende Fremdsprache") a primary school is obliged to offer. Moreover, there is no grading in exercise courses such as "English as a foreign language" although it is a compulsory school subject with marks from year five (secondary level) on. However, due to requests of parents, most Austrian elementary schools offer English as mandatory exercise course.

1.1 Current status of English in the primary curriculum

Presently, the Austrian national curriculum for primary schools does not include a set number of lessons for pupils to learn English during their first two years of education. Foreign language learning and teaching essentially has to occur in subjects such as music, arts, handicrafts, physical education, mathematics and "Sachunterricht" (a subject comprising basic and general instruction in geography, history, economics, social studies and science), without diminishing the students' learning opportunities in these topics. In the third and fourth year of elementary education, the curriculum allocates one hour per week for a foreign language, which most Austrian primary schools have decided to be English. Additionally, the target language may be taught in an incorporated form in any subject but German. (Lehrplan der Volksschule, 2012, p. 207)

However, as stated above, the "compulsory" English lesson has not yet been implemented as a school-subject in Austria's primary education system. A key factor that may explain its neglect has been observed by the author on many occasions. Therefore, it is fair to assume, that the extent and success of early childhood foreign language acquisition in primary schools in Austria is dependent on the individual pedagogue's linguistic skills, efforts and focus of emphasis (Buchholz, 2007, pp. 235, 247)

1.2 GK4

In December 2012, the ministry of education released their first publication dedicated to the topic "GK4" (Die Grundkompetenzen Lebende Fremdsprache, 4. Schulstufe) to provide teachers involved in primary education with a scheme of descriptors to ensure the quality of their lessons. GK4 was composed and developed by the Austrian Centre for Language Competency (Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum, ÖSZ) It characterises the minimum standards of linguistic skills students should reach in competences such as listening, reading, and writing within a foreign language by the end of their four-year education whilst attending any primary school in Austria.

The required accomplishments are grouped into various educational aims and comprise a listing of competency-orientated skills young learners are expected to acquire regarding their linguistic, social and intercultural capabilities. Recommendations concerning oral as well as written reception, production and

interaction are based on the specifications found in the national curriculum and the CEFR. These guidelines do not explicitly determine standards but offer a competence model for primary level and suggestions on standardising language education. (Felberbauer, Fuchs, Gritsch, Zebisch & Carnevale, 2014, pp. 8-11, 15-18)

Contrary to the educational standards, which have been issued by decree (Verordnung der Bundesministerin für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur über Bildungsstandards im Schulwesen StF: BGBl. II Nr. 1/2009), GK4 have no such juridical significance. Consequently, the educational objectives of GK4 are not legally obligatory but mere recommendations. It is, therefore, a matter of an individual pedagogue's decision whether or not to apply GK4.

1.3 Problem statement

The present state of research regarding the context of the “year-four-competences” is insufficient. Therefore, it remains uncertain whether one hour a week, which on average equates to one twentieth of the total instruction time available in the third and fourth year of primary education, is adequate to supply pupils with a deeper understanding of the English language and arouse cultural and social awareness regarding foreign speaking people and nations. Although the composers of GK4 suggest in 2014 that it is possible to commence a child's linguistic proficiency toward level A1 within the current time allotment, given goal-oriented, stringent instruction (Felberbauer et al., 2014, p. 15), they were uncertain about this particular two years before (Felberbauer et al., 2012, p. 6). As the authors do not state any explicit reasons for this shift of opinion, it remains unclear on which scientific grounds these assumptions have been made upon.

Linguistic research shows that foreign language acquisition in young learners depends on various factors such as the age of a child and its exposure to the target language, but other components such as the quality of instruction, motivational aspects, and practise opportunities are of importance as well. Although linguists generally agree on these characteristics, there are controversial theories suggesting different time phases during which second or any further foreign language acquisition should take place in order to achieve best results. Other investigations imply an advantage of older students when it comes to explicit foreign language learning and suggest that comparatively young pupils tend to acquire the target language implicitly, for which a high amount of exposure time is necessary. Nevertheless, experts concur that students, who have been introduced to a foreign language at a younger age, perform generally better than those who have undertaken foreign language acquisition at a later period in their life. (Pinter, 2011, pp. 49-64)

Despite the fact that the exact amount of time exposure necessary to acquire certain proficiencies continues to be indeterminate, the curriculum requires young learners to use the target language considerably and naturally. („Der Gebrauch der Fremdsprache wird [...] zur Selbstverständlichkeit“; „dass die Schüler allmählich auch fremdsprachlich frei agieren lernen“) (Lehrplan der Volksschule, 2012, p. 209). The “year-four-competences” are proposed to tackle these parameters and to provide primary school teachers with an outline of principles to ensure skill-oriented English instruction. Furthermore, a foundation is offered which aims to aid in designing an efficient and adequate key programme for teaching the target language at secondary level (Felberbauer et al., 2014, pp. 1-5). Studies suggest that there is a distinctive diversity in teaching approaches concerning foreign language education at primary school in Austria resulting in divergent learning progress, performance and skill levels of young learners. These disparities combined with insufficient information on student's knowledge often induce secondary school teachers to start teaching English from scratch. In this regard, GK4 aim at facilitating the transition from primary to secondary school (Felberbauer et al., 2014, pp. 12f). The question arises, whether this educational innovation is generally approved and applied by primary school teachers and whether its implementation is perceived as an appropriate, beneficial provision to help increase the quality of teaching and learning a foreign language (Rogers, 2003, p. 15).

1.4 Academic interest

The author's experience as a teacher and lecturer for English as well as the conclusions drawn from conversations held with colleagues and experts of the ÖSZ have led to the assumption that the concept of GK4 has yet to arrive in Austria's primary school classrooms. These observations combined with studies of relevant literature provided the incentive for conducting scientific research within the target field.

The significant academic interest for this study consists in providing an insight into possible motivational factors influencing teachers' decisions on whether to apply GK4. It aims to reveal the necessary preconditions for a general implementation focusing on certain aspects such as extent of support by school supervising authorities, teachers' attitudes toward competence based teaching and their mind-sets regarding the

application of educational benchmarks. Moreover, the general characteristics influencing the adoption rate of innovations will be of relevance.

1.5 Research questions

In order to cover the essence of all crucial aspects on the topic of interest, the central question has been devised as follows: What are the advantages and challenges of implementing GK4 in Austria's primary schools? Based on the prime research question, the following more specific questions have been formulated:

- a) Which fundamental factors influence a primary school instructor's decision in Austria whether to implement GK4?
- b) What kind of impact does this framework of competences have on teaching English at primary school?
- c) In what way are GK4 considered to offer an appropriate pedagogical approach to enhance the quality of teaching and learning English at primary level?
- d) To what extent is GK4's framework of competences deemed to facilitate the transition from primary to secondary foreign language education?
- e) What are the pedagogical preconditions for an extensive implementation of GK4 with regard to teacher education?

The preceding questions have provided a framework to outline the complex of problems and have served as basis for developing the key-interview. They will also structure further research to produce the necessary data as they will serve as basis for developing the interview guide for the interviews with pedagogues teaching English at primary school. They are supposed to produce the relevant information as to indicate "what data to collect next, from whom and where" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 599). Grounded theory will be relevant for answering the research questions and for generating hypotheses and theory (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 598).

1.6 Purpose of the study

This study aims at explaining the motivation and necessity for developing GK4 and to give an insight on the views of co-author Carla Carnevale on this educational innovation. Subsequently, primary school teachers will be interviewed as it is planned to take a closer look on pedagogues' attitudes toward the catalogue of the "year four competences" and the way in which GK4 are currently applied in every-day-practice in certain primary schools in Austria. Analyses of these interviews are supposed to give an overview on the underlying factors that may influence a primary school instructor's decision whether to implement GK4. Furthermore, it is aimed to uncover possible assets and drawbacks teachers may face through the application of GK4 in a classroom environment and to reveal the conditions and prerequisites for a comprehensive implementation of this framework of educational objectives.

2 Theoretical background

Although there is a shortage of scientific findings regarding the application of GK4 there are, however, relevant studies published on the approaches of certain Austrian, German and English schools toward attaining quality standards. These publications focus on identifying the success factors determining the realisation of objectives and include significant analysis on the implementation of educational standards and innovations in selected schools (Freudenthaler & Specht, 2005; Beer, 2006; Eder, Gastager, & Hofmann, 2006; Zeitler, Heller & Asbrand, 2012; Rürup & Bormann, 2013).

Research conducted by Dederling (2006, p. 201) highlights relevant factors which assist in indicating the extent and success of the implementation of innovations and objectives into school-life. Aspects such as the importance of a project within the context of school development work, pedagogues' involvement in the learning process, the attitude of teaching staff toward a project and the general willingness to incorporate innovative processes can be identified as most influential regarding the diffusion process of new concepts.

Other important studies are the ones of Freudenthaler and Specht (2005) and of Beer (2006) who investigated the attitude of teaching staff towards educational standards in Austria. Although GK4 are not identical with educational standards, findings of these studies were considered to offer important indications for the current research project.

Furthermore, literature on primary school teachers' linguistic prerequisites as well as investigations into foreign language acquisition as a child and pedagogy as indicated for example in Pinter (2011), were of importance. Pinter (2011, p. 184) suggests that an instructor's attitude and personality have a great influence on pupils' learning opportunities in the language classroom. Thus, teachers' approaches toward the implementation of educational objectives such as GK4 may also have an impact on the learning and teaching equilibrium and consequently on the application of quality standards as indicated for example by Rürup and Bormann (2012) or Zeitler (2013).

The purpose of the following section is to provide definitions of the terms in focus, outline the theoretical concerns and present an overview of the current research conducted on the topic of quality assessment in schools.

2.1 Innovations in education

Educational innovations can be described as relatively newly developed concepts within the system of school. The nature of educational innovations may be examined under five main aspects, namely time, factual conditions, social elements, spatial aspects and cognitive dimensions (Rammert, 2010, pp. 29-34; Bormann, 2013, pp. 95f). The key factors that spark the development of educational innovations are imbalances and stress within the school-system and the concept of school being a "learning organisation" (Holtappels, 2013, pp. 45f, 57f). To initiate change, there are three strategies that refer to the various possibilities of putting innovations into practise. Literature on the acceptance of innovations implies that novelties are more likely to be adopted when their assets and aims are transparent and relevant for the target users (Bormann, 2013, p. 92; Rogers, 2003, p. 15f). Research on educational innovations suggests that innovations, which are in use, inevitably influence individuals and systems involved. Steering committees, teacher-networks, the commitment of head teachers, further education courses and self-evaluation measures are components that influence the development of an innovation (Holtappels, 2013, p. 56-64).

Publications on GK4 do not include any research on this innovation to date. Therefore, a research gap has been identified. According to the co-author of GK4, Carla Carnevale, it has to be assumed that only few primary school teachers are familiar with GK4 and even less work under the terms of their recommendations (personal conversation September 11th, 2015). GK4 qualify as educational innovation as they present a recently developed, contemporary concept. It remains open, in what way this framework of competences is actually used in practicing (Altrichter & Wiesinger, 2004, p. 220) teaching English in certain primary schools in Austria. GK4 explicitly claim to render teaching English more effective and to alleviate some of the problems in connection with the transition from primary to secondary school (Felberbauer et al., 2014, p. 13). However, the advantages and challenges (Rogers, 2003, p. 36) associated with GK4 are currently unknown. The "year-four-competences" aim at improving the quality of teaching English at primary level. Hence, this postulation needs to be looked at in relation to the situation before, where there were no guidelines listing the linguistic skills primary school pupils should acquire. With regard to the factual and social dimension, it has not been analysed how the concept of GK4 relates to the conditions of every day practice at primary school and in which way it influences the preparation, teaching and reflection of English lessons. With reference to Buchholz (2007, p. 234f), the great differences in linguistic skills after four years of learning English as a foreign language at primary school often result in difficulties at the transition to secondary school. GK4 expressly declare to provide a framework of reference for language acquisition at primary level that aids in harmonising the process of transition and establishing a sound foundation for secondary education in English (Felberbauer, 2014, pp. 7, 15). However, it is unexplored whether GK4 meet these demands.

To conclude, it seems apposite to research in what way GK4's framework of competences is observed to be convenient or problematic for teaching English at primary school. The question arises, whether teachers view GK4 to be an appropriate approach for enhancing the quality of teaching English and thus disburden the transition to secondary school. Furthermore, it needs to be investigated whether GK4 are discerned as a chance for rebalancing the learning outcomes after for years of primary education in English.

2.2 Implementations of educational innovations

Generally, "implementation" may be described as the actual application of an innovation or as a process aiming on establishing the innovation. Both, the use and the process that leads to the application are influenced by a number of aspects which are the innovation per se, the way it is communicated, the time factor, and the individuals and systems concerned by the implementation (Rogers, 2003, pp. 12-31). Barriers in the course of

implementation are related to the notions of value, power and authority, as well as fear and uncertainty (Holtappels, 2013, p. 48). Implementation may be regulated by “top-down” resolutions comprising legal aspects or by “bottom-up” concepts, including individuals concerned by the innovation. Research on the implementation of educational innovations implies that intentions of changing procedures and developments at school are often entailed with intricacies because of the complex and largely self-determined functioning of the school-system. Accordingly, innovations are often adapted. In order to achieve the designated purpose, it seems advisable to involve the target users in the innovation-process and take their requirements into account (Holtappels, 2013, p. 53). In this connection, individuals’ attitude towards the innovation and their motivation to apply it, are decisive for the realisation of implementation (Trempler, Schellenbach-Zell, & Gräsel, 2013, pp. 342ff).

As the implementation of GK4 has not been investigated yet, aspects determining their adoption remain undefined. It is unsure, whether pedagogues recognise the use of GK4 as “relative advantage” for themselves and for their learners respectively. Furthermore, it is open in how far primary school pedagogues experience GK4 to be consistent with the traditional teaching principals (“compatibility”) and to what challenges (“complexity”) the application of GK4’s framework of competences are associated with. With respect to “observability”, it is unclear in what way GK4 are viewed as a beneficial approach to enhance learning outcomes and to facilitate the transition to secondary school. Possible challenges and impediments, that are perceived as hindrances to the application of GK4 have yet to be identified. As for GK4, it is open which of the implementation-strategies are considered to be influential and relevant for a teacher’s decision of putting GK4 into use.

2.3 Educational standards, benchmarks and informal standards

Commonly, the purpose of standards is to assure a certain level of quality. Educational standards occur in various forms that mainly differ in determination of objectives. Distinctions need to be made to informal standards and benchmarks. Informal standards have no legally binding character but influence individuals’ practices (Schott & Azizi Ghanbari, 2012, pp. 14f). Benchmarks essentially may be described as standards without legal obligations (Thonhauser, 2005, p. 105), which do not necessarily have an influence on individuals’ practices. Research on the implementation of educational standards outlines a multitude of descriptors that signify the status of implementation. Swanson and Stevenson (2002, pp. 4-7), describe significant criteria to be the revision of the curriculum, the provision of performance standards, the performance of alignment assessments, and measures for teacher-professionalisation. Beer’s (2007, p. 192) study on the implementation of educational standards in Austria reveals a generally negative mind-set of pedagogues toward the application of standards. It is open, whether a survey on teachers’ attitude toward GK4 would reveal similar results.

With regard to GK4 and the items listed by Swanson and Stevenson, the revision of the curriculum is scheduled for autumn 2018. The postulation for performance standards can be considered fulfilled as GK4 include a table of can-do-descriptors for basic competences in the target language. Thirdly, assessment reflecting learning results is required, which is supposed to take place from the school year 2018/19 onward. The last item includes provisions for further professionalisation of pedagogues on primary level, a postulation that, according to educational authorities, will be tackled in the near future. To sum up, the implementation-status of GK4 can be considered to be at the beginning, as only one of the items mentioned above has been fulfilled so far. As GK4 are currently without binding character and their impact on teaching has not been investigated yet. Although GK4 do not qualify as educational standards, the typical process-phases, observable in connection with the implementation of educational standards, seem relevant when investigating on GK4.

The conclusions drawn from literature research suggest to investigate teachers’ attitude towards GK4 and to reveal their associations, apprehensions and needs in this context. It will be, therefore, part of further research in connection with the doctoral thesis to describe in which way GK4 have been implemented to date and which aspects of a typical process-phase remain open.

2.4 English as a foreign language at primary school

Studies conducted by Buchholz (2007) illustrate the discrepancies that characterise the transition from primary school to secondary school with regard to English as a foreign language. These discrepancies in the Austrian school system are considered to be caused mainly by two factors. On the one hand, there are divergent approaches to teaching English at the individual primary schools that lead teachers at secondary school to start

at square one. On the other hand, English at secondary school is taught on a significantly higher level compared to primary school regarding linguistic quality, expenditure of time, and assessment. (Buchholz, 2007, p. 235)

Buchholz's analyses reveal a generally negative perspective of secondary school teachers on English classes at primary school. This view appears to be primarily based on a lack of information on what is happening in the first four years of learning the foreign language but also on little interest in it. The scarce interest may often root in a frustration caused by the experience that pupils have often learned wrong vocabulary and incorrect pronunciation, which is difficult to correct. Another factor seems to be that the competences listed in the curriculum for English at secondary school are not founded on knowledge that has been acquired at primary level. Furthermore, learning English at primary school is deemed to be of little value for foreign language acquisition on secondary level. (Buchholz, 2007, pp. 236ff)

Not only the learning outcomes of teaching English at primary school are diverse, but also primary school teachers' perspectives on teaching English in the first four learning years appear to be divergent. The majority of participants in Buchholz's survey state that they would disapprove of an evaluation of their students' learning achievements. More than half of the interviewees are convinced that pupils benefit most by learning English through play. Many do not feel responsible for teaching English "professionally" and claim a "non-binding" character of this mandatory exercise course. Furthermore, there is hardly any communication between primary school and secondary school teachers to harmonise the transition for young learners. (Buchholz, 2007, pp. 239f)

Investigations on pupils' perspective on teaching and learning English at primary school suggest that more than half of the respondents do not feel well-prepared for secondary level. In this connection, it turns out that the level of preparation at primary school corresponds to the marks received on their first English-test at secondary school. Generally, English at primary school seems to be less popular than at secondary school although many pupils state that it is very demanding. It appears that learners do not mind being assessed and having to study hard, on a contrary, they appreciate finally learning the language "properly". Particularly older learners at primary school deem the sometimes unduly playful approach inappropriate and boring. (Buchholz, 2007, pp. 241-245, 292f)

According to Buchholz, the lack of guidelines and information on what may be expected after four years of learning English contributes severely to the difficulties in transition from primary to secondary school. Moreover, the potentials in connection with early foreign language acquisition remain underused. (Buchholz, 2007, p. 245)

To conclude, the way English is implemented and its purpose at primary school in Austria seem to be an issue of concern for various reasons. Firstly, it is up to the individual school if they offer it as a subject to their pupils at all. Secondly, it depends on the particular teacher's commitment and competences to provide adequate instruction in English. Consequently, teaching and learning English at primary level may vary considerably regarding frequency and quality. Therefore, learning outcomes after four years of primary education are divergent and pupils may encounter difficulties at the transition to secondary level with English as a subject comprising tests from the first year onward. Another fact to be considered is the limited time provided for English by colleges of education for primary school teacher training. Research conducted by Buchholz suggests that the majority of primary school teachers' linguistic competences are insufficient for meeting the primary school curriculum's requirements. (Buchholz, 2007, pp. 235- 245, 262-266)

2.5 GK4 in the context of competency oriented language teaching

In educational science, skills, which are fundamental for mastering everyday situations, are commonly referred to as "competences". GK4, the "year-four-competences", comprise a catalogue of reference listing linguistic abilities that provide pupils with the necessary basics in English for an unproblematic transition to secondary school. These basics include listening, speaking, reading, writing, and social skills. Due to the suboptimal performance of students taking part in the PISA studies, competency-based and outcome-oriented teaching has become a main focus of Austria's educational policy. Relevant educational literature attributes beneficial characteristics to competency-based teaching which may be summed up as learner-orientation, transparency of aims and expected learning outcomes, as well as the acquisition of skills little by little (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 146f). To date, there are not many publications on research in the context of competency-based teaching. Critics deny the advantages ascribed to this relatively new teaching approach. Others declare that it is difficult to trace learning results only to the teaching approach, as many other factors influencing students' skills and performance have to be taken into consideration (Steele et al., 2014, pp. 96f).

As there is a general lack of scientific research on the impact of output-oriented, competency-based education on learning results, it remains open whether teaching with the framework of GK4 is presumed to be beneficial for establishing young learners' linguistic skills. It will be, therefore, subject to further investigation to reveal in how far primary school pedagogues associate GK4 with the postulated qualities.

3 Empirical investigation – the key-informant interview

To begin with the empirical investigation, it was decided to interview an expert in the field of GK4, namely Carla Carnevale, who is co-author of GK4 and in charge of the general coordination of all methodical and didactical projects developed by the ÖSZ regarding language competency. She had been chosen as a “key-informant” due to her central role in the development of GK4. Since there were no suitable pre-developed applications available which could have assisted in attaining the necessary information for this purpose, the interview had been compiled specifically for this enquiry.

The meeting with Carnevale was conducted via skype using a variation of the “interview guide approach”. The common version of this approach implies that the subject matter and talking points are outlined earlier while the particular order and wording of question is decided on through the course of the interview (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 413). On a contrary, for this specific “key-informant interview” it had been decided to include typical features of a “standardised open-ended interview” namely a set of previously designed questions to ensure the inclusion of all relevant issues. Nevertheless, the possibility of asking follow up questions and adding enquiries for clarification was given, thus providing more flexibility and naturalness. (Bortz & Döring, 2006, pp. 238f; McMillan, 2012, p. 292)

For the purpose of the study, the interview with Carnevale mostly consisted of direct questions targeting on information about the expert's opinion on or experience in certain issues regarding the implementation of GK4. The general concerns of directly worded questions were insignificant in respect to the proposed research since the aims of the interview had frankly been declared. The choice of response mode was an unstructured one, giving the interviewee the opportunity to answer without restraints. (Cohen et al., 2011, pp. 419f)

The interview partner Carla Carnevale had been purposefully chosen based on specific criteria. The first criterion for this purposive sampling was being involved in the development of GK4 to ensure insight and background knowledge on the topic in question. The second criterion was having experience in teacher training as to make sure the interviewee has a certain understanding for the sensitivities and attitudes of the population. Due to her role as co-author of GK4 and lecturer at the college of education in Upper Austria, Carnevale fulfils both criteria and it was supposed that her contribution would be most informative. (McMillan, 2012, p. 105)

3.1 Operationalisation

In the course of research for the doctoral thesis, key-informant Carla Carnevale was asked questions concerning her personal motivation for co-editing the “year-four-competences” as well as to her assessment regarding the future development of this educational innovation. Furthermore, her estimation on factors influencing teachers' decisions on whether to apply GK4, circumstances that make their application necessary, and hindrances in this respect were of interest. Questions with reference to the impact of educational policy measures were included as well as aspects on challenges for a comprehensive implementation of GK4.

3.2 Findings

The responses were analysed using QCAmap, a programme specifically designed for evaluating qualitative data. It was then coded, creating factors that derive from theories on the implementation of innovations. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the outcomes that will serve as a base for further investigation, in particular for developing the interview-guidelines for the teachers that will be interviewed.

3.2.1 Perceived need for a change

There are several reasons why the implementation of GK4 in primary schools seems pertinent. One aspect is assumed to be pupils' heterogeneous English skills after primary school. The cause of this heterogeneity are,

according to the interviewee, manifold. On the one hand, there are divergences in teaching English regarding methods and didactics, but also various “intensities” of teaching English are recognised to be an issue. On the other hand, there are a number of pupils from a multilingual background, which is another fact that leads to the linguistic diversity of learners.

An additional argument alludes to the challenges many students face learning English at secondary school. These difficulties are monitored to root in the teaching of English at primary school that may sometimes be inadequate. Furthermore, the need for expertise in teaching foreign languages to students with diverse linguistic background is stated.

GK4 are supposed to tackle all these issues. According to Altrichter and Wiesinger (2004, p. 222) the chances of implementation are higher, if the individuals who are supposed to apply the innovation feel the need for it. In this context, the question arises whether primary school educators, who are the target adopters of this innovation, view GK4 as the answer to the problems mentioned above. It will be, therefore, subject to further research.

3.2.2 Relative advantage

As to Carnevale, GK4 are supposed to serve as didactical scaffold and provide a basis for the teaching design. They offer a table of competency oriented proficiencies regarding young learners’ linguistic, social, and intercultural skills and therefore fulfil the curriculum’s requirement for being impartial and open-minded to diversity. Moreover, GK4 are designed to facilitate students’ transition from primary school to secondary school.

All these mentioned aspects may be viewed as “objective” advantages. Nevertheless, with respect to the adoption rate of an innovation, the subjectively recognised benefit of a novelty is crucial (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). It remains open, whether primary school teachers distinguish GK4 to be of personal advantage for their teaching.

3.2.3 Decision for the implementation

Generally, a paradigm shift is believed to be necessary. Teachers should advance their perspective of teaching from a “theme-centred” approach toward a more “application-oriented” one. Carnevale is convinced that the availability of practicable and competency-oriented teaching material may influence a teacher’s decision on whether to use GK4. In addition, further education courses that are motivating and convey how competency-oriented assignments may influence the teaching and learning process are considered to be significant. Last but not least, the interest of head teachers and school authorities is deemed relevant.

An additional advantage is seen in the notion that GK4 do not regiment teaching methods and approaches. Therefore, GK4 would be in harmony with existing values and teaching techniques. According to Rogers (2003, p. 15), compatibility is an important characteristic that influences the implementation rate.

Furthermore, the interviewee assumes that teachers are contented to be provided with a specific concept for competency-oriented teaching of English. However, with regard to the clarity of GK4’s aims, it is acknowledged that the “year-four-competences” have yet to arrive in most primary school classrooms. Currently, there is no report on feedback from pedagogues working with GK4. Only few teachers are aware of these informal standards, let alone apply them.

3.2.4 Necessity for system support

The interviewee claims to observe no hindrances concerning the implementation of GK4. This is based on the assumption that everybody would notice the need for a change in teaching English at primary level. Nevertheless, the interest and support of the ministry of education and school authorities is considered to be crucial. Without the assistance of teacher training colleges and school governance, a comprehensive, long-term and successful implementation of GK4 seems unrealistic.

Consequently, the implementation of GK4 by legal means, i.e. its incorporation into the primary school curriculum on the one hand and into the curriculums of teacher education colleges on the other hand, is deemed inevitable. Moreover, specific measures of school supervision institutions appear to be invaluable for the diffusion of GK4.

4 Summary and conclusion

Due to the awareness for the necessity of acquiring profound skills in the English language, teaching English at primary schools has become the centre of interest for educational development projects. Presently, a discrepancy between the status of English at primary schools and the expected competences pupils should acquire can be observed. In order to counter these inconsistencies, GK4 were developed at the request of the ministry of education and published in 2012. Although GK4 seem to provide incontrovertible advantages for teaching English at primary level, the innovation has hardly been adopted so far.

The reason for this reluctance may have its origin in the “nature” of diffusion processes. Research shows, that the implementation of an innovation is more likely to be successful if the potential adopters perceive the innovation as a convenient solution for issues that need to be solved. Even though the assets of GK4 appear obvious to their developers as well as to lectures for English at teacher training colleges, it remains unclear whether primary school teachers perceive their application as beneficial and adequate. To reveal pedagogues attitude towards GK4 will be, therefore, subject to further enquiries within the doctoral thesis.

In order to spread information on this novelty and to promote its transfer into schools it is regarded appropriate to foster its employment by legal authorities. Without the support of head teachers, school supervisors and colleges of education, a comprehensive implementation seems unlikely. Research on innovations suggests that diffusion usually progresses ungovernable. It may develop in conformity with the aims but also result in the contrary (Holtappels, 2013, pp. 52f). However, Rogers (2003, p. 15) proposes that inclusion and participation of the target individuals in the process of implementation would increase the adoption rate. Therefore, it seems appropriate to investigate this aspect in regard to GK4 in further studies.

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