TEACHING ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the research and practice of the author as a member of the Romanian staff teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language for the Preparatory Year (RFL-PY) at Politehnica University Bucharest. Teachers of RFL - PY are confronted with a growing demand for RFL courses tailored to specific needs, since the students will study at various faculties after they finish the Romanian course. Therefore, they should make a selection from the students' specialist area and adapt the materials to the learners' needs, thus improving their motivation and making learning better and faster. The author discusses some teaching methodological aspects – from the communicative and eclectic approaches – then proposes exercises that are part of a possible lesson, envisaged as a means methodological transfer of the communicative/post-communicative (eclectic) approach applied to the teaching of Romanian as a Foreign Language.
Key-words: communicative, eclectic, approach, Romanian as a Foreign Language

Introduction

The evolution of our epoch can be seen, in a diachronic plan, if we consider a global vision and we take into consideration the various components of the social, political, economic and cultural macro-systems of the planet, as passing through a significant dynamic of change.

The aims of such an evolution are specific to the contemporary period. The implications of admitting such influences upon the current state of all phenomena, upon the increase in responsibility of all those contributing to the development of a type of education able to answer in anticipation to the changes envisaged for the future are conducive to the occurrence, in the current educational landscape, of numerous types of approaches to change.

Their common denominator is **optimization in education**, and, while there is not such a thing as a unique formula of the implementation of change, there are certain important elements/directions to follow, that should mainly aim at:

- reevaluation and appraisal of real values to a higher extent,
- considering education and especially learning itself as a priority,
- and creating a *nation of learners*

Moreover, with to a view to attaining such objectives, education should turn into a system able of consistency and coherence, able to produce and support the formation of a nation of entities that are educating themselves, by ensuring their access to educational services in accordance with their needs, wherever and whenever these may be manifested.

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Consequently, a new type of personality is being built and promoted, whose reconfiguration re-locates the problems of education within a new matrix of values, focused on **active and formative elements**. Once new social dimensions are introduced in linguistics (such as: feasibility, possibility, potentiality and adequacy of what is said in a certain language, the concept of communicative competence is born. In other words, those ideas were the starting point for what was to become the Communicative Language Teaching – CLT.

I. The communicative and eclectic approaches – an overview

I. 1. Communicative language teaching (CLT)

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of study. Language learners in environments utilizing CLT techniques, learn and practice the target language through the interaction with one another and the instructor, the study of "authentic texts" (those written in the target language for purposes other than language learning), and through the use of the language both in class and outside of class.

Classroom activities guided by the communicative approach are characterised by trying to produce meaningful and real communication, at all levels. As a result there may be more emphasis on skills than systems, lessons are more learner-centred, and there may be use of authentic materials.

Learners converse about personal experiences with partners, and instructors teach topics outside of the realm of traditional grammar, in order to promote language skills in all types of situations. This method also claims to encourage learners to incorporate their personal experiences into their language learning environment, and to focus on the learning experience in addition to the learning of the target [32].

Savignon [40] states that, according to CLT, the goal of language education is the ability to communicate in the target language. This is in contrast to previous views in which grammatical competence was commonly given top priority [6]. CLT also focuses on the teacher being a facilitator, rather than an instructor. Furthermore, the approach is a non-methodical system that does not use a textbook series to teach the target language, but rather works on developing sound oral/verbal skills prior to reading and writing.

CLT teachers choose classroom activities based on what they believe is going to be most effective for students developing communicative abilities in the target language (TL). Oral activities are popular among CLT teachers, as opposed to grammar drills or reading and writing activities, because they include active conversation and creative, unpredicted responses from students.

Activities vary based on the level of the language class they are being used in. They promote collaboration, fluency, and comfort in the TL.

- The activities listed and explained below are commonly used in CLT:
- Role-play,
- Interviews,
- Group work,

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- Information gap,
- Opinion sharing.

The purpose of teaching is that of developing the communicative competence. This should be seen as a manner of defining what the student and user of the foreign language has to know in order to be competent from the communicative point of view in a community where that language is being spoken.

I.2. The eclectic approach – important parameters

In the literature, the eclectic approach is described as a method of language education that combines various approaches and methodologies to teach language depending on the aims of the lesson and the abilities of the learners (as described on the British Council site related to that subject). The basic idea of the approach is that different teaching methods can be borrowed and adapted to suit the requirement of the learners, with the result of a less monotonous and/or boring class.

This approach is a conceptual one, and it does not merely include one paradigm or a set of assumptions. Instead, eclecticism is constituted from several theories, styles, and idea, with a view to gaining a thorough insight about the subject – that is why it draws upon different theories in different cases. The concept of 'eclecticism' is common in many fields of study such as psychology, martial arts, philosophy, teaching, religion and drama – and languages.

Below are some of the main principles to be taken into account in an approach to learning:

- Applying in setting or in contexts of future use;
- Setting meaning by correlating with the student's personal experience;
- Teaching for transfer, by generating a planned sequence of activities meant to put a distance between the academic abstract context and the real one;
- Isolation of critical attributes, by marking them clearly;
- Progression from concrete, via semiabstract and up to abstract in introducing new material;
- Modelling – it is about products, procedures or processes, organized per stages and kept as later references for the student;
- Similarity of environment – by focalizing the mind in wait of the events to follow;
- Maintaining vivid interest by a variety of formats in practicing materials;
- Creating an appropriate atmosphere, relaxing and at the same time stimulating;
- Adjusting the degree of guidance – i.e. higher for new tasks, decreasing at later stages.

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II. 1. Main features of relevance in the teaching of a foreign language

There are several major kinds of changes associated with the paradigmatic modifications in the teaching of foreign languages. Here are some of the main characteristics of such ways:

- The autonomy of the learner – students are seen as being responsible for their own learning, and they should develop reflectivity and autonomy in learning;
- Cooperative learning – based on the interaction patterns between the students, with the preservation of a good balance between competitivity and cooperation, with project work as a good example in this respect;
- Curricular integration – the main idea is connected with the concept of linguistic competence, which is necessary for learning in all disciplines of study. The concept is named language across the curriculum – here, multidisciplinary projects can be a representative example;
- Accent on meaning – the focus is on the use of the language. Thus, the teaching of grammar is meant as a support for the understanding of the message of the text and of its communicative intention;
- Diversity – it is accepted that each student is different, therefore instruction should be differentiated accordingly. It is paramount to take into account the awareness of the students as to their strategies of learning that help them to become effective lifelong learners;
- Alternative evaluation – the new forms of evaluation should reflect the real life conditions and involve thinking abilities. They are more cost and effort consuming, but they provide key information in the process evaluation of the student, by means of portfolios and so on;
- The teacher is seen as a co-learner – a new feature of the teacher, that of becoming a person that continues to learn, but, at the same time, a facilitator and a fellow learner of the students.

II.2. Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) in UPB

The objective of the Romanian as a Foreign Language course for the Preparatory Year (RFL – PY) is to promote Romanian culture and civilization on an international scale, a target that may be reached by combining the effort to develop students' skills to speak and communicate in Romanian with a gradual introduction of the authentic Romanian culture and civilization.

This is one of the factors which can contribute to ensuring a high level of homogeneity of the intensive courses provided, as the teachers should – and do - have the skills and openness to:

- collaborate closely in designing the course content and structure;
- set up a methodological approach based on modern pedagogical principles;
- communicate professionally throughout the study modules in order to adjust/amend course elements with a view to improving its quality.

The main objectives of the course are:

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- to help students to learn and develop linguistic and communicative competences at B2 level (CERF), by internalizing the rules of appropriate pronunciation, basic and/or complex grammar structures and using them in real-life contexts, as well as by developing the skills to understand and produce an oral/written discourse;
- to develop grammar, vocabulary and linguistic support needed for students to communicate effectively as professionals;
- to enhance learners' communicative competences through integrated activities/tasks;
- to help students adopt a positive, intercultural attitude towards the other members of the team, which will result both in a better understanding of the Romanian culture and civilization, and in students' increased interest in the global, multicultural and diverse world;
- to develop students' essential skills required to study and understand the diverse special terms used in the fields of engineering, medical or financial sciences (to give only a few examples) in Romanian, at university level;
- to develop students' autonomous study skills, and make sure they are able to identify, understand and produce specialized texts in all forms – oral and written – at university level.

The level aimed for the students to reach at the end of course is B2 - CEFR. The expectations of the factors involved in ordering the course, namely: the Ministry of Education of Romania, the UPB, the students themselves and the teachers of technical disciplines who are going to supervise the Bachelor, master and doctoral candidates dissertations and/or theses, are that by the end of the course the students have attained this level and they would have become independent learners who will be able to continue to study within the Romanian context.

As we all know, when it comes to language learning, the teacher's awareness of the limitations and challenges of the given context is a must. Due to the fact that there are scarce teaching resources for the teaching/evaluation of Romanian as a Foreign Language, teachers always have to adapt materials, design their own course materials and permanently (re)adjust them to the needs of the students. Teaching multicultural classes also means that teachers need to consequently adapt materials and, more often than they would like, adapt their language to the students' level.

II.3. Blended Learning and its Role in Optimizing the RFL – PY Course

Nowadays, students expect technology to be part of their language classes. Therefore, teachers should combine Internet and digital media with more 'traditional' classroom methods (such as translation, dictation, drills – all re-evaluated and given a new role within the economy of the lesson). Still, in what is traditionally known as face-to-face classes, teachers focus on using digital devices in class as part of a well-justified pedagogically coherent approach.

The main strategies used during the Preparatory Year course are the ones adapted from the communicative and eclectic approaches; there are some examples:

- interactive dialogues;
- active reading;

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- role play and simulations;
- translations;
- teamwork and project work;
- simulated task-solving approach.

Learning activities are interactive, based on a contextual understanding and practice of grammar and lexis. They are varied, and cover a mix of all four skills, naturally integrated from an input of reading/listening through speaking and up to writing – with steps from receptive to productive language, from controlled/guided learning to free linguistic production.

In such an approach, teachers have to continuously monitor the class, as, when the students work in pairs they naturally tend to use their L1. Teachers also have to use the best methods to organize the students' work in pairs – thus trying to correct their tendency to work alone and to always resort to the teacher as the keeper of all knowledge – and groups, alternating them with individual and front class activities.

Teachers of RFL - PY – as the majority of language teachers nowadays – area confronted with a growing demand for courses tailored to specific needs. Therefore, they constantly make selections from the students' specialist areas and adapt the materials to the learners' needs, thus improving their motivation and making learning better and faster. With students' areas of interest varying more or less on an annual basis, teachers make efforts to adapt materials and approaches accordingly, and thus cater for all the students' educational needs.

III. From theory to practice

The final part of this paper is meant to illustrate the way theory can be translated into practice; in what follows, the author presents some sample exercises that are part of a possible lesson, envisaged as a means methodological transfer of the communicative/post-communicative (eclectic) approach applied to the teaching of RFL. PW stands for 'pair work', WhCA for 'whole class activity', IW for 'individual work'.

EXERCIȚIUL 1:

Aflați ce crede colegul vostru despre următoarele subiecte:

1. Ce meserie e importantă la voi în țară? De ce? *Ex: medic – salvează vieți.*
2. Dați două exemple de activități pe care le face un profesionist. *Ex: ospătar – ia comanda și servește clienții.*
3. Ce meserie vi se potrivește? De ce? *Ex: șofer – îmi plac mașinile.*
4. Cum credeți că vă descurcați într-o multinațională? *De ce abilități aveți nevoie pentru o asemenea activitate? Ex: spirit de echipă*
    - Time: 5 mins
    - Focus: PW, WhCA
    - Students work in pairs, discuss about Qs 1-4, and then name a spokesperson and share opinion with the whole class.
    - Teacher asks students to discuss about Qs 1-4 and to find out partner's opinion on the job-related topics. T recycles vocabulary. T monitors students.

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- ***Rationale:*** warm-up/lead-in stage, recycling vocabulary.

EXERCIȚIUL 2

2.a. *Potriviți cuvintele și expresiile care descriu trăsături morale cu definițiile lor:*

a. eficient	*1. lucrează și se înțelege bine cu alții*	*a.*	*3*
b. tolerant	*2. nu întârzie niciodată*	*b.*	
c. deschis la nou	*3. realizează tot ce își propune în timp util*	*c.*	
d. cooperant	*4. se împrietenește ușor cu oamenii*	*d.*	
e. individualist	*5. apreciază exclusiv și în mod exagerat tot ceea ce aparține propriei națiuni*	*e.*	
f. flexibil	*6. arată înțelegere pentru atitudinile și ideile altora*	*f.*	
g. punctual	*7. nu permite abateri sau modificări de la standard*	*g.*	
h. sociabil	*8. se gândește doar la el*	*h.*	
i. naționalist	*9. se arată mereu interesat de ce este de actualitate*	*i.*	
j. rigid	*10. se adaptează ușor la orice schimbare*	*j.*	

- Time: 10 mins
- Focus: IW, PW, WhCA
- Students work individually to match words describing moral traits with their definitions. They select qualifiers describing qualities in an employee at a multinational corporation. In pairs, they check answers.
- Teacher invites students to find the definitions of the words and phrases in the first column, and encourages them to work together for the completion of task; teacher gives students examples of some words describing various moral features and asks students to match them. Teacher encourages students to find out as many words and phrases as they can, regarding the traits of the ideal employee in a multinational corporation, and monitors students and gets feedback.
- ***Rationale:*** sensitizing students to choose job-related words describing targeted behaviour within a multicultural group.

2.b. *Alegeți cele mai importante 3 (trei) trăsături morale de mai sus și formați propoziții despre comportamentul ideal al unui angajat la o companie multinațională:*

Ex.: Marius este un programator eficient și, de aceea, e apreciat de clienți.

1.....
2.....
3.....

- Time: 5 mins
- Focus: IW, WhCA

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- Students form sentences using the new words in their vocabulary.
- Teacher asks students to produce sentences using the new vocabulary; teacher monitors, helps students, and provides feedback.
- ***Rationale:*** sensitizing students to choose job-related words describing targeted behaviour within a multicultural group.

EXERCIȚIUL 3

3.a*. În perechi, găsiți jumătatea logică a enunțului; scrieți rezultatul în caseta de mai jos:*

1. Nu trebuie să laşi pe mâine...	*a. ....trebuie să atunci şervețelul la gunoi.*
2. Dacă sufli nasul...	*b. ...ca să mănânci mâine.*
3. Când ai un plan...	*c. ...poţi să-ţi vezi mai bine defectele.*
4. Muncește astăzi	*d. ...ce poți să faci azi.*
5. Cu ochii altora ...	*e. ... trebuie să îl respecți.*

1.	*2.*	*3.*	*4.*	*5*
d				

- Time: 5 mins
- Focus: PW, WhCA
- Students match the sentence parts in the two columns, then write the resulting sentences.
- Teacher monitors and validates students.

3.b. *În grupuri de câte trei studenți, scrieți 10 enunțuri referitoare la comportamentul adecvat al fiecărei persoane în timpul pandemiei de COVID-19. Folosiți verbe la conjunctivul prezent și cuvintele de mai jos:*

mască, mănuși, dezinfectant, apă, săpun, distanțare fizică, plata cu cardul, online

Ex.: În mijloacele de transport în comun, trebuie <u>să purtăm</u> <u>mască</u>.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

- Time: 10 mins
- Focus: GW, WhCA
- Students negotiate, then write rules about people's desired behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Students practise the „conjunctiv prezent", as well as useful, prevention-related vocabulary.

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- Teacher guides and monitors students, gives feedback and validates rules.
- ***Rationale:*** speed competition in order to both challenge students and to raise awareness about people's desired behaviour during troubling times; whole class feedback and discussion.

EXERCIȚIUL 4:

4.a*. Citiți textul* ***Să nu renunți la visul tău!*** *despre Traian Vuia și puneți verbele din paranteze la* ***conjunctivul prezent.*** *Ex.: (1) să termine*

Să nu renunți la visul tău!

Născut în Banat, Traian Vuia reușește (1)..... (**a termina**) liceul la Lugoj și, apoi, să își ia doctoratul în științe juridice la Budapesta, în 1901. Înscris și la Școala Politehnică din Budapesta, el nu reușește, însă, (2) ..... (**a absolvi**), din cauza unor dificultăți financiare.

Marele său vis este (3) …….. (**a zbura**), așa că începe (4)……(**a efectua**) calcule pentru planurile unei maşini de zbor. În anul 1902 pleacă la Paris, dorind (5) …….(**a construi**) în capitala Franţei un "aeroplan-automobil". Proiectul prezentat de Vuia este respins de comitetul științific francez, care nu poate (6) .....(**a înțelege**) cum poate (7) ..... (**a se ridica**) în aer un aparat de zbor mai greu decât aerul.

Fără (8) .....(**a renunța**), Traian Vuia reușește (9) .....(**a breveta**) invenția în 1903 și, cu ajutorul familiei, care îl sprijină financiar, pe 18 martie 1906, poate (10) ……(**a demonstra**) tuturor că a realizat imposibilul: a construit un aparat mai greu decât aerul, care s-a ridicat de la sol prin mijloace proprii. A fost îndeplinirea unui vis de inginer aerospațial, pe care lipsa diplomei nu l-a împiedicat să viseze și să realizeze ceea ce și-a propus: să zboare!

4.b. *Găsiți și celelalte verbe la conjunctiv prezent din textul despre Traian Vuia. Comparați rezultatele cu colegii. Ați reușit să le găsiți pe toate?*

- Time: 10 mins (4a) + 3 min (4b)
- Focus: IW, WhCA
- Students read the text and work individually on practising the „conjunctiv prezent" (4a). Students reread the text and find the verbal forms within speed limit. (4b
- Teacher introduces students to the world of engineering, by combining grammatical focus with the information regarding cultural and historical aspects from our Romanian history of science and technology. Teacher prompts/monitors students and gets feedback. (4a)
- Teacher encourages students to complete the task asap. (4b)
- ***Rationale:*** introducing students to important Romanian cultural figures, and encouraging them to find their own motivation in their jobs/lives.

IV. Conclusions

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The subject of methodological approaches to teaching foreign languages is far from exhausted, with new paradigms always replacing old ones. The paper has discussed some teaching methodological aspects – from the communicative and eclectic approaches – then proposed some exercises that are part of a possible lesson, envisaged as a means methodological transfer of the communicative/post-communicative (eclectic) approaches applied to the teaching of Romanian as a Foreign Language. The success of the teaching efforts is to be seen annually, in the results of the students of the Preparatory Year.

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