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COMMUNICATIVE METHODS OR TEACHING GRAMMAR?

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Abstract: The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the way technology is used to teach foreign languages in relation to this dilemma: should we use communicative methods for foreign language teaching or should we teach grammar? This issue has been problematic and widely discussed, causing never-ending debates in the Romanian University and pre-university learning and teaching environment. What type of learning, communicative or grammar centred, do technology based teaching and learning tools offer? Are they of use to Romanian learners? While the tendency is, in Romanian learning and teaching environment to make thing easy and attractive for students, the technology-based courses are different and perhaps more useful for students as they make students make a greater effort.

Keywords: Technology, ESP, Romania, psychology, culture.

Introduction

Communicative methods or teaching grammar? This issue has been problematic and widely discussed, causing never-ending debates in the Romanian University and pre-university learning and teaching environment. For a while, teaching grammar has been considered fit to ban when teachers were supervised. Learning foreign languages such as English was supposed to be fun and communication, and that grammar should be pushed aside. The idea was to provide students with a not threatening and fun environment to learn a foreign language such as English and to make them feel confident in their communication abilities.

Nowadays, the method of teaching the English language with games is still popular in Romanian highschools. It is well-known that highschool students go through a difficult age psychologically, as it is the time when they question and reject rules and conventions. Grammar rules can be regarded as part of these conventions. They are psychologically more inclined towards rebellion and creativity and less for obeying rules, so teaching communication and games can be regarded as more appropriate in establishing a connection with these students. Students belonging to this age group are more prone to question the practical use of rules and theory related to language and be more open to its practical, communicative use in various everyday life situations. What is more, they are more preoccupied with spending time with and making new friends, visiting foreign countries and wishing to establish relationships and using their knowledge of a foreign language to this purpose. They are psychologically less inclined towards routine, and rules tend to be associated with this, especially grammar rules, and more open towards new experiences and adventures. Teachers need to sympathize with their students and find a way of communicating their knowledge to them and this seems an easy way. However, this can only be seen as a temporary solution, suitable only for what Romanian culture regards as the best years of our

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lives, the teenage years spent in highschool. There are enough Romanian old films and novels to prove this, which continue to retain their popularity: the film *Liceenii* (1987), translated as *Highschool Students*, made after the novel *Liceenii* by George Şovu, the novels *Cişmigiu et Co*. by Grigore Bajenaru, with its continuation, *Bună dimineaţa, băieţi*! From these films with highschool students we remain with the image of the students with the ups and downs in their lives, related to relationships with their parents, teachers, friends, first loves, and with the issues they deal with, in school with work and friendships, as well as troubled relationships with parents, lovers, and teachers. They know to have fun and when to be serious, or they will have to learn these. These films and novels tell us to respect these years in the students' lives and make them comfortable and enjoyable, while combining sympathy and the minimum of harsh rules. The trick is to know when to apply discipline and when to enjoy things together with your students. It takes a lot of courage and risk to apply the model of the teacher who relinquishes control and becomes "buddies" with his students. On the other hand, being too harsh can result in loss of communication with the students; if the activities are too threatening the same can happen.

With highschool students, as well with students of any other age after all, the teacher needs to sympathize, to try to be in their shoes and explain things depending on their way of understanding. In order to do so, psychology knowledge is necessary, to know the specificities of every age, as well as for understanding how someone seeing the respective foreign language for the first time can feel and get to become interested and motivated to learn it. The tasks are designed to fit in with their own interests, for instance a teacher can introduce a discussion about the *Harry Potter* series if he knows students enjoy it to start motivating them to learn vocabulary items related to magic and witchcraft. Just as very young beginners are motivated to learn a foreign language through games and pictures, and stories, so can highschool students be motivated by presenting them with types of activities and communication fit to their psychology.

However, we could argue that for any game there are certain rules to be obeyed. We could look at the grammar of a foreign language such as English through this perspective. Romanian Professor Lidia Vianu specializes in recuperating the great names of Romanian English language teaching methodology. She is the owner of an online publishing house, Contemporary Literature Press. By publishing Aurel Candrea's *I Learn English*, she states that contemporary communicative methods no longer require from the student to focus on grammar too much and actually know it, while Candrea's method says we need to know the rules of grammar just as we need to know the rules of any game.

For a group of learners, we start first and foremost by doing a needs analysis as teachers. What kind of learners do we deal with? Beginners, intermediate, advanced? Do we teach the foreign language for special purposes or not? What is their age, what are their expectations, what do they need to know by the time they graduate this class? It is from here that we should evaluate which method is best, communicative or grammar-based teaching. This should be a universal issue, not specific to Romanian culture necessarily. The shift from the grammar-translation method to communicative methods has in fact been universal for the study of the English language; it is not just found in Romanian culture. In the same way, the focus on the psychology of students in pedagogical studies has been documented everywhere. The same could be said about the shift of focus from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning. Romanians believe that their learning system has focused too much on the theoretical aspect and too little on the students' practical skills. For highschool students

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especially, foreign language classes, especially English, are associated with a more relaxed and fun way of learning, as the teachers are more open and sympathize more with them, and the culture of the English-speaking countries is very familiar and appealing to them due to popular culture. They enjoy watching their films, listening to their songs, borrowing their celebrations such as Valentine's Day, reading their bestsellers, etc. English language classes are also associated with the use of the modern technology, from cassette players and video to the use of computers and tablets. One could argue that youth culture is not a feature specific to Romanian society alone, yet in comparison with other objects of study the methods for teaching foreign languages differ significantly in the more intelligible, communicative, fun, and practical ways of teaching. We could also mention the fact that young students have high hopes of visiting, studying in or establishing themselves in a foreign English-speaking country or at least of establishing business connections abroad. This can have a strong impact on the way they relate to the subject and to the way they communicate with their teachers and are more receptive to what they are taught in class.

Young students are now considered to be addicted to technology, and they are well-known for their constant use of gadgets such as smartphones. There are claims that these gadgets distract them in class. There are also claims that technology can always make life easier and even enhance learning. A specificity of Romanian culture is the belief that youngsters use devices such as smartphones only for fun and also to acquire a certain status among their peers, that they are less concerned with their practical use in learning. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Romanian culture has become a consumerist society, more concerned with fun and pleasure, and less sensitive to spirituality, education, and discipline.

With these issues in mind, how do Romanians relate to the way technology is used to teach foreign languages? Does technology establish a common ground for communication between teachers and students? Does it motivate students more to learn a foreign language? Is teaching with technology related to communicative methods for foreign language teaching or to teaching grammar?

Background

Why does the English language have such an influence on Romanian culture, and when did this influence start?

It has to do with economic interests, according to Condruz-Băcescu (2013: 20). English has become a necessity for Romanians, just like for any other peoples using English as a global language. English has become a must for Romanians wishing to communicate in their field of activity (Held et al, 1999: 346).

English is everywhere, being needed from hobbies, popular culture to university studies and business purposes. This is why it is so widely taught, to students of any age, any level, and working in any field of activity, from general English to English for specific purposes. Even as a student in Engineering you will have English classes in the curriculum.

Ţirban (2013: 75) argues for the influence of the European Union, which Romanian joined in 2007, as part of the situation of English at present in the Romanian curricula.

Teaching English has had a tradition in Romania, flourishing especially after 1989, the year marking the fall of communism, according to Zagan-Zelter (2010: 246). According to these two authors, this moment meant the flourishing of the study of English as a foreign language: children would start learning it at 3 years old, then they would study it in primary school, secondary school, highschool, and even at university, no matter what specialization they chose. They would need a language certificate for getting a Bachelor's degree, Master's

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degree or PhD. English has become necessary, according to Zagan-Zelter (2010) for Romanians as it is an international language. In universities such as those related to economical and engineering studies, students are taught English so that they will be able at the end of two years of study to reach B2, starting from B1 according to the Common European Framework assessment scale (Zagan-Zelter 2010: 246). Firstly, these students need to have good knowledge of general English, and then move on to being taught elements of English for Specific Purposes.

What should be specific in these cases is related to the specific vocabulary and business situations students can find themselves in. Yet, all this presupposes knowledge of basic grammar.

The following questions related to the teaching of English at the Faculty of Economy can stand for any ESP domain, related to the contents of the course, the focus on needed skills, vocabulary, and grammar: "Should there be a different course design for each program of the faculty (marketing, management, finance etc.)?" (Zagan-Zelter 2010: 247)

These dilemmas have turned into research questions for numerous papers and books in English-teaching methodology. These dilemmas remain to this day and teachers are still trying to solve them when they work on handbooks. For the domain of Business English, in the 1960s-1970s the focus was on vocabulary, which was dealt with in texts and dialogues on a specific topic such as banking. Comprehension questions and vocabulary drills were among the exercises. In the 19702-1980s, coursebooks started focusing on communication skills (speaking, writing, listening, reading). What was considered important was the functional use of language, for expressing opinions, advice, agreement. The focus on practical use and not on theoretical use of language was beginning. (Zagan-Zelter 2010: 247)

Romanian teachers have moved towards the communicative teaching of language, following the shift from traditional teaching methods in the 1970s brought by the Council of Europe (Bucur and Popa 2013: 32).

The shortcomings with the communicative approach can be seen in fluency replacing accuracy, when not enough focus is placed on grammatical accuracy. This may arise from the need to have students express themselves using their speaking skills quite early in the teaching process. Of course the use of language is the main objective of teaching and learning a foreign language.

Communicative skills are part of using language for practical purposes. The Romanian teaching system is trying to move from placing focus on theoretical knowledge learning and practical skills. We can see this in papers published on the subject of the teaching process. Even for modern physics, the approach is practical: The authors Stoica, Moraru and Miron focus in the paper *New Frontiers of the Teaching Process* published in 2010 on Science Direct on the way school research projects can help students deal with the acquired knowledge.

The European context nowadays asks students to be prepared for a world of cultural diversity, mobility, and technology. The discussions about culture and the different cultures is now a matter of actuality more than ever. Professor Sorin Baciu has designed a course of lectures for students at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, *Culture. An Awareness-Raising Approach*, with the purpose of developing their critical thinking, helping them communicating using the English language; his book is also useful to understand cultures and today's world. The course is like a guide through today's world, with its issues, such as globalization, culture shock, cultural dimensions (Hofstede) and, of course, to a

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definition of culture. The course is for engineering students as well as for the students of the Translators and Interpreters section within the same university. This course is taught along with a practical English course for students of both specializations. This only proves the strong connection between language and culture, with the necessity of connecting the two.

This connection between language and culture is explored through translations. Even though the grammar-translation method is said to have lost its popularity, the importance of translations in today's world is also seen in the way that the field of Translation Studies is still growing as a discipline and translations are widely taught at university level, during Practical courses and also for specialized studies of Translators and Interpreters. The work of famous authors of English Studies like Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu is still enjoying popularity. They have popularized the great authors of English literature through their translations. Levițchi's handbook for translators from English to Romanian and Romanian to English is not outdated yet.

Petrescu's Science Direct article *How to raise cultural awareness through teaching translations* (2012) confirms both the strong connection between language and culture and the importance of teaching translations (3910).

Another issue addressed in a Science Direct paper, and which is specific to the culture of Romania, is that of homework. According to Trif (2012), in *Psychological Basics of Homework in Romania Today*, homework is perceived as negative in Romania, due to Romania's historical background and its association with practices from a historical period (1013). In Romania, the author of the article states, homework is made synonymous with exercise (Trif 2012: 1013).

The role of homework may also have lost popularity due to the large amounts of homework given to Romanian students in general at all levels for the time of the holidays. The amount of homework required of them has often been unrealistic and incompatible with the time they had to finish it. Even homework during school days can be the same. However, due to the changes in the Romanian teaching environment homework should also be regarded in a different way. Trif says that homework has come to be regarded as unhelpful in the teaching process, due to lack of creativity, personal involvement and communication (Trif 2012: 1015)

The reason for this can be the large amount of work and also the lack of feedback from the teacher, due to the same reasons.

The perspective of using in English in today's world is, for learners, both a motivation factor and a necessity. The trend that is now emerging across the world and which is also accessible through technology to Romanians are MOOCs, mass online courses. They can be useful to learn a foreign language and even aspects related to the culture of a foreign language.

MOOCs, EUROCOR language Courses, Tests. Solutions and Recommendations

We need to evaluate the utility of using technology when teaching a foreign language, just as we need to find a didactic purpose to any teaching English with games activity. In any classroom we use at least some audio material so that the students have access to material produced by native speakers. Of course, this material is usually accompanied by tasks, consisting in multiple choice questions, true or false, fill-in-the-gaps etc. Multiple choice based tests are also fashionable, such as IELTS, Cambridge, TOEFEL, which are taken by quite a number of Romanian students, with various purposes: studying or working abroad,

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migration, etc. The format of these tests has also had an impact in the students' way of studying and in the teachers' methods: the grammar lessons are very concise and based on examples. The teaching of grammar rules can be simplified compared to old teaching English handbooks. Practicing for this type of tests usually involves technology: students can access Internet sites.

Romanian society believes that a huge amount of information is now available on the Internet, if properly selected. This is why the focus should not be so much on memorizing skills as on practical use of information.

In spite of talking about a communication era, self-learning courses, and online or correspondence courses are found alongside face-to-face learning environment. The poor economic conditions cause teachers to lose enthusiasm for their jobs, according to opinions shared by Romanians. What is more, the idea that time is money can also be applied here. Nowadays we try to find time for doing a variety of activities and online learning can be regarded as a faster alternative. We find that we lose too much time in traffic jams, since the large cities of Romania are very crowded with cars.

What type of method do courses like correspondence courses by the European Institute of Courses through Correspondence (EUROCOR) used by Romanians and MOOC courses use for teaching foreign languages? EUROCOR uses audio material (CDs) to teach pronunciation and to hear dialogues, read by native speakers. So do MOOC courses on edX, Coursera, and Futurelearn. MOOC courses use, additionally, video materials, so that the students can see their teacher in class explaining. Self-learning courses like courses through correspondence and MOOCs make use of grammar-based teaching. Even correspondence courses allow the student to have an online account from where to send homework. If the student does not master the grammar issues, then the homework or assignment are incorrect and marked with zero. In this sense, such courses are perhaps more useful than face-to-face teaching and learning, where teaching through games, one side of communicative language teaching, gains foreground in Romanian teaching and learning environment. The accent placed on communication can be sometimes wrongly understood in face-to-face situations.

Current tendencies in Romanian society for continuous professional development to regularly participate in training sessions, workshops, courses etc. ensure the success of distance learning through regular mail or online MOOCs. MOOCs are meant for a variety of ages of learners, and for learners coming from a variety of cultural, social, and psychological backgrounds. These courses have been successful for Romanian learners, and popularized by institutions such as the British Council, which invited Romanian teachers to courses related to language, culture and literature on FutureLearn MOOC platform. These MOOC courses continue the idea that activities for learners should not be threatening, that learning should especially develop practical skills for learners, the integration of technology, and the use of communication between learners. The use of videos, articles, multiple choice tests, and essay assignments, as well as the learner-centred teaching method are by now familiar to Romanian teachers and learners for foreign language learning and teaching. Yet, for foreign languages, grammar is also put for practical use. If the learner chooses a wrong answer from multiple choice quizzes, he does not receive points or is told he is wrong, and an explanation follows below. The online MOOC courses also allow students to offer feedback about the course, and evaluate their teachers. Some Romanian universities also make use of anonymous questionnaires asking students to express their opinion about the teacher's attitude, knowledge of the subject, and clarity of the material presented. This is supposed to help

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efficient communication between teachers and students. Romanians are concerned with a speaker's presentation abilities, with the way he can transmit information and opinion efficiently in a determined period of time. This also holds true for class activities. The way a speaker gets the attention of the audience is also important for teachers.

Conclusion

While the tendency is, in Romanian learning and teaching environment to make things easy and attractive for students, some technology-based courses can be different and perhaps more useful for students as they make students make a greater effort in mastering grammar rules. These online or distance courses help combine teaching grammar with teaching communication. Language learning EUROCOR courses make a lot of use of grammar-translation method and of teaching grammar.

It is impossible to separate teaching communication from teaching grammar. This is proved by the courses, online and through correspondence, which promise learners to master the basics of a new language or of an intermediate or even advanced level very fast. With EUROCOR language learning courses, students do not stand a chance to pass the homeworks and multiple choice test at the end of the course, needed to receive a diploma from the Institute, if they do not master grammatical rules. Once they tick an answer that is wrong, they lose points and the chance to pass the test and receive the diploma. They may, however, request another test until they pass. In MOOCs for foreign language learning the same type of testing is given. We could say that grammar is reintroduced to the study of foreign languages, with the help of multiple-choice tests. Nowadays the focus is no longer on the grammatical theory when it comes to testing, in the sense that students are not asked to reproduce and write about grammatical rules. The task is more difficult than before, in fact, as students are asked to recognize the correct structures and produce the correct structures by applying the rules. The knowledge of rules is presupposed to be there, and students are expected to do something more, actually use them. This makes sense since we call today's age the age of communication. After learning how to use grammar in context, the students are expected to use the respective structures and recognize them in the future conversations in a foreign country on various occasions.

The language classroom is extended nowadays with the help of technology outside its physical space and time.

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