

LEARNING REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY. CASE STUDY: THE 6th GRADE GEOGRAPHY TEXTBOOK

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(Received: December 2018; in revised form: January 2019)

Abstract

This paper analyses the tasks allotted to students, featuring two thematic units in the 6th grade Geography textbook published in 2018 by the Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing House Ltd., Bucharest and used in the schools in Romania during the 2018-2019 school year. After a brief analysis of the textbook and its lesson structure, we studied the tasks on Regional Geography in the following thematic units: "Europe-geographic identity" and "Europe in the contemporary world". These tasks are associated with some visual materials (e.g. illustrations, books, charts, sketchy drawings and the like), with some texts and web sources. The studied assignments are included in the lesson sections Discover and Apply. Most of the tasks demand recognition and identification of some geographic aspects. Less importance have the tasks that require the systematization of information based on some criteria. To improve thorough information processing, it is advisable to include certain activities of identifying geographic relationships of hierarchy, comparison, explanation and ordering of data, synthesizing it in texts, problem solving and problem-situations.

Keywords: *learning, tasks, competences, exercise, curricula, data processing*

INTRODUCTION

The changes in Romania after the year 1989 have engendered a series of reforms within the lower and higher Education system. If in 1997 the alternative textbooks for preuniversity education enjoyed appraisal as an innovative solution (Cristea, 2018b), afterwards, these were challenged due to contradictions owing to scientific findings and considering the

discrepancies generated by the core contents (Cristea, 2018a), inappropriate design from pedagogic and learning perspective, negative effects as regards final assessments (Cristea, 2018b).

For restoring these setbacks, in the year 2018, the Senate passed the *Bill of the Single Textbook* forwarded by the Ministry of National Education (Tudorica, 2018), but this law was declared as unconstitutional (Constitutional Court, 2018). Albeit, Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing House, the Official Journal /National Printing House of Romania, belonging to the Romanian state, were delegated to edit and print the single textbooks (<http://www.ziare.com/scoala/manuale/pop-reinvie-editura-didactica-si-pedagogica-ca-sa-faca-manualele-scolare-legea-manualului-contribuie-la-securitatea-nationala-1483028>).

The single Geography textbook for the 6th grade (Fiscutean et al., 2017) was designed based on the *Geography School Syllabus*. The textbooks for the 5th to the 8th grade (Ministry of National Education, 2017) were devised by a four-author panel (M. C. Fiscutean, C. Mihai, D. Fiscutean, and I. Popa), with competences in Geography (Cîineanu, 2018). The second edition of this material was revised considering the observations of Dr. Ioan Mărculeț, Geography professor in a high school in Bucharest (Cîineanu, 2018). His textbook is available in PDF format on the MNE platform. The National Assessment and Evaluation Centre (<https://manuale.edu.ro/manuale/Clasa%20a%20VI-a/Geografie/EDP/>). The schoolbook was introduced in the schools in Romania in the 2018-2019 school year.

In a previous study, I studied the structure of the textbooks and their thematic units, likewise their proposed assignments for the students, as well as the thematic units regarding Human Geography (Cîineanu, 2018). In the current research, we shall analyse the tasks set for the students and comprised by two Regional Geography thematic units.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Romanian Geography textbooks have been the studied by an array of scientific research. Dulamă & Ilovan (2015, 2017) scrutinized the evolution of Geography textbooks in Romania, from the first editions through those of the Communist period, highlighted their diversity, content quality and illustrative material.

Through Didactics of Geography studies, researchers spotlighted the textbook as the main learning tool for students; they emphasized the features, functions and aspects related to their use (Dulamă, 1996; Dulamă & Roșcovanu, 2007; Mândruț & Ardelean, 2015; Mândruț & Dan, 2015; Dulamă & Ilovan, 2016). Learning activities were organized according to the

texts and visual materials within the textbooks (Dulamă, 2000) and the manner in which these could be employed in shaping and developing the competences typical of Geography was presented (Mândruț & Ardelean, 2015; Dulamă, 2010, 2011a). In other studies, aspects related to the assessment of Geography textbooks (Dulamă, 2009) and to the projection of thematic units and learning activities (Dulamă, 2011b, 2012) are discussed.

Bagoly-Simó undertakes a gamut of comparative studies of texts and illustrative materials within the Geography textbooks published in Eastern Europe countries, Spain, and Switzerland (Bagoly-Simó, 2013). He scrutinizes the data about New Zealand in the Geography textbooks of post-socialist countries (Romania), Occidental (Germany) and post-colonial (Mexico) (Bagoly-Simó, 2011). A study of the textbooks in Romania, Germany and Mexico reveals otherness (Bagoly-Simó, 2012). Ciineanu (2016, 2017) studies a range of textbooks from India.

To obtain a wider image upon Geography in the lower education in Romania, there were analysed the teachers' standpoints regarding the lower-education Curriculum (Dulamă et al., 2017) touching the employed didactic approaches and learning methods (Gale et al., 2017).

Some other research papers considered the competences and contents of Mathematics and Geography pertaining to the school syllabus of *Mathematics and Environmental Exploration* (Dulamă & Magdaș, 2014) and the content of Geography in digital textbooks of *Mathematics and Environmental Exploration*, for the 2nd grade (Buzilă et al., 2017; Dulamă et al., 2017; Magdaș et al., 2017; Ilovan et al., 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The research material is made of the assignments engulfed by the 6th grade Geography textbook in the two Regional Geography thematic units: *Europe-geographic identity* (pp. 40-81) and *Europe in the contemporary world* (pp. 82-89). The tasks allotted to students are associated with certain texts or visual materials (sketchy drawings, maps, photographs, charts, etc.).

Research approaches. Data on the tasks contained in the textbook, collected through the method of analysis, is systematised in the tables below (Tables 1-17). We mentioned the category of tasks, the task itself, learning-teaching approaches employed to solve them, the cognitive processes specific to Geography, undertaken by students while carrying out the task. The charts were included in this research paper in chronological order. We employed the visual methods in order to analyse the illustrations in the textbook (sketchy drawings, maps, photographs, charts, etc.). The study was performed from the viewpoint of a Geography teacher who uses

this textbook in class, reason for which we collected research data by means of the participatory observation approach. Interpreting the findings was achieved also through the method of community diagnosis, because we analysed some cultural-anthropological aspects (conceptions upon the reality of geographic learning, systems of values, culture evolvement, etc.).

RESULTS

In Tables 1-17, it is outlined the analysis of the assignments contained by the textbook in the lessons pertaining to thematic units: *Europe-geographic identity* and *Europe in the contemporary world*.

Table 1. Assignments for *Lesson 1. Europe – geographic location. Shores: bays, isles, peninsulas and stretches*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Satellite photography: Europe (Google Maps)	1. Identify the extreme points of Europe	Identifying
	Photographs: Cape North, Cape Roca, Tainaron Cape, North Russia - Vorkuta Sketchy drawings: flags in miniature for Norway, Greece, Portugal and Russia	2. Name the extreme borders of Europe and the countries where these are	Localising
	Satellite photography: Europe (Google Maps)	3. Identify the oceans which flank Europe to the North and West	Localising
Apply	The map: "Europe: bays, peninsulas and stretches"	4. Identify peninsulas, islands, bays and stretches	Localising Identifying
	Dumb map of Europe: Maps from <i>Google Maps</i> : Scandinavian Peninsula; North of Norway; Iberic Peninsula; West of Portugal; shore of the Adriatic Sea; West of Croatia; Netherlands; South-East of Romania; the Danube Delta; Illustrations: shores with fjords; dalmatic shores; shores with polders; shores with deltas	5. Identify: stretches, islands, peninsulas and types of shores	Localising Identifying

Table 2. Assignments for *Lesson 2. Generic features of the relief. Major units of the relief of Europe*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Map <i>Major relief units in Europe</i>	1. Localize mountains, volcanoes, plateaux, plains	Localising Identifying Classifying Establishing spatial relations
Apply	The text of the lesson under the section <i>Find out</i>	2. Associate units of relief with the orogenesis in which they were formed	Matching Classifying

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Table 3. Assignments for *Lesson 3. Europe's Hydrography*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Map <i>Hydrography of Europe</i>	1. Classify: the running waters, according to spring and river mouth; lakes and seas according to their geographic position	Localising Identifying Classifying
Apply	Fill-in-the-blank text box	2. Seek data about the Volga (spring, debit, length, tributaries, lakes, river mouth)	Documenting Selecting data
	Sketchy drawing: delta and estuary	3. Mention the shape of the river mouth for the rivers in Europe	Analysing Matching Comparing
		4. Explain the conditions of delta formation, of the estuary and the approach of economic usage	Updating data by heart Explaining Establishing cause-effect relations
Dumb map of Europe	5. Identify rivers and lakes	Localizing	

Table 4. Assignments for *Lesson 4. Climatic and biographic differences*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Illustrations of some areas in Southern Europe; Northern Europe; Eastern Europe; Western Europe	1. Discover the geographic area from the illustration	Analysing Matching Comparing Deducting
		2. Explain the factors according to which the landscapes in Europe are differentiated	Explaining Comparing Establishing cause-effect relations Deducting
Apply	Maps: <i>Types of climate in Europe, Biogeographic areas in Europe</i> ; the text in the textbook; incomplete table	3. Order in a table the types of climate, vegetation, fauna and their specific soils types in Europe	Identifying Selecting data from text and maps

Table 5. Assignments for *Lesson 5. The political map of Europe – states and regions*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Political Map of Europe	1. Identify states with access to the sea / devoid of access, peninsular states, capitals	Identifying Localising Classifying
Apply	Incomplete tables Geographic atlas	2. Fill in a table with data consisting of geographic denominations (states, capital cities, the running waters which cross the capital cities)	Identifying Localising Matching

Table 6. Assignments for *Lesson 6. Geographic spread of population. Elements of anthropological diversity (ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity)*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawing: Rostrum with the flags of the most popular states in Europe	1. Mention the geographic regions with the highest number of inhabitants, the factors which determine the spread of	Analysing Realising hierarchies

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	Chart <i>The percentage of urban/rural population</i> Map <i>If in Europe were to live 100 people</i>	the population throughout the continent, the most inhabited European states and the percentage of urban/rural population	Explaining Establishing cause-effect relations Identifying
Apply	Dumb Map of Europe Map <i>Linguistic structure of the population of Europe</i> The text of the lesson from the section <i>Find out</i>	2. Classify the countries according to certain criteria: the linguistic family and the prevalent religion	Identifying data in text and on the map Classifying Matching

Table 7. Assignments for *Lesson 7. Great European cities*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawings as stamps: St. Basil's Cathedral; Big Ben; The Eiffel Tower; Colosseum; Brandenburg Gate	1. Match the architectonic elements with the corresponding capitals 2. Estimate which is the oldest architectonic built element	Updating of information by heart Matching
Apply	Dumb Map of Europe	3. Classify cities according to certain criteria: geographic setting, function, touristic attractions	Identifying data in texts and on the map Classifying
	Text of the lesson	4. Match cities to the historic period when they appeared	Matching Ordering chronologically

Table 8. Assignments for *Lesson 8. Natural resources and their use*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawings; excavator; truck loaded with logs; wooden cabin; logs	1. Identify the exploited natural resource and mention the products obtained based on the identified natural resources	Analysing Identifying
	Map <i>The forested surface of Europe</i>	2. Identify the countries with a small percentage of the forested surfaces	Identifying Information updating by heart Generalising
		3. Explain the dwindling of the forest areas in the identified countries	Explaining Establishing cause-effect relations
Apply	The text of the lesson	4. Mention exhaustible and inexhaustible energetic resources, advantages of using these natural renewable resources, an area in Europe with energetic geothermal potential	Identifying data in the text Establishing cause-effect relations

Table 9. Assignments for *Lesson 9. Economic activities: agriculture, industry, services*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawings: bottle with olive oil, bag with flour, milk, dairy products Map <i>Agriculture of Europe</i>	1. Identify countries/regions where goods are produced: olive oil, flour, milk, and cheese; fill in a table geographic denominations (countries) for the agricultural cultures: olive tree, vineyard, cereals	Analysing Identifying Localising Matching

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Apply	Sketchy drawings: salmon tin; bratwurst – sausage which is cooked; tea box; bottle with olive oil; crescent-shaped croissant-pastry product; pizza	2. Identify the country of origin of the grocery products	Updating information by heart Identifying
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Table 10. Assignments for *Lesson 10. The European Union*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawing Identity card of the European Union (flag; number of states; population; headquarters; Europe Day)	1. Mention the number of member states of the European Union, the number of stars on the flag and the country which harbours the headquarters of the European Commission	Analysing Identifying
	Sketchy drawings: the Euro; Europe day: 9 th May; the Anthem: Ode to Joy; Motto: United in Diversity	2. Identify the symbols of the European Union	Analysing Identifying
	Map <i>The waves of accession to the European Union</i>	3. Identify the founding states, the year in which most states adhered, the year of Romania's joining the European Union	Analysing Identifying Classifying Ordering chronologically
Apply	The text of the lesson	4. Present, in writing, in a travel log, the member states of the European Union, in the chronological order of accession (state, capital city, year of enlargement, a touristic landmark)	Documenting Selecting data Writing: delivering a text
	Text Section <i>Geoinfo: The Internet</i>	5. Deliver a speech arguing before the classmates the need to respect a certain right as a European citizen	Documenting Selecting data Speaking Establishing spatial relations
	Map <i>The waves of enlargement of the European Union</i>	6. Identify states which are not members of the European Union; explain why these states are not part of the EU	Identifying Explaining Generalising Assessing

Table 11. Assignments for *Lesson 11. France*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawings Identity Card (flag; surface; population; capital city; official language; form of government)	1. For France, mention the flag colours, the capital city, the official language, the form of government	Analysing Identifying
	The political map of Europe	2. Identify the Eastern neighbours of France and the sea towards the South	Identifying Localising
		3. Name the geographic shape of the territory of France	Identifying
	Sketchy drawings: The Eiffel Tower; the Gallic Rooster; Dumb map (Alps, the Arch of Triumph, Castle, Plane)	4. Classify the representative elements of France according to certain criteria: relief, tourism, transportation, agriculture, industry	Identifying Matching Classifying

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Apply	Maps <i>Landforms and hydrography of France; Main cities of France</i>	5. Classify units of relief, cities, rivers, harbours of France, considering the criterion of geographic setting	Matching Identifying Classifying
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Table 12. Assignments for *Lesson 12. Germany*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawing Identity Card (flag; surface; population; capital city; official language; form of government)	1. For Germany, mention the flag colours, the capital city, the official language, the form of government	Analysing Identifying
	The political map of Europe	2. Identify the Eastern neighbours of Germany and the sea towards the North	Identifying Localising
	Sketchy drawing: Berlin Wall; Dumb Map with landmarks (football, the Danube, Brandenburg Gate) The political map of Europe	3. Classify typical aspects of Germany according to several criteria: relief, tourism, transport, agriculture, industry	Identification Classification Matching
Apply	Maps <i>Landforms and hydrography of Germany; Main cities of Germany</i>	4. Classify units of relief, rivers, seas of Germany considering the criterion of geographical setting	Identifying data in text and on map Classifying Matching

Table 13. Assignments for *Lesson 13. Italy*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawing Identity Card (flag; surface; population; capital city; official language; form of government)	1. For Italy, mention the flag colours, the capital city, the official language, the form of government	Analysing Identifying
	The political map of Europe	2. Identify the Northern neighbours of Italy and an island in the South	Identifying Localising
	Sketchy drawing: The Leaning Tower of Pisa; the Dome of Florence; Dumb map comprising landmarks (Gondola, Volcano, Motorcycle, Pasta)	3. Classify typical aspects of Italy according to several criteria: relief, tourism, transport, agriculture, industry	Identifying Classifying Matching
Apply	Maps: <i>Landforms and hydrography of Italy; Main cities of Italy</i>	4. Classify cities, rivers, islands, active volcanoes of Italy considering geographical setting	Localising Classifying Identifying data on map

Table 14. Assignments for *Lesson 14. Russian Federation*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawing Identity Card (flag; surface; population; capital city; official language; form of government)	1. For Russia, mention the flag colours, the capital city, the official language, the form of government	Analysing Identifying
	The political map of Europe	2. Identify the Western neighbours of Russia	Identifying Localising
	Sketchy drawing: Cathedral of St. Vasily the Blessed; Matryoshka Doll; Dumb map with landmarks (skates,	3. Classify typical aspects of Russia according to some criteria: culture, attire,	Identifying Classifying

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	Russian fur cap, accordion, wooden house with porch)	dwelling, sport	
Apply	Dumb map of Russia	4. Identify units of relief, cities, seas, rivers of Russia; Classify cities, lakes and rivers in Russia according to geographical setting	Localising Identifying Classifying

Table 15. Assignments for *Lesson 15. Scandinavian countries*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawings: Identity cards: Norway, Sweden, Finland (flags, surfaces, population, capital city, official language, form of government)	1. Considering each Scandinavian country, mention: the flag colours, capital city, official language, form of government	Identifying Matching
	Previous sketchy drawings	2. Identify the common aspect on the Norway, Sweden and Finland flags	Identifying Differentiating
	Sketchy drawing / Dumb map (Vikings; reindeer; Aurora Borealis; bicycle; fir tree; Viking long ship / Drakkar	3. Classify typical aspects of Scandinavian countries according to some criteria: culture, attire, dwelling, sport	Classifying Analysing
Apply	The text of the lesson	4. Explain the importance of the roof form for dwellings	Explaining Establishing cause-effect relations

Table 16. Assignments for *Lesson 16. European Cultural and Human Values*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Illustrations: St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican; Oxford University; Vienna Opera House	1. Match European cultural institutions with their corresponding cultural fields (religion, art, education)	Matching
Apply	The text of the lesson Web sources (Internet)	2. Match the cities: Moscow, Sankt Petersburg, Rome, Madrid, Paris, Vienna and Prague with elements of architecture of renowned buildings in Europe	Selecting data from text and web sources Documenting Matching

Table 17. Assignments for *Lesson 17. Life Quality in Europe*

Task category	Means of learning	Task	Cognitive processes
Discover	Sketchy drawing: dwelling; education; family; revenue; healthcare; environment	1. Mention the indicators which reflect the quality of life in Europe; identify the most prominent indicator which influences the life quality in Europe	Identifying Problematizing
	Local horizon	2. Identify the assets of life quality in your native city	Assessing Debating Establishing spatial relations
Apply	Map of Europe <i>Population's satisfaction degree</i>	3. Identify countries and capitals with life quality above the European average	Identifying Generalising
		4. Explain the quality of affluent lifestyle in the previously mentioned countries and capital cities	Explaining Synthesizing Debating

DISCUSSION

a) Analysis of the textbook structure. The textbook engulfs an introductory section (Romania's national anthem, Textbook presentation, General and specific competences, Contents), four thematic units (*Learning about the world in which we live; Anthroposphere – men and their activities; Europe – geographic identity; Europe within the contemporary world*), proposals for Final Revision, Annexes (*Map of Europe – Countries, cities, rivers, lakes; Europe – Map of mineral and energetic resources, and Agriculture of Europe*).

b) Analysis of the thematic units structure. Each unit comprises introductory elements (unit plan: lesson titles; revision; assessment; key words; a sketchy drawing; specific competences; a text addressed to the students), lessons destined to shape competences typical of Geography; a revision lesson and an assessment one. The 26 lessons are not distributed evenly within the thematic units: three lessons comprised by Unit I, six lessons found in Unit II, 15 lessons in Unit III, two lessons engulfed by Unit IV (Observe; Discover; Learn; Geoinfo; Apply).

c) Analysis of tasks assigned to students in Unit III of the textbook: "Europe-geographic identity".

Analysis of the tasks categories. Tables 1-17 reveal that the duties assigned to students are included in the sections Discover and Apply. The findings of textbook-tasks analysis highlight that some of these may as well be comprised by other categories (Learn; Geoinfo).

Analysis of means of learning. Concerning the sources that are indicated to the students as support materials to be used in task-solving, Tables 1-17 exhibit as prevalent the references to the visuals, followed by the amount of texts in the textbook and, at times, referred web sources. Maps (54) hold the highest incidence as visual materials, being followed by photographs (42), sketchy drawings (29), charts (6), and block charts (2). To instil in students the specific competence *2.1 Localization of geographic elements on cartographic materials*, specified at the beginning of these thematic units (Fiscuteanu et al., 2018), maps featuring a richer and more varied content would be useful.

To optimize the space allotted in the textbook, in favour of other content, it is advisable to reduce the dumb maps dimensions that generally span half a page. In order to enhance the quality of the process of analysis and interpretation of photographs, to ease the development of specific mentioned competences (3.3. Presentation of cultural, human and natural diversity by means of interdisciplinary matching; 1.2. Description of relation between the geographic elements and phenomena using specific terms; 3.4. Depiction of the local, national, European and world heritage using various sources) (Fiscuteanu et al., 2018), an increase of their dimension would be

welcomed, along with including certain tasks to have students undertake a guided, systematic scrutiny.

Analysis of the required tasks and cognitive processes. In Tables 1-17, in the third column, the prevailing activities refer to tasks that ask students to identify various elements in the visuals provided, in texts or the web sources and to scan and skim data from text and maps. Despite the fact that these tasks are comprised by the sections *Discover and Apply*, their solving demands processes of recognition and reproduction of certain geographic aspects, not genuine discovery based on geographic reason and thinking, therefore it is sought a superfluous processing of the geographic data. Though students make thorough use of maps in fulfilling the tasks of this kind, there appears the questions whether students, by accomplishing these, do include and keep Geography knowledge in their own cultural background.

Very useful for organising geographic information based on some criteria are the tasks in which students are asked to fill in the data tables. To thoroughly process geographic data and to develop the cognitive processes, tasks requiring identification (discovery) of some cause-effect relationships, data hierarchy, chronological ordering, comparison, explanation of some processes or situations, synthesising in spoken and written texts (text delivery: descriptive text, informative text, explicative text, summary, characterisation, etc.), problem solving and problem situations would be useful.

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of studying the activities in both thematic units – *Europe - geographic identity; Europe in the contemporary world* –, we reached several conclusions. All tasks are included in the sections *Discover and Learn*, but according to the objectives, some of these may be comprised by other sections of the lessons. Most tasks require cognitive processes of recognition and identification of some aspects from the visuals. Lower presence is allotted to tasks that entail cognitive approaches of data systematising reliant on some criteria. For the growth of minute processing of geographic data, it is advisable to include some activities of identifying geographic relations, of hierarchy, comparison, explanation and ordering of data, its synthesis in texts, problem solving and problem situations.

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