

CONTENT BASED LEARNING-TASK BASED LEARNING-PROBLEM BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING ROMANIAN LANGUAGE TO FOREIGN STUDENTS

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Abstract: *When talking about the process of Romanian language teaching, learning and using the Romanian language, leads us to the idea that we are faced with a considerably large number of variables. No matter what happens during the process, there is always something good to acquire and put into practice. Despite this “methodological painkiller”, boosting efficiency is the determining factor. In the practical, everyday management of classes, it is common knowledge that it is more challenging for a teacher to do something “inappropriate” than to do it “correctly”. However, considering that almost all actions count, the teachers’ exclusive attention to the process comes as a necessity. As for the rest of the process, the things we have mentioned above are to be seen in a different way. Natural Romanian usage involves fluency and one can get the impression that Romanian is not difficult to learn and activate. It is pointless to say that this is a determining factor in encouraging students to be part of the “effort”. In contrast, artificial, highly automated Romanian tends to change into a nightmare for both teachers and learners. The context of CBL, TBL and PBL is represented by Communicative language teaching. The communicative approach was developed mainly by British applied linguists in the 1980s as a reaction against grammar-based approaches like situational language teaching and the audiolingual method. Strange as it may seem, the foreign language being taught during modern/current classes tends to lose the center of attention in this context. The main focus of attention is no longer on language but on some relevant subjects. Indeed, language should not be an end but a means. In different terms, the process works mostly with message-focused activities rather than form-focused ones. When it comes to modern approaches, the term “learning” becomes a very general one, mainly biased in favor of acquisition.*

Keywords: content-based learning; task-based learning; problem-based learning; communicative approach

Teacher’s role

It is the teacher’s role to make artificial elements part of the natural language system, in other words, to integrate them. The fact that the teacher’s competence in the foreign language can make a huge difference in students’

proficiency is easy to demonstrate. In a lot of cases, teachers act as role models. Strange as it may seem, the opposite of this desirable situation is not a so-called anti-role model teacher. As a matter of fact, the worst-case scenario is represented by that kind of teacher who is ignored, who does not make his/her students react one way or another.

Overall teaching success is highly probable to descend from the right combination of desirable factors. Among these, we should mention the teacher's ability to combine a thorough planning with his/her capability to become flexible. It seems that being balanced offers certain advantages whereas being unidirectional may prove unproductive, sometimes.

“What makes a good teacher?” has been a long-debated issue. The main discussion point here is whether there is a so-called good teacher, or it is just a question of individual preferences. At first glance, one (especially a principal or a parent) may say that results make a good teacher. It is partly true. Students will probably say that a good teacher establishes good communication first and foremost. Teachers would probably say that a good teacher is one who never stops trying to become a good teacher for his/her students. Jeremy Harmer interviewed students to find out their opinion related to what a good teacher may be. Here are some of the representative answers he collected:

“-They should make their lessons interesting, so you don't fall asleep in them.

-A teacher must love her job. If she really enjoys her job that'll make the lessons more interesting.

-I like the teacher who has his own personality and doesn't hide it from the students so that he is not only a teacher but a person as well – and it comes through the lessons.

-I like a teacher who has lots of knowledge, not only of his subject.

-A good teacher is an entertainer and I mean that in a positive sense, not a negative sense.

-It's important that you can talk to the teacher when you have problems, and you don't get along with the subject.

-A good teacher is...somebody who has an affinity with the students that they're teaching.

-A good teacher should try and draw out the quiet ones and control the more talkative ones.

-He should be able to correct people without offending them.

-A good teacher is ... someone who helps rather than shouts.

-A good teacher is...someone who knows our names.” (Harmer, 2001: 1-2).

Taking into consideration these perspectives, we may say that a good teacher is somebody who can blend in perfectly with his/her students'

particularities and necessities. We may discuss the issue in terms of teacher's skills and knowledge, but it is easier to consider that issue more simply. Some students are motivated/ impressed by the teacher's knowledge while others by the teacher's personality, which makes him/ her a fascinating person. It matters a lot what the students are mainly interested in when it comes to their teachers. All teachers have strong and weak points. It depends a lot how they deal with them. Concealing weaknesses from students might not be the best solution all the time. Sometimes students need to be shown that teachers are also/ only human but that it is human (to be read normal) to do something about your problems. From this point of view, it may be a good idea for the teachers to appear as they are (i.e. active human beings).

If we take notice of this great diversity of variables, we will come to this conclusion: "different teachers are often successful in different ways" (Harmer, 2010: 23). On the other hand, the opposite functions just as well. Nonetheless, doing their best in the right context will take teachers closer to what is generally called "success".

The context of CBL, TBL and PBL

If we are to summarize some of the more recent (not necessarily "latest") trends mentioned earlier, we should outline some significant shifts that the process of language teaching/ learning generally underlines. Current trends focus mainly on the acquisition process. In order to make use of it, the first thing to do is to structure contexts that favor the reactivation of the acquisition, whose mechanism (the language acquisition device, according to N. Chomsky) falls away much earlier than puberty.

But how can this mechanism be set to work again? Since the 1960s the best solution that has been found is to recreate, according to the possibility, the conditions that occur when the learners acquire their mother tongue. It is not difficult at all to realize that it is fairly impossible to "bring" to classroom those conditions that are present in natural acquisition. Nevertheless, acquisition increases at the same rate as recreating those primary conditions. The starring role here is played by the meaningful/ relevant knowledge delivery. As a matter of fact, the three methods enunciated above deal with this issue. Hence, teaching is no longer structurally planned but situationally organized. The context of CBL, TBL and PBL is represented by Communicative language teaching. It is an

"approach to foreign or second language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence, and which seeks to make meaningful communication and language use a focus of all classroom activities. The communicative approach was developed particularly by British applied linguists in the 1980s as a reaction away from grammar-based approaches such as situational

language teaching and the audiolingual method. The major principles of Communicative Language Teaching are:

1. learners use a language through using it to communicate
2. authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities
3. fluency and accuracy are both important goals in language learning
4. communication involves the integration of different language skills
5. learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error

Communicative language teaching led to a re-examination of language teaching goals, syllabuses, materials, and classroom activities and has had a major impact on changes in language teaching world wide. Some of its principles have been incorporated into other communicative approaches, such as task-based language teaching, **cooperative language learning**, and content-based instruction.” (Richards, 2010: 99).

Strange as it may seem, the foreign language being taught during modern/current classes tends to lose the center of attention in this context. The main focus of attention is no longer on language but on some relevant subjects. Indeed, language should not be an end but a means. In different terms, the process works mostly with message-focused activities rather than form-focused ones. More attention is given to the functions of language than to the notions of language. Modern approaches operate with uses rather than concepts. Students are expected to benefit from modern trends. For example, these trends can be more realistic. For example, the so-called 100 per cent comprehension approach is not taken into account anymore, especially because it is not realistic when it comes to real life.

When it comes to modern approaches, the term “learning” becomes a very general one, mainly biased in favor of acquisition.

Content based learning

Content and language integrated learning is a method that brings together language instruction with subject matter instruction making use of the target language. Some examples of content-based instruction include Sheltered Romanian, Immersion or Language across the curriculum.

The student studies a subject such as geography, chemistry or history, learning at the same time the language (Romanian in our case) used as a means for getting across the teaching line’s message. Choosing the language to use is a matter of choice. It may be a second language, an additional language or a combination between a second/ third etc. language and

student's first language (translanguage content and language integrated learning).

This approach is very different from general Romanian teaching. Students are supposed to learn only what they need for the content of the lesson, not grammar items and patterns. Language is used for learning, not for some later use.

Content and language integrated learning concentrates on content, communication (after all, it addresses communication competence), cognition and culture. Students are supposed to cooperate with one another so as to successfully perform genuine tasks. Teachers will help their students by making use of the so-called scaffolding. In different terms, CLIL still makes use of progressive stages.

The content that teachers bring about may have already been studied in students' L1 or it may occur at first sight. Both ways present certain benefits that should be thoroughly considered. Students are given the chance to reach cognitive academic language proficiency first, but also basic interpersonal communication skills.

Jeremy Harmer presents several ways for the CLIL teachers to encourage good learning:

-We can get the students to compare the work they are doing with work they have done before. We will get them to see how and why they have made improvements.

-We can give the students different strategies for doing a task and ask them how effective they are. For example, we can show them four different ways of taking notes. They have to think about which one they prefer and why.

-We can discuss the best way of remembering words and encourage the students to keep vocabulary books in which they write down words and phrases that they need to remember.

-At the end of a lesson or unit of work, we can get the students to think about what was difficult and what was easy- and why. We can get them to think/ take notes about how they will use what they have learnt and how they will follow it up. (Harmer 2012: 237).

Task-based learning

Considered "dictionaryly", task-based learning is

"a teaching approach based on the use of communicative and interactive tasks as the central units for the planning and delivery of instruction. Such tasks are said to provide an effective basis for language learning since they:

- a) involve meaningful communication and interaction
- b) involve negotiation

c) enable the learners to acquire grammar as a result of engaging in authentic language use.

This approach does not require a predetermined grammatical syllabus since grammar is dealt with as the need for it emerges when learners engage in

interactive tasks. In using tasks in the classroom teachers often make use of a cycle of activities involving a) preparation for a task b) task performance

c) follow-up activities that may involve a focus on language form. Task-based language teaching is an extension of the principles of Communicative

Language Teaching and an attempt by its proponents to apply principles of second language learning to teaching.” (585).

Since TBL is closely related to communicative language teaching, it appears evident that the focus is mainly on fluency-first, accuracy-after. Similar to this, we should outline that TBL concentrates first on performing a task and only afterwards on the linguistic elements present in and during the task. As a matter of fact, accuracy is said to descend from fluency. A very good example here could be the one of N. Prabhu (in the late 1970s he structured TBL as a reaction to Communicative language teaching and the n/f syllabus). He understood that the best way to teach grammar is to concentrate on meaning/message and not on structures. He managed to offer support to this idea in the course of the Bangalore Experiment.

The need to communicate is at the core of the process. This is one reason why the syllabus objectives are formulated according to real language use and not grammar structures. Students will (try to) communicate making use of their available resources. “Over time, the language that is necessary to perform different relevant tasks will be absorbed without really being aware of it. The basis of the task-based approach is the alternation **perform-observe-re-perform**” (Thornbury, 2007: 58).

Scott Thornbury mentions the following task types:

- Surveys-as when groups of learners collaboratively produce a questionnaire on the subject of music tastes, survey the rest of the class, collate the results, and report on them to the class.
- Design tasks- as when learners collaborate in deciding on the most effective use for a vacant space in their neighborhood and present their case to the rest of the class.
- Research tasks- as when learners use the resources of the Internet, for example, to research an aspect of local history with a view to writing the wording for a new monument.
- Imaginative tasks- as when learners script, perform, and record a radio drama based on a regional folk tale (119).

A slightly different perspective on task types is presented by J Willis:

- Listing-making a list (Willis, 1996: 186).

These tasks are meant to reflect real-life needs and skills. In other words, since the students are supposed to do something, at least this should be meaningful. This applies to the teacher as well. N. Prabhu stated that it is not possible to really focus on meaning if the background is occupied by a language syllabus. He argues that it is not even moral to ask about message when you are really interested in form. This would spoil genuine communication. However, some structures are possible to be made more salient.

Unlike the syllabus followed by CLIL (i.e. structured in terms of subjects), TBL syllabus is built on tasks/ activities. Another name for this kind of syllabus is “syllabus of means” as opposed to “syllabus of ends”.

Some of the advantages of TBT, due to some principles that it follows, are: form is better learned when the focus is on message, performing tasks help to structure knowledge, students will exercise negotiation (for meaning).

Problem-based learning

This approach has a lot of things in common with the other two perspectives mentioned above, the striking similarity involving TBT. In this respect,

“students work through problem-solving tasks that are similar to real world problems they are likely to encounter. It involves collaborative group work and may take different forms but always makes use of a focus on a problem or problems to drive the teaching-learning process. Resolving the problem typically involves research, reading, writing, group discussions, and oral presentations, activities that are used as the basis for language development” (Richards, 2010: 458-459).

Student-centered approaches insist on maximizing students’ involvement and conversely, limiting teachers’: “Student-centered learning has its foundation in social constructivist theories. This perspective contends that learning occurs as knowledge is negotiated among learners, often facilitated by a more knowledgeable group member and that students need to be active, intentional learners.” (Palincsar, 1998: 345-375). The teacher’s role in PBL is to facilitate knowledge construction by means of collaboration. Learning becomes a sense-making activity. Sense is no longer received mostly. Students are supposed to drive the course of the lesson while the teacher’s role is that of a scaffold. He/she will not seek to correct students’ mistakes but to understand students’ ideas.

PBL makes use of complex problems meant to stimulate learning. The main idea is that such problems, in general, do not have just a single solution/correct answer. Students are allowed to negotiate the best “alternative”. This is just one way to make students become responsible for their learning. This is related to learning by (really) doing. Students enhance their perspective of being so-called self-directed learners.

The importance of PBL is huge due to the fact that students prepare to successfully integrate in a decision-making context/ environment. Unlike the Industrial Age, The Information Age is based on constant change. The relevance of “old-school information” is very likely to decrease dramatically. In other words, that information is highly possible/ probable to become obsolete. In this case, mechanisms are more useful than the materials. Students will become more aware of themselves, the environment and best connecting strategies.

The characteristics of PBL are:

- “• It is problem focused, such that learners begin learning by addressing simulations of an authentic, ill-structured problem. The content and skills to be learned are organized around problems, rather than as a hierarchical list of topics, so a reciprocal relationship exists between knowledge and the problem. Knowledge building is stimulated by the problem and applied back to the problem.
- It is student centered, because faculty cannot dictate learning.
- It is self-directed, such that students individually and collaboratively assume responsibility for generating learning issues and processes through self-assessment and peer assessment and access their own learning materials. Required assignments are rarely made.
- It is self-reflective, such that learners monitor their understanding and learn to adjust strategies for learning.
- Tutors are facilitators (not knowledge disseminators) who support and model reasoning processes, facilitate group processes and interpersonal dynamics, probe students’ knowledge deeply, and never interject content or provide direct answers to questions.” (Hung, 2015: 488-489).

The learning cycle implied by PBL is structured as follows:

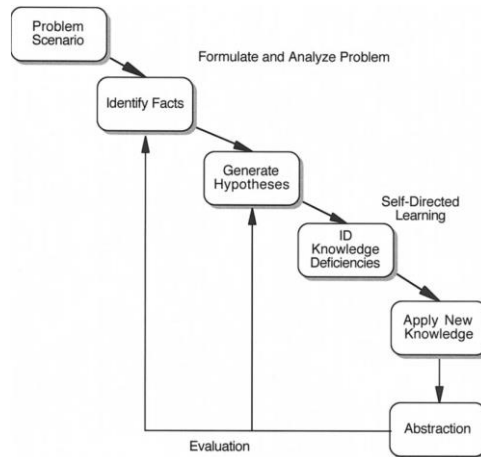


Figure 1: The problem-based learning cycle (Hmelo-Silver, 2004: 237)

One big problem of PBL is that it takes a lot of time to fully integrate within individuals. Nevertheless, all journeys are said to start with a single step, be it hesitant or bold. More than this, we all know that changing pace, from time to time, is a must even though it may create the impression of destabilizing of the entire “construct”.

Instead of a conclusion, as A.S. Schoenfeld said, “how one teaches and the strategies that are applied are intimately related to teachers’ beliefs about the nature of the teaching-learning process.” (Schoenfeld, 2006: 21).

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