DIDACTIC INTERACTIVE STRATEGIES WITH THE FOREIGNERS WHO STUDY ROMANIAN LANGUAGE

Florentina BUCUROIU [*]
Bogdan-Gabriel GEORGESCU [*]

Abstract*: Most of the people who try to do a good job in the educational field have questioned themselves at least one time on the qualities they should acquire in order to become better trainers, better teachers or counselors. Some of them read a lot of scientific literature on teaching strategies others put them in practice many times and in various ways. Others developed their own methodologies and improved them year after year. Nobody remained impassible to this aspect because teaching is supposed to be more than a job, and dedicated professionals in this sector can even develop it into a form of art.*

This is the topic we try to approach in this paper: What makes a good teacher? Or, if our purpose appears as an imaginative and even impossible one, let's try a down to earth approach: Which are the best strategies to be implemented and pursued by a teacher so as he can get well instructed and educated grown –up graduates in the domain of foreign language teaching-learning?

Keywords*: language learning, teaching strategies, foreign students.*

Language teaching-learning is a quite complex process in which instant production in spontaneous conversation is the last and the most difficult level to be reached. There are lots of theories regarding the best approach to this issue from behaviorism to Noam Chomsky`s "black box" or "language acquisition device", from Ivan Illich (learning is far from being a result of instruction) and R. Allwright (language learning takes care of itself) to Richard Schmidt with his theory of language noticing and awareness-raising. "Affective variable" of the humanist approach and discovery learning (M. Lewis) are also taken into consideration when looking for the implications of the teaching-learning strategies on the outcome of the respective activities.

Our approach to Romanian language learning mainly follows the guiding lines set by the communicative approach to teaching foreign languages. It emerged about the end of the 1960s when most of the researchers and specialists in didactics came to the conclusion that the traditional approach (audio-lingual method) didn't work well enough any longer and it was not a resourceful strategy in point of producing good communicators. The didacticist approach was particularly concerned about a detailed description of active-participatory and traditional teaching methods and their corresponding teaching patterns. Unlike the old pattern-based learning, the communicative approach promoted and developed some general ideas into good teaching practice, such as: human communication relies on more than linguistic competence – linguistic interaction comes consequent to social competence; imitation precedes spontaneous language production but it is not the final aim; language

[*] University of Pitești, florentinabucuroiu@yahoo.com
[*] University of Pitești, georgescu_b2002@yahoo.com

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skills should be developed in order to achieve real-world aims, not only some narrow/particular topic-related contents; rendering the desired meaning is more important than the linguistic form because errors are a natural part of any learning process. Vocabulary and grammar are better to be learnt in an everyday communicational context; language appropriacy is as important as linguistic accuracy – the discourse context should be observed carefully; affective involvement and active participation offer them the chance to personalize the conversation topic that is making the learning material real and meaningful; spontaneity gives much more benefit than mechanical repetition and it should be continually encouraged; language is not a set of patterns to be memorized by constant repetition but a way of message exchanges, it is a vehicle, not a road to be followed without destination; interactivity – real-world interaction simulations are both useful in terms of imitation and language production; task-based/oriented language learning brings students closer to the real-world communicative and functional requirements; authentic didactic material is generally better received and more productive than the traditional textbook and CD; mother tongue or some other language which the students feel confident in can be used whenever necessary in order to simplify the explaining process and reinforce the correct and full understanding.

Communicative teachers view language learning as a two-way process: "learning the language in order to use it and using the language in order to learn it", that means communication is both a purpose of learning and a context for language acquisition. (Adriana Vizental, 2008: 36-37)

We are pleading here for task-based learning and encouraging students to take action and express their opinions freely and confidently because, it is said, a teacher should tell, explain, demonstrate, inspire and encourage (W. Ward) his students at the same time.

As far as the language learning is concerned, students should first feel comfortable and confident with the topic, with the whole group and with the task itself. If these premises are accomplished, the rest of the didactic approach comes naturally and easily.

Teachers' main goal should be helping their students learn in a friendly appealing positive environment where they feel engaged and challenged from an intellectual point of view.

Both group work and pair work has also proved to have positive influence on students' capacity to learn and acquire information, mainly in medium sized classes where the teacher cannot always be responsive to all the individual needs of each student. According to James Zull, "students can learn a tremendous amount from their peers, who they may be able to relate to more than their teacher" (James E. Zull, 2009). A successful and entertaining method of bringing students together and connect them to the language targeted topic is definitely through games. As important teaching tools, they facilitate cooperative learning. Some of the countless benefits of using games in the classroom can be the following: helping students to know themselves better; enabling students to develop close connections with their international colleagues, by reinforcing a sense of community in the classroom, when all the students feel comfortable while expressing ideas in a friendly learning environment. Games also motivate students to actively and deliberately involve in the learning activities as it is generally accepted that students learn more when they are experiencing funny tasks.

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Judy Willis asserted "when the joy and comfort are scrubbed from the classroom and replaced with homogeneity, and when spontaneity is replaced with conformity, students' brains are distanced from effective information processing and long-term memory storage… Optimal brain activation occurs when subjects are in positive emotional states or when the material holds personal meaning, connects to their interests, is presented with elements of novelty, or evokes wonder" (Judy Willis, M.D., 2006: 58).

The key to success in the teaching-learning-evaluation process is, therefore, motivation, seen as a mechanism that pushes us towards taking action, and drives us into a kind of behavior that leads to success.

Motivation must be connected to both types of actors involved in the process mentioned above. Teacher and learner as well create the learning context, the premises of a good running of the entire educational endeavor. (Keller, 1992)

John Barbuto (2001: 713) identifies five sources of motivation: intrinsic processes that derive from the pleasure to accomplish a task; instrumental sources derived from tangible rewards awaiting; perception of external self, derived from the need to improve reputation; internal self perception derived from the requirement to achieve personal self-imposed standards; internalize goals that derives from faith/deep belief, firm adhering to a principle.

All these motivational sources are possible with the foreign students and this is why a skilled teacher will always pay attention to enhancing each of them, especially when he notices vulnerabilities, so as to get better results in point of students' involvement and information storage.

Law of interest or interest in information is one of the essential laws of memory. Anatole France used to say that "to understand the things one reads he needs to digest them hungrily." In other words, if there is not a real interest in what you see, read or know, certainly, no data will remain stored within the brain for long. The leading role, however, belongs to the teacher, as he is the conductor of the orchestra and the character responsible for the harmony of interpretation. According to Anita E. Woolfolk`s taxonomy (1990: 5-7), the teacher should assume no less than 7 lines of responsibility, as follows: 1. expert in teaching-learning (he makes decisions on the educational process); 2. motivational agent (he maintains the interest and willingness to engage in activity); 3. leader (he leads, advises, and offers the affective support); 4. adviser (he makes use of his persuasion techniques and empathizing ability); 5. model (by his own personality and behavior); 6. reflexive professional (he notes and analyzes from a psycho-pedagogical perspective everything that happens in the classroom); 7. manager (he provides classroom management and a good communication with the external factors - teachers, parents etc.).

The teacher is obviously expected to play a lot of roles, supervise and make the whole process roll in the desired direction. But what about himself? Who is this Teacher? How is his personality? What is his own style and how can he adapt it to the class requirements?

"Efficiency of style cannot be assessed in itself but only by reference to the generating factors related to the teacher's personality and to the psycho-social context in which it is integrated." (Ioan Nicola, 2003: 568-569).

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Based on studies they have developed on the teaching behavior and on the relationship between teacher and his students, the concept of "educational style or teaching style" was introduced and they defined several types of learning styles: 1. democratic; authoritarian; laissez-faire 2. student-centered and group-centered 3. authoritarian and liberal style etc.

"In the process of direct professional activity (teaching and educational in this case), certain skills (such as communication skills or emotional balance) develops (or forms) as they put their mark on that activity, making it (with different degrees of influence) more productive and/or more efficient. When skills of educators are high level (in terms of quality and productivity), it is said that they have talent to the teaching profession." (Ioan Jinga, Elena Istrate, 2008: 87)

According to the researchers, an efficient teacher is supposed to meet the following requirements/competences: clearly establishes the educational objectives that are to be carried out with the students; makes his students aware of the highest performance to achieve; identifies and designs learning activities that are relevant to everyday life; demonstrates a concern to adapt to the diversity of students; creates and maintains in classroom a favorable working-learning climate; encourages social interaction in class; gives students a working structure likely to guide their learning efforts; facilitates the processing of information by students while using various methods, teaching strategies; develops the capabilities of information essentializing among the students; stimulates intellectual development of students by structuring the learning tasks, through their involvement in various work situations with the information; makes a permanent monitoring of student progress in meeting goals (Ormond 1998, *apud* Diaconu, 2002: 28-29).

In Romanian language teaching-learning one should take into account the most important aspect of homogenous "team cohesion" which, in case of a multinational/multicultural group, refers to the personal attraction between the teacher and each and every member of the group, in spite of the geo-political and social gaps. The same type of interaction is desired to be developed among the students as well.

"Flexibility" might be considered as being the ability of the teacher / moderator to maintain an open attitude, to accommodate different personal values and to be receptive to the ideas of others and cope with various issues seen from different angles.

For many adults "open communication" is very seductive and it represents the ability to get access and shared information resources. To make this possible, it is compulsory to work in a perfectly comfortable atmosphere. On the other hand, "coordination" is that skill necessary to manage actions in the right order with the purpose of achieving complex tasks. It is usually the language teacher/trainer who is in charge with this.

Of course, within any language courses, adults need "confidence" in order to express themselves openly, this only happens whenever there is mutual trust, and everyone relies on the others.

Some of the linking ingredients in the language class group work are "complementarity" and "interdependence" referring to groups whose members welcome the other's skillful contributions with regard to the whole language class performance.

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"Balance in members' participation" is also important in classroom activity management since interactive approaches are desirable and necessary to achieve the final task.

Reciprocal teaching is always an efficient open-ended task meant to create opportunities for everyone's manifesting self-confidence, expressing his own point of view while motivating it at the same time and it is also a perfect occasion for self-esteem strengthening.

Formalism should be avoided in all respects and language studying should not focus on isolated language patterns, but on the facts of living expressed by authentic speech: Ask for directions when you get lost in town, Order a meal in a restaurant, See a doctor when you are ill, Buy drugs from the chemist's, Borrow a book from the library etc.

The teacher should first give the learners a task to accomplish and play an observer`s role, and it is only when they fulfilled it that the teacher turns to the "language focus" stage, makes corrections, adjustments and suggestions to their oral outcome. Open-ended tasks imply more independence and confidence given to the students and a modality of bringing them closer to the language reality. Under the same favorable auspices, one can place some other approaches derived from lower level educational stages such as kindergarten and primary school.

The author's chair for example, usually used in the Step-by-Step educational alternative, can work very effective with the adult students as well. Every language class could open up with a student sitting on this special and magic chair and telling his colleagues the story of the previous day or anything he considers interesting, funny or challenging. Some of them will share productive learning methods they discovered meanwhile and used by themselves in order to optimize memorization and language production.

Role-play is an excellent resource from many points of view: it creates interactivity, students can "live" the respective language by integrating it in a simulated life situation, it is a funny learning activity and it gives the protagonists the opportunity to re-create, adapt and think each and every reply from a communicative perspective.

Adult students will take the learning process seriously and in accordance to the needs of their *domain of interest*. This is why a good teacher should be able to introduce, develop and integrate the grammar aspects into various and interesting *vocabulary contexts* while taking into account the different specialization each student is going to follow. In turn, the students will be asked to make sentences/phrases and give as may example as possible and even write short essays on topics of interest in their own domain.

Proverb session is an activity with very good feedback from the students. It offers a beneficial response in point of both language usage and socio-cultural exchange. Proverbs and sayings convey important stimulating messages and they are generally short enough to permit easy memorization and reproduction.

Another funny method to bring students closer to one another and encourage conversation and language practice generally is *music time* class. One can start from a given topic (i.e. *love messages*) and each student will be asked to choose one stanza/fragment of a love song in his own culture and try to translate and explain it in Romanian for example. This would also be an opening strategy for further conversation on various cultural approaches to love, marriage etc.

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Imitate your teacher/colleague/friend/neighbor! is a technique with very funny outcome and a starting point for discussion on different language styles, context usage of words and expressions, over-correction and intentional meaning distortions. Students will be "warned" long before about their task that is paying attention to such language stereotypes or abnormal usage and taking notes. In this way, they will gather enough replies for the respective class and be prepared with typical responses.

They will make numberless mistakes and that`s inevitable. It is therefore essential to repeatedly explain the students that language learning cannot be accomplished at once because interpretive skills (listening, reading) develop faster than the expressive skills (speaking, writing) and learning a foreign language requires enough time and much more practice.

All these are strategies we successfully applied during our Romanian language classes and we found it useful to share them with other teachers implied in teaching activities with foreign students. We appealed to such approaches because everyone knows that teaching communication is only seemingly a facile thing. There are so many factors of incidence to be considered at this level that our task is partly made easier and partly hindered. Funny activities we discovered to be generally very well accepted and lucrative and that is why we largely applied them within our daily language classes. Laughter and crying are technically two ways of our inner living that convey the same meaning in every corner of the world (some differences are inherent yet). Laughter opens hearts to the others around and opens minds to interaction and verbal communication. Students need sustained and meaningful encouragement – that means motivation and a good communicative mood. In exchange, they will assume "command" and lead their own learning while the teacher will only supervise and adjust the whole process.

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