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DEVELOPING LEARNERS' ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The paper addresses the topic of developing learners' oral communication skills in Romanian as a foreign language. After briefly reviewing key literature on the topic, the paper describes the experience of the students enrolled in the Preparatory year of Romanian language for foreign citizens organized at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (curriculum and syllabi design and implementation, types of classroom and homework activities, assessment tools and program outcomes related to the topic).

Keywords: Romanian as a foreign language; oral communication skills; Preparatory year of Romanian language for foreign citizens; the Romanian Language Institute (ILR); the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR).

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1. Preliminary remarks

The current article aims at presenting the methodological options used by teachers from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania, when teaching Romanian as a foreign language to foreign students, with a focus on the development of the latter's oral communication skills. We are, of course, aware of the fact that oral skills are not acquired in isolation from other linguistic, sociolinguistic or pragmatic competences, but we choose to mainly focus on oral skills while marginally referring to the other competences.

The article begins by referring to the framework put forth by Council of Europe's (2020) with its revised version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Next, we briefly present the national and international context to teaching and learning Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) and to some previous research on the topic of developing learners' oral skills in RFL. Subsequently, we present the strategies and activities RFL teachers at ASE, Romania, employ towards attaining the goal of equipping their students with sound oral reception and production skills in Romanian. Last but not least, the article ends with a brief conclusion.

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2. A brief literature review

This section provides the background for the presentation of strategies and activities designed to enhance learners' oral communication skills in Romanian as a foreign language (RFL). We do so by referring to: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as revised by Council of Europe (2020), the national and international context of the teaching and learning of Romanian as a foreign language, as well as a selection of previous articles that tackle the topic of oral communication skills in RFL.

According to the Council of Europe (2020), the development of oral communication skills in a (second) language falls under several categories of activities – reception activities, production activities, interaction activities, all aimed at developing learners' ability to comprehend and use language efficiently in a complexity of contexts. Needless to say, development of oral skills is not isolated from the development of written, mediation, pluricultural competences, or that of linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. It is just for reasons of space that this article only refers to the development of oral skills.

We now provide an overall view of the common reference to the development of oral communication skills as delineated by Council of Europe (2020), without referring to fine grain distinctions between levels of proficiency (A1-C2). Reception activities are based on strategies such as “identifying cues and inferring” information (p. 47), with oral comprehension activities targeting “different kinds of one-way comprehension [... with learners' roles varying from] a one-way role of an overhearer or bystander, to being a member of a live audience, to being a member of an audience at a distance – via media” (p. 48). Production activities are based on strategies such as “planning, compensating, monitoring and repair” (p. 61), which implies that the “[a]bility in this more formal production is not acquired naturally; it is a product of literacy learnt through education and experience.” (idem). Oral production activities are meant to illustrate “interpersonal, transactional, evaluative” functions by equipping learners with the ability to address audiences, make public announcements, sustain various types of monologues (idem). Interaction activities are based on strategies such as “turntaking, co-operating, asking for clarification” (p. 71) and imply the need for the learner to be placed in contexts that require exchange (of information) with other participants. Oral interaction activities are also based on “interpersonal, transactional, evaluative” functions (idem) and are designed so as to assist learners in developing the ability to understand an interlocutor in contexts such as: conversations, informal and formal discussions on various topics, “[g]oal-oriented collaboration [...], [i]nformation exchange, [o]btaining goods and services, [i]nterviewing and being interviewed, and [u]sing telecommunications” (ibidem).

It is evident from the framework developed by the Council of Europe that the development of oral communication skills is a multi-faceted endeavor, with deep implications as regards the complexity of instructional activities one may resort to throughout the process. It is also obvious that learners can only benefit from the exposure to and involvement in such varied activities as the ones outlined above, with a view to make themselves understood and successfully interact/ cooperate with peers in the target language(s).

When talking about the learning of Romanian as a foreign language (RFL), we deem it important to acknowledge the complexity of the contexts in which RFL is taught and learned. On the one hand, there is the experience of international learners acquiring RFL across the world, on the other hand there is the experience of international learners acquiring RFL in Romania.

In the case of international learners acquiring RFL across the world, the teaching of RFL is mediated by the network of more than 50 Romanian Language Departments established at partner universities, under the aegis of the Romanian Language Institute (ILR), established in 1999 and subordinated to the Ministry of Education. The Institute aims at promoting the Romanian language, culture and civilization at international level by means of courses in Romanian language, culture and civilization, and the organization of a variety of cultural activities both at university level and at community level.

The Romanian Language Institute also organizes Romanian language classes and examinations for all levels of proficiency (A1A2, B1B2, C1C2). The examinations consist in three tests – reading comprehension and knowledge of grammar, writing production, and oral reception and production (ILR, not dated). The weight of each test in the overall mark varies from one level of proficiency to another. For instance, at A1A2 and B1 the written test weighs 75% and the oral test 25%, whereas at B2 and C1 C2 the written test weighs 50% and the oral test 50% (as per Ministerial Order OMECI 4394/ 2009).

The activity of the Romanian Language Institute and its network of Romanian Language Departments is complemented at international level by that of the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR), established in 2003 and subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The network comprises 20 Romanian Cultural Institutes across the globe, whose mission is to represent, promote and protect Romanian culture and civilization at home and abroad. The Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) has a distinct Romanian Language Bureau whose aim is to organize Romanian language, culture and civilization classes for both Romanian and foreign citizens, to train teachers and evaluators, to organize examination sessions, to design teaching and learning materials for RFL etc. (ICR, 2014). The examinations aim at checking learners’ oral and written comprehension, as well as oral and written production, for each all level of proficiency.

In the case of international learners acquiring RFL in Romania, previous literature can be grouped into the following categories: articles on the teaching of RFL in pre-university environments (Iftime & Vărășteanu, 2013) and in university contexts – either as part of language classes attended by foreign students joining study programs taught by Romanian universities (Pricope, 2014), or as part of the Preparatory year of Romanian language for foreign citizens (Badea & Iridon, 2020, Forna, 2020 a.o.). In what follows, we briefly present ideas put forth by the aforementioned authors highlighting the aspects related to the development of oral communication skills.

In pre-university context, Iftime & Vărășteanu (2013) tackle the issue of developing young learners’ skills in RFL, namely foreign learners enrolled in primary schools and taking classes of Romanian as a “Modern Language”. The authors briefly present the syllabus for such a subject, out of which we highlight the reference to oral reception and oral production aims. Along the lines of the European Language Portfolio, in primary school context, oral reception activities aim at developing the capacity to understand simple oral messages, with the following aspects in mind: “[p]roviding a proper response to” greetings, questions, instructions, recognizing “the names of the objects from the immediate universe in messages clearly and slowly articulated”, identifying gist in children’s movies and songs (p. 328). As regards oral production, at primary school level, the aim is to facilitate learners’ use of RFL in every-day communication contexts, with the following aspects in mind: “[r]eproduction of information / songs / short and simple poems with the teacher support”, “[p]roviding basic information [...] about self [...] [n]aming objects in the immediate universe (idem: 329).

In university context, Pricope (2014) refers to the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language in universities in Romania, in the context of their increased internationalization. Against this background, the author refers to the different categories of international students attending Romanian universities – from those participating in short-term mobilities (via the Erasmus framework) to those enrolled in long-term study programs, either in Romanian or in a foreign language. Irrespective of the category, international students attend classes of Romanian as a foreign language to acquire/ improve on their linguistic and cultural knowledge. With respect to the development of oral communication skills, the author points to activities such as role plays and simulations, debates and conversations, guided visits etc. Pricope highlights a change in the textbooks designed for teaching RFL – a move from grammar-based approaches to the communicative approach:

In comparison with the beginnings of teaching this subject matter, when the student books contained a large amount of grammar explanations, and, mostly, grammar drills and repetitive models, the recent period, most of the books available in book shops or in scientific centres have approached teaching Romanian as a foreign

language from a communicative and cultural perspective, which adds value to the aforementioned domain. (Pricope, 2014, 22)

In university context, Badea & Iridon (2020) tackle the topic of developing learners' oral communication skills in RFL from the perspective of students enrolled in a Preparatory year of Romanian language for foreign citizens (without naming the university) during the 2019-2020 academic year. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, classes began face-to-face and continued online; the student group comprised 12 learners from six different countries, who were involved in activities such as brainstorming, role plays, information gap, board games, story completion, storytelling, or simulations (of shopping activities or job interviews). The initial aim of the teachers was to encourage development of students' fluency in RFL, with the focus gradually shifting towards also improving accuracy, so that at the end of the academic year students possess a B1 level of proficiency.

Forna (2020) describes the activities designed for the development of both oral and written skills in RFL of students enrolled in a Preparatory year of Romanian language for foreign citizens at the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca. The author focuses on the first semester of studies and the discipline entitled "Oral and written communication 1", emphasizing the fact that the latter's purpose is more to provide students with opportunities to use and develop knowledge and skills acquired by attending other disciplines in the curricula, and less to expose students to new knowledge and skills. With respect to oral communication, the 25 students are exposed to activities such as: monologues, dialogues, telephone conversations etc. on topics such as oneself and one's family, the times of the day/ week/ year, the meals of the day, reading a map, talking about daily actions/ tools in desired professions, spare time and holidays etc. The author highlights the fact that these activities are used as opportunities for students to acquire vocabulary, grammatical structures as well as improve on pronunciation and discourse genres.

So far, we have presented the national and international context of teaching and learning of Romanian as a foreign language and have placed such endeavors in the larger context provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages put forth by Council of Europe (2020). We now turn to the presentation of the practical means of developing international students' oral skills in Romanian employed at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania.

3. Developing oral skills in Romanian as a Foreign Language at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

In keeping with the national standards developed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS, 2019), the curriculum for the Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens includes disciplines designed for the development and practice of oral communication skills in Romanian, as well as activities that serve the same purpose included in all the other disciplines in the curriculum.

The disciplines especially designed for the development and practice of oral communication skills are "Practical course of Romanian: oral and written communication" (6 hours a week) and "Practical course of Romanian: comprehension of oral and written text" (4 hours a week), totalling 10 out of 25 hours a week in the first semester of studies (40% in the curriculum of the first semester, 20% in the curriculum for the entire year). The two disciplines offer students exposure to a variety of oral texts (teachers' and peers' productions, textbook recordings, as well as real-life recordings of news, ads, music etc.); this mixed approach aims to help learners become familiar not only to native and native-like pronunciation but also to non-native pronunciation, hence equip them for further study in a Romanian university and for living in a community of Romanians, both these contexts being characterized by speaker variety (in terms of pronunciation, accent, delivery speed etc.). The activities undertaken to stimulate students' production of oral text either in the form of small monologues, or in the form of participation in conversations are related to topics such as: oneself, one's surroundings (dwelling and furniture, the city), one's family, clothing and footwear, personal hygiene, meals and

beverages, daily activities and plans, sports and technology etc. Moreover, the oral materials are complemented by written materials, used for activities such as: dictation, reading aloud (with students hearing themselves and their peers and teachers pronounce letters and letter groups, such as ‘che, chi’ [ke, ki], ‘ce, ci’ [tʃe, tʃi], ‘ghe, ghi’ [ge, gi], ‘ge, gi’ [je, ji] etc.), role playing conversations based on ready-made scripts or scripts that have to be partially or fully elaborated by students, producing an oral and/or written version of answers to questions meant to facilitate and monitor comprehension of main or specific ideas, summarizing and reporting on peer’s contribution, comparisons of ideas in the text with information derived from the students’ already existing knowledge on the topic etc.

Evaluation of oral skills is done throughout the semester (by classroom interaction with peers and teachers, and by delivery of small oral presentations), and by means of midterms and final exams which include oral comprehension and oral production exercises. On the occasion of ongoing evaluation and midterms, students are also trained to self evaluate oral skills, based on criteria such as: oral accuracy (intelligibility in terms of pronunciation and prosody, fluency), morphological and syntactic accuracy, use of vocabulary, task completion, as well as conversation skills (information gathering from and information giving to one’s partner). For successful completion of the two disciplines, written skills are also evaluated on the occasion of ongoing evaluation, midterms and final exams, through activities such as: taking dictation, filling in sentences with words from a listening material, sentence and paragraph writing, elaboration of one-page presentations on a given topic. Students are trained to self evaluate written skills on the basis of criteria such as: spelling, capitalization, punctuation, morphological and syntactic accuracy, use of vocabulary, clarity and task completion, format and organization, as well as coherence, cohesion and complexity.

In addition to the disciplines especially designed for the development and practice of oral communication skills, oral skills are practiced and developed to some extent through all the other disciplines in the curriculum⁴. Classroom activities include oral interaction and oral production activities: peer to peer and student-teacher interaction, checking and/or asking for clarification, acknowledging understanding of a variety of items (related to grammar, vocabulary, content, professional context), pair and group work, discussion and debates on content items, checking/proving comprehension of audio and video recordings, comparison and contrast between Romanian realities and home country realities, simulation of professional conduct (job interviews, product and service commercials, doctor-patient interaction etc.). Evaluation of oral skills is done through oral presentations during the semester and oral exams at the end of the semester. Evaluation criteria include – content quality, structure and organization of information, visual design, audience rapport and quality of question and answer session, fluency and accuracy (oral, morphological and syntactic).

Apart from curricular opportunities to develop and practice oral skills in Romanian as a foreign language, students are also offered extra-curricular opportunities, either on campus, or off campus. On campus, APLR students are periodically invited to join Romanian and other international students in activities organized by the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, by ASE’s Cultural Studies Centers (e.g. Centre de Réussite Universitaire, the Centre for Japanese Studies, the Centre for American Studies), or by ASE’s International Relations Department, such as: cultural evenings, annual meetings with previous APLR alumni, workshops and other events included in the agenda of “ASE International Week” etc. The highlight of the academic year is APLR students’ participation in the Annual Students’ Conference, with papers submitted and defended as part of the

⁴ According to ASE (2023-2024), the other disciplines in the curriculum are:

- during the first semester – “Romanian culture and civilization”, “Practical course of Romanian: phonetics, vocabulary and grammar structures 1”, “Practical course of Romanian: text production”;
- during the second semester – “Business communication in Romanian”, “Practical course of Romanian: phonetics, vocabulary and grammar structures 2”, “Practical course of Romanian: text comprehension and production” and optional courses, as follows: the ‘medicine’ track – “Specialized Romanian language course for biological and biomedical sciences”: Biology, Anatomy, Chemistry, the ‘economics’ track – “Specialized Romanian language course for social sciences”: Management, Marketing, Finance, the ‘engineering’ track – “Specialized Romanian language course for engineering sciences”: Transport and Constructions, Management, Information Technology.

dedicated panel on “Romanian culture and civilization in international context”. Participants write and present papers on various cultural topics, as well as topics related to the professional field of subsequent specialization (e.g. medicine, economics etc.). Off campus, APLR students may develop their oral (multilingual and multicultural) communication skills by study visits to museums and other cultural establishments, guided tours of Bucharest, concerts at the Romanian Atheneum, book launches at the Gaudeamus International Book Fair etc.

To successfully complete the program, students have to pass both each and every discipline in the curriculum (which includes demonstrating mastery of oral skills in Romanian), and the graduation exam. The graduation exam is held on campus, before a jury and consists of two mandatory tests aimed at evaluating general and professional communication skills in Romanian, minimum level B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The first test consists in the elaboration and public defence of a paper written according to specifications and on topics made known to graduates 30 days before the examination date; the second test consists in a monologue and a dialogue on the basis of a short written text given to candidates on the spot on the day of the exam (ASE, 2023). Naturally, good command of oral skills in Romanian is mandatory for students to pass the graduation exam.

4. Conclusions

This article has tackled the topic of developing learners’ oral communication skills in Romanian as a foreign language. We began by briefly highlighting relevant aspects from the Council of Europe’s (2020) revised version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. We then referred to the teaching and learning of RFL both at international and at national level – we mentioned the activity undertaken by the Romanian Language Institute (ILR) and the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) with respect to the promotion of Romanian language, culture and civilization at home and abroad, and briefly pointed to the format of language examinations (where oral skills play an increasing role starting with the B2 level of proficiency). Naturally, we also briefly presented a selection of articles on the same topic as the current article, and highlighted the teaching and learning activities employed by teachers of RFL in pre-university and university settings.

We then described the teaching and learning activities employed by teachers of RFL at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania, to develop the oral communication skills of international students enrolled in the Preparatory year of Romanian language for foreign citizens. We have tried to add to the scholarly discussion in the field by raising awareness of curriculum and syllabi design and implementation, types of classroom and homework activities, as well as types of (self-) assessment tools and activities employed so as to facilitate students’ acquisition of the target level B1 according to the CEFRL, as stipulated by the national standards developed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

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