DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING ROMANIAN THROUGH ENGLISH TO FOREIGN STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Romanian is a complex language, rich in poly-semantic words, with difficult grammar rules and many exceptions from the rules, especially when it comes to nouns and verbs. When facing the need of teaching Romanian through English to foreign students, most of them Israeli, i.e. both Arabs and Jewish, it becomes a real challenge, and sometimes it exceeds the limits of the imaginary. But the goal is to eventually make them understand and use correctly things which might have seemed impossible due to non-existent correlations.*
Keywords: *Romanian, English, difficulties, non-existent correlations.*

Foreign students in Romania

Most foreign students choose to study medicine in Romania for different reasons, two of which are very obvious and common among foreigners: first of all, education is cheaper in Romania than in their own country and, second of all, our educational system combines theory with practice, unlike other systems where emphasis is placed more on theory rather than practice. The latter approach is detrimental to the future development of students and their preparation for the medical career.

Starting with clinical years, students are allowed to practice in hospitals, to directly interact with patients, to make case histories and, step by step, they are trained for their future life as physicians. It is a hard experience for Romanian students, but it becomes even harder for foreign students, since they are also confronted with other problems: they are not familiar with Romanian hospitals and academic institutions, they do not master properly the Romanian language, and the very few who manage to speak Romanian correctly may also experience nervousness when dealing with patients at first. That is why, at first at least, they are accompanied by an assistant lecturer who mediates the relationship with the patients.

Most foreign students do not know any Romanian at all when they come to Romania. There are very few who come to Romania one year before enrolling to the medical school and choose to study Romanian intensively during the preparatory year. It lasts a whole year, in which they study the Romanian grammar and vocabulary thoroughly, along with subjects like Biology and Anatomy, that will further on help them in being admitted to the Faculty of Medicine. However, this category of students is currently not too large.

The vast majority of foreign students are from Israel (approximately 70%), and the rest come from Greece, England, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, the US, Thailand, Japan, etc. For almost all of them, Romanian is very new, and the very first words they learn are from the taxi drivers and shop assistants. It is hard for them at the beginning to make Romanian friends, and once they become friends with the

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Romanians, the latter's tendency is to practice their English and not to help their foreign friends learn new words or phrases in Romanian.

The characteristics of the Romanian language

Romanian is a complex language, always oriented towards novelty, towards regeneration and renewal. This can only be possible and it has always been possible through the contact between languages. Romanian, like some other languages, has been very permissive when it came to borrowing words, most of which of English origin lately. All these foreign words and phrases have (1) either been assimilated to the Romanian system (for example, by changing form in order to be easily assimilated into the Romanian vocabulary) or (2) preserved as such, and used as an alternative to the already existing Romanian equivalent. It is also worth mentioning those English words which have entered the Romanian vocabulary due to the absence of a word with such a reference (3).

(1) *autoimmunity* (English) < *autoimunitate* (Romanian)
bypass (English) < *bypass/ by-pass/ bai-pas* (Romanian)
(2) *pacemaker* (English) < *pacemaker /stimulator cardiac* (Romanian)
(3) *stent* (English) < *stent* (Romanian).

Either way, Romanian has managed to preserve a balance and not become a "victim" of the massive wave of foreign loanwords, being relaxed to a certain extent, aware of the fact that some of the English words and phrases will eventually become part of all languages worldwide.

Learning Romanian

When confronted with the Romanian language, most students find it hard to cope with, and of course, the more different the languages, the more difficulties arise. The first impediment is **the alphabet**, but since we speak of students and not pupils, they have for sure learned another foreign language using the Latin letters. English is the most appropriate means of teaching a new language when the two parties involved in the process of learning do not have any other language in common. English is the best choice since it is universally taught and spoken, it does not have complicated grammar rules and the words or phrases from its vocabulary tend to be borrowed in most languages and therefore referred to as international words and phrases.

When teaching the basics of Romanian, the news comes when the **letters specific to the Romanian alphabet** have to be introduced: *ă, â, î, ş* and *ţ*, but it is not very hard for the students to learn them, and what they really enjoy is practicing the pronunciation in chorus.

Students will next become familiar with the **definite** and the **indefinite articles**, the former's use being different from English. If in English, they both precede the noun, in Romanian, the definite article is attached to the end of the noun, and only the indefinite article comes in front of the noun. For some students it is hard to use the articles correctly from the very beginning, since the use of articles in English resembles their language, from which Romanian in different.

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English	Romanian
SINGULAR	
Masculine	
a *(male) student* (indefinite article)	***un*** *student* (indefinite article)
the *(male) student* (definite article)	*student**ul*** (definite article)
Feminine	
a *(female) student* (indefinite article)	***o*** *studentă* (indefinite article)
the *(female) student* (definite article)	*studen**ta*** (definite article)
Neutral	
a *corpse* (indefinite article)	***un*** *cadavru* (indefinite article)
the *corpse* (definite article)	*cadavr**ul*** (definite article)
PLURAL	
Masculine	
some *(male) students* (indefinite article)	***nişte*** *studenţi* (indefinite article)
the *(male) students* (definite article)	*studenţ**ii*** (definite article)
Feminine	
some *(female) students* (indefinite article)	***nişte*** *studente* (indefinite article)
the *(female) students* (definite article)	*studente**le*** (indefinite article)
Neutral	
some *corpses* (indefinite article)	***nişte*** *cadavre* (indefinite article)
the *corpses* (definite article)	*cadavre**le*** (definite article)

Two other problems to be approached are **gender** and **number**. The existence of three genders (masculine, feminine and neutral) in Romanian is a bit challenging to be explained through English, which only has two (masculine and feminine), but by choosing the right examples and by making students aware of the existing rules and also the exceptions from the rules, it will no longer be perceived as a difficult thing.

For example, it is easy to understand that most **masculine nouns** take an *-i* as a plural ending:

(4) *un coleg – doi colegi*
un prieten – doi prieteni
un profesor – doi profesori

but it takes time to understand and use correctly masculine nouns that either change the ending, but still take the *–i* (5), or simply preserve the singular form (6) (i.e. invariable nouns).

(5) *un frate – doi fraţi*
un tată – doi taţi

(6) *un ochi – doi ochi*
un genunchi – doi genunchi

Similarly, it is easy to understand and remember that most **feminine nouns** take an *-e* as a plural ending:

(7) *o fată – două fete*
o masă – două mese
o profesoară – două profesoare
o restanţă – două restanţe

but it is more difficult to remember the forms ending in *-i*, which students initially thought that were specific to masculine nouns.

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(8) *o stradă – două străzi*
o uşă – două uşi
o maşină – două maşini
o sală – două săli
o ţară – două ţări
(9) *o carte – două cărţi*
(10) *o farmacie – două farmacii*
o disecţie – două disecţii
(11) *o cafea – două cafele*
o şosea – două şosele

When discussing **neutral nouns**, it is also difficult to make students understand and differentiate between words ending in *-e* (12) and words ending in *-uri* (13), and also nouns that preserve their form (14).

(12) *un creion – două creioane*
un apartament – două apartamente
un oraş – două oraşe
(13) *un pix – două pixuri*
un metrou – două metrouri
(14) *un nume – două nume*
un prenume – două prenume

Verbs also represent a real challenge for foreign students, but once they learn that there are four conjugations according to the ending of the verb in the infinitive *(-a, -ea, -e* and *–i/-î*), they will start making their own simple sentences and talk to one another, which gives them courage to further study and practice.

Pronouns are hard to explain to foreign students through English, since they either do not exist in English or are not translated (it is usually the case of the accented forms of the personal pronouns). The difficult part refers to the non-accented forms of personal pronouns, because of their form.

(15) *He asks **me** something.* *El **mă** întreabă **(pe mine)** ceva.*
(16) ***I** have a headache.* ***(Pe mine) mă** doare capul.*

Sentence (15) above is easy to understand, even though in Romanian we may have both forms of the personal pronoun in the Accusative (accented: *pe mine* and non-accented: *mă*), but the problem comes with sentence (16) where a pronoun in the Nominative (*I*) is translated by means of a pronoun in the Accusative (accented: *pe mine* and non-accented: *mă*).

There is also lack of similarity when translating an English sentence (with a pronoun in Nominative) by using different equivalents in Romanian (a pronoun in the Dative):

(17) ***I** like medicine.* ***(Mie) îmi** place medicina.*
***I** am hungry/ unwell/ sleepy.*
***(Mie) mi-**e foame/ rău/ somn.*

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Along with the explanation of grammar items, students are taught basic **set phrases** (18-20), which seem to be more useful for beginners, or more medical ones, once they have started the study of Romanian, under the form of simple dialogues (21-22). The use of such phrases makes students easily integrate among their colleagues, irrespective of their nationality.

(18) *Cum te numeşti?*
Numele meu este George. Tu cum te numeşti?
Eu sunt Ana.

(19) *De unde eşti?*
(Eu) sunt din Italia. Tu de unde eşti?
Eu nu sunt din Italia, sunt din Grecia.

(20) *Bună! Eu sunt Mihai. Sunt student la medicină.*
Bună! Eu sunt Cristina şi sunt studentă la litere.

(21) *Ce vă doare?*
Simt că mă doare tot corpul, dar cel mai mult mă doare capul.
De când vă doare?
De câteva zile.

(22) *Bună ziua. Ce vă supără?*
Bună ziua. Nu prea pot să dorm bine noaptea.
Din ce cauză?
Cred că mă obosesc foarte mult la serviciu.
Mai aveţi şi alte simptome?
Uneori ameţesc şi trebuie să mă aşez.

In conclusion, the professor's role is to make connections and correlations between Romanian and English in terms of grammar and vocabulary, and it is the task of the student to further correlate the newly-introduced items to his/her previous knowledge and to his/her mother tongue. Therefore, this is the big challenge: attempting to explain a new foreign language through the rules of another. Moreover, not all students have the same amount of knowledge of English, therefore it is more difficult for some of them to first understand the concepts in English and then to understand how they work in Romanian.

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