

CLASS MANAGEMENT. THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE TEACHER IN TEACHING RLFL TO FOREIGN STUDENTS IN THE PREPARATORY YEAR

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Abstract

Compared to the past, now, through the use of modern technologies, teaching has changed a lot; yet we consider that the job of a teacher involves the same physical, emotional, moral and material sacrifices, and the role of the teacher has remained unchanged, even if the teacher had to constantly adapt to the new requirements, by approaching new teaching strategies and methods.

Therefore, for the smooth running of the teaching-learning-evaluation activities and the achievement of the proposed objectives, in our case the acquisition of the Romanian language as a foreign language (RLFL), the teacher will always be the one responsible. He/she is the only one in a position to be responsible for the activities he/she undertakes in the class in order to lead the students to success; in other words the teacher is responsible for the management of the class and must be aware, at all times, that the success of the students depends on his/her work and involvement in the latter's academic journey.

In this article we will try to highlight (1) the role and responsibility of the teacher, in general, and of the teacher of Romanian as a foreign language, in particular; (2) what, how, to whom and how much a RLFL teacher has to teach, so that in the end, his/her students can express themselves in Romanian, fluently and without too many mistakes, at the minimum B1 level of linguistic competence; (3) how and if the teacher succeeds in facilitating the integration into the Romanian socio-cultural environment of the foreign student who came to Romania to study for a bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctorate or residency; (4) how relevant is for the RLFL teacher the way in which the psychopedagogical implications of each of the analyzed axioms are illustrated; (5) how the positive and negative aspects of the chosen teaching methods are noticed in one situation or another; (6) what behavior the RLFL teacher must have in the class and how he/she manages to defuse the possible conflicts that may arise at the group level, considering the ethnic, cultural and age heterogeneity of the student class; (7) what types of support he/she needs to provide to his students so that the targeted goals are achieved.

Keywords: management, leader, class, teacher, foreign student, Romanian as a foreign language (RLFL), teaching, preparatory year

Rezumat

Din cele mai vechi timpuri și până în zilele noastre, când, prin folosirea tehnologiilor moderne, lucrurile la clasă s-au schimbat foarte mult, considerăm că meseria de profesor implică aceleași sacrificii de ordin fizic, emoțional, moral, dar și material, iar rolul cadrului didactic a fost și a rămas încă neschimbat, chiar dacă profesorul s-a văzut nevoit să se adapteze în permanență noilor cerințe, prin abordarea de noi strategii și metode de predare.

Prin urmare, de buna desfășurare a activităților de predare-învățare-evaluare și de atingerea obiectivelor propuse, în cazul nostru achiziția limbii române ca limbă străină (LRLS), întotdeauna profesorul va fi cel responsabil. El este singurul în măsură să răspundă de activitățile pe care le întreprinde la clasă pentru a-i conduce pe studenți spre succes, cu alte cuvinte, cadrul didactic este răspunzător de managementul clasei și trebuie să fie conștient, în permanență, că de munca și implicarea lui depinde reușita cursanților săi în parcursul lor academic.

În articolul de față, vom încerca să evidențiem (1) cât de importante sunt rolul și responsabilitatea profesorului, în general, și a celui de limba română ca limbă străină, în special; (2) ce, cum, cui și cât trebuie să predea un profesor de LRLS, pentru ca, la final, cursanții săi să se poată exprima, în limba română, cursiv și fără prea multe greșeli, la nivelul de competență lingvistică minim B1; (3) cum și dacă profesorul reușește să faciliteze integrarea, în mediul socio-cultural românesc, a studentului străin, venit în România să studieze la licență, masterat, doctorat sau rezidențiat; (4) cât de relevant este, pentru profesorul de LRLS, modul în care se ilustrează implicațiile psihopedagogice ale fiecăreia dintre axiomele analizate; (5) cum sunt sesizate aspectele pozitive și cele negative ale metodelor de predare alese într-o situație sau alta; (6) ce comportament trebuie să aibă profesorul de LRLS la clasă și cum reușește el să dezamorseze eventualele conflicte ce pot apărea la nivel de grup, având în vedere eterogenitatea etnică, culturală și de vârstă a clasei de studenți; (7) ce tipuri de suport trebuie să ofere el studenților săi, astfel încât obiectivele ținute să fie atinse.

Cuvinte-cheie: management, leader, clasă, profesor, student străin, româna ca limbă străină (LRLS), a predă, an pregătitor

Motto: "Teaching is one of the most cognitively engaging, emotionally draining, and physically demanding jobs there is" (Dylan Wiliam).

Starting from Dylan Wiliam's perspective, in this article we will analyze the mission that the teacher has in his/her didactic activity of teaching-learning-evaluation, as well as the position and responsibilities he/she holds as class leader, in general, but also of the class of foreign students (who come to Romania to attend study programs taught in Romanian and need, in this endeavor, to acquire the new language quickly and well), in particular; we will present the role and involvement of the teacher of Romanian as a foreign language in the activities of organization, leadership and management of the student group.

In our approach, we will start from the general idea that all these aspects mentioned above, in the broad field of pedagogy, have given birth to what specialists call class management, a new discipline, which aims to use a "set of relationship management tools between teacher and student on the one hand, and between/ among students on the other" (Bursuc & Popescu, 2007, p. 11). So, we are talking about a vertical student-teacher axis and a horizontal student-student axis.

The premise from which we start is that the activity of the university teaching staff intended to teach RLFL to foreign students who arrive in Romania from all over the world broadly falls within that of the foreign language teacher, with the only mention that the foreign language he/she

teaches is, in fact, his/her mother tongue set in other patterns, unlike his/her colleagues who teach different foreign languages, themselves not being native speakers of these languages.

So, in order to highlight the role of the RLFL teacher in the management of the class of learners, we have to consider, right from the beginning, two essential aspects:

(1) on the one hand, the heterogeneity of the target group participating in the courses, in terms of age (over the years I have had in the same class students aged 16, so still minors, up to 76 years old, retired seniors wishing to complete or diversify their studies),

(2) on the other hand, the heterogeneity of the target group, regarding the *socio-cultural and linguistic origin* of its members.

And, if we think that the teacher of Romanian as a foreign language (RLFL) (like all foreign language teachers) has the duty to teach all foreign students to speak Romanian, at least at B1 level of linguistic competence (according to the descriptors of CEFR level), the two aspects mentioned above, real challenges that the teacher has to face with each generation of students, make the teacher's mission extremely difficult, if not impossible in certain situations, which is true, are quite rare. So, the achievement of the expected results largely depends on the teacher's skills, his/her mastery/art of teaching, the strategies and methods used in the didactic act. The teacher will have to put into practice all the theoretical knowledge acquired in school and make considerable efforts so that his/her students, speakers of languages, sometimes totally different from Romanian (to mention only the agglutinating languages) and coming from extremely varied socio-cultural backgrounds (some finding it difficult to adapt to life in Romania and even the climate in the new country, which makes a small part of them give up in the end and return home to the family they left), with systems of totally different education, to succeed at the end of the Romanian language preparatory year, in communicating orally or in writing and in understanding specialized texts in Romanian.

Therefore, we can affirm, with the conviction that we are not wrong at all, that the preparatory year study program is a rather difficult program to manage from the perspective of the course participants, since the students come from very varied social and cultural backgrounds and different from the Romanian one. They have different mentalities, traditions and customs, religions, a different education from country to country or from one student to another, sometimes evident even among students belonging to the same national cultural space, as they come from conflict zones or from marginalized areas; at the group level, the teacher has the purpose, in addition to teaching them to communicate in writing and orally in Romanian, to train them in the spirit of tolerance and acceptance of the other, to make them

know the unique elements of the Romanian space and grasp them correctly to be able to live and study in Romania. And, very often, this approach is not an easy one at all, because the linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity of the students in the preparatory year (whether we are talking about the Romanian language courses or the Romanian culture and civilization courses, whether we refer to the specialized language seminars that they attend according to the curriculum) often puts the teacher in critical situations which he/she must know how deal with without morally or culturally harming any of his/her students. This means that the teacher must have vast knowledge in various fields (for example: history, religion, politics, geography, etc.) but also have very good communication and social skills, in order to manage to solve potential conflict situations what might occur at the group level.

In this context, it would be ideal to achieve a target group characterized by some homogeneity from the perspective of the Romanian language level¹, the understanding of the elements of Romanian culture and civilization and civic and moral education, a difficult or even impossible thing to achieve, as our own and long experience in the field has shown.

So, in this whole equation, aside from the fact that he/she is always working “with the client’s material”, the teacher is responsible for organizing the class, imparting knowledge and evaluating the performance of his/her students. He/she must constantly follow the evolution of each student, adapt his/her teaching strategies and methods to the specific needs and requirements of the target group and constantly answer questions like: *What do I teach? Who do I teach? and How do I teach?*

To the first question, the answer should not be hard to find, because, like for any other foreign language, for the Romanian language seen from the same perspective, the learning adventure begins with the alphabet and the specific pronunciation rules, and the subsequent notions, whether we speak

¹Even if some specialized works (see Scmitt, 2007; Pănișoara, 2015) state that “the heterogeneity of the class is much more productive for all participants”, because when a weaker student is made to work together with a better one, the chance that the activity the first grow in quality is greater than if the respective student were to work with one of his peers, regarding the preparatory year, no matter how hard we try, we will not be able to achieve performance if in the group formed at the beginning of the academic year (October 1) we bring students arriving at college late (sometimes after 2-3 months) because it is difficult to obtain study visas. For those in this situation, it is ideal to build new groups, which start the study of RLFL from the alphabet, and not to insert them in already formed groups in which the students have meanwhile reached a level of linguistic competence, A1, at least. No matter how hard we try to group these students with their better peers, experience has shown us that we would do nothing but create discomfort for the newcomer, and he/she will not progress by skipping stages of understanding some phonetic-grammatical and syntactical aspects, but, on the contrary, they will get stuck.

of phonetics, grammar or vocabulary (the three major compartments of a language) will be taught concentrically, from simple to complex, from real to abstract, so that, even from the first lessons, the student can formulate short statements, can communicate at a minimal level in the new language, so that at the end of the preparatory year, he/she reaches the threshold B1 level or even manages to pass it.

Regarding the next question, related to the type of student whom the teacher must teach Romanian as a foreign language, the answer can be found in our previous statements, when we mentioned the heterogeneity of the target group. Of course, this also plays a particularly important role both in the economy of lessons and in the management of the student class.

From our point of view, the most important question is how a teacher should teach, how he/she should adapt the contents taught to the level of linguistic competence of the target group, so that his/her message connects the sender to the receiver, in such a way that the latter can decode it clearly and correctly; because on this depends the understanding of the written or oral messages, the contents and the knowledge transmitted during the courses, then their assimilation and finally putting them into practice. Also, in his/her approach, the teacher needs to know which types of strategies and which teaching methods should be applied and in which learning contexts, which types of exercises to select to ensure the strengthening of the acquired knowledge and their application in different communication situations.

To see how the whole teaching-learning-assessment process of RLFL works, from the perspective of class management, we will next focus on some aspects related to what the teacher should do during the course to achieve his/her goals, which should be his/her role in leading teaching activities and how he/she should act as a class coordinator.

In this sense, in his work *How to Teach. Teaching Strategies*, Phil Beadle offers a series of useful tips for all teachers, whether they are beginners or already have extensive experience in the field. For young teachers at the beginning of their teaching careers, Phil Beadle's advice, if not all, at least some of it, is worth considering in order to know how to better manage some of the problems that will surely arise at some point in their career; of course, to the experienced teachers, the things mentioned by the English author, are known, but now, they can be sure that in situations similar to those described in this work, they acted correctly or not, or, rather, in the same way or differently, if we think that the solutions proposed here are not absolute ones.

Among the advice given generously and with pertinent arguments, worth noting are those on how to manage a class with many students, some of them unruly; how to manage to control these deviant behaviors; how to ar-

range students in desks so as to achieve maximum efficiency of the teaching-learning act²; when to start a teaching activity and when to end it; what attitude to take towards chewing gum³ or the habit of eating during class; how to stop those who want to talk to the colleague just when the teacher is preparing to teach a new lesson; how important the break which the teacher must take before a transition is (explained by the author as “the space between one activity and the next” (Beadle, 2020, p. 19) and which will be successful, says Beadle, only if the teacher knows when it is time to stop the activity, he/she will ask students to put their pens down⁴, look at him/her and pause before speaking) to set the pace of the teaching and to capture the attention of all class participants. Before concluding the chapter dedicated to student management, the author does not forget to mention the sanctions that students should receive when they are undisciplined and/or do not complete their work tasks. Considering the age group and the school environment to which Phil Beadle refers, namely the schools in Great Britain, we must mention that the sanctions proposed by him (for example, detention, which does not exist in Romanian schools) are to be remembered for informational purposes, but that most of them cannot be applied in Romanian schools, and even less so in universities. Moreover, all Romanian universities have methodologies regarding the activity of students, whether they are

²According to specialists, placing the desks in groups is the correct and efficient way of organizing the class. Unfortunately, not many Romanian universities benefit from modular furniture, or, even if they have such tables, professors very rarely place students in groups; it seems that the “frontal” seating, with the teacher at the chair and the students behind each other, is still preferred/approached by teachers. Perhaps one of the reasons can be the fact that, sitting in groups, students talk to each other when it is not appropriate, and they do not always pay attention to the teacher or their colleagues in other groups, when in the economy of the lesson, they are not given the floor.

³Here I give credit to the author who does not allow his students to chew gum during class. We have the same approach, considering that chewing gum prevents students from correctly pronouncing the sounds of the Romanian language, especially when the phonetic-phonological system of their mother tongue is very different from that of the Romanian language. After a period of resistance, the students learn that they are not allowed to chew gum in the Romanian language classes and, before entering the class, they go to the trash can. This becomes a reflex over time.

⁴The author insists that the writing instrument, held by the students while the teacher is explaining something, is meant to distract them, and that it is much better for the students to leave the pens/pens/pencils on the table until he/she finishes the explanations. In our experience, even though we have never personally asked students to do this, we must mention that we have observed this type of behavior in some students from Western European countries.

Romanian or foreign, and documents that also provide for sanctions. However, the problems that the RLFL teacher can frequently face are repeated lateness to classes and non-fulfillment of work tasks (uncompleted homework, refusal of some students to participate in some activities in or outside the classroom); these deviations are usually sanctioned with the awarding of low grades in the formative evaluations.

However, the conclusion of the English author is that the teacher works in the class with some living beings, who also live beyond the school space and who bring with them an emotional and educational baggage of their own families, minds and behaviors that the teacher must model, train and deal with; and “if you want to be a great teacher, you must discover your own way of teaching, and not slavishly follow someone else’s methods” (Beadle 2020, p. 34).

In addition to those mentioned by Beadle, in the chapter devoted to the principle of student class management, Ion-Ovidiu Pânișoara recognizes the role of class leader that every teacher has, but distinguishes between the status of manager and that of class leader, stating that “sometimes he/she [the teacher] deserves to be perceived as a leader by his students” (Pânișoara, 2015, p. 139), because if the manager coordinates and is “colder”, centered on the formal role he/she holds, the leader stimulates, is more empathetic and emotionally involved; “if leaders “take” with them the others whom they manage to excite and motivate, managers have control as their tool to build the road to performance” (*ibidem*). Opting for the idea that the teacher must be more than a manager, that he/she must become a leader of the class, next, the author brings into discussion the three fundamental myths that specialized literature distinguishes when addressing the status of a leader (see also McKee Boyatzis & Johnston, 2008); these myths also lend themselves well to the role of the class leader teacher. Thus, the conclusion reached is that to be a teacher you need knowledge in the field, specialized knowledge, but to be a good teacher, you also need to have qualities, a vocation for this, to be able to develop your social and emotional intelligence; also, the teacher, in his/her capacity as a leader, is the one who, at the class level, can create, and it is his/her duty to do so, a positive, attractive and motivating climate for the student or, on the contrary, a demotivating and unattractive one for the student, a fact that will eventually cause them to stop coming to classes with pleasure; last but not least, the author shows that the teacher, like a leader, is under constant pressure generated by the stress of power, in our case, by “the didactic power that the teaching profession gives to the one who practices it” (Pânișoara, 2015, p. 140), a situation that can lead, in some cases, to what specialists call *the sacrifice syndrome*. We must not lose sight of the fact that, indeed, the job of a teacher is a very demanding one from a physical and emotional point of view, and not infre-

quently, the RLFL teacher leaves the classes after five hours of intense activity, drained of energy.

Therefore, the activity of coordinator, leader of the class of students can sometimes contain, at first glance, paradoxical elements, generated by the fact that, with man as the object of the didactic action, the reality in the class is extremely changeable, diverse and interpretable. That is why we believe that the same contents will never be able to be taught absolutely identically to two different groups of students, even if the strategies and methods used by the teacher will be the same each time, since many variables enter into the economy of the lesson, related to the difference in the organization of the target group, the mood of both the teacher and the students, the degree of fatigue, the power of understanding of each student, the presence of unruly students who want to draw attention to themselves, and why not, the weather etc.

And yet, to be a good leader of the class, to achieve the expected results, the teacher must constantly offer his students:

1. informational support - the transmission of knowledge to the course participant is considered; the teacher must be a vast informational resource for his students, possess solid theoretical knowledge, be able to respond to all the challenges from the students, correctly answer the questions asked by them, both in terms of the Romanian language and its difficulties of learning, as well as aspects related to Romanian history, culture and civilization, the new socio-economic and cultural environment in which the foreign student enters; the teacher must have the ability to successfully get out of all the traps laid by the students and give pertinent answers, without in any way harming any of the students; also, he/she has the duty to make the information as accessible as possible to the intended target audience, to make it attractive in the eyes of his students, explaining to them that, to build the whole, every particle is needed.

2. instrumental support - it starts from the idea that the simple transmission of information is far from sufficient; as mentioned previously, students must be taught how to learn, what to do and how to do it; moreover, the teacher has the duty to support his/her students to develop their own thinking strategies in accordance with the contents taught (to make analogies with the mother tongue, when appropriate, to understand aspects related to Romanian traditions and customs through the reference to similar ones from their own culture; not infrequently it has happened to us that while teaching a lesson on Romanian culture and civilization, the foreign student realizes that the same elements are also found in his/her culture, but that until that moment they were not aware of it), because, as noted in specialized literature, information alone has a very low formative value; very often, student needs additional explanations related to what to do at the end of the lesson,

what to learn and how to solve the exercises given for homework, so that for the next class they do not come without their homework and the reason that they did not understand what they had to do or that they did not know how to do it (sometimes, despite all the explanations, such situations still occur, probably not so much because of misunderstanding, but because of laziness or occupying free time with other activities; we believe it is appropriate that in these circumstances the student must be reprimanded and subsequently sanctioned so that the situation does not occur again).

3. evaluative support - through this, the permanent evolution of the student is followed, from the first courses to the final exam in June; the teacher has the obligation, as often as needed, to provide substantive feedback to his student, through which he/she can equally appreciate both the quality and the quantity of their performance; the assessment must be both formative, aimed at the student's progress, and summative, at the end of the semester or academic year; the summative assessment can also be done at the end of some chapters, of a cycle (here we have in mind the CEFR descriptors for reaching a level of linguistic competence) to establish whether the students have already acquired one language level or another, and when it is found that this objective was not met, it is necessary to take remedial measures by resuming or supplementing some work tasks; also, the evaluation must be as objective as possible, even if the teacher knows very well the students he/she works with, because a subjective evaluation only gives a false image of the true skills acquired by the students.

4. emotional support - it is considered that the teacher-student binomial relationship is a human relationship, which does not stop at the door of the lecture hall and involves interaction, mutual influence and determination; "the teacher must not erect a barrier between him/her and the student, because in this way, he/she risks losing access to a major level of involvement that can be produced by the affective level, and not the cognitive level" (Pânișoara, 2015, p. 142); emotional support means providing understanding support when the learner needs it, especially since the students the RLFL teacher works with are generally young teenagers who are leaving their families for the first time and, moreover, arriving, mostly alone, in a foreign country, in a foreign city where they do not know anyone and where they have to live until the end of their studies, adapting, some harder, others easier, to some new living conditions (accommodating in a dormitory with other students in a room or renting a studio or apartment, which is not easy to do), to socio-economic and natural environment, for some of them totally different; the extent to which the teacher is willing to provide emotional support to his/her students and to respond affirmatively and empathetically to their psycho-affective needs invariably leads to an increase in the level of trust that the foreign student gives to his/her teacher; and a higher degree of

trust in the teacher brings with it greater involvement, a much greater capacity for voluntary effort and, in general, an atmosphere conducive to learning. We now remember moments when, many years ago, students from the Republic of North Macedonia confessed very late that they came from Aromanian families, although the teachers knew this, as long as their matriculation status was *ethnic Romanian*, and that only afterwards did this category of students gain confidence in their teachers and in the new socio-cultural environment; or moments when some students reached the threshold of depression because they could no longer bear the distance from their parents and family, but with the emotional support provided by the teachers, they finally managed not to drop out and complete the preparatory year of the Romanian language, and today they are already specialists in their fields, whether they became doctors, economists or lawyers.

In conclusion, in order to successfully fulfill his/her noble mission, the teacher must identify his/her own way of managing the group of students, conducting the class activity, choosing and implementing the newest and most suitable methods and teaching strategies so as to always balance the contradictory elements that will surely arise at some point in the life of the class of students.

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