

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Abstract

Reading, writing, speaking and listening – the four foundational skills of language learning have been constantly reassessed over time. When we learn a new language, we firstly learn to listen, and read then speak, and finally write. Therefore, traditionally, we consider that the student first acquires skills of receiving the newly acquired language (listening and reading) and, later, skills of producing that language (speaking and writing), thus gradually turning from consuming a foreign language, to delivering it. Thus, language teachers insist on practicing all four language skills to ensure that both the spoken (listening and speaking) and written (reading and writing) aspects of the language are developed at the same level. However, experiencing the pandemic with all the imposed major switches that needed to be done in education proved changes in the way communication skills are acquired under these specific circumstances. Our research, conducted with foreign students learning Romanian Language during the last academic year, made us understand that teachers need to adapt their teaching tools and cope with new challenges imposed by the reversal of the ratio between the volume of online or asynchronous activity and the onsite ones, according to the traditional model. At the same time, we need to consider the fact that both teachers and students have been forced to redefine and understand how public and private spheres interact during online courses. Nevertheless, through this article, our intentions are to analyze the way in which the students' perception on the way of learning foreign languages has changed due to new social imperatives that have tipped the scales in terms of acquiring oral communication skills to the detriment of written communication skills, but have also changed perspectives on other satellite skills needed for an effective communication such as cultural and social skills.

Keywords: *Language skills, distractors, communion, private discourse, public discourse.*

1. Premises

All the modern language teaching strategies take into consideration the four main skills that have to be registered in progress while the process of language acquisition is completing. In order to obtain an objective evaluation of this progress, the rates have been standardized according to four major skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing.

First of all we need to accept the fact that speakers constantly adapt their skills and, more than that, generations change their perspective on learning in accordance with technologies used in acquiring and refining these skills. Thus, in a retrospective view, we may see that mankind started with audio and experimental learning in contouring listening abilities, while reading or writing comprehension was not needed for a long period of time as written documents is to be associated with the economic, cultural and social evolution of the community. This first communicating skill triggered the second one, own observation about the world needing to be shared by means of speaking. Later, within expanding communities, the need for communication was getting more and more complex, this way reading and writing gained in popularity and turned from prerogative of the privileged classes/aristocrats to the fundamental right to education and the fight against illiteracy. Popularity of reading and writing started to grow as people's need of distance communication (either in space or in time) became of great importance in social interaction. Statistical data, registered in 1975, showed that adults spent 45% of their time in listening, 30% in speaking, 16% in reading, and 9% in writing (Weirauch, & Swanda, 1975). Consequently, all the four skills became compulsory in communicating by means of a certain natural language.

The evolution of communicating needs prove that the first two skills turned from skills uttered in direct interaction, to mediated interaction (radio, telephone, TV, internet, etc.), these ways registering not only a perpetual diversification of contexts for listening and speaking, but also a diversification of

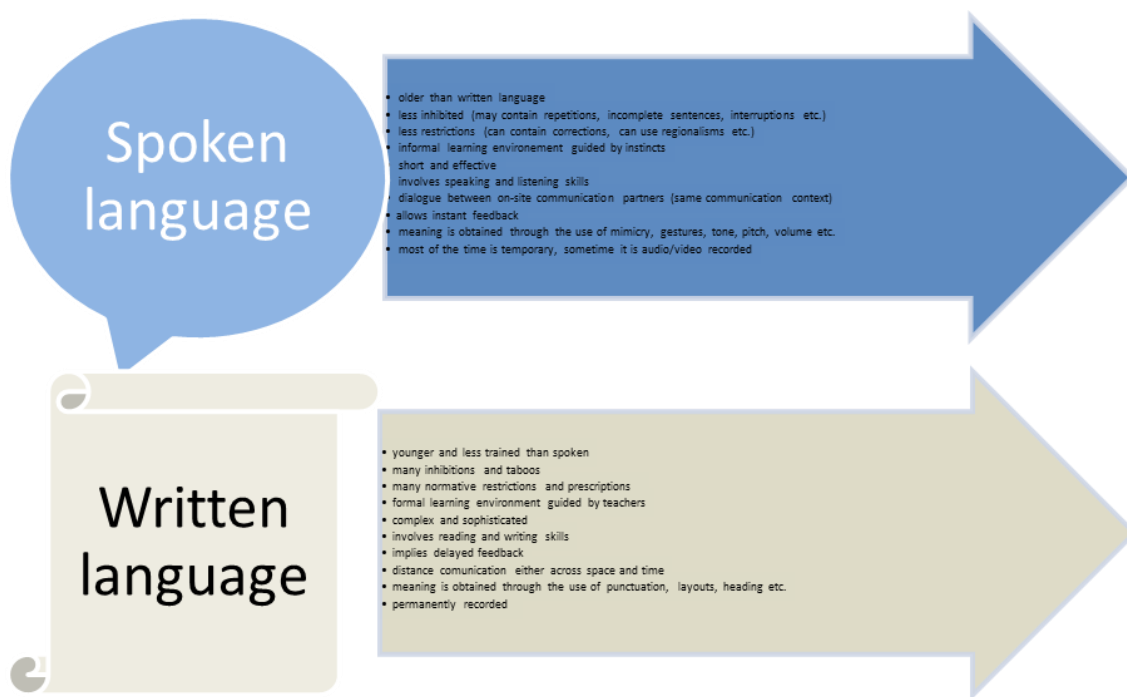
distractors needing either to be anticipated and prevented, or dealt with instantly in order to allow the transfer of information among participants.

As previously stated, the latter two skills (reading and writing) were meant from their very beginning to mediate indirect communication, thus supplying time or space gaps between speakers (Khan, 2021). The least spectacular evolution seems to be registered with the reading skills which represent the ability of interpreting and decoding signs; while the signs evolved from being engraved as cave walls representations and nowadays we can speak about signs on virtual walls, delivering online messages. Mankind started practicing reading while interpreting pictures marked on stone, then, as the writing systems diversified consistent with communicating needs it required more and more refined abilities in decoding messages. This way, numerous writing and encoding systems were created and the need to read/decode them expanded in accordance, till the peak when people understood that a worldwide known and accepted encrypting code is needed so as every speaker, no matter the languages he/she can utter, could be able to properly assign the same meaning to a predefined message, starting from traffic signs, to emoticons and so on.

Thus we can see that language skills can be associated to two fundamental groups: spoken skills – longer practiced in mankind history, and the first to be acquired independently – and written skills – more recent, and not of common use, needing specialized guidance.

All in all, if we are to summarize the literature analyzing language skills we can put it in a nutshell as presented in the chart below:

Figure 1. Synthetic view spoken/written language.



Considering the fact that the language skills are related to each other by both direction (in or out) and method of communication (spoken or written), we can see that they work in pairs from “consuming” the language, while listening and reading, to “producing” that language, while speaking and writing it.

Table 1. Input and output of language skills.

	INPUT/RECEPTION		OUTPUT/PRODUCTION
Spoken	listening	→	speaking
Written	reading	→	writing

Our main goal in teaching Romanian language to foreign students is to motivate them into stepping forward from consuming the target language at A1 level, to producing it. Nevertheless, the pandemic context made us re-evaluate our perspectives on the teaching-learning process, due to the fact that the tests applied to the students at the end of module A1 showed that they have successfully solved the listening and reading tasks, without any major barriers in correctly decoding the oral messages and the written ones, but failed in achieving maximum scores in speaking and writing tasks.

2. State of art

In order to better understand the differences between spoken and written skills in our attempt to anticipate and overcome difficulties that students can encounter while learning second or third languages, we need to accept the fact that digital practice (digital learning included) has changed people's attitude, in general, and students', in particular, towards communication, by leveling the differences between spoken and written as compared to the traditional/classical standards. For example, written language is supposed to be more strict and keen to regulations and norms, while spoken is generally accepted as free from restrictions as long as the speaker is subjected to different variables (state of mind, state of health, culture, education, practice, etc.) that represent arguments for breaking rules (either voluntarily or involuntarily). Still, the teaching practice of recent years has proved to us that written language in virtual media is rapidly cancelling the differences mentioned above due to the fact that people's need for instant, efficient and brief communication made them fusion. Thus we can see that virtual communication platforms allow interrupting speakers with written messages, in chat rooms, that are parallel to speaking sessions. Nowadays media favors both instant sending and withdrawing a written message, which was not to happen with traditional writing that was supposed to last as a proof. Thereby, the internet network facilitates real time communication either spoken or written. More often than not, written messages in instant communication are no longer complex and sophisticated, but rather short and effective, allowing instant feedback and most of the time being temporary – the send/unsend option being at hand for everybody. Simultaneously, the meaning is acquired somehow similar as in speech, through the use of paralanguage - mimicry, gestures, tone, pitch, volume etc. which are the attributes of the spoken are now comprised in images or emoticons that are to be the key in decoding messages, while traditional attributes of written messages, such as punctuation, layouts, heading, capitalizing, etc. are reevaluated with different utility or even ignored (coma, for example, is quite absent in instant messages).

When tackling the idea of inhibitions that were supposed to provide people from expressing themselves freely in writing, this is no longer an issue of virtual communication as the limits between public and private spheres were erased since the person either speaking or writing on virtual channels feel protected by their comfort zone, most of the time sending public messages from private backgrounds.

So, the key element we need to pay attention to in teaching is that the online activity has blurred the boundaries between public and private sphere (Meyrowitz, 1985), allowing the fusion of the two, consequently, students' interest in learning language issues that are not reflected into everyday practice is even lower than before the Covid 19 pandemic.

3. Study case

In designing the online language courses we had start from the fact that our students may interact with real life Romanian language either in direct interaction with native speakers or via YouTube, TikTok, individual blogs, etc. where natives speak and write freely and the odds for them to visit virtual libraries and get access to standard language through consecrated literature are less than those of them reading social media and watching vloggers on personal channels.

Therefore, the greatest challenge with virtual teaching and learning process throughout pandemic was to decide if standard language is to prevail in our teaching strategy or if we had to make a concession and get closer to the real language environment that students will feel alive and familiar with.

The real fact is that spoken language is rarely taught in classes, most of the language courses being designed to follow written aspects and literary language (Armstrong, & Ferguson, 2010). Nevertheless, there are numerous circumstances when students do not encounter, in real life conversations, certain utterances that are described as standard and they have difficulties in understanding everyday speaking which is, in fact, fundamental for their integration into students' community.

For example, there are a few Romanian numerals which differ in pronunciation so much when we compare their normative form to the real life speakers' utterance that are not re-cognoscible by students learning Romanian as foreign language. Numerals such as 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 are rendered in speech according to their written form, considering the fact that – at least in theory, according to linguistic customs – Romanian is a phonetic language. The real state of fact is that no native would ever pronounce these numbers in compliance to this regulation, even if they turn to the standard when writing official/public documents. Therefore, most often than not, our students hear UNȘPE [unSHpe], instead of UNSPREZECE, DOIȘPE [doiSHpe], instead of DOISPREZECE, etc. Even simple Romanian phrases, i.e. *Sunt acasă* (engl. *I am at home*) / *Nu sunt acasă* (engl. *I am not at home*), need to be presented to students in double version as they would never hear them at their fellow Romanian colleagues in the dormitories as they are taught at language courses. The frequency of popular way of expressing, i.e. *Îs acasă* or *S-acasă* / *Nu-s acasă*, put students into intriguing contexts, being forced, most

of the time, to fix in mind 2 variants: one to comply with faculty assignments, another to integrate in the age group and in the community of interests.

Based on these observations, we considered it necessary to consider among our teaching tools video and audio sequences that reproduce popular speech to create a close to reality linguistic environment for students to feel as familiar as possible to the real speaking contexts, but we had to emphasize that the written version of the Romanian language it is somehow strict and that the rules for drafting the texts which they will produce in order to address the authorities or to answer the examinations must be known and observed.

As a result of this approach, students were much more receptive to the reading and listening tasks, but also less reluctant to adopt the rules of standard language, as long as their need for phatic communion with their fellow Romanian students was met.

4. Conclusion

Even if online courses have swept the lines between public and private sphere, students can be motivated to respect each other's comfort zone and privacy so that the educational purpose of Romanian language courses is achieved, as long as the teaching strategies used in the design of the Romanian language course take into account their needs for communication and linguistic integration, but also cultural and social in the academic environment in which they will study in the coming years.

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