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THE NEED FOR ENGLISH IN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: In Romania, children usually come in contact with a foreign language around the age of 3 or 4. It might be beneficial for them since the sooner they come in contact with it, the better for their further knowledge of the given language, but it might also be detrimental to their proper acquisition of their mother tongue.

Keywords: foreign language, school/ university, need, pupils/ students

In Romania, children first come in contact with a foreign language at kindergarten, i.e. roughly around the age of 3. It is very likely for most of them at this age not to master perfectly their mother tongue either. This might be considered a drawback by some people since there is always the possibility of **confusion** between words, **mispronunciation** or even their **incorrect learning** of a foreign language from the very beginning.

The **confusion** may arise due to the similarity in form between words in two or more different languages, that is due to the so-called "false friends". Children might confuse between words like those below, which have a similar form in Romanian and English, but whose meaning is completely different.

librărie (book shop) – *library*
tablă (white/black board) – *table*
ordinar (of a bad quality) – *ordinary* (common)
actual (at present, at the moment) – *actual* (real)
eventual (possible, likely) – *eventually* (in the end)
crimă (murder) – *crime* (minor offence)
criminal (murderer) – *criminal* (someone who commits a crime, an offence)
magazin (shop, store) – *magazine* (journal)
fizician (physicist) – *physician* (doctor)
sensibil (sensitive) – *sensible* (rational, common-sensical)

Mispronunciation is often due to the child's incomplete cognitive development, which makes him/her incapable of long-term remembering and correct pronunciation of the words and phrases heard or taught. Repetition and correction is mandatory at this stage for a good development of pronunciation. The cases in which incorrect pronunciation starts from the teacher are rarer; unfortunately, they still exist.

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The **incorrect learning** might be due to the teacher's fault or the learner's fault. In the former case, the teacher's skills might prove insufficient for the needs of the learner, i.e. he/she may mispronounce words, may provide too much or too little information, incorrectly adapted to the cognitive level of the learner or may not provide enough explanations or correlations with the mother tongue, for the learner to better understand the notions and concepts taught. It the latter case, it may be due to the child's incapacity of following the explanations of the teacher or his inability to start studying a foreign language at such a young age. In either case, patience and repetition are the key to the correct understanding of the ideas, words or concepts discussed and further on learned.

It is well-acknowledged that once the pupils advance in age, it becomes easier for both (them and the teacher) to approach grammar and vocabulary. When it comes to **grammar**, it is very important to follow a given order, to provide as many examples as possible to better illustrate the grammar items taught. When grammar is taught, it is essential to use a reduced vocabulary, easily accessible and understood by the learners, for the sake of practice. When asked about grammar, most students may over-react and complain about it, seeing it as boring or repetitive.

Still related to **grammar**, the forms of the verbs in English are easier to learn by any Romanian student since, unlike the Romanian verb, the English one has fewer formal indices that mark the person and the number. That is why, at least for Present Tense Simple, the only ending used is the one specific to the third person singular: *-(e)s* (e.g. *he studies*). The subject is of utmost importance in English, since it provides information about the person and the number, especially when expressed through a personal pronoun (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă; Comişel 1992:35).

Also relevant for the current discussion are the **mistakes** made by anyone who begins to study a foreign language. First of all, mistakes occur due to the incomplete cognitive development of the pupil who attempts to learn another language (a foreign one), other than his mother tongue. It is the teacher's duty to identify and try to comprehend the causes of the mistakes made (Ivanov 2011:5). Ivanov identifies three major classes of mistakes made by students in their attempt to learn a foreign language: *interlanguage errors* (which are due to the linguistic transfer), *intralingual errors* (specific to the language learned) and *developmental errors* (due to the learning process). The last two can be taken into account and paid more attention in the case of younger students who have not had the chance to understand and master completely their mother tongue, while the first class of mistakes brought into discussion is moreover related to students in high schools or universities, given their more developed cognitive level.

Moreover, **mistakes** represent the feedback given by the students in the process of learning a foreign language. It is the duty of the teacher to apprehend them, since they might give a clue on the stage of linguistic development of the learner. The teacher's experience is also very important, because he/she can notice the mistakes that are recurrent with each generation of students. Therefore, he/she shall understand which are the items that require more time for explanations and practice.

In addition, mistakes are imminent, at least at the beginning, when one tries to get accustomed with the grammar and the vocabulary of the new language. In other words, they are inevitable since they go hand in hand with learning and practicing.

Respect for the teacher and the other colleagues, the desire to study, paying attention and doing the homework are some of **the qualities of being a good student** (Riddell 2014: 4-5). A

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good teacher should be both strict and indulgent with his students, must be aware of the students' needs, must have a lot of patience, must be aware that not all students can learn in the same rhythm, should not only limit himself and the teaching activities to books, but should also rely on the emerging issues in the class, neither should he pretend to know all nor ask it from his students (Riddell 2014: 11). Above all, the teacher's most important quality is to know **how** to teach his subject. However, we consider that there is more to those mentioned already, and it is impossible to keep the high standards and ideals at each and every lesson.

The **methods** used when teaching a foreign language differ with age. Nowadays, children are more exposed to the internet and games, whether we like it or not. They both represent possible sources of English vocabulary, but it is the task of the teacher or parent to lead the child through this process of learning a foreign language this way. For the child it becomes easier and he will learn many words without much effort, especially if he engages himself in programs or games that he enjoys. Conversely, it is also a very dangerous means of learning, since without proper guidance and monitoring, the child may follow unwanted paths and links, thus overexposing himself and becoming more vulnerable in front of the vast pieces of information that the internet has to offer, inappropriate at early ages.

Therefore, the teacher has to adapt his methods to the learning needs of his students, since at present, new request, changes, challenges and, last but not least, the rapid and dynamic evolution of languages may endanger the curriculum and also the attitude of the student during the implementation of the teaching-learning process (Ivanov 2011: 194-195). It is not only the student who should be versatile when it comes to learning a new language and comply with the teacher's requests and methods, but also **the teacher should become versatile** and adapt and do with the methods and techniques that are suited best to the students. Therefore, it is important for the materials to be informative, enjoyable and entertaining, for the students not to lose interest in what they are taught (Umstatter 2002: vii). It is very important to make them look forward to the next lesson, to arouse their curiosity on the matter discussed and, why not, if time permits, let them choose a topic of discussion.

Once the child grows older, the needs also change. He switches from games to documentaries, movies, music etc. Internet has become part of everyone's life, easily accessible not only on the computer, but also on the phone. Despite being forbidden in schools, mobile phones are still used by students in their quest and desire for knowledge, but the phones may also turn into the teachers' enemies, since there is this tendency of checking on the internet what the teacher teaches. This approach may be due to the short time allotted to the lesson itself, to the incomplete or incorrect understanding of the teacher's explanations or, some other times, to the uncontrollable desire of the student to show off in front of his colleagues and thus disturb the likely development of the lesson, as planned by the teacher. It is obvious that phones cannot be forbidden at home, and the student is allowed to check on the internet what he thinks he has not fully understood in class, and as long as it does not occur in the classroom, it is a normal thing to do either out of curiosity or out of the need to learn and understand better.

The teacher may also approach **modern methods** in the teaching-learning process and make use of the internet in the classroom. There are very many websites[1] that provide tests and questionnaires for the sake of practice the notions and concepts taught in class, which the teacher may use together with his students for free. It seems easier, since most such websites also

[1] See, for example, http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/, consulted on 6.05.2018.

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provide the score at the end of the test, along with the correct answers, in order for the students to acknowledge the mistakes they have made. If not preferable in class, the teacher may recommend such tests to be done at home, since they are structured and adapted to the students' level of knowledge. The purpose of other websites[2] is to make the student determine his own level of English. There are authors, for example Umstatter (2002: viii) who have come to see or refer to students as "test-takers". We consider this approach to be rather limited, since students not only study a language for the sake of testing it and being assessed, but also for their own benefit and practice.

As for other methods, when **teaching English in schools**, the **audio-lingual method** is used for young learners in kindergartens and in primary schools, when children have to focus more on listening and repeating, on making habits, on creating patterns, since they are now learning how to write in their mother tongue. Another method that could be successfully used with children at very young ages refers to their learning by means of commands, such as: *Stand up!, Raise your right hand!, Sit down! Go to the door!* etc. This method is called **total physical response (TPR)** and it focuses on repetitive commands and creation of patterns, easy to reproduce by children at this age.

Another method, which best applies to pupils in the elementary school, is **the structural approach**, which focuses on grammar and rules, on them being taught one at a time and in a specific order. A method for children in the elementary school focuses on placing the child in a given situation in which he has to invite, suggest, complain etc. It focuses on the student and the world around him and the most likely situations and arguments that can occur. He needs to use the familiar and known vocabulary, imagining what he would say if he were in such a situation. This comes under the heading of **communicative language teaching (CLT).**

When it comes to pupils in (state-supported or private) high schools, **immersion** is a very common method nowadays, especially for students of foreign origin established in Romania, but also for Romanian students. They are supposed to study most or all the subjects (math, geography, history etc.) in English. It is a very challenging and difficult approach, since all the thoughts should be formulated directly in English. It requires more attention and more commitment from the student. The advantage of such a method is that English will never lose its authenticity as long as the teacher teaches only in English, without resorting to the students' mother tongue (Riddell 2014: 2).

On the other hand, **in universities**, a combination of methods[3] is preferable. The **direct method** focuses more on the words (the vocabulary) pertaining to a specific field of activity, which is the aim of most universities, i.e. to teach English for specific purposes, according to the specificity of each faculty/ university (e.g. medicine, computer science, law, economic sciences etc.), and also on their correct pronunciation, and less on grammar rules. **The lexical syllabus** starts from original and authentic materials in which stress in placed on different words or phrases, according to how frequent they are. However, the purpose of learning at this stage is not only fluency in speaking, as most students expect only to talk, but also accuracy and fluency in writing.

There is this imperative need, to which universities must respond, related to the acquisition of foreign languages by students, since many of them have the opportunity

[2] See, for example, https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/content, consulted on 6.05.2018.
[3] For a more detailed discussion on teaching methods, see Willis, D.,*The Lexical Syllabus*, Collins Cobuild, 1990.

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(sometimes a one-life-time opportunity) to go and study abroad, even for short periods of time, which incapacitates them if they do not know how to speak at least one foreign language (English in particular), if not more. They may get scholarships or may attend internships either in Romania or in other countries, which represents a huge advantage for their future development, irrespective of the field of activity chosen for the future and knowing a foreign language represents an open door to better choices.

Additionally, after graduation, when in search for a job, they will always be asked about the foreign languages they know, and the key to a successful career is tightly connected to the answer to such a question, i.e. the more languages one speaks, the better for him in life. Knowing a foreign language is also mandatory in case one wants to continue one's studies. The enrollment to a Master's program or a Doctoral school also requires that the candidate know a foreign language.

The focus of the present paper is on foreign language teaching and acquisition is schools and universities, but with particular interest in English, since it is present everywhere in schools, in advertising, on television, on the internet etc. Therefore, it is worth the name of "the language of globalization".

There have always been **divergent opinions** about English as a language. Some perceive it as merely an instrument, "a skill to use for communicating thought and information". Others understand it as "an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translingual and transcultural competence" (MLA 2018). Without taking sides in the ongoing and never-ending debates on the purpose and role of English as a global language, we all agree that knowing English is of utmost importance.

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