

USING ENGLISH IN TEACHING ROMANIAN FOR FOREIGNERS: WHAT BALANCE BETWEEN STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC PORTFOLIO AND COMMUNICATIVE EFFICIENCY?

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***Abstract:** Increasing student mobility has multiplied the opportunities of teaching and learning Romanian as a foreign language during the last decade. However, students' linguistic and cultural diversity has a significant impact on the methodological aspect. The aim of this paper is to question English as an intermediary between students' mother tongue and Romanian as a foreign language within groups of learners in their preparatory year, before attending the Faculty of Medicine. Our proposal takes into consideration both the students' linguistic portfolio and their need to use English in the process of learning Romanian. Several cases of misunderstandings have been identified and their analysis makes us more aware of the impact of a third language in the learning process.*

***Keywords:** Romanian for foreigners, teaching methodology, needs analysis, English, impact*

Preliminary Considerations

Learning foreign languages has raised several controversies along time that built the premises of the appearance of new useful concepts. Without immersing in a detailed analysis of the development of learning methods, we can acknowledge that each of them contributed to the solving of problems and opened horizons with forming potential. From the ecological perspective (van Lier, 2010, 2012) the main focus of language learning is the quality of learning opportunities, of various classroom interactions and of any type of educational experience in general. The fundamental pedagogical principles of this approach are the development of relationships, at different degrees of interaction, the creation of valid contexts from an ecological point of view, agency, identity and motivation.

The environment, through the components and nuances it may have at different moments in time, influences every segment of the learning process. This aspect is more significant and easily detectable when learning a foreign language in its origin country. The students from our case study experiment a

series of interactions both during the Romanian language course and their social life. Their linguistic and cultural experiences lived in their countries or in other context are also added up. Teaching and learning Romanian within the context we are going to present in this study cannot be dissociated from the characteristics of the environment they take place in.

Romanian – a language in-between English and the students’ mother tongue

This study is based on observations from working with foreign students who will study at different Romanian universities. Following the process of teaching Romanian to these students, we have reached some observations based on which we will approach teaching Romanian as a foreign language by using English as an interface. The hypothesis is whether teaching Romanian as a foreign language through English is a real advantage, a necessity to launch other educational methods that should not suppose the use of an intermediate language, according to context and given conditions.

Before approaching the challenges of teaching Romanian for foreigners, we need to have a short incursion into the experience of Romanian universities on differentiating the Romanian for natives and the one foreigners assimilate. In *Bibliografia românei ca limbă străină / LRS* [References on Romanian as a foreign language/RLF], the coordinator Victoria Moldovan gives a short introduction that shows a remarkable moment for Romanian for foreigners: „In the last decades of the 20th century, as a direct consequence of a favourable political-economic conjuncture, teaching RLF has known a maximum development period. In the 70s, many Romanian universities created specialized (collective) structures for teaching Romanian to foreign students who were going to study in Romania. The political decision, with an important ideological and economic substratum, had consequences linguistically, raising interest among specialists for researching Romanian from the perspective of teaching it as a foreign language. Thus, after 1970 the RLF area took shape more clearly, the research integrating itself within applied linguistics.” (Moldovan 2012:9) Even though over a period of five years, manuals diversified as methods and content have been established, most of them opt for translation into a foreign language, usually English or French. Since they are not the subject of this article, we will not discuss the content of manuals, but the use of translation (especially into English) in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. This method can be used with a limited number of students who study the language at a less advanced level, at most A2. During this article, we will approach the issue of translation into English in the case of a large group of students, who are in the preparatory year.

In order to discuss the role of English in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, we need a context to show the rhythm of study and the objectives of

the educational process. Let us consider as case study an intensive course, like the ones in the preparatory year of about twenty hours a week where students may come from different cultures, and may or may not speak English. In the case of a group of about twenty five persons, communication in English implies that the members of the group understand this language. It is truly an element available to those who speak it, especially during the first courses when the members of the group get to know each other and present themselves. But it must not gain the status of conditioning learning Romanian and making it difficult for students who are not English speakers.

To review the practical observations received from preparatory year students, the observation made by Adriana Curta is worth mentioning. She notices that the traditional method of teaching foreign languages relates to grammar and translations. (Curta 2011) Let us have in mind that many students feel the necessity to translate since, probably, this is how they learned foreign languages in school, especially by translating into and from their mother tongue. Since in a heterogeneous group, translation into the mother tongue by the teacher is impossible, using English is a coherent and handful substitute. The key to the discussion is how and how much English is used. Opting for lectures in English about Romanian can be beneficial when the students' English level is previously evaluated, but the lectures are not characteristic to practical language courses.

As the course develops, and from the first stage we move to the proper study of Romanian, from the observations arises that English facilitates the assimilation of the first elements of a foreign language, like the units based on greetings, presentations, some information on the origin country and nationality. The English level required at this stage is one that does not surpass A1 (beginner level), according to standard criteria. At the same time, the necessary English vocabulary for teaching Romanian at this level is a universal one, in the sense that almost anyone can understand the words: Name, City, Hello, House, etc. If things continue by using English as an interface in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, the observations made during the courses with students of different nationalities are multiple and we shall analyse them further on.

When English functions as a communication language in teaching Romanian, and practically Romanian will remain at the stage of a material that is either read, written or listened to, things will become complicated, and Romanian will not reach the status of a language that students can communicate in, or this is the level they need. While working with foreign students we have noticed that some of those who have advanced knowledge of English tend to filter the entire educational process of learning Romanian through this language. At a given moment, they will not be able to get passed the translation of the simple vocabulary items, and certain features of Romanian, like inflected forms, pronominal clitics, strong and weak forms of pronouns, etc. will bring about many issues because they will be compared to English grammar.

Things become complicated the moment when, due to the flux of grammar explanations in English, the course risks to become a metalanguage form, eventually a translation course, or interested students are not in the least philologists, and their level of all grammar notions is unknown. This is also the cause for which the lecture in English is unreliable. Of course the situation would be different when teaching a group of philologists who have good knowledge of the English language/grammar. But, in the situation mentioned in this study, including the explanation that Romanian is not part of the same family as English helps only apparently. Students will ask for clear meanings or explanations about the difference between some elements that pose problems of translation, and of studying a foreign language. For example, when teaching the personal pronoun in the accusative or dative, we come to the failure to provide an English correspondent for strong and weak forms, even though one can provide examples of translation and explain features of Romanian. We mention here a series of philological aspects that not all students will perceive and will ask for explanation about the meaning of each form. While students must understand that we are dealing with two different languages, they will be confused about such an answer and will insist on finding inexistent correspondents in English. Obviously, these situations are due to the fact that the group is not made up of specialists who can take into consideration aspects of the translation science, and some will study specializations unrelated to philology. For example, let us consider the following sentence: *Eu îl văd pe Alex pe stradă.* - *I see Alex on the street.* In the case of a group that is given explanations in English, those with an advanced level of English will not be fully satisfied with this translation. The personal pronoun *îl* will pose the following problems: How do you translate it in English? The correspondent form of *him* is not used in this case because in English the double expression of the direct object does occur. When the English interface receives comparison attributes, then the course becomes only half about Romanian, and half English. Meanwhile, students who do not have an advanced English level are overshadowed. If at the beginning English is a comfortable element used for introducing the basic vocabulary of Romanian, where grammar content occurs, due to the differences between the two languages, a kind of block is established. In a situation like the above mentioned sentence, this block is surpassed only by repetition and practice, as is the case of those who do not speak English.

The above mentioned example is merely one of multiple examples we have noticed regarding a simple feature of Romanian. When students are used to being translated every word or be given lectures in English about any grammar content from Romanian, a confusion occurs and it leads to a course on the comparison between a grammar element from Romanian and its correspondent in English, thus losing sight of learning Romanian.

Also, another risk that English has as an intermediary language in teaching Romanian is that students have great difficulties in giving up the support language – English – and communicating only in Romanian. Even when we talk about students with abilities in learning foreign languages, there is always the checking by translating into English. From the experience with foreign students, it resulted that, in the case of those who treated English as a real filter of Romanian, the more it helped them at the beginning, the more difficult it was for them to pass the psychological block of using Romanian as a communication language, useful in the scholar and social environments. English is, for those who have an advanced level, a familiar element, while communication in a new language implies more intellectual effort.

At the same time, as the intensive course develops, the problem of translation and entirely abandoning English become more complicated. When students reach the A1 level, but when they leave the course English is the communication language in the social environment, it is a sign that learning more Romanian becomes more difficult. The same difficulty may arise with the assimilation of certain grammar structures and logical connectors for which the translation into another language might be a philological problem.

Therefore, what is to be done when English hinders the teaching of Romanian for foreigners? Of the advantages of the English language, a minimal vocabulary can be retained, that should contain helpful keywords for foreign students and that should not pass level A1, maximum A2 of English knowledge.

What solutions can be found for not abusing English? In order to substitute the need for translation, visual materials will be used, and students will make use of the dictionary to provide them with a translation into their mother tongue. Obviously, such strategy implies a greater effort, but leads to the possibility of not transforming the practical course of Romanian into a course of language history, translation theory or other philological subjects that are not the object of our study. During the courses where we have used English as described above we have noticed that students' progress is faster, although more difficult at the beginning. As to the theoretical aspect of understanding some grammar elements, they will be acquired by practice and will be explained once the students' level of knowledge allows it to.

At the same time, the on-line possibilities come as an addition to abandoning the use of English. The Romanian language dictionary and even the dictionaries that translate from Romanian into another language available on the internet come to facilitate the learning of Romanian.

Conclusions

We could cautiously structure the preliminary conclusions regarding the use of English as an intermediary. Without ignoring the real needs of the

students, we recommend finding methodological solutions in accordance with the learning situations and the real needs of those learning Romanian as a foreign language. Motivation and empathy are two qualities that should lack from the learning process of each participant.

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