University of Pécs

"Education and Society" Doctoral School of Education

András Gyertyánfy

The criteria for and the stages of selecting the content of teaching. A comparative analysis of theories in German and Hungarian history didactics

Abstract of the doctoral theses

Supervisors

Prof. Dr. Ágnes Fischerné Dárdai

Dr. habil. Zsolt Vitári associate professor

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The presentation of the research

The research problem and the research questions

Both anecdotal evidence and findings of history didactics suggest that many history teachers in Hungary teach too much course content, so that pupils cannot learn it in depth. Studying history is often data-centred, superficial and lacks understanding. Why does this happen? The reason is assumed to be twofold. The content of curricula and textbooks may be too much, and / or teachers may insist on teaching the whole textbook content (or the totality of what they deem to be the "usual" content), although they could significantly select between the content elements.¹

Researching this problem can follow two strategies. It may aim at *exploring* it by empirical methods. How much course content do history teachers teach and why? How do they relate to the curriculum content and the textbook content when deciding on the course content? However, before an empirical examination, basic theoretical issues should be clarified. For example, what is the role of the content in our teaching? If the purpose of teaching history is to improve skills, content does not matter, and it can be reduced in any way. By contrast, if the content is important, the criteria for its selection are also important. Furthermore, what are the right criteria for selecting the content? And what are the respective roles of the curriculum, the textbook and the teacher in selection the content?

The other strategy may aim at *solving* the problem. It would not seek to explore it empirically, but to give theoretically based proposals to curriculum makers, textbook authors and history teachers in Hungary, in order to help them to be more selective with the content of teaching. I chose the second strategy for three reasons. First, both answering the preliminary theoretical questions and doing the empirical research would have taken too much time for a doctoral theses. Second, I wished to produce something directly useful for the classroom teaching. Third, I prefer doing theoretical research to empirical.

My research questions were the following:

- 1. What scientific theories has determined history teaching?
- 2. In the light of these theories, what is the role of the content and the selection of the content in history teaching?

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¹ Csala (2002) 54; Jakab (2006) 20.

- 3. What are the criteria for content selection in history teaching?
- 4. What is the role of the curriculum, the textbook and the teacher in content selection?

In order to find out the answers I researched *German* and *Hungarian* history didactics literature.

Questions 1-2 can be considered preliminary to the main research. That is why the title of the theses only reflects questions 3-4: "The criteria for and the stages of selecting the content of teaching. A comparative analysis of theories in German and Hungarian history didactics".

History didactics is mainly national.² Still, Hungarian history didactics cannot help but taking into account foreign scientific arguments, as it does not have sufficient capacity to address on its own the problems arising from classroom practice.³ No doubt, we can learn less from the content itself selected for teaching in other countries. By contrast, the selection criteria and the considerations on the role of the curriculum, the textbook and the teacher in the selection process may serve as models for us. But why exactly German history didactics? First, it is usually considered to be one of the most developed in the world.⁴ Second, it has traditionally been the main source of inspiration for Hungarian history didactics (with the exception of the communist era). In the past decades Ágnes Fischerné Dárdai has conveyed its trends and findings to Hungarian literature.⁵ Influenced by narrative theories, Hungarian history didactics is closer to German history teaching than to the English and the American.

Though history is often integrated with social and civic education both in Hungary and in German-speaking countries, my research was restricted to the content selection in history teaching and not in the latter. It focused on teaching in the secondary school (in Germany *Sekundarbereich* I / II, and according to UNESCO definitions *ISCED* 2 / 3).⁶

In my dissertation, I had to distinguish between the terms *content*, *curriculum content* and *course content*. First, I pointed out, that all the three concepts indicate factual knowledge both in Hungarian and German terminology (*ismeretek* in the former and *Kenntnisse* in the latter), and do not include skills or other factors. Second, it is obvious that German terminology,

³ See Kaposi (2010).

² Ecker (2017) 62.

⁴ Seixas (2016) 428, 437.

⁵ See F. Dárdai (2006).

⁶ Das deutsche Bildungssystem (2013).

unlike Hungarian, distinguishes quite clearly between the tree notions. Curriculum content (in a curriculum context) is mostly called *Thema*, course content (in a classroom context) *Lerngegenstand / Unterrichtsgegenstand / Unterrichtsstoff*, and content in general (if both curriculum content and course content are meant) is mostly called *Inhalt*. In the theses I followed the German terminology, and differentiated between the Hungarian terms *téma* (in a curriculum context), *tananyag* (in a classroom context) and *tartalom* (including both).

My research was only concerned with the *selection* of the content (in German: Auswahl, in Hungarian: kiválasztás), and not with its *organization* (in German: Anordnung, in Hungarian: elrendezés). The former means choosing the factual knowledge to be taught, whereas the latter means determining their sequence in the curricula and in the lesson planning.^{8,9}

The type and the method of the research

Hans-Jürgen Pandel distinguishes between two types of history didactics research. One of them is the empirical or practical research, on fields like the teaching process, the textbook or the historical consciousness of persons or groups. This type of research uses a so-called data language to express its findings. The other type is the theoretical research opening new perspectives for history teaching. Its results are expressed in a so-called hypothetical language. Examples of such theoretical findings in Hungarian history didactics are history teaching based on story telling (*történettanítás*), in-depth teaching (*mélység elvű tanítás*) and focused teaching (*fókuszált tanítás*).

My research was theoretical. Its aim was to open new perspectives for Hungarian history didactics in the field of content selection.

Theoretical research has been rare in the past decades in educational science and in history didactics, mainly because American and European science policy has supported the so-called evidence based research, i.e. empirical research.¹⁴ As Pandel points out, however, this science strategy is not satisfactory. Today's empirical research is mostly based on psychological learning models, but these models only have sufficient explanatory power for a certain group

⁷ E.g. Rohlfes (1986) 260; Gies (2004) 147-148; Pandel (2013) 112-116; Mayer – Gautschi – Bernhardt (2012) 380

⁸ See Fischerné Dárdai (2010) 10; Szabó (2012) 4-5; Katona (2012) 7.

⁹ E. g. Barricelli (2012); Pandel (2013) 380-396; Rohlfes (1986) 235-248.

¹⁰ Pandel (2013) 431-432.

¹¹ Szebenyi (1978).

¹² Bihari – Knausz (1997).

¹³ Knausz (2015) 59 et sqq.

¹⁴ Tenorth (2014) 6, 14-15.

of classroom problems. It is therefore necessary to bring into the discussion new theoretical approaches. 15

In Hungarian history didactics, research on skills development (classroom tasks) seem to have been prevalent in the past decades. Such research has been based on experiantial or constructivist learning theories. My research does not follow this line, but rather another series of research inspired by narrative (or cultural) psychology, ¹⁶ considering the impact of collective memory and historical science on history teaching.

My research method was to collect, interpret and synthesize the German and the Hungarian theories on the selection of content in history teaching. Both analysis and synthesis were important. Through the latter, the result is more than just a historiography or a literature review.

My method was hermeneutic (interpretive), or it can also be classified as a discourse analysis, as it enumerates the most important authors and narratives of the German and Hungarian scientific discourse. However, I deliberately used both methods only to a limited extent. A deeper hermeneutics of the theories would have involved a more thorough exploration of their social, political, ideological background. A deeper discourse analysis would have meant a further examination of the competition between scientists and scientific narratives. My research, however, was neither historic nor sociologic, but didactic. My goal was not to provide the possible deepest analysis, but a detailed yet organized overview that could be used by curriculum-makers and in classroom practice, and that could inspire a more effective selection of the content of history teaching. Therefore, I could not go very deep in the analysis.

The structure of the theses

My treatise is divided into five parts marked in Roman numerals. Part I presents the methodology of the research. Part II is divided into two chapters in which I attempt to answer research questions 1 and 2, which are preliminary questions. In Parts III and IV, I come to the main research topic, answering research questions 3 and 4. Part III refers to findings in German and Part IV to findings in Hungarian history didactics. Both Parts have analytical and synthesizing chapters. In the analytical ones, I present the theories of each author separately. For the German part, of all those who comprehensively discuss the issue of content selection,

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¹⁵ Pandel (2013) 433, 445.

¹⁶ E.g. Szebenyi – Vass (2002), Kinyó (2005), Knausz (2015).

and for the Hungarian part, of those who touch at least some aspect of it. In doing so, I try to reflect faithfully the authors' own thoughts and use their own terminology, but also to interpret their models and make some critical or comparative remarks. Synthesizing chapters are based on analytical chapters. They summarise the former and also supplement them by referring to further sources. My goal here is to draw the big picture, marking the consensual and the controversial allegations. I seek to use uniform terminology here. My dissertation ends with Part V which evaluates the research, addresses the question of its practical applicability, and discusses how it could be continued.

The sources of the research

I reviewed the scientific literature meeting the following conditions: relating to my subject, being in German or in Hungarian, being part of the history didactics discourse, and having been published between 2001 and 2018 (whether in the first or in a newer edition). These publications reflect the communicative memory of today's history didactics on my subject. I also used English language literature, but only exceptionally, especially when answering (preliminary) research question 2.

The search for the relevant German literature was conducted in the online catalogue of the library of the Georg Eckert Institut für Schulbuchforschung in Braunschweig, in the *FIS-Bildung* database, and by reviewing the tables of contents of the journals of the discipline. I found that in the past two decades content selection has not belonged to the much discussed topics in German history didactics, so it has not resulted in a large number of journal publications. The relevant theories are rather to find in static works like handbooks.

The German literature on content selection was therefore made up of two groups:

- Manuals. I identified five German handbooks with scientific apparatus that discussed the topic of content selection in depth, usually on a few dozen pages each.¹⁷ Two other handbooks did not discuss the issue in detail, one probably due to its methodical nature, and the other perhaps to its Anglo-American orientation, which is an exception in German history didactics.¹⁸
- Articles. I found thirty to forty articles discussing some aspects of the subject, which had appeared in journals or in compilation books.

¹⁷ Rohlfes (1985/2005); Bergmann (1998/2003); Gies (2004); Barricelli – Lücke (2012); Pandel (2013).

¹⁸ Mayer – Pandel – Schneider (2004): Handbuch Methoden im Geschichtsunterricht; Brauch (2015).

Since publications in Hungarian history didactics are relatively small in number, I reviewed all published titles (books and journals) to select the relevant items. For this I basically used the *Amicus* catalogue of the National Széchenyi Library, the *MATARKA* database and the *Pedagógiai Adatbázis* (PAD) of the National Pedagogical Library and Museum.

The Hungarian literature I used was made up of the following three groups:

- A monography on the subject of the research: Imre Knausz: A múlt kútjának tükre. 19
- Manuals: András Katona József Sallai: A történelem tanítása, Jánosné Csepela –
 Péter Horváth András Katona Anna Nagyajtai: A történelemtanítás gyakorlata, and
 Barnabas Vajda: Bevezetés a történelemdidaktikába és a történelemmetodikába.²⁰
- Articles. Some fifty titles touching some aspect of the topic. Most of them were published in journals and some in compilation books.

The findings of the research

I present my findings in the order of the four research questions outlined at the beginning of the theses (to which I added a fifth question during the research).

What are the theories which have influenced scientific thinking about history teaching?

English history didactics is constructivist, source and skills-developing-oriented, whereas German history didactics is constructivist and narrative, but also integrating the source-centred and skills-developing approach. Hungarian history didactics is usually held to be source-centred, but I prove that it is rather narrative than just source-oriented.

From the point of view of my research topic, this argument confirms that the content of the teaching and its selection are important issues not only in German but also in Hungarian history teaching. As a result, German research findings on content selection are relevant for Hungarian history didactics, too.

Beyond the issue of content selection, I suggest that Hungarian history didactics place more emphasis than before on the narrative and the narrative-oriented paradigm. The main advantage of this would be a broader, deeper understanding of the purpose of learning history.

¹⁹ Knausz (2015)

²⁰ Katona – Sallai (2002); Csepela – Horváth – Katona – Nagyajtai (2000); Vajda (2018).

The aim would then not only to enable individuals to critically understand the past, but also to have themselves orientated by the past. To make pupils understand that the past is not "dead and gone", but it has an influence on their present and the future.²¹

Other benefits of making the narrative paradigm more explicit would be the following:

- The paradigm offers more answers to some crucial questions like the role of factual knowledge, the traditional curriculum content or the teacher autonomy. These questions are left unanswered by the source-oriented, competence-based paradigms.
- The classroom practice can receive help not only in the field of designing sourceoriented, skills-developing tasks, but also in the field of teacher narratives as a starting point for learning and pupils' narratives as its endpoint.
- It can also have a positive effect by interpreting skills development not as a separate activity, but integrated into the deconstruction and reconstruction of narratives. Skills would then less compete with content, developing skills would be seen as an integral part of teaching narratives. This could replace the dilemma "I have little time—shall I move on with teaching the content or shall I develop skills?" with "I have little time—shall I teach more, but superficially or less, but deeper?", a question to which one would expect an answer more in favour of quality teaching.
- The opposition between the theory and the classroom practice could be reduced if the methodological renewal which the first has tried to impose on the second for decades could be seen less as a replacement of traditional methods of teaching with new ones rather then to use both in a better quality.
- One would also greet empirical research not only on the proportion of old and new methods used in classrooms, but rather on the effectiveness of those methods. The latter perspective would in my opinion be more informative on the quality of history teaching than the first.

Obstacles and difficulties in the way of the narrative paradigm are the following:

- Pedagogy, supported by education policy, is competence-based. This is reflected in the curricula and the non-subject specific teacher training courses. So specificities of the history subject, deviations of history didactics from general didactics should be

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²¹ Lee (2017) 61-62.

formulated more clearly. The most important among those may be that the main purpose of the subject is to shape the historical consciousness (identity) of individuals. It should be stressed that this can not or can little be operationalised.

- The focus on the narrative can raise doubts about the importance of skills development. This danger is real because Hungarian history teaching is still characterized in part by traditional, monolithic narratives from the times before source-orientation was spread. It is very important to stress that the narrative paradigm does legitimise traditional, monolithic narratives. In the opposite, it does integrate source orientation and skills development in the de- and the re-construction of the narratives.
- The narrative approach may seemingly contradict findings of Hungarian researchers who follow the source-oriented approach of the Anglo-American history didactics. In reality, there is no contradiction between them, as most Anglo-American research findings are valid in the a narrative approach, too.

What is the role of the content and what is the significance of the content selection?

The vast majority of Hungarian and German history didactics experts advocate that content and skills are equally important factors in history teaching. According to the narrative-constructive paradigm, content and form of the narrative are intertwined. Theoretical questions of selection have not been paid much attention by the majority of Hungarian experts, whereas the Germans consider it to be an important problem, so their manuals deal with it rather thoroughly. My research is therefore relevant to Hungarian history didactics, which also has narrative-constructivist characteristics. At the same time it is directed at issues that has little been treated in Hungarian literature yet.

Which are the good criteria for selecting the content in history teaching?

What is the role of the curriculum, the textbook and the teacher in the content selection?

The position of the *German authors*, which my research has made accessible in Hungarian, provides a rich set of criteria for Hungarian thinking about the content selection, and offers answers to some of the questions left open by the Hungarian research. The main findings of the German discourse are as follows:

- It is the near consensus of opinion that the content of history teaching is significantly determined by the tradition living in the collective memory. This seems to be the reason why the traditional content chronologically covers history, and also why it remains largely unchanged in the long run. Still, this does not mean that all traditional elements must be selected for teaching. Selection means filtering the tradition.
- It is a contentious issue, but the majority believe that nurturing national and European identity is necessary despite globalisation, individualisation and migration.
 However, the narratives of the minorities must also be included in the teaching of history.
- It is considered to be an epistemological fact that selection is always (implicitly or explicitly) influenced by the present of the selector. For similar reasons, it is inevitably subjective. Therefore, selectors are expected to justify clearly why they choose the given content.
- History fundamentally defines history teaching, not only by its content, but also by its perspectives of time and space. The content of the teaching should reflect the diversity of the approaches of history, because this would help pupils see history more complexly.
- The near consensus is that the curriculum content of history teaching cannot be deduced from the objectives of education or from skills development. All of these should be formulated independently in the curriculum and linked by the teacher when planning the lesson.
- Content selection clearly does not end with selecting curriculum-making. This must be followed by the teacher's decisions on the course content. German terminology differentiates between the terms meaning the content of the curriculum and the content of the course. Selection by the teacher is important because he or she may take into account the characteristics of their pupils.
- The selection by the teacher is described by the so-called didactic analysis, which originates in general didactics, but has a subject specific version, too.

- Research findings on the role of textbooks as content regulators are few and contradictory.

In *Hungary*, scientific discourse on content selection in history teaching is poor, compared with the German speaking countries. Still, there are some consensual points, and also some questions to be answered:

- There is consensus of opinion as to the importance of the traditional content for the development of pupils' identity, but also that minority narratives should be included in the content. Education should help the consolidation of the proper identity as well as the acceptance of other identities.
- History didactics accepts that the traditional content is basically constant. If so, why do many experts expect the content to change more dynamically? There is a similar contradiction between the expectations of reducing the content and preserving the traditional content at the same time.
- It is the consensus of opinion that one of the criteria for the content selection is the so called *present principle* (in German: Gegenwarstbezug, in Hungarian: jelenely), i.e. selecting the content according to its importance in the present. However, the question remains unanswered how to avoid indoctrination arising from the subjectivity and the possible ideological nature of this kind of selection.
- It is the consensus of opinion that it is desirable to include in the content new approaches in history (social, cultural and mentality history, women's history, microhistory etc.) so as to break the traditional dominance of political history.
- Some argue that the content should be selected in order to develop structural knowledge (first order concepts). One expert thinks that the selection of the content should generally be dependent on skills development (although primarily in the context of the selection by the teacher).
- -There are theoretical arguments for the selection by the teacher, still it rarely happens in the classroom practice in Hungary. Traditionally, it is the textbooks which determine the course content.

In the light of the aforementioned findings, the following suggestions can be formulated for the history teaching in Hungary:

- Content should not be subordinated to skills development. Content-independent activities do not meet the criteria of good history teaching. Following the German practice, the goals of the lessons, formulated in the headings *learning goals* of lesson plans (in German: Lernziel, in Hungarian: tanulási cél / az óra célja) should depart from the content and not merely from skills development. In the curricula, the content, the educational goals and the skills development objectives should be formulated independently and should only be linked with each other in the course of the didactic analysis made by the teacher.
- The traditional canon must be preserved, but minority narratives should be integrated in the content of teaching. Teaching should also be multiperspective. In Hungary this means a greater emphasis on the narratives of gypsies and neighbouring nations.
- It seems urgent to introduce the culture of the content selection by the teachers. This can primarily be achieved in the university training of future history teachers, and also by adopting curricula that allow and encourage this kind of selection. The main argument in favour of it is that the selection should also take into account the pupils' preliminary knowledge and their motivation. It would also make teachers see more clearly why they teach a given topic, and what are their goals with it.
- Both in Germany and in Hungary there is a constant effort to reduce the content of teaching. German history didactics tells us that this effort is hindered by the society's sticking to the stories living in the collective memory, which influences the curriculum-making committees, too. By contrast, reducing the traditional content seems to be easier by the teacher. This often means allocating less time to certain subjects rather than to omitting them completely, and decisions are made at classroom level, not at national level. Decisions are justifiable by pedagogical efficiency, the characteristics of the particular study group, the learning situation, the teacher's skills and abilities. So whilst curricula alone may not be able to reduce the content, they can help teachers to do so.

What is the difference between the terms skills, competence and historical thinking, and how do they fit into the terminology of history didactics?

The logic of the research made it necessary to clarify the meaning of skills and its related concepts. My positon is that *skills* (képesség), *competences* (kompetencia) and *historical*

thinking (történelmi gondolkodás) can be used is Hungarian terminology interchangeably. Furthermore, I suggest that the notion skills (competencies, historical thinking) can be partitioned into three sub-notions, which are the following: historical methods of comprehension (ismeretszerzési módszerek), interpretive or second order key concepts (értelmező kulcsfogalmak) and material or first order key concepts (tartalmi kulcsfogalmak). The latter can be considered as being something between factual knowledge and skills.

At the end of my thesis, I explain that my findings are, in my opinion, applicable in two practical areas: (1) teacher training, (2) curriculum-making. I present an example for both. I give account of a course I held early 2020 at the Department of Contemporary History of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Pécs for 4th years' students of history. I also present a brief analysis of the national and the framework curricula published 2012.

Further research perspectives

I believe my theoretical findings make room for empirical research. On field would be teacher mentality. Research questions might include for instance the following: What are trainee teachers' inherited patterns for the content selection by the teacher? How do they relate to the textbook content? How do they relate to the idea of the selection by the teacher in general? The findings would be useful to designing more precisely teachers training courses on the content selection at university. The impact of such courses should also be empirically tested.

Further theoretical research would also be useful, like e.g. on the problem of organizing the content in the curricula and in the lesson planning. In a broader perspective, it seems to be useful to examine the situation of Hungarian history didactics in general. Its resources are limited, how should they be best used? What kind of research or other activities should be preferred? This might depend on the factors determining its prestige and acceptance by historical and educational science, as well as by classroom practice. The German experience in this respect would be worth considering.

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