

# The Development of Communicative Skills in Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language Online

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## **Abstract:**

Since the advent of a new era of teaching, the development of communicative skills has been seen as one of the central objectives of language learning. However, the present-day context of the COVID-19 pandemic made us re-think and re-structure the majority of our teaching practices, including speaking activities that we used to suggest to our Romanian language students. In this paper, we have tried to tackle the topic of the development of communicative skills in teaching Romanian as a foreign language in an online classroom. The paper presents a list of obstacles that we, as teachers of Romanian as a foreign language, have encountered in the COVID-period teaching, such as students' shyness and reluctance to participate due to various reasons, the difficulties linked to the organization of pair- and groupwork, the obstacles in correcting and moulding students' pronunciation, as well as lack of feedback or reaction on part of students in the situations when a dialogue is intended by the teacher. All of these challenges are accompanied by potential solutions that we have found useful and efficient in our teaching practice. Moreover, the paper presents a number of activities that can be successfully used in an online environment for the development of learners' communicative skills. Taking into consideration the challenges presented in the second section of the article, we have tried to give some practical suggestions on how the respective activities can be conducted in an online classroom in an optimal way.

**Keywords:** communicative skills, Romanian as a foreign language, teaching methods, speaking activities, online teaching

## **Communicative skills in teaching romanian as a foreign lanaguage. Online language teaching. Preliminary remarks**

Since the advent of a new era of teaching, the development of communicative skills has been seen as one of the central objectives of language learning. The earlier teacher-centred methods, such as the Grammar-Translation method, gave birth to quite a few popular approaches using communication as a central tool of language acquisition. As stipulated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020), the main aspect that would be considered in the process of language teaching and learning is

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its functionality. Thus, it describes language proficiency not from the viewpoint of the correctness of oral or written discourse, but from that of the ideas a person is able to express, the tasks he/she is able to perform, as well as the situations in which he/she is able to interact. Such approach was bound to change the attitudes towards language assessment – a teacher has to evaluate what the student can accomplish rather than what he cannot. The communicative angle of the language proficiency description offered by this document, central for modern European language teaching, makes teachers pay increased attention to the development of productive skills – speaking and writing.

As far as the Romanian language course is concerned, it has been no exception. In an attempt to adhere to the best European language teaching practices, quite a few Romanian researchers have contributed to the creation of a vast methodological basis that provides teachers and other specialists interested in the field with the necessary methodological premises for their everyday activity in the classroom. Thus, we would mention volumes and papers by Elena Platon, Diana Viorela Burlacu and Ioana Silvia Sonea (2011), Aurora Tatiana Dina (2013), Ludmila Branște (2015), Liliana Neaga (2016), Reka Kutasi (2021) and others. All the above-mentioned papers have demonstrated that communication is one of the central activities in teaching Romanian as a foreign language; these papers have also suggested a wide range of methods and procedures that can (and should) be used in the classroom for efficient language acquisition.

Having established the importance of communicative skills in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, we will proceed to the main topic of our paper, and namely the development of such skills in case of online teaching. It is a well-known fact that the COVID-19 pandemic made teachers re-think and re-structure their usual teaching methods and practices. Adapting them to the new reality, in which teacher-student and student-student communication was mediated by screens and virtual platforms, was far from being an easy task. However, the aim of the present paper is not to emphasise these difficulties. We believe that this experience has also brought about a lot of useful changes, making us reconsider our previous teaching preferences and accents and improve our old strategies and procedures.

It is widely assumed that education is a highly conservative domain, and teachers are its representatives. Even though computer technologies have long been an indispensable part of our lives – which is especially true in the case of our students, the generation of *digital natives* (the term introduced by Prensky 2001) – quite a few teachers were reluctant to use IT developments in their teaching practice. Surely, there exist some methodologists who tried to demonstrate the benefits of using IT

developments in teaching (see, for example, Chirilă, 2017), but even so, the vast majority of teachers were comfortable enough with their old ways. Second, the pandemic led to a rapid development of numerous online tools meant for teaching: platforms, worksheets, online exercises, quizzes etc. Thirdly, the situation in which the lack of direct communication was felt by teachers and students alike made us look for new ways of breaching this gap and getting closer to each other, even if divided by great distances and several time zones.

It follows from what has just been said that the COVID-19 pandemic not only made us reconsider our previous teaching practices – it left us with a large number of new teaching tools, methodologies, procedures and suggestions developed by the specialists in the field. We would like to mention in this connection that returning to the classroom, when the pandemic allows for it, does not mean to say these developments have to be forgotten, and teachers should return to their old teaching practices. We strongly believe that the elements of the above-mentioned findings should also be introduced in offline contexts, thus making teaching process more interactive, student-friendly, relaxing and stimulating.

As far as the present paper is concerned, it is centred around a highly laborious task – the development of communicative skills in teaching Romanian as a foreign language in an online classroom. Speaking has probably been the most difficult skill to teach online: the mediation of screen, the lack of personal contact, the problems with the Internet connection, the accumulated stress of life routines radically changed – all these added to the obstacles we faced during the pandemic. Thus, we will start by enumerating the challenges posed by the online context and suggest some technological solutions we have managed to find. At the end of the paper, we will also describe the way classical speaking activities frequently used in offline contexts can be applied in a virtual classroom.

### **Challenges of teaching communicative skills online**

In this part of the paper, we are going to describe the challenges teachers faced when making students communicate online. We will not concentrate on the most obvious obstacles, such as poor Internet connection, lack of appropriate devices or background noises. What we are primarily interested in are the aspects referring to learners' and teachers' profiles and their personal learning and teaching difficulties.

One of the most important challenges faced by language teachers during the pandemic proved to be students reluctant to communicate in a new environment. Feeling intimidated in front of the screen, they were unwilling to talk to their computers, tablets or telephones rather than a living person. Some students were shy to express themselves publicly,

when the attention of the whole class was directed towards them. Others did not feel comfortable when using technology, having no previous experience of accessing electronic means of videoconferencing. Last but by no means least, a student might have refused to interact because of the lack of motivation. Such situations surely require a great deal of patience and wisdom on part of the teacher. Rather than opting for the easiest way out of it, which presupposes ignoring the respective student and leaving him/her suffer in silence, these learners should be additionally encouraged and motivated to participate in the dialogue, demonstrating that virtual communication is the future of human interactions, and that the acquired skill will help them not only to master Romanian, but also to solve certain professional tasks or to achieve other potential future goals. In order to help them diminish the anxiety, teachers can use various preparation strategies, offering students a list of words they might use during their speech or letting them plan their speech for several minutes (Harmer, 2007: 346). As for the lack of motivation on part of the student, the teacher should apply a set of special techniques suggested in the literature on the subject (see, for example, Chirilă, 2021).

Another challenge to overcome was the apparent impossibility of pair- and groupwork in the online context. As has been confirmed by numerous papers on the didactics of language teaching, these types of interaction in class are most suitable for language development: they increase Student Speaking Time, promote active learning and ensure the creation of bonds between class- and groupmates (see, for example, Harmer, 2007: 165; Scrivener, 2011: 45). As far as online platforms are concerned, surely, pair- and groupwork is much harder to organise; however, platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Webex and Skype have developed these options. Thus, teachers can use the function of breakout rooms, and their circulation around the physical classroom during the activity can be replaced by alternatively connecting to different rooms. However, all the activities presupposing the use of this tool have a serious disadvantage: they are highly difficult to monitor. The teacher has to connect and re-connect to different rooms; thus, he/she might startle students and interrupt their flow of speech. Moreover, in teacher's absence students might start using another language, which would easily be observed in an offline classroom. Thus, conducting breakout room activities requires a lot of practice on part of the teacher – he has to master the technology to connect quickly to different groups without being noticed by students in order to monitor the activity efficiently and not to hinder its natural flow.

An important challenge of online Romanian language courses is difficulties in teaching pronunciation – a pivotal aspect for success in communication. As far as the phonetic level is concerned, students might

face various challenges, for instance, pronouncing vocals such as /ə/ or /i/, as well as certain combinations of fricatives and affricates that require additional practice. Unfortunately, it has to be stated that these corrections are rather difficult to perform during an online group lesson due to the impossibility of quick interruptions, longer time required for reaction and correction of mistakes, and poor quality of sound, especially in meetings with the participation of a large number of people. Our suggestion in this case would be registering students' mistakes during their speech and presenting them with this list at the end of their talk. Afterwards, the teacher can record these words, send them to students and give them the homework of practicing the respective lexical units, recording them and sending the recordings back to the teacher. While rather time-consuming, this method would allow for an individual approach to each learner's difficulties and would answer their own learning needs.

Last but by no means least, teachers may face the challenge of receiving zero feedback from their students. Correlated to the difficulties discussed at the beginning of the section, teachers find themselves in a situation in which they fail to read students' reaction to their words, especially in the groups where students prefer not to turn on their cameras. Thus, teachers lack a great deal of non-verbal information that they usually get by means of observing their students' behaviour; this might lead to an uneasy situation, in which the asked question receives no answer (especially in newly-formed groups, where teacher-student and student-student relations are yet to form). In this case, the teacher should not be discouraged; far from that, he/she should come up with some techniques to involve students in the conversation. First and foremost, the reason for no one answering the question might be the way the question is formulated (it is recommended to formulate questions precisely and clearly, starting with question words such as *cine, ce, unde, când, cum* etc. – Scriverener, *op. cit.*: 212). Secondly, the topic might be unfamiliar to students, so the teacher has to make sure that students have enough knowledge on the subject in order to provide an opinion. Thirdly, the question might contain unfamiliar lexical units or grammar structures, so the teacher might try to write the question down and ask students to translate it.

### **Activities and techniques for the development of communicative skills in teaching romanian as a foreign language online**

In this section of the paper, we are going to present several speaking activities that can easily be adapted for the online classroom of Romanian as a foreign language. It should be mentioned from the very start that the list of activities presented below is far from being exhaustive – our aim here is to offer suggestions that would prompt

teachers' creativity in designing their own online speaking activities for different proficiency levels, targeting various vocabulary and grammar topics.

First and foremost, we are going to suggest an easy activity, which may seem obvious, but is, no doubt, worth mentioning in the context of this paper. For individual work, students can be given the task of recording a speech – a planned non-interactive speaking activity. Depending on the proficiency level, it can tackle different subjects. For instance, for A1 Romanian language students it can be the description of their houses or flats, pets or the scenery they can observe looking outside the window. When the task is completed, students present their videos to the class by sharing their screens. This activity has numerous advantages: it promotes active learning, it motivates students by making them share their day-to-day life, it allows them to show just the aspects they would like to share (without forcing them), it creates bonds between students, which is a difficult task in the context of online learning.

An activity similar, in a way, to the previous one is recording a short Instagram or Facebook story in Romanian on a daily basis (it is not obligatory to post it on social networks – students can just upload their stories on the platform used for the online classes). The teacher can give students target vocabulary they have to use, a topic they have to cover or a certain object they have to show. This activity would motivate students to use their daily activities – such as browsing social networks – for the purposes of the Romanian language learning; they would be attracted by this modern method, feeling teachers' comprehension of their interests; they would get accustomed to using Romanian for usual daily activities.

Another technique which we highly recommend for online classroom speaking procedures is making up questions addressed to another student. First, learners are given several minutes to prepare questions using target vocabulary; then, one student reads a question and names a person who is going to answer it. This activity is highly beneficial for the following reasons: it captures students' attention, it motivates them to interact, it draws them closer to the offline communication they would normally have in a physical classroom, and, again, it creates bonds between groupmates.

Needless to say, online language teaching favours the use of various online audio and video sources that can either be accessed by the teacher and shared with the students, or accessed by each student individually, on their own devices. For B1-C1 Romanian language learners, we would suggest choosing sequences of dialogues from TV shows or movies which present various repair strategies or functional exchanges. Students can be asked to make a list of formulaic expressions asking to paraphrase or repeat an idea, talk more loudly, order a coffee, ask how to get

somewhere etc. Then they can make up and act out their own dialogues using these expressions in separate breakout rooms.

Yet another example of planned non-interactive speaking activity is creating a Power Point presentation on a selected topic, especially the one tackling their native culture or traditions, thus facilitating the constant reflection on ethnic differences through the intercultural perspective (Cazac, 2022: 137). It can be applied even with the elementary students of Romanian, and the benefits of this creative activity are not difficult to see: it teaches students to structure their ideas in a logical sequence; it helps them become more culturally aware, more tolerant and more interested in other ways of life. However, in order to prevent a mechanical copying of information from various Internet pages, teacher has to set out a number of clear rules for the elaboration of such presentations: for instance, students cannot use online translators to translate large chunks of text, they cannot mechanically copy information from Internet pages, they have to be able to provide translation for all unfamiliar words (this could be done directly on the slide), they have to use short sentences, easily understandable by the rest of the group etc.

In what follows, we would also like to suggest some communication games that are usually played in physical classrooms, but can successfully be adapted to online environments. The first example is games based on an information gap, where students have to talk to a partner to solve a word puzzle, arrange elements (for instance, words in a sentence) in the right order, find similarities between pictures etc. For these activities, we suggest using websites such as Wordwall, Puzzlemaker, Word Search Maker and others, which allow teachers to create their own language exercises; the solutions to puzzles can be negotiated by students in breakout rooms.

A highly efficient way of prompting speaking is describing pictures. The teacher can select a set of images containing a variety of details or actions, depending on the target vocabulary and grammar (for example, *transportul, naționalitățile, prezentul, perfectul compus* etc.), divide students into small groups or pairs in different breakout rooms and ask them to name the elements they can see in the pictures. This could also take the form of a competition, where the last person to name a detail wins.

Breakout rooms allow teachers to conduct even such complex and sophisticated speaking activities as role plays. Even though they impose a whole set of restrictions on the type of the role play the teacher might want to choose, students will surely be able to act out some more simple situations in which they would have to negotiate meanings and arrive at certain conclusions adding up different pieces of information. For example, intermediate students might imagine they are a family who has to choose a vacation destination. Each family member would have

his/her own preferences and opinions, so arriving at a common decision would require students' cooperation and negotiation.

Yet another stimulating speaking activity is presenting the results of a survey conducted in the class; this activity would be suitable for pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced students. Students choose topics for the questionnaire (the range of topics can be vast, but the teacher can provide students with the target grammar that has to be used in the formulated questions); the next step is making up a set of relevant questions that have to be sent to the teacher for revision. The corrected questions have to be answered by the rest of the students in the group. The author of the questionnaire then collects the data, analyses it and publicly presents the results. Needless to say, this activity is easy to carry out in the online environment, when the results can be centralised easier than in offline contexts, for example, by means of Google forms, SurveyMonkey and other web resources for creating online questionnaires.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have tried to tackle the topic of the development of communicative skills in teaching Romanian as a foreign language in an online classroom. First and foremost, we have demonstrated that the choice of this issue is dictated by both the mandatory character of the development of communicative skills in the modern paradigm of language teaching and the novel methods and procedures that were created during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in this paper we have tried to demonstrate how the recent global events changed our old teaching practices, making us face new challenges and look for new solutions.

The second section of the paper has presented a list of obstacles that we, as teachers of Romanian as a foreign language, have encountered in the COVID-period teaching. First of all, students were shy and reluctant to talk due to different reasons, such as the stress caused by the imposed restrictions, their personality traits, their lack of knowledge of computer technology, their lack of motivation etc. Second, the organisation of pair- and groupwork requires some additional effort on part of the teacher. Third, an important element of communication, pronunciation is highly difficult to teach in online classrooms. Last but by no means least, teachers not infrequently have to fight lack of feedback on part of students and to look for explanations why his/her questions remain unanswered. Even though some (or even all) of these difficulties are bound to arise in the framework of online Romanian language lessons, we are convinced that the suggested solutions would help teachers overcome them.

The third section of the paper has listed a number of activities that can be successfully used in online environment for the development of learners' communicative skills. Taking into consideration the challenges presented in the previous section, we have tried to give some practical suggestions on how the respective activities can be conducted in an online classroom in an optimal way. Surely, we understand that the solutions we have described require additional preparation on part of the teacher; however, we strongly believe they should be applied if what we aim at is language proficiency in general and well-mastered communicative skills in particular. As a final remark, we would like to add that what we have done in this paper is only to scratch the surface. However, the present paper constitutes an invitation for other language teaching specialists to a constructive dialogue on the subject.

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