Implementing GK2/GK4 as an instrument for evaluation in English at primary school

An empirical qualitative study

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Abstract

GK2, the "year-two competencies" and GK4, the "year-four-competencies" have been developed to supply teachers with a frame of reference regarding skills every learner should attain within their first two and four years of education in English. This study is directed on giving an insight into how GK2/GK4 may be used as an instrument for evaluating teaching and learning English at primary school. It focuses on taking a closer look on pedagogues' attitudes towards GK2/GK4 and on the way in which certain teachers describe to apply them in every-day-practice in primary schools in Austria. In this connection, it targets on giving an overview on the challenges of teaching and learning EFL at primary school in Austria and on outlining the value of using GK2/GK4 within the teaching process.

Zur Implementierung von GK2/GK4 als Evaluationsinstrument für Englisch in der Grundschule

Eine empirisch qualitative Studie

Zusammenfassung

GK2, die Grundkompetenzen für die zweite Schulstufe und GK4, die Grundkompetenzen für die vierte Schulstufe bilden einen Referenzrahmen in Bezug auf Grundkompetenzen, die in der lebenden Fremdsprache nach zwei bzw. vier Lernjahren erworben werden sollten. Die vorliegende Studie gibt einen Einblick in die Anwendung von GK2/GK4 als Evaluierungsinstrument in Englisch in der Volksschule. Des Weiteren werden Einstellungen der Pädagoginnen und Pädagogen zu GK2/GK4 untersucht und Anwendungsmöglichkeiten des Referenzrahmens im Schulalltag beschrieben. In diesem Zusammenhang wird auch auf die Herausforderungen des Unterrichtens und Lernens von Englisch als Fremdsprache auf der Primarstufe eingegangen und es wird ein Überblick über den Einsatz von GK2/GK4 im Unterricht gegeben.

1   The current situation of English as a foreign language at primary school in Austria

According to a presidency conclusion of the European Commission, every European citizen is required to speak at least two additional languages to their first language (European Commission Staff Working Paper, 2011, p. 4).

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Regarding foreign language education, English is in leading position as it is globally used as a lingua franca and is generally acknowledged to be the most important language for international, political, and commercial communication (Harmer, 2007, pp. 14–18). In times of student mobility and internationalisation of education, the qualification to correspond in English both competently and confidently is commonly taken for granted, as *"English seems to have joined the list of basic skills"* (Graddol, 2006, p. 72).

However, there are currently no educational standards for teaching English in Austria at primary school and English has yet to be implemented as a compulsory school subject. Yet the primary curriculum expects pupils to use the target language effectively and substantially (Lehrplan der Volksschule, 2012, p. 209). Moreover, learners are required to have achieved level A1 of the CEFR after their first year of learning English in secondary school (Lehrplan lebende Fremdsprache AHS; Lehrplan lebende Fremdsprache NMS).

1.1 The challenges of EFL at primary school in Austria

The notion of comprehensive education requires a single teacher to cater for all subjects except for religious education on primary level. Therefore, the quality of English language teaching and learning mostly depends on the individual pedagogue's linguistic skills, effort and focus (Buchholz, 2007, pp. 235, 247).

There seems to be a conflict between the available time for teaching and the expected level of proficiency that should be achieved as there is only one lesson per week allocated for English in year three and four while there is no extra lesson for it in year one and two in which English has to be taught in an integrated form within other subjects (Lehrplan der Volksschule, 2012, p. 207). In this connection, Buchholz identifies a diversity in teaching approaches at primary school which results in divergent learning progress, performance and skill levels of young learners (Buchholz, 2007, p. 245).

1.2 GK2/GK4

In order to provide primary school teachers with a scheme of descriptors and to ensure the quality of foreign language education, GK4, the "year-four competencies" were first released in 2012. GK4 were composed and developed by the Austrian Centre for Language Competency (Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum, ÖSZ). They characterise the basic linguistic skills students should reach at listening, reading, and writing as well as socials and intercultural competencies within a foreign language by the end of their four-year education whilst attending any primary school in Austria. Although phrased in a similar way to educational standards they are recommendations and their application is not obligatory. Three years later, in 2015, GK2 were developed in order to prepare learners gradually for GK4's stipulations and, subsequently, for level A1 of the CEFR. The "year-two-competencies" draft the skills pupils are expected to have obtained after two years of learning a foreign language and focus on listening and speaking as well as cross-cultural activities and the use of language in the context of social interactions. Furthermore, they include a first introduction to reading and writing of familiar words and phrases. (GK2/GK4, 2015)

2 The key elements of teaching

Within the context of teaching, literature describes certain aspects as "key-elements" of a pedagogue's job. These elements can be summed up as "lesson planning", the actual process of "teaching", "assessing" of the teaching and learning process, the "evaluation", and finally, a "reflection" of the whole teaching and learning cycle (Warwick & Wolport, 2014, p. 39).

2.1 Assessment and evaluation

With reference to the two elements "assessment" and "evaluation", various definitions and interpretations can be found. For this study, they will be distinguished as follows. "Assessing" may be understood as an approach that focuses on understanding the state of a process, i.e., the process of learning, through questions and observations, whereas "evaluation" targets on determining the value of something, i.e., the learning outcomes. While "assessment" entails an ongoing process of providing pupils with feedback on their learning as well as constantly adapting the teaching as a consequence of the conclusions that have been drawn from the assessment, "evaluation" may be considered as a final process. "Assessment" is usually understood as a

prospective approach that concentrates on the next steps that have to be taken in the process of teaching and learning while "evaluation" is generally regarded as a retrospective approach focusing on what has been achieved. Therefore, "assessment" is often referred to as a formative approach that aims at promoting learning and "evaluation" is usually regarded as summative approach that records learning. To sum up, "assessment" may be qualified as a process-oriented approach whereas "evaluation" is mostly product oriented. (Hall & Sheehy, 2014, pp. 324ff; Hargreaves, Gipps, & Pickering, 2014, pp. 313–316)

Successful planning, may it be lesson planning or long-term planning, requires both, the evaluation of pupils' progress and the evaluation of teaching skills (Medwell, 2014, p. 164). With reference to children's progress, learning objectives of teaching EFL in Austria may be found in the national curriculum and in GK2/GK4.

2.2 Reflection

Regarding the reflection of learning outcomes as well as of teaching strategies, Warwick and Wolpert (2014, p. 38) recommend embracing reflection as part of the daily teaching routine in order to advance from a "descriptive" to a more "analytical" approach. According to Pollard et al., it is reflection that allows pedagogues to *"mediate externally developed frameworks for teaching and learning"* (Pollard et al., 2008, p. 15).

In order to constantly improve teaching and learning, pedagogues need to examine what happened, when, and in which context. Furthermore, aspects that went well should to be determined and success factors have to be identified. In a next step, elements that need improvement have to be diagnosed and possible alternatives must be considered. In a last step, teachers have to analyse possible consequences and implications for future planning. (Warwick & Wolpert, 2014, pp. 38f)

Referring to Warwick and Wolpert, evaluation is a *"fundamental part of the planning, teaching and assessment cycle"* (2014, p. 39). Within this cycle, reflection is the basis for evaluation and reveals possible effects for learners as well as implications for future lessons. On the other hand, evaluation may be regarded as crucial for advancing and determining reflection (Warwick & Wolpert, 2014, p. 39).

2.3 Evaluation

2.3.1 Objectives and forms of evaluation

Evaluation of learning does not only provide a "numerical measurement" (Hall & Sheehy, 2014, p. 326) that may serve as a basis for grading, it also equips teachers and future teacher of students with an outline of a child's accomplishments as well as learners and their parents with a summary of a student's progress (Hall & Sheehy, 2014, p. 325f). There are various possibilities to carry out or record evaluation such as the academic evaluation of a lesson, reflective diaries, comments on parts of the lesson and pupils' self-evaluation (Medwell, 2014, p. 164; Warwick & Wolpert, 2014, p. 39).

2.3.2 Evaluation skills

For best teaching and learning outcomes, evaluations skills have to be practised and developed. It is important for pedagogues to systematically investigate and analyse their teaching and to adopt a critical approach in order to be able to diagnose errors. To promote accurate and stringent analyses, it is essential to carry out evaluations with a focus on specific aspects, i.e., evidence based. In this context, evidence is what learners say or do, that is oral or written production or any other performance. Subsequently to a lesson evaluation, conclusions should be drawn and consequently, implications for future lessons identified. (Hall & Sheehy, 2014, p. 325; Warwick & Wolpert, 2014, pp. 43f)

2.3.3 Evaluation of learning

When evaluating children's learning, it is necessary to determine to what extent learning goals have been achieved and to recognise misunderstandings and mistakes that might have been caused by unclear instructions or any other hindrances. Again, the analysis has to be reviewed referring to the learning outcomes and the quality of the performances. In a further step, it has to be decided on how the identified problems will be addressed in future lessons. (Medwell, 2014, p. 164)

2.3.4 Evaluation of teaching

Regarding the evaluation of teaching, Warwick and Wolpert (2014) suggest analysing the proceedings of instructions from a learner's point of view. When evaluating the appropriateness of a lesson plan, it needs to be considered whether the timing was suitable and whether explanations were understandable and sufficient. Furthermore, behaviour management should to be evaluated regarding its effectiveness and any aspects that have remained unclear need to be identified. (Warwick & Wolpert, 2014, p. 41)

3 The empirical investigation

The empirical investigation for this study has been carried out in the course of research for a doctoral dissertation that is currently in progress. As the thesis focuses on primary school teachers' perspectives on the implementation GK2/GK4, it was concluded that a qualitative study comprising one key informant interview and twelve interviews with primary school teachers would provide relevant data to give insight on the proposed users' attitude towards this educational innovation. The interviews were conducted using an interview guideline. Regarding data analysis, Hopf's interpretation method (Kuckartz, 2010, p. 73) was directive.

3.1 The sample

The participants of this study were purposefully chosen (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 156) as it was aimed at scrutinising an inhomogeneous group concerning age, years of teaching experience as well as attitude towards teaching according to GK2/GK4. The difference in age and teaching experience is reflected in the youngest participant being 25 years and having four years of teaching experience and the oldest participant being 63 years and having taught at primary schools for 38 years. As a result, the average person in this sample is 45 years old and has 22 years teaching experience. While five participants have fully implemented GK2/GK4 into their teaching routine, three apply parts of the concept and four do not apply them at all.

3.2 The analysis of the data

The analysis of the interview that was carried out with key-informant Carnevale, who is co-author of GK2 and GK4, revealed that there are several reasons why GK2/GK4 had been developed. With regard to teaching English on primary level, a need for change was detected. On the one hand, pupils' heterogenous English skills were observed. It was expected that this heterogeneity would root in a diversity in teaching English regarding methods and didactics, but also in various "intensities" of teaching English. Furthermore, the potentials and challenges of teaching pupils with a multilingual background seemed to remain mostly neglected. On the other hand, it was recognised that the challenges of learning English in secondary school could not be met appropriately if teaching English in primary school would remain inadequate. Therefore, a need for developing expertise in teaching English to students with a diverse linguistic background was identified. In this context, it was aimed at developing a framework of reference that could serve as didactical scaffold and basis for a teaching design that would fulfil the curriculum's requirements of being impartial and open-minded to diversity and that would facilitate students' transition from primary to secondary school.

The analysis of the interviews with primary school teachers revealed that there are certain aspects that are perceived as challenges of teaching English in primary school in Austria. Firstly, and as already mentioned above, the concept of comprehensive education that requires a single person to teach all subjects is regarded to be demanding and many pedagogues consider their English skills to be insufficient for preparing their students adequately. Secondly, the very little time that is allocated for teaching EFL is observed to be problematic. Thirdly, the fact that English is still a non-mandatory and non-graded subject does not enhance its position in primary school. Furthermore, some teachers believe that the requirements of GK2/GK4 are in contrast to previously established values as teaching literacy is still controversial.

Referring to the interviewees, there are particular factors that influence a primary school instructor's decision whether to implement GK2/GK4. The generally perceived challenges described above may be viewed to be conducive for implementing GK2/GK4 by some pedagogues while they may be considered to be impedimental by others. Ten of the twelve participants regard GK2/GK4 to be a beneficial tool within the teaching process. GK2/GK4 are reported to be used as a starting point for the year plan, they provide teachers with directives for

lesson planning, help evaluate pupils' skills, may be applied as reflection tool and, based on the outcomes of the reflection, supply teachers with differentiated activities for their learners.

The majority of interviewees regard GK2/GK4 as a valuable tool for facilitating pupils' transition in English from primary to secondary school. They believe GK2/GK4 to provide more learning opportunities within the concept of comprehensive education that would allow for more target oriented, coherent teaching. GK2/GK4 are generally considered to be a useful guideline for lesson preparation, teaching and reflection. Most interviewees are convinced that English would obtain a more binding character through the use of GK2/GK4 as they provide learners, teachers, and parents with a framework that makes learning results more visible and that may be applied as a tool for assessment and evaluation.

Regarding the implementation of GK2/GK4 as an instrument for evaluation, they are valued for giving a fundamental frame of reference to teaching English on primary level which would enable teachers to prepare students for the specific requirements at the end of each learning year. According to the participants, GK2/GK4 offer more transparency regarding the teaching objectives and learning outcomes than the current curriculum. They would provide practicable, accessible and coherent information on what should be achieved and would, therefore, prevent a too great diversity in teaching approaches at primary school. GK2/GK4 were developed in order to support the learning process on the way to level A1 of the CEFR (Felberbauer, Fuchs, Gritsch, Zebisch, & Carnevale, 2014, pp. 8–12). As a framework that is similar to educational standards they are supposed to support underperforming students and reduce educational inequality. Through the continuous practice of systematically interlinked subject matter, competencies are built that would help prepare students best for the challenges at secondary school. In this connection, GK2/GK4 are also considered to support and clarify the requirements of the curriculum. Furthermore, GK2/GK4 are said to offer a framework of reference that provides orientation and helps pursue the goals that are clearly outlined and comprehensible for teachers, parents and learners. Therefore, they help in evaluating what has been learned and in outlining what still needs to be learned and thus enable teachers to apply a more transparent system of assessment and evaluation.

4   Conclusion

With reference to the participants of this study it may be concluded that pedagogues appreciate having GK2/GK4 as an instrument that provides a clear guideline for the whole teaching process of English at primary school. As there are currently no grades for English on primary level, GK2/GK4 are considered to offer a valuable instrument for assessing and evaluating both, the teaching and the learning.

However, it should be noted that the analysis of the data indicates that the comprehensive implementation of GK2/GK4 requires certain adaptions in Austria's educational system that may be roughly outlined as follows: Firstly, the legal anchoring of English as a mandatory school subject on primary level with an assigned teaching time and marking system, secondly, the promotion of linguistic professionalization of pedagogues, both in initial teacher training and in continuing education courses, thirdly, the supply with appropriate teaching material that is in line with the framework's requirements, and fourthly, the supervision by educational governance in order to guide and control the process of implementation. Although the results of this study are by no means considered to be generalizable, they offer perspectives on the concerns and needs of GK2/GK4's target adopters which may be taken into consideration when planning and developing measures to promote their general implementation.

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