

Metodică

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METODICA PREDĂRII LIMBII ENGLEZE

**Strategies of Teaching and Testing
English as a Foreign Language**



Ediția a IV-a

Collegium

POLIROM

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Can you speak English?

When a person wants to undertake a certain task, he must first of all determine *what* he wants to do, *why* he wants to do it, and *how* he can best accomplish his goals. In the same way, the teacher of English as a foreign language (L2) must understand *what* he is teaching, *why* his students are learning English, and *how* he should teach it.

This chapter aims to answer briefly to these three basic questions.

1.1. Linguistic competence vs. communicative competence

Answering the question of *what* we, teachers of English, are teaching seems to be easy: we are teaching English as a foreign language (L2). The answer, however, is not so simple. First of all, language is not taught *in itself*, but through content; secondly, every age group requires different contents, as well as different educational strategies. But most of all, what the language teacher needs to understand is the fact that language itself is a very complex thing. Linguists and philosophers of the language have spent a lot of time and energy trying to unravel its intricacies, but the subject is far from being exhausted.

Approaches to L2 teaching go hand in hand with the main linguistic theories of the age.

Language is a *semiotic system*, i.e. a socially accepted system of *signs*. The signs of the language – its individual speech sounds, letters, words, etc. – are known and shared by the entire language community. For example, the letters of the Latin alphabet are meaningful and have the same value for the entire Western world, but they are alien to the Russians, to the Japanese or the Arabs, who use other alphabets (i.e. different codes). In the same way, English words (e.g. *boy*, *home*, *to work*, *to love*) are meaningful to all the speakers of the English language, but sound gibberish to Romanians who have not learned the language. It is thanks to such shared systems/codes that communication within the group is possible.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the father of *semiology* (the science of signs), viewed human communication as a continuous process of *encoding-decoding* that goes on

between two or more individuals who "know the code," i.e. share the same language. The process starts in the mind of the speaker – the producer and sender of the message – who puts his thoughts (*meanings*) into words, organizes them into logical *structures* following to the rules of the dictionary and grammar, and gives them a physical (*phonetic*¹) form. The message thus constructed is "sent" towards the listener/receiver of the message in the form of a "ribbon," a continuous succession of sound waves. In his turn, the receiver who "knows the code" decodes the message by following the same route in the opposite direction: he receives the message in its phonetic *form*, analyses its *structures* and gets to the *meaning* the sender wanted to convey. Schematically, this can be presented in the following way:



In oral, face-to-face interaction, the language "flows" between the two interactants as water in a drainpipe, as Saussure's picture of the "talking heads" (Fig.1) suggests. In written communication, there is a similar encoding-decoding process, only this time the physical *form* of the message is *graphical* (signs on paper) and there is generally a significant time lapse (the writer and the reader of a novel may never meet).

To name the speaker's knowledge of the language, Noam Chomsky² (1928-) proposed the term *linguistic competence*.

According to Chomsky, people possess a "universal grammar," i.e. an innate knowledge of the basic grammatical structure common to all human languages. This is how, with the help of a finite set of terms and a limited set of grammar rules, the speaker can recognize and produce an infinite number of grammatically and semantically *well-formed* (i.e. accurate) sentences³, including sentences that are totally new.

Following de Saussure's distinction between what he calls *langue* (i.e. the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system) and *parole* (i.e. the concrete instances of use of the *langue*), Chomsky proposes the term *linguistic performance* to designate the speaker's actual use of the language⁴. Chomsky admitted that in their performance, native speakers often produce utterances that are not well-formed (e.g. elliptical or minor sentences), and that they often make mistakes when using the language



Fig. 1. Talking heads, according to Ferdinand de Saussure

1. De Saussure referred only to oral communication.
2. The founder of transformational-generative grammar, a system of linguistic analysis that revolutionized linguistics.
3. A sentence such as, *He is a boy*, is both grammatically and semantically well formed; *He has some air*, may be grammatically well formed, but semantically it is anomalous.
4. Romanian provides the dichotomy *limbă* (i.e. language) – *limbaj* (i.e. linguistic communication).

informally. However, he considered that such utterances are not significant for a linguistic study.

Chomsky's ideas were taken up by foreign language teachers who, in accordance with his theory, established that their main goal was to endow learners with a kind of linguistic competence similar to that of the native speaker. Consequently, acquisition of a foreign language relied on learning :

- *vocabulary*, in the form of
 - *spelling*, i.e. the correct succession of letters within words ;
 - *pronunciation*, i.e. the chain of speech sounds that makes up a lexical unit ;
 - *meaning(s)*, i.e. the dictionary description(s) of a lexical unit ;
- the grammatical *structure* of the target language.

Unfortunately, some teachers still think that vocabulary and grammar are "all there is" to teaching and learning a foreign language. However, the competent speaker's ability to interact linguistically with other members of society cannot be restricted to the rules of the language or to grammatical and semantic well-formedness.

Analyzing wide samples of ordinary linguistic exchanges, linguists realized that vocabulary and grammar are unable to account for the boundless variety and creativity of individual sentences. They noticed that ordinary communication abounds in non-well-formed or faulty linguistic constructs, yet this does not prevent meaningful communication. They concluded that the competent speakers' ability to communicate largely depends on *pragmatic* factors, i.e. on factors pertaining to their knowledge of the world and of the unwritten rules that govern human society and communication.

One of the first sociolinguists, Dell Hymes (1927-2009), argued that conversations abound in non-wellformed utterances, yet they do not prevent meaningful communication. Hymes insisted that the competent speaker knows how to use the language not only *correctly*, but also *appropriately* with respect to context, addressee, register and activity type, i.e. that the rules of the language are subordinated to the "rules of use."

Therefore, Hymes concluded, Chomsky's insistence on linguistic well-formedness as criterion for linguistic competence is too narrow ; *linguistic competence* is only one aspect of the competent speaker's *communicative competence*¹, i.e. his overall ability to interact with the help of the language.

1.2. The students' needs

This brings us to the second question formulated in the introduction to this chapter, namely *why* our students learn English, i.e. the *students' needs*.

We live in a world where on-line communication and fast means of transport have given a new meaning to the word "distance" : we can talk to (and see) friends living thousands of miles away, receive information instantly, travel to far away places in a matter of hours, etc. Furthermore, in a continuously globalizing world, and especially with the enlargement of the European Union, people travel more than ever before, whether for

1. Hence the *Communicative Approach* to L2 teaching that emerged in the following years.

touristic, educational or professional purposes, and English has become the main instrument of communication (the *lingua franca*) of the modern world.

Under the circumstances, our students need to learn English so as to be able to *communicate* with its help. Numerous learners will also need a certificate attesting their knowledge of the language.

To develop the students' communicative competence, language teachers must first of all understand the complex nature of communication. Jack C. Richards (1986) suggests the following main features of communication:

- communication is *meaning based*:
 - when speakers utter words and connect them by the rules of grammar, they do so in order to convey meaning;
 - the communicator conveys meaning through a variety of channels: language, paralanguage, visual images, etc.; with every level of his utterance, the speaker aims to convey more (or more subtle) meaning, as well as to give more force to his message;
- communication is *conventional*:
 - "language as code" is conventionally accepted by all the members of a language community;
 - communication is based on further – social and cultural – conventions established by the community in which that language is used; speakers formulate their message according to the basic features and conventions of the communicative context;
- communication is *appropriate*: Interlocutors adapt their utterance (in terms of word choice, stylistic level, grammatical complexity) to the social environment, i.e. the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, the setting (physical and temporal) in which the exchange occurs, the activity type, etc.;
- communication is *interactional*:
 - communication involves at least two participants who interact and "cooperate";
 - meaning is not inherent in words/phrases alone, but is negotiated between the interlocutors on a case-to-case basis; the speaker formulates his message according to his interlocutor's ability to understand his words and to the real-world aims he wants to achieve;
- communication is *structured*:
 - human communication consists of a boundless variety of discourse types and genres, each with its own specific structure, e.g. the structure of a newspaper article is different from that of a political speech or a sermon; face-to-face conversation is different from a telephone conversation, etc.

The list highlights the primacy of meaning in communication: there is simply no communication if meaning does not "flow" between the speaker and the receiver. It also suggests that other factors (e.g. appropriacy, strategic effectiveness) are at least as important as grammatical accuracy.

On the basis of such observations, and in order to answer learners' language-related needs, the Council of Europe has developed a *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR¹), which aims to provide common guidelines for the learning, teaching and assessment of all foreign languages.

1. The CEFR is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9 of the present book.

According to the CEFR, *communicative language competence* includes :

- *linguistic competence*, i.e. the speaker's ability to recognize and produce meaningful and coherent utterances/texts ; his knowledge of the *vocabulary* of the target language, his *grammatical accuracy* ; to use the language flexibly and fluently ;
- *sociolinguistic competence*, i.e. the speaker's ability to *adapt* his message to the social environment, to use the language *appropriately* with respect to the receiver, the social and situational context in which exchange takes place ;
- *pragmatic competence*, i.e. the speaker's ability to disambiguate utterances with the help of the context and fill in missing links ; to recognize the gap between what is *said* and what is *meant* (i.e. between the literal meaning of an utterance and the speaker's *intended* meaning) ; to produce clear and coherent messages ; to use the language *functionally* ;
- *strategic competence*, i.e. the speaker's ability to identify cues and make inferences ; to cooperate and negotiate meaning ; to use linguistic strategies of *repair* (compensating, monitoring and repair), of *indirectness* and *politeness* (aimed at obtaining real-world advantages and/or avoiding negative consequences).

There is no one-to-one match between the two lists, but rather, a complex network of interactions. Each competence requires knowledge of the language (i.e. linguistic competence), but it also calls for knowledge of the world's conventions and structures (pragmatic competence). The interactional nature of communication necessitates sociolinguistic competence, but it also involves good control of vocabulary and grammar. Strategic competence attests good knowledge of the world and of society (sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence), as well as good language skills.

Thus, to sum up : students must learn to use the language *meaningfully*, *accurately*, *appropriately*, *functionally* and *strategically*.

1.2.1. Using the language meaningfully & accurately. Linguistic competence

Meaning and accuracy are intrinsically related to the dictionary and the grammatical framework of the language.

All communication relies on transfer of meaning : the speaker must be able to convey his ideas and wishes, which the receiver must be able to comprehend. If meaning does not "flow" from the one to the other, there is simply no communication. Whether the speaker's utterances are grammatically correct or not is less important than his ability to make himself understood. In the same way, the foreign language teacher must first of all focus on meaning, rather than accuracy. But as the learner becomes more proficient, the role of accuracy increases because, on the one hand, it helps the learner acquire higher level certifications ; on the other, accuracy improves the speaker's personal image and social status.

Meaning and accuracy work on all linguistic levels – from pronunciation, through words choice and range, to the complexity of the speaker's sentences – and the teacher

must pay special attention to those aspect of the language that present some difficulty for Romanian learners. For example :

- Pronunciation (e.g. of specific English phonemes - [r], of [æ], of [θ], of [ð]) :
 - Incorrect mastery of the English phonemes may trigger change of meaning, often with comic or tragic results, e.g. in a popular Berlitz ad (*youtube*), a desperate voice on the megaphone calls out, *We are sinking*, to which the German coastguard calmly replies *What are you sinking [i.e. thinking] about ?*
 - In an exclusive social environment, such as a job interview, a professional or political speech, incorrect pronunciation brings on sneers: think of your own reaction on hearing our political leaders speak English; in a 2013 commercial, the Romanian singer Smiley makes fun of Bulgarians speaking English (e.g. *precision*, pronounced [pri'siʒn], with the lips tightly rounded);
- Spelling :
 - The gap between spelling and pronunciation makes English spelling especially difficult for Romanian learners. But spelling is very important because slight mistakes can trigger serious changes of meaning, e.g. the *sun* is quite different from the *son*; one's knowledge of the *world* is very different from one's knowledge of the *word*; etc.
- Polysemy :
 - Most English words have more than one meaning (e.g. look up such basic words as *get*, *book*, *house*, etc. in the dictionary). Phrases can also have more than one meaning (e.g. *make up* - to form, to invent, to be reconciled ...).
 - Due to the high meaning potential of the English vocabulary, words and phrases must always be taught in context;
- Homonymy (words that are pronounced and/or spelled alike) :
 - The high occurrence in English of homophones or near homophones makes it difficult for learners to differentiate between items such as *sun-son*, *mare-mayor*, *word-world*, etc.;
- Conversion (the ability of English words to take on various grammatical functions without any change of form) :
 - Due to the high convertibility of English words, learners may find it difficult to identify the predicate of the sentences, e.g. *These buildings house a conference*; *Down your drink in one gulp*.
- Phrasal verbs (verb + particle) :
 - Phrasal verbs are often opaque (their meaning cannot be guessed), so that they have to be learned just like any individual word, e.g. *to call of* = to cancel; *to pick on* = to tease, to harass; *to hang out* = to associate, to spend time with; etc.
 - Phrasal verbs are an essential part of the native speaker's dictionary, so that they must become part of the learner's vocabulary as well;
- Idioms (groups of words which have a unitary, generally figurative, meaning) :
 - Just like phrasal verbs, idioms are often opaque, e.g. *to be all ears* = to listen attentively; *to get to the heart of something* = to get to the essence of a problem; *to speak with one's tongue in one's cheek* = said in a way which is not meant to be taken seriously;
 - Just like phrasal verbs, idioms are typical for native speech, so that learner's must be able to recognize them and perceive their metaphoric character;

- * False friends (words which look/sound like items in the mother tongue but have different meanings):
 - *to realize* = a-și da seama (Rom. *a realiza* = to accomplish); *to prevent* = a împiedica (Rom. *a preveni* = to warn); *eventual(ly)* = în cele din urmă (Rom. *eventual* = perhaps); etc.
 - Ignorance of false friends – which exist between most languages – can trigger embarrassing situations, e.g. a tourist in a Spanish speaking country wanted to say that she was *embarrassed*, but the Spanish *embarazada* means “pregnant”; or, in the time of Ceaușescu, a young friend of mine in a German school was asked if he loved our *leaders* and replied “No!”; what he meant was that he did not like songs (G. *lieder*); luckily, he was too young to be punished by the police of those times.
- * Polysemantic words whose second or third meaning is a false friend:
 - e.g. *fine* = bun/bine; amendă; *concrete* = concret; beton; *intelligence* = inteligență; spionaj; etc.
- * Metaphoric speech, euphemism:
 - e.g. *to use the bathroom* = to go to the toilet; *to downsize staff* = to dismiss employees; etc.
 - Students must learn not to take every message at face value, to understand irony, exaggeration, or vagueness of expression;
 - Metaphor is an essential component of strategic communication, so that it will be discussed again in that section.

The Council of Europe’s *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* assesses the speaker’s linguistic competence by criteria such as: general linguistic and vocabulary range (i.e. richness), vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, phonological control (i.e. pronunciation), orthographic control (i.e. spelling), fluency, etc.

Obviously, linguistic competence alone cannot ensure efficient communication: a person may have a rich vocabulary and know the rules of grammar perfectly and still fail to communicate well.

1.2.2. Using the language appropriately. Socio-linguistic competence

Thus, following Chomsky’s insistence on linguistic well-formedness, mid-20th century language teachers focused on accuracy. Chomsky’s view, however, was rejected by socio-linguists, who found that “there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless,” and even that “some occasions call for being appropriately ungrammatical” (Hymes, 1966). An experienced communicator, Hymes upheld, knows the rules of correct social behavior: when to speak and when to keep silent, what to talk about in different situations, or how to address different types of persons. Memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, errors in applying knowledge, are typical for ordinary communication. To deal with them in an educated way, communicators have developed specific strategies.

A young child, who has a limited vocabulary and barely any world experience, will talk to everybody in the same way (e.g. address and older person with the 2nd pers. sg. *tu*). But as time goes on, and by gradual education, he learns the need to, and how to make differences.

The same requirement works when learning a foreign language. Since children begin to learn a foreign language at a very young age, the teacher's influence is extremely important. Nor is it less important in later periods: on the one hand, one can never fully master the rules of correct social behavior; on the other, it can mean the difference between success and failure in essential moments in life (e.g. a job interview, a date, etc.).

Therefore, learners must be taught to *adapt* their utterances to

- the *situational context*, i.e.
 - the addressee, e.g. older or younger, socially superior or a peer, etc.;
 - the situational context (the time and place of the interaction);
 - the activity type, e.g. shopping, seeing a doctor, a job interview, face-to-face conversation, etc.;
- the *discourse type*, i.e. written or oral communication, official/formal or informal, etc.: e.g. official interview, face-to-face conversation, article for tabloid or for highbrow paper, political speech, advertising, etc.

Adapting one's utterance to the social and discursive context involves:

- word choice: the learner needs to understand the stylistic component of lexical items – formal words, neutral or informal one, slang and taboo – and choose among them so as to ensure stylistic consistency;
- pronunciation: standard pronunciation is required when speaking formally, regional pronunciation may be used in informal interactions;
- grammatical complexity and accuracy: formal communication requires complex, well-formed sentences, while colloquial conversations are often based on elliptical utterances; etc.

Thus, learners need to acquire the skill of formulating their utterances differently when addressing receivers belonging to various social categories and age groups: they can use simple words (perhaps slangy ones) and elliptical sentences (even incorrect grammar) when addressing a close friend or a relative from the country-side, but their words must be elevated, their grammar correct and the sentences more complex when talking to a person who is socially superior (e.g. a teacher or a role model). Other factors, such as the place where the interaction takes place (in the street or in a doctor's office), the activity type (a friendly talk or a job interview), etc. also influence one's choices and formulations.

Apart from language, speakers have a second channel by which they can convey meaning: *paralanguage*. Defined briefly as the speaker's meaningful behaviour, paralanguage is an even more subtle and powerful means of communication than language. We can see how powerful it is by analyzing the results of a simple experiment (Cook, 1992: 66-67, quoted by Vizental, 2008: 159-160): Two groups of people were asked to utter the same linguistic message: *I am not upset*. The members of the first group had to accompany their words with paralinguistic message of positive polarity: smiling, looking straight at the interlocutor, shaking hands. The second group's paralinguistic message was