

TRAPS TO THE APPLIED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: THE FUNCTIONAL ILLITERATENESS

Violeta NEGREA¹

Motto: “Not ignorance, but the ignorance of ignorance is the death of knowledge.”
Alfred North Whitehead

Abstract

The article suggests the reconsideration of the applied English teaching activity for the Romanian fresh students in economics which is hampered by the recent wide spread phenomenon of functional illiterateness of the high school graduates. The critical quantitative and qualitative analysis of the misused language samples raise questions on the students capacity to communicate accurately and transfer professional knowledge and understanding from one language into another. Our commitment to support professional training of the students brings forward facts and figures of the phenomenon and suggests solutions for the improvement of their reading and listening comprehension ability and meaningful language articulation both in Romanian and English. Our research is driven by the commitment of language teachers to adopt a specific national level admitted definition of the phenomenon first, and then to make possible the development of an adequate strategy to put an end to it.

Keywords: functional illiteracy, vocabulary practice, linguistic competencies, language cognitive function, professional development

1. Conceptual and practical considerations

Although the assessment that “in a global knowledge-based economy, Romania needs qualified labor force to be competitive in terms of productivity and innovation”² is taken seriously, we become more and more painfully aware of the phenomenon defined by the concept *formal illiterateness* which brings in frustration, upset and disappointment. More often than not, this is associated with ignorance, as the functional illiterate does not know that he doesn't know. His information, ideas and practice are partially ignorant as they produce

¹ The University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, violeta.negrea@gmail.com

² <https://ceae.ro/>

deviated professional, social and political problems, ranging from ridiculous to disastrous. According to UNESCO (1978: 183)³ “a functionally illiterate person cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his own and the community’s development.”

The international statistics show that 85% of the world adult population is literate indicating also that the prevalence of illiteracy is higher in developing countries, but functional illiteracy is paradoxically higher in developed countries (Bhola, 1995: 18). Recent comparative estimations range the percentage of the functional illiterates in Europe as the lowest in Sweden with 8% and the highest in Portugal with 40% (Eme, 2011:753–762; Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2011). But according to the recent survey carried out by the Romanian “Center for educational evaluation and analysis⁴” in Cluj-Napoca the 42% of 15 year Romanian graduates is the highest in Europe⁵, making Romania the lowest quality work force producer in Europe. Although there is no formal evidence of the phenomenon estimation to eventuate from the higher education graduates, the case study analysis of the academic linguistic skills of the young students in finance shows that it is actively devastating.

The various definitions of the phenomenon and their corresponding diagnosis assessment can draw fundamentally different estimations. Our local-sized research is focused on the functional illiterateness as a result of a deficient formal education as opposed to dyslexia which is a specific neurobiological learning disability. Our study is limited to the quantitative and qualitative investigation of the phenomenon associated to the first year students in finance and banking in the Academy of Economic Studies, aiming at making language education efficient in terms of economic, social and professional success. The investigation is also limited to the assessment of English and Romanian language experiences and their consequences in terms of reading comprehension, knowledge transfer and critical thinking training in student-centered language training activities. The two languages samples are selected from one applied-language unit assigned to students’ class activity.

Our investigation takes into account that the high percentage of functional illiterateness has a strong impact on the Romanian BIP which can be improved consistently till 2035 by over 200% if the phenomenon would decrease, says Ligia Deca, education expert and presidential counselor.⁶ We consider that the language teaching focus on the subject investigation is a priority for the language educational policy which is able to contribute to the phenomenon reduction by 5% per year, as suggested by Cristian Lazea, chief economist of the National Bank of Romania.

2. Technicalities and practicalities

The development of our research has started from the students’ inability to comprehend texts in English and transfer knowledge already learnt in their Romanian native language into English which makes the new professional concepts work for their efficient and effective professional training. The chain process of understanding, knowledge transfer and critical thinking is closely confined to their scarce vocabulary.

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5102880/>

⁴ <https://ceae.ro/>

⁵ www.news.ro

⁶ <http://www.presidency.ro/ro/administratia-prezidentiala/consilierii-presedintelui/deca>

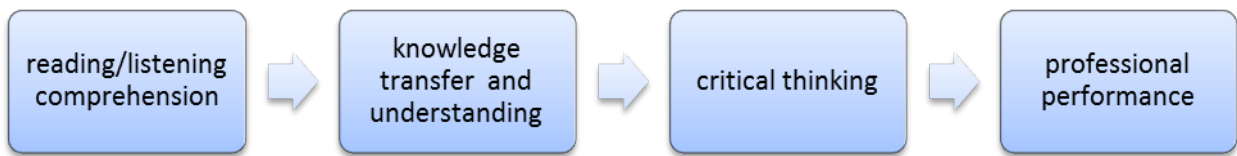


Fig. 1. The direct relationship between reading and listening comprehension to professionalism through language development and critical thinking ability

Humans use their natural language not only for communication, but also for the enlargement of their cognitive powers. Writing and uttering ideas train not only memory, but they also facilitate and enhance reasoning process. (Clark, 1998; Chomsky, 1976) Language acquisition and enculturationⁱ create that range of cognitive complexity and reasoning capacity which derive from the conceptual resources of the educated and trained native language. (Bowerman & Levinson, 2001). It is the out-put of the language faculty which plays the role of conjoining information so that thoughts can be associated with expressions and sentences which then generate input for further conceptual language out-put.



Fig. 2. Applied language development process

Language, by virtue of its role in producing cycles of new thought-contents, which were not previously available, is the main source of cognitive flexibility and adaptability which makes our species so distinctive. Cognitive science research has been exploring the relation between language and thought and suggests explicitly that many language aspects, ranging from word meanings to conventional and novel expressions, reflect enduring conceptual mappings of knowledge and experience. Carruthers's claim that all domain-general propositional thoughts can be framed by Chomsky's level of linguistic representation, i.e. the language logical form (LF), is pivotal for the applied terminology development, comprehension and learning (Carruthers, 2002: 657-726). The linguistic level of applied language representation is essentially based on thought which makes sense of the claimed cognitive function of language, making its form to serve as a level of representation for cognition (Chater, 2002:680). Carruthers also suggests that cross-domain thinking requires translation of domain specific data into common linguistic format which makes the language form (LF) play the role of cross-domain medium of exchange. Language, as a cognitive effective tool, makes possible abstraction of notions and creates new mental entities "practically out of nothing." (Bolinger, 1975:251) The development of logic, hence scientific arguments is made possible through propositional debates based on natural language. The formation of a professional community sharing the same language has, therefore, been essential for the progression of human thought through formulation and resolution of conflicting views (Hampton: 2002:688).

Consequently, applied vocabulary comprehension is essentially a core component of the professional knowledge development and its critical transfer. It makes students access their

background knowledge, understand and express professional ideas, communicate effectively, and facilitate learning new concepts. Students' word knowledge is strongly linked to their reading comprehension capacity, to their critical thinking, and obviously, to their professional expectations. If students do not adequately and steadily grow their vocabulary knowledge through native and foreign language acquisition, their reading comprehension and their qualified competency will be dramatically affected (Chall & Jacobs, 2003) as language development is a necessary condition for the acquisition of cognitive skills.

3. Applied vocabulary training case-study

Our local-sized research has focused on the functional vocabulary illiterateness as a result of a deficient formal education and it is limited to the quantitative and qualitative investigation of the phenomenon associated to the first year students in finance and banking in the Academy of Economic Studies. The investigation is also limited to the assessment of both English and Romanian language experiences and their consequences in terms of reading comprehension, knowledge transfer and critical thinking training based on translation, as a student-centered language instruction activity. The languages samples are selected from unit I, Market Economy, which is dedicated to students' class and homework activity.

Aceste avuții **nu conteneau** să fie sporite atât prin munca sclavilor cât și prin împrumuturi purtătoare de dobânzi mari, (*high interest loans*) condițiile tranzacțiilor fiind precis stabilite prin înscrisuri (*writings*).

The translation task aims at:

- developing reading comprehension
- vocabulary knowledge and conception
- improvement of cognition creatively
- accurate knowledge transfer
- speaking and writing competence

But the poor knowledge of their own native Romanian made the student centered task difficult to carry out due to the misunderstanding of the verb *a conteni*. The DEX-on line entry explains:

conteni [At: COD. VOR. 34/6 / V: (înv) ~*tin*~, *cun*~ / Pzi: ~*nesc* / E: ml *continere*] **1-2 vi** (D. flinte; construit cu prepoziția *din*) A întrerupe o mișcare sau o acțiune începută. **3 vt** A opri. **4 vi** (D. ploaie, vânt, plâns, durere etc.) A se domoli. **5 vi** (Pex) A se opri. **6 vt** A porunci cuiva să înceteze. **7 vi** A lua sfârșit Si: *a înceta*. **8 vi** (îe) A ~ **din viață** A muri. **9 vi** (îe) A ~ **din gură** A tăcea. **10 vt** A potoli pe cineva. **11 vr** A se stăpâni. **12 vt** (Cu o complinire introdusă prin pp *din, de la, ca să*) A împiedica. **13 vi** (Înv) A interzice. **14 vt** (Înv) A opri.

The following diagram shows the relationship established by the students between the various meanings of the Romanian word “*a conteni*” they imagined, and their resulting English mis-translation:

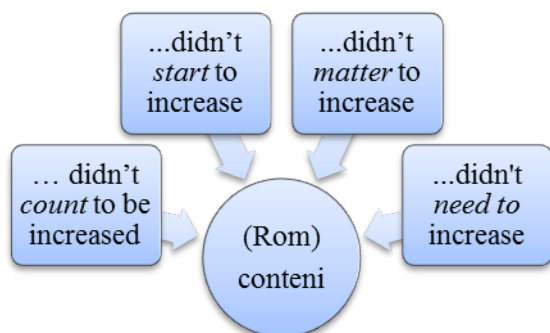


Fig. 3

The comparative study of the Romanian word “a conteni’ and its corresponding translation variants, reveals the students’ capacity to think creatively in terms of their imagination, not of their reading comprehension ability and vocabulary knowledge.

It is clear that the meanings that they opted for correspond to no reading comprehension, but to the similarity of the word format. The misunderstanding of the Romanian *a conteni* leads to its association to different Romanian or English word values which make no speaking or writing comprehension.

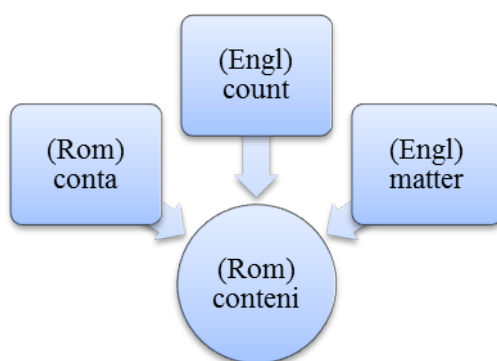


Fig. 4

The language instruction challenge consists in focusing on systematic and consistent translation approach aiming at the development of reading and listening comprehension and critical thinking in both native and secondary language. It is the teacher responsibility to work intensively on the students’ language proficiency reconstruction in terms of their professional domain.

4. Conclusions

At the end of our analysis, it became clear how challenging it can be for a high school graduate to become fully proficient in applied English and expectedly employed in the professional domain he opted for. His problematic schooling experience did not help him to develop his ability to explore the relation between his native language and thought, ranging from word meanings to conventional and novel expressions, to map knowledge and experience. He needs to change his learning habits and understand that the language logical form (LF) is pivotal for the applied terminology development, comprehension and learning. (Carruthers, 2002: 657-726) The linguistic level of his professional knowledge is essentially

based on thought which makes its form to serve cognition. (Chater, 2002:680) He also needs to become aware of the role played by his domain specific data translation into a common linguistic format as a cross-domain medium of exchange. The development of creative thinking and problem-solving ability is made possible through the development of his natural language and its relationship with the foreign language.

Consequently, the applied language teacher and his student will need to develop adequate techniques and strategies to improve vocabulary comprehension which is a core component of the professional knowledge development and its critical transfer. Students' vocabulary knowledge is strongly linked to their reading comprehension capacity, to their critical thinking, and obviously, to their professional expectations.

Bibliography and References

- Bhola, H. S. 1995.** Adult Education Policy Formation and Implementation: A Global Perspective. *Policy Studies Review*13 (3/4): 319–340.
- Bolinger, Dwight.** 1975 *Aspects of language*, 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- Bowerman, M.; Levinson, S. eds.** 2001. *Language acquisition and conceptual development*, Cambridge University Press
- Chall, J. & Jacobs, V. A.** 2003 *Poor children's fourth-grade slump*. American Educator, Spring, American Federation of Teachers
- Carruthers, P.** 2002. "The Cognitive functions of language" in *Behavioral and Brain Science Journal*, vol. 25
- Chater, N.** 2002: "Is LF really a linguistic level?" in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 25
- Chomsky, N.** 1976. *Reflections on language*, Temple Smith
- Clark, A.** (1998) "Magic words: How language augments human computation" in *Language and thought*, ed. P. Carruthers & J. Boucher. Cambridge University Press
- Eme E.** 2011. Cognitive and psycholinguistic skills of adults who are functionally illiterate: current state of research and implications for adult education. *Appl. Cogn. Psychol.* 25
- Grotlüschen, A., & Riekmann, W.** 2011. *Leo. – Level-One Study: Literacy of adults at the lower rungs of the ladder*. Hamburg: Universität Hamburg.
- Hampton, J.** 2002 "Language's role in enabling abstract, logical thought" in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 25:6

ⁱ The process whereby individuals learn their group's culture through experience, observation and instruction. The term was used by the American anthropologist Melville Herskovits in 1948 in his article *Man and his works: The science of cultural anthropology* In *Social forces*, vol27, March, issue 3, accessed on 8.21.2018 <https://academic.oup.com/sf/article/27/3/317/1991662>