EEPG primary school network meeting in Lisbon 9-10 September 2010

Participants:
Margit Ross (Koolibri)
Mojca Urankar Počkaj (Rokus-Klett Publishing House), mojca.urankar-pockaj@rokus-klett.si
Kina Andreeva (Prosveta Publishing)
Chris Jolly (Jolly Learning)
Carmo Correia (Leya Publishing)
Rita Oliveira (Texto)
Joana Duarte (Leya)
Cristina Ferreira (Texto)
Patricia Oliveira (Texto)
Preben Späth (EEPG)

Thursday morning
Carmo welcomes the participants

Topic: The role of characters and mascots in primary textbooks (and how can they evolve from grade to grade how can they be used outside textbooks for merchandising and for other educational materials.)

Cristina told that many textbooks for primary in Portugal lack the excitement of a plot and that they often present unreal contexts. In addition they often disregard the interests of the learners. She presented a big new project called “a grande aventura” (the great adventure), which has just been published, also reflecting the new syllabus for maths in grades 1 and 3. [remembers to copy from her presentation the characteristics of the characters and mascots, page 3 or 4]

The two characters are called Estrela (star) and Ulisses (has a heroic tone to Portuguese speakers). Interestingly the characters are not perfect but simple, curious. The two mascots are called Elastico (he loves to jump along the math lines and make jokes; also elastic meaning trying different solution paths) the other is called Alturas (she sees the world from the top). A movie introduces the characters and the mascots to the learners. They also do the same activities as the learners themselves are supposed to do. Discussion on whether to change the mascots each year, so the learners do not get bored.

Margit talked about the fact that it is very costly to produce additional materials like puppets and mascots. She also mentioned that the characters used in textbooks are either animals (based on imagination) or persons (based on reality). Fantasy characters have always been part of fiction and fairy tales; in addition they are part of childhood nowadays. She presented a textbook series with a squirrel as the main character. Other animals used can be a fox. She also quoted the basic values stated as goals in the curriculum e.g. honesty, justice, respect for oneself and others, freedom, democracy, tolerance, and patriotism.

Long discussion about handwriting evolved: the different teaching methods with either print or precursive (connected letters in hand writing). Margit also showed some textbooks with photos of real children - another approach used with success.

Kina first gave a short presentation of Prosveta Publishers, who have more than 1,600 titles. The Bulgarian textbook situation is not particularly suitable for innovations and non-standard approaches like the use of mascots. In addition the curriculum is very strict and precise in its requirements. The tradition in Bulgaria is that everything should be presented in a scientific way. “Learning by playing” is certainly not promoted. However there are small signs that some things are changing even in Bulgaria. Characters are slowly beginning to appear in textbooks for first grade, e.g. the owl in maths primers.

Mojca presented a three level primary course set called “Magic Adventure 1”, where there funny characters like the boy Peter who is 6 years old with his friend Lola; in addition we see the character Tricks who is always joking and / or provoking. Also there are some aliens who travel I a time machine, where you may also meet different animals (e.g. giraffe, mouse, pelican and snake).

In each unit one of the characters is guiding the learner. The other set is a cross-curricular textbook set with a holistic approach to early learning. The goal is to connect knowledge from different areas of life. The working title is Filip and Ana as main characters being a drone and a bee. Mojca also showed the long way of developing the characters.
Chris presented the package Jolly Phonics in the perspective of the role of characters and mascots. They have 3 characters in their material: Inky Mouse shows Snake and Bee how to read and write; she got her name when she spilt a bottle of ink on herself; second is Snake who learns quickly and is always hungry. At first he frightened Inky but soon they became friends; thirdly we have Bee who met Inky when she could not find her way back to the hive. She does not find reading easy, but she keeps trying. The aim is to provide child-friendly personalities which are not adult/teachers and which are free of racial and national stereotypes.

Thursday afternoon:
Structure of textbooks in the different countries: How is each subject structured for each grade? How is navigation facilitated for early learners? And for teachers?

Cristina presented the “grande aventura” which is as tradition wants it structured in units, in this case 10 units per textbook; this allows the teachers to work according to each class’ pace without being forced to comply with pre-established goals which are laid down in traditional textbooks in Portugal keeping clear pace with the calendar e.g. Christmas and Easter. They can work through the book in the order they wish. Double page layout used to present new topics. Important are also the directed questions asked to the learner when they try to solve the question, including the option to reflect on their solutions by asking: “Is your solution sensible? Please explain!”. As for navigation several icons are used in the books for first grade since reading actual texts is a problem in this grade. Finally Cristina listed a number of questions for reflection.

Margit presented the view from an Estonian perspective. Textbooks consist of three basic parts: content based on curriculum; methods based on pedagogy; presentation based on visual layout. Margit showed actual examples of layout and structure of textbooks for Maths, Nature, Environment and Arts. She also explained the use of different font faces and sizes. As for navigation colours are often used to make navigation easier.

Kina about the subjects taught in the Bulgarian schools in first and second grades. Prosveta develops two learning sets in each subject in each grade. A set includes textbook, workbooks, teacher’s guide, self-study workbook, CDs, various teaching aids. The structure of the textbooks is normally determined by the curriculum, and the material is organised in units. Navigation is ensured by the use of so called guides in the beginning of the books, and by symbols. The teacher’s guides contain a lot of help for navigation including methodological guidelines and a table of conformity with the curriculum.

Mojca presented the structure of the textbook set “Magic Adventure 1”. She explained the internal structure of a unit: Double spread introducing the content of the unit. Next spread presents different activities like songs and body games, spread no. 3 presents our world and Trick’s tricks. The next spread will present a game, and a review board game. It was decided to realise an idea for the member section of the EEPG web site to present icons used in textbooks of the members including an indication of the meaning of the icons in English. As for navigation the first unit in each book of this cross-curricular set will have the same colour etc. The 10 units of the books are focused in the same themes like the school, traffic, autumn is here, winter, health, spring and weather and summer. The subjects covered include language maths and environment.

Chris told about the role of curriculum in the perspective of developing textbooks. There is a balance between the light touch and an almost helpful curriculum, and on the other hand the rather restrictive curriculum (BG as an example). He compared private and government schools as regards effectiveness. There has been no significant raise in literacy in the UK since the 1980s. Curriculum has been changed in the UK every two years for decades. The earlier Labour government had informed publishers and schools about the new curriculum etc. but everything was cancelled by the new conservative government. There is in teaching in general the divide between inclusiveness and focus. The problem lies in the actual presentation of the curriculum. The good way is to focus meaning dealing with a subject in depth through one whole school year in stead of having the subject in parts each school year. Focus is what Finland and Singapore are doing being high up on the PISA scale. He presented the National Literacy Strategy published in the UK in 1997 where the goal was to teach children to read whole words in stead of focussing on the relationship between letters and sounds (as is being done in the Phonics Handbook i.e. synthetic phonics). This is a clear example of a government being much too restrictive in the definition of learning goals. 10 years later the
government published the book Letters and Sounds, a Primary National Strategy, where the focus has changed totally.

Friday morning:
Success case studies: winner and loser projects

Rita told about several projects for the first 4 years of Primary: Clube dos Cinco (2003-2007), Um-dó-li-tá (2007) and A Grande Aventura. By 2010 Texto will have 26% of the market for Maths and Sciences and Environmental studies in Portugal with an innovative project like A Grande Aventura. This year a new program of Maths, decided by the Ministry, was mandatory for all Maths books and Um-dó-li-tá consolidated as the best Math textbook on the market (covering 29% market share). Discussion arose as to have teachers pay or not for participating in training activities where products from a publisher are being presented. All the individual steps of the development of such a big project are indicated in the presentation. A Grande Aventura is accompanied by digital materials (CD) offering games. Some teachers are still not convinced of the new methodologies used in these new Math textbooks.

Margit told about two different approaches for Maths in grade 1 in Estonia. Margit analysed the two covers of the textbooks to find out the reason why one became a winner, whereas the other book became a loser. The loser looked very child friendly at first glance, but maybe too modern and too stylised (with animals appearing all the time, rather childish in the appearance), whereas the winner cover is more traditional (with young characters helping the pupils throughout the book). Another issue is the spreads in the loser book with long lists of numbers to be worked on by the learner (demotivating). The most important reason is probably that the author of the loser is well known for his authoritative and over-scientific approach when he has been teaching coming teachers at the university.

Kina explained that Prosveta normally publish two learning sets in each subject for each grade, and thereby they cover around 50% of the market in Bulgaria. Often the decisive factors to make a book a success or not is related to the personality of the author presenting his/her work to teachers. As for the books for man and society they are not so successful, mainly because they are too difficult. And the answer of Prosveta is to produce and publish additional materials with easier exercises and games etc. to make the work in the subject easier. In general it is a good idea to have a team of authors consisting of both high level academics and everyday teachers, only together these persons can produce materials that correspond to the needs of the learners in schools. Furthermore Kina presented “Hello! English” for students from first to eighth grade. These textbooks cover more than 40% of the market for English in Bulgaria, competing with Cambridge and Longman. Here she showed the various activities and tasks defined in the books for primary, including a number of cross-curricular links to activities of other subjects.

Mojca told that Rokus-Klett has only 10-15% of the primary school market (grades 1 to 3) in Slovenia for subjects like Maths, Slovenian language etc. The new approach will be a series of books that cover all subjects in a cross-curricular way. One problem in Slovenia is that most of the professors at the biggest university are already hired by competing publishers; in addition they have problems to think in the cross-curricular way. In stead the authors for this approach are ordinary teachers with academics as more external consultants. They intend to invite the principal and 3 primary teachers from 100 schools and ask them to evaluate the material as it grows in the future. They will be paid for the evaluation work. They foresee quite a challenge in cooperating with 300 teachers, who will feel solidarity with the publishing house (there names will be listed in the back cover of the books to be published).

Chris handed out a list of winners and losers and decided to focus on the losers. An example is Jolly Phonique which is a programme to teach reading and writing in French form the first year. It was intended to reach schools teaching French as a first language and so was written entirely in French. The sales have been primarily in Anglophone Canada; however, they have not succeeded even in Quebec or in European schools. The material is sold entirely to areas where French is not the first language. One explanation can also be the fact that here an English publisher is ‘telling’ French people how to teach the phonics of French.

Evaluation sheets were filled in by all participants.
The last item was to discuss potential topics for coming meetings of the network (the list below reflects the suggestions made in the evaluation sheets):
- Innovation in layout – how can it help provide success?
- Specific teacher’s materials – good examples.
- How are authors selected and trained?
- How are sciences taught in primary grades?
- Methodological approaches used in textbooks for primary and how they differ in different subjects.
- Good idea to invite some experts to make short introduction to the main topic(s) of a network meeting?
- Loyalty strategies to keep teachers working with our materials