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LANGUAGE TEACHING – CHALLENGES IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

Summary

As a teacher of Swedish and German at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Bucharest, I often have to confront dilemmas at different levels. One dilemma is a classic one: grammar-based methods of teaching contra task-based approaches emphasizing communication and the practical uses of language. In a culture very different from my own Swedish one, other dilemmas also appear in my actual work, both with students and colleagues. To what extent do the teaching methods differ between foreign teachers (both from Germany, Austria and Sweden) and those from Romania? How do the traditional teaching methods in Romanian look like, i.e. what are the students familiar with regarding teaching/learning when they enter the university, and to what extent can they adapt to foreign teachers with slightly or very different methods from their homelands?

Key words: foreign languages, teaching, methods, grammar, communication, culture

In this article, I will discuss the challenges that appear when two different cultures meet in the field of teaching and learning a modern language.¹ The term Learning and Teaching Cultures used in this article will be understood in a broad sense: from different learning and teaching traditions, methods, customs and contexts. I will highlight and discuss relevant aspects based on my personal experiences as a Swedish teacher

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1 I will use the terms modern language, foreign language and target language synonymously, which in this article all mean a non-native language taught in a classroom, as opposed to a second language which is learned in an environment where the language is spoken.

working abroad. Documents concerning this issue will also be highlighted and researched. As a lecturer of Swedish and German at the University of Bucharest teaching Romanian students, I sometimes have the feeling that I cannot reach the students in a way I would like, and that there are hidden barriers between us which inhibit a desirable acquisition of the modern language that I am teaching. I have asked myself over and over again why our Swedish course book *Rivstart* (Lindemalm, Karl & Levy Scherrer, Paula)¹, based on a communicative approach, does not seem to work.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the aforementioned matters and to offer suggestions on how to overcome these dilemmas. I claim that Romanian students' difficulties with learning Swedish, or accepting the methods of teaching, comes from the differences between the cultures of the students and their teacher. This comes from both how students are accustomed to learning (and perhaps even how they want to learn) and how teachers are accustomed to teaching a modern language in Romania.

The qualitative research carried out for this paper includes discussions and conversations with both colleagues, students learning Swedish in the first, second or third years, and former students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Bucharest.

In Swedish schools, language teaching used the Grammar and Translation Method up until the 1960s. This method involved translations of words and texts into the mother tongue, a grammatical analysis of texts based on grammar rules, and memorization of words and phrases. This method sets high demands on students' analytical skills and competence refers to knowledge of grammar and other aspects of language.

Since then, other methods were created in response to the Grammar and Translation method. First was the Direct Method, which took inspiration from the way children learn their first language: through listening. This allows a foreign language to be taught directly, without intermediation through the mother tongue. The language is learned through imitation and the input is the most important component. After the Direct Method, other methods have been developed, such as the Audio-Lingual method, the Cognitive Code-learning, the Functional-Notional approach,

1 See references for bibliographical details.

Community Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, Dictogloss, Suggestopedia and so on (see Tornberg, 1997, Ericsson 1989, Malmberg 2001, Arnqvist 1993, Eriksson & Miliander 1991).

The methods employed in Swedish schools today are a mixture of many of the methods mentioned above and they have largely been influenced by three different language theories: behavioral, cognitive and sociocultural. In the last decades, the latest theory, the sociocultural, has been stressed in Sweden. This is clearly seen in the latest curriculum for upper secondary school from 2011. The goal of teaching thus achieves communicative competences:

The teaching of [...] Modern languages should aim to develop the pupils' language skills and of the environment so that they can, want to and dare to use the language in different situations. Through the teaching, students should be given the opportunity to develop a communicative ability. This ability includes both reception, which means understanding spoken and written language, as well as production and interaction, which means formulating and interacting with others in speech and writing. In addition, students should be given the opportunity to develop the ability to use different strategies to support communication and to solve problems when language proficiency is insufficient.² (https://www.skolverket.se/laroplaner-amnen-och-kurser/gymnasieutbildning/gymnasiesarskola/sok-amnesplaner-och-kurser/subject.htm?subjectCode=MON&courseCode=MONXXX5&lang=sv&tos=gys#anchor_MONXXX5)

If you compare these goals with the ones stipulated in different curriculums for modern languages in Romanians schools, there is a definite similarity³. For example, both countries highlight and stress commu-

2 Undervisningen i ämnet moderna språk ska syfta till att eleverna utvecklar språk- och omvärldskunskaper så att de kan, vill och vågar använda språket i olika situationer. Genom undervisningen ska eleverna ges möjlighet att utveckla en kommunikativ förmåga. Denna förmåga innefattar både reception, vilket innebär att förstå talat och skrivet språk, samt produktion och interaktion, vilket innebär att formulera sig och samspela med andra i tal och skrift. Dessutom ska eleverna ges förutsättningar att utveckla förmåga att använda olika strategier för att stödja kommunikationen och för att lösa problem när språkkunskaperna inte räcker till. (https://www.skolverket.se/laroplaner-amnen-och-kurser/gymnasieutbildning/gymnasiesarskola/sok-amnesplaner-och-kurser/subject.htm?subjectCode=MON&courseCode=MONXXX5&lang=sv&tos=gys#anchor_MONXXX5)

3 (file:///C:/Users/Asa/Downloads/limba_engleza_moderna_9_12.pdf, <http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/Curriculum/2017-progr/19-Limba%20moderna1.pdf>)

nicative and interactional competences instead of a grammar-based approach. This may be explained by the fact that both Romania and Sweden are members of the European Union. The European Council has pointed out in various publications during the last decades the importance of communication and interaction when it comes to modern language teaching.⁴

The term “communicative competence” was introduced by Dell Hymes about 60 years ago, and in the field of foreign language pedagogy it stands as a contrast to the narrower focus of language competence as grammar. The communicative competence can be divided into different components (Canale and Swain, 1980; Malmberg, 2001):

- **grammatical or linguistic competence:** this is an umbrella term including elementary knowledge about the structure, the sounds, the mechanics, the vocabulary of the language and so on;
- **sociolinguistic competence:** the capacity to use certain words and expressions in correct contexts, i.e. the rules of discourse. This is a knowledge about what is expected socially and culturally by users of the language;
- **discourse competence:** the ability to hold a conversation together in a meaningful way, to express ideas, to tell, to explain, to be able to have a conversation through questions and answers;
- **strategic competence:** the ability to find solutions for linguistic obstacles, compensation for imperfect knowledge;
- **sociocultural competence:** includes knowledge about the culture, literature and the history of the target language, in order to understand figurative language and references.
- **social competence:** the ability and willingness to express empathy, motivation and beliefs.

It is these skills that pupils in Sweden are expected to master. In order to achieve these competences, the Swedish National Agency of Education stipulates that teaching a foreign language in schools should be done in the target language, not in the mother tongue. Furthermore, pu-

4 (<https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/swd-recommendation-key-competences-lifelong-learning.pdf>); 2014 Council Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences.

pils “should have the opportunity in the education to meet different kinds of spoken language”.⁵

Detailed and concrete recommendations for methods of teaching were published by the Romanian National Agency of Education in 2017⁶ in the curriculum for the discipline Modern Languages for the 5th to the 8th grades. This publication also states that teaching should be done in the target language. So, these objectives do exist on paper, but are they followed in reality?

According to an examination carried out by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in 2010, the situation in 40 primary schools nationwide was not satisfactory, stating that “the communicative skill at many schools needs to be far more prioritized in teaching in order to be said to have its starting point in the current curriculum.”⁷ The main problem lies in the general poor use of the modern language in the classroom, both by pupils and teachers.

The question still remains if this misuse stems from the teachers’ traditional idea that language teaching is more about language structure than practical training in understanding and expressing yourself in the target language. The evidence suggests it is not. At most of the schools under this specific research, the main opinion of the teachers is that communicative skills are more important than the formalistic skills⁸, but the Swedish School Inspectorate is still concerned because not *all* of the investigated schools followed the curriculum.

In contrast to this opinion, teachers in Romania seem to have a more positive approach to the traditional Grammar Translation Method, where the mother tongue is exclusively used, even though more modern,

5 I undervisningen ska eleverna i första hand få möta talat språk av olika slag samt få sätta innehållet i relation till egna erfarenheter och kunskaper. Undervisningen ska också ge eleverna möjlighet att samspela med andra och med stöd av digitala verktyg. Undervisningen ska dra nytta av omvärlden som en resurs för kontakter, information och lärande, (<https://www.skolverket.se/laroplaner-amnen-och-kurser/vuxenutbildning/sarvux/gymnasial-niva/sok-amnen-och-kurser/subject.htm?subjectCode=MON&lang=sv&tos=gys&w ebto=sarvuxgy>)

6 <http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/Curriculum/2017-progr/19-Limba%20moderna1.pdf>

7 I den här granskningen har vi sett att den kommunikativa förmågan vid flera skolor i betydligt högre grad behöver prioriteras i undervisningen för att undervisningen ska kunna sägas ha sin utgångspunkt i gällande kursplan.

8 <https://www.skolinspektionen.se/globalassets/publikationssok/granskningsrapporter/kvalitetsgranskningar/2010/moderna-sprak/webb-slutrapport-moderna-sprak.pdf>, p. 20

communicative methods are also used in parallel. The Romanian classroom still uses techniques that involve direct translations, text readings, and grammar and vocabulary exercises. Accuracy is a priority, and pupils are often corrected.

The Romanians use of teaching through traditional methods is backed by research such as a study in 2008 on English taught as a modern language in 10 different Romanian schools in Timisoara (Oprescu, 2008). My own experience at the university in Bucharest further backs my observations. For example, in order for students in German (Applied Modern Language) to be allowed to write exams, they must have translated all texts from the German course book into Romanian (the mother tongue). This is mandatory for the first and the second year of study. Other colleagues use memorization of words or/and phrases and translations as the main methods of teaching. Furthermore, the results of my own questionnaire concerning Romanian students' experiences and opinions about learning foreign languages in school, show that most of them have a positive attitude towards the traditional Grammar Translation Method.

Oprescu (2008) claims that traditional methods offer the advantage of a solid knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and pupils develop a good capability to write in the foreign language. Another advantage is that the professor has more control over the class than when using more modern methods.

Until now, I have been talking mainly about teaching in primary and upper secondary schools to show the differences in teaching methods and in learning attitudes between the two countries, Sweden and Romania, and to establish the students' experiences before they enter the university, even though I am aware that one cannot generalize these experiences.

One of the main problems that I encounter in my classroom is the students' attitudes toward the communicative approach and the understanding of the methods involved in reaching a communicative goal. This approach is clearly to be seen in the Swedish standard course books, *Rivstart*, used at universities all around the world. To reach the Bologna Model's language levels A1-B2, the books stress interactions between the students, opinion-expressing exercises, argumentations, and so on.

Furthermore, Romanian foreign language learners often express the opinion that they find it meaningless to speak with others at their level because they want to be constantly corrected by the teacher. I claim that

this priority of accuracy could be at the expense of communication. However, this doesn't mean that accuracy shouldn't play an important role in teaching. If accuracy is too stressed or done in a less constructive way, students are not likely to develop fluency in communication. Moreover, they don't even see the purpose of these exercises and get frustrated and bored. It seems they want to have clear advice on what to memorize and have difficulties seeing the point of using the language if they don't have a perfect knowledge of all its parts, they have less or no experience whatsoever of the strategic competences mentioned above. I strongly believe this is due to differences in teaching and learning traditions despite the fact that the curriculums look the same on paper.

Romanian students' attitudes on learning a new language, share similarities with students outside Europe, such as in China (Wang, 2009; Boeckmann), where the Grammar Translation Method still dominates. Furthermore, in an article about teaching German to foreigners in non-European countries, Boeckmann (2010: 955) claims that German or Austrian teachers (DaF-, DaZ-teachers) teaching German in non-European countries (mostly in Asia but other countries such as Cuba or South Africa as well) encounter two kinds of problems implementing occidental teaching forms: difficulties that come with different working conditions such as poor in-service training for the teachers, insufficient audio-visual equipment or internet facilities, unsuitable rooms, time constraints and oversized groups; students' attitudes, which cover a large spectrum: they are not sufficiently used to the communicative learning methods, they find the communicative competence as a learning goal too demanding, they show a resistance toward innovative communicative methodology (ibid.).

The role or the status of the teacher also has a significant influence on the success or failure of a communicative competence's goals. Whereas Sweden has a long tradition of democracy and students are aware that they can influence their education, the school environment in the Romanian society is still very authoritarian.

I will now turn to the actual situation at the university. Since 1994, The Swedish Institute supports the Swedish language taught at the University of Bucharest, partly in forms of financial supports (materials, workshops etc., and scholarships for students staying from 6 to 12 months in Sweden) and partly through programs that send a Swedish lecturer on

a scholarship to be employed by the university through a mutual agreement between the countries. The actual education is divided in three big modules, seminars on the structure of the language (*structura limbii*), seminars on the practice of the language (*practica limbii*) and a seminars and lectures on culture and literature studies (*civilizație*).

I teach seminars on the practice of the language. After three years of Swedish, I notice that students have a good grasp on texts but a poor grasp on communicative skills, both in understanding the spoken language and in writing or speaking the language. The most interesting thing is the lack of sociolinguistic competence, i.e. the capacity to use certain words and expressions in the correct contexts. The majority of the students tend to translate directly from Romanian into Swedish and thereby over-use the grammar structures. While Romanian is a synthetic language, Swedish is an analytical language, which means that, in many cases, the context, not the structure, is emphasized.

Do Romanians have a harder time learning Swedish than English, French, or even German because it is more exotic? Or is this due to learning traditions where the analytical skills are emphasized? It goes beyond the framework of this paper to find a solid answer to these questions, but there is no doubt that the difficulties in developing sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences by Romanian students in Swedish as a modern language lie largely in different Learning and Teaching Cultures.

In order to overcome these dilemmas, I agree with the 8 teaching strategies suggested by Eßer (2006:13):

- have accurate information in advance about the Teaching and Learning Culture of the students;
- ask students for their opinions on the course content, the working and exercise forms;
- have an open approach to the double-sided outlandishness in teaching;
- exchange ideas with other teachers;
- endeavor to include regional teaching forms;
- include regional textbooks or materials in coursework;
- have courage to disappoint students' expectations;
- understand that your own or the foreign Learning and Teaching Culture is not static and unchangeable.

For the differences between these specific Learning and Teaching Cultures talked about here, I would like to add two other strategies:

- have an open discussion about what the studies will lead to;
- have an open discussion at the beginning of class about the communicative skills listed above.

Points 9 and 10 are interlocked and are of great importance given the changes that come over time. Until 2015, for example, a student in modern languages at the University of Bucharest could obtain an authorization as a translator on the basis of the diploma and two recommendations of two different professors. This is no longer the case and most of the graduated students of Swedish start to work as coworkers at different call centers instead of translators. There the communicative skills are of essential importance. The fact that very few of the students follow an academic career is also something to be accentuated.

To be a person with a higher education was a way of climbing in the social hierarchy in the communist time in Romania. Even though 30 years have passed since then, I often wonder if this view of seeing yourself as a pure linguistic with a high analytical knowledge of the foreign language, isn't still the overall motivation for many students in studying a modern language. No wonder then, if they can't see the meaning of communicative exercises like small dialogues, role-plays etc.

Finally, I want to point out that Romanian society is still in transition, and there is a mixture of both admiration and resistance towards more Occidental values, even though Romania has been a member of the European Union since 2008 and has adopted democratic ideas and thoughts, and has implemented the guidelines of these values on paper. In this sense, is it both the manuals as well as the teachers' democratic, non-authoritarian, "dialogical" styles the students find hard to connect to?

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SPRÅKUNDERVISNING – UTMANINGAR I EN MULTIKULTURELL KONTEXT

Som lärare i svenska och tyska vid fakulteten för främmande språk och litteraturer vid universitetet i Bukarest ställs jag ofta inför diverse dilemman på olika nivåer. Ett av dessa är klassiskt: grammatikbaserade utlärningsmetoder kontra uppgiftsbaserade tillvägagångssätt där kommunikation och det faktiska användandet av språket fokuseras. I en kultur som är mycket olik min egen svenska uppstår även andra dilemman i mitt faktiska arbete, både vad gäller relationen med studenterna men också den till de andra kollegorna. I vilken utsträckning skiljer sig de olika metoderna mellan de utländska (både tyska, österrikiska, svenska) lektorerna och de inhemska från Rumänien? Hur ser de traditionella undervisningsmetoderna i Rumänien ut, dvs. vad har studenterna med sig i bagaget när de kommer till universitetet, och i vilken utsträckning kan de anpassa sig till de utländska lektorerna med lite eller mycket olika metoder från sina hemländer?

Nyckelord: främmande språk, undervisning, metoder, grammatik, kommunikation, kultur

Annex

Some of the answers by students in the second year on the following question⁹:
What are your experiences of foreign language teaching in school (basic school/ high school)?

Student	Answer	Remarque
1	Learning by heart, listening comprehension, verbal exercises before exams.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.
2	When I was in basic school, one didn't care so much about foreign languages but in high school the situation changed. I learned English and French but I have to say that the teachers didn't use any direct methods. We did not have any motivated teachers and they sometimes focused only on grammar which I think is wrong, since the vocabulary is the most important thing.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.
3	I was always passionate when I tried learning a new language. I liked doing all those exercises, i liked seeing that I was doing good at tests; but what I felt was missing and still think it's missing even at the university, is the practical side, the free speaking side. I study Italian and don't practice speaking as much as I would want to at the university, even if I know the grammar well. It is not the same thing to do good at a test and succeed having a conversation.	Written directly in English, hence the errors were not corrected by me.
4	In high school and in primary school it was a bit funny with foreign languages since the teachers taught a lot of theory and therefore we did not do any practical exercises. It was hard for the students since we had to do the exercises alone.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.
5	My experiences from foreign language teaching are based on translation methods, from the second language into the mother tongue, and to practice the language by reading books and learning new words and phrases.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.

⁹ This particular question was asked and answered in a written form by students in the second and the third year. They had the option to answer in Swedish, English or Romanian.

6.	I learned German in high school and everything was translated into Romanian. We also listened to music and all of the pupils had to read everything in the book. It was very good since all of us could understand.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.
7.	We only did exercises in our book. Many of my class mates didn't take part in the lessons but the teacher didn't care. In primary school, for example, we learned German for four years. After four years, I could write some sentences in German but I could not speak at all.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.
8.	In school it was a totally different thing, since it was easier to learn a foreign language. It was a different system and we focused more on grammar. We also had more time to learn something in the second language.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.
9.	I have studied English and French. In general, we worked with textbooks which prepared you for exams like Cambridge (CAE/CPE) or DELF/DALF. Since these exams are very complex (listening, speaking, reading, grammar, writing), also the textbooks were structured quite well. For me, listening always has been a problem, but I think it has helped me in the best way to learn foreign languages.	Translated from Romanian into English by me.
10.	In primary school and in high school, the teachers used more traditional methods to teach us a second language: translations to (Romanian) the mother tongue, grammar analysis et. They often worked, but not always.	Translated from Swedish into English by me.
11.	There was little focus on vocabulary and it was taught in primary school using images from the book to which we associated the correct word, but they used mostly the translation into the mother tongue (romanian, in my case).	Written directly in English, hence the errors were not corrected by me.