

English in and for the EU, A “Must” but Not Just Anyway – Political Valences of Communicative Language Teaching in the 21st Century



Linguistics

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Vanda Stan

**Faculty of Humanities, Political and Administrative Sciences
University Vasile Goldis, Arad, Romania**

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to outline deficiencies and try to find solutions to flawed and outdated practices in ELT in numerous Romanian schools and institutions of tertiary education. An advocate of a balanced and open-minded communicative approach in ELT, as a political component to proper EU adjustment, the article points out the importance communicatively instilled competences in learners, in a timely manner. These are of utmost importance for the latter's future social and professional lives as EU citizens. The article underlines the way in which good teaching practices impact the manner in which learners, as recipients of these practices, shall easier find a job and adjust to the labour market which requires communicative competences, openness and flexibility in communication, irrespective of the domain. The European multicultural, multi-lingual labour market demands skills, abilities and competences which are the outcome of avant-garde teaching techniques which consolidate independent thinking, reasoning and action combined with a strong sense of responsibility and behavioural, social patterns as supported by the European Council.

Uniquely, indeed, Europe is “a melting pot” of languages, nationalities and citizenships in a common reality and a common political construct which unites us in the same geographical space, a common history and a common culture although still in different countries. And still...despite all the elements of the common European denominator, the effort towards linguistic unification, in view of increased efficiency, better understanding, increased cooperation and enhanced wellbeing is constant and has to be carried on with new ideas, rejuvenated perspectives and latest methods.

European multilingualism is symptomatic for what the continent's citizens call “unity within diversity” and, despite appearances, it contributes to the forging of close links among peoples, knowledgeable about the linguistic differences on a background of a mutual European identity, with its components: local, regional and national identities.

Within the current context of globalization, mobility and migration of labour force, not only for Europe but for the entire world, multilingualism can offer new solutions for the citizens and for society as a whole. Hence the increased desire of a large number of European citizens to acquire as many foreign languages as possible in order to ease their adjustment and proper functioning in as many countries of the European Union as possible.

A special place within this range of languages is undoubtedly held by English, the lingua franca not only of Europe, but of a vast majority of the world, in the major areas of economic-commercial-financial-social- technological domains, spoken at a basic level by one third of the world's population, almost 2 billion people, facilitating thus understanding among people, the

smooth running of global trade, business, communications, transportation, diplomacy, tourism, aviation, entertainment, etc.

A good level of English can ensure new and increased opportunities for a better work place in one's own country or one of the EU member states, a place in a very good European university, knowledgeable and informed participation in conferences and seminars where the participant can freely and openly express his/her views and ideas on the topic and contribute professionally to the debate, present papers with important contributions which all participants can easily grasp and benefit from.

Among the European nations, Romanians have a reputation of good language speakers attested not only by empirical data but also by the very statistics of Cambridge University testing services which place Romanian test takers among the countries at the very top of their proficiency pyramid.

However, upon more attentive specialized scrutiny, the results of surveys regarding Romanians' foreign language proficiency show a few short-comings which need swift addressing.

First and foremost the number of foreign language speakers, which has no connection to the high proficiency of the previously mentioned outstanding language proficient test takers, has to be mentioned. More than one-third of respondent adults aged 22 to 68 declare that they do not know any foreign language. A slightly smaller proportion claim that they speak one foreign language. The foreign language most beloved and taught is by far perceived to be English, followed by German and French, which comes as no surprise.

Another statistical outcome reflects the fact that a higher proportion of the younger adult population claim to speak foreign languages than of the middle aged or older generations who have hence developed an acute feeling of inadequacy whenever confronted, socially or professionally, with the necessity of using the foreign language.

Moreover, a correlation was found between a high level of education and a higher proficiency level in foreign languages since it is in universities, first and foremost, that students polish the previous high school language skills and pass on to the the new, profession-oriented language, their ESP.

When asked about the source of their knowledge of foreign languages most of the respondents claim that school classes as well as private tutoring gave them some knowledge but all these have apparently by far not had the linguistic impact of TV, cartoons, movies, music, books, magazines etc. A finding which in itself sends a message regarding the manner and quality of teaching in the educational system where quantity surpasses quality and old teaching methods both prevail and prove inefficient.

Similar findings hold true for the vast majority of the employees in the Romanian companies, little knowledge of English, with much increased competence levels in the foreign corporations and

companies working in Romania. The level of foreign language proficiency at the work place has been found to be responsible for better performance, understanding and overall achievement.

Both Romanian and multinational employers are in search of employees able to have a fluent conversation in the foreign language, edit documents, answer calls, participate in conferences and seminars knowledgeably using the foreign language. Hence, Foreign language proficiency (English) has become a pre-requisite in any interviewing process.

As recent studies have pointed out, multilingualism is of essence for culture, education, communication and the labour market, for the inclusion (social and professional) of migrants and the mobility of the labour force, for decreasing unemployment and thus opportunities for social unrest, all these contributing to the increased European Union economic competitiveness and smooth progress.

It is of vital importance for companies which wish to “conquer” new markets and address its customers directly in a language known by the latter. The fact that a number of highly appreciated and very professional companies with non-multilingual management have lost important contracts due to the impossibility of addressing the customer is a case in point.

What, more than anything, drew our attention when reviewing the situation of foreign language learning and proficiency in Romania, was the underlying reason, we perceived as the cause of poor language output: the manner of teaching of foreign languages in our high school and tertiary system.

Subsequent to a large number of visits and inspections in schools of very good repute, it has become increasingly clear why, nowadays’ young adults and especially middle-aged and elderly citizens, disregard completely their foreign language formal educational input. Indeed, English is being taught intensively, universally, in all schools-high schools and universities but there is a blatant lack of communicative input in the teaching as such, very little scope for real life communication and hands on interaction that does not seem artificially constructed and sterile, incapable of catching and keeping the attention of the learner, incapable of offering him the sense of real linguistic achievement and linguistic progress. Hence the feeling that movies, music, games, magazines and journals are much better ‘textbooks’ that those offered in the formal educational system.

In order to avoid misunderstandings it has to be said from the very beginning that it is no claim of ours that when teaching communicatively teachers need not teach grammar. This has often been presented as a shortcoming of the communicative method by linguists who argued against overtly teaching grammar, as this, apparently, distracts the learner from the message he wishes to convey and thus hinders the flow of communication. In order to convey a clear message on our part, we speak against a heavy, sole emphasis on structure at the expense of natural communication but by no means a complete disregard of the former. Grammar constitutes undoubtedly part of the basis of language teaching but definitely not in the traditional manner.

Beginners are first exposed to new language in a comprehensible context, so that they be able to understand its function and meaning. Only then is their attention turned to examining the grammatical forms that have been used to convey the respective meaning. The discussion of grammar is explicit, but it is the learners who are doing most of the discussing, with teacher guidance.

Neither do we advocate empowering our learners mainly and solely with speaking abilities while looking at the wider contexts of language use outside the classroom. It is , however, imperative that we focus on encouraging learners to communicate uninhibitedly without having non-stop, at the back of their heads, the constraints of grammar rules. Practice shall improve their accuracy as well as their fluency, in the long run.

As for the teacher, it is obvious that classes taught communicatively place greater demands on him than other approaches. Lessons are less predictable; teachers have to listen to what learners say and not just how they say it, and to interact with them as ‘naturally’ as possible. The use of a wider range of management skills than in the traditional teacher - monitored classroom is also a fact.

Moreover, non-native speakers of English probably need a higher level of language proficiency - or rather, a different balance of skills - to be able to communicate with ease, and to cope with discussing a wider range of facts about language use than they are accustomed to.

Should these communicative methods be used from the very first years of language acquisition, they would, undoubtedly develop communicative competence and create learning opportunities. These communicative , interactive, non-conventional methods of teaching foreign languages would lead to the formation of student communicative competences which in their turn offer them wider learning opportunities but also a vaster range of insertion on the labour market.

The aforementioned easier labour market insertion has been supported by findings derived from surveys and tests administered to graduates of the Faculty of Management/Marketing and International Law as well as the employers from prestigious companies.

By developing both communicative competences and offering learning opportunities in an interactive manner the students are offered dynamic, real life situations in which the communicative competence needs to adjust to the total absorption in information, linguistic and paralinguistic, coming from one or several interlocutors.

The assessment of communicative competences can provide essential data regarding the internal dynamics of the English curriculum at all levels of the educational system as well as criteria for the correct assessment in examinations.

Moreover, by implementing good practices in ELT and a proper use of the communicative approach teachers actually meet the political requirements in the domain of foreign languages regarding the endowment of all European citizens with the necessary means to overcome the

hurdles in the way of the intensifying of international mobility and a stronger cooperation among European citizens, not only in the domain of education but also in that of industry/economy.

Good teaching practices reflect themselves later on in the life of the former learners in more open-mindedness and flexibility when it comes to getting to know other European citizens, realities, national and regional languages, the respect for the multiplication and preservation the vast variety of cultural European identities. They do remove the threats caused by marginalization and frustration springing from among those who can not communicate in an interactive Europe.

It comes hence as a conclusion to claim that proper communicative teaching techniques have political importance and content since they reflect themselves upon behaviour patterns and interhuman relationships throughout one's life.

It has rightfully been said that "if you wish to stop a war, learn a language". One can hence infer ,that by learning a foreign language and learning it properly we create a bridge between people, peoples and cultures, the foundations of better understanding and tolerance among people, we try to understand their way of thinking and forever surpass cultural barriers. All these cannot but be advantageous for all of us as European citizens and for the progress of the union in all its sectors of activity.

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