

TEACHING ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. INTERCULTURAL APPROACHES

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Abstract

The perspective of teaching Romanian as a foreign language is becoming increasingly evident, as demonstrated by the special attention it is starting to receive. The cultural and social space in which the teaching and learning of Romanian as a second language takes place is important as far as it influences the way in which a person acquires the skills to receive and produce a message, whether oral or written. But the act of teaching brings with it an innovative approach when the target group is not homogeneous in terms of age, nationality, religion, traditions, and customs. Thus, one of the challenges faced by teachers is the choice of the target language, especially when one or more members of the group have no or minimal knowledge of the target language.

Keywords: Romanian as a foreign language, interculturality, teaching

1. Introduction

Grosu-Rădulescu [1] analyses the Romanian educational context in which foreign languages are beginning to be studied. Inevitably, there is a reference to the historical, social, and cultural context of pre-1989 Romania, but the transformations occurring after the Revolution against the communist regime are well highlighted. Today, a new branch is taking shape or, rather, is being consolidated - Romanian as a foreign language. This is not a new perspective, as Romanian is not taught as a mother tongue but as a foreign language in ethnic minority schools. The novelty comes in the context in which academic institutions and universities in Romania, but also abroad, are organizing Romanian language courses for people from both European and non-

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European countries. This comes as a necessity, but also as a solution for people from other countries who want to study a specialisation where the language of instruction is Romanian. In this respect, today we are discussing a specially designed programme (Preparatory Year) that takes place over one academic year. It aims at the intensive study of the Romanian language so that at the end of the programme the learner acquires the competences corresponding to level B1-B2 (oral/written) of the Common European Framework of Reference [2]. The study programme is designed in accordance with this framework and other reference documents on language acquisition. Formal-academic study is supported by the need for the physical presence of the learners in Romania. This is a key factor for language learning in the non-formal context. Moreover, they must put into practice the acquired skills.

Teaching Romanian as a foreign language becomes a challenge when the target group is not homogeneous in terms of age, nationality, religion, tradition, and customs. The challenge also arises when teaching is based on a carrier language. This obviously influences language acquisition because the learner's knowledge of the target language is important. In a group of ten people there can be all the levels described by the CEFR, from A1 to C2. Frequently, learners noticed similarities between the mother tongue and the Romanian language, similarities which do not exist with the medium language. It is therefore recommended that the language be taught without an intermediary (the support language) or that it be used as little as possible. Also, speaking about a heterogeneous group, difficulties arise in terms of pronunciation in Romanian. If a learner from the European area can assimilate the correct pronunciation of sounds more quickly, a learner from the African or Asian area will need more practice. On the other hand, most learners are between 18 and 26 years old, and distance from home can be a barrier to the level of concentration needed to acquire a new language. Therefore, the teacher must face these challenges through the methods he/she approaches both in the actual act of teaching and in the communication and relationship he/she builds with the target group.

2. Theoretical framework

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The cultural context is one of the main elements that helps a person acquire new language skills. This is clearly covered by the Common European Framework of Reference, a document which provides a common basis for setting out all the "skills and knowledge that an individual needs to acquire and develop in order to behave effectively linguistically" [2, p.12]. Therefore, in an era of globalization, cultural identity is becoming a much-contested concept so that specialists today discuss multiple ramifications of education: axiological, integrated, lifelong education, education of gifted children, but also intercultural education. Constantin Cucos [3] defines education as "a process of universalization of the human being, of its re-folding on the coordinates of multiplicity and value variety. Education today is at once globalized and globalizing. It is influenced by the process of globalization, the effects of which it in turn amplifies" [3, p.72]. In other words, education on "openness to multiple values is a fully justified approach as it aims at a better insertion of the individual in a polymorphous and dynamic spiritual world" [3, p. 172]. In this direction we must also consider the learning of the Romanian language as a foreign language, especially in the context in which the physical presence of the learner in the Romanian cultural space is mandatory. This is a crucial factor which encourages language acquisition, but which can, however, affect the acquisition process because elements such as the person's maladjustment or exclusion from society are involved. From this point of view, the objective of intercultural education should be emphasized, as Constantin Cucos describes it: "the main objective of intercultural education is to prepare people to perceive, accept, respect and experience otherness [...] Intercultural education means that the educational process itself must take place in an interactive environment, by bringing together or bringing face to face the bearers of different cultural expressions" [3, p.172]. This perspective is an extremely important one in teaching Romanian as a foreign language to students in the Preparatory Year, considering that they will be integrated into study programmes taught in Romanian and, therefore, most of the students will be ethnic Romanian students.

The cultural and intercultural aspects of teaching Romanian as a foreign language are beginning to constitute a new branch in the scientific research. We will focus only on a selection of studies concerning this relationship. A first study is that of Oana-Luiza Barbu [4] in which the author explains the importance of cultural awareness on the part of the teacher when teaching a

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foreign language. Reviewing the main studies on the relationship between language and culture, Barbu points out the cultural diversity of the Preparatory Year group, which is why she recommends that topics and socio-cultural contexts should be chosen with caution in the teaching process. The author also points out that "teachers must take into account the linguistic profile of each course participant, attitude, behaviour and learning style" [4, p.19]. Thus, the suggestions he makes complement this statement: from avoiding stereotypes and prejudices by addressing topics such as climate, leisure, family, animals, to the presentation of tourist attractions and their history, to the description of a prominent personality in Romania. Moreover, students are asked to complete this picture with personalities from their home country.

Another study that aims at integrating Preparatory Year students into the Romanian education system is Mirel Anghel's [5]. These interactive methods and open attitude also aim to understand values, motivation, and barriers in multicultural environment because students face a cultural shock. He proposes the creation of study groups involving both Romanian and foreign students to create bridges between cultures; to go beyond the formal threshold and move beyond it by conducting joint projects. This will reduce the tendency to drop out due to integration difficulties. Therefore, the teacher must give students the opportunity to affirm their cultural identity and, at the same time, to know and understand the Romanian cultural identity. Building strong and stable relationships between foreign and native students will facilitate language acquisition and the achievement of the desired level of knowledge.

Silvia Krieb Stoian and Loredana Netedu [6] discuss the barriers that arise in the intercultural communication of foreign students in the preparatory year. The authors identify linguistic barriers (phonetic and grammatical differences between Romanian and the native language), social-cultural, educational, or psycho-relational barriers. At the same time, they propose several ways of overcoming these limits: creating contexts in which it is possible to interact with native speakers, offering the opportunity to promote one's own culture in formal and non-formal activities involving mixed teams. The solutions proposed are based on the premise that this "intercultural communication, and implicitly the acculturation of international students in the Preparatory Year, implies not only the reception and acquisition of information through

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the Romanian language, but also their contact with a series of extra-linguistic factors, less visible initially, but essential in raising awareness and overcoming possible communication barriers" [6, p.37]. Thus, the conclusion reached by the authors is that the cultural diversity of the Preparatory Year group of students is metamorphosing from a barrier into an advantage for language acquisition.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions and hypothesis

This research was based on the case study and started from the following questions:

1. What are the most appropriate methods for developing specific skills for non-native language acquisition?
2. What are the intercultural factors that influence the formation of communicative competence in the language?

The research hypothesis was the following: the use of teaching methods based on the personal experience of both the teacher and the learner leads to the development of communicative competence in Romanian.

3.2 Description of the research group

The research took place over two semesters of the 2021-2022 academic year, with participants being students in the Preparatory Year. Ten students were part of the research group. They come from the following countries: Indonesia (2), Austria (1), Haiti (3), Albania (2), Turkey (1) and Algeria (1). Of these, four are male and six are female. For the Haitian participants, their native language was also one of the support languages, but for the others the acquisition of Romanian was done with the help of English. Of the sample, only one student had previously acquired knowledge of Romanian.

3.3 design and conduct of the research

The intercultural perspective is a factor that the teacher must consider in any teaching class. In this article, I will present an example of the steps I have

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taken in my research. This refers to one of the Writing and Composition courses whose topic was "Writing Descriptive Text" and the type of activity was a review. The common reference level was A2. The lesson began by asking students to write on a sheet of paper five words that come to mind when they think of the word 'travel'. The choice was not accidental, as it offers the opportunity to connect with destinations and sights they can visit in Romania, but also in their countries. The students used the vocabulary they had previously acquired. They mentioned words such as "museum", "historical buildings", "cities", "Caribbean Sea", "Istanbul", "desert", "holiday", Bran Castle and Peles Castle. As we can see, some of them wrote words with a general meaning, others mentioned cities or regions of their country. But it is notable that they mentioned two tourist attractions in Romania. Based on the answers and using conversation as a teaching method, each student responded to the request to describe a tourist attraction in their country. At the same time, images of what they chose were projected. Reading from the pictures became an enjoyable way to practise oral communication in Romanian and facilitated comprehension. They also described the two sights in Romania that they had visited on a trip they had organised. The teacher's support consisted of explaining how to get to these places. This exercise aimed to refresh all the knowledge needed to write a descriptive text. The next task involved the student's ability to read a Romanian text correctly, to identify the elements in a picture, to specify their position using accusative and genitive prepositions and to answer questions orally. Each student received an envelope containing a letter and a picture sent by Maria (fictional character) to her friend. After the reading and after carefully observing the supporting image, students answered the questions on the task-cards to check their understanding of the text and identify the specific elements of a letter. Their answers were written on the board in the form of a cluster (cluster method). Considering that the underlying image represented the centre of Brasov, the students were asked to find a similarity and a difference with the centre of a city in their country, one of the questions being whether they liked or disliked the city where they came to study. Through this exercise, students were able to update their knowledge (vocabulary, grammatical structures) for the next work task: writing an 80–100-word letter to their parents describing the city of Brasov from their perspective. Each of them received a sheet, an envelope, and a stamp, and at the end they put the letters in the (improvised) mailbox to recreate reality as faithfully as possible. A letter was chosen at random. After the reading, the

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students made the necessary corrections guided by the teacher. This type of assessment encourages students because it helps create group cohesion and facilitates mutual learning. However, the activity continued during the break as everyone talked about other tourist attractions in their country that they recommended to visit.

4. Results and discussions

The close observation of the development of the Preparatory Year students as a result of integrating the intercultural perspective into the teaching process demonstrated its importance. Although in this article we have only exemplified one of the activities, it is obvious that the teacher applies the principles of intercultural education to each course. Therefore, the research found that cultural factors influence the formation of communication skills in Romanian language. Thus, the reference to customs, traditions, mentalities, to the learners' knowledge of their culture, in parallel with those related to Romanian society, facilitates the language acquisition process. In this way, it could be observed that the most effective methods for developing specific language acquisition skills are those that involve the learner directly, interactive methods. As concerns the production and reception of oral and written messages, at A2 level, according to the Common Framework of Reference, the user can understand and use common expressions and words on topics such as simple information about him/herself, his/her family, the area where he/she lives, his/her professional activity. The user is also able to understand short, simple and clear messages. To develop these skills, we used traditional and modern methods throughout the research, including the intercultural perspective. For example, Romanian advertisements for certain products were analysed. The students were then assigned to produce a Romanian-language advertisement for an object/product from their home country. The theoretical learning was also exploited through music. There were several criteria for selecting the songs. They had to capture the students' interest, contain accessible vocabulary, include grammatical structures already assimilated, age of the participants. The research also found that students' attention was more easily captured by music from the international repertoire. Knowing the melody line made it easier to understand the text in Romanian language. Among the songs used were "Still loving you" by Scorpions (Romanian version of "Eu nu te-am uitat", Mihaela Runcanu) or

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"The power of love" by Jennifer Rush ("Puterea dragostei", Eva Chiș), but also songs from the Romanian repertoire such as "Copacul" by Aurelian Andreescu or "Drumul" by Irina Rimes.

5. Conclusions

The methods used demonstrated that the introduction of the intercultural factor resulted in a reduction of the time needed for language acquisition, improvement of pronunciation, grammatical structures needed in oral and written communication. It was also possible to observe an increase in group cohesion and in the level of concentration needed to acquire a new language. Therefore, the development of understanding, speaking, and writing skills is a process influenced by multiple variables such as the age of the students, the culture they come from, the teaching methods and means used, the forms of organisation (frontal, individual or in pairs), the feedback given by the teacher in the assessment activity. In conclusion, a basic principle in the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language is the skill with which the teacher correlates these variables to facilitate and make the learners' learning more efficient.

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