

## BOOK REVIEW

***Alfabetul lui Hipodor. Limba română ca limbă nematernă. Clasa a II-a (Hipodor's Alphabet. Romanian language as Second Language. Second Grade), by Antonela Arieșan, Anda Bratu (coord. Elena Platon), vol. I-II-III, Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2014-2016, vol. I - 174p., vol. II - 196p., vol. III - 162p.***



How would you like for the textbook your child is learning the letters from to look like? Which would be the eligibility criteria if you had several variants before you? Would it be the playful aspect or the exactness of the content? Colourful and airy pages or pages that are filled with useful activities? A rich vocabulary or an authentic one? Humour or efficiency? *Alfabetul lui Hipodor (Hipodor's Alphabet)*, which appeared in three volumes at the Casa Cărții de Știință publishing house in 2014, aims to satisfy all of these expectations and, to a great extent, it actually succeeds in doing so. The ABC is part of a more ample project, coordinated by Elena Platon, of producing a series of textbooks for Romanian, for primary and middle school, specially designed for children who are non-native Romanian speakers. This undertaking is not a new one, there have been other course materials that were created

and that specifically addressed national minorities, but this is a new communicative and friendly approach to learning, which is essential for the children's subsequent approach to reading and learning in general. Information about the series as well as the audio support for the listening exercises can be found on the project's website, [www.invatam.ro](http://www.invatam.ro).

Although the learning process is done exclusively through game and story, the teaching concept of this ABC is built on solid scientific principles, which can be found in the teaching instructions for second language teaching and evaluation. In the theoretical scaffolding what is evident is the presence of the communicative model from the *Common European Framework for Languages*. The initiation and the establishment of competences from there is adapted to the capacities and skills from the school syllabus for 2nd graders, after the students

with other mother tongues have already learnt the ABC in their first language during their 1st grade. The situations of communication and the lexical field are kept in areas that are familiar for the children – leisure activities, family, food, adventure, circus etc. – while the learning of the sounds and letters is done in an integrated, authentic and coherent manner. The exercises are alternated and diverse, so that neither boredom nor the minimization of any of the capacities would interfere. There is space given to reading, speaking, vocabulary and indirect grammar, but the major and very useful novelty stems from the presence of listening activities. The supporting recordings are done by professional actors and are explored through humorous and useful exercises. For class teachers there is also the advantage of the teaching scenario that has already been created, in orderly stages, but also the possibility of doing differentiated work, since the activities have a progressive difficulty level and are very diverse. At a quick glance, there are at least twenty types of exercises: to identify, to regroup, to explain, with multiple choice, with binary choice, to compare, to replace, to fill in, to transpose, to dissociate, to correct, to build a narrative discourse, to pronounce, to associate etc. In the first units the exercises use especially images while, in the second half, they use words or sentences. Still related to the typology of the exercises, it is worth mentioning the consistent introductions of the TPR (Total Physical Response) method, a metaphor of the teaching undertaking proposed by the textbook. The student is even physically involved in the progression of the lesson, since he/she reacts through indicated gestures – applauses,

raising one's hand, leg tec. – when he/she achieves a cognitive operation of the type of distinguishing sounds or associating words.

As aforementioned, the true success of the textbook, beyond the solid theoretical support canvas, is the playful and humorous teaching method, which is supported by a graphic aspect that is rich in beautiful and dynamic images. The authors, Antonela Arieşan and Anda Bratu, seem to have inexhaustible sources of creativity. The three volumes, with six units each, tell the story of Nino, a little boy who wants to learn how to speak and write in Romanian. As a matter of fact, Nino and his curiosity represent the red thread that crosses all the textbooks from the series, from the preparatory grade to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. He is accompanied by his friend Lila, who is a funny little purple sheep. In the 1<sup>st</sup> grade they happen to end up with a family of friendly hippopotami, who accompany them in the learning adventure. As a result, mother Hipodora prepares surprises for them, while friend Hiporici seconds him in the adventure. Students, in turn, can win hippo-points if they are well prepared. Furthermore, Nino encounters a band of leprechauns who initiate him into listening, reading, speaking and writing.

In this outline scenario, there are constant games that appear and that, through their graphics and how they engage children, remind us of the adventures from fairytales or the Piticot game: the characters need to overcome challenges, find treasures, search for clues, identify the best solution, go through labyrinths and dominoes etc. Everything is transformed into a story. For instance, when it is introduced, the letter *ă* is said to be the sister of *a*, but it cannot stand

the sun and that is why it always wears a hat on her head; we must always put its hat on because otherwise it has terrible headaches. When the students have to tell a story, a summary, or reproduce something they are invited in a magical armchair of sorts, the chair of the narrator, which gives weight to the message.

The story scenario respects the teaching principle of progressiveness. In the first volume the activities are almost exclusively oral, while the messages involved in receiving and producing are usually short and authentic dialogues about daily situations: at the market, at the bus ticket booth, at the movies, in the kitchen etc. In the second volume there are short texts that appear, which are generally retellings of certain books that are already known by the children, which is pretext for listening or reading: *The story of the giant radish*, *The story of Pinocchio* or *Alice in Wonderland*. Each time, beside the activities of direct exploration, of comprehension, these pieces of text are preceded by pre-listening/reading exercises, by exercises meant to familiarise one with the theme and the vocabulary of the text, and are followed by post-listening/reading exercises, in order to process and produce personal messages. In the last volume there are grammatical exercises that appear as well, especially ones connected to the problems that a non-native speaker has in Romanian: feminine agreement, the plural, the article, irregular verb forms etc. However, meta-linguistic terms do not appear at any moment, so that the correct forms are

learnt as an integral part of the story covered in the classroom. For instance, for the correct use of a verb form, the students must create cat sentences, meaning they have to associate the pronouns written on the head of the cat with the verb forms written on its body.

From the point of view of the structure, each unit respects the same teaching path. Each of them is preceded by objectives that are announced on the first page, just as some adventures that are about to take place. Then there are three sections that have similar, interconnected themes, while the new letters are introduced as an integral part in the second section, after the vocabulary and the narrative outline have already been prepared. At the end there are two useful boxes that appear: 'ideas to take home' – a summary of 6-10 lines of the contents covered and a short test that allows a practical (self-)evaluation of the last things that were learnt. A special form of evaluation-revision is represented by the last unit from the textbook as well, since it resumes through a story and exercises everything that has been learnt throughout the school year.

Although it was conceived for the classrooms where Romanian is not a native language, *Alfabetul lui Hipodor* (*Hipodor's Alphabet*) can be used just as well in native Romanian 1<sup>st</sup> grades too, as a support for the mother tongue. The quality of the concept, the creativity, the diversity of the activities, the integrated learning, the humour, the captivating graphic aspect make it, by far, the most state-of-the-art and pleasant ABC on the present Romanian textbook market.

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