Storybooks as a Way to Improve Language and Cultural Literacy

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1. Introduction

The crisis of humanity is a reality that is more and more obvious. Almost everywhere, the last years have brought to the surface and made to explode intercultural conflicts and tensions that have been dormant up until now. The coming together of several ethnicities, cultures, religions, minorities, especially in the European space, has generated attacks, discrimination, extreme politics and an unprecedented hate discourse. Under these conditions, the educational system is urgently obligated to build or to develop abilities and competences "which help citizens to live together in culturally diverse societies" (Byram et alii 2014: 9), just as European linguistic policies have been stating more and more forcefully. It is not by chance that linguistic and intercultural competences are linked together, since they determine one another and are perceived as being associated with one another by learners, in this case – students who learn Romanian as a foreign language in colleges from Cluj, Romania that have medical specializations. Here, there are annually 2400 foreign students from over 90 countries, and thus it is essential to know the new socio-cultural environment and that of the Romanian language, which allows integration, on the one hand, and access to a medical education, on the other hand.

In October of 2015, we initiated the project entitled "Storybooks as a way to improve language and cultural literacy for foreign students within «Iuliu Haţieganu» University, Cluj", within the courses of Romanian as a foreign language, with the stated intention of improving linguistic competences in receiving and, then, producing a written text. Cultural literacy was not presented as an educational objective, but we projected upon the final results thematic identity and social expectations, which were confirmed.

Even though we went through several stages with the students, the final target, which was borne in mind since the beginning, was the creation of a text in

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Romanian by each student on *Storybird*, the online platform for digital books, starting from already existing images. The option for this manner of working can be explained through the need to involve two types of adaptation: that of the teacher, who has to think the teaching and assessment process in a different paradigm than before, and that of the student, who needs to give a form to his/her own discourse in a foreign language according to external conditionings, just as in reality, and not according to their own baggage of words or cliché-syntagms.

2. Methods and goals

Since the purpose of our article takes into consideration different variables, but which are subjected to learning a foreign language, the work methods with students were adapted to the three essential concepts that we have proposed to follow: literacy, respectively its procedural avatars, digital stories and intercultural competence, the latter being in the background but not less important.

2.1. Types of explored literacy

Our present students are part of the first generation that has been completely "electronic", meaning that they grew up and were educated in a world filled with devices. Thus, teachers are challenged, by the nature of this fast evolution of technology, to change their teaching and assessment methods, which were still valid 7–10 years ago. The competences to be formed are new but necessary, and are linked precisely to the spectacular technological change of the world. There is less and less talk about classic literacy, about the understanding of the spoken or printed discourse, and more and more about digital, media, visual and informational literacy (*apud* Daniel & Shin 2010: 2)[1]. We took each one of them into consideration, we followed their presence because they are related to the language, which they will influence, and even change. We have, however, added another type of literacy, *health literacy*, a syntagm put forth by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services[2], with the purpose of educating the population towards understanding medical information. The researcher Don Nutbeam puts into teaching instructions the stages of learning this competence, from understanding the written message to the critical analysis of the information about a medical subject (Nutbeam 2000: 263–264). For our medical students, who in their 2nd and 3rd year of college study Romanian – specialized language, the fixing of health literacy is essential.

Therefore, this paper aims to define, based on a case study, a direction that was both new and necessary in foreign language teaching: the combination of digital tools with the expressiveness and the emotion generated by the narrative framework, but also with the openness towards the world associated with the target language. The transgression of the traditional language learning framework can be beneficial in these times shaken up by idiosyncrasies emerged from confronted alterities.

[1] *Digital literacy* subsumes the other three, since it implies functional and social abilities for using technologies related to the Internet. *Media literacy* represents the capacity to create multimedia texts by using linguistic, audio, imagery and video instruments. The *visual* one means the capability of understanding and using graphic representations to communicate contents. Finally, *informational literacy* means the ability to find and process the information that is relevant to different purposes.

[2] https://health.gov/communication/literacy/?_ga=1.230812246.894640700.1469489782.

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2.2. Creating digital stories

In trying to combine and practice the types of literacy mentioned above, we appealed to digital stories. What are these digital stories, so popular during the latest years in learning environments opened towards new technologies? In the easiest way, they can be understood as a learning tool that emphasizes personal stories. The finished product is usually a multimedia presentation that combines various communication elements in a narrative structure. Multimedia insertion involves text, image, video, audio, social media posts – such as Twitter, Facebook – or interactive maps. At the end, productions are posted online, so the receiving audience is not restricted only to teachers and colleagues, but it is also extended to other interested international receivers around the world.

More than other types of messages, narrations allow an escape from the self, from one's own individuality, an identification with someone who's not one's own person: "Our ability to communicate the experiences of others (...) with its international, transhistorical and transcultural usage makes storytelling a powerful learning tool" (Mac Drury & Alterio 2002: 6).

As far back as 1994 in California, Professor Joe Lambert had created The Center for Digital Storytelling which in 2015 became The Story Center. Both on the center's website (http://www.storycenter.org/), and in the collective manual created by professor Lambert's team there is a functional poetics of the short narrative text that is being shaped, a poetics that maintains some of the rules of the technical game known from classic literature, but essentially changes others. Storytelling is no longer the privilege of the professional writer, but rather it is accessible to anyone who can make of it a manner of expression, of communication about themselves, with others. "Writers" are common people, and the role of the created text is not just aesthetic, but also emotional and social: "Story is learning, celebrating, healing, and remembering" (Lambert 2010: v). This is precisely the direction we worked in with our students, who became writers of short stories in the target language, Romanian. Beside the competences of receiving and producing written text, students were able to express their own culture, their personal experience with enculturation, customs and with the original social mechanisms. Another methodological direction that was inspired by Lambert's books is the Socratic method of questioning students: each stage started with key questions, whose answer, collectively provided, was the input for the instruction and easy-learning of the new terms or techniques.

2.3. Developing cultural literacy

Of the connotations of cultural literacy, which was invented and theoretically framed by E. D. Hirsch[3], we retain only the idea that it refers to the ability to understand and participate fluently in a given culture, and not the elitist strategic approach, which has been criticized on several occasions.

We have used in parallel the syntagm of intercultural communication competence (ICC), partially overlapping the previous notion. We took the theories

[3] *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* – 1987; *The Dictionnary of Cultural Literacy* – 1988; *The New Dictionnary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* – 2002 (with Joseph F. Kett and James Trefil).

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of professor Byram who, as a matter of fact, was involved for a long time in shaping the present European linguistic policies, which were beyond imagination outside the cultural competence[4]. For lack of space, we invoke just two of his theories, which are interconnected, and which go across his cognitive-constructivist studies from the past two decades like a red line. The first theory refers to the process of teaching both language and culture, based on four essential attitudes of the student, each of them being dependent on the neighboring attitudes: language learning – language awareness – cultural awareness – cultural experience (Byram, Esarte-Sarries1991: 20). From here the second important idea derives: the process of developing the intercultural communication competence must begin from being aware of one's own cultural values, related to the cultural values of others and not from the conformation of the other to their personal scale of values (Byramet alii 2001: 7).

During foreign language classes, digital stories can be used as an expressive background that integrates specific topics with skills and competences throughout the whole curriculum of this field of study. Therefore, at the practical courses of Romanian as a foreign language, our gain has doubled from the beginning – the use of the target language as a communication tool, to improve its fluency, coherence and complexity, as well as the suggestion of the identity–alterity topics that initiate and refine the cultural literacy of our students. These two pillars were intertwined and mutually reinforced, creating the premise of a successful teaching method, as I will try to outline below.

3. The Project: input, stages, type of assessment

The "Storybooks as a way to improve language and cultural literacy for foreign students within «Iuliu Haţieganu» University, Cluj" project was established through an agreement between the cultural association Pro Literacy Cluj and the Medical Education Department, Chair Modern Languages, Faculty of Medicine, "Iuliu Haţieganu" University. At this university there are two lines of study for foreign students, who in the first years of study can choose English or French as a language of mediation in the teaching process. Students learn Romanian in the first three years, in order to communicate with the doctors and patients from hospitals or, as the case may be, as a language of the specialty courses from university. According to specialization, general medicine or dentistry, they have 3 or 4 hours of Romanian per week. They start from level 0 and, at the end of their 3rd year, students reach about a B1 level, with individual variation from A2+ to B2, according to the *CEFRL*. At the end of the 2nd year and throughout the 3rd year, beside general Romanian, they also work on specialized medical language, as mentioned previously.

The target group was represented, initially and for administrative reasons, by a few groups of foreign students from both lines of study, respectively one 2nd year group (English line of study) and four 3rd year groups (French line of study). As a result, at the end we have 74 storybooks, out of which 13 are from students from the younger year.

[4] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/

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The Storybird educational platform is intuitive. The digital books are created starting from the first image which, once selected, imposes on the writer a series of images, hypothetically linked, from the same graphic artist. The order belongs to the user. Next to each image there is a special space where little texts fit, which creates the story. The author can receive feedback, can post the digital book online and can even download and print it for a modest amount of money. Of course, anyone can have access to their own book or others that are in the website's library, which already contains thousands of creations.

Our option for this platform has several reasons, some being general, while others are specific. First of all, as we have mentioned in the introduction, it is impossible to imagine a future world without technology, and it is thus important for the institutionalized education to lead its efforts towards improving some very useful competences, by exploiting intelligent technology. Foreign language teaching can profit from this. There are multiple website and online educational platforms, but when we initiated the project, we realized that Storybird offers the best balance between the cultural opening through discourse in the target language and the development of linguistic competences. As we already know from our professional experience, it is easy to fall into the trap of a superfluous and inefficient use of digital instrument in the educational medium, "due to symbolic values attached to technology infusion" (Daniel, Shin 2010: 4). Along similar lines, the teacher-student partnership is consolidated, and the image of the teaching authority of the type *deus ex machina* is undermined for the benefit of a collaboration in which knowledge is shared, since often the digital literacy of students is vastly superior to that of the teacher. Second of all, we were drawn by the idea that through Storybird one can equally stimulate the receiving language competences through the books that have already been posted and the producing competences, especially the written one. The specificity of the platform comes from the freedom vs. constraint dynamic in creating a discourse, meaning that the series of images imposes the production of the message, and it is not the pre-thought message that searched for means of visual expression. This is the formula that is the closest to the real and non-didactic context of language use, where the situations enforce a linguistic reaction on the speakers. Third of all, the social network value of the platform brings extra motivation to students. What is profitable here is not only the collaboration within a university group, but also the feeling of belonging to a storytelling community that is international and heterogeneous, but with common educational preoccupations.

The initiation, implementation and dissemination of the project were covered as planned, but in the present article we will describe, due to space, only the stages of the implementation, meaning those related to the actual collaboration with the students in order to create the books in Romanian. The order of the actions is easy to follow in the scheme below (Figure 1).

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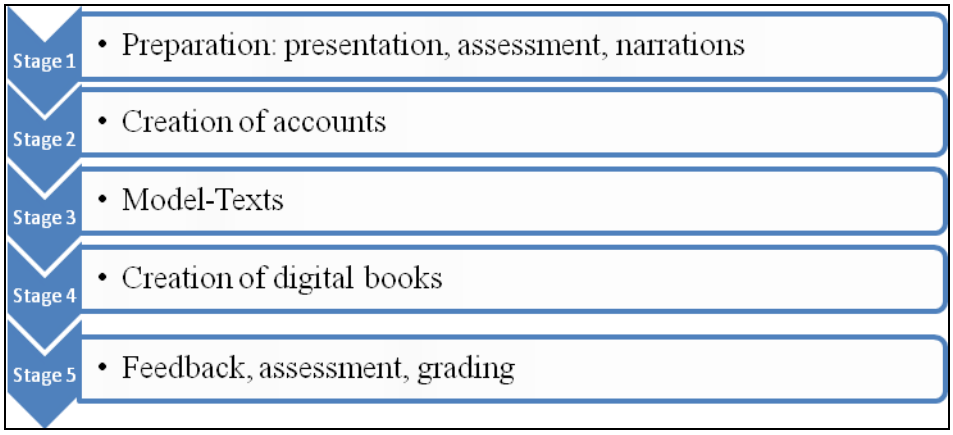


Figure 1: *The stages of the implementation of the project*

Stage 1: At the beginning of the 2015-2016 university year, the students were informed about the "Storybooks as a way to improve language and cultural literacy for foreign students within «Iuliu Haţieganu»University, Cluj" project that would take place during the first semester. They were told that the final product of each student will be graded as a piece of writing, within the five competences (listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar/vocabulary), according to the usual criteria for final assessment. Thus, they were to receive a maximum of 20 points out of 100 possible. The criteria for the evaluation were presented in a transparent manner, although they already knew the first four from the previous year: the complexity of the text, correctness, organization, communicative efficiency, the connection between image and text. At the end, a few questions guided them towards the conditionings of the narrative text. We started from the seven important elements of personal electronic narrations, as identified and defined by Joe Lambert. During the discussion we only valorized the first four, which are specific to books created online, since the last three imply audio and video effects that define the wider category of storytelling. These are: a point of view, a dramatic question, an emotional content, the economy of the form, the rhythm, the gift of the voice, an accompanied soundtrack (Lambert 2010: 9–24). Thus, the questions that allowed us to define together the narrative text were: How do you feel when presenting a personal experience to a group of people? Which do you think is the most important question that your favorite book/movie is trying to answer? Do you remember sequences from your favorite book/movie that you cried/laughed at? How many pages/phrases do you think that an ideal storybook has, so that the reader would not get bored?

Stage 2: After shaping the expectations and work directions, students were asked to create individual accounts. The "Studio" function of the platform allows the creation of online catalogues by teachers. It is sufficient to introduce the student's name or ID for passwords to be generated automatically. Each group had its own catalogue, and within the tight community the texts of colleagues could be accessed immediately. There were minor log in problems, students who forgot their password, but they were solved quickly by generating a new one.

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Stage 3: After logging in, the teacher presented her own storybooks, which were already posted on the platform, as model texts. The activity allowed a review of the necessary steps in constructing personal books: choosing the subject, selecting the images, arranging them in a logical order, filling in each page with 1 or 2 phrases and, at the end, choosing the title. By reading the texts together, we checked the students' literacy level in Romanian. Where there appeared expressions, interjection or reactions that were culturally predefined, less encountered by learners in common teaching materials, we stopped the presentation and we explained the socio-cultural background and the corresponding literacy. Furthermore, the common interrogation of students (Which is your favorite part? What new word did you retain? How would you end the story?) appeals to the meta-linguistic abilities of the students, and training them has proved to be useful in the manifestation of a critical spirit towards their texts.

Stage 4: If the first three stages were exhausted during the courses from the first week of the semester, the stage for the elaboration of storybooks benefitted from 6 weeks. The fundamental obstacle was the wrong order of the cognitive operations done by the students. They considered that it is worth to come up with or recount an experience and only then search for illustrations. The most affected were the 3rd year students who received the task to imagine a story with a medical topic. Once they understood that this was a losing strategy and that the illustrations are not a redundant re-run of the text, they were able to create stories that were not only coherent and rich in specialized vocabulary, but also amusing or with an unexpected ending. A. R.[5] created the story of a mouse named Flupi, who has multiple problems with his teeth and turns to a dentist, without making use of any images containing an oral cavity.

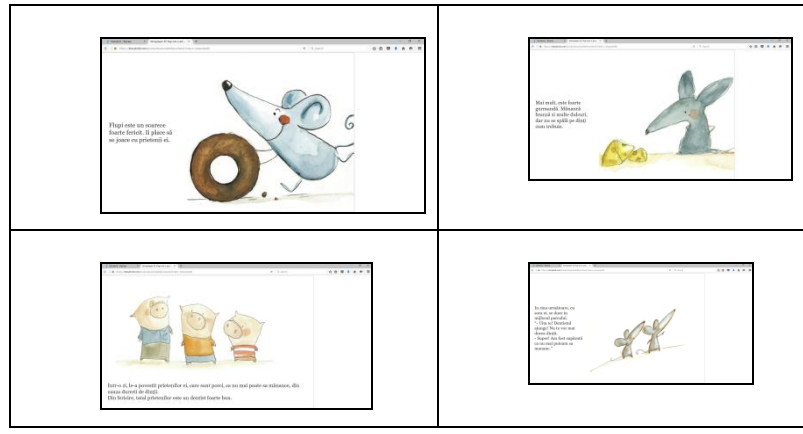


Figure 2: *Pages from a book containing dentistry terms (A.R.)*

Stage 5: The teacher's feedback was offered promptly, as soon as the students loaded their finished book on the account. Although the 20 points were thought for

[5] For students who are quoted we will use the initials of their name and surname, in order to protect their identity.

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the initial version of the book in Romanian, the feedback continued until they reached a form of the text that was as close as possible to a correct and authentic Romanian. The Storybird platform has this great advantage as well, of offering space to exchange opinions, corrections, and suggestions, under each student's book (Figure 3).

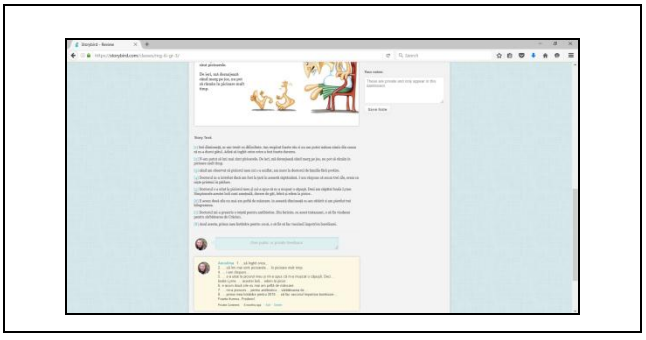


Figure 3: *The space for text/for feedback and corrections*

The feedback was not limited to correcting and then grading the digital books. The observations were personalized and it was the same for encouragements or compliments. It seems that such subjective feedbacks weighed more heavily in motivating the participants who were involved than the score based on strict criteria. More than once we have received disappointed observations from our students that they were not told "bravo!" but only "very good!"

As a partial conclusion, students enjoyed creating books on Storybird. This was confirmed by the fact that they all participated, without fail, although they were also offered a classic version of assessing the competence of written production, at the final exam. Moreover, they would have liked the same type of activity in the 2nd semester as well.

4. Language learning outcomes

For the majority of medical students in Cluj, Romanian is the second, third or even fourth foreign language. Due to the nature of the chosen academic specialization, they are obligated to use English or French as a language of study and often times this is not their mother tongue. As a result, it was visible in the texts created by students on Storybird that there is no imminent danger of impediments in using language as in the case of transferring vocabulary as a sum of words, of loan translations or of a functional impediment (Castelotti, Moore 2002: 13–14).

There were other types of errors that appeared but even their frequency was a good indicator for the teacher, so that she could return and insist on the problematic contents. With younger students, those from the 2nd year, the most numerous mistakes are related to their level: since most of them are situated at an A1+ - A2 level, the B1-B2 linguistic content is wrongly used. Of course, an adapted use of the linguistic instruments that they master would avoid mistakes. Among the sensitive aspects we have: doubling of the direct object – personal names through a pronoun, forms for 3rd person subjunctive, pronoun in dative and accusative, possessive dative

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etc. Elementary mistakes such as subject-verb agreement or noun-adjective agreement or reusing the subject pronoun in the phrase are rare.

In the 3rd year, where the language level is around a B1, but can also reach, in isolated cases, a B2, the grammar mistakes are no longer as visible, but there are lexical hesitations that appear. C.F. uses "a îndurat un şoc" ("he/she endured a shock"), instead of "a suportat un şoc" ("he/she suffered a shock"), although the second form is more transparent. It is probable that this accessibility in itself seemed to him/her as a clue of inadequacy, and thus he/she used the archaic variant of the verb, because it sounded more Romanian. An identical case is that of "strungăreaţă" ("gap-toothed"), used by G.P. instead of "diastemă" ("diastema"). Another interesting aspect is the linguistic game initiated by 3rd year students, because they feel they have a better grasp on the language. They sometimes use alternative variants of expression for the same content: one that is simple, of whose correctness they do not doubt, and one that is more complicated: "Poţi merge la balenă acasă (Puteţi să mergeţi balena casei)" ("You can go at the whale's house (You can go house's whale)", as D.D. tries, being clearly aware that the first version of the book is a draft.

No matter the level of the mistakes, they can be signaled and corrected, either individually or through group exercises for clarification and fixation. For that matter, what was signaled as incorrect by the teacher in the feedback was immediately corrected, with few exceptions.

5. Cultural literacy outcomes

We mentioned previously that cultural literacy was not an objective that was explicit or declared in the discussions with the students. However, many of the stories form around problems of cultural identity. The journey of initiation of the foreigner who does not relate to a new environment is a metaphor that is often encountered in the students' texts from the platform. In the digital book "Ursuleţul care caută norocul" ("The teddy bear who's searching for his luck"), M.H. outlines the portrait of the adolescent who leaves to discover the colored world, but returns tired to the friendly cave, where his/her family welcomes them with fondness. C.S. has a similar story, although he/she uses other images and events: young Pierre goes through a failed escape from home. Certainly, these can be personal projections and then the value of the text is a therapeutical one, to put up for discussion a self that is not very open towards the otherness of the Romanian socio-cultural environment. Perhaps, equally, it could just be a thematization of some feelings that were not tried personally, but which, lived by others, have impressed them. In the same category there are two more stories about Christmas (T.H.). The connotation of familial warmth is evident for the characters who feel far away from a lost paradise, superimposed over the far away family home. If we read these narrations in terms of social representations, we can determine that the constant return towards the joy of a temporarily irretrievable past undermines the openness towards the immediate environment of immersion.

Another category of texts sets up for discussion the exotic character of the condition of being foreign. The character that was created is never of the same

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nationality as the author; on the contrary, it appears as completely exotic: a Liberian little girl who is at a loss for words (C.F.), a pregnant woman from Africa (C.G.) or a boy from the savannah who resorts to a shaman (E.G.). Every time however, modern medicine has a saving solution. In these types of texts, the openness towards the other is already detectable, even though it is excessively simplified, cliché-ridden. In the exit from one's own perspective and in the desire of knowing other values, norms and beliefs, Byram sees the key of the intercultural competence (Byram, 2014: 40).

The digital books that use Romanian names, places or events are the most interesting ones for the immediate cultural literacy. An ailing person is called Domnul Nas ("Mister Nose") (M.L.), a little girl who lives in the Maramureşului Mountains loses her cat (L. H.). A fragile intercultural competence generates comical images. The little girl from the Maramureşului Mountains has her tea every afternoon, just like an Englishwoman who lives next to Hyde Park. What remains, however, is the curiosity, the openness and the benevolence towards a temporary adoptive culture. Amongst these qualities there is a cultural literacy that is being built, since the speakers learn "to constantly move between their linguistic and cultural world and that of the users of the target language" (Scarino 2010: 324).

6. Conclusions

The present study followed especially the implementation of the "Storybooks as a way to improve language and cultural literacy for foreign students within «Iuliu Haţieganu» University, Cluj" project, pointing out three concepts that are profitably implicated in the present studying of foreign languages: storytelling, linguistic competences and cultural competences.

At the end of the study, we can confirm that the method used is effective and fruitful not only for studying a foreign language, but also for the process that our students are facing, that is adjusting to a new socio-cultural environment. I had no doubt that digital stories enhanced students in their learning experience. Nevertheless, a great surprise was the students' intuitive and consistent involvement of their cultural literacy in stories more or less personal. The value of the combination of tools and abilities in the project is given both by the topics full of emotion and personal experience as well as by the clarity and quality of texts posted on the Storybird platform.

The results, materialized in the acquisition of important digital, cultural and language abilities, as well as the enthusiasm of the participating students encourage us not only to continue the known formula, but also to propose new work techniques (group activities, the inter-evaluation of students) and to more complexly build new digital instruments that would add a voice and movement to the stories that were built.

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Abstract

In teaching foreign languages, it is getting more and more obvious that teachers can no longer limit their goals to the creation and development of the language skills. At the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Cluj-Napoca, Romanian as a foreign language is accompanied by productive activities and exercises, in order to promote an open attitude towards perspectives and new cultures among students. The project "Storybooks as a way to Improve foreign language and cultural literacy for students within «Iuliu Hatieganu» University, Cluj" has allowed the development of writing language skills, by creating stories in Romanian, but, on the other hand, it also implied a subtle dimension for the development of non-linguistic skills, namely cultural, digital and health literacy. The benefit was threefold: for teachers – an accurate diagnosis of the issues for each level of language, for students – an initiatic journey projected into the metaphors of the text and for all the participants – an avoidance of the classic didacticism, but not of the professionalism.

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