COMMUNICATIONAL APPROACH IN TEACHING ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract:The essential scope in the process of teaching and learning Romanian as a foreign language consists in acquiring conscious, spontaneous and fluent communication skills. Studying the Romanian language by foreign students presupposes the development of communicative, verbal and linguistic skills; that implies a multistage structure of the teaching-learning process. The harmonious combination of these factors cannot but contribute to the efficiency of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, the communication method being not a subject of study, but a technique based on exchanging several phrases aimed at the fulfillment of the didactic task. The source of inspiration lies in modern didactics with some registered results, to which we are going to add some from our own experience – an indispensable component of any "guided" Romanian language learning process.

Keywords: the Romanian language, foreign students, stages, process, the dialogue situation, conversation, interdisciplinary approach

I. Introduction

In a language we distinguish two basic spheres: the linguistic act (speech) and language "or the system which the linguistic act corresponds to" [1]. In one of her works written quite a long time ago, but still remaining highly useful [2], Tatiana Slama-Cazacu states that "the fundamental hypostasis of speech is the dialogue situation". This proved assertion made by a highly competent and well-known scholar determines our approach: in this article, among various speech activities used in teaching and learning Romanian as a foreign language, we shall look closer at the communication and reception method not as a subject of study, but as a technique based on the exchange of phrases aimed at the fulfillment of the didactic task in order to enrich the range of activities useful in teaching and learning Romanian.

We are convinced – and in this we rely upon both some positive results acquired by modern didactics [3] and our own pedagogical experience – that it is an indispensable component of any "guided" process of learning Romanian as a foreign language. Its finality is strictly limited: it is to provide the efficiency of real communication. Obviously, this article is not the first one concerning this issue [4]. Its importance for didactic strategies is the reason why such a vast number of scholars offered their own solutions and recommendations. Conversation as a method of mastering the target language covers the "dialogue condition" [5] and respects the principle of active teaching through oral techniques and remains one of the main factors of language skill formation. It comes as no surprise that the main objective of our activity is not to make foreign students study the grammatical forms and rules of the Romanian language mechanically, but to help them to become capable of extrapolating the way the Romanian language functions in "a real communication through recombination (citing from Renzo Titone) of earlier existing structures in new forms determined by the

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situation" [6] from the earlier acquired knowledge. The "situation", in its turn, is to "determine" acquiring knowledge and skills in a professional field through laborious work.

II. Teaching as Management of Learning

Speech as activity is an "act of human intercommunication which presupposes a sender and a recipient with exchangeable positions" [7]. Conversation teaching, as any oral technique created and developed in line with the demands of active teaching and real communication, presupposes a certain order of stages; it is realized according to a certain protocol, a certain combination of conventions which, in an adequate progression, will not lead to inhibiting reactions impeding communication. The reason for this is not difficult to see: the active and engaging method of conversation is not at all an incidental and spontaneous practice, but an attentively elaborated communicative strategy, which takes into account the importance of teaching-learning system in determining the necessary stages; according to this system, a foreign student is not only to receive, but also to contribute, this being the active factor of the process.

We shall suggest our own methodological structure, relying upon the necessary list of references and our experience. It includes the following stages:

A. Stage I

It is the first stage, which is called completely manipulative by some scholars, with the dominating role of teacher. It consists in presenting a text and making a conversation on its basis. The text includes the pretext and the content of the conversation. It should have a topic of professional or cultural interest, contain some elements which would arouse students' curiosity, be adapted to the students' level and take into account the minimum vocabulary principle. The representation of the text is carried out through teacher's impeccable and artistic reading, not only based on accuracy, but also producing general understanding of the written message. Teacher's reading leads to acoustic-articulatory, semantic and optic fixation, forming correct pronunciation, intonation, speech velocity, mimicry and gesture, which provide intellectual and affective information in communication process. The reading of the text is to be continued by all the students (remarkable results are also achieved by choir reading) accompanied by correlations imposed by real situations. After reading the text conversation as orientation provides some feed-back which informs the teacher how the reading was followed by the students, how the students understood the content of the conversation and cause-effect relations in the text, and what feelings were evoked by the reading. In order to verify the general understanding of the content we can suggest receptive reading which presupposes linear, sequential and integral study of the text with some variations in speed and attention to different elements of the text, with clarifications and careful observation of some "key sequences" [8], or explicative reading which consists in reading some fragments accompanied by explaining and formulating the main ideas. We can also offer foreign students a vision of Romanian civilization and culture, which, at the beginning, will include short lectures conducted by the teacher who should have vast didactic, methodological and linguistic knowledge, as well as that in spheres of pedagogy, sociology, psycholinguistics etc. The reason for this is quite simple: there are quite a few interdisciplinary issues appearing in the instructive-educational process. During these lectures

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the information should be well exemplified by text, published documents, booklets, and short films about Romania. The typology of texts should be as varied as possible: scientific, literary and artistic texts about everyday life, descriptions and short stories, the texts of monologic and especially dialogic character. A text is followed by images, then come multimedia, i.e. audiovisual documents. All these become sources of information and models of expression, which help to acquire language skills and to perform various activities (to share and to look for information, to socialize, and to express attitudes and feelings).

This first activity, like the other ones, in fact, should be carried out in calm and friendly atmosphere. Beginning from the first classes with foreign students we paid much attention to the way the didactic activity is carried out, trying to provide friendly and welcoming atmosphere which is necessary for working climate based on trust, calm, patience and pedagogic tact which, as is well known, does not require exacting demands. Teacher's humaneness, his ability to establish contacts and his humor are absolutely necessary and should be always present in teaching process, because learning without willingness to communicate does not exist, and communication, in its turn, cannot exist in cold and artificial atmosphere.

B. Stage II

At the second predominantly manipulative stage of the consolidation of knowledge we should work out linguistic material (both lexical and grammatical) from a text in order to form the students' capacity to make a conversation by way of dialogues "teacher-student" and "student-student". Here we should pay our special attention not only to the informational value of the text, but also to the formal aspect of the material so as to provide perception, decoding, reproduction and memorizing the enunciations. From the informative aspect we pass on to the communicative one which presupposes the active presence of the students on the lecture. They should become active actors and participate through personal activity and independent work, being ready to discuss a subject on the basis of the earlier accumulated grammar and lexis. The success of a lecture depends on the quality of the receptors, their capacity to receive and multiply information. Only the combination of informational and communicational aspects develops both an inquiring and creative mind, thus corresponding to the norms of modern pedagogy which has become even more efficient in Romanian educational system in particular and in the European one in general.

At this stage mini-conversation is an efficient instrument in teaching, explaining, exercising and fixing grammatical and lexical structures, while the discussion itself has only a reproductive character. By numerous and repeated exercises we pay special attention to syntagms, sentences and phrases, i.e. syntactical units, since communication is not established by single words, but through the already named combinations of words. Students should get accustomed to making sentences, no matter how primitive they might be at the beginning. That is why they should be asked in such a way as to make them answer not simply "yes" or "no", but to make them construct the whole phrases or sentences. By this we create an illusion of dialogue, bringing the students closer to a real communication. This illusion grows even stronger if the students not only answer the teacher's questions but also address each other with their own questions. Collective form of work and adequate tasks of the whole group or just a couple of students enlarge the so-called "time of speech" of a student which is vital for

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communication. The strategies of dealing with the texts suggested for the analysis and reflection include the traditional approach (which is less advisable for it leads to the absence of interest and passivity of students) and the general approach (which is more efficient since it presupposes the ability to extract essential information and to analyze a text in detail bearing in mind its content and expressive planes). These two approaches are to be adopted through the dialogue which, by means of comparison, also helps to discover some common features of different cultures. It will not be an exaggeration to say that explicit references to other cultures (and, especially, to those of the students) are obligatory since by doing this we broaden our knowledge of human culture and highlight some specific features of each culture.

C. Stage III

The third predominantly communicative stage includes the guided use of the acquired knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in new contexts. It is an important stage because of its consciously creative character which, by means of numerous exercises taking into account the gradation of difficulty, helps to complete the transition from reproductive to free and productive speech. Slife & Weaver (1992) suggested several strategies of cognitive and metacognitive self-regulation, according to which a student can choose, prepare and integrate new information in his own set of knowledge. By doing this he organizes his own thinking process. Such regulation makes it possible to apply knowledge in new learning situations.

At this stage communication is established by a certain speech situation and is concentrated upon one central topic, which does not exclude deviations and discussing secondary topics, but the students are to use first and foremost a certain set of words and phrases from a certain thematic group in a certain situation. Thus, a certain lexical-grammatical material is selected and sorted out depending on the topic of communicative acts, but not on the topic in general, as at the stage of free discussion. The topics "First meeting" or "Acquaintance", "In a shop", "At the railway station", "Visit to a doctor" and other general situations are to be divided into smaller situations. "First meeting", for example, may take place on a lecture, at work, in the street, at someone's place etc. and, depending on the persons who get acquainted, the character of the dialogue might be slightly changed. The content of each situation of communication is reproduced in dialogues and mini-conversations which correspond to the communicative intentions of the speakers. This can lead to the final stage of the task – it is improvisation, so to speak, the stage of liberated speech during discussions. The teacher counts on the automatic transfer on part of the students from an early given situation to a new one; thus, under the teacher's guidance students transfer the conversational capacity from one situation to another, being encouraged to use the earlier produced patterns and having all the necessary lexis at their disposition. At present, the teaching of foreign languages suffers a change of paradigm, which occurred along with the theories related to culture learning from an anthropological point of view, defined as ways of life and a set of practices based on values specific to a group/community [9].

As has already been mentioned above, it is the basic stage which shows us how the information is received and reported (i.e. understood) by the allocator so that he could become a locator (sender) and, therefore, whether he will succeed in placing a certain material into a context and changing it depending on new communication situations at the stage of free discussion. From the point of view of psychology, what has just been described at these three

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stages can be seen as the transition from the direct speech to the reported speech and, finally, to the narrating one.

D. Stage IV

The fourth completely communicative stage (we are going to call it improvisation stage) presupposes the most complete type of conversation which fulfills our permanent aim – acquiring communicative skills. Free (situational) or "liberated" (notion introduced by Joseph Pignolet [10]) conversation is established after intensive linguistic training. Students should possess sufficient amount of the earlier acquired knowledge, a linguistic "capital" which can be the only sound basis for the discussion.

Conceived as a way to verify the efficiency of the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, it is based not on repetition, but on experiment, verbal reactions of sudden, spontaneous and natural character. It is a free activity, without guidance, the teacher's role being less important – he is only an animator. Such kind of discussions is provoked by daily events from any sphere of life, politics, culture, science and other topical issues chosen in such a way as to spark interest and to stimulate students' imagination and their creative capacity.

III. The Effects of Communication Method Upon the Student-Teacher Relation

Any situation can potentially provoke discussion, but in an infinite multitude of situations there are some of them that may greatly facilitate oral discussion, especially when something new and unusual takes place. Communication situation that are to be real and authentic are usually found in daily life: introducing a friend, dinner in a restaurant, traveling by train (advanced students can discuss Romanian culture and civilization). Before placing the students in a communicative situation they should be given some orientations: a list of words typical of the semantic field of the topic (syntagms, expressions and phraseological groups) as well as that of linguistic structures which are to be used in speech, the distribution of roles (if necessary), mentioning the teacher's ability to "direct" and to "play" these roles together with his students and using several techniques: included dialogue, chain dialogue, interpretation of roles, questions with a number of answers, description, narration, oral compositions, as well as linguistic games, contests, debates, riddles, jokes; all these ensure an unusual structure of a lecture, keep the students attentive and curious, eliminate tiredness and fill the gaps in students' vocabulary. All methods and techniques usually applied in learning and teaching a foreign language are useful for us. It does not mean to say that we tend to give an absolute value to these methods. We do not apply them ad-literam: they are, like in this case, adapted and differentiated according to the necessities in order to cover all the four linguistic activities at a time: listening, reading (repetition activities), speaking and writing (productive and interactive activities).

The fact that conversation is not only a technique but also a difficult kind of art does not depend on the stage or kind of lectures; it presupposes deep knowledge of the rules of speech and language, as well as the psycholinguistic and psychopedagogical mechanisms which govern verbal communication processes and does not ignore a number of implicit factors in the system of sending and receiving communicative acts.

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IV. Conclusions

Insisting on conversational, communicational and receptive method with these several observations, we are not going to absolutize it, considering it to be the only valuable one for any language in any situation. Without overestimating it, we should admit that it is an activity which fulfills both communicative and interactive tasks. Conversational method forms a part of language studies as a communication act which corresponds to the modern trends in teaching foreign languages with special attention to student, dialogue, teaching to communicate and psycholinguistic approach in communication.

Appealing to imagination and liberating verbalization, this method brings to the fore and imposes authenticity as an obligatory feature of linguistic changes. Thus, communication act is respected; it remains authentic, helping us to shift accents from the language system (langue) to speech activity (parole), from the written form of a language to various forms of oral activity, from abstract mastering of some linguistic models to their context-situational integration.

Using this method, we are convinced that the conversational method provides increase in efficiency of teaching and learning a language by foreign students, forming a free way of expression close to that of the native tongue which is a permanent aim of didactic activity.

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