Empathic and Supportive Teachers, Key to Quality and Efficiency in Education

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Abstract: This article presents the results of a study developed by the Institute of Educational Sciences Bucharest which offers a general and updated image upon the early school leaving (ESL) in Romania. The phenomenon has been analysed from the policy perspective, as well as from the educational actors' perspective (teachers and students). The research methodology has been designed in European partnership, within the framework of the Erasmus+ EMPAQT project (EMPAQT, ***). and comprises policy analysis and a quantitative survey based on questionnaires applied to 73 students and 260 teachers from upper secondary schools situated in disadvantaged areas. The conclusions of the study highlighted the Romanian teachers' need to better develop their skills and competencies for working with children at risk of ESL: competencies for building learning situations which encourage equity and inclusion, competencies for developing resilience in children in order to be able to face and recover from adversity, guidance and counselling competencies in order not only to support children in their academic performance, but also to help them develop positive attitudes towards learning, education and their professional future.

Keywords: *early school leaving (ESL); educational policies on ESL; prevention and intervention measures at school level; teaching practices to reduce ESL.*

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1. The Early School Leaving Phenomenon: Specific Aspects in the Romanian Context

1.1. ESL at national level: definition and values of indicators

In Romania, *early school leaving* (ESL) is defined as the percentage of the population aged 18-24 who graduated maximum the lower secondary education (gymnasium/ the VIII class) and who do not undertake any further education or professional training forms (Ministry of Education, 2015).

At the European Union level, The EUROSTAT data indicate an average of 10.6 % of young people (aged 18-24) who were early leavers from education and training (12.1% of young men and 8.9% of young women). The proportion of early leavers ranged from 3.1 % in Croatia to 18.6 % in Malta (EUROSTAT, 2018). The several states are still far away from reaching the European targets set in the „2020 European Strategy”, including the target of decreasing the ESL rate to less than 10%.

In Romania, the ESL rate decreased slowly but constantly between 2003-2009: from 22,5% in 2003 to 16,6 % in 2009. From 2010 onward the ESL rate increased, undoing the progress from the previous years. In 2017, the value of the indicator was 18,1%. Romania currently ranks among the countries with the highest ESL rates, being overtaken only by Malta, Spain and Turkey. The difference between Romania and the average rate in the European countries has increased over the past three years reaching to almost 8 percentage points. Romania only has little time left to reach the targeted aim of 11.3% forecasted for 2020 in the National Reform Plan.

Source: Eurostat, 2018.

Figure 1. The ESL evolution between 2006-2020, Romania and UE (%)

Except for the last year, the ESL rate is higher among the male population in comparison to the feminine population. The data link directly with the sex differences of other relevant ESL indicators (e.g. gross rate for participation to education, the school abandon/drop-out rate, etc.) and underline the female advantage towards male.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Total	17.9	17.3	15.9	16.6	19.3	18.1	17.8	17.3	18.1	19.1	18.5	18.1
Female	18.0	17.4	16.0	17.2	19.0	17.2	16.9	15.9	16.7	18.5	18.7	18.1
Male	17.8	17.1	15.9	16.1	19.5	19.1	18.5	18.7	19.5	19.5	18.4	18.0

Source: Eurostat, 2018.

Figure 2. The Romanian ESL rate by sex, 2006-2017 (%)

1.2. *Determinants of ESL*

Romanian young people have various reasons that lead to their ESL. The national statistical data (Institutul de Științe ale Educației, 2015) and several national studies (Fartusnic, 2012; Ivan & Rostas, 2013; Jurcan, 2011; Voicu, 2010) outline that usually, there is more than one single factor that make young people to leave school early. In accordance with the conclusions of these studies, the main factors contributing to the early school leaving in Romania are:

- factors regarding the pupil/family and the educational demand: the low level of the family income, as a financial constraint to support collateral educational costs, especially among the poor disadvantaged families; the limited territorial accessibility to educational services in isolated rural areas; children involvement in seasonal work and in younger brothers caring/babysitting; parents' migration abroad together with their children, leading to temporary withdraw from school; the limited educational level of the parents; the family **valorisation** of school education; disability situations and/or special educational needs; precarious health conditions; the cases of early marriages and/or early pregnancies; the limited employment opportunities and parents' lower participation to education in several rural/suburban communities ; the increased ESL rate among Roma children is also related both to poverty and in some cases to cultural factors;

- factors regarding the educational offer: limited offer for the program *A second chance* and *School after School* in rural areas and in poor communities; the lack of school infrastructure in the rural areas at the level of early education (day-care); the insufficient correlation between the

educational offer and local and economic specificity; issues related to the school environment (educational ethos, teacher attitude towards pupils, etc.); insufficient educational support for pupils of the minority groups or for those at risk of ESL; the situations of drop-out more specific among boys or pupils in the rural areas at the gymnasium level; aspects related to the applied curriculum: competitive educational strategies, the lack of modern teaching strategies, lower motivation of professors/teachers, barriers in the communication school - parents; the lack of support staff (school counsellors, psychologists, support teachers, school mediators) to help the children at risk of ESL; limited financial resources allocated per pupil from the education budget.

Up to the influences of the above mentioned reasons, in Romania, ESL is predominant among certain groups facing risk situations, of which could be mentioned: youth coming from the rural communities, young people coming from families with modest income, Roma and other minorities, pupils who repeated at least one year or who abandoned school.

1.3. National policies and measures implemented to prevent ESL

At national level “*The strategy for reducing early school leaving*” was designed, including intervention areas for the period 2015-2020. The strategy targets the groups dealing with the highest ESL risk: a) children and young people that will be in the group age 18-24 in 2020; b) children and youth coming from families with low social and economic status; c) children and youth from rural areas; d) Roma children and youth and other disadvantaged groups.

The strategy proposes four pillars for improving ESL: 1) to provide access to education and quality education for all children; 2) to ensure the completion of the compulsory education for all children; 3) reintegration in the educational system of early school leavers; 4) adequate institutional development support. The prevention measures included in the strategy aim at reducing the ESL by: increasing the quality of the educational offer, educational support measures for pupils to obtain better academic results. The intervention measures at individual level are supporting the pupils exposed to ESL risk, following the early warning signals received. The compensation measures intend to support the reintegration in the educational system of the persons who left the school prematurely and the acquisition of the qualification needed by them to enter the labour market.

Several activities and projects regarding the ESL reduction were implemented by different institutions. The Ministry of Education had a major role, through the projects from the European structural funds in the

Operational Structural Development Program for Human Resources Development POSDRU 2007-2013. Within this program, a major intervention area targeted the prevention and correction of ESL by financial support dedicated to integrated projects: guidance and counselling services, remedial education, the Second Chance programs, awareness campaigns, individual financial support, etc. In the framework of POSDRU 2007-2013 integrated interventions were funded in order to increase the access and participation to preschool education, primary and secondary education for the pupils exposed to the risk situations (especially Roma children, children coming from disadvantaged socio-economic areas, disabled children): financial support for families; a Second Chance type of programs (10714 beneficiaries); school after school programs (24325 beneficiaries); integrated counselling services for the persons at risks of ESL (120385 beneficiaries); teacher training programs; curricular and extracurricular activities. The great majority of the projects were focused on prevention and adjustment measurements to reduce ESL. Half of the projects were implemented by NGOs in cooperation with the ministries and other subordinated institutions.

The Operational Sectorial Program Human Capital POCU 2014-2020 proposes a set of interventions aimed to supporting the participation in education of the groups at risk of ESL, focusing on Roma minority children and rural areas. The measures promoted include: the school curriculum, teaching and learning materials, teacher training, other integrated measures of prevention and intervention to reduce ESL.

1.4. Good practices in the area of early school leaving (ESL): Project EMPAQT

Beside the policies, measures and interventions implemented at national level, different initiatives evolved in Romania from Erasmus + projects. Such an example is the Erasmus+ project: *Empathic and supportive teachers, key to quality and efficiency in education* (EMPAQT) developed in international partnership (Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Romania and Turkey, 2016-2018) which aims to contribute to the creation of school environments that foster equity and inclusion, where disadvantaged learners receive all the support they need to succeed and feel respected and valued.

The policy approach chosen by the EMPAQT partners is people-focused. On one hand, the project addresses the needs of the teachers as professionals to achieve pedagogical support, which will enhance their skills for creating a positive and supporting learning environment and for increasing students' resilience. On the other hand, the project addresses

young people in disadvantaged areas who need support and coaching for building a positive self-concept, setting realistic personal goals and for building strategies to achieve well-being through education and professional accomplishment.

In order to reach the needs and perspectives of both beneficiaries, the project partners conducted a survey for defining the teachers' methodological needs in mastering communication and coaching skills for diversity management in the classroom. The survey addressed also the students from various backgrounds in order to determine their levels of trust to the persons in school and their proneness for interaction on personal issues and challenges they face. The results of the survey have been used to develop a specialised EMPAQT training course for teachers and other school specialists, implementing innovation through a holistic approach in which the classroom piloting became part of the teacher training.

Further on we will present the results, conclusions and recommendations drawn from this study in relation to Romanian teachers and students. The results for other countries, as well as aspects related to the training programme are not covered by the present article.

2. Methodological aspects

The research with ESL theme was designed on the basis of a joint research methodology of the EMPAQT Project, which has unfolded from 2016-2018.

Research tools

This research methodology included the analysis of the main educational policy documents relevant to ESL in Romania, as well as a quantitative analysis of the data collected through questionnaires. The project partners designed and administered two questionnaires – one for pupils and one for teachers – in order to investigate relevant issues related to ESL, from the educational actors' perspective (causes related to the factors contributing to ESL, prevention and intervention measures); these aspects will be analysed in detail in the next chapters.

The questionnaire addressed to pupils targeted 9th grade pupils from high schools or vocational schools, at the beginning of the transition period to upper secondary education. Also, the questionnaire targeted the teachers teaching different subjects in high schools or vocational schools.

The two questionnaires covered different categories of items: multiple choices, open response and with appreciation scales. The statistical

data was processed according to a common model for the whole EMPAQT project.

Population surveyed

The application of the questionnaires did not involve a representative sample at national level; the research instruments targeted the pupils and teachers from different educational units which vary in terms of the residence environment, the socio-economic environment, the general level of performance of the school, categories of pupils from risk groups, etc., in order to capture as much as possible the complexity of the ESL phenomenon.

A total of 73 students answered the questionnaire. The students come from the 8 counties (Alba, Braila, Calarasi, Dambovita, Giurgiu, Ilfov, Prahova, Suceava) and Bucharest city. The demographic data on pupils, considered relevant for ESL issues, show that:

- 86.3% of respondents are between 15-17 years and 13.7% are between 18-20 years;
- 59% of respondents are females and 41% are males;
- of the total respondents, only one student has repeated a grade during school life;
- 77% of respondents come from a family with 2 or 3 children; 12.3% of respondents come from a family with 1 child and 12.3% come from families with 4, 5 or 6 children. More than two thirds of respondents live in a nuclear family (composed from: mother, father and children). Other family situations refer to: living in an extended family; living with a step-parent; living in a mononuclear family; living only with other members of the family;
- a percentage of 71.2% students have their own room at home and 28.8% are sharing their room with sisters or brothers;
- a percentage of 19 % students answered that they are currently working for money; more than a half of respondents declared that they have worked for money;
- 95% of respondents mentioned that they have access to a computer/tablet at home; 95% of respondents answered that they have a mobile phone of their own.

A total of 260 teachers (high-school and vocational school) responded the questionnaire. The demographical data on teachers show that:

- most of respondents (67%) are above 30 years old, with a peak on the interval 40-49 years old;

- there is a vast majority of female teachers (87.7% of respondents), a percentage similar to the one found in the general population of high-school teachers in Romania;
- there is a large variety of the subjects currently taught by the teachers who responded to the survey;
- the vast majority of teachers (93%) who responded the questionnaire have a permanent status in school (Romanian: *profesori titulari*);
- the majority of respondents have been working for a long time in the school in which they are teaching now, with more than 11 years of experience (58%);
- the teachers declared that they participated in a variety of professional activities during the last 12 months (mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching, network of teachers formed specifically for the professional development of teachers, individual or collaborative research, etc.).

3. Results of the research

3.1. Students opinions regarding learning, the school ethos and ESL issues

The students were invited to express their opinions on a set of aspects with relevance to ESL issues: the reasons for school involvement, conflict situations in the school environment and the type of support they need to do academically and personally better, the profile of the friends who drop out school.

Factors for students' involvement

Over 90% of respondents completely and mostly agreed that they enjoy coming to school when they have done their homework, when they have their favorite class or when they study with their favorite teacher, while over 80% are coming to school because their best friends are coming, or when in school there are extracurricular activities like music, sports, arts activities. Other reasons mentioned in lower percentages by students are: learning new things or meeting classmates and friends. Nevertheless, when asked about their real involvement in different activities at school, over 50% students said they were never or rarely involved in any activity (like music bands, dance groups, science class, theatre class, art courses or religious activities), while only 36% students have been involved regularly or often in sport activities or volunteering activities (for the other types of activities the percentages are even lower).

Overwhelmingly (more than 95%) students prefer teachers who were understanding, have a sense of humour and respected students, 85% prefer teachers who are fair both in terms of evaluation and relationship with the students and do not evaluate students only on the ground of their academic performance. Regarding the teaching methods, the vast majority of students (75%-85%) agree that teachers often use in their teaching presentations and discussions, around 60% of respondents declared that debates and teamwork were often used in teaching, while 60% of the respondents declared that role play, school trips and school visits were never or rarely approached by teachers.

97% of the respondents completely and mostly agreed that individual factors contribute to students doing well at school and high percentages (85%-90%) consider that family, teacher and school related factors contribute to doing well at school. Large percentages of students (32%-37%) declared that they completely and mostly disagree that peer and social environmental factors contribute to doing well at school. Interestingly enough, when asked about the reasons for not doing well at school, students completely and mostly agreed that individual factors are the reasons for not doing well at schools (92%), teacher and family related factors (80%) or school related factors (74%). Large percentages (around 40%) completely and mostly disagreed that peers and economic factors contribute to students not doing well at school.

The sense of belonging at school was completely and mostly related by the large majority of students with friendship relations (99%), with doing academically well (95%), with family (86%) and teachers (77%). Large percentages of students (58%-34%) completely and mostly disagreed that the school counsellor, the community or the ethnic/religious background can contribute to the sense of belonging to the school.

Conflicts at school

Regarding the frequency of conflicts with classmates, more than half of participants (61%) mentioned that sometimes they get into conflict with peers. The main reasons for getting into conflict were personal disagreements (53%), the aggressiveness of other students and stress (around 40%), while 86% declare that never or rarely conflicts appear because of their own aggressiveness.

Related to conflicts with the teachers, 68% of respondents declared that they never got into conflicts with teachers. Nevertheless, an important percentage of students (31%) said that sometimes they did get into conflict with teachers. The reasons mentioned for these conflicts were attributed to:

students (noise in the classroom, not being attentive, students not learning, offending teachers – 20%), teachers (being disrespectful towards the students, displaying superior attitudes, unjust evaluation – 16%), small marks (14%), homework (5%), other causes (truancy, quarrels – without mentioning on whose fault was).

Support received and needed

When asked about the type of support needed to do academically better at school, 100% of the respondents appreciated that their own contribution can help them do academically better at school, and a large percentage indicated also the help of the family (95%), the support of the teachers (91%) and friends (80%). Large percentages of respondents (47%-38%) completely and mostly disagreed that doing academically better can be due to the school counsellor, due to community or due to the support received outside regular classes.

When experiencing personal difficulties most of the students relied on parents and friends (87%) and high percentages (82%-50%) declare that they never or rarely rely on the school counsellor, head master or teachers.

When experiencing school difficulties, the vast majority of the investigated students declared that they turned to parents (91%) and friends (78%) while large percentages of students (77%-36%) declared that they never or rarely rely on the school counsellor, head master or the teachers in case of personal difficulties.

Early school leaving

The vast majority of the investigated students (84%) portrayed the dropouts as people who primarily do not have interest in learning, are coming from families with problems or do have family responsibilities. Other important factors mentioned by large percentages of respondents (77%-50%) as part of the portrayal were: being a member of an economically disadvantaged family, not having supportive parents, the tendency to get married early and learning difficulties. Large percentages of students completely and mostly disagreed that being involved in politics (68%), having problems with the law, coming from ethnic minorities, having difficult relations with peers and teachers (44%-35%) are part of the students at risk of ESL portrayal.

Suggestions to prevent early school leaving

The majority of suggestions students made for preventing ESL were related to:

- communication: more and better communication with the students and with the parents;
- the teachers: to be more kind and understanding with the students`, not offending students, not behaving as superiors, being supportive, paying attention and offering help, using
- different teaching methods for those in difficulties, changing the authoritative teaching style;
- the school system: more focus on the evaluation methods through marks which are sometimes too drastic, special classes for those who cannot attend regularly, no coregency and repetency, offering scholarships not only for excellency but also for those belonging to poor families;
- the students: developing motivation for learning, non-aggressiveness, self-confidence
- the families: to offer more support to children and get more involved;
- the school counsellor: more counselling sessions for approaching the students` problems.

3.2. Teacher opinions regarding the school participation and causes of ESL

Teachers were invited to express their opinions on a set of aspects with relevance to ESL issues: analysis of pupils' attitudes towards learning, ways to address conflict situations in the school environment, assessment of causes and responsibilities for ESL, training on an active role in preventing and reducing ESL.

Factors for students' involvement

The involvement of students in their own learning is considered to be an important aspect for academic success, respectively for ESL prevention. Most of the responding teachers identified as main factors of students' involvement the following: the supportive and encouraging families (85%), students' educational aspirations (83%), students' good relations with their teachers (80%), the organisation of extra-curricular activities (69%) as well as good relations with their peers/friends (61%). Other factors identified by the teachers in lower percentages refer to other school aspects (a good provision of necessary equipment and didactical means, using creative and attractive teaching methods).

Almost all teachers (96%) completely or partially agree that students' low performance is due to the lack of interest in learning or the learning difficulties. At the same time over three quarters of respondents consider

that low performance is caused by students coming from families with problems (84%), by having familial responsibilities (working, taking care of siblings, etc.) (82%), by coming from economically disadvantaged families (74%). Among the reasons for low performance added by teachers we also found: group influence, the individual potential of each student, negative social models, family values and motivation, lack of monitoring by parents, lack of skills for learning to learn. It should be noted that the causes of low school performance are placed by teachers more at the level of factors related to pupils than school related factors.

Challenges in teachers' relation to their students

The vast majority of respondent teachers (over 90%) completely agreed that the challenges encountered in the relation with their students include: understanding their students' needs; increasing the students' motivation to learn; solving the conflicts among students, working in cooperation with parents and working in cooperation with classmates.

Primary cause for conflict with students

A strong consensus was reached among teachers (85%) that the lack of motivation on students' part is a primary cause of conflicts. Other causes mentioned by teachers referred to poor communication with parents, societal models, school curricula that is not adapted to students' needs, economic factors and lack of career perspective for students; other student related factors (learning difficulties, behavioural problems and absenteeism). At the same time, 82% of teachers surveyed strongly believe that their own personal factors (professional motivation, abilities to handle conflicts) do not cause conflict with students. As a result, the cause of the conflicts is located by the teachers especially at the students' level.

The majority of teachers (80%) overcome conflicts with the students by creating a supportive and tolerant atmosphere in class; by talking to the students and learning about their problems; by adapting the regular curriculum to the students' level; by informing the parents. Less than 20% of respondents said they have made changes in the school management. As a result, the measures to overcome conflictual situations remain centred at the level of each teacher's strategies.

Responsibility for preventing ESL

Almost all surveyed teachers (98%) completely or partially agree that the responsibility for preventing early school leaving lies within the families. This responsibility is, at the same time, primarily placed by teachers also on

the students (83%), on the support organisations from the community (75%), respectively on the government level (74%). Only two thirds of teachers are assuming this responsibility for themselves (70%) or for the school counsellor (68%), and the school management (66%).

Most of the teachers identified as causes for ESL family related factors (97%), economic factors (93%), as well as individual factors (92%). Only 56% of respondents believe that school related factors are causes of ESL.

School strategies to prevent early school leaving

According to the respondents' statements, the most encountered strategies employed by schools in order to prevent ESL are as follows: strengthening home-school liaison (95%), improving school ethos (89%), improving counselling services at school (85%), supporting teachers with regular in-service training (81%), studies done at school level to understand better students' needs/difficulties (77%), mentoring and coaching from experts/agencies/volunteers outside the school during the school year (68%), additional funding for these kind of problems (66%).

Requisites for teachers working with students at risk of ESL

The most needed aspects for teachers working with students at risk of ESL are: support materials (82%), specific training programs (66%), mentoring or coaching support (65%).

For the development of work skills with pupils at risk of ESL, teachers mentioned priority training themes: increasing student motivation (59%), working with parents (55%), understanding differences (48%), specific teaching methodology for activities with students at risk of ESL (46%), solving problems (45%), class management (36%), intergenerational conflicts (33%), inclusion strategies (31%), evaluation strategies (16%).

Teachers also proposed other complementary modalities of professional development: mentoring/coaching assured by those who have good results in working with pupils at risk of ESL (41%), class observation (watching teachers dealing with similar situations) (29%).

4. Conclusions

In 2017, the ESL rate in Romania was 18,1% which currently ranks Romania among the countries with the highest ESL rates in Europe. According the conclusions of several national studies, there is more than one single factor that makes the young people to leave school early (factors regarding the pupil, factors regarding the family and education demand,

factors regarding the educational offer, etc.) and the Romanian young people certainly are not an exception.

In order to improve the situation of ESL, at national level was designed a specific strategy, with intervention areas for the period 2015-2020. The projects developed from structural funds POSDRU 2007-2013 have promoted punctual interventions to increase the access and participation to education for the pupils exposed to ESL risk. The POCU 2014-2020 propose a set of integrated interventions to reduce ESL.

A variety of Erasmus+ project also proposes innovative interventions and solutions designed in international partnerships and adapted by the countries to national contexts. The EMPAQT project could be mentioned as such a good practice, as the research developed within the framework of this project brought into attention beside the policy perspective, also the perspectives of the most important educational actors: pupils and teachers. The study highlighted some important conclusions related to ESL in the schools which participated to the survey in Romania.

Related to the students, the results of the survey show that they enjoy coming to school in certain conditions which are related either to the fulfilment of their responsibilities assigned by teachers, or to how they feel when they are coming to school. Nevertheless, in the students' opinion, Romanian teachers mainly use traditional teaching and learning methods. Friendship relations contribute to the feeling of belonging more than teachers or the schools; conflicts with the peers and with the teachers are present in the school space. Students attribute their academic performances mainly to themselves, being overconfident and putting a high pressure on their own capacities. In time of troubles, students are still searching for their families' and friends' help, while the school management, the teachers and the school counsellors are still perceived as not offering the whole support a student needs to doing well at school. With the students' eye, we can portray students in risk of ESL as having no interest in learning, coming from families with problems or having familial responsibilities; these students need better communication with teachers and with the parents; they also require that teachers should have good socio-emotional abilities in order to be able to understand and specific support; the school system to be more open to children in difficulties, and to find alternative ways for the evaluation of their progress and to enhance their motivation for learning; new ways of involving families into the educational situations.

Related to the teachers, the results of the survey show that they consider very important for the academic success the students' own learning and aspirations, the support from families, the students' good relations with

their teachers and peers, as well as their involvement in extra-curricular activities. Moreover, the teachers attribute the low academic performances and conflict situations mainly at students' level. The majority of the teachers who participated in the survey strongly believe that their own personal factors (professional motivation, abilities to handle conflicts) do not cause conflict with students, being confident in their teaching and class management abilities. Nevertheless, teachers recognise important challenges in understanding their students' needs, increasing their motivation to learn, solving the conflicts between students, working in cooperation with parents and working in cooperation with peers. In teachers' opinion, the responsibility for preventing ESL lies mainly within the families, but it is also an important responsibility for teachers and students. In the eyes of the teachers, the causes for ESL are mostly related to the economic or individual factors, only half of respondents believing that the school related factors are contributing to the ESL.

The suggestions related to the prevention of ESL seem to be different in students' and teachers' opinions. Analysing both perspectives, we can see that while students offer suggestions for a better educational process, the teachers are more focused on their own professional development recognising the lack of specific competencies to prevent and solve ESL situations.

Taking into considerations the pupils and teachers perspective related to the ESL, the conclusions of this article should converge to the idea that ESL could neither be approached as a student's individual problem, nor as question of the teachers competencies solely. The educational systems should be informed about pilot actions targeting the ESL phenomenon. In this direction, the EMPAQT project could be considered a good practice for the Romanian educational system by supporting schools, students and teachers in better dealing with the ESL.

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