



ORIGINAL PAPER

Problems of Social Integration and Correct Expression of Foreign Students in Romania

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Abstract

In this article we brought into attention the status of foreign students from the preparatory year, and also some issues regarding their capacity of integration into the Romanian social, cultural and linguistically space, without missing the aspects concerning the difficulties related to the integration of the foreign students in the new environment. Therefore, the problem that most foreign students face is that of the Romanian language barrier. Thus, it was concluded that the need for Romanian language courses is imperative, because the language allows access to all areas of daily life of the student residents in Romania. Consequently, we want to highlight the reality that, the lack of knowledge of the Romanian language of the foreign students, their impossibility of communicating or understanding the message of the written texts, leads to the absence of the informational support regarding the rights and obligations or services to which they can access. The lack of information, the linguistic and cultural barriers they face lead to the non-accession of rights and the inefficiency of the integration programs.

Keywords: *foreign students; integration; linguistic; preparatory year; Romanian language.*

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Introduction

The Romanian language preparatory year that has been taking place for many years as well at the University of Craiova, which has been among the first universities housing a department for teaching Romanian as a foreign language, is necessary for the foreign students not only for acquiring the linguistic notions of the language but also for the discovery of the notions of Romanian culture and civilization which would help them integrate more easily. The necessity of the socio-cultural integration of the foreign students originating from sometimes entirely different linguistic, cultural and religious environments becomes essential. Once in Romania, the foreign students in the Romanian language preparatory year face a new and sometimes totally unknown society. Thus they go into a socio-cultural shock they must overcome as soon as possible to be able to integrate and socialize.

One of the main reasons of the accommodation issues might be the switch in the symbols the students formerly knew, which now have changed due to the new cultural environment, and the fact that some of the students refuse – consciously or not – this new life in a foreign country which causes them discomfort and determines them to isolate themselves, to avoid contact with representatives of the new culture in the end leads to failure. Each foreign student coming to study in Romania has certain socio-cultural values belonging to the country and traditions he has acquired through education, which represents a cultural nucleus, therefore understanding the cultural values of the others with whom he comes in contact is the most important moment of the process of communication and its socio-cultural integration (Râmbu, 2006: 336).

The foreign people's access to education, both in the university and pre-university mediums, is guaranteed in equal conditions as the Romanian citizens by the Law of the National Education no. 1/2011. Beyond the formal equity, ensuring the migrants' effective participation to education is not a priority for the public authorities. According to existing data, in the 2014-2015 academic year the Romanian education system accounted for 7,110 migrants from third party countries. The vast majority of these (6,713) took university classes while only 397 took pre-university classes, many of the foreign students opting for private schools (Voicu et al, 2015: 58-59).

The main obstacle to the integration and socio-cultural communication of foreign students is their tendency to interpret the foreign cultures (of the country in which they are from and of the countries of origin of their colleagues) through the prism of their own cultural values and not to be neglected, of the language of the people you want to assimilate, or at least recognize. We hardly understand the meaning of words, facts and actions that are not specific to us, especially if we do not have basic language knowledge. Therefore, the assimilation in good conditions of the notions of Romanian language by the foreign students is a very important aspect for their socio-cultural integration. Consequently, the assimilation of the notions of Romanian in good conditions by the foreign students is an important aspect in the view of their socio-cultural integration.

The socio-cultural integration and the correct assimilation of the linguistic notions by the foreign students

The socio-cultural environment, through the components and nuances it can have at different times, influences each segment of the learning process for foreign students. This aspect becomes significant and easier to notice when you learn a foreign

language in its country of origin, in our case Romania. Foreign students who come to study in Romania experience a series of interactions both during the learning of the Romanian language and in their social life.

To this aspect are added their linguistic and cultural experiences lived in their countries or in another context, which only interfere with the new experiences lived in the country where they will pursue their studies for 4-6 years or more. Teaching and learning the Romanian language as a foreign language cannot be dissociated from the characteristics of the socio-cultural environment in which it takes place. Therefore, foreign students' linguistic and cultural diversity has a special importance in teaching the Romanian language as a foreign language.

Without ignoring the real needs of socio-cultural integration of foreign students, methodological solutions must be found in accordance with the learning situations and the real needs of those who learn Romanian as a foreign language. Motivation and empathy are two qualities that should not be missing from each participant's learning process.

The language barriers constitute an important obstacle for obtaining useful information in each and every case. The clerks responsible with the public relations and directly interact with immigrants mostly speak only Romanian, the posters and the documents displayed in the bulletin board are elaborated in Romanian, and can also be translated into English in the best-case scenario (Popescu & Toth, 2009: 19). The lack of information and obstacles when accessing relevant information are found on all levels. There have been cases of administrative issues, such as the difficulty of obtaining a dormitory room by a foreign student.

The integration does not occur in a static society, the foreign students integrate into a fluid, dynamic, ever changing society. Integration is a long-term process, non-linear, on multiple levels, that requires a capacity for adaption both from a multitude of factors of the host society and from the foreign students. In the absence of better information regarding the rights and obligations that arise from the right of residence on the Romanian territory, the participation of the foreign students from third-party states to the process of integration and implicitly to the social, economic and cultural life of the society they live in is greatly hindered. The linguistic and cultural barriers lead to a lack of information that has as a main consequence the non-fructification of the rights granted by the law to this category and thus their and the integration programs' inefficiency. The foreigners with a permit to stay in Romania represent a category of persons which, despite the fact they benefit from a statute similar to that of the Romanian citizens, often encounter obstacles when accessing these rights, caused by the lack of knowledge of Romanian language, the lack of information concerning the rights and obligations or the services they can access, the impossibility to communicate or to understand the message of a written text, the absence of the informational support (Popescu & Toth, 2009: 7).

A non-speaking Romanian foreigner's issues related to language or cultural differences are big enough and this only makes it more difficult to interact with the Romanian authorities, with the University's administrative employees, with the owners of an apartment they would rent or whom will offer them a place in the dormitory, etc. Taking into account this aspect it becomes very important to group the foreign students according to ethnic and cultural similarities criteria. For the Muslim communities, for example, it is preferable to constitute a specific group, due to cultural particularities.

As all the information, including that related to the documents the students have to prepare in order to be accepted to different faculties or to obtain certain facilities they

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should benefit from is written in Romanian, the students are constrained to resort to Romanian people, speakers of Romanian they most frequently meet, such as: foreign students who have lived in Romania for a long time and already speak Romanian, teachers from the preparatory Romanian year, English speaking clerks from the administration, etc.

Sometimes, along with the language issue, the students have invoked a reserved, discouraging attitude of the personnel who ought to provide information. Obtaining the necessary documents for the legal stay in Romania as well as the workaround for certain real-life situations suppose the interaction with several Romanian public institutions. Thus, the language barriers become a consequence of the fact that the personnel involved in public relations mostly speak Romanian and the information displayed at bulletin boards are not translated into international languages.

The lack of coherence when providing the foreign students with information regarding the procedures they must abide to once on Romanian territory, the administrative thicket that traps the foreigner is probably the most important problem and, furthermore, the most frequently mentioned. The proposed solutions assert the direction of a better corroboration of the procedures and the synchronization of the activities of the involved institutions. The lack of synchronization of the involved institutions, the deficiencies of collaboration and communication regarding the approach and the terms for elaborating and presenting the documents have important consequences on the foreign students' adaptation to a new socio-cultural environment. The delay and the postponing of certain terms lead to situations when the necessary documents expire before others are issued. The foreign students in Romania have an acute need of information. The general perception is they are trapped in the administrative thicket and that generally they need to figure it out themselves. The lack of information generates a series of problems on all levels of life, ultimately leading to isolation and exclusion. There also arises the issue of knowing the rights of the persons who have a legal permit to stay in Romania, namely the foreign students, by the clerks in the public institutions they interact with.

The information regarding the stay permit represents in the opinion of all interviewed nationals is the fundamental right through which the foreign student has access and from which follow all the other rights during his stay in Romania. However, obtaining the stay permit is a confusing and complicated experience for all the foreign students. The difficulties identified underline the lack of coherence of the procedures to be followed in order to obtain the documents necessary to the file and the multitude of the institutions that issue them. The course for obtaining the documents is sinuous and discouraging.

The problem is not the people at the counter, when you submit the file. If it's not complete, they give it back, if it's complete, they take it. The problem is to go there and find there's a document missing, that the law has changed... My permit was valid for one year, then in the first year I had a permit, then when I started the second year, they gave me a three-year permit, because the law had changed in the meantime. I was lucky they had told us at the faculty the law had changed, that we have to submit the permit for all the years of study, for the scholarship. (student, Senegal) (Popescu & Toth, 2009: 23)

Another problem of social integration of the foreign students in Romania is the medical system, though the medical exam in case of emergency is free for a student, the medical system does not offer them another advantages, such as discounts or subsidies in case of serious health issues; also, this system should offer discounts for the medicines prescribed by the doctor. Nevertheless, in this domain of the medical services the situation is not more disadvantageous than that of the Romanian citizens.

The difficulties related to the language are a major impediment for the socio-cultural integration of the foreign students, this being caused by the fact that almost all activities conducted by the Romanian institutions are almost exclusively in Romanian, though the access to the opportunities for studying Romanian is high. It is a known fact that the preparatory year of Romanian as a foreign language has taken place in several university centers around the country since 1974, the University of Craiova being one of the first centers to teach Romanian as a foreign language. In the context of the integration of the foreign students into the Romanian society, the domain of the social connections becomes very important, underlining the importance of creating and maintaining social relationships along the integration process. It is the social dimension of the integration, among the facilitators of the integration being: the language and the knowledge of the host culture, that is the cultural dimension of the integration; safety and stability, feelings that determine a sense of continuity and identity, regarding the identity dimension of the integration (Mircea & Necula 2009).

The knowledge of Romanian and the cultural orientation represent the major landmarks for defining a better integration of the foreigners into the host society. The language barriers and the lack of information regarding the culture and the traditions of the host society constitute the most frequent difficulties that the authorities need to confront and that is why the knowledge of Romanian by the foreign students constitutes the nucleus of the integration itself.

Moreover, the linguistic obstacles, the information mostly available in Romanian, the reserved, discouraging attitude of the personnel who ought to provide information represent the main obstacle in the relationship between the foreigners and the public institutions, and, as a consequence, against a smooth integration process (Alexe & Păunescu, 2011: 36).

The statistical data reveal a year per year increase of the number of foreign students who benefitted from Romanian language classes, the tendency being ascendant for the years to come. Within the Department for Applied Modern Languages at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Craiova, for the preparatory year of Romanian as a foreign language are signed up around 150 foreign students.

The classes of Romanian as a foreign language also integrate the cultural component, so the A1, A2 level knowledge – that can become B1, B2 until the end of the year, depending on the involvement of the foreign students in the process of learning and the connection that can be created between the teacher and the student at the communicational level – is added the study of Romanian culture and civilization. The necessity of Romanian classes is imperative, as the language allows access to all the domains of the residents' everyday life as students in Romania. The knowledge of Romanian is also necessary for the medical students' internship in Romanian hospitals, for their direct contact with patients that most often do not speak English. In the assimilation of Romanian as a foreign language one starts from language classes based on everyday life problems, then moving to specialized language classes, such as medical language classes in the case of the medical students or technical language classes for the

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automation students. Within the Department for Applied Modern Languages at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Craiova, for the preparatory year of Romanian as a foreign language we have a basis of educational materials, partly created by the teachers of Romanian as a foreign language, partly already found in the department's library. As it is a known fact that one of the resident foreign students' problems is they cannot borrow books at home unless they have the residence in the city where they live, the students can buy, photocopy or borrow them from the department's library.

The classes of Romanian as a foreign language bring together students from different cultural environments, originating in European, Asian countries, etc. Thus, one of the issues that arise for all the participants to the classes of Romanian as a foreign language and that may be a challenge for the teachers also, is the inter-cultural adaptation, which may be defined as: "the process of adaptation to the requirements of the new cultural environment (Kim, 1988)" referring to "the way the emigrants or the newcomers to the foreign culture resist to the stress provoked by the difference between the original and the host culture" (Kaizer & Buzera & Dimitrova & Panea, et al., 2012: 114). The foreign students who come to study in Romania need to learn to experiment, to accept and respect the alterity (Nedelcu, 2008: 42). Between the condition of Romanian as a maternal language and Romanian as a language assimilated by the foreign citizens who come to Romania for studies there are differences we should take into account now and in the near future, though we are part of a European Union where bilingualism predominates and where English has become the second maternal language. But we should not forget that the traditions of a country are comprised and described in the language of that country. For historical reasons, of long-lasting tradition, in Europe the national and linguistic diversity shall persist, no matter the force of the unifying tendency.

Therefore, for a better integration of the foreign students eager to learn the language of a country that would adopt them for at least 4-6 years, it is very important to appropriately approach the process of teaching-learning Romanian as a foreign language and the instilling of the idea that without a solid knowledge of Romanian the social integration process will be much more difficult. The final goal of the classes of Romanian as a foreign language is to train good users / speakers of Romanian who use it both as a means of communication and a method for knowledge. Man, the more languages he knows, the easier he can communicate with people belonging to different cultures and linguistic environments, he learns to be tolerant, flexible, his linguistic "legacy" spiritually enriching him (Norel & Sâmihaian, 2011: 2).

The implicit or explicit knowledge of grammar rules is undoubtedly essential for mastering a foreign language, for we cannot use words without knowing how to put them together. In a formal class of study of Romanian as a foreign language, the learning must be organized in order to be efficient. This supposes the preparation of a study program, of an analytical curriculum, so that segments of the overall body of knowledge are one at a time presented for a systematic and gradual assimilation of the matter, rather than the whole. These segments could be matters of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation or writing.

Thus, grammar may provide the basis for a set of activities in the classroom, period for which it temporarily becomes the main objective. On a long term, the learning of grammar must be considered one of the means of mastering the language on its while, not a purpose in itself. For that reason, though it is possible at an early stage to ask the students to assimilate a certain grammatical structure through exercises that focus on

possibly incomprehensible manipulations of the language, we should quickly move on to activities that make an understandable use of the language. Even these activities will be eventually replaced with tasks that should stress on the acquisition of a general fluency, where the main emphasis is on the successful communication (a successful transmitting-receiving of messages) and where the acquisition of grammar is only an episode towards reaching a major goal. In the groups formed by beginner students it is necessary to use the maternal or the English language as a transition language for translating, generalizing or using analogies for a proper explanation of the respective grammatical structure. The more advanced groups or in the cases of a more difficult structure, this stage could take longer.

Despite all this, in the case of a simple structure or one resembling to a structure from the maternal language, the students tend to intuitively acquire the foreign language. The purpose of the practical exercises solved in the classroom or given as a homework is to make the students assimilate the entire structure or to transfer their knowledge from the short-term memory to the long-term memory. The purpose of such exercises is to help understanding the explanations and to thoroughly assimilate the correct forms, which ensures the linguistic competence accepted by the native speakers.

An important stage during the assimilation of Romanian as a foreign language is that of producing and understanding of messages by the foreign students, in the context of their use for non-linguistic purposes, keeping in mind the way in which the lexical-grammatical structures are used in this process. Such activities are based on exchanging communicational messages, within certain dialogues or stories which practice the forms of verbal tenses or are brought into discussion dilemmas that impose the use of modal verbs, the conditional, etc. This stage is the most valuable as it imposes on the students the use of lexical-grammatical structures in coherent sentences, like they would it in real life situations. At the end of cycle of study of Romanian as a foreign language, the students take tests in order to prove themselves and to the teachers how well they assimilated the studied matter. The purpose of taking a test is to ensure the necessary feedback without which no progress would be made.

The acquisition of the Romanian grammatical elements will allow the students to face the difficulties encountered in real life situations and automatically to more easily integrate at the social level. An assimilation of Romanian as a foreign language has uncontested advantages, as “communication represents the totality of the interaction phenomena and the totality of the processes through which people are exchanging information in society and they relate to the environment” (Șerbănescu, 2007: 15). Besides developing the means of expression of the foreign students, learning Romanian as a foreign language also reveals to them new ways of life and other cultural values conveyed by the assimilated language. Hence, in order to efficiently communicate with the members of a different culture, the foreign student is obliged to develop his competence of inter-cultural communication, which “represents the capacity of the individual to adapt to the communication style specific to another culture, to efficiently, successfully, handle the situations of inter-cultural communication” (Șerbănescu, 2007: 287).

The assimilation of Romanian grammar is important, but the cultural education is important as well, for it allows the foreign student to learn the things he needs in order to properly function within the cultural environment of the country he resides in. Culture designates a socially inherited ensemble and transmitted, of behaviors and symbols bearing meanings, a system of representations and a system of language, which is

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expressed through symbolical forms, a means through which for the people communicate, they perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life (Dasen, 1999: 85).

The main obstacle in the inter-cultural communication is each people's tendency to interpret the foreign cultures through his own cultural values. This is not equivalent to the annihilation of the maternal language, the non-practice and lack of respect for the customs, traditions and personal professional beliefs, but on the contrary, it demands their cultivation in the value system of the respective society (Măciu, 2006: 115). A clear example of social conduct is the salute. In many Western cultures, a handshake and the direct visual contact are considered adequate, while in other parts of the world, the salute consist of a bow, without visual contact. It is difficult to avoid the imposing of the cultural norms on other persons, such as the case of the foreign students who come to study in Romania, even at a time when there is a frequent contact with other cultures (Gavreliuc, 2011: 43).

Learning is a dynamic and individual process. A teacher must seize the rhythm and efficiency of this process, must always analyse and compare the results, and also adjust the teaching methods in order to quickly reach higher standards from a qualitative point of view. It is essential to be aware of the learning dynamics, according to the intellectual abilities, educational needs, as well as interests and goals each learner has. This is a matter which depends on the teacher's authority, responsibility and personality. We find these even more important when foreign language learning is involved, especially in order to reach the required competence and performance parameters.

Ioan Neacsu, a Romanian professor, researcher in the pedagogical and educational field, notices that all the subsumed learning processes "lead to education" (Neacsu, 1990), or in other words, "to train means to effectively apply knowledge, experiences and skills of pedagogical, psychological, logical, physiological, ethical and psychosocial nature for the organization of an environment liable to generate learning" (Neacșu, 1990: 71).

For another Romanian researcher in the field of education, learning appears as "a set of new results produced by procedural activity and refers to knowledge, skills, concepts, ways of thinking, attitudes and behaviours" (Iucu, 2001: 34). As far as the learning methods are concerned, meaning the techniques and strategies used by teachers in the Romanian foreign language class, we find significant the principles Slama - Cazacu distinguishes ever since 1973, as being fundamental in the learning process, with particular reference to foreign language learning; she defines one method as "dynamic" (Slama – Cazacu, 1973: 36), involving role play inspired from real life situations, as well as contexts with interesting and useful topics, which can eventually be interpreted and commented right along. Another method which results from the one previously mentioned, is the method of dialogue, and the last, but not least refers to error correction.

Nevertheless, no matter which language learning theory we bring into question, all of them lead to the same directions to follow: first comes the process and then comes the result or the product.

In conclusion, the interactive methods of teaching-learning Romanian as a foreign language, focused on the student and based on the receiving theories, undoubtedly contribute to the formation of a solid knowledge of the language and to an easier integration of the foreign students to a new social and cultural environment, through an organized and systematic process of transmitting and assimilation of knowledge.

Sometimes the low quality of Romanian classes offered by universities leads to a superficial assimilation of the Romanian language and culture by the students and to a much slower social integration. A solution would be the adaptation of the methodology of teaching Romanian as a foreign language and its imposing on all the educational institutions; the adaptation of the curriculum to the right learning needs of the foreign students, according to age categories and the level of training; the teaching of Romanian language and culture in the preparatory year to groups comprising a maximum of 15 foreign students; the use and development, by the universities, of the network of teachers having inter-cultural competences, specialized in teaching Romanian as a foreign language.

Conclusion

An intercultural educational situation may require a selection of the pedagogical objectives, of the teaching methods and activities or of certain communication patterns. The foreign students of different nationalities may prove to be more vulnerable and insecure, which triggers the need to adopt an empathic teacher behaviour, which should give more care and support than in a usual unicultural classroom (Pricope, 2012: 491) The easiest assimilation of Romanian as a foreign language by the foreign students is necessary for their integration to a society that would adopt them for a few years or maybe for life.

Thus, the language barriers, consequence of the fact the personnel involved in public relations mostly speaks only Romanian and the information displayed at the bulletin boards is not translated into international languages constitute the main obstacle for the foreign students and not only for them, when communicating with public institutions. The incapacity of the public institutions to respond to the needs of the foreign students who live in Romania may lead to a series of problems. From an economic point of view, Romania would miss the opportunity of benefitting from the training and the working capacity of the foreign students who, after graduating the faculty, wish to work in our country, thus contributing to the tax system. At a political level, the incapacity of the Romanian state of integrating legally staying foreigners on its territory may lead to the creation of tensions at a regional, UE and international level.

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