# *CULTURAL DIVERSITY – AN INCREASING CHALLENGE FOR TEACHING ROMANIAN TO THE ENGLISH MODULE*

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***Abstract:*** *The English module of the Faculty of Medicine which started with 7 students in 2002 now comprises approximately 350 students only in the first two years of study. They come from all over the world, mainly from countries such as Israel, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada, etc. Planning and delivering Romanian classes for such an eclectic group of medical students becomes more challenging every year. The aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between the cultural diversity of these students and their ability to study Romanian. It appears that this depends to a great extent on their mother tongue (Hebrew, Arabic, Indian, Greek, Turkish, German, English etc.), knowledge of other foreign languages, ethnicity, customs, age, willingness to socialize with other foreign or Romanian students, etc.*

***Keywords*:** *medicine, English, diversity*

The English Teaching Module was set up at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Carol Davila" of Bucharest in 2002. It started with 7 students from the Middle East, the United States and Europe. At present, there are approximately 650 foreign students enrolled in the six years of study at the English Teaching Module, out of which approximately 350 in the first two years of study. The admission quota for the first year has been of 200 seats for the past couple of years.

The foreign citizens applying for the English Teaching Module have to take an English proficiency test - as an entrance examination - in order to be admitted in the first year and, subsequently, they have to study Romanian for two years so as to be able to interact with the Romanian patients during the clinical years. For the past two academic years, this English proficiency test has consisted in a written examination comprising grammar and vocabulary exercises, as well as writing an essay on a general topic, testing the candidates' ability to read, write and understand academic English.

According to the laws in force, the grades for this entrance examination are given from 1 to 10 (the minimum passing grade being 5,00) and the foreign candidates are enrolled in the first year at the Faculty of Medicine in the decreasing order of the grade point average obtained at this written English examination

In the 2013-2014 academic year, the students enrolled in the first two years of studies came from four continents of the world, respectively from Europe, Asia, Africa and America. An overview of the countries of origin of these medical students reveals that they came from France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Morocco, Namibia, Somalia, Kenya, Algeria, Nigeria, the Sudan, Israel, Pakistan, India, Singapore, Thailand, the United States and Canada.

In point of English, the students came from countries where the official language is English and from countries where English is a foreign language. Insofar as language diversity is concerned, according to the classification of the languages of the world, the languages spoken by our students belong to the following families: Romance

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languages (French, Italian, Romanian), Germanic languages (English, German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish), Greek, Indo-Iranian (Persian), Afroasiatic languages (Arabic, Hebrew) and Turkic language (Turkish).

Working with the students enrolled in the English Teaching Module poses a double linguistic challenge involving two languages, i.e. English and Romanian. Irrespective of the fact that one third of these students come from countries where English is the official language, quite a lot of them actually have a different mother tongue, i.e. Romanian, Arabic, Indian etc., and they think in that respective language.

Their knowledge of English is unequal and, furthermore, once they become medical students they certainly do not improve their general English. At the same time, most of the foreign students' theoretical knowledge of English grammar is generally flimsy. However, they make tremendous progress in medical English, since they have to cope with their core subjects. The fact that they revert to speaking their mother tongue when they are not in class does not help them either improve their English, or learn Romanian. The students who obtained lower grades in the entrance examination find it difficult to take notes and to express themselves in English. Often, the doctors teaching the medical subjects are confronted with this problem.

Consequently, teaching Romanian - a Romance language - to foreign students whose linguistic background is completely different and who seldom interact with Romanian students is quite difficult. Moreover, after graduating from various educational systems, these students are confronted with preclinical subjects requiring previous general knowledge, i.e. biochemistry and biophysics, which they often lack. As a consequence, within the limited timeframe of the academic year, they focus primarily on the medical subjects, respectively anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, biophysics, genetics etc.

The foreign students who study medicine alongside the Romanian students learn Romanian better and faster, irrespective of their original knowledge of Romanian upon enrollment, due to their constant interaction with Romanian teachers and fellow students.

The fact that both in English and in Romanian there are many similar or identical medical terms, exhibiting minor spelling differences (*intestine/intestin*), but having a distinct pronunciation (*diagnosis/diagnostic*), which is of tremendous help to the Romanian students who study medical English, seldom helps these foreign students. As it is well known, in English there are many medical terms borrowed directly from Latin and rather few directly from Greek (since most Greek loan words came via Latin) - especially the anatomical nomenclature (*Nomina Anatomica*) - whereas in Romanian these medical terms were borrowed mostly via French.

During the first years of medical studies, most of the foreign students are too overwhelmed by the fact that they have to learn human anatomy with its anatomical nomenclature in English to make the necessary correlations with Romanian. Only the students of Greek, Italian, Spanish, Romanian and French origin benefit from these correlations and, as it was to be expected, they seem to learn Romanian more easily.

Romanian as a foreign language is a compulsory subject for the first two years of study and, in order to be enrolled in the third year, the students of the English Teaching Module have to pass a written and oral Romanian examination testing their ability to interact with the Romanian patients during their clinical rotations. Although teaching Romanian through English is the only available option, it is both an advantage and a disadvantage for the students. Except for the students whose mother tongue is



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English, all the others are actually studying a third (or fourth) foreign language (Romanian) through a second (or third) foreign language (English).

As mentioned above, their knowledge of English in general, and of English grammar in particular, is unequal, and so are their grades (i.e. from 10,00 to 5,00 - the minimum passing grade). Although the students are split into small groups, only one Romanian seminar (two hours) per week is far from enough.

Furthermore, due to administrative constraints, a group includes students of various nationalities, which makes it impossible to select a teaching approach focusing on a particular linguistic issue specific to a certain language. For instance, the students of Indian and Thai origin pronounce Romanian sounds with greater difficulty and require more reading practice than the students of Arab origin, the Greek students make more spelling mistakes, since they frequently use Greek letters, etc.

Cultural diversity, or multiculturalism, more specifically linguistic diversity, poses a genuine challenge when teaching and learning Romanian. It is completely unrealistic to attempt to teach these students Romanian through their mother tongue, for the obvious reasons, but it would certainly be easier for them to learn Romanian. Another so far unrealistic goal would be to have only students who know excellent English and who have to learn only Romanian! Things being as they are, while learning Romanian, our foreign students are also learning English.

If we take the case of the Arab students coming from Israel, the situation is the following: they have already learned three languages, respectively Arabic and Hebrew (which is compulsory for the Arabs) and English at an intermediate or advanced level, and know they have to learn a fourth language. They are accustomed to learning a foreign language with its grammar. Nevertheless, in order to learn Romanian, they often have to translate the Romanian words into Arabic, sometimes through Hebrew (with the help of the Jewish students) because they do not know all of the words in English. Consequently, they find themselves actually studying both English and Romanian!

The native speakers of English coming from the United States and the United Kingdom seem to encounter more difficulties in learning Romanian than the students from other countries. It is our assumption that these difficulties are due to the fact that the respective students have never learned another language besides English, their mother tongue. Anyway, they exhibit genuine problems when confronted with the theoretical aspects of Romanian grammar and are unable to make linguistic connections.

Cultural diversity also means that the different cultures should respect each other's differences and maintain their cultural identities. The only downside is that most of the Moslem girls who rarely mingle with the other students, particularly with the boys, keep to themselves and, consequently, do not avail themselves of the opportunity of speaking in Romanian with the other students. Socializing with Romanian students in Romanian at the faculty would help them learn Romanian more easily, without actually infringing on their beliefs.

On the other hand, Moslem boys, like all the boys in the world, love sports and interact more both with other Moslems who speak good Romanian and with Romanian students. Consequently, they learn Romanian more easily, some of them becoming fluent by the end of the first year and even using colloquial words from all over Romania!

In the case of the students of Romanian origin, who generally come from the United States and Canada, we have noticed that only some of them are fluent in Romanian. In general, even if they do speak fluently, they do not write in Romanian.



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Unfortunately, even after their fellow students manage to speak some Romanian, the students of Romanian origin continue to speak with them in English!

On the overall, observing cultural diversity appears to have both advantages and disadvantages and remains a subject under debate, not only in the Romanian class, but also around the world!

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