KEY ELEMENTS IN TEACHING ROMANIAN TO MULTICULTURAL GROUPS

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Abstract:The paper intends to present a few points that the author considers to be key elements in teaching Romanian to multicultural groups. Among others, the paper emphasizes the importance of oral interaction in the effort of teaching Romanian as a foreign language to the multicultural groups who need it, while also discussing the importance of the textbook(s) used in class, with a view to the teachers' success in appropriately adapting the curricula to the students' needs. The author will list some of the various needs that motivate students to study Romanian, in close relation with their social and political or economic situation. Starting from this needs analysis, the author will then focus on the benefits of oral interaction, in two of its instances: a controlled environment – the classroom – and real life, amongst native Romanian speakers. Similarly, the other key element discussed here, namely the best materials to use in the language class, will be discussed after the results of the needs analysis.

Keywords: language class, multicultural groups, Romanian

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an influx of foreign students eager to study in our Romanian Universities, which, in its turn, has given rise both to an increase in the degree of teachers' professional skills required by the job, and to the level of language performance and cultural acquisition on the part of the students. In my experience as one of the teachers that make Romanian language and culture more palatable and appealing to foreign students, I have come across a number of issues that may influence students' performance (with their variations); while helping students decode intricate grammar rules and, afterwards, write their own message using that very code, I have come upon two major factors that may have a direct influence on the linguistic progress of our students: the material they study and the success rate they have when they try to interact orally with native Romanian speakers.

If one has a quick look at the methods of what is now labelled as 'traditional school', one cannot help considering the benefits of face-to-face interaction, both individually and socially. It is a well-known fact that, on completion of one's studies, one is expected to fit in and effectively work as part of a team; all this argues in favour of the old-fashioned methods of interaction. Even though students are now able to sit an exam on-line or, after getting a job, to communicate on-line with good professional (or personal) results on different social networks, that is hardly enough if they want to get a career. In universities (at least), there is a constant tendency to help students get acquainted with real-life situations; usually, that happens during the communication or the language seminar. In my personal case, students are given all the assistance they need during the seminar of communication in English, where they may improve both their language and professional communication skills. The same happens with foreign students who come to Politehnica to learn Romanian.

The type of learning that we, teachers of Romanian, choose to adopt for our multicultural groups of students is, naturally, the blended one, as the Romanian language poses all kinds of difficulties, manifested at all levels (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary); unfortunately (but very naturally), these difficulties cannot be overcome without face-to-face interaction and communication. Still, since we now live in the Internet age, we resort to all

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possible tools we can afford in order to accomplish our task. In this paper I will, thus, refer to my own experience with some multicultural groups whom I have taught Romanian; in my analysis, I will describe the multicultural groups I intend to discuss, and I will refer to the methods that I, for one, adopt in my language class. The focal point will be the necessity of preparing students for their future academic life and what they fear most: face-to-face meetings with Romanian native speakers. First, I will have to touch upon the need for some students to study Romanian, and, after that, I will try to emphasize the importance of the two key elements that may make the difference in students' struggle with the Romanian language: oral interaction and the right material to study. I will dwell upon the two points immediately after a brief description of the students and their needs.

Types of students

As already discussed in other studies [6], [7], [8], I have perceived a constantly growing interest in the study of Romanian, which can be explained in various ways. Some of the Politehnica foreign students come here to avoid the difficult situation they would have to deal with if they were back home, and that may mean, with various changes from one year to another, depending on the global or local issues, one or more of the following: war, social, economic or/ and political unrest, and personal issues. Others are only interested in learning new skills and techniques that will help them give their careers a boost. In my analysis, I intend to touch upon some points that refer to assisting these students, who belong to multicultural groups, in their attempt to live and learn in Romania.

I have to take into account the nationalities of the people in my multicultural group, as they reflect on the different types of needs they have and, therefore, on the teaching methods employed. For this study, I have considered my experience with students that have come from the following countries: Albania, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Egypt, Greece, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Macedonia, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Palestine, Russia, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela. As it may be easily noticed, that is a wide range of people, with their own customs and linguistic particularities. For example, even though most of the students from the Arab countries can talk easily among themselves and pray to the same God, they may share very little in terms of linguistic or cultural interests with the others, or, indeed, with the teacher. What they actually need is to embrace a new language and culture, and, for now, Romanian is their target language, which they will try to master, taking baby steps and starting with the basics. The methods these students adopt will depend mainly on their needs and personal learning styles. As their respective personal learning strategies have been analysed in some other papers, I will now focus on the students' needs and the way they shape the curricula.

What are the foreign students' general needs?

As professionals who take their jobs seriously, the people who teach Romanian as a foreign language know that the very first step in assisting students in their efforts to master a language is finding out what their needs are (and here I refer both to their language acquisition and their professional goals). For the purpose of this study, I have found it helpful to group the students my multicultural groups in three categories, depending on their needs and familiarity with their declared target: the Romanian language and customs.

For starters, I have considered a multicultural group where I have placed those students that, before their coming here, had already got acquainted with the Romanian language or culture and wanted to come to this country to further their education because they had either fallen in love with the language or been persuaded by the high quality of the Romanian academic life. In this case, their needs refer more to acquiring the linguistic skills that are specific to their intended career (in foreign languages and literatures, politics, international affairs, management, logistics, veterinary medicine or geology) than to their general knowledge of the language. From personal observation, I can clearly state that these

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students use both traditional learning methods and on-line resources in their studies, trying to cover all the bases and get as much information as possible from all sources.

The second category of students that form our multicultural groups consists of people who come to Romania because they need shelter, they try to escape a war or avoid some other type of difficulty in their own countries. Although this category is constantly being reshaped, year after year, the students in it have something in common: they discovered that getting an education abroad is a good strategy to avoid the hazard at home, while doing something useful. These students, also, are highly motivated to learn Romanian in order to save themselves (and, sometimes, their families) from immediate personal crisis. That being said, though, since these students only perceive the Romanian language as a tool or a facilitator, they need to learn more than the students in the first group, and at a faster pace. If they want to do that, they will also need a blended approach to Romanian, with an emphasis, at first, on face-to-face interaction.

The third group of foreign students I am studying consists of people who, for various (personal) reasons, find themselves forced to live in Romania for a while. Unfortunately, these students perceive Romanian classes as something that was imposed on them by others (relatives, most of the times); consequently, they have low motivation levels and are not eager to learn. Another reason for their low level of enthusiasm could be the idea that, since they are going to stay in this country for a while, they will pick up Romanian words and phrases anyway. Moreover, since most of them live in Romania with their families, they may also feel protected by their relatives against whatever misfortunes may happen in life (unemployment, failure, academic expulsion). This group is, in fact, the most demanding and less motivated of the three. The students' needs are many, but the desire to succeed is a lot under that of the students belonging to the first two groups.

What type of textbooks do students need?

After describing the categories of students that, in one academic year, should get a B1-B2 level of mastering the Romanian language (if we speak about the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – CEFR), I will now focus on the texts and themes to be discussed in the language class, with special attention to developing the skills for successful oral interaction.

To someone who teaches Romanian to foreign students, choosing the material to be studied in class must be quite easy – that is the general view all the other language teachers share. When one is struggling with students who have taken IELTS and/ or Cambridge exams, the challenge of teaching someone Romanian as a foreign language sounds like a joke. Actually, things are far more difficult when teachers try to help students master such a tricky language as Romanian may prove to be.

In education, there is a two-fold contract, consisting in the agreement between a teacher and her/ his students, which must be approved of by both parties involved in the learning process. That is one reason why the teacher must "permanently (re)adjust her views on the course content and the learning/teaching process, as prompted by the students' opinions, critical assessment and suggestions of amelioration." [4]. When choosing the material to be studied for a semester or a year, teachers have to take into account the students' specific targets for the near future, by means of a questionnaire, and then adjust materials to the goals to be reached.

It is in this part of my paper that I plan to make a list of the aspects that, in my view, would be helpful in the course design, as well as in organising possible cultural outings (to museums, sightseeing or guiding the foreign students through the city). Starting from the idea that the usual, ordinary aspects of life will be of the utmost interest to my foreign students, my list of themes to be found in a textbook must include the following:

- Talking about oneself

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- Greetings
- Introducing oneself
- Talking about one's professional life
- Learning styles
- Customs:
- National holidays
- Religious events and celebrations
- Personal events
- Socializing:
- Going to the restaurant
- Travelling
- Leisure activities
- Developing a global-oriented attitude:
- My role in the world
- Cultural diversity
- Developing a tolerant personality

Clearly, there are many other subjects, issues and themes waiting in line to be included on the list, but the beginners' textbook must take into account those aspects discussed above, related to interests, personal, academic and professional alike, and learning styles.

Describing a good textbook

In the search for that perfect textbook that caters both for the needs of the students and the teachers' demands, we, teachers, have to tick as many boxes as possible in the wish list. In our Romanian language classes at the Politehnica University of Bucureşti, the teachers involved in the teaching/ assessment process aim to help students develop the following skills/ competences/ abilities:

- The linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence;
- The communicational competence for the four skills (written understanding, oral understanding, written communication, oral communication);
- The knowledge competence (general culture, aspects related to inter- and multi- cultural awareness as well as social culture) and also communication skills needed in the contexts of everyday life and professional activities;
- The cultural component as part of the communicational competence in a foreign language;
- The capacity to recognize and understand facts of culture and civilization so as to create an intercultural perception;
- The capacity to identify and embrace cultural diversity within the students' multicultural group;
- Accepting and celebrating professional differences as a means to attaining personal and professional growth;
- Cultivating tolerance towards others as equal partners.

After testing a variety of materials – including both textbooks in printed versions and materials taken from internet sources – the author has come to the conclusion that, for various reasons, very few sources stand the test of our students' demands. Although reliable and excellent in design and style, many textbooks are considered too difficult to be tackled by foreign students, and, therefore, are rejected as unfriendly – the proverbial too hard nut to crack. The issue here, then, remains the possibility to combine useful and relevant grammatical and vocabulary materials with attractive and accessible texts/ images/ exercises. And, for students, to use what they have learned for oral interaction with native Romanian speakers.

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Oral interaction and its benefits

All groups of students mentioned above are supposed to learn (relatively quickly) both theoretically and practically – this means they need to understand grammar and apply its rules both in class and outside it. Although all students benefit from the advantages of on-line dictionaries and manuals, for those who need to make fast progress in Romanian, oral interaction is of the essence. No matter the level of the accuracy, foreign students need to start using Romanian language as a tool all the time, in all circumstances, not only in class. Actually, during the Romanian class, students may learn to interact with both teacher and other students in a controlled environment. What are the advantages of this controlled oral interaction? I will list only a few of them below:

- The teacher may correct both grammatical and vocabulary mistakes made by students;
- Pronunciation becomes easier to correct, both by fellow students and the teacher;
- Oral interaction may, at first, be directed by means of scenarios and role play; this method helps boost students' confidence in their own linguistic progress;
- Cultural traits are understood better and possible blunders will be avoided easier;
- A controlled environment will foster subsequent successful oral interactions in Romanian.

Clearly, after this first stage of controlled oral interaction in the Romanian language, there must follow a second stage, of free oral interaction. Some students may attempt to get to this stage from the very beginning of their studies, without paying much attention to language accuracy. Though their efforts are to be appreciated, those students must be careful not to sacrifice too much accuracy in favour of language fluency; being fluent in a grammatically incorrect language is far from the desired outcome. Still, when all steps are followed diligently, this second stage of oral interaction in Romanian may have the following benefits:

- Students will test their language in real-life instances, thus improving their performance in both listening and speaking skills (obviously, language comprehension should be improved as well);
- Exposed to a larger range of pronunciations, students will become aware of more linguistic subtleties and, as a result, will try harder to process, understand and imitate different types of pronunciation than they would do in class;
- Based on small successes, at first, students will feel encouraged to further their studies and try even harder to master the Romanian language;
- Teachers may still monitor students' activities in real-life when they all visit museums or other public locations and interact with the locals; feedback is easier to give in those cases;
- Cultural aspects and people's mentalities are better understood and perceived when students have first-hand experience with them;
- Students' free interactions may become topics for students' presentations in class, thus enabling the teacher assess their progress in both oral interaction (talking to people) and oral presentations (giving a talk in front of other people).

Conclusions

When discussing the findings of this study, I will start with the importance of the oral interaction in the students' overall learning effort, and end with the considerations regarding the use (but not abuse) of a good textbook.

As expected, there are many ways in which foreign students may benefit from oral interaction in their effort to learn Romanian. When attempting to get acquainted with a foreign language and culture, theory has to be supported by lots and lots of practice. Teachers

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offer foreign students opportunities to learn Romanian and improve their language and communication skills by exposing them to all types of situations; moreover, they also encourage their students to go out of the classroom and practice as much as they can. If theory is well assimilated, students must also stand the test of putting theory into practice, and that is achieved by interacting orally with different types of people. At the end, foreign students' successful interaction with the locals is what teachers of Romanian consider a job well done.

Now, as far as textbooks are concerned, the results of the analysis may vary, in accordance with the specific multicultural groups we try to discuss. After the brief consideration of the students' needs for an appropriate instrument of study, I have found that the search for a good textbook may be rather difficult; what was considered excellent for the majority of the 2015 and 2017 students, who came with a certain linguistic inheritance and learning aptitudes that enabled them to become fluent in a few months, may prove barely enough for some of the 2016 and 2018 students, whose linguistic background and personal learning skills prevent them from mastering the Romanian language in an equal space of time. Since the linguistic skills and learning strategies of the students in the multicultural groups the teachers meet every year differ to such a degree, the effort to get them all to the linguistic level desired is becoming more and more challenging.

Well, then, how do we find the good textbook we are so anxious to use in the Romanian language class? Probably, by searching high and low, and, eventually, after using up most resources, writing our own. What this brief discussion has revealed, actually, is the necessity for constant adjustment, as well as for creating one's own textbook, in accordance with the specific needs and abilities of the real students.

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