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ASPECTS OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: *The advent of the* Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) *and the* European Language Portfolio (ELP) has *opened up new perspectives in teaching foreign languages at academic level. The progressive integration in teaching practice of the resources provided by these documents implies, on the part of the teacher, special emphasis on communicative tasks. With regard to the assessment of linguistic skills, finding optimal strategies for objective evaluation proves crucial. The educators' system of assessment in keeping with quality assurance in higher education enables students to diagnose, optimize, and overcome difficulties that might occur during the teaching/learning process.*

Keywords: *assessment, docimology, didactics, methodology, system.*

1. Introduction

The process of foreign language teaching/ learning in Romanian higher education has undergone, in time, a series of changes that have shifted the focus from strictness to liberty, inventiveness and creative responsibility. The traditional triad vocabulary–grammar–translation has been gradually replaced by the so-called 'direct' methodology (Adina Curta, 2007), considered to be the first methodology specific to foreign language teaching. It is grounded on teaching vocabulary without reference to the student's mother tongue, using objects and pictures, starting language study with oral communication way before focusing on writing skills, and finally teaching grammar inductively, without an explicit study of its rules. Both *audio-oral* and *audio-visual* methodologies that followed placed special emphasis on language lab, a vital tool in rehearsing language structures to the ultimate stage of their acquisition. New theories—like the linguistic (*functionalism*) and psychological (*cognitivism*) one—paved the way to the *communicative* methodology.

A fresh start in foreign language learning is given by a constant preoccupation for the real needs of the learner—which are linguistic in nature. The speech acts of various communicative contexts in everyday life are regarded as an essential aspect of communicative skills. The teacher's role evolves alongside the student's, who gains an active role in his/her education.

The 21st century opens up a new approach to the communicative methodology, which rounds up and particularizes its practices and strategies (*see* the 'action-language' approach, promoted by the European linguistic documents, especially by the CEFR). The 'action-language' model is based on the actions that the learner intends to perform in the studied language. Its

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principle consists in the accomplishment of *tasks* by an *actor* through different *strategies* in four *domains*: *personal*, *public*, *educational* and *professional*.

2. Common European Evaluation

The advent of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) opened up new perspectives in teaching foreign languages at academic level. The issue of a common, European assessment system based on transparency and coherence—which triggers a common recognition of the six accepted levels of competence—is topical and of vital importance in achieving the aims of the European linguistic policy. From the European perspective, the foreign language class benefits from the theoretic support of the documents elaborated by the European Council: the above-mentioned CEFR, and the European Language Portfolio (ELP). These are pedagogically complementary: the former addresses teachers, curriculum designers and tutors, while the latter represents the work and self-assessment tool of language users. Romania has adhered to the objectives of the European linguistic policy, including in its official documents (i.e. the national curriculum) references to the CEFR. The progressive integration in teaching practice of the resources provided by these major documents implies, on the part of the teacher, special emphasis on communicative tasks. The 'plurilinguistic' and 'pluricultural' competences mentioned in the CEFR become linguistic communication and cultural interaction skills of any social actor who performs, to various extents, several languages and the experience of more cultures.

3. Principles

The assessment of oral skills consists in measuring and checking the ability to receive and produce oral messages, as well as to communicate both fluently and accurately. In this respect, the summative evaluation has to be correlated with the coursework and, consequently, it is assumed that knowledge has been transferred according to the moment and level of each student's progress. Therefore, testing students' knowledge at the beginning of the first semester is crucial in assessing their language skills acquisition in secondary education, as the marks obtained for the Baccalaureate examinations are not always relevant for the needs of a newly formed group of students.

What seems to be an important problem for foreign language teachers in assessing their students is basically that of finding optimal strategies for an objective evaluation.

Oral assessment can often be better structured if the teacher devises and employs marking schemes or multiple-choice tests, for example, which should be focused on:

- answers in keeping with the questions (issues to be considered: there is no link between the two; the answer is not relevant to the question, but has nonetheless been understood; the answer is partially true; the answer is not entirely satisfactory, yet still touches some relevant points; the answer is correct, and includes supporting details);
- the comprehension of a real-life or professional situation, displayed in a picture (issues to be considered: the message/situation has not been understood; the expressed ideas are not significant for the situation presented; the answer broadly includes essential ideas derived from the given context; the message is well-defined, and the main ideas are adequately expressed);

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- pronunciation/intonation (issues to be considered: first language interference in the process of second language acquisition is as limited as possible and does not hinder the understanding of the message; pronunciation does not lead to a comprehension impediment, despite several errors);
- vocabulary (issues to be considered: the range of vocabulary unaltered by words inexistent in the target language will be traced and marked; the use of any words that restrict understanding will be marked down; a wide range of vocabulary will yield a high score, so much the same as the use of specialized language in a professional context that needs a specific approach);
- syntax (issues to be considered: word order, as well as the extent to which message can be easily and thoroughly comprehended, are of great relevance here);
- the examination of the student's communicative strategy will include the following: communicative attitude; willingness to communicate; hesitations due to his/her personality or knowledge deficiencies; openness to dialogue; a coherent and well-supported approach to the topic.

It is known the fact that the issues of assessing and marking students—as well as candidates in various examinations and contests—with a view to improving examination conditions and methodology, are referred to as *decimology*. Being the result of Henri Piéron's research in the field, this pedagogical discipline dates back from 1922. It is mainly concerned with different types of marking, as well as variations in the marking procedure with a single examiner, and the more so with different ones. Apart from this, it deals with the subjective factors involved in marking, along with the proper means to secure the objective feature of a test. If examination means 'balancing' at its Latin origin, its purpose is to assess or diagnose, through an objective evaluation given by the unitary character of the test. The following issues are to be analyzed: the quantity of information; the capacity to understand, select, assimilate and organize information; the ability to provide a solution to a concrete problem.

The test must be designed according to its ultimate end (to check, for example, the student's memory or reasoning). A test must be both valid and accurate. By *validity* it is implied that the test result is in accordance with the result obtained in a real-life situation (i.e. the test measures the required value), while *accuracy* means that the result will have the same interpretation, irrespective of the evaluator. There are studied effects in the specialized literature (Pavelcu, 1968) meant to prove the complexity of the concept: the *contrast* effect (occurred when assessing a paper in contrast with the other—e.g. a paper is better marked if it follows a poor one); the *sequence* effect (occurred due to a change in the examiner's degree of exigency throughout assessing a batch of papers—the examiner's exigency increases gradually, despite the assumption that it is the other way round); the *halo* effect (consists in the fact that general judgement extends over some particular aspects of the examined—e.g. a student's good results in major subjects can influence the marks for other disciplines).

4. **Determinant Factors**

A change in mentality with regard to assessment is very important. The concept of evaluation as a punitive tool originates in the school years, if this merely emphasized students' knowledge gaps, without providing any feedback or guidance. In every area of knowledge, evaluation is clearly centred on quality. It has to be grounded on the intended objectives, as well as on methods and results correlated with the objectives. It is very difficult to evaluate the efficiency of a

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learning process if a predictive assessment test was not administrated from the start.

General objectives, with the aim to promote self-confidence in students and to develop their personality, are difficult to assess (in pedagogical terms, they are called 'final objectives'). They must be conceived so as to describe an observable wanted effect. The students' degree of competence and performance in a foreign language is an easy-to-follow phenomenon, not only through their capacity to express themselves, but also through a multitude of options that open up in gathering knowledge, when mastering a foreign language of wide circulation (e.g. the search of international database resources, participation in multicultural projects and events, exchange student programmes, etc.).

As a component of quality assurance in education according to European norms, teachers in general—and modern language teachers in our case—undergo a process of student evaluation. This should not be perceived as a negative critique, but rather as a useful feedback in improving their teaching practice. Such an analysis allows for a good diagnosis which may help in overcoming future difficulties. In order to be constructive, however, this type of assessment should not be understood in terms of a monitoring and control activity.

In general, it seems that numerous theoretical and practical attempts to turn assessment into an objective procedure have been doomed to failure. As a matter of fact, it is not subjectivity in particular that needs to be avoided, but rather arbitrariness in the assessment process. As long as there is subjectivity and approximation involved, one cannot speak of fair assessment. There are mainly three criteria that should be met in any evaluation procedure: *effectiveness*—which monitors if the educational system can reach its objectives; *efficiency*—which allows to confront the results with the methods used in getting them; *equity*—which encourages non-discriminatory access throughout the whole system.

Noteworthy is the fact that the first two criteria have been inspired by educational economists, while the third is chiefly of social nature. These traditional criteria are important, but nonetheless fail to cover the entire educational system, particularly the academic environment. It is equally necessary to apply pedagogical criteria in terms of relevant and coherent methods and strategies.

5. Conclusions

We may say that the assessment of the educational system in keeping with its capacity to engage the student in the learning process—and particularly in learning a foreign language—is crucial in the student's attempt to acquire a set of skills focused on continuity, utility, relevance, impact, coherence, feasibility, applicability, and efficiency. The change in mentality about evaluation, the choice of general and specific objectives, the integration of resources offered by European linguistic documents focused on communication tasts – all these lead to the achievement of new evaluation strategies in the process of modern language learning.

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