

ROMANIAN CULTURE, CIVILIZATION AND LANGUAGE - AN ENGLISH TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Yolanda-Mirela CATELLY¹

¹Assoc. Professor, PhD, Politehnica University Bucharest, Department of Communication in Modern Languages, Bucharest, Romania
Corresponding author: yolandamirelcatelly@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper is meant at presenting the rationale underlying the design of a course of *Romanian culture, civilization and language (ROMCIV)* for master students of the Bucharest Polytechnic Computer Science Faculty, within an international joint project – the *Erasmus Mundus Master of Science Programme "Data Mining & Knowledge Management"*, in which Romania is a partner alongside with France, Spain and Italy. The concrete educational context is presented, as well as the options and priorities considered by the English teacher when designing and teaching the course, as a challenging but rewarding developmental new experience.

Keywords: *course design, Romanian Culture, Civilization and Language Course, teacher development, tuition in English*

Motto:

What comes to my mind now when I hear the word Romania is: beautiful places, open people, good food and trying to become democratic.
(Lukas - Slovakia, a master student who took the ROMCIV course in 2013)

1. INTRODUCTION - WHY A COURSE OF ROMANIAN CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND CIVILIZATION FOR INTERNATIONAL ENGINEERING MASTER STUDENTS?

The study presents the background and framework of the principles underlying the design and teaching of a *CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)* type of course, from the perspective of an English language teacher, within a context characterized by a series of features to be taken into consideration for avoiding potential biases and for reaching success, against certain constraints imposed by the concrete educational setting. In fact, as a teacher of English, but also as a native speaker of Romanian, living and working

in Romania, to be invited to design a course of *Romanian Culture, Language and Civilization (ROMCIV)* delivered to master level international students of Computer Science participating in a prestigious international cooperation programme and coming from countries of four continents, was indeed challenging. The singular elements were represented by the fact that the context in which the course was to be designed/taught assumed several requirements to be appropriately and simultaneously met; among them, for instance, the variety of students' backgrounds and the fact that input about the Romanian culture and civilization had to be taught *via* English as the language of tuition, but in a Romanian university. Moreover, there was a severe time constraint, *viz.* only six courses were provided, which imposed a very strict delineation of the *needs versus* the realistically-possible-to-fulfil *objectives*.

The main expectation of the ROMCIV course was challenging in itself, *i.e.* to make the trainees (from Egypt, Slovakia, Ethiopia, Mexico or India) know and understand as much as possible about Romania in just 12 hours, using a foreign language, such as English, for discussing a different language/culture/civilization (the Romanian one). Apart from the peculiarities of such a type of course, which could be called an adapted alternative to a traditional CLIL one – for which few guidelines, previous examples and/or suggestions of good practice could be identified in the literature¹ - the lack of specific teacher training in this domain, at national level, also contributed to increasing the size of the challenge, as the author mostly had to rely on her previous experience in designing other CLIL courses². Hence, the important role that had to be given to

the elements of *interactivity*, with regular *feedback* from the learners, and a *flexible* standpoint, open to amendments, as the main pillars of course building.

Viewed in the European Union current context, the programme within which the course was created³ displays a range of features which necessarily had to be found in the ROMCIV course as well, in an effort of harmonization with the cooperation and mobility international tertiary education programmes in which Romania is a member. Thus, the *Erasmus Mundus* programme aims at increasing the qualitative level of higher education, by encouraging dialogue and understanding, not only between peoples but also between cultures. In order to achieve real success and efficiency of such a course, one should agree with this perspective⁴, that encourages any form of culture learning in any type of context, enhanced by its being seen as a "lived experience" by all participants. This should by no means make us deter from the fundamental principles of practicing CLIL⁵. Thus, language should be seen in real-life situations, which can contribute to introducing the trainees to wider cultural contexts, prepare them for internalisation in their academic or working life, while developing in them interests and attitudes transcending a single culture and reaching a superior level of understanding, openness and tolerance to diversity.

2. THE ROMCIV COURSE - RATIONALE, OPTIONS AND FOCI

The ROMCIV course is introduced in this section, from the rationale underlying the methodological approach and choice of input content, to the main foci in it and feedback obtained from the attendees. Certainly, due to space reasons, only the representative elements and choices are mentioned, in order to provide a general perspective of both the process of its designing and teaching, and of the product itself, *viz.* course slides, applications and forms of assessment.

Methodology-wise, the ROMCIV course has a core of communicative approach to teaching/learning, enriched by prompts from the CLIL

experience, resulting in an eclectic blend of means and methods relying on a well-justified pedagogical framework of principles. The consistent methodological thread is *interactivity*, by elicitation of opinions and views from the trainees, while encouraging localizations and exemplifications from participants' own experience. Accordingly, the course input addresses not only the cognitive side of the trainees, but also the socio-affective and emotional ones, with music, paintings, humorous stories and the like being regularly used in course delivery.

The fact that the master students are specialized in Computer Science, therefore expert users of IT, is exploited in the design of the course input, which uses various forms of e-learning means (audio, video, YouTube items, Internet searches and virtual tours, etc.). In this manner, the learners were encouraged to continue to explore the Romanian culture universe at the post-course stage - which they actually did, following the links suggested and enriching the references of the course with numerous additions!

An array of various *means of instrumenting* the course design and teaching was generated, improved and recurrently used along the two years in which the course was initiated, piloted and then developed, as follows: needs analysis questionnaire to the master programme coordinator, students' profile (age, country of origin, previous exposure to English, special interests about Romania, a.s.o.), weekly end-of-course recorded opinions of the participants and e-mail messages from them, applications to be used during the course and handouts with homework tasks, final tests and Course Evaluation Sheets. Here is only one (salient and quite unexpected!) example of how the teacher tried to flexibly adjust the course input as a function of students' perceived interests: a discussion was initiated on *Dracula*, the character made world-famous by Bram Stoker's novel⁶, so typically misappropriated and misunderstood for speculative touristic interests, which in fact distort the respectable genuine historical figure of Vlad Țepeș (the Impaler)⁷, relating him, in the popular culture, with the vampire myth. More than one student strongly insisted that the

teacher should provide the truth on this imaginary character, so this was added to the history-focused course.

The survival kit of *Romanian language pills* should be also mentioned in this brief review as, at each course, a set of useful words/phrases was offered, with practice and production tasks created on them. Moreover, the principles of spelling and pronunciation in Romanian were introduced and exemplified by analyzing the Romanian geographical and personality names mentioned in the course. In this respect, the portfolio assignments asked the trainees to identify and learn at least five new words/phrases per week of either General Romanian or about the course topic, thus encouraging them to take advantage of the linguistic bath they were in for four months, but also of their own particular interests. Their portfolios were included as 25% in calculating the final grade, alongside with other 25% for their involvement in class discussions and 50% for the final test. In what follows, the main ROMCIV course topics are presented, along with aspects selected for emphasising them and essential remarks on the approach for designing/teaching them.

The first course topic was a "General Introduction to Romania", consisting of:

- an elicitation quiz about the country and culture,
- a discussion of the good or bad points as stereotypes circulated about the country,
- a section named "Romania in a nutshell" including minimal geographic, historical, political and social information about the country,

The CLIL character of the course can be perceived more clearly from the description of a reading task which was created, asking students to match a range of tips from the Romanian paper money with the corresponding profiles of the illustrious personalities represented in them (Enescu, Iorga, Blaga, Eminescu, Caragiale).

The course ended by a mini-survey, with the trainees being asked to jot down the first three things that come to their mind in connection with Romania. Their answers definitely showed that the ROMCIV course was really necessary. Comparatively with the topic selected for the

final test, *viz.* writing an informal e-mail message to a friend back home with the Subject line: "Memories from Romania", in which students simply enjoyed displaying their much vaster knowledge acquired throughout the course inside and/or outside of class, the initial answers appeared as vague, and sometimes even marked by cultural (and political!) bias.

This was actually the main point that led to the decision of devoting one full course (number 2) to a discussion on "Cultural (stereo)types" and critical incidents in general, with the students having their share of story telling and conclusion drawing, as they had already traveled for academic study purposes in three countries (France, Spain and Italy) previous to their encounter with Romania. The assignment was a comparison between their own country and Romania from whatever viewpoints they wanted, a topic prompted by the very brief presentations of their own cultures which they were asked to make in class during course 2.

The next two courses focused on: the seven arts, with selective portraits of personalities and their works, links for the students to search for more in accordance with their own preferences (no. 3), and all branches of economy, with selective portraits of personalities in science and technology, also with a follow-up assignment suggesting them to further investigate the important Romanian figures in the field of their professional interest, *viz.* Computer Science (no. 4).

As, at the time of course 5, the National Day of Romania was quite close, its significance was included in the topic, followed by presentations/virtual tours of the main Romanian museums; links were also provided in order to open up new vistas of further investigation after ROMCIV.

The various forms of *feedback* collected, such as participants' opinions from the Course Evaluation Sheets, the interesting texts produced within the Final Test writing section, as well as the class discussions were generally appreciative - with most answers asking for a longer course duration. They included useful suggestions to be taken into consideration for the future, for instance organization of field visits, with the course tutor, to museums and other sights.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although only interim conclusions can be drawn in this stage, two directions can be discussed as emerging from the initial ROMCIV course design and implementation.

Firstly, several significant components of the approach to molding a CLIL course of a quite different type to the contextual requirements should be underlined, not necessarily in a set order of priorities, but seen as interwoven elements conducive to attaining the goals. Thus, a thorough needs analysis was carried out in due time, after which clear course objectives were established. The course designer/teacher maintained an attitude of objectivity in making selections and advancing opinions as to the course content, with utmost care given to providing alternatives for the trainees to choose from. Consistency of the methodological approach in teaching and evaluating was also aimed at, without neglecting a necessary amount of flexibility prompted by the regularly collected feedback from participants. For assuring an accurate “feeling” from their part, and for understanding the proposed topics, a carefully pondered blend of general background issues and certain distinguishing particulars, special or even unique features characterizing the Romanian culture and civilization were included in the course input. The chosen vehicles were mainly based on IT means, specific to Computer Science students’ profile, therefore encouraging them to continue to discover more about Romania, after they took the course, in the most comfortable familiar manner for them as professionals in the field, using their own “tools of the trade”. The approach was particularly favored by the communicative/eclectic views underlying the design and teaching of the ROMCIV module, with choices being made and corrections operated as a function of the permanent collaboration with both the programme coordinator and with the participants themselves.

Finally, the entire experience was indeed a challenging one for an English language teacher who is a Romanian native, teaching CLIL content about Romania to a multicultural student group

– i.e. facing unavoidably subjective elements and biases, everything against a time constraint turning choices even more difficult, particularly in the absence of prior specialized training, partially compensated, though, by a certain amount of previous experience in terms of CLIL course types design and teaching to engineering students. In the process of generating the module, not entirely devoid of moments of uncertainty, one definite positive aspect was therefore represented by an increasing awareness of its benefits for the professional development of a teacher^s who, taking a new hat, that of a CLIL course designer, gives herself a strong chance to move forward in the profession.

References

1. British Council, BBC (2006), <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/content-language-integrated-learning>, retrieved 17.07.2013.
2. European Commission – EACEA (2009 - 2013) Erasmus Mundus Programme, http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/, retrieved 07.08.2013.
3. Moran P. R., (2001), *Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice*, Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
4. Banegas D.L., (2012), *CLIL teacher development: Challenges and experiences*, Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning, 5(1), 46-56.

Endnotes

1. ICR (2013), Romanian Language, Culture and Civilization Courses, Braşov, Romania, http://www.icr.ro/cursuri_brasov, retrieved 7 January 2013.
2. Catelly, Yolanda-Mirela (2009) Scientific and Technical Communication in English – Course Slides, Bucuresti: Editura Printech.
3. European Commission – EACEA (2009 - 2013) Erasmus Mundus Programme, http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/, retrieved 07.08.2013.
4. Moran, Patrick R. (2001) *Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
5. British Council, BBC (2006), <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/content-language-integrated-learning>, retrieved 17.07.2013.
6. Stoker, Bram (1897), *Dracula*, <http://www.bramstoker.org/pdf/novels/05dracula.pdf>
7. Prince of Wallachia (1431–1476/77), was a member of the House of Drăculeşti, a branch of the House of Basarab (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vlad_the_Impaler).
8. Banegas, Dario Luis (2012) *CLIL teacher development: Challenges and experiences*, in *Latin American*

Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning,
5(1), 46-56, <http://www.unifg.it/sites/default/>

files/allegatiparagrafo/20-01-2014/banegas_cli_
teacher_development.pdf , retrieved 17.08.2013.