

COMPLEMENTARY TOOLS IN TEACHING RFL: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *In the context of learning Romanian as a foreign language through a guided process based upon the communicative-actional method, dictionaries remain indispensable instruments of learning. In order to determine the scale of the use of dictionaries in learning a foreign language, the most widely used type of dictionaries as well as their disadvantages; we subjected the students that study Romanian as a foreign language to a survey. The present article presents the results obtained in its course.*

Keywords: *lexis, dictionary, Romanian as a foreign language, guided learning.*

*Knowing another language
is like having a second soul.
Charlemagne*

The present paper is based on the practice of learning Romanian as a foreign language (RFL); its aim is to bring to the limelight some key aspects that deal with teaching/learning, especially underlining the place, time and importance of using dictionaries. This research returns to the problems that appear in the classroom for both professors and students. The source of inspiration for this study resides in the modern didactics – the process of “guided” learning of Romanian as a foreign language.

Teaching a language is an activity that requires exactness; the professor has to distribute and classify the aspects of language in a rigorous way: each of them has a well-established order and modality of teaching. Treating its various hypostases in mastering, exercising the RFL lexis and its practical use in speech, it has to be stated that there are two possible approaches to the process: the *explanatory aspect* and the *applied* one. There are two levels of teaching and learning RFL vocabulary. At the first level lexical elements are

subordinated to grammatical structures, remaining within the limits of the minimal fundamental vocabulary (Franțescu, 2016: 48). RFL learning is based upon studying the most common words that can be used in everyday situations in which a speaker finds himself (Câșlaru, 2016: 1003). As far as RFL is concerned, a highly useful tool would be a fundamental vocabulary organized according to the frequency and availability of words such as, for example, the *Fundamental polyglot vocabulary of the Romanian language (Vocabularul fundamental polyglot al limbii române)* by Maria Iliescu; however, the market lacks this kind of dictionaries.

At the second level the main concern is that of enriching the vocabulary; the goal here is obtaining the possibilities of producing flexible and detailed statements. The theories that affirmed that learning endless lists of words translated into students' mother tongues would complete the process of mastering and enriching vocabulary have already been shown to be outdated. New methods are based not only on understanding the meaning, but also on mastering the usage of words, as well as their collocations in the act of speech (Andrei, Braniște & Câșlaru, 2014: 92). Tatiana Slama-Cazacu believes that “the fundamental hypostasis of speech is a dialogue situation” (Slama-Cazacu, 1968: 58). The precursory phenomenon which implicitly conditions fluent speech is learning the meaning of the words which is impossible without dictionaries.

It should also be mentioned in this connection that learning the meaning is by no means a mechanical process, whereas words are seen through their phraseological and even supra-phrasal dependence. The enrichment of vocabulary implies semantic decoding. At the second level the means used for semantization of new lexemes are mostly the linguistic ones. The skill of thinking and expressing oneself directly in the target language is the basic objective here. The possibility to establish connections and parallels in the target language should become habitual. Using dictionaries in the process of formation of this skill is a highly important and efficient tool.

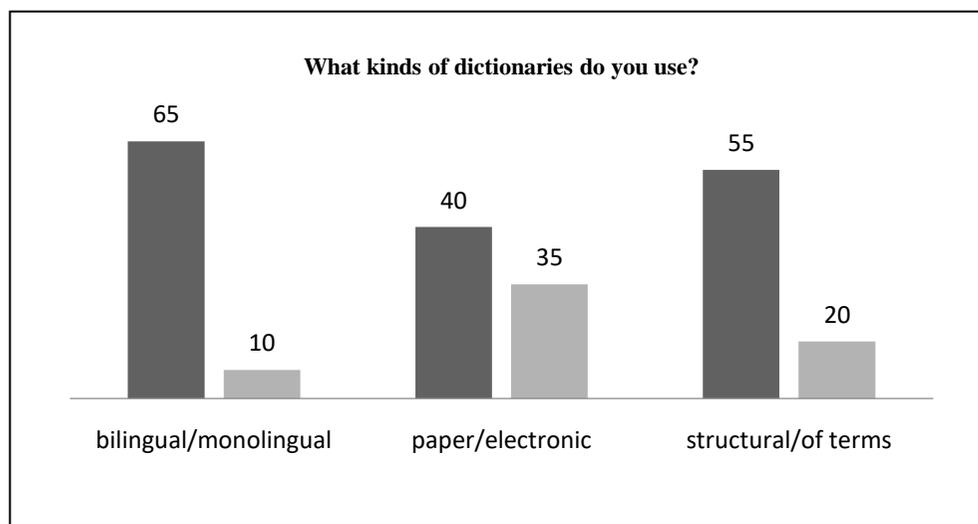
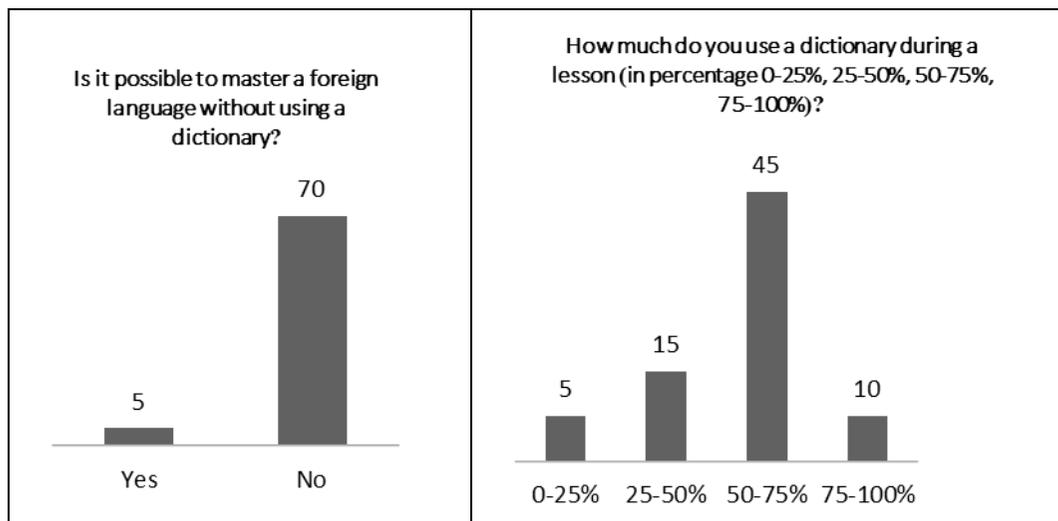
Self-definition in a language is carried out through context. An isolated word has no communicative value. Its meaning separated from those of the surrounding words is “hidden” and is no longer significant for speakers. The meaning of words is conditioned by their contextual position; therefore, the meaning of a word placed in a lexical combination where it constitutes the only unknown element can be established more easily, while “the corresponding context can define the situation which defines the word” (CEFRL, 2003: 67).

Contextual self-definition moulds the global meaning of a word. In this way some grammatical forms can even add to their value. When we dwell upon this issue, we do not deviate too much from the topic of the paper which is centred around text and vocabulary: a grammatical form can hardly be called a separate phenomenon detached from lexicology and semantics, on the contrary, it is directly involved in these language aspects. Any grammatical phenomenon is reflected in words, rendering them a new meaning. For those who learn a language the habit of semantization through context generates and develops the capacity to understand a text or a discussion, even though there are some unfamiliar words. Importance given to the context becomes major in cases of lexical polysemy, partial synonymy, homonymy and understanding expressions typical of a certain language.

Thus, the dictionary becomes the most precious instrument for those who deal with RFL. From the very beginning the explanation of unfamiliar words is not carried out by the professor, getting the students accustomed to using the dictionary in a constant manner as an essential element in RFL learning.

In what follows we are going to present the questionnaire filled in by the preparatory year students, both in present and from the previous graduations, presently

PhD candidates in Letters. The total number of completed questionnaires included in our corpus accounts to 75.



The obtained answers allow us to affirm that the necessity of dictionaries can hardly be denied. The students that study Romanian as a foreign language prefer bilingual dictionaries to the monolingual ones, whereas the structural ones that contain declinations, illustrations and grammatical situations are far beyond the dictionaries of terms on the list of their preferences. As far as the format of the dictionary is concerned, students tend to use printed dictionaries more often. However, it should be underlined that the electronic ones are not far from substituting them. The majority of students use dictionaries in 50-75% of the situations during the process of learning a foreign language.

The questions with free answer gave the subjects of our study an opportunity of mentioning a number of inconveniences faced when using dictionaries. Not all words of a language have perfect equivalents in another one, thus, the solution offered by the

dictionary creates perplexity. Not all specific nuances of meaning that originate from polysemy, synonymy, antonymy and lexical homonymy can be rendered. A bilingual dictionary is a tool for translator rather than for a language learner. Monolingual dictionaries, in their turn, prove to be of great efficiency since they contribute to an easier memorization and enrichment of vocabulary.

Foreign students that study Romanian face difficulties that can hardly be easily overcome without using auxiliary materials: a foreigner that uses a usual dictionary runs into difficulties when trying to identify the gender of a noun in the Romanian language until he gets accustomed to the abbreviations. For a student from Japan, Korea or Vietnam, as well as for an English or Turkish speaker (let alone Arab speakers) all inanimate objects are neutral in terms of gender; thus, they are immediately puzzled by the fact that *banca* and *iarna* are feminine, whereas *copacii* and *peretele* are masculine. Learning the gender of a word together with its meaning is bound to create great difficulties for these students. Psychological reactions, especially the discouraging ones, play a key role in the mechanism of learning a language – the reason why they should be avoided by means of offering supporting materials that would be reliable from both practical and psychic points of view. When such materials are harmoniously combined and used with discretion, in a balanced manner and in the right moment, they provide correct semantic decoding followed by the enlargement of the sphere of applied lexical knowledge acquired by foreign students.

Working out manuals, didactic exercise books and most concise, attractive and speech-oriented dictionaries is important; however, the teacher's place in the classroom is decisive – the idea supported by Comenius (“The student is granted with work, whereas the teacher is granted with guiding”) and Gh. Doca (“you can have the best didactic support, special glossaries, audio and video materials and latest dictionaries, but if you do not know what to do with them, it is all in vane”)¹. The most efficient practice for mastering new vocabulary is using it in direct speech, thus, the lexical elements in a dictionary should be integrated in supra-phrasal units that exceed the limits of a sentence or a phrase.

The *Common European Framework Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* states:

“Communication and learning involve the performance of tasks which are not solely language tasks even though they involve language activities and make demands upon the individual's communicative competence.” (CEFR, 2003: 15).

Thus, the process of reception and comprehension, especially in reference to written texts, can be facilitated by appropriate use of supplementary means such as:

- dictionaries (monolingual and bilingual);
- thesauruses;
- pronunciation dictionaries;
- electronic dictionaries, grammar, spelling checkers etc.;
- reference grammar books.

At the same time, the structure and intensive character of the Romanian language course for foreign students can hardly allow to pay much attention to dictionaries and lexical exercise as such. Practical principles and methods of elaborating a dictionary should be well thought over and offer a subject for further discussion. A great test of knowledge is the immediate necessity to communicate in the Romanian language in order to satisfy

¹ The International Symposium – *Metode și strategii în predarea limbii române ca limbă străină*, organized by “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Romanian Language for Foreign Students, Iași, 2001.

numerous everyday needs – the fact that requires using all acquired knowledge of the language in the process of speech which is carried out in the specific environment of the studied language, in the country in which it is spoken by all population. Using the Internet together with other tools contributes to the access to information in real time.

One of the advantages of using dictionaries on the Internet – in the context in which Romanian lexicography joins the existing trends in European lexicography is reflected in students' autonomy, differentiated approach and the facilitation of contextual learning.

Unfortunately, in the process of learning a foreign language there are still those who believe that we can fully rely on the linguistic macro-climate, random search of words on the Internet or the shortest and easiest way – the classmate. What we do in our Department is team work. Obviously, the aspects enumerated above have beneficial influence on a foreign speaker; however, “they can hardly constitute the basis for exercising a language in its learning phase. This would mean to say that language skills acquisition is determined by circumstances” (Chirilă, 2020: 262).

It goes without saying that regular lexis exercising with the help of the dictionary is necessary; however, it is better to be conducted in the situations that are as close to the real ones as possible, i.e. in conversation, through incorporating lexical difficulties in a normal and unforced way. Using lexis means, in fact, speech, and it is hardly possible to learn to speak by means of special exercises that presuppose the use of the dictionary, it is acceptable only from time to time. Specific exercises leave a false impression of learning and practicing vocabulary, but in reality they are just speech patterns.

At present, using the method of communicative-actional teaching and learning, mastering lexis no longer presents a quantitative process during which memorization of some lists of terms is intended, but a qualitative one in which the student contextualizes the word (Cellier, 2011: 438). Thus, mastering vocabulary is an “implicit process” (Andrei, Braniște & Cășlaru, 2014; Franțescu, 2016). Whatever aims a lesson might pursue, their fulfillment as such is surely acquired by means of using the target language which means, in fact, lexical exercise.

To sum up, dictionaries are used automatically from the very first until the last lesson through speaking exclusively in the target language. Frequent contact with various elements of a language makes the difficulties in memorizing new words with the help of dictionary gradually disappear. Sometimes the lack of a word can lead to the failure of the whole communication, and in this case it is only the dictionary that can help. We are convinced that using any type of dictionary leads to growing efficiency of the process of learning the Romanian language by foreign students, progressively forming a way of expression which would be as free of that of the native tongue as possible – a permanent goal of didactic activity.

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