THE PRODUCTION-ORIENTED APPROACH IMPLEMENTED IN A COURSE OF ROMANIAN FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (COVERING THE FIELD OF BIOLOGY AND BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES)

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Abstract:The current paper's objective is to present the results gained by implementing POA (Production-Oriented Approach) in the process of teaching Romanian as a foreign language to the students belonging to the Preparatory Programme. The above-mentioned didactic approach was created by a team of researchers from China, led by Wen Qiufang (2015), and proposes a reorganisation of the teaching process in order to improve the communication and production skills of Chinese students who learn English. The research aims to present the way in which this method can be applied to a foreign language in another linguistic context: Romanian as a foreign language. POA was applied to the students who subscribed and follow the Preparatory Programme of Romanian, in a course of Romanian for specific purposes: biological and biomedical sciences, in order to check the efficiency of this didactic approach and its potential in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. Thus, the teaching process was tailored according to the three stages suggested by POA: motivating, facilitating and evaluating, the topic being The human respiratory system.

Keywords: teaching methods, POA, Romanian as a foreign language, specialized vocabulary, communication/language production

This study[1] has two parts: the first part consists of a general presentation of the theoretical, methodological and teaching frame provided by the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) and the second one is a result analysis of POA application in a course of Romanian as a foreign language, paying special attention to terms used in the field of biology and biomedical sciences (such a subject is included in the Preparatory Programme of Romanian, the West University of Timisoara: *Romanian for specific purposes – the field of biology and biomedical sciences*).

I. Theoretical framework

Even if the POA was tailored for improving English instruction in the universities of China through steering learning in the direction of an active linguistic behaviour (Wen, 2017: 91) materialised through original production activities, the theoretical base of this method could be applied to other foreign language learning-teaching backgrounds. Raising language awareness, perfecting the linguistic system and expanding the discursive competence (Wen 2017: 91) are strong arguments which sustain that POA could be extended to other language learning-teaching contexts (as tools for classroom instruction that actually works).

I consider that any instructional approach of a language is built on some practical needs which learners have and I think that every method has strong points and weaknesses or shortcomings, but what I found interesting and useful in the theoretical and practical framework of POA is the production enhancement (Wen 2017: 94), this steering of the language towards productive linguistic activity, towards teaching strategies which challenge

[1]A part of this study was presented at *The Fifth Forum on Innovative Foreign Language Education in China: Recent Development of the Theory and Practice of POA*, organized by The National Research Centre for Foreign Language Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 11-12 May 2019, Beijing, China.

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the learner to communicate efficiently in a certain language using his/her own language acquisitions and triggering new personal acquisitions for the same purpose: the efficient use of language.

Even if every teaching activity starts with conveying the goals which the teachers expects to be achieved by the learners by the end of the class/course, not always the learners reach that target, because they do not always have the capacity to predict the usefulness of what they learn and to prospect the production outcome(s) of the learning activities.

Because of this, I consider the idea of *production enhancement* (Wen 2017: 94) extremely useful in the systematic study of a foreign language, proposed by POA through the means of organising and channelling the learning activities according to this pattern: starting and ending the learning process with production activities: 'POA starts with production and ends with production as an ultimate objective' (Wen 2017: 94).

This reconstruction of the learning process is useful because it challenges the learner from the beginning to be part of a production activity in which he/she is constrained to use his/his own language acquisitions, to become aware of his deficiencies, to identify his learning needs in order to perform well when producing language and to stimulate him during the learning process to reach a successful production activity.

This way to build the teaching process rises the learners' *motivation* through the access to production, a task they need to fulfil at the end of the learning process; thus, to look at the finish line from the start is a stronger motivation to reach it.

Some of the specific features of POA are:

- *Output language acquisition*: steering language acquisition in the direction of production skills, which are extremely important in using a language and which become a learning objective;
- *Input as enabler*: selecting the materials used in the learning process with the purpose to enhance the learners' production competence;
- *Teacher mediation* – the importance of the teacher in scaffolding students' learning in order to reach the production goals faster.

After reading some articles which describe or apply the POA (for example: Wen 2016; Wen 2017; Deng 2018; Ren, Wang 2018) and analysing the POA system and its comprising elements in order to see whether this approach in teaching English in China is applicable to other languages and in other contexts of learning foreign languages, I consider it useful to point out some aspects which make POA a teaching model with general use:

- The accuracy of the POA system: the strong connection between the three components of the method: teaching principles, teaching hypotheses and teaching procedures;
- The theoretical and methodical orientation of the system towards actual results: learning activities focused on linguistic production in order to enhance production competences;
- Realistic qualitative and quantitative feedback given from both diagnostic and prognostic perspectives on the productive linguistic skills of the learners at the beginning and at the end of the learning process.

II. Learning Romanian as a Foreign Language using the POA

a. Romanian as a Foreign Language in universities from Romania

Currently, Romania is an option for several foreign citizens who want to study various fields (in Romanian). Before they begin their studies in Romania (after being accepted), the international students have to subscribe and follow a university programme of learning Romanian for one (academic) year. This year of linguistic preparation, compulsory for the ones who want to study in a Romanian university, in Romanian, ends with a graduation exam, which certifies the level of knowing Romanian and which needs to be of a minimum

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B1 level according to *The Common European Framework of References for Languages* (CEFRL).

Thus, The West University of Timisoara offers such a programme. The goal of this linguistic preparation programme is acquiring general communication skills in Romanian, but also professional communication skills; that is for facilitating the access of international students to tertiary-level study programmes in Romanian.

During the first semester (14 weeks – 25 hours/week) international students learn Romanian and aim to acquire general communication skills (oral and written comprehension, oral and written communication, vocabulary and grammatical structures); in the second semester (14 weeks – 25 de hours/week) the students continue to enhance these skills, but they also have a new subject: *Romanian for specific purposes*; groups are made according to the specific field which they will study: *Mathematics and Natural Science, Biology and Biomedical Sciences, Engineering, Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, Sports and Physical Education*. The main objective of this subject is to expose and familiarise students with specialised vocabulary for them to acquire minimal professional communication skills. Developing these skills is made gradually, through the transfer from general linguistic acquisition to specific linguistic content in a certain field. I teach *Romanian for specific purposes*: *Biology and Biomedical Sciences*. Most of my current students who subscribed for this programme will be studying in the medical field.

b. Arguments for applying POA in teaching *Romanian for specific purposes*: *Biology and Biomedical Sciences*

The subject *Romanian for specific purposes* targets to develop the following professional communication skills which the students need in order to study in Romanian:

- Acquiring the specific elements of specialised discourse.
- Developing the capacity to transfer linguistic elements from the common discourse to specialised language and from these discourses to the common discourse.
- Correct and relevant usage of basic lexical units and terms in speech acts.
- Integrated use of linguistic contents (Phonetics, Vocabulary, Grammar) in both written and oral communication (adapted to a certain profession).
- Enhancing reception skills (reading and listening comprehension) and production skills (writing, speaking and interaction) when dealing with specialised texts, within level B1 (minimum) according to CEFRL (*The Common European Framework of References for Languages*).
- Correct adjustment to several dialogues and interactions within a workplace context.

When reading about POA applied in teaching English as a foreign language, proposed by professor Wen Qiufang, I thought it would be a real challenge for me to try this approach, as a teacher of Romanian as a foreign language (for specific purposes), due to the fact that it is built on a communicative/productive component of learning a foreign language.

The challenge was to check the possibility and to find the opportunity to implement POA in the courses of Romanian as a *foreign* language – used in the field of biology and biomedical sciences in order to enhance productive skills, using the Production-Oriented Approach, which considers that learning a second language with language output can lead to better learning outcomes than learning without output (Wen 2016: 5). This method places the output before the input in order to serve as *driving force for L2 learning* (Wen 2016: 5).

c. Applying POA in teaching Romanian as a foreign language (the field of biology and biomedical sciences)

The target group I work with and which was exposed to my implementing POA has 20-25 foreign students who learn Romanian at the West University of Timisoara, for one academic year, in order to be able to study medicine in Romania. The group is extremely

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heterogeneous, as they come from several linguistic, cultural and historical backgrounds: Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Serbia, Switzerland and Syria. Their knowledge of Romanian is currently somewhere in between B1 and B2 (according to The Common European Framework of References for Languages).

I applied the method on a single topic from Biology and Biomedical Sciences: *The human respiratory system*. The topic is strongly connected to their future field of study at tertiary level. The topic covered 6 hours/meetings lasting for 90 minutes each and the goal was to develop professional communication skills through activities centred on production skills and objectives and practice oriented towards language acquisition.

d) Romanian for specific purposes. Teaching process

The teaching process is mediated by the teacher and follows the three steps proposed by POA: Motivating, Enabling and Assessing (Wen 2017: 98-100).

1. MOTIVATING

Firstly, I exposed to my students two scenarios focusing on production activities and explained what the tasks were. I built these two production tasks in direct connection with the output-driven hypothesis (Wen 2017: 96-97) proposed by POA with the purpose of obtaining, at the end, better outcomes. I proposed two scenarios given the fact that they have quite different levels of mastering and knowing Romanian. The students having a lower level of Romanian only had to solve the first task (situation 1), while the students with higher communication skills had to comply with both production tasks.

Situation 1: *You study Medicine. It is your first year of study. Your Anatomy teacher gives you an image which presents the respiratory system and asks you to describe it and the way it functions (in approximately 10 lines).*

Note: The students receive an image with the human respiratory system as visual support for solving the learning task.

Situation 2: *After finishing your classes, you work part-time at a gym as a personal trainer. You have a meeting with a client who comes for the first time at the gym. Before starting the workout, you must make some recommendations on how to have a correct breathing while working out, using relevant issues from the previous description. What will you recommend?*

In order to make the production tasks realistic and to stimulate the communication skills they already have, the students watched two short videos (approx. 3 minutes each) based on communication bits connected to the production tasks. The first one contains an anatomic description of the respiratory system and the second one is a presentation in which the speaker gives advice on how to breathe correctly, using demonstrative physical examples (Follow the links - Video 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlPx3XaxI-s; Video 2: http://rom.explainwell.org/index.php/table-of-contents-speak-easy/breathing-correctly/).

The stake of watching these videos is for students to become aware of their personal language skills and their personal limits in accomplishing the productive tasks. These aspects can be factors which motivate the student to perform better in the future, as professor Wen stated: 'The POA assumes that if students realize their weaknesses, they, as adults, would like to learn more in order to avoid embarrassment and perform more effectively in the future' (Wen 2016: 8).

Secondly (a stage of about 20-30 minute), the students, split into two groups (according to their language level – B1 or B2), tried to produce individually, in writing, the output tasks (task 1 for B1 group and tasks 1 and 2 for group B2). The output tasks are for activating the existing production skills and for identifying what exactly the students lack and need in order to fulfil the production tasks.

By the end of this activity, each student read his production and I initiated a conversation in order to make the students aware of their own problems met during the accomplishment of the task. I would like to highlight only some of the difficulties identified

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by the students: the transfer of the terms from the mother tongue (Arabic or Serbian) or from a worldwide known language (English or French) in Romanian, the lack of specific linguistic structures/phrases necessary for a scientific description, the limits met in structuring a descriptive passage, the deficiencies in giving advice and making recommendations.

This stage was for me a way of evaluating the students' communication skills in Romanian (biomedical field) and for my students – a chance to make a personal analysis of the difficulties they met, to ask themselves what they lack and what they need and which are the aspects towards which they need to steer their learning. Undoubtedly, this methodological perspective grows the students' motivation to learn the specific contents of professional communication in Romanian in order to better fulfil the initial production tasks.

In the final stage of motivation I revealed my students the objectives they need to accomplish at the end of the learning activities from this unit.

The main objectives of this unit for focusing on the students' production skills, using POA were:

- To make an elementary scientific description of the human respiratory system;
- To give advice and to make recommendations on how to breathe correctly while doing several activities – daily or professional.

The objectives derived from these production activities have in view using scientific contents specific to the proposed topic and useful linguistic elements: specific terms, grammatical structures and phrases used in descriptions and giving advice/making recommendations.

Furthermore, I exposed to the students the communication and the linguistic objectives which I had in mind for the entire unit:

- To identify/to locate the organs which are part of the human respiratory system in order to describe it;
- To extract the scientific contents (3 ideas/pieces of information) useful for making an anatomical description;
- To acquire the terms which designate the components of the respiratory system;
- To produce a specialised mini-dialogue exploring some information offered by the support-text (by asking or answering);
- To rebuild a text which describes the *pulmonary ventilation process*;
- To sustain the logic sequence of paragraphs which describe the *pulmonary ventilation process*;
- To identify the particularities and to observe the cohesion of paragraphs in a scientific description;
- To identify language phrases in Romanian which are specific to an anatomical description, using the support-text: the description of the larynx;
- To analyse the parts of an anatomical description using the support-text: the description of the larynx;
- To identify phrases and formulas for offering advice and making recommendations on how to have a healthy life.

Moreover, I exposed to my students the general plan of the teaching process: the types of learning activities which we will do, using contents from the medical field; the productive activities which they need to fulfil in the evaluation stage and which have been anticipated in this initial (motivation) stage.

2. ENABLING

This stage of the teaching process implies the students' completing both a learning circuit which is guided by a teacher, who has the role to offer them, step by step, all the necessary resources (scientific, linguistic and rhetorical contents) and a selective learning circuit, conducted by their own, personal needs (see selective learning hypotheses – Wen

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2016: 6-7). Through both learning strategies, students would be able to reach performance in productive activities.

In order to enable learning scientific, linguistic and rhetorical contents which are specific to the topic: *The human respiratory system*, I selected four texts from Biological and Biomedical Sciences. These specialised texts are the support material for the learning mini-activities built on some specific objectives, but which all work together for the students' completion of the major objectives targeted by the above-mentioned unit: enhancing the students' production skills.

The first step in enabling the input

The access to the scientific knowledge from Biological and Biomedical Sciences using the specific terms in Romanian

I proposed the students to carefully read a text (the enabling material) which contains the basic scientific information regarding the organs of the human respiratory system: *The structure of the respiratory system* (https://www.revistagalenus.ro/practica-medicala/sistemul-respirator-si-efortul-fizic/). The enabling material encompasses the scientific information from video 1 used in the motivation stage. Starting from this text, I designed four learning and usage mini-activities which would be useful for the students' developing their productive skills and for them solving output tasks.

a) *Fill in the blanks with the organs of the respiratory system.*

For this mini-activity I gave the students an image representing the human respiratory system. The specific objective of this task: *to identify/to locate the organs which build up the human respiratory system and to describe it*. The students complete the task by connecting the image with the information from the text and with the specific anatomical terminology. Thus, the students are able to acquire the terms which designate the parts of the respiratory system.

b) *Work in pairs and discuss the most important pieces of information (regarding the topic of the course) from the support-text. Write down in the spaces below the most important 3 ideas/items according to your choice.*

The targeted specific objective is: to extract the scientific contents (3 ideas/items) useful for the anatomical description; the current objective is connected through the productive task with the upcoming objectives. This mini-activity aims at exploring the text at its scientific extent so that the students extract the relevant issues from the text. In this way, the students can configure step by step the scientific knowledge needed for describing accurately the respiratory system. At the same time, fulfilling the task in pairs triggers a productive interaction between students, as a well-sustained micro-dialogue is automatically started (they need to reach an agreement regarding the top 3 pieces of information from the text).

c) *What do you know about the respiratory system?*

Work in pairs (student A and student B) and put together the information about the respiratory system by asking the proper question for the given answer or by giving the proper answer to the given question. Then, read the dialogue.

Q: Student A: Which are the components of the respiratory system?

A: Student B: .....

Q: Student A: .....

A: Student B: The lungs are coated with a double membrane called pleura.

Q: Student B: How is the covering of the lungs called?

A: Student A: .....

Q: Student B: .....

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A: Student A: The respiratory tract of the respiratory system has an important role in the filtering and the humidification of the air.

d) *Work in pairs (student A and student B) and phrase questions regarding the respiratory zone for your partner to answer.*

Q: Student A: .....?

A: Student B: .....

Q: Student B: .....?

A: Student A: .....

The objective of the activities c) and d) is to produce a specialised mini-dialogue, exploring the information given by the support text, phrasing questions and giving answers. These two mini-activities resort to production skills, in a controlled way, in order to stimulate the production skills of both students forming the pair. Furthermore, the exercises guide the students also from the perspective of contents for them to acquire useful scientific contents for the anatomical description of the respiratory system.

All these mini-activities try to solve the issue of the scientific knowledge transfer from the student's native language to Romanian (in the field of anatomy and medicine) and challenge the student to acquire and activate the Romanian anatomical terminology necessary for developing production skills and completing the output task.

The second step in enabling the input

The access to the conceptual architecture of the descriptive scientific discourse (the sequence of the scientific contents)

For this stage I used a text related to the first text (in what the scientific content and the discourse objective is concerned). The text describes the process of *pulmonary ventilation*; the order of the paragraphs is different by contrast to the original variant of the text. The specific objectives are: to put together a text which describes the process of *pulmonary ventilation* and to sustain the logical sequence of the paragraphs which describe the above-mentioned process.

The two proposed mini-activities (using the support text no. 2) were:

a) *Read the text regarding **pulmonary ventilation** and try to reassemble it by logically ordering the paragraphs which describe the process. Sustain your option.*

b) *Write down a clue which sustains your reordering of the paragraphs.*

Reassembling the coherent sequence of ideas and sustaining the reordering with arguments by identifying some clues offered by the fragment itself made the students aware of the way in which the information is structured in a descriptive scientific text. The students managed to find arguments and clear examples for the coherent order of ideas: SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION – COHERENCE – GRADUAL SEQUENCE

I. General presentation of the topic (general idea of the text);

II. Defining the concept/process the text refers to;

III. and IV. Introducing details about the topic;

V. Information syntheses.

The students' production skills were enabled through their argumentative/counter-argumentative statements and reactions when completing the paragraph reordering task.

The third step in enabling the input

The access to the proper linguistic phrasing and discourse construction characteristic for a scientific description

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With the help of the descriptive text about the *larynx* used as a model, thematically and structurally connected to the current unit, I designed two activities meant to improve the students' Romanian language level and to develop the production skills required by a properly written scientific description. My aims were for students to identify the phrases which are specific to this type of text, using the support text (*Describing the larynx*) and to analyse the structure of an anatomical description, using the support text.

The mini-activities proposed for this step:

a) *Identify the phrases which are specific to an anatomical description, having as a support the following text* (https://www.humanitas.net/ro/wiki/anatomie/laringele/).

b) *Analyse the structure of the description, searching for the following aspects*: a) purpose; b) structure; c) content; d) language particularities (specific terms and phrases).

The fourth step in enabling the input

The access to production skills using speech acts: giving advice and making recommendations

The first proposed mini-activity was for the students to identify the phrases used in giving advice and making recommendations in Romanian, using the support text no. 4 ("Advice for a healthy life"). (https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/5-sfaturi-pentru-o-viata-sanatoasa-236344)

a) *Identify in the text words which express advice or recommendations.*

Then, I revised with the students the grammatical forms and the syntactical structures used in expressing these speech acts: the Imperative Mood (affirmative and negative); verbs in the present form of the Indicative Mood (1st person plural); verbs used in special structures like: *to give advice/to recommend* followed by *the Subjunctive* (special compounds in Romanian); *must, to be* + the adverb *good* (in Conditional form) +/- the Subjunctive (special sequences in Romanian); *better* + Conditional Clause/Subjunctive/Imperative; *If I were you* + the Conditional – all of them supported by examples.

b) *Make a recommendation for a healthy life/ Give advice on how to have a healthy life.*

The specific objective from the closing part of the enabling process was to identify and to use the linguistic tools in order to make recommendations and to give advice (topic: *healthy life*).

This second part of the teaching process is crucial for enabling communication skills, for stimulating selective learning and for improving production skills in Romanian for specific purposes –(the field of biology and biomedical sciences). The enabling stage contributes to the preparation of the next stage – Assessing.

3. ASSESSING

At the end of the Enabling stage, I discussed again with the students the output tasks which they got familiar with in the motivation stage, in order to prepare the assessment of the achievement. The students had to fulfil the output task (the final communicational product) under the form of a written composition. I designed tasks according to the students' differentiated levels.

At the same time, I set up together with the students the final evaluation criteria. To achieve the major objectives of this unit (to write an elementary scientific description of the respiratory system; to give advice on and to make recommendations for correct breathing in daily and professional contexts), the students' communicative/linguistic products will be evaluated (and marked according to the following rating system – poor – 1, good - 2, excellent - 3), on the basis of the following criteria:

1. Adequate scientific content (knowledge of anatomy: naming the respiratory organs and the processes involved in breathing);
2. Coherence and logical sequence of the information given on the respiratory system (general idea of the text; defining the process; introducing details about the topic; information synthesis).
3. Using anatomical terminology referring to breathing (between 15 and 25 terms);

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4. Following the specific structure of an anatomical description (purpose, structure, content, language particularities);
5. Phrases typical for a descriptive text (between 15 and 25 terms);
6. Giving advice and making recommendations for correct breathing (1-3 pieces of advice);
7. Using specific structures for Romanian in order to give advice and to make recommendations.

I set a deadline for them to send me the samples via email for an initial individual assessment.

This assessment method aims at checking if the student has internalised the objectives of the unit. The students have a few days to complete the output task (a written essay). The final communication product which will be assessed is a synthesis of the objectives set for the enabling stage and reactivates, in an integrated form, most of the production mini-activities carried in the enabling stage.

As a final evaluation, meeting the requirements of POA, I organised a collaborative assessment (Wen 2017: 100). The students were split into four groups (1-2 students with a higher language level and better communication skills and 2-3 students with fewer skills) with the purpose of evaluating 5 students′ samples (anonymous) they made according to the previously discussed criteria. The students analysed and made comments on these productions (positive aspects, aspects in need of improvement). At the end, I discussed with all the students the level of the task completion and offered general feedback, highlighting the positive aspects; I also corrected the most frequently met language errors and made suggestions for improving the critical issues.

This form of assessment is very useful because it leaves an open door to continuous learning and motivates students to improve and enhance their production skills.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to check the effects of implementing POA when teaching Romanian for specific purposes (the field of biology and biomedical sciences), I collected two types of feedback: from my students and through my personal observation attending another course with another group of students who had the same topic (but which followed a different approach – teaching starts with input and goes on to reach the productive output).

The students' feedback: Generally, the students considered the method useful because it increases their confidence and openness to communicate productively and to take part in activities implying production; it creates the perfect set for solving the language problems; it challenges students to get involved; the learning circuit is known from the beginning; the outcomes are known from the beginning; there is the possibility of tailoring learning to personal needs.

I made a synthetic comparison between the methods also by observing a class which used another approach – starting with the input and finishing with the productive output. The students solve efficiently the lexical, grammatical and reading comprehension tasks, but it is obvious that the course lacks the productive mini-activities which could help them complete the production task from the end of the unit; weak results in the final productive activity are recorded because they do not have the independence to communicate productively and the capacity to personally select what they learn; addiction to the text used as input can be noticed.

Personal observations on the implementation of POA:

- It is a coherent method built on solid principles and methodical hypotheses.
- It ensures security to the didactic process through designing the teaching activities depending on the productive activities from the end of the teaching process.

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- It does not allow the teacher to ignore the productive extent of the teaching process in any of the stages of teaching.
- It gives the possibility to fully measure the results of learning by confronting the beginning (the output driven) with the output communicational production from the end of the learning process.
- It simultaneously activates linguistic (vocabulary and grammar), discourse and scientific tools for fulfilling the activities of language production.
- It encourages personalised learning through selective learning.

There are also some shortcomings of implementing the POA when teaching Romanian for specific purposes (in the field of biology and biomedical sciences): It is somewhat more difficult to implement the method when teaching Romanian for specific purposes because of the necessity to focus teaching on scientific knowledge needed in the biomedical field, not only on elements required by functional communication. The shortcomings referring to the acquisition of scientific knowledge could slow down the students' productive activity. The method could only be partially applied when working with a group of students who have a heterogeneous level of Romanian. The efficiency of language production is conditioned by a strong background of Romanian language proficiency.

Perspectives on implementing POA: This method enables me to reorganise the teaching materials I use in the courses of Romanian for specific purposes as I can fully use the conceptual structure proposed by this Production-Oriented Approach (POA).

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