

Cultural Aspects in Producing Written Messages at the Preparatory Year*

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Abstract:

The article focuses on the cultural aspects contained in recent Romanian textbooks of Romanian as a foreign language and on the cultural aspects identified in the essays of our foreign students who studied Romanian at the preparatory year of Romanian as a foreign language. By means of a categorization between general cultural aspects and cultural-linguistic aspects we describe the most peculiar aspects noticed in the written messages of foreign students, aspects that may represent a good starting point for conceiving new textbooks of Romanian. We observed a noticeable contrast between the monocultural perspective of certain Romanian textbooks for learning Romanian as a foreign language and the multi- and intercultural attitude of the essays written by the foreign students.

Keywords: cultural aspects, Romanian as a foreign language, writing competence

The discussion concerning cultural aspects in relation with the process of teaching-learning a foreign language has passed through multiple stages. It started, in Edward Sapir's 1920 study, with the assertion of an indivisible connection between language and culture. Then studies focused on the relationship of language and culture in society (Hymes, 1964), on the sociolinguistic interaction, or socio-rhetoric (Gumperz, 1972) or, more recently, on contrastive rhetoric (Connon, 1996). In spite of all these significant references, we still do not have an operational definition of culture for the process of teaching foreign languages. Instead, culture is repeatedly reduced in the field of foreign languages to 'food, folklore and statistics' (Kramersch, 1991: 218). At present, although we have more and more studies about the influence of different cultures of origin on the acquisition of foreign languages (Kramersch, 1993, Seelye, 1981 and 1994, Odlin, 1989), the

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field is open to reflection and theoretical and systematic approaches. Generally, researchers plead for teaching cultural contents in a systematic, well-structured way (Lessard-Clouston, 1998). Romanian studies are following this direction of research (Muscan, 2002).

Our article proposes a twofold analysis; firstly, of the cultural contents identified in recent textbooks of Romanian as a foreign language, and secondly, of the cultural aspects observed in the written messages and essays of foreign students enrolled in the preparatory year of Romanian as a foreign language.

Cultural aspects: definition, categorization, didactic role

For a clear delineation of the subject, a rather weak dichotomist, categorization between **general cultural aspects** and **cultural-linguistic aspects** is proposed. In the first category, we include rules of social organization, personal space, self-image elements and opinions about the world, value systems, beliefs, superstitions and habits. In the second category, we consider the speech acts, the rhetoric rules for organizing a text, verbal politeness, stylistic aspects, pragmatic characteristics, phraseology and paremiological elements.

The categorization of contents with cultural character is hard to be done because of the diversity of numerous aspects shared between more disciplines: anthropology, ethnolinguistics, psychology, pragmatics, etc., and this is the reason why we do not attempt to cover all the aspects that may be categorized.

Through analyzing cultural aspects of writing messages in Romanian as a foreign language, we can identify topics of interest for developing competences in writing and speaking. Simultaneously we can identify 'obstacles' that the cultures of origin raise in learning Romanian. The greater the difference between the cultures of origin geographically, the more numerous the cultural aspects involved in developing the writing competences.

In a globalised world on the topic of cultural contents we should probably begin with establishing a methodology for improving the acquisition of foreign languages. It is obvious that the students will speak and write with pleasure about topics they are interested in or passionate or about topics in vogue. On the other hand, the element of novelty, brought by the functional curriculum, consists of organizing the didactic sequences around a pole of interest suggested by students and not by the teachers. Additionally, the functional curriculum is created and varies according to the cultural context of each country and the cultural backgrounds of the students.

The didactic role of cultural contents is considerable: writing or speaking about cultural themes enriches and stimulates intellectual curiosity, develops empathy and creativity. The students are encouraged to discover differences not just to reflect upon the new culture by being exposed to monoculture didactic materials.

Cultural aspects in Romanian as a foreign language textbooks

The most recent textbooks for Romanian as a foreign language depict cultural aspects of general interest. The textbook coordinated by Elena Platon (2012) chooses important figures for Romanian movies - the director Nae Caranfil, touristic sights – Sinaia and Peleş Castle, Constanța and The Black Sea, Bucovina and Voroneț Monastery, Maramureș region, Bran Castle, Cheile Turzii, etc., Romanian cuisine, Romanian athletes – Nadia Comăneci, Diana Chelaru, Gabriela Szabo, Romanian actors – Alexandra Maria Lara, cultural, historical and scientific figures – Nicolae Paulescu, Constantin Brâncuși, Aurel Vlaicu, Vlad Țepeș, Mircea Eliade, George Enescu, customs and traditions – *mărțișor* etc., for portraying a cultural profile of Romania. Although the monoculture perspective is dominant: factual fragments, self-images, general information for presenting ourselves in front of foreigners, there is also present an opening to interculturality. Romanian cuisine is approached by comparing Romanian with Asian or Mediterranean cuisine. The textbook coordinated by Liana Pop (*Autodidact*, 2008) includes in *Contents* a series of cultural competences: the map of Romania, Romanian currency, Romanian family names, climate, tourist information, etc. (2008: 85). The textbook of Daniela Kohn (Puls, 2009) is written from a multicultural pragmatic perspective and chooses elements of Romanian cuisine (The Christmas meal), seasonal traditions (Christmas), tourist sights (Biserica Neagră, Bran Castle, Masa tăcerii), festivals (Gărăna) and destinations for leisure, subordinating the teaching of cultural contents to the acquisition of language. All these textbooks abandon the old perspective of textbooks for Romanian as a foreign language in which the self-images were full of stereotypes and clichés, of exclusively positive aspects of ‘high’ culture, presented many times by means of literary texts.

The present trend is to deal with linguistic contents together with the cultural aspects. This point of view is reflected in the titles of recent books: Boțman Rodica (1995) – *Discover Romanian. An Introduction to the language and culture*, Gheorghe Doca (2001) – *Cultură și civilizație românească în dialoguri bilingve/ Romanian culture and civilization in bilingual dialogues*, Otilia Hedeșan (2008) – *Bun venit în România! Manual de limbă română și de orientare cultural pentru străini/*

Writing messages in the preparatory year

The competence of writing in a native language is learned and transmitted culturally as a set of practices through an instructional process that requires multiple exercises and experience. Developing the competence of writing in a foreign language begins as a mechanical process, formal and mimetic, becoming a complex act over the course of learning. The simple translation from the native language gradually gives room to creativity. It is obvious that writing does not refer only to the proper act of writing but also to complex thinking acts, linguistic codification and composition. Kaplan (1966) was the first researcher who observed that the cultural and linguistic backgrounds determine the principles of organizing a discourse as a reflection of culture and native language.

During years of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, we have identified, in students' written messages, a series of characteristics that belong to both the cultural context of the students origin', as well as to the new cultural environment in which they tried to integrate themselves. Students enrolled in the preparatory year have the advantage of learning Romanian by observing and reflecting on the new culture, through immersion in a Romanian environment, benefitting from direct experiences *in situ*. In their essays they use cultural aspects they note in stores, restaurants, society, adding to and contrasting with those elements from their own culture. The predominant aspects are the 'visible' ones: cuisine, clothes, everyday products, etc., to the detriment of more profound aspects such as moral or life values, beliefs, ideals, etc. At the same time, we can make some generalizations regarding cultural characteristics that appear frequently in their essays exemplified in the following lines:

- a. At the level of form: vertical aligned writing, symmetrical paragraphs of equal dimension, with a spatial distribution that imitates Chinese or Korean pictograms, or writing proper names, and starting sentences with low-case letters, in the case of Arab or Greek students;
- b. At the level of topics: students choose to depict aspects of cultural differences, contrasts in clothing between Europe and the Middle East, social (and gender) behavior, mentalities, differences in cuisine;
- c. At the level of ideas: students choose to emphasize ideological or historical and political aspects that are not

universally accepted, but culturally formed in a certain geographical context.

For instance, in the papers of Asian students we can notice how much students appreciate the social (or professional) group, the value of cooperation and social hierarchy:

Studentilor, în România, le place să vină târziu. Există câțiva studenți care întârzie zilnic. Dar în China nimeni nu ajunge târziu. Noi așteptăm profesorul și stăm jos înainte de curs/ In Romania students like to come late. There are students that are late every day. But in China nobody comes late. We wait for the teacher and sit before the course. (F., China)

Studenții în România sunt entuziasmați și curajoși. Ei îndrăznesc să spună opinia lor. Asta mă surprinde, dar este un aspect activ și inteligent și studentul poate să acumuleze cunoștințe repede la curs/ In Romania the students are enthusiastic and brave. They dare to state their opinion. This surprises me but it is an active and intelligent aspect and the student can accumulate knowledge fast on the course. (F., China)

The attitude towards smoking in public spaces or towards drinking alcohol is culturally determined:

Am observat multe diferențe dintre oamenii din Zimbabwe și oamenii de aici. În România, fumatul este prea normal și acceptabil./ I noticed many differences between people from Zimbabwe and people from here. In Romania smoking is too common and acceptable. (V., Zimbabwe)

Cele mai multe fete folosesc make-up. Ele sunt elegante, dar le place țigara. Sunt multe anunțuri cu fumatul interzis afară, dar stau de vorbă cu țigări. În China nu ne plac țigările, doar bărbaților, foarte puține femei fumează./ Many girls use make-up. They are elegant, but they like cigarettes. There are many notices which forbid smoking but they still chat with cigarettes. (F., China)

Aici oamenii beau tradițional vin și țuică și multe beri./ Here, people traditionally drink wine, brandy and many beers. (P., Zimbabwe)

The students make frequent comparisons with the cuisine from their country of origin even when there are no significant differences:

Nu-mi place brânza în România. Când eu iau masa la restaurant întotdeauna este brânză pe masă. Brânza este foarte sărată pentru mine și în România nu este ceva picant. Vreau să mai stau în România, dar o să mănânc la KFC dacă mai stau, să iau ceva picant./ I do not like cheese in Romania. When I eat at the restaurant there is always cheese on the table. Cheese is too salted for me and there is nothing spicy. I want to stay longer in Romania but I'm going to eat at KFC if I stay longer in order to eat something spicy. (C., Coreea de Sud, South Korea?)

Nu știu de ce românii fac ciorbă de burtă, nu e bine/ I do not know why the Romanians make soup from tripe, it is not ok. (A., Serbia)

Mâncarea aici e foarte bună. Au sarmale, ciorbă și supă și prăjituri la fel ca noi în Serbia./ The food in here is good. They have meat rolls, soups and cakes like us in Serbia. (M., Serbia)

Românii mănâncă mulți cartofi în fiecare zi, dar în China orezul și făina sunt importante./ The Romanians eat a lot of potatoes every day but in China the rice and the flour are important. (F., China)

Expressing emotions and the social code in the public space trigger reflections on their own culture:

Românii se îmbrățișează și se sărută pe obraz când se întâlnesc. Dar în China noi dăm mâna cu celălalt, fără sărut pe obraz. Cred că chinezii sunt mai introvertiți, nu sunt buni la exprimarea sentimentelor. The Romanians embrace and kiss one another on the cheek when they meet. But in China we shakehands without kissing on the cheek. I think that the Chinese are more introverted, they are not good at showing their feelings. (F., China)

The cultural meaning of colours in the social space generates irreconcilable contrasts:

Românii și chinezii sunt toți prietenoși și ospitalieri. Românii le plac florile, preferă în special trandafirii albi. Ei cred că aceia simbolizează puritatea. Dar în China, florile albe și crizantemele galbene apar doar la înmormântări. Chinezii preferă roșu. Ei cred că acela simbolizează fericire și bucurie./ The Romanians and the Chinese are friendly and hospitable. The Romanians prefer especially white roses. They consider them a symbol of purity. But in China white flowers and yellow chrysanthemums appear only at funerals. The Chinese prefer red. They believe that red is a symbol of happiness and joy. (F., China)

The first messages written in the preparatory year include a series of lexical and semantic calques, sayings and metaphors from the native language used in the messages with no logical connection with the rest of the text or its main argument:

Casa mea este castelul meu. Când sunt acasă, sunt liniștită și în siguranță pentru că nicăieri nu este ca acasă. Familia este cel mai mare dar pentru o singură persoană. Familia este ceea ce ține o persoană în cele mai dificile momente. Casa este puternică atunci când este pace și iubire de pace. Mâncăm toți dintr-o farfurie./ My house is my castle. When I am at home I feel safe and peaceful because there is no place like home. Family is the biggest gift of a person. Family is the factor that supports a person in the most difficult moments. The house is strong when there is peace and peace loving. We all eat from one plate. (V., Bulgaria)

The new cultural context in which the foreign students live imposes a series of set-phrases and stereotypes integrated in their written messages, together with set-phrases from the country of origin. A student from Korea, for instance, imagines a dialogue with a shop-assistant in a mall in Bucharest that begins with ‘Bine ați venit în magazinul nostru!’, probably by a Korean model, and ends the dialogue with ‘Introduce your pin code!’ that she probably noted on the point-of-sale terminal cashier.

The above mentioned situations prove that the most difficult aspects to be integrated into written messages (but also into oral messages) are the socio-cultural aspects. The use of interjections to express emotions and feelings, the use of discourse markers and *embrayeurs* (e.g. the Romanian particles *păi*, *știi*, *iată*), the use of certain degrees of respect and politeness (e.g. through pronouns), expressions that accompany certain gestures (e.g. *a bate în lemn*, *Doamne ferește!*), are difficult to present through rules and descriptions in such textbooks, as certain elements require exposure to a real-life situational communication, which is hugely varied.

Conclusion

There is a noticeable contrast between the monocultural perspective of certain Romanian textbooks for Romanian as a foreign language and the multi- and intercultural attitude noticeable in the essays written by the foreign students. Textbooks should be conceived and written using the disposition of students to reflect upon and internalize aspects of Romanian culture which are common with or different from their own culture and which they consider positive in the new culture they are experiencing.

From the perspective of the teaching process we should reflect more and try to provide a linguistically codified framework for cultural aspects of language learning: social distances, expressing emotions, life values and beliefs, etc. This is however a rather difficult and vast project, particularly in the absence of a clear methodology concerning teaching and assimilating cultural aspects. At the same time, we should not forget that the ability to tell stories, to transfer information, or the talent to observe and craft arguments, belong to the native qualities of each student (Myles, 2002) and it is difficult to reproduce and refine them in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Keeping an optimistic note, at the end of this article we plead for extended studies on the topic in order to formulate rules and principles for teaching cultural content by means of language learning. If this requirement is not

accomplished, we shall be in the situation of using the Romanian expression ‘Doamne ferește!/ May God protect us!’ in the most inappropriate contexts, as some of our students did.

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