

Critical Thinking Reflected in History Textbooks

Beatrice Alina DINU¹

Abstract

In a country where the rate of functional illiteracy is reaching worrying levels, critical thinking remains one of the solutions to combat this harmful phenomenon of today's society.

Schools should focus not so much on the transmission of knowledge but on the competence to learn to learn, so that students become autonomous in learning and move from superficial thinking to deep thinking.

Textbooks have recently become the primary document that teachers follow, but without analyzing them to see what kind of thinking it promoted. A possible modification of the History curriculum, 4th grade, and textbooks should aim at training students in the ability to think critically.

Keywords: critical thinking, ERR framework, general and specific competencies, textbooks, school curriculum.

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1. Introduction

Critical thinking occupies a special place in Romania in pedagogical discussions but is neglected in its application in the classroom, especially in history classes. This subject still remains for students one that involves a several years, dates, events and without any attractive elements. By referring to the exercises proposed in History textbooks teachers manage to maintain this image of what History is and even to promote superficial thinking among students.

Every human has a history of his own, a past to which he constantly turns his eyes to see how it was and how it became. History teaches us to believe in change, to see the character of a man in his deeds, to always look for the future with hope. This is an art and few people know how to understand and teach it.

The simple transmission of knowledge, data, events imprints in the minds of students from an early age that the image that history is boring. Involvement, training in thinking, engagement in one's own formation and development will lead to a transformation of what we believed about History.

It takes a transformation of our own thinking to be able to develop a higher level of thinking among today's students. History can only be a tool that we can use to develop critical thinking in the Romanian school.

2. Overview of critical thinking in literature

The term *critical thinking* was first used in 1941 by Edward Glaser in *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking* and became widespread in the second half of the twentieth century. Edward Glaser's ideas were based on those of John Dewey, considered the modern father of critical thinking (Fisher, 2011, p.2).

Although the term *critical thinking* is used in the literature recently (Neacșa, 2016, 512) it is still considered that the description of the process of finding and searching for the truth that Plato makes in the Myth of the Cave is analogous to today's critical thinking. (Bernart, 2003, p. 40)

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Limiting the human being to think according to the standards imposed by society is like imprisoning human beings under the earth, so that the light of true knowledge only creeps into the room and the prisoners have it only as much as they are allowed by those who are keeping them captive.

The image of people being bound from an early age so that they can only look at the direction desired by the conquerors, illustrates the severity of the limitation imposed, but also shows an image of what education in schools has meant over time.

From the point of view of learning theories critical thinking can be included in the constructivist theory of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized active, conscious student learning, either individually or in groups. Based on constructivist ideas, Richard Anderson theorizes the so-called theory of the scheme in 1985, following which the Evocation / Realization of Meaning / Reflection framework was developed. (Oprea, 2006, p. 114)

The three stages of the framework are closely related and form a whole, through which the personality of students can be developed and formed harmoniously. Students are encouraged through this framework to participate in an active, exciting discovery that will lead to finding answers to the questions that (can) appear.

In the Evocation stage, the students' knowledge baggage is accessed by capitalizing on their personal life experiences and by returning to what they knew. The process that takes place at this stage is similar to the process of revival and is's also a bridge between what we know and what is new to us. (Bernart, 2003, p. 42)

The second stage of the framework is the Realization of Meaning. In it students must show an intense cognitive concentration in order to reach the maximum potential of each. A full understanding and acquisition of new knowledge is also ensured. (Cristea, 2017, p. 56) The last stage of the framework goes beyond the classic fixation of knowledge and creates moments when the learned information is critically analyzed. The presence of this stage in a lesson allows students to ask questions, express reasoned personal opinions and reflect on their own learning process, thus creating conditions for the development of metacognition. (Bernart, 2006, p. 42)

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3. Research methodology

Knowing these three stages of the ERR framework allows the teacher to set their goals clearly, to build an appropriate strategy to ensure that new information is learned by students. Just as a leader analyzes the resources at his disposal, the field he has to fight, the teacher must do the same in choosing the strategy he will use in the class of students.

However, one can observe in the Romanian school an inclination of teachers towards the excessive use of school textbooks, without analyzing them in order to discover what they transmit and promote.

For this reason I chose to analyze two of the History textbooks, 4th grade, to discover the extent to which their authors promote critical thinking through the exercises they propose, but also the link between them and the school curriculum (Anghel, 2017, p. 193).

The specific objectives of the research were to identify the exercises in the History textbooks, 4th grade, which stimulates critical thinking; making the correspondence between the exercises proposed in the textbooks and the general and the specific competences; determining the incidence of the stages of the ERR framework in the process of developing critical thinking, through the exercises proposed in the History textbooks.

4. Analysis and interpretation of the research data

In order to carry out the research, we took into account the History textbook, 4th grade, from Aramis Publishing House (Burtea, D., Perța, A, 2016) and the History textbook, 4th grade, from Corint Publishing House (Petre, Z., Teodorescu, B., Andrei, C., 2016), and the research was of a qualitative type.

The authors of the two textbooks propose a fairly high number of exercises for students to solve, namely 269 in Aramis and 307 in Corinth, but the number of those who require students to access the higher level of thinking was low: 59 in Aramis (18%) and 58 in Corinth (16%).

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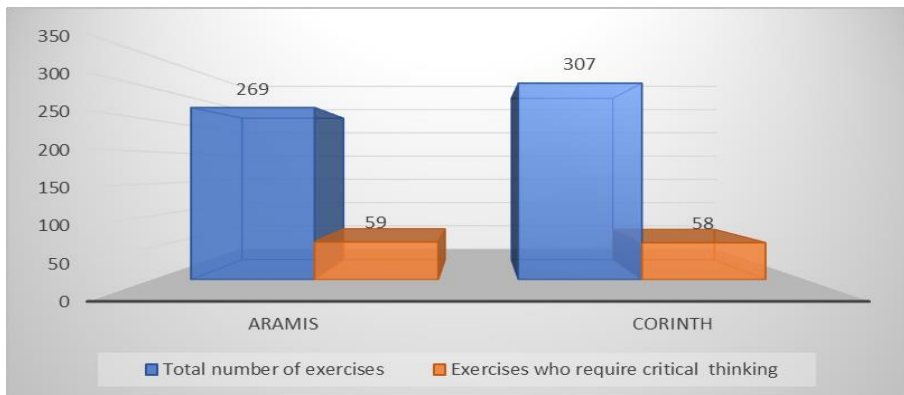


Figure 1. Number of exercises who require critical thinking

Although collaborative learning is closely related to critical thinking, the exercises proposed in the two textbooks that combine collaboration with critical thinking are limited. If in Corinth we could identify 18 exercises (24%) that correspond to this classification, in Aramis we identified only 9 exercises (13%).

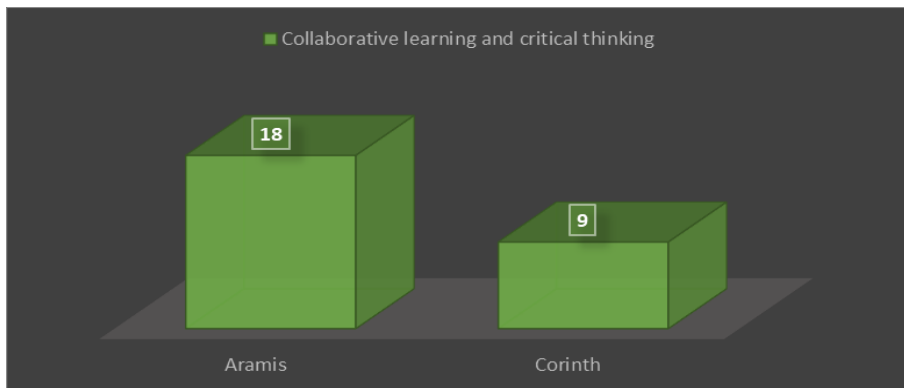


Figure 2. Collaborative learning and critical thinking

Analyzing separately the exercises that stimulate critical thinking, we classified them into two categories: those that can be included on a certain higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy and those that are based on a modern method / technique. The number of exercises that can be included on a higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy

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differs this time between the two textbooks. If from Aramis we can include in this category 34 exercises, from Corinth we can classify 45 exercises on the three higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

The Analysis level includes 9 exercises (26%) from the Aramis textbook and 15 exercises (33%) from the Corinthian textbook. For the Evaluation level, the authors of the two textbooks propose an equal number of exercises, namely 17 (50% for the Aramis and 38% for the Corinthian), while the Creation level has the fewest proposed exercises, 8 from Aramis (24%) and 13 from Corinth (29%).

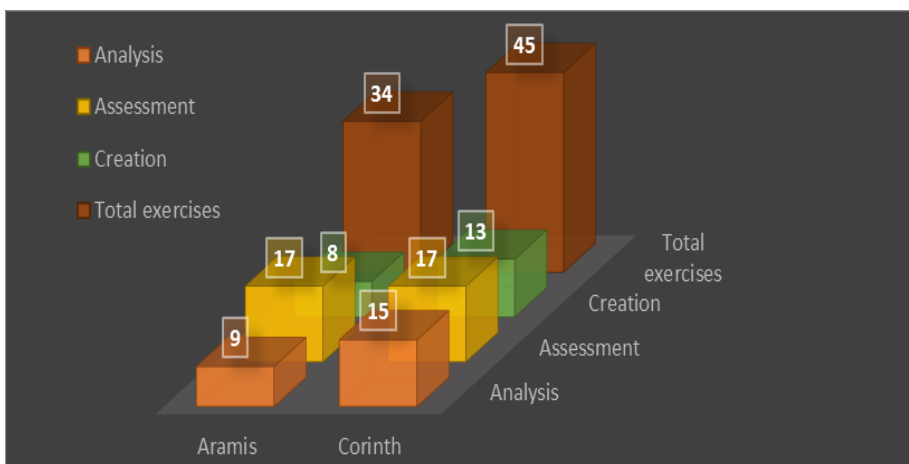


Figure 3. The number of exercises that can be included on a higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy

Each exercise identified and classified in this category was included in a general and specific competence (Programa școlară pentru disciplina Istorie, clasa a IV-a, 2014). Thus, following the analysis, we found that an equal number of exercises in the two textbooks, namely 5, could not be included in a general or specific competence.

The authors of the manual from Aramis Publishing House propose most exercises for general competence 4 (35%), while those from Corinth propose most for specific competence 3 (33%). Both those in Corinth and those from Aramis propose a small number of exercises for competence general 1 (9% for the Aramis and 5% for the Corinthian).

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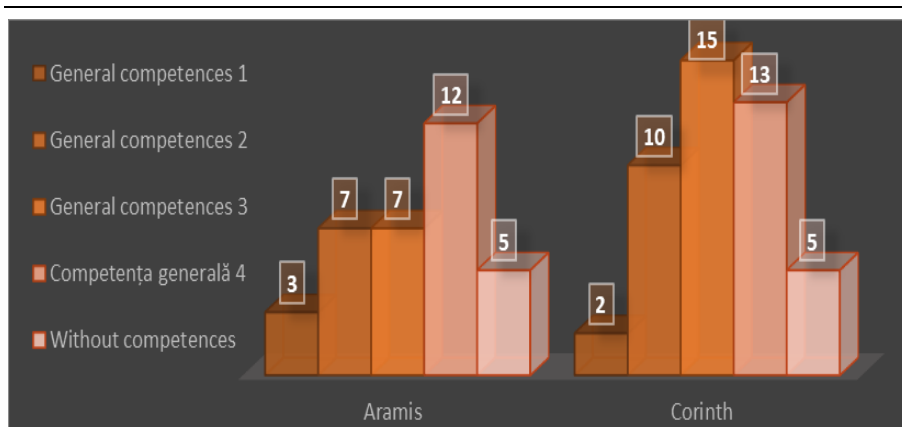


Figure 4. Exercises classified by general competences

It should be noted that none of the authors propose exercises that stimulate students' critical thinking and that can be included in the specific competence 1.2. Referring to another classification of these exercises, I could see that the Evocation stage is almost completely neglected by the authors of the History textbooks, as well as the Reflection stage which is not capitalized on its true value. The authors are content to propose most exercises that stimulate critical thinking for the stage of Realization of Meaning.

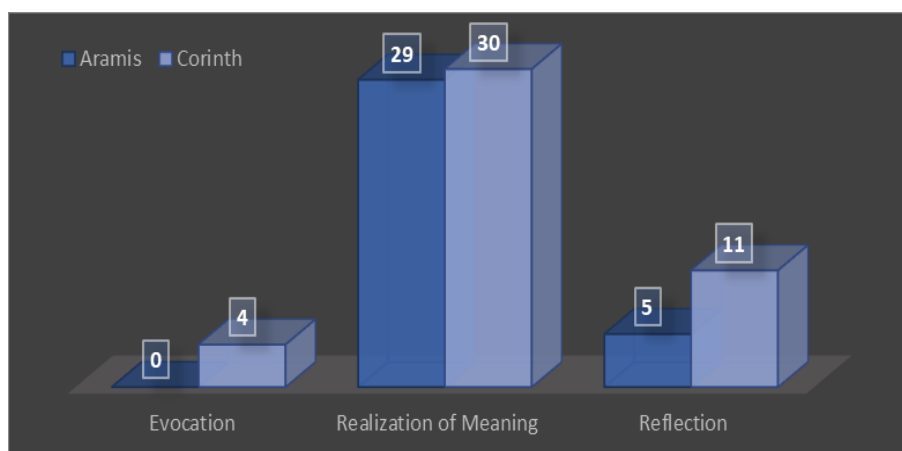


Figure 5. The number of exercises who was included in ERR

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The second category of exercises that stimulate students' critical thinking is the one of exercises based on a modern method / technique. This time, the exercises that stimulate critical thinking and can fall into this category are more numerous in the Aramis, representing 25 of the 59 exercises, while those in Corinth propose only 13 exercises based on a method / modern technique.

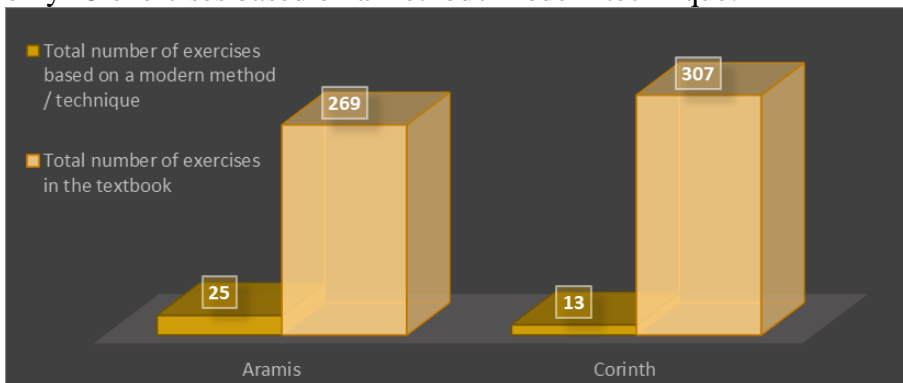


Figure 6. Exercises based on a modern method / technique

The two textbooks propose a series of modern methods and techniques that engage the student in learning, arouse his interest and encourage him to enter the path of discovering new knowledge about historical personalities and about historical time.

The Starburst is most often used by the authors of the Aramis booklet, followed by Quadrants, Clusters, the Venn Diagram and Quintet, while those in Corinth most often use RAI, followed by the Starburst and the I know / Want to know / I learned method.

It can be seen, therefore, that the authors place particular emphasis on the formulation of questions and the provision of answers, on the development in students of these two categories of skills so necessary today.

Regarding the inclusion of these exercises which are based on a modern method / technique and which stimulates critical thinking we could find that general competence 1 is neglected (4% for the Aramis and 8% for the Corinthian) and that most exercises are proposed for general competence 4 (40% for the Aramis and 54% for the Corinthian).

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From the Aramis textbook, we could not include 3 exercises in a general and specific competence, and from the Corinthian textbook 2 of the 13 did not fall within a certain competence.

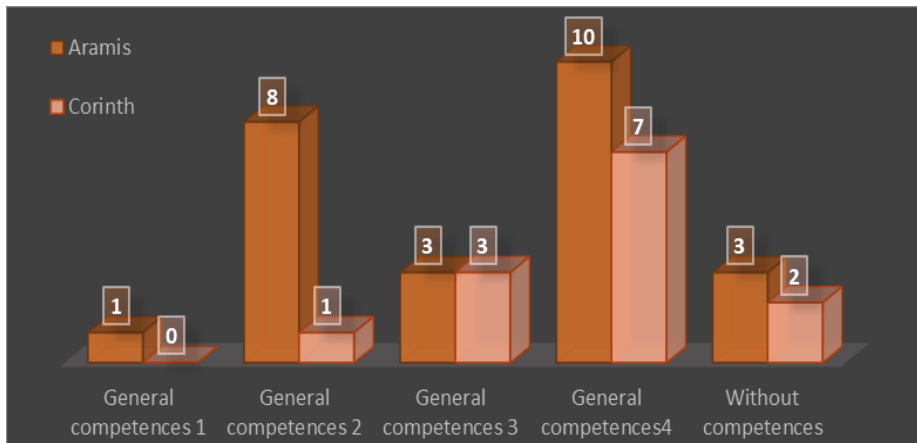


Figure 7. Exercises classified by general competences

The last classification of the exercises that were based on a modern method / technique consisted in framing them in a certain stage of the ERR framework. We could see, again, that the Evocation stage contains the fewest exercises in both the Aramis and the Corinthian textbooks (4% for the Aramis and 23% for the Corinthian).

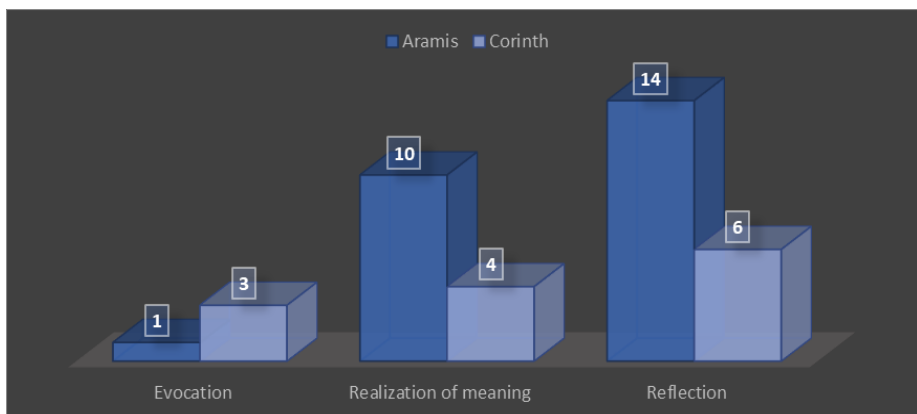


Figure 8. The number of exercises who was included in ERR

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A change is that the authors propose exercises based on a moderate method / technique given the stage of Reflection, although the realization of meaning is not ignored.

Following the results obtained, we could see that the authors of the two textbooks are trying to capitalize on a wide range of methods and techniques that teachers can use in class to attract students in their own training and development.

The authors also try to comply with the curriculum by including the proposed exercises in a general or specific competence although there may be exercises that involve a forced inclusion or even that can not be included in any general and specific competence.

On the other hand, regarding the negative aspects resulting from the research we could see that although we live in a society that wants to focus on group learning, the authors of the two textbooks miss out this aspect even if they propose exercises based on methods / modern techniques and for which group solving is more beneficial.

Looking at the results from the perspective of the two levels of thinking - lower and higher - one can notice in the History textbooks the lower-level thinking, where the students' tasks are to identify, mention, read, transcribe some information, requiring students to access a deeper level of thinking.

The way in which the authors propose the exercises for the three stages of the ERR framework illustrates their perspective on their importance in the life and development of students. Thus, what the student has, what he knows, the baggage of knowledge with which he comes is not capitalized. The emphasis is on what the teacher conveys, which refers to the authors' conception that the teacher owns the truth and not the student.

The Reflection stage is also neglected in part by the authors when proposing exercises that stimulate critical thinking. Reflection on one's own learning, the formation of the competence to learn to learn, the development of metacognitive abilities are just goals that we seek to achieve, but for which we do not make an effort.

We can see, lastly, that even if we focused on the two alternative textbooks, we would still find that it won't be enough to stimulate students to develop critical thinking, to reach a higher level of thinking.

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Therefore, it is imperative to revise the textbooks of History, 4th grade, so that critical thinking won't be ignored, but to take a leading place, and to significantly decrease the degree of functional illiteracy.

Conclusions

In a world where cooperation and collaboration are increasing in demand, the authors of History textbooks should adapt to the requirements and propose exercises aimed at this type of learning, encouraging the development of interindividual relationships, the formation of communication skills, increasing the degree of tolerance in a society that lacks these values.

Both the curriculum and the history textbooks need a revision, so that the values we want to see around could be found in school documents. They should be a support for the teacher who wants to develop metacognitive skills in his students.

Critical thinking must not only remain a theoretical knowledge, it must not just be known by teachers, but also by those who make textbooks and want to be a support for teachers through what they do.

In the absence of the teacher's involvement, the student will relate to what he discovers in the textbook he has in front and will try to educate himself by respecting it and capitalizing on its content.

The image that students have of History is one that needs change. Therefore, the proposed exercises, the texts used, the images used must be meant to contribute to this change.

It is not enough to want to see a change but to be part of it. History can become one of the most beloved subjects of students through the involvement of the teacher, by transforming the ordinary into art and by the teacher's ability to impel students to boldly discover ancient lands of old times.

The rate of functional illiteracy could drop significantly if teachers, no matter what cycle of education they teach would give up the old patterns and boldly push for new forms of teaching, capitalizing on them in class and engaging students in their own training and development.

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More than ever, Romanian schools need to promote critical thinking, a higher-level thinking among students, thus helping them to successfully integrate in today's society.

Critical thinking is just a step towards this change that we want so much yet it is an essential one in our transformation and education. Getting out of the patterns, getting out of the cave and out of the darkness should not scare us, but make us rise more to the heights of knowledge.

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