



ORIGINAL PAPER

EFL in the Post-Communist Era: Background, Methods and Values

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Abstract

The present paper aims at offering an overview of teaching and acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the period after the 1989 Revolution. Structured in four sections, it focuses on the background of teaching English in the communist and post-communist eras with reference at the changes of our educational system, the importance of English as a means of international communication and the extent of it in schools, as well as on the various methods used in classes in order to facilitate the learning process of a language. Thus, throughout these past 30 years from the communist period, one can easily notice a tremendous shift from the old-fashioned, restrictive way of teaching a foreign language to a modern approach, ready to meet the needs of both young learners and adults. The Grammar-translation method, widely used for some years in our educational system, has steadily been replaced by newer and more updated approaches to help learners become proficient users of English. Nowadays, the role of English as a Lingua Franca is definite, with more and more learners, at all ages, studying and using it in different contexts. Undoubtedly, English has become a tool of international communication and it is in the power of teachers/trainers to facilitate this acquisition process in order to meet the interests and needs of contemporary learners.

Keywords: *EFL, Post-Communist era; Lingua Franca; GT approach; CLT.*

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Background

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been learned and taught in Romania for many years, yet to different extents. When discussing the preference of the Romanians over a certain foreign language, one needs to consider other factors beside the purely linguistic ones. The studying of a language is greatly influenced by historical, geopolitical and economic factors. As part of the Eastern European countries, Romania went under the Russian influence after the Second World War, and, interestingly, during the communist period, though the regime was in tight connections with the Russians, the first foreign language learned and taught in schools was French. Other foreign languages, such as Russian, English, and, in a lower extent, German were taught in different schools across the country. Whereas Russian was mainly taught in countryside schools, sometimes as a first language, the situation looked differently in the big cities: French was considered the first option, followed by Russian and English as second languages.

After the 1989 Revolution and the fall of communism, the Romanians had the chance of meeting the Western culture, and apart from other economic and political changes, the educational system has undergone a series of transformations. It was the case of the foreign languages as well, where the role of English has risen gradually to a very large extent nowadays. Yet, this reform of the educational system has been a continuous process, targeting the leveling of teaching foreign languages to the curricula and the methods used in the European Union.

At the beginning of the post-communist period, precisely during 1990-1993, the Government tried to implement some changes which were not specific to the English language but common to all foreign languages taught in schools and high schools. The foreign language became a compulsory subject starting with the 2nd grade, the choice of the language being on the part of the educational institution, depending on their resources. The teaching of foreign languages in the primary education system proved difficult to be implemented since many schools did not possess the human resource necessary to this process, so, primary teachers had to combine their role with that of a foreign language teacher. At the same time, there was a general curriculum, valid to all languages, which was focused on the traditional teaching, the goal being the lexical and grammatical correctness of the language. In secondary schools, the English textbooks were rather dull, based on the main principle of reading and translating texts, offering no freedom to teachers but to follow the contents of the textbooks.

Only during 1993-1995 there was an attempt to modernize the curriculum, in the respect of setting objectives specific to different age-groups. Thus, we can talk about the integration of both general and specific objectives in the English-language curriculum, the appearance of some more attractive and colorful textbooks to be used in class, as well as the structuring of contents on themes, ideas and lexical-grammatical structures. The next three years brought forth a methodology of teaching with a focus on developing skills, shifting the way of teaching from the teacher-centered lesson to the student-centered one. Reading and translation, the analysis of literary texts, the grammatical theory gradually decreased in importance opening the gate towards other methods such as the audio-lingual one, offering teachers the possibility of choosing among a series of alternative textbooks which suit the needs of their classes. A real landmark in the modernization of the curriculum emerged in 1998 with the implementation of the National Curriculum which also changed perspectives in relation to the teaching of foreign languages. The new framework brought a lot of advantages for

the teaching of English, mainly the one concerning the syllabus which included the development of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. At the same time, teachers were free to choose the textbook which suited best the interests and needs of their students, the number of alternative resources being on increase. Yet, a major drawback of the curriculum regarded the teaching of English as a 1st foreign language which became compulsory from the 3rd grade-on and optional for the 1st and 2nd grades.

After 2001, and especially after two important moments in the history of our country, 2004- Romania becoming a member of NATO and 2007- the adherence of Romania to the European Union, an increased interest in both the teaching and learning of EFL could easily be perceived, an interest which is still present nowadays. The process of acquiring the language has been aligned to the standards imposed by the EU while the skills involved have been in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

In the paper called “The Evolution of the English Subject Curriculum in Romanian Primary and Lower Secondary Education”, the authors, Norica Bucur and Oana Popa (2015), divide the curricular reform into two main stages: 1990-1998 the transition stage, 1998-present the National Curriculum stage. Yet, in the light of the main changes regarding the teaching of EFL and English as a First Foreign Language (EFFL), they continue subdividing these two main stages into several sub-stages related to the specific modifications which have appeared throughout the process. As it is stated, “considering the official EFFL curricular documents in force since 1990, the EFFL curriculum for primary and lower secondary education in Romania could serve as a possible example for the tumultuous history of Romanian education reform. Even if stagnation or involution stages could be identified along the analyzed period, the EFFL curriculum for primary and lower secondary education has moved forward. The most recently designed foreign language subject curricula for primary education (2012, 2015) definitely prove this positive evolution, which will probably extend to both lower and upper secondary levels in the near future, to ensure competence-based education, in line with European and international trends” (Bucur, Popa, 2015: 55).

All in all, ever since 1990, there have been constant efforts to improve the curriculum for teaching EFL, a process which is still in progress in order to offer both teachers and learners the chance of an education aligned to the international standards. At present, the English subject matter is studied starting from kindergarten (an optional activity) to the academic education (especially the first two years of higher education) giving the chance of an openness towards globalization.

English – a Means of International Communication

Due to globalization and the fact that, for some years now, people from different countries and different fields of activity have started to connect with one another, the English language has known an enormous spread all around the globe. It is used as the main means of communication in all sorts of fields, be it politics, business, social media, tourism, etc., thus becoming an international language. Several terms have been rendered to its use around the world, such as EIL -English as an International Language (Jenkins, 2003), English as a Global Language (Crystal, 2003), Englishes, English as a World Language (Mair, 2003), English as a Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer, 2000), all considering the widespread of this language in various contexts.

Thus, “when we refer to a certain language as *a lingua franca*, then we consider the use of it as a means of communication by speakers belonging to different cultures

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and regions. Both native and non-native speakers are integrated in the concept, since it is spoken in situations with widely varying combinations of participants, including first language speakers of different varieties” (Mauranen, 2017: 9). At the same time, in her work called “Understanding English as a Lingua Franca”, Barbara Seidlhofer (2011) discusses different studies related to the spread of English as an international language, and, implicitly as a Lingua Franca, relying on data and concepts provided by Crystal (2006), and Kachru (1992), coming to the conclusion that, “so while estimates of speakers are bound to be vague, the orders of magnitude seem to be fairly clear. Here are some figures, which taken together certainly amount to the conclusion that 'native speakers' of English are clearly outnumbered by 'non-native speakers': Crystal (2003b: 69) gives the following estimates for speakers of English in terms of Kachru's model of 'concentric circles' (Kachru, 1992): 'Inner Circle' i.e. first language in, for example, UK, USA: 320-380 million; 'Outer Circle' i.e. additional language, in India, Nigeria: 300-500 million; 'Expanding Circle', i.e. foreign language, in China, Russia: 500-1000 million” (Seidlhofer, 2011: 2-3).

Thus, considering Kachru's model, we can easily integrate Romania in the 'Expanding Circle', with more and more citizens learning and using the language internationally. Though it is very difficult to find relevant data regarding the number of Romanians as speakers of English as a Foreign Language, we can rely on data from the National Institute of Statistics which offer a view of the foreign languages studied in the Romanian educational system. In a report of the academic year 2015-2016, we find that the first foreign language studied in the primary and secondary educational system is English with 84.4% of the total number of primary school learners and 79.2% of the total number of secondary school learners, studying it, followed by French with a rate of 12.8% in primary education and 18.6% for the secondary education. On the third position we find German language with a rate of 2.1% in primary schools and 1.9% in secondary schools. (INS-The National Institute of Statistics report on the Educational System in Romania 2015-2016)

As for the situation in the high school educational system, for the same academic year 2015-2016, the students learning English as the first foreign language (562.2 thousand students) greatly outnumber those studying French (100.5 thousand students), followed by German (7.0 thousand students) and other languages in a lower degree (3.8 thousand students). (INS -The National Institute of Statistics report on the Educational System in Romania 2015-2016).

According to the data presented above, there is no doubt that English ranks first in the top of foreign languages studied in schools in the Romanian educational system. It is a matter of choice on behalf of the stakeholders involved in the educational process—authorities, teachers, and students in equal parts who have taken the decision to align the studying of foreign languages to the standards of the European Union. The fact that English nowadays is considered a Lingua Franca globally is a prerequisite of the decision made by those involved.

At the same time, since Romania is part of the European Union and, since special importance is offered to the proficiency of English throughout the continent, several statistics have emerged, ranking countries and their citizens according to the level of spoken English. In this respect, according to the latest index (2018) which regards the ranking of countries and regions by English skills, we find Romania on the 16th place (out of 88 countries and regions), i.e. with a high proficiency of the language. In Europe, our country registers a score of 60.31, being placed the 13th out of 32

countries. This high proficiency trend has been valid ever since 2014, which shows a constant effort to maintain a high standard of both teaching and learning this foreign language (EF EPI, 2018).

As stated, “worldwide, over 1.4 billion people live in countries where English has official status. One out of five of the world's population speaks English with some degree of competence. And by 2000, one in five – over one billion people – will also be learning English. Over 70% of the world's scientists read English. About 85% of the world's mail is written in English. And 90% of all information in the world's electronic retrieval systems is stored in English. By 2010, the number of people who speak English as a second or foreign language will exceed the number of native speakers. This trend will certainly affect the language” (Hasman, 2004: 19).

The spread of this language in the education systems around the world, its use in various fields of activity, the redefinition of our world, have all contributed to the rise of English as an international language. It is used in business, as the prime tool of communication among people of different origins, it appears in the academic world through international conferences, work-shops, it is the main language in medicine and technical fields, not to forget its widespread use in the online field.

Older and newer methods in teaching / learning EFL

Alongside the evolution of English as an international language, several debates and studies have drawn attention towards different methods which suit best the needs and interests of students or learners. These methods and activities are supposed to ease the task of the English teachers/trainers in helping their students acquire the necessary information in order to be successfully used in real-life situations. A distinction should be made between learning English as part of the educational system, i.e. students having English as a subject matter in schools, therefore needing to reach goals imposed by curricula and adult learners who face the task of becoming proficient in English out of various reasons: they need the language at work or they are simply interested in traveling around the globe.

This section discusses methods used in classes which help teachers facilitate the learning process of their students. A method is the means which offers suggestions on how to teach a certain content, selecting and ordering the materials to be taught. The most well-known methods of teaching are: the grammar-translation method (GT), the direct method, the audio-lingualism, the communicative language teaching (CLT) and the humanistic approaches which include the silent way, total physical response, suggestopedia and community language learning. The present part focuses on only two methods, the grammar-translation method and the communicative language teaching since these are the ones with a great expansion in our educational system. All the other methods are also used in classes, but to a lower extent. Considering the GT method, we find out that, “the grammar-translation method (GT) is undoubtedly the oldest method when it comes to teaching foreign languages. It was first used in the Middle Ages in order to teach Latin and Greek and, once the modern languages emerged, it continued to be the preferred method used in classes by teachers and scholars in the field. The use of this method in schools began at the end of the eighteen century in Germany, being aimed at teaching English for gymnasium. This is how the GT method is also known as the Prussian method by the Americans. Actually, the grammar-translation method was devised and developed for use in secondary schools. It could even be called the 'grammar-school method' since its strengths, weaknesses, and excesses reflected the

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requirements, aspirations, and ambitions of the nineteenth century grammar school in its various guises in different countries” (Howatt, Widdowson, 2004: 151).

In Romania, during the communist period and immediately after the 1989 revolution, this method was largely used in the educational systems in order to facilitate the learning of English. The textbooks heavily relied on translations from English into Romanian and vice versa, followed by grammatical rules in detail and many exercises to practice the rules. In order to acquire new terms, students were supposed to have vocabulary notebooks where the terms were presented in English on one column and their equivalents in Romanian on the other column. Teachers used to ask students to memorize the new terms, to translate sentences and later on (according to proficiency levels), texts (especially literary ones) with no emphasis on oral communication. For the written part, students were often asked to simply copy in their notebooks texts or sentences and, from time to time, to make compositions of their own related to the topic in the textbook. The Romanian language was widely used in classes as the main means of instruction, teachers explaining rules and making comparisons between the two languages in order to make students understand different concepts. Listening as well as speaking activities were rather scarce. The method is still used nowadays by some teachers, yet to a lower extent.

The GT method has advantages as well as disadvantages. According to specialists in the field of language teaching, the disadvantages outnumber the positive points, so, it is advisable for teachers to try to use this method only when absolutely necessary. Practically, its main advantage is somehow of an economic nature, since it's easier to be applied in classes with lots of students, being less time-consuming. Teachers feel they can test students' comprehension easier and in a more precise way. Yet, the biggest disadvantage of this method is the fact that it does not focus on improving speaking skills, which is a prerequisite of learning any foreign language. One cannot believe he/she is proficient in a foreign language if they are unable to produce instant oral messages and need time to translate in their minds what they intend to say. So, the primary goal of teaching/learning a foreign language, and in this case English, is somehow overlooked by this method. Though precise in comprehension, it transforms classes into dull experiences for students who, many times seem absent-minded and bored by coping with rules.

Therefore, “translation and the formal learning of grammar proved effective in the learning of what we call today the classical languages, which except in academic and scholarly circles no one ever makes use of in normal course of life. The inordinate burden which these devices put on the pupils proved useless in the acquisition of a modern language like English which is taught for purposes of day-to-day communication and to be employed in life situations. Both formal learning of the grammar of English as well as translation were carried out in fact in writing with the result that language learning in grammar-translation method became one of learning the written form of the language” (Mukalel, 2007: 50).

Special attention should be offered to a new, modern method of teaching foreign languages, in this particular case, English. The communicative language teaching (CLT) approach is far beyond the characteristics of GT in the respect that “language carries not only functional meaning, it also carries social meaning” (Littlewood, 1981: 4). Ever since its introduction in the late 1970s, the CLT method has gone through several changes so that it could incorporate a special attention to language form. Hymes (1971), introduced the concept of communicative competence, emphasizing the fact that the

linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar rules) is not sufficient in the proficient use of a foreign language. Thus, the rules of language use, known as communicative competence, weigh much in the acquisition of an L2. The concept relies on the idea that learners should be able to function in different contexts, while the grammatical accuracy is not sufficient in every-day situations. After the introduction of the concept, several researchers proposed different models of this approach. Canale and Swain (1980), Bachman and Palmer (1981), all introduced several models of the competence which included the linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic and strategic competences in the teaching of a foreign language. Curricula and syllabi integrated not only the focus on language forms but also an awareness of meanings and functions.

CLT is mainly characterized by its focus on learners, it is a learner-centered approach where students have more control and autonomy. It is based on group-work interaction and corrective feedback. In a class, students heavily rely on collaboration and sharing to get their messages through. Students are exposed to the target language as much as possible, through the use of listening and speaking activities, the avoidance of mother tongue in explanations, and a restructuring of reading and writing which are focused more on the needs of the learners. The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator, helping students whenever needed yet, creating a climate conducive to language learning. What is extremely important to state is the fact that, in the CLT, linguistic competence and the communicative one should not be dealt with separately, on the contrary, syllabi need to integrate the practice and development of all skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Therefore, “what the learners need to know how to do is to compose in the act of writing, comprehend in the act of reading, and to learn techniques of reading by writing and techniques of writing by reading” (Widdowson, 1978, p.144). So, a practice of a certain skill should never exclude another, all skills need to be integrated as smoothly as possible so as to lead to a proper acquisition of knowledge of the foreign language. Concerning the different syllabi which exist throughout the world, the most important aspect is that, “while there is no single syllabus model that has been universally accepted, a language syllabus today needs to include systematic coverage of the many different components of communicative competence, including language skills, content, grammar, vocabulary and functions” (Richards, 2006a: 26).

Nowadays, English teachers/trainers have at hand a multitude of materials and textbooks to choose from, depending on the needs of their learners. One cannot consider a method better than the others but try to integrate them in the teaching process so as to help students become proficient in their use of the foreign language. While the above-presented grammar-translation method is chosen by teachers in order to make sure their students master the knowledge of parts of sentences (tenses, clauses, grammatical rules), it's been proved that it is not sufficient in the complexity of language learning process. Even if students have acquired the knowledge of grammar structures, they may not be able to vary their speech in different contexts or feel at ease with different communication strategies. Both in speaking and writing, it is important to set the correct style of communication – formal or informal to be able to state that the process was a success to you (as a user of a foreign language) and to the other participants (pleased with the outcome of the interaction). The Communicative Language Teaching approach helps students precisely in this matter.

So, “current communicative language teaching theory and practice thus draws on a number of different educational paradigms and traditions. And since it draws on a

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number of diverse sources, there is no single or agreed upon set of practices that characterize current communicative language teaching. Rather, communicative language teaching today refers to a set of generally agreed upon principles that can be applied in different ways, depending on the teaching context, the age of the learners, their level, their learning goals, and so on” (Richards, 2006b: 22).

The Romanian educational system, in terms of teaching English as a foreign language, offers guidelines regarding the level students need to target at different ages depending on when they started learning the language, while the curriculum states specific competence students need to acquire as well as types of presenting contents. It is based on the CLT method since it focuses on transmitting and receiving oral and written messages in various communication situations, producing messages in various contexts, the proposed themes and contents being in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In the Curriculum for high-school children, under Values and Attitudes, it is stated that teachers need to develop the awareness of students regarding the role of English as a means of access to international labour market and worldwide culture heritage (Anexa O.M.E.C, 2006). Cultural differences and stereotypes are also mentioned as well as the development of students' interest in discovering specific socio-cultural and professional aspects, through the reception of a variety of texts in English. Grammar points are viewed as elements of construction for communication, needed to facilitate the overall performance of students in the foreign language. Thus, the preferred method in accomplishing the goals imposed by the curriculum is the CLT approach since it is the most suitable approach in the current situation. The Curriculum for teaching English in High-schools builds the development and thoroughness of key competences such as 'Learning to learn', interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competences. Teachers are free to choose the textbooks which suit the level and needs of their students and ever since the appearance on the market of different prestigious publishing houses, the offer is both extended and valuable as contents. All these show that our country is on its correct path towards modernization and alignment with international standards, specifically the European ones.

Conclusion

As already mentioned in the present paper, the Romanian educational system has undergone several changes throughout the period following the fall of communism in 1989. The teaching of foreign languages, and in this particular case of English, has not been apart of the major changes which involved the system. If during the communist period, English was taught in lower extents in schools as the first foreign language, this situation dramatically changed once our country passed to the era of modernization. A real turning point in the evolution of the education system was the year 1989, when the National Curriculum was introduced, which also changed perspectives in relation to the teaching of foreign languages. This Curriculum has been updated ever since, nowadays being aligned to the common trends and values of the European Union.

Due to globalization and the fact that, for some years now, people from different countries and different fields of activity have started to connect with one another, the English language has known an enormous spread all around the globe, being considered nowadays a real Lingua Franca. Students and learners have become more and more aware of the importance of learning English since it is the main means of communication worldwide. According to statistics, English ranks first in the top of foreign languages studied in schools in the Romanian educational system. It is a matter of choice on behalf of

the stakeholders involved in the educational process- authorities, teachers, and students in equal parts who have taken the decision to allign the studying of foreign languages to the standards of the European Union, preparing themselves to function on the international market as proficiently as possible.

Alongside the evolution of English as an international language, several debates and studies have drawn attention towards different methods which suit best the needs and interests of students or learners. These methods and activities are supposed to ease the task of the English teachers/trainers in helping their students acquire the necessary information in order to be successfully used in real-life situations. The methods and approaches of teaching/learning English as a foreign language have also known several stages, including the transition from older techniques such as the Grammar-translation approach, which was widely used in the years right after the fall of communism, to the newer, modern approaches such as the Communicative Language Training, where the focus is on the student and his/her ability to use and cope with the language in a diversity of communicational situations. What is extremely important to state is the fact that, linguistic competence and the communicative one should not be dealt with separately, on the contrary, syllabi need to integrate the practice and development of all skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The education institutions, teachers and students and the stakeholders involved in the educational system, are all an integrated part of the process of proficiently acquiring a foreign language, being aware of its importance internationally. All in all, Romania has proved to be on the correct path towards modernization and alignment with international standards, especially the European ones.

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Article Info

Received: April 09 2019

Accepted: May 10 2019
