

A Brief History of Language Teaching within the Educational System in Romania

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to offer an overview of foreign language teaching against the background of the Romanian educational system, which encompasses three major stages of evolution: the inter-war period, the communist and post-communist ages. Starting from the analysis of various documents specific to each epoch, our main goal is to highlight the way in which historical events determined and influenced not only the evolution of pedagogical thought in our country, but also the teaching strategies used in the field of foreign languages.

Keywords: *tradition, communism, education, teaching methods*

Introduction

Teaching foreign languages in Romania was a dramatic process that depended on the very history of the country and bore the mark of the succeeding leading ideologies. In order to understand the present status of education in Romania and envisage the future, we have to look back and analyse its past. That is why we should take into consideration the following questions: did the inter-war period lay the foundation of our educational system? How was it possible for the Romanian educational system to survive during Stalinism and Ceaușism? Could Romanian school preserve its tradition and respond to the general evolution of pedagogy and teaching methods?

We hope that the answers to all these issues will provide a comprehensive picture of the Romanian educational system and its evolution, with an emphasis on its avatars.

The inter-war period

The inter-war period consisted in complex changes at all levels: social, political and cultural. According to historians, its evolution included four stages: between 1919 and 1922 Romania had to cope with the devastation after the war, then, between 1922 and 1928, there was a revival of the country manifested in the political and economic life; the great economic crisis (characterised by inflation, unemployment and poverty) was felt between 1929 and 1933, being followed by an unprecedented economic boom, during 1934 and 1938, when the country reached its maximum potential. In such a context, the Romanian education system was subject to various changes and transformations as well. One of the most outstanding measures that had a great impact on the educational system was the Law of Education, issued in 1924, which

stipulated that elementary education should be fee-free and compulsory. Thus, the Romanian educational system was characterised by two complementary tendencies: modernisation and autochthonisation, that is, it could compete with the most advanced educational systems in Europe, while putting its national specificity into value. What could explain the advancement of the Romanian school? First of all, the political leaders understood that education was a priority for Romania's evolution and built well-equipped educational institutions; therefore, two of the most distinguished Ministers of Education, Constantin Angelescu (1922-1926) and Dimitrie Gusti (1932-1934) put into practice various educational policies and organisational strategies meant to strengthen the Romanian educational institutions at all levels. These measures added impetus to the growth of pedagogy, two schools becoming very influential during that period: *The School of Cluj*, with its representatives F. Ștefănescu-Goangă, Al. Roșea, N. Mărgineanu, D. Todoran, O. Ghibu and *The School of Bucharest*, with its members G.G. Antonescu, I.C. Petrescu, Stanciu Stoian, I.I. Gabrea, Simion Mehedinți, as well as other famous personalities from other cultural centres in Romania, like Ștefan Bârsănescu (Iași), Constantin Nărlă (Cernăuți), whose enormous contribution consisted in synthesising basic concepts of the new pedagogical trends: sociocentrism, pedocentrism and psycho-centrism. The newborn pedagogy promoted the principles of the active school, whose main purpose was to create a strong link between theory and practice, preparing students to meet the requirements of the society they lived in. One of the requirements of this modern society was the study of foreign languages, which led to teaching a wide variety of languages in both state and private schools. For instance, the high-school curriculum, which was one of the most advanced in Europe, as far as the organisation and level of education provided to the students was concerned, included, besides classical languages like Latin and Greek, French, German, Italian and English. Moreover, in order to meet the requirements of the new educational system, lots of foreign language trainers were employed, being very well paid by the Romanian state. This fact offered Romania the opportunity to become a real paradise for teaching and learning foreign languages as a way to adjust to the modernisation process started all over the world.

The Stalinization of Education

Unfortunately, the reformation and rebirth of the Romanian pedagogical thought was deviated from its normal course by the general deconstruction of the country's establishment in the aftermath of the World War II. It was from that moment on that commenced *the Dark Age* of our educational system as it became a perfect tool for communist propaganda. The domination of the Soviet Union and the pressure of its ideology brought about not only a change of the linguistic hierarchy, but also of the foreign language curriculum content. Consequently, Russian was declared the major foreign language, and it gradually conquered all educational levels: primary, secondary and academic, usurping the position formerly held by French, German, Italian or English. On the 30th of August 1945, Aurel Potop, Secretary Deputy of the Ministry of Education, argued that the introduction of Russian was necessary on the grounds that Romania was surrounded by Slavic countries and Russian literature was imbued with practical and real-life aspects that could easily be put into practice provided students get familiar with the Russian language in early educational stages, for example in the fourth grade [10, 480]. Despite the well-designed political strategies to bring Russian to the fore, there was a serious shortage of qualified Russian teachers, which brought about the import of Soviet trainers whose main role consisted in specializing Romanian teachers in the Russian language on a large scale. Starting with 1948, Russian became compulsory in all schools and, in order to hasten this process, even teachers who had not been able to graduate from the Romanian-Soviet Institute and ARLUS (The Romanian Association for Strengthening the Relation between Romania and the Soviet Union) were given the chance to teach. Moreover, in universities the Russian way of thinking became dominant, as the authors of the *Report on the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania*, show, quoting Mihai Ralea:

The university teaching staff's great discontent consists in the present payment system according to imposed rules. Professors with a lower number of students (especially in technical science faculties) have fewer classes, in most cases only 50% of the classes professors with lots of students have'. And he continues: 'The obedient imitation of the Russian university rules on the number of classes is not fair, as the situation existing in our country does not match the one in the Soviet Union. We do not have the same number of students (higher in USSR), not even the high number of aspirants the universities and institutes in the Soviet Union have. The current system of teaching in our country makes it impossible for some of the teaching staff to do research, as they are forced to simultaneously deliver two, three or even more lectures, not having the chance to prepare them accordingly [10,476].

As the Russian ideology conquered more and more supporters, a new pedagogical objective had to be fulfilled, which was the introduction of a standardised course book for each subject included in the national curriculum. In this context of huge indoctrination, the foreign language bourgeois textbooks, which were considered retrograde, were replaced by the new ones that reproduced the model offered by Anton Makarenko, the theorist of Soviet pedagogy, who praised the concept of productive labour, cultural instruction being seen as futile and incapable of building up a new personality. The language textbook dealt with imposed topics and themes. Students had to cope with learning uninteresting, boring materials that emphasised the relationship among three factors, pupil – school – factory, in the light of the supreme ideology, historical materialism, Stalinism and Trotskyism, while teachers mainly resorted to the old-fashioned Grammar Translation Method. Following the model of the classical languages, teaching was viewed as transmission of a set of grammatical rules, its main criteria being: the medium of instruction was the mother tongue, written exercises helped at practising the target language, translation of written texts into L2 was highly valued, being seen as the supreme aim of foreign language teaching. Therefore, other language skills like speaking and listening were paid no attention to, while vocabulary was taught by means of listing words and phrases. It was a fundamentally passive and not productive way of learning a language, the teacher being seen as a provider of knowledge, a model of correct form and, most of all, the controller of the class. Under the given circumstances, the Grammar Translation Method was suitable to spread the "stahanovistic" thinking that imposed the notion of "the proletarian intellectual", an epitome of the "new man". We could illustrate this tendency with a short fragment from a literature textbook that preceded its content, without paying attention to several hilarious errors:

On visiting some factories and institutions, one is surprised by the great number of young people employed there. There are some industrial units, for example, the Borzești chemical combine, the Săvinești man-made fibre factory, the Suceava timberprocessing complex, the Călărași straw pulp factory and the București transistor factory, where the average age of the workers is below 30. In some new settlements built as a result of Romania's economic development, such as the town Victoria and others, the number of young people is so great that these places have been nicknamed youth towns. (sic!) (...) Alongside the whole people, the youth of Romania dedicate their energy not only to economic progress, but also to social and political activities. The younger generation is also represented in the highest body of State power, the Grand National Assembly, where it discusses and adopts the laws which concern the nation as a whole [1, 3, 4].

As we can see, foreign language teaching turned into the main instrument meant to put into practice the guidelines of the communist government, that is, social class-cleansing and complete politisation of Romanian society, an outstanding component of *the cultural revolution*:

The main objectives of the totalitarian power by means of this reform aimed at censoring and strict orientation of information, the rigorous control of educational institutions by resorting to the complete annihilation of university autonomy, abolition of private and religious schools, supplying the staff necessary for the industrialization plan that was about to be developed, the rapid training of a number of dedicated followers who were able to apply the Communist policy of the party in the state institutions, army, justice and culture.

In other words, the creation of the new man, of the perfect robot, ready to unconditionally serve the party, its policy and its leaders [2, 51].

These dramatic transformations were to reach their climax at the end of the '60s, when learning other foreign languages than Russian was seen as a threat to the stability of the "revolutionary conquests" of the communist regime. Accordingly, philological education had to be reorganized, the study of Western foreign languages being drastically reduced in schools, high schools and universities. The contact with the Western culture was permitted under the strict control of the state. That is why special institutions like The General Direction for Press and Publishing Houses, subordinated to The Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, which had been founded before, continued to vigilantly monitor the ideological purity of the communist doctrine. Moreover, it was the Russian language itself that became the main source of information for specialists in different fields. For instance, two of the reputed scholars of English Language and Literature, Leon Levițchi and Ion Preda, had to translate A. Anixt's *History of English Literature* from Russian into Romanian, becoming one of the most popular works dedicated to this subject. Mention should be made of the fact that this book was accepted as it offered Stalinist and Marxist perspectives of literary interpretations, fitting into the patterns imposed by the political ideology of the time. As for other attempts of scholars to escape the communist ideology by writing on topics that were not part of the indoctrination programme, we should point out that they encountered great difficulty due to the scarcity of the sources of information and lack of direct contact with Western cultures and civilizations. Such an example is *The History of 20th century French Literature*, published in 1968 by Alexandru Dimitriu Păușești, professor at the University of Bucharest, who admits that:

Un cours de littérature française du XX^{ème} siècle paraît pour la première fois dans notre pays...Cet ouvrage ne serait être définitif. La dernière partie (après 1940) este surtout déficitaire, come il est normal dans l'état actuel de nos possibilités de documentation [6, Avant-propos].

Nevertheless, we may wonder how Romanian culture survived during this Dark Age. Firstly, valuable classical works were translated by famous groups of translators popularising Western and American culture and literature. As Rodica Pioariu states, quoting Petre Solomon, there was a serious concern to translate the works of the great classical writers by "committees of translators and linguists" [7, 199] that brought to light literary masterpieces of Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner etc. Some of these translations, done by Frieda Papadache, Petre Solomon, Petru Comărnescu, Eugen B. Marian, Emil Gulian, Dan Botta, Miha Dragomir etc. are still in use today. Secondly, another major source of information was the reputable cultural journal *Secolul XX* that had an enormous role in spreading up to date literary and artistic creations. Thirdly, some school textbooks designed for the study of foreign literatures (Russian, French and English) contained no socio-political texts, but focused on pure literary information, which constituted a form of silent resistance to the devastating indoctrination and brain-washing process controlled by the political leaders of the time.

Apparent Shifting towards Modernity

We might think that beginning with 1965 (the year of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej's death) Romania reached a stage of relative liberalization that could be explained by a new historical context, marked by Ceaușescu's succession to the leadership of the Communist Party. We should also note that, although he was the only communist ruler that firmly condemned Czechoslovakia's occupation by the Soviet army, his position, which was highly acclaimed by the Western countries at the time, did not imply any adjustments of the domestic policy. In other words, the brutal mass terror of the "hysterical materialism" that characterized the Stalinist period was replaced by the more subtle ideological strategies and psychological terror of

Ceaușescu's age. As Giovanni Sartori [9, 190] states, in spite of any changes of a totalitarian regime,

the essence of a totalitarian state does not ever alter. Routine gives birth to transformations, but they are only variations within the regime (within the social class). Terror, forcefully exercised, permanent cleansing, concentration and extermination camps – all these become characteristics that precede routine. On the other hand, the routine of totalitarianism may rather strengthen and not diminish other characteristics.

In their turn, the authors of *Raportul Comisiei Prezidențiale pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste în România (Report on the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania)* assert that there was no real destalinisation in Romania. An obvious proof is the fact that students' books continued the model of Soviet pedagogy, topics still praising the communist ideology, now materialized in the concept of the "multilaterally developed society" There were a plethora of topics such as: *The Agricultural Production Cooperation, Work in the Field, The Five-Year Plan, The Patriot* etc. the principle of a narrow specialization remains the guiding line of the national curricula, foreign language books having to intermingle specialized information (literature, culture and civilization) with a variety of technical texts in accordance with the ideology of the moment, that is, practice, research and education. One of the long lasting textbooks with such a design is the one published in 1977 by Corina Cojan, Radu Surdulescu and Anca Tănăsescu, revised in 1990, which was in use until alternative textbooks started to be issued and introduced in the Romanian educational process. The structure of a Unit consisted of three Streams, A, dealing with literature, B, with technical issues and C with grammar, many other books reproducing this pattern.

As for the teaching methods themselves, Ceaușescu's apparently new political position encouraged a modern approach, which, as a matter of fact, intended to promote communist humanism based on the training of a multilaterally developed man:

To educate the new generations in the communist spirit means, on the one hand, to help them reach the scientific knowledge standard characterizing this half of century, to acquire the quintessence of modern sciences, without which the progress of today's society cannot be conceived, to become highly competent specialists and, on the other hand, to assimilate a broad, humanistic general culture, to acquire the dialectical-materialistic conception that provides them with a clear representation of their role in society, to help them understand the perspectives and the meaning of the historical development, the major requirements of our time. Only by harmoniously combining these fundamental dimensions that are inseparable from education, by thus crystallizing the pupils' personality (...) we will be able to really mould a young generation capable of keeping the flame of progress ablaze, successfully continuing the great work of building up socialism and communism in Romania. [5, 15 Nicolae Ceaușescu quoted in "The Development of Education, Science and Culture in Romania", 1979, our translation]

That is why, we should emphasise the fact that a new direction in the instructional process started to be felt. This was demonstrated by the numerous works dedicated to a new kind of pedagogy and methodology that started to be published and translated: journals like *Modern Languages in School, The Journal of Pedagogy* or books like *Modern Language Methodology, Experimental Research Methodology* by Eugen Noveanu and Ligia-Iuliana Pană (1981), *Educational Methods* by Ioan Cerghit (1980), *Methodology for Teaching Technical French* by S. Burdea et al (1980), *Lessons Applying Active Teaching Methods* by P. Popescu and I.C. Roman (1980), *Teaching Foreign Language Skills* by Wilga M. Rivers (1977) and *Scientific Educational Revolution* by B.F. Skinner (1971). Foreign language teachers understood that the Audiolingual method would be beneficial for students, and, as a result, they promoted it in schools and gradually, bringing about a real improvement of the educational process. Although a teacher-dominated method, its novelty implied a shift of emphasis from grammar rules to structures. Based on behaviourist psychology, stimulus-response learning made use of repetitive drills that enabled memorisation of linguistic structures and pronunciation, avoiding

grammatical explanation and using vocabulary in context. The focus was on error correction, and, above all, teachers resorted to tapes and a variety of visual aids. Although a step forward, the main purpose of this method was students' accuracy, and not fluency. As Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers state,

Learners play a reactive role by responding to stimuli, and thus have little control over the content, pace or style of learning. They are not encouraged to initiate interaction, because this may lead to mistakes. The fact that in the early stages learners do not always understand the meaning of what they are repeating is not perceived as a drawback, for, by listening to the teacher, imitating accurately, and responding to and performing controlled tasks they are learning a new form of verbal behaviour. [8, 56]

In order to prove the great impact that the Audiolingual method had on Romanian teachers, we can exemplify with a series of school books of the period that were designed accordingly. In the textbook written by Corina Cojan and Carmen Ionescu, for the second year of study (1974), the lessons were organised so that listening and speaking could be developed by means of a variety of drills and supported by various audio aids. In some cases, even the textbooks were accompanied by vinyl discs to be used by foreign language teachers in the classroom. Such an example is the textbook written by I. Brăescu, Marcel Saraș, Al. Dumitriu Păușești, *A French Course Book for Technical and Human Sciences High Schools, 4th year of study*.

Despite the openness of the teaching strategies, the content of the textbooks had to follow the new stage of the communist ideology that promoted inflated nationalism and isolationism under Ceaușescu's presidency. Accordingly, the main purpose of the texts in foreign language textbooks was to reinforce the feeling of patriotism, eulogizing the picturesque landscapes of the country, the great achievements of industry and agriculture under the guidance of the Communist Party, as the titles of the period show: *The Socialist Republic of Romania, Invitation to Beautiful Romania, A Folk Festival, My Village, The Danube Delta, Sights in Romania, Industrial Towns in Romania, The Pioneers, Visit to the Nursery School, The Applied Science Club, Joining the Union of Communist Youth, The 23rd of August, La ronde à Prislop, Chant de la Roumanie, La grandeur d'un peuple, Maramureș, terre et gens, La chimie pendant le quinquennat de la révolution technique et scientifique*. As a matter of fact, this type of patriotism evolved into the cult of Ceaușescu's personality. The myth of his great figure was present not only in all foreign language textbooks, but also in other books used for instruction in schools, his picture being printed on the first page. The theme of praising the communist leader and that of the glorious country were part of "the shameless nationalistic demagogy" [10,507] that presented Ceaușescu as the last descendant of a long series of magnificent Romanian rulers; moreover, he was presented as a sum of the characteristics of the "multilaterally developed man". As a consequence, most of the foreign language textbooks began with guidelines from Ceaușescu's speeches at political assemblies and congresses of the Communist Party. As for teaching methods, as Mariana Negulescu asserts, an up to date methodology had to replace the old one that was based on three universal principles: presentation of the new lesson, application by means of exercises and assessment. In her opinion, new pedagogy should not recite conjugations of verbs, declinations of nouns or translate texts, but make full use of conversation, in order to transmit messages; language is a means of communication because the minimal unit is not the word any longer, but the utterance. The Romanian school of foreign languages has in view a progressive succession of skills: "from understanding and decoding the oral message through speech to reading and writing" laying the foundation to a new method, the eclectic one that combines the best techniques offered by all foreign language teaching methods [5, 20,61].

Since the '90s to the Present

Despite the constraints of the regime (which was the controller of every cultural aspect), the foreign language teachers somehow succeeded in acquiring the new Chomskyan linguistic trend rooted in the revolutionary Generative Transformational Grammar approach. The most valuable concepts, i.e. performance and competence, guided the pedagogical thinking, paving the way of the Communicative Approach. The novelty of such a tendency consisted in the fact that not only grammatical structures and linguistic acquisition were hinted at, but also pragmatic and functional use of language for meaningful purposes was explored. Apart from this, according to Bernard Miège [4, 19], the communicative thinking originates in other three founding trends already manifested in the '50s and '60s in the "capitalist" world: cybernetic, structuralist and functionalist. The basic concepts postulated by these theories, that is the feedback phenomenon, the idea of pertinent oppositions, the autonomy and individualism of the human subjects [4, 32], can be identified in Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers's own definition of the communicative method:

Language is a system for the expression of meaning. The primary function of language is for interaction and communication. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative as exemplified in discourse. [8, 71]

All these factors resulted in a shift of teaching strategies and consequently the textbooks introduced after the '90s were mainly conceived in keeping with the integrated-skills approach, so as to develop all skills solidly and harmoniously. Lessons consisted not only in new topics that stimulated students' interest in learning about foreign cultures and civilizations but also in the use of active teaching and learning. Accordingly, teachers' main purpose was to maximize the opportunities for interaction through pair and group work, proving their complete adherence to the modern pedagogical principles formulated by Finnochiaro and Brumfit in *The Functional-Notional Approach: From Theory to Practice*: "Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by language" [3, 93]. From now on the foreign language teacher is no longer seen as a mere source of information and a model to imitate but as an instigator of language activities and provider of resources.

A major breakthrough in the destiny of teaching foreign languages in Romania resided in decentralizing the educational system, leading to the replacement of standardised textbooks with alternative textbooks.

One of the major outcomes was the increased competition among teachers, who could be divided in two categories: traditional teachers, who had to adapt themselves to the new requirements of the curriculum, and the new generation of language trainers, who, formed in the existing context, embraced the communicative dimension of language teaching. This state of affairs resulted from the change of paradigms, which was intrinsic to modern society; language was no longer viewed as a system of rules and structures, but as perpetual communication integrated in what Gianni Vattimo calls "the society of generalized communication and plurality of cultures" [11, 15], which means a process of interaction among cultures, "liberation of differences and local elements" [11, 13], and "the chance of a new mode of being" [11, 16].

Conclusions

Our intention to survey the avatars of foreign language teaching within the Romanian educational system leads us to the conclusion that, despite the terrible torments it had to face throughout its history, it managed to preserve the values set by its founders during the inter-war period for the generations that were innocent victims of the indoctrination programme of the

communist regime, and to connect them to the general evolution of the Western pedagogical thinking. Understanding the present and building up a new future of the Romanian educational system would not be possible without an objective evaluation of its blamable or blameless past.

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O scurtă istorie a predării limbilor străine în sistemul educațional românesc

Rezumat

Scopul lucrării de față este de a trece în revistă metodele de predare a limbilor străine în contextul educațional românesc, plecând de la cele trei perioade importante care îi marchează evoluția istorică: perioada interbelică, comunismul și post-comunismul. Plecând de la analiza unor documente specifice perioadelor menționate, ne-am propus în principal să relevăm modul în care evenimentele istorice au determinat și influențat nu numai gândirea pedagogică, ci și strategiile de predare a limbilor străine.