The Challenges of Unity in Diversity: Teaching Romanian Language and Culture to the Foreign Students of a Technical University

Elisabeta Simona CATANĂ*

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1. Introduction

This theoretical paper proposes a culture-based approach to teaching Romanian to the first year and second year foreign students of a technical university in Romania where they study in a foreign international language – English, French or German, according to their choice – having the opportunity to opt for studying Romanian as an optional subject in their curriculum. We argue that in the Age of Globalization governed by the principle of unity in diversity, teaching Romanian language to the foreign students of a technical university in Romania requires a special focus on broadening their cultural horizon by enlarging upon culturally relevant didactic materials, and, especially, upon proverbs. Reconsidering and upgrading our teaching methodology and didactic materials, we will motivate the foreign students to learn Romanian, meeting their present needs and expectations for their future social, academic and work purposes in the 21st century multicultural Romania.

Welcoming the students' decision to adapt to a foreign culture by learning its language, we have to admit that most foreign students, who live and study in a smaller cultural community, such as the Romanian cultural community, have to overcome a series of cultural biases and challenges. One of these biases is the preconceived idea of being enough to know and use just an international language of communication they have learnt from an early age for different purposes anywhere in the world and particularly for academic and business purposes. An argument against this preconceived idea is that one's national pride and cultural differences will never disappear even in the most developed globalized society and that is why learning a local language for living and working in a particular corner of the world becomes a must for professional politically-correct communication and for successfully integrating into the new cultural community. One of the challenges is the foreigners' necessity to acknowledge the importance of learning the basics of a local culture, such as the Romanian culture they have to adapt to for a temporary

* Politehnica University of Bucharest, Romania.

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period of time, instead of only relying on the cultural basics of an international language of communication.

The case of learning Romanian for living and working in Romania will be analysed from the foreign students' perspective and from the perspective of teachers used to the methodology of teaching a foreign international language. This article shows that teachers of Romanian for foreign engineering students should reconsider and upgrade the existent methodological approach and didactic materials according to the students' needs and educational background. Just resorting to the existing teaching materials and textbooks for teaching Romanian to young students in a technical university without adapting them would not meet their learning needs for two reasons: 1) the existing textbooks do not provide enough cultural information a foreigner must be familiar with in order to successfully integrate into the Romanian cultural community; 2) the existing textbooks do not focus on the specialized Romanian vocabulary for the various engineering fields, and, therefore, do not meet the engineering students' academic and business needs.

Deciding to learn Romanian at the age of 18-20 for coping with life and civilization in Romania, and for work purposes as well, foreign engineering students are recommended to attend a two-hour introductory course on the Romanian culture and civilization offered in the international language of communication they use at university in order to turn them familiar with the origins of this language, with the past of this language and culture. Being explained in an international language that Romanian goes back to the Latin structure which it has preserved, they will understand that Romanian belongs to an old civilization whose identity and values are here to stay and must be respected. They will have to know that Romanians are conservative in terms of their traditions and cultural values which they take great pride in. When already familiar with a few basic cultural aspects, the students will understand that learning Romanian is important for successfully integrating into the Romanian cultural community.

2. Teaching Romanian through Proverbs. From Cultural Issues to Vocabulary and Grammar Acquisition

To enable the engineering students to learn Romanian in a time frame of two years at university, we have to motivate them through interesting teaching and assessment activities. That is why two important approaches must be adopted for an effective life-long learning: 1) the real life approach to the Romanian culture and language; 2) the academic approach to the Romanian culture and language. As far as the first approach is concerned, we recommend the following activities: a) organizing compulsory thematic trips to different rural and urban areas in Romania at the weekends and on holidays; b) offering the students the opportunity to discover real life in Romania, its past, the various customs, the old and modern ways of spending one's free time, the Romanian faith, religion, holidays, mentality encapsulated in proverbs; c) providing language explanations during these trips to facilitate the students' understanding of the Romanian language and culture; d) assessing the students' acquired knowledge based on mid-term and end-of-term projects asking them to describe the Romanian places they have visited together with the Romanian teacher, to share their impressions of the local peculiarities, food, customs, and to make

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comparisons between the Romanian culture and their own culture. Such cultural trips should start at the end of the first academic year when the foreign engineering students have reached the A2 level successfully. The academic approach aims at preparing and giving Romanian lectures meant to develop the students' grammar knowledge, vocabulary, communicative and academic writing competence in a motivating manner. Pair work activities for conversations to practice the Romanian language structures, group work activities for discussing and analysing certain Romanian cultural issues will contribute to the students' effective acquisition of Romanian language.

Since our purpose is to facilitate the foreign students' learning of Romanian and, at the same time, to broaden their cultural horizon within interactive courses focusing on an exchange of cultural knowledge and values in simulated meetings and team-work activities, we put forward the necessity of designing teaching materials for A2-B1 levels, approaching the cultural component as well as the linguistic one. In *Cultural Awareness*, Barry Tomalin and Susan Stempleski promote this double-edged approach for effective communication in a foreign language and culture: "Successful cross-cultural communication demands cultural fluency as well as linguistic fluency" (Tomalin, Stempleski 1993: 105).

Teaching Romanian starting from the contexts of proverbs and making the foreign students familiar with the meaning and connotations of the Romanian proverbs, we arouse their interest in discovering and understanding the Romanian culture, motivating them to enrich their vocabulary and to advance their grammar knowledge. Such teaching materials and teaching contexts set the stage for interactive courses which are meant to broaden the students' cultural horizon, to develop their communicative competence, to encourage their creativity in making comparisons between their own culture and the Romanian culture, and to enhance their cognitive development. Asking the students to think of an equivalent of the Romanian proverbs in their own culture and to further enlarge upon the wisdom and connotations of these proverbs in controlled communication contexts under the professor's supervision and assistance during the Romanian language courses and seminars, they will activate their contextual memory, their cultural memory and will develop respect for diversity. Teachers and students will bridge the gap between cultures and will interactively discover different national and traditional values, new perspectives on life, lifestyles, work-styles, new manners of communication and behaviour.

Many theorists admit the importance of discussing and analysing proverbs for developing cultural knowledge and understanding. According to Tomalin and Stempleski (*Ibidem*: 130-131), proverbs emphasize a nation's cultural values. They propose a list of teaching activities to investigate the English culture through proverbs so that the students discover "cultural values through proverbs" (*Ibidem*: 130). In *Teaching Language in Context*, Alice Omaggio Hadley quotes a series of authors, who have proposed the effective use of proverbs for teaching cultural issues, and suggests that acknowledging and respecting cultural differences are key objectives in terms of education. In Hadley's own words:

> Richmond's model is useful in that it points out the dangers of presenting cultural material, such as proverbs, in a way that implies that the underlying ideas and allusions are necessarily equivalent. […] Significant cross-cultural understanding can

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> begin to happen only when students become aware that their own view of the world is culturally bound, and that the viewpoint of those in another culture cannot be fully understood until one begins to appreciate the different cultural framework through which they perceive the world (Omaggio Hadley 2001: 383).

Enlarging upon proverbs in our courses and seminars of Romanian language, we could offer the students a wider perspective on approaching and respecting cultural differences for our comfortable journey through life in a multicultural environment, for our successful cooperation with the people around us, for our appropriate behaviour, actions and judgement of things. Thus, we recommend including the following two books in the students' bibliography: *Buna-cuviinţă oglindită în proverbe şi maxime din toată lumea* (in my translation, *Decency Reflected in Proverbs and Maxims from All Over the World*) by Gh. Paschia (1970) and *Arta de a reuşi în viaţă – să învăţăm înţelepciunea din proverbe* (in my translation, *The Art of Succeeding in Life: Let Us Learn Wisdom from Proverbs*) by Arina Avram (2002). Gh. Paschia (1970) quotes a series of proverbs and maxims belonging to various writers and philosophers, organizing them into themes in an alphabetical order and offering an important cultural material to be considered for developing our cross-cultural awareness.

In her preface to the book *Arta de a reuşi în viaţă – să învăţăm înţelepciunea din proverbe*, Arina Avram (2002: 7-8) considers that by discovering the wisdom of the proverbs of the world, we will know how to achieve the desired end or the great success in life. Arina Avram divides a wide range of proverbs belonging to different cultures into 107 themes, quoting these proverbs as pieces of advice for raising our awareness about the importance of learning how to behave, speak and adopt politically-correct approaches under various circumstances in our journey through life. We could include Arina Avram's book in the students' bibliography, selecting a series of themes and proverbs to be discussed within group-work activities in our seminars of Romanian language. Thus, we will enable the foreign students to enrich their Romanian vocabulary within motivating cultural contexts, encouraging them to seek and understand the wisdom of the world encapsulated in proverbs and laying emphasis on aspects such as: the importance of a good beginning in everything, the importance of preparation in any action we take, the importance of silence under certain circumstances, the importance of patience, of politeness, of gaining experience, of adapting to different situations, the importance of avoiding conflict, being respectful, tactful and modest.

Cross-cultural understanding must be developed in time through real cultural experiences provided by the organized trips the foreign students are recommended to take under the Romanian teacher's guidance and through motivating Romanian lectures at university. Thus, the foreign students will understand the Romanian wisdom encapsulated in the Romanian proverbs and will be open to a new cultural approach of the world. Proverbs speak for a particular nation's inherited wisdom, identity, landmarks of mentality, morality, faith. They should be included and enlarged upon in all courses and seminars of Romanian language and culture in a technical university in Romania. They will be remembered as poems and life experiences within the process of lifelong learning.

Teaching grammar and vocabulary based on cultural contexts provided by culturally relevant teaching materials, including proverbs, we stimulate the students'

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creativity and develop their ability to argue for the meaning of the proverbs in their own words for accomplishing the seminar tasks and for doing their homework. Proverbs can be turned into stories whose grammar structures and lexical items will be easier to remember and to use in the students' own contexts of communication. Thus, the students will enjoy a double benefit: on the one hand, learning Romanian, and, on the other hand, getting familiar with the Romanian culture, mentality, views on the world and identity. They will acknowledge cultural differences, becoming more open-minded and tolerant. By focusing on proverbs as contexts for teaching Romanian vocabulary and grammar, we teach the foreign engineering students that the inherited wisdom of the past, which is reflected in proverbs, accounts for the essence of the present wisdom whose legacy must be remembered and paid tribute to.

3. A Foreign Engineering Student's Perspective on Learning Romanian for Social, Business and Academic Purposes in the Multicultural Romania

Since the students' perspective on the effectiveness of a particular subject of study in the university curriculum for their future career and lifelong learning is relevant for the necessity to adapt our teaching materials, methods and approach to their needs and expectations, we consider it the starting point for successful cooperative teaching and learning. Knowing *why* and *how* to learn Romanian fast and effectively for academic, business and social purposes in the multicultural Romania, where they can also use an international language of communication, such as English, the engineering students will overcome their cultural biases and limits and will become open to acknowledging the Romanian cultural values, learning Romanian for successfully meeting the challenges of living and working within this new cultural community. Teaching Romanian to the second year foreign students of a technical university in Romania, the author of this article has asked a group of 10 foreigners a series of 5 questions to find out their perspective on the importance of learning a local language for academic, business and social purposes in a multicultural, European country where they can also use an international language of communication, such as English:

1) As long as you can study, communicate, present your research papers in an international language of communication, such as English, do you think it would be to your benefit to learn Romanian for your present and future purposes regarding your studies, career and social life in this country? Mark the importance of learning Romanian on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 is associated with the utmost importance and 1 with the least importance.
2) What would you like the Romanian courses to attach more importance to: a) conversational Romanian in different real situations of communication in Romania; b) Romanian for technical purposes; c) the Romanian cultural values and issues; d) all of the previously mentioned aspects? Tick the points you consider important to you.
3) How many hours a week would you be willing to spend for learning Romanian at university, by attending the seminars of Romanian, and

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individually, by doing your homework, resorting to e learning, watching the Romanian TV programs?

4) What kind of seminar activities would you appreciate as the most useful for learning Romanian at university: a) conversation practice in different situations; b) grammar practice and academic writing in Romanian; c) discussing cultural differences and focusing on the Romanian cultural values, customs, rules of communication and behaviour in academic, business and social circumstances; d) all of the activities mentioned above? Tick the points you consider important to you.
5) Under what circumstances have you acquired more Romanian vocabulary: a) within the courses and seminars of Romanian language; b) while socializing with the Romanian colleagues; c) through individual e learning, language practice and homework. Specify a percentage next to each point from a) to c).

Appreciating the foreign engineering students' interest in discovering the Romanian culture and civilization and in learning the Romanian language within interactive courses at university and through socializing with their Romanian colleagues, we have to create more teaching materials focusing on cultural aspects, on culturally meaningful stories and proverbs, on language in use in different cultural contexts. Most answers to the above five questions indicate the students' desire to learn Romanian for their social and business purposes and for integrating into the Romanian society. Most students have specified that they would rather learn Romanian by participating in the Romanian language courses and seminars or by socializing than do their homework or resort to e-learning which they do not have enough time for. Their interest in general language practice and technical language practice speaks for the necessity to upgrade our teaching materials and our communicative methods of teaching for meeting the students' needs and expectations.

4. Methodology

As the foreign students start learning Romanian when they begin their studies in a Romanian university, the direct method must be carefully combined with the communicative method. Considering the direct method important for teaching grammar, vocabulary, cultural aspects, and the communicative method essential for developing the students' communicative competence, for encouraging the teacher-student cooperation, for stimulating the students' capacity to feel Romanian and to think in Romanian in their conversations in pair work and group work activities, we attach more importance to the learner-centred approach. Foreign engineering students are adults willing to learn Romanian for integrating into the Romanian society and should be involved in an exchange of cultural experience with their colleagues and teachers in organized verbal activities, such as group work or pair work activities, within the seminars of Romanian language.

Interactive teaching, cooperative learning and teaching, encouraging the foreign students to use language in real-life situations and developing their speaking, reading, writing, listening skills require the teacher to be a *controller* and a *facilitator*, in Douglas Brown's (1994: 160-161) terminology, in a Romanian

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language class for foreign engineering students. The Romanian teacher will have to permanently offer assistance during the students' group work or pair work activities, facilitating and encouraging their discussions.

The learner-centered approach to teaching Romanian to the foreign students of a technical university in Romania is meant to develop their self-confidence and motivation to communicate within thought-provoking verbal and written activities. Their learning experience will be more effective, turning them into partners during the teaching process. Building upon their cross-cultural knowledge, the students will be more motivated to further resort to e-learning for Romanian language acquisition and for accomplishing their homework tasks.

5. Conclusions

Teaching Romanian language and culture to the foreign students of a technical university in Romania is one of the challenges of globalization for achieving unity in diversity. Just knowing and using an international language of communication for social, academic or work purposes will not be conducive to successfully adapting to the Romanian cultural community. That is why the foreign students of a technical university in Romania, where they study in an international language, decide to learn Romanian for living and working successfully in this country.

To meet the foreign engineering students' learning needs, teachers of Romanian have to adapt their teaching materials, teaching methodology and approach according to their requirements. They will have to broaden the students' cultural horizon, involving them in an exchange of cultural knowledge and experience by adopting the real life approach and the academic approach to teaching Romanian. Resorting to cultural contexts provided by thematic trips to different urban and rural areas in Romania and giving academic lectures focusing on evincing the Romanian wisdom encapsulated in proverbs, we will facilitate the students' language learning and, at the same time, we will stimulate their creativity, helping them to enrich their vocabulary and to learn grammar within memorable cultural contexts.

Teaching Romanian to foreigners, who study in an international language, requires our effort to arouse their interest through interesting teaching activities, through effective communicative methods for developing their communicative competence, and through thought-provoking assessment activities. By learning Romanian and by understanding the Romanian cultural values, foreign engineering students will be able to successfully integrate into the Romanian society, achieving unity in diversity in a politically-correct manner.

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The Challenges of Unity in Diversity: Teaching Romanian Language and Culture to the Foreign Students of a Technical University

Starting from the challenges of learning and teaching a local language and culture in the 21st century multicultural Romania, this theoretical paper argues for the importance of an upgraded, motivating culture-based approach to teaching Romanian to the foreign students of a technical university in Romania. The main argument is that effective teaching of any foreign language must broaden the students' cultural horizon for their accomplishment in the field of education and for politically-correct approaches. Knowing an international language of communication, such as English, is not the only prerequisite for fitting into the Romanian secular society, concerned with preserving its culture and values, and at the same time, open to multiculturalism for achieving unity in diversity. Learning Romanian and discovering its culture and identity as well as the specific manners of conduct and communication in formal academic, business or social encounters, amounts to embracing diversity and achieving unity in terms of respect, tolerance, open-mindedness, politically-correct approaches. For successfully teaching Romanian to foreign engineering students, this article lays emphasis on the relevance of focusing on the Romanian cultural values, on the Romanian wisdom encapsulated in proverbs. Thus, we enhance the students' motivation to learn a new language, stimulating their creativity and developing their cognitive and argumentation capacity.

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