

Ралука-Микаэла Левонян

Raluca-Mihaela Levonian

Доктор философии. Помощник преподавателя/Приглашенный лектор

Румыния, Бухарест/Италия, Калабрия

Университет Бухареста, Гуманитарный факультет/Университет Калабрии,

Ph.D. Teaching Assistant / Visiting Lecturer

Romania, Bucharest / Italy, Calabria

Гуманитарный факультет

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters / University of Calabria, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici

e-mail: raluca.levonian@litere.unibuc.ro

THE VOICE OF THE IMAGES: THE USE OF VISUAL ARTS IN THE ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Голос образов: использование визуальных искусств в курсе румынского языка как иностранного

Key words: foreign language teaching, Romanian, visual arts, intercultural awareness.

Ключевые слова: обучение иностранным языкам, румынский язык, изобразительное искусство, межкультурное общение.

Abstract. This article explores the significance of cultural references in the process of foreign language teaching, discussing the case of Romanian as a foreign language (RFL). The first aim is to analyze how diverse RFL handbooks present information on Romanian culture, with a particular focus on visual arts. The second aim is to discuss further possibilities of building cultural awareness through the use of artistic references in the language classroom.

Аннотация. Статья исследует важность культурного контекста в процессе преподавания иностранного языка на примере изучения румынского как иностранного (RFL). Статья рассматривает материал с двух точек зрения. Во-первых, рассматривается материал о культуре Румынии, в особенности ее художественной культуры, в учебниках румынского языка как иностранного. Во-вторых, обсуждаются возможности формирования культурной компетентности в процессе преподавания иностранного языка через изучение художественной культуры в целом и визуальных искусств в частности.

Introduction

The development of intercultural competences has become a priority in foreign language (FL) pedagogy over the last decades. This direction has been acknowledged by guidelines like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which states that one of the main aims of the language learning process is “to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage” [3, 3].

The shift in learning goals from communicative competences to intercultural awareness is grounded in the view that communicative interactions are not produced in a

vacuum, but in a space which is influenced and constantly shaped by the cultural backgrounds of the interactants. In spite of the widespread consensus regarding the development of FL learners' intercultural skills, the elaboration of new language teaching resources dedicated to such goal seems to be more difficult. In particular, this is the case of idioms which are studied as foreign languages by relatively small number of learners and for which the number of available teaching resources is rather limited compared to such languages as English, German or Spanish. This paper focuses on the case of Romanian as a foreign language (henceforth RFL), discussing how a particular aspect of Romanian culture, namely visual arts like painting or sculpture, is reflected in the contemporary RFL coursebooks. Further, the paper discusses how art images can be integrated in the RFL teaching process, both as a resource for communicative-based tasks and for the presentation of the target culture.

Culture and cultures

The idea that mere “knowledge of the lexis, grammar, and phonology of one particular “linguistic code [...] is not adequate for successful intercultural communication [...]” [1, 63-64] has become widely accepted and not even communicative teaching approaches seem sufficient for the construction of the learners' cultural skills [5, p.56]. Cultural aspects were introduced in traditional FL teaching mostly as factual data about the target culture, an approach which is not very helpful for the learners in their interactions with members of the other culture [5, 58; 2, 13]. However, questions arise in regard to the content of a syllabus which may support intercultural awareness; in other words, which topics provide an insight into the target culture and which ones are less relevant. Otwinowska-Kasztelanica [7, p.36] points out that the integration of cultural elements into a course syllabus implies the decision whether to treat culture as a content in itself or as a context for the FL teaching, with the latter option tending to reduce culture to a superficial presentation in the LT resources.

The role and the space allocated to the cultural dimension in the FL teaching process depend therefore upon the definition of culture which is taken into account. For instance, Scollon and Scollon define culture as “any aspect of the ideas, communications, or behaviors of a group of people which gives to them a distinctive identity and which is used to organize their internal sense of cohesion and membership” [8, 140]. The two authors sustain the relevance of the anthropological view of culture for intercultural communication [8, 139] and this is the dimension which is captured most often in FL coursebooks, which pay attention to the systems of beliefs, values and practices in use in the target culture. On the contrary, the “high” aspects of the culture, encompassing artistic masterworks, are presented in the coursebooks mostly as factual information, in an approach that views “culture as an artifact” [5]. Still, it is necessary to accept that “culture cannot be framed only as social practices such as cuisine, festivals and traditional dress” [7, 36]. It is understandable that teaching culture is, unavoidably reductive process, especially in the context of a FL course which has time limits. Certain aspects will be selected, while others will be glossed over, but the selection of the topics ultimately depends on the institutional syllabus as well as on the learners' needs and motivations. Moreover, FL teachers need to take into account the possibility for elements

of both “anthropological” and “high” culture to be integrated in the teaching process.

Visual arts as an aspect of Romanian culture in RFL handbooks

Most handbooks for RFL are oriented toward the acquisition of grammar notions and vocabulary. A certain “transactional orientation” [6] is visible in the tasks aiming to develop competences for communicative interaction, as the analysis of three RFL resources shows.

The textbook *Limba română. Manual pentru studenții străini* [9] is the most detailed one, at the level of Romanian grammar notions introduced. Cultural aspects are introduced gradually, according to a prioritization of the student’s priorities and needs. The final section of the coursebook, addressed to advanced students, includes a group of lessons regarding diverse aspects of Romanian “high” culture. Visual arts are spoken of in the texts presented in two thematic units, Lesson 35, “Brâncuși”, and Lesson 36, “Arta românească” (“Romanian art”). Each unit encompasses one main text which is presented at the beginning, followed by a list of the new words which have to be learned by the students. The material for reading in Lesson 35 is an adapted excerpt from the monography *Brâncuși. Amintiri și exegeze (Brâncuși. Memories and exegezes)* by Petre Pandrea. The text includes general data about the life and personality of the famous Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși but lacks any presentation of Brâncuși’s works. *Arta românească* is an ‘artificial’ text, created by the authors of the coursebook as an overview of Romanian arts. After a general presentation of the folk art, Romanian masterpieces in the area of painting, sculpture, architecture and music are highlighted. An interesting feature consists in the fact that the authors introduce five famous Romanian painters, Nicolae Grigorescu, Theodor Aman, Ștefan Luchian, Nicolae Tonitza, Ion Țuculescu. Although no masterpiece is singled out, the authors include a characteristic trait for each painter’s style and works.

The texts in this manual are followed only by grammar exercises and therefore there are no exercises or tasks that may be based on the content or form of the texts introduced. However, at the end of each lesson, the last task regards the writing of a composition on the topic introduced in the main text. The task proposed for the text “Brâncuși” is to describe a Romanian museum, while the communicative task corresponding the text “Romanian art” asks the foreign student to present the art of his/her native country.

Romanian culture represents a topic of interest in more recent textbooks which attempt to overcome the grammar-centred approach to FL teaching, by paying more attention to the development of the communicative abilities. Still, most cultural information given in the current resources regards the domain of “high” and popular literature. For example, in the textbook *Essential Romanian*, by Ana Dorobăț and Mircea Fotea [10], only one lesson discusses Romanian visual arts. The text has the title “Atelierul lui Brâncuși” (“Brâncuși’s atelier”) and it is again an excerpt from Petre Pandrea’s monography, focusing on the artist’s personality. In contrast to the previous coursebook, the text proposed here is accompanied by two illustrations, representing two of the artist’s famous creations. The exercises following the text range from simple to complex and are intended to help the learners practice the lexical items and grammar notions newly acquired. Some tasks focus on the development of the communicative

abilities, regarding the text comprehension and the production of oral messages. Exercises 6 and 8 elicit the students' opinion about their favourite artists and works of art.

Both coursebooks introduce "high" cultural topics at the advanced level. An attempt to integrate cultural elements among the resources for beginners is made in the workbook *Româna ca limbă străină. Caiete didactice A1+* (Platon 2012). This workbook is structured in thematic units, aiming to form communicative competences for the CEFR levels A1 – A2. Each unit includes a special section, *Let's know Romania!*, formed by a short and simple text on a specific aspect of Romanian culture, followed by 1-2 exercises. The topic of Romanian visual arts is covered in the first unit, *Let's get to know each other!*, through a text about the painter Nicolae Grigorescu, followed by two comprehension exercises. Unlike the manual by Brâncuș et al., the workbook includes an image of the painter and a colour reproduction of one of his famous paintings. A further reference to sculpture is made in the fifth unit, "La serviciu!" ("At work!"), where one of the brief texts on cultural topics regards Constantin Brâncuși's life and works.

Discussion of the results

The study of the three RFL resources selected indicates the authors' preoccupation with transcending the mere presentation of grammar notions and linking the foreign language to the broader frame of the target culture. However, the cultural approach proposed in the analyzed books remains mostly at the level of factual knowledge, as the thematic units merely include simple data about a few outstanding Romanian artists. In fact, the coursebooks sustain East's findings, according to which FL teachers view "culture knowledge" as information-driven and ethnocentric [5, 63].

A first general trait of the discussed resources regards the content of the texts introducing Romanian art. Visual arts are presented in a selective manner, through the individualization of some artists. The artist who appears constantly seems to be the sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, followed by the painter Nicolae Grigorescu. One possible explanation may be that the former is viewed as an artist of international fame, whose creations are modern and abstract and thus more likely to appeal to a foreign audience. In contrast, Grigorescu's works, which treat religious or historical subjects, but also Romanian country life, appear to have a more prominent "nationalist" dimension. Generally, the didactic resources place emphasis on the creator, but not on the creation itself.

The selection of topics is connected to a specific approach to visual arts in the RFL resources, which can be viewed as the "narrativization of the art". The texts introducing arts are predominantly narrative, presenting the painter's or sculptor's life. Even when descriptive paragraphs are inserted, they regard the creator's feelings and worldview, and not the creation. Painting and sculpture are therefore interesting for the coursebook authors as long as they can be narrativized, i.e. transformed into a text.

The text-based approach is motivated by the fact that the authors consider the written texts as more suitable for the FL teaching than the use of images. In the 2003 coursebook, the text and the exercises following tend to favour the reading and writing skills. The newer materials propose tasks that may be used for the development of speaking skills, but these tasks are still based on the text of the lesson, not on the

illustrations accompanying it. The general tendency is to neglect the potential of the images as a resource for RFL teaching or, more precisely, the potential of artistic images. The illustrations accompanying the texts in *Essential Romanian* and in *Româna ca limbă străină. Caiete didactice A1+* are meant to support the written text representing the ‘core’ of the learning unit, but no exercises or tasks are proposed that may use the illustrations. The only resource which attempts to overcome the cultural barrier is *Essential Romanian*, which proposes a wider range of exercises than the other books. Some of the exercises succeed in involving the students by inviting them to narrate their own experiences, to describe and motivate their preferences in the domain of visual arts. Thus, the focus is shifted from the teacher to the learner, placing the latter at the centre of the learning process.

Integrating visual arts in RFL courses

The creation of intercultural awareness has become a priority in RFL classes held during the last years at the University of Calabria. Following this aim, the scarcity of didactic resources for advanced level had to be compensated by additional materials which encompass a wider range than the written and oral texts. The integration of visual resources aiming to familiarize the Italian students with Romanian art has been experimented during 2013 – 2015 within pilot seminars on Romanian culture and civilization within the courses of “Lingua e Traduzione Romena” (“Romanian language and translation”). The framework for the analysis was based on the checklist provided by Corbett [3, 160-164], including such elements as images of people, their gaze, settings, composition, fashion.

The use of the images has fulfilled more functions. First, reproductions of Romanian famous paintings by Nicolae Tonitza and Nicolae Grigorescu have been used as a support for communicative tasks. The students analyzed the images and were asked to provide possible titles and create contexts for their creation. Then, the images have been used as a starting point for narrative tasks. For Tonitza’s painting *The queue for bread*, they were asked to create a story that would have explained the image. For another painting by Tonitza, *The huntsman’s daughter*, they had to imagine a story involving as a protagonist the child in the painting.

Other images of paintings have been used as a resource for documentary work. From this perspective, the paintings by Nicolae Grigorescu have been presented in order to document the past life of Romanian peasants. Among the paintings chosen for discussion were *Peasant woman in front of the hearth* and *Girl with her dowry*. Further, the images were compared to the *Portrait of the nobleman Năsturel Herescu*, by the same painter, encouraging the students to observe the differences in the characters’ dress and to understand the social class differences in early modern Romania.

A third phase in the use of visual resources aimed at developing intercultural awareness. For each painting discussed, the students were asked to make comparisons with artistic works from their native culture or to link it to the broader European cultural and social context. Some answers given regarded the establishing of comparisons with the Italian past, as the students considered that the painting *The queue for bread* reminded of the fascist dictatorship in Italy. Other paintings were interpreted through the lens of the

global culture. For example, most of the students agreed that Nicolae Tonitza's creation, *The huntsman's daughter*, reminds of the fictional character of Little Red Riding Hood. At the end of the seminar, some of the students declared that the analysis of paintings contributed to their better understanding of Italian impressionist art as well. The majority agreed that the cultural topics discussed helped them understand the arguments in the Romanian literature courses as well. Another student talked about the visual arts providing "deeper insight" into the target culture: "[A painting] is more than a photography, because a painting has a soul."

Conclusions

Didactic resources for Romanian as a foreign language tend to incorporate rarely references of information about Romanian visual arts as a cultural topic. When such topics are introduced in the coursebooks, the tendency is to narrativize the presentation of the visual arts, by focusing on the artists' lives, and to gloss over the representation of the masterpieces and their potential for language teaching. Pilot seminars on Romanian language and culture conducted at the University of Calabria have shown that reproductions of artistic works prove a valuable resource for language teaching, that can be employed for communicative, documentary or intercultural tasks.

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