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The challenges of designing a course in Romanian for specific purposes

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Although the teaching of Romanian as a Foreign Language has a long and established tradition in (higher) education Romanian institutions, the specific purposes component is much younger and has received little attention as focus of research in language teaching. A compulsory component of the academic programme called Preparatory Romanian Language Year organized by many higher education institutions in Romania, Romanian for Specific Purposes (RSP) poses a number of challenges to practitioners such as needs and target language use analysis, course and materials design, as well as evaluation. The present paper aims at bringing these challenges into the foreground of the teacher agenda and shows how lessons from the rich and broad research into English for specific Purposes, a leading language for specific purposes domain, can help RSP practitioners understand their multi-faceted roles and assume them, expanding the valuable pool of expertise in RSP.

Keywords: *language teaching, curriculum design, Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL), Romanian for Specific Purposes (RSP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*

1. Introduction

A result of global trends in people mobility, travelling for getting an education abroad has become a common occurrence in all societies connected to the 'global village' (Yeravdekar and Tiwari 2014). As a response to globalization forces, internationalisation of higher education means a complex system of policies, practices, actions and measures taken by national authorities, institutional management boards and local decision factors to support mobility of population for acquiring tertiary education in places far away from native lands, immersed in

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new and often challenging social, academic and cultural environments. Such mobility depends on foreign language competence, and, although the widespread of English as a lingua franca makes it the first choice as the language of education in international contexts, other options are available. Where a certain educational offer is available only in a local language (other than English), international students can access it upon mastering the respective local language. In this way, internationalisation and mobility for education become opportunities for teaching and learning of any local language as long as quality education can be obtained in that particular language.

In the context of teaching Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) for tertiary education, the present paper discusses the design of a course with a specific purpose focus, Romanian for Specific Purposes (RSP), which is part of preparing international students for accessing universities and programmes in which Romanian is the medium of instruction. The approach is comparative, trying to draw on the wealth of research that exists on needs analysis, methodological approaches, assessment and ongoing development of courses in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). With a broader and stronger tradition, ESP can serve as a model path to be taken in developing RSP and as a guide in understanding and overcoming challenges.

2. Context

Even though internationalisation has been more often than not connected to Englishisation of higher education (a concept met with conflicting attitudes; see Kirkpatrick (2011) for a critical perspective, or Sabate-Dalmau (2016) for a regional one) there is also a distinct non-English component in many internationalised higher education institutions. Universities with international outreach, which seek to preserve and promote the leading place of educational programmes in the local language, offer international students the possibility to learn the local language in order to access higher education programmes. Romania has been a participant in the global trend of attracting international students by applying classical strategies: on the one hand, offering an ever-increasing number of university programmes in English, that is, developing what is now called English Medium Instruction (EMI), and, on the other hand, extending the offer of learning Romanian as a Foreign Language in order to facilitate the enrolment of international students into Romanian medium instruction in higher education. Strengthening these two fronts can significantly contribute to the increase in the number of incoming international students in a university. Moreover, if English Medium Instruction is often more

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attractive for short-term incoming students (such as those on Erasmus+ mobility programmes), incoming students who learn Romanian and enrol in Romanian medium higher education, do so for full study programmes and even for connected cycles (Bachelor, Master, PhD).

For a higher education institution, attracting international students to learn Romanian and then to enrol in Romanian medium higher education is a significant gain. It is a policy by which a university can keep an international student for years and years. Such feat can stand proof for the quality of the programmes in the local language, can stimulate other international students to follow a similar path and, ultimately, may even contribute to improving the overall ranking of the university, an ever more important goal of all universities in a very competitive higher education sector. Alongside these aspects of integrating Romanian medium instruction into the internationalization process, the spread of Romanian as a foreign language has a wider and more profound impact. Language teaching is closely connected to the culture and society of the people who speak the language. International students who learn Romanian, study in Romania and succeed here academically often become valuable ambassadors of cultural and social values upheld in Romanian higher education. This, too, can contribute to shaping a positive profile of Romanian universities and makes Romanian as a study language track for international students an important component of internationalization of higher education.

3. The preparatory Romanian language year

In terms of how this component works, although there is variation as Romanian universities have quite a high degree of autonomy in deciding their own policies, the basic principles are coded in national legislation regarding the acceptance of international students into the Romanian educational system at all levels (Ministry of Education Order no. 3473/2017). According to this, an international student who wants to study in Romanian medium higher education, must either prove performance in Romanian language of at least a B1 CEFR level (by taking a test at the university where he/she wants to study, or by obtaining a certificate at a certified language test centre) or attend Romanian language courses in a system called ‘Preparatory Romanian Language Year’ (henceforward, Preparatory Year). The Preparatory Year is a full academic programme of 60 ECTS points that runs over two academic semesters with 26-28 hours of face-to-face teaching weekly. Another 10 ECTS points are given for the graduation exam which should certify a minimum level of Romanian language competence of B1 (CEFR). Upon the

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completion of the Preparatory Year, international students should be able to attend and complete tertiary education programmes taught in Romanian. Not all Romanian universities organize the Preparatory Year for international students. Those who do, however, must obtain accreditation for it from a quality assurance agency (ARACIS) recognized by the national authorities. For this, the organizing institution designs and implements relevant curricula and sets up regulations and norms to align the programme with specific educational objectives and with all other academic programmes of the institution. The Ministry of Education then, acknowledging the accreditation of the Preparatory Year, assigns international students who put in a request to the respective institution, so they can study Romanian for a full academic year.

The full scope and details of academic subjects in the Preparatory Year are beyond the scope of this paper, but, just to give an overview, we should mention that subjects whose learning objectives fall within the four macro-skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) are complemented by subjects such as Romanian Culture and Civilization and Romanian for Specific Purposes (RSP). The RSP course is actually a distinctive feature of the Preparatory Year. Universities which organize this programme can choose an area of 'specialisation' and decide to have RSP for engineering, for business, for health sciences, for hard sciences, for humanities, etc. Therefore, international students who intend to pursue, for instance, engineering studies in Romanian higher education can choose to go to a Preparatory Year which offers Romanian for Engineering as a RSP course. This course is part of the second semester curriculum and starts building on a prerequisite that learners have already acquired at least a good A2 level of General Purposes Romanian. The following sections of this paper will discuss the challenges in designing the syllabus for the RSP course which is part of the Preparatory Year in the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca (TUCN), in Romania. The specific purpose is connected to hard sciences (math, physics, and chemistry) and engineering.

4. A Romanian for specific purposes course

4.1. Using ESP research to ground course design in RSP

Although the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language can be dated back to the 18th century Enlightment movement (Samuil Micu, 1791-1806), the tradition of RSP is much shorter. However, important principles and approaches can be transferred and applied from the rich, long and well research tradition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

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A foundation pillar of specific purposes language teaching is synthetized in the five key roles of ESP practitioners, according to Dudley-Evans and St. Johns (1998): teacher, course-designer and materials provider, collaborator (with a subject specialist), researcher and evaluator (p. 13-17). These key roles are particularly relevant to RSP practitioners, as they are faced with a scarcity of research and relevant literature to which they could turn for inspiration in RSP teaching. As a consequence, an RSP teacher needs to be able to plan, to design, to assess and to implement approaches, teaching materials, and evaluation instruments to meet the specific learning objectives. In other words, they need to be aware of all roles and be willing to assume all of them.

In specific purposes language teaching, learning objectives are closely linked to the target language use context (see also *target performance domain*, Biggs and Tang 2011) such as the professional or academic context in which the learner will use the language. Needs analysis defines the gap between what the students know and what the target language use context requires them to know. The information yielded is used to formulate the learning objectives and to design a course. In order to understand and define the target language use context, the language teacher collaborates with the members of the discourse community, a subject specialist, and performs analyses of the specific discourse via the written and oral texts produced by the community.

In the case of RSP, the current level of language performance of the students is easily assessed. The course is taught in the second semester where the assumption is that students have already reached a minimum of A2 (CEFRL levels) in general purposes Romanian language. The difficulty comes in how to define the target situation of specific purposes language use in terms of vocabulary, skills and genres and how to perform a pre-course needs analysis. In the case we are discussing here, the RSP course is in the field of hard sciences and engineering. It is meant to prepare the learners for access to higher education in Romania in various science and engineering fields. But the students attending the course will study a broad range of hard sciences and engineering field in Romanian higher education and will thus have varied target language use situations. The knowledge of what exactly each student/group of students will study and hence what they will use Romanian for in their academic life (post Preparatory Year) is impossible to fathom before designing the course. This makes it more difficult for the course designer to define a specific purpose for the RSP course. The situation also comes in conflict with the core concept of languages for specific purposes which is based on clearly identified and defined communication situations.

The course designers in the TUCN appealed to research and practices in ESP to find grounding theoretical approaches for such situations and to formulate best

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solutions. In Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), the professional information about the learners (the tasks and activities learners are/will be using English for – target situation analysis and objective needs) constitutes a foundation component which indicates their specific needs and underlies all decisions regarding course content, from vocabulary selection to grammar and discourse components. This very important information lacks for the RSP course we are discussing here. Course designers cannot know what specific study/professional situation students enrolled in the Preparatory Year will be using Romanian for. Consequently, within the vast domain of hard sciences and engineering (assigned for the RSP course), the specific purpose approach is difficult to implement.

The decision about what to focus the course on and what content to include in this case was based on the distinction between what Basturkment (2010) called *wide angled* and *narrow angled* courses in ESP. According to her, wide angled ESP courses are tailored for a more general group of learners while the narrow-angled ones, for a very specific group. The meaning of the latter is that learners have largely homogeneous needs and have a particular, well defined, academic or professional environment for the target language use situation. The learners who take the RSP course in the TUCN are precisely the opposite: a heterogeneous group from the point of view of specific needs, with various, loosely defined target language use situations. Some, in all probability, will study engineering (Mechanical, Electrical, Computer Science, etc.) in Romanian, others, environmental and life sciences, chemistry, physics etc. (the vast umbrella of hard sciences). To further complicate the situation, at the end of the first semester, while the minimum level of Romanian at which they are supposed to have reached is A2, the picture of their proficiency looks rather like a scattered chart, from struggling A2 students to good, independent B1 students. This is the level of proficiency with which they will start the RSP course.

In practical terms, these are the considerations resulting from the only available form of needs analysis for the RSP. It is only natural that the option be a wide angled course of RSP, albeit not without its own challenges. A general premise of wide angled courses is that of 'the transferability of skills – the students will transfer the knowledge and skills they gain from the wide-angled course (such as, EGAP or English for Business Skills) to their own specific area (such as, their studies in psychology or law, or their work in management or marketing)' (Basturkment 2010, 54). This notion is not uncontroversial. Arguably, the students will not use the language only for general purposes or a broad professional domain (if there is such), but will need it for specific academic (getting a university degree) purposes and in their specific line of work.

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Against the idea of wide angled courses in LSP and the underlying concept of transferability of skills, Hyland's stand is that different disciplines have their own ways of 'crafting arguments', their own different ways of communicating specific activities, expressing values and ideas:

> The discourses of the academy do not form an undifferentiated, unitary mass but a variety of subject-specific literacies. Disciplines have different views of knowledge, different research practices, and different ways of seeing the world, and as a result, investigating the practices of those disciplines will inevitably take us into greater specificity. (Hyland 2002, 390)

Acknowledging the two views on how 'specific' a course content can be, based on students' professional (and academic) needs (specificity based vs wide-angled, transferability-of-skills based), the designers of the RSP course in the TUCN have adopted the wide angled view. But, as Basturkment (2010) observes, there is no real divided between the two, rather the views form a *continuum of specificity* (p. 55), from highly specific options to options that cater for a wide range of learner needs, such as those of the RSP course. The design of the RSP course allowed the flexibility of adapting a core content (the initial course content) to more specific needs, thus moving along the continuum from catering for general (academic) needs of Romanian language users to catering for narrower needs, along the way, as the course is implemented. If the pre-course needs analysis provided the initial wide-angled design, the on-going analysis allowed revisions, extension of concepts to more specific situations, or even reduction or elimination of parts that might seem irrelevant for the current learning situation.

4.2. Common core mathematical language and transferability of skills

In practice, the wide angled approach led to a close inspection of what is truly common core and runs across all the spectrum of hard sciences and engineering in tertiary education. A discipline that fits the requirement is mathematics, in its various branches and levels of complexity, with foundation mathematics as an academic prerequisite for studying in most hard sciences and engineering fields. Hence, the core of the content for the RSP was built around foundation mathematics vocabulary and language problems. There is extensive literature on the description of mathematical language, the various semiotic systems it makes use of, how it is acquired and its implications for comprehension of mathematical concepts (Lee 2006; Schleppegrell 2007; Riccomini et al. 2015). Abedi and Lord

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(2001) added more by focusing on the use of mathematics language especially in written tests, including word problems. Their work contributed to defining the features of written instructional language inside word problems. For the purposes of the present discussion, several ideas highlighted in these studies are relevant and have been taken as rationale for using mathematical discourse as target common core of the RSP course.

Mathematical discourse has been shown to have specific features in vocabulary, grammar and syntax and in that it makes use of multiple semiotic features (Schleppegrell 2007; Cocking and Mestre 1988). As some of these semiotic systems are universal (basic operators, geometrical shapes and symbols, etc.) and familiar to students irrespective of their L1, they were taken as starting point for developing vocabulary and basic phrase banks in Romanian in the RSP course. In each learning unit containing such vocabulary items/phrases, course designers provided opportunities for learners to create their own multilingual and multisystem dictionaries (mathematical symbols – Romanian correspondent – translation into students' L1).

Word problems in mathematics are a discipline specific genre which poses serious challenges in teaching and learning mathematics due to conceptual aspects but also to language-related ones (Abedi and Lord 2001; O'Halloran 2003). For the target students of the RSP course, if the conceptual aspects are assumed to be familiar, the way this mathematical knowledge is constructed in Romanian becomes the focus of the RSP course. Consequently, comprehension practice was built around the (assumed familiar) rhetorical pattern of simple word problems (involving arithmetical and basic algebraic knowledge) – know information/ given data vs unknown information/ what needs to be found/ calculated – working from recognition of pattern to focusing on grammatical and syntactical realization of meaning in Romanian.

Learning the language of a specific domain is more than acquiring its technical vocabulary. As M.A.K. Halliday (1978) pointed out, it means using language in new ways as well as learning new "styles of meaning and modes of argument [...] and of combining existing elements into new combinations" (1978, 195–196). In mathematics, this is also obvious in the choice of syntactical patterns and the preference for certain forms less frequent/not used in everyday language. They should be the focus of the RSP course, so chosen that they can be accessible even for students whose proficiency in Romanian is little more than A2. Such patterns are found in word problems in Romanian; for instance, the gerund of the verb *to know* (*știind că*) followed by the conjunction is used to introduce known data and is paired with an impersonal form of the conjunctive of the verb *to find*

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our (*să se afle*) to operationalize an imperative meaning for what needs to be calculated.

Students learning such specific features will be able to recognize them in a wide range of contexts across fields of science such as physics, chemistry, engineering etc., which makes them appropriate as content in a wide angled RSP course. Moreover, developing students' awareness of how certain grammatical and discourse features differ in specific contexts (mathematical language in this case) of meaning making from everyday language is one of the basic transferable skills targeted by specific purposes language teaching.

The discourse pattern described above is typical for the genre of word problems, as the course designers observed by analyzing a range of authentic texts before tailoring language practice to focus on them. The task has been one of the most challenging aspects in the process of building the RSP course in the TUCN because Romanian is sparse in studies describing specific features of mathematical discourse. Once more, the studies on mathematical register (Halliday 1978) in general and those on teaching and learning mathematics in English cited above have been seminal resources for the RSP course designers, indicating areas of difficulties raised by the specific ways in which language is used to communicate in mathematics. Teachers' roles in LSP are multifaceted including that of researchers, whether they need to study the specific communication context targeted by their language course or the grammatical or rhetorical features of genre texts used in that context. RSP teachers must certainly follow this path, too. Functional linguistics provided theoretical and practical approaches to registers, genre analysis constructed a detailed picture of types of text that populate disciplinary communication, text analysis showed how selection and patterning of lexical, grammatical and rhetorical features realize specific meanings in different languages. The knowledge generated by such studies is fundamental to course design in LSP. In ESP, genre and register knowledge has fertilized the development of long teaching and learning traditions such as that initiated by Swales' CARS model (1990) (in academic discourse) or by Bhatia (1993), to mention the best known.

Nevertheless, for RSP these studies still have limitations. Lack of descriptions of professional genres as they are textually realized in Romanian and as they are used in local disciplinary discourse communities makes the work of RSP course designers much more labour-intensive. Before being able to include genres or textual patterns and preferences of various disciplinary discourses they need to do the research which results in descriptions of these features in Romanian. It is a challenge and a strong emphasis on pre-design activities which fall within the roles of LSP teacher as described by Dudley-Evans (1998): collaborator with specialists in

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a discipline (the end users of genre texts that might be included in the LSP course), researcher (socio-linguistics, textual linguistics, etc.) and evaluator. Although it might open appalling perspectives for RSP teachers, this situation constitutes one of the most fertile grounds of further work in RSP. New lines of research that draw from a rich Anglophone tradition in LSP are there to be explored and used to design RSP course anywhere on the continuum of specificity from wide angled approaches to very narrow ones.

5. Conclusion

The present paper described the challenges posed by designing a specific purposes Romanian language course from the curriculum of the Preparatory Year of Romanian language in a higher education institution, the TUCN, in the following areas:

- pre-design needs analysis;
- descriptions of the target language use context;
- choice of focus (wide angle vs specific angle);
- choice of core content;
- description of specific discourse features of the core content.

Drawing from both theoretical and practical approaches to LSP in English language teaching, the designers opted for a wide angled perspective and the inclusion of a core content of mathematical language, allowing for flexibility in re-shaping the course content and focus by on-going research in specific features of this disciplinary discourse and the application of the principle of transferability of skills in language use.

Fundamental gaps in knowledge and resources were identified, such as the lack of research in Romanian genre texts and their textual features in the disciplinary discourse of mathematics. However, the rich Anglophone tradition of genre and text analysis and provide useful paths to follow. Exciting and valuable lines of work open in research in multiple disciplinary discourses in Romanian, both from a cross-disciplinary perspective (e.g. word problems in mathematics vs in physics) and from a cross-language perspective (e.g. English-Romanian).

In addition, enhancing theoretical insights from ESP with theoretical considerations and situated practice in other LSP, such as RSP, contributes to the growth of LSP as a discipline, as a common core knowledge in language teaching and learning.

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