Valentina Mureșan

18 Developing Communication Skills in Romania in the Digital Era

18.1 Introduction

The starting point for my study is Don Tapscott’s remark (2008:126) about the increasing number of school leavers in the USA, which he explains as the refusal of this generation of learners to accept ‘the old broadcast product’. The group of learners who are prone to give up being part of the educational system belong to the newer generation of students, born after 1977, that is, members of the ‘Net Generation’ or generation Y (born between 1977 and 1997) and of the ‘Generation Next’ or generation Z (after 1988) (Tapscott, 2008:16). To support his claim for rethinking modern teaching, Tapscott uses the findings of a 2006 report, where students justified their disinterest by saying that ‘classes were either not interesting or just plain boring’ (2008:126). Sadly, the above-mentioned situation is very similar to what we experience in Romania, where the passing rate for the final secondary school exam (the Baccalaureate) has dropped in the last few years.

Starting from the postmodern learner needs and the demands of the digital age society, I propose to take a closer look at foreign language teaching in the secondary education system, with a focus on the importance of developing a communicative competence.

For a more accurate description of the context of secondary school teaching in the local community, I rely on the remarks and comments of participants in the Blended Learning programme (a European funded training project for secondary education teachers). During 2008–2012, I was a co-trainer in this project, responsible for the Web 2.0 in Education training sessions, together with colleagues Phd. Mihaela Tilincă, Tatiana Cărăbaș, and Melinda Moldoveanu. Furthermore, for the discussion on how foreign language teaching fosters the development of communicative skills, I rely on my doctoral research, which I conducted in a local secondary school in 2009.

18.2 Are Teachers Prepared for Digital Age Teaching/Learning?

The Blended Learning teacher-training programme covered a twelve-month period for two series of seventy teachers from the Banat region, further divided into three smaller groups per series. Within this project, the topic of Web 2.0 in Education was one of six face-to-face training sessions, the remaining topics being: Research in Education, Career Management, Project Management, Evaluation and Course Design. The training
sessions were followed by four hours of mentoring sessions and two unconventional (non-classroom) events each month.

It is in this context that the participating teachers were asked about the possible meaning of web 2.0 and the majority was not familiar either with the concept or with most 2.0 tools. At this point, I was taken by surprise, as I had anticipated a large number of participants to be using technology on a regular basis, in all the stages of the teaching/learning process, from lesson preparation to classroom activities and later for designing homework tasks to encourage students to develop new skills. The exceptions were teachers of informatics technology and some isolated cases, who used the computer regularly to prepare for their lessons or for professional development through online courses. The project aimed at selecting a very diverse group of participants, with teachers involved in teaching from elementary to secondary school, ranging in age between 20 and 60 years, teaching different subjects and functioning in schools from both the urban (the majority) and rural environment. The surprise was that young teachers, in their twenties or thirties, were not among the frequent computer users for school activity.

Together with the other trainers, we opened the discussion about the relevance of teaching in the Digital Age and introduced the participating teachers to the expectations of a generation that is familiar with technology and has to develop new skills in order to cope with the demands of a very dynamic job market. We invited teachers to reflect upon the expectations of the new learner and the challenge of being relevant for this new generation, by exposing them to a series of online materials, starting from the popular YouTube video *A Vision of Students Today*, created by anthropologist Michael Wesch of Kansas State University in 2007 to inspire teachers to reconsider learners’ needs (Tapscott, 2008:121–122). Later, we added Sir Ken Robinson’s invitation to change paradigms in education (Robinson, 2008), or Sugata Mitra’s *School in the cloud* concept (a new approach to schooling, where learners learn best from one another, by discovering together the solution to learning tasks), on TED Talk (Mitra, 2013).

An unexpected outcome was that although some teachers were resistant to change, more than a third accepted our invitation to explore different uses of technology and reconsider their teaching strategy in order to better ‘engage’ learners. Their resolutions ‘to link the virtual world and its many facets with the charming world of books and language’, to ‘use more interactive methods’, to ‘keep an open mind’ or ‘to be a click away’ [my translation] were written on self-addressed postcards, which we sent a few months later to remind them of their promises.

However, for nearly every reformed teacher, ready to adjust to the demands of a Digital Age, there was a teacher who resisted change and who believed that Net Geners ‘waste’ their time in front of the computer, they do not read and they do not socialize. From group discussions during the training sessions, I concluded that the problem was not so much the lack of facilities or old technology, which is slowly catching up with what happens in other countries, but the teacher’s mindset (a term
used in this study with the meaning of attachment to the values of/identification with a particular approach to teaching).

To conclude, the challenge of teacher trainers was to battle the old mindset and open the teachers towards instructing and equipping their students for the future and not for the past. For a clearer picture of the transition that needs to take place in postmodern teaching, I include below Tapscott’s overview of the two teaching paradigms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broadcast Learning</th>
<th>Interactive Learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher-centred</td>
<td>Learner-centred</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-size-fits-all</td>
<td>One-size-fits-one</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instruction: learning about</td>
<td>Discovery: learning to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic learning</td>
<td>Collaborative learning</td>
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### 18.3 Why Focus on Communication Skills?

Tapscott (2008) stresses that an important part of the solution for teaching the Net generation is addressing the issue of boredom in class, and brings as evidence the first recommendation of the researchers investigating school leaving in the USA, which is to ‘improve teaching and the curriculum to make it more relevant and engaging for young people’ (2008:126). Tapscott continues this idea of ‘engaging learners’ and pleads for teachers to ‘step off the stage and start listening and conversing instead of just lecturing’ (2008:130), because ‘kids who have grown up digital expect to talk back, to have a conversation’ (2008:126).

Thus, communication and oral interaction are part of classroom expectations, but these are not just factors that favour student participation in class, but a skill that employers expect students to develop in school. Moreover, I claim that what happens in class at the level of oral communication constitutes the basis for constructing a personal model of communication as adults, so, exposure to teacher lecturing will not only affect the student’s interest in that particular class, but it contributes to a faulty communication pattern embedded in the mind of the learner.

This view is supported by two recent news articles, which discuss the question of equipping students with a communicative competence. Dumbrăveanu (2006) and Dogioiu (2008) draw attention to the Romanians’ low communicative skills and call it ‘a problem of Romanian society with roots in the school’ and ‘the most serious disease of Romanian society’ [my translation]. Dogioiu (2008) attributes the problem to the issue that ‘Romanians talk a lot and communicate very little’ [my
translation] and mentions that communication practices do not rest upon dialogues, but communication rather takes the shape of a set of monologues. She advocates introducing rhetoric in the curricula as an elective subject, as she claims that the blame does not ‘rest only with those who do not have this ability, but the major culprit is the educational system’ [my translation].

Similarly, Dumbrăveanu (2006) discusses the results of a recent longitudinal research project, conducted by the National Institute of Education on the topic of developing communicative competences in the compulsory formal educational system, comprising an analysis of both regular classes and extracurricular activities. The findings of the above-mentioned research reveal that in the curricula, ‘communicative competence often resumes to knowledge of specialised terminology, even when there is reference to expressing one’s opinion; communicative competence as interaction is rarely mentioned, if mentioned at all, in the curricula’. Furthermore, if there seems to be some focus on the production and reception of oral and written messages in the context of the language classes, in teaching of Romanian language the ‘routine of an academic “approach” ignores real life communication and promotes teaching an artificial language’ [my translation]. Dumbrăveanu also signals that in the context of the science classes, communication only implies formulating personal interpretations of diagrams, phenomena or laws. Finally, she concludes that, in addition to problematic curricula, their interpretation and application by the teacher is also disputable, as she often observed that teachers only indicate the number of the exercise and the page, without stressing the real-life utility and applicability of the activity.

Perhaps of all school subjects foreign language classes are the context where teachers deliberately set out to build a communicative competence and students can experience the immediate real-life impact of being able to communicate effectively in a new language.

Moreover, within language exams, the communicative competence is one of the five components under scrutiny. English language exams are fashionable in Romania nowadays and overall Romanian learners achieve fairly good results; however, my experience as an oral examiner for the speaking component of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (CEFR levels A1-C1) and that of my fellow examiners is that Romanian candidates generally underperform in the speaking part, as many do not master a higher level of communicative proficiency in the English language, characterised by features such as flexibility, naturalness and precision. The popularity of English language exams can be verified by the large number of candidates: 26,000 for general and specialised English language exams in 2013, according to the representatives of British Council Romania (Gavrilă, 2013). The reasons behind the choice to sit these exams are mainly grouped around studying and career opportunities in an increasingly mobile community, but these may also extend to comprise cultural and social aspects.
Furthermore, there seems to be a demand for foreign language proficiency, as EU reports reveal that Romanians are falling a little behind the rest of Europe when it comes to learning foreign languages. Only 48% of the Romanians say they can converse in another language, as opposed to 54% of the Europeans; the foreign language that most Romanians speak is English (31%), according to Education Commissioner, Androulla Vassiliou (Solomon, 2012).

18.4 The Communicative Competence and Language Teaching

To continue the discussion regarding the role of the school in building a communicative competence, it is worth mentioning the view of a group of professionals in education, including a former minister of education (Miroiu et al., 1998), who have diagnosed the Romanian educational system as one which does not revolve around building competence in all its aspects, but rather focuses on one dimension – knowledge input. Moreover, of all key competences, building the communicative competence (not in the strict paradigm of the Communicative Approach, but in a more general understanding of an educational goal, irrespective of the subjects taught) has been ‘the Cinderella’ of the system, with very few classroom activities to encourage communication, although, in theory, the Romanian school syllabus aims at building and developing all key competences (Comisia Europeană/ EACEA/ Eurydice, 2012).

In order to explain why foreign language teaching does not really address this problem, it is important here to clarify the concept of communicative competence, both as a term belonging to language teaching terminology and pedagogy. Here, I rely on Celce–Murcia’s (2007) model of communicative competence, which includes a subset of six interrelated competences – discourse competence, interactional competence, linguistic competence, socio-cultural competence, interactional competence, formulaic competence and strategic competence. Celce–Murcia’s model continues earlier efforts to understand and define the concept of communication competence – Chomsky (1965), Hymes (1971), Canale and Swain (1980), Canle (1983), Bachman (1990), and Bachman and Palmer (1996).

According to Celce–Murcia (2007), linguistic competence and formulaic competence are different entities, the former involves knowledge about the open-ended linguistic systems (phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic) and the latter refers to pre-fabricated phrases or ‘chunks’, which are heavily used in everyday interaction (2007:47). The driving force, the strategic competence is defined as ‘an available inventory of communicative, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies that allow a skilled interlocutor to negotiate meanings, resolve ambiguities, and to compensate for deficiencies in any of the other competences’ (2007:44). Discourse competence refers to ‘the selection, sequencing and arrangement of words, structures and utterances to achieve a unified spoken message’ and is manifested in aspects such as cohesion, deixis, coherence, and generic structure (2007:46). Socio-cultural
**competence** refers to ‘the speaker’s pragmatic knowledge, i.e. how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication’ (ibid.), including language variation in accordance to the socio-cultural norms of L2 (a second language). Finally, interactional competence is defined as a hands-on competence with three components – actional competence (knowledge of how to perform common speech acts), conversational competence (knowledge of the dialogic strategies in communication such as turn-taking, interrupting, opening and closing conversations, changing topics, collaborating, backchannel, etc.), and the non-verbal or paralinguistic competence (implying knowledge of kinesics, proxemics, non-verbal signals and non-linguistic utterances with interactional import) (Celce–Murcia, 2007:48–49).

Celce–Murcia (2007:51) concludes the discussion on communicative competence with the remark that the new pedagogy should be governed by a number of principles to ensure that learners are linguistically and culturally competent in the L2. These principles include: a focus on the importance of integrating language instruction with cultural and cross-cultural instruction, with the need to use materials that are well contextualised and meaningful to the learners, with objectives that include ‘some type of real-world discourse’, on the importance to address functional elements and not just structural elements (as Celce–Murcia views it, the challenge is to ‘maintain a balance’ between a focus on vocabulary and stock phrases and one on grammar and pronunciation (2007:52)), the need to address the context dynamic aspects of interaction (rhythm, intonation, body and eye movements in face-to-face communication), and also an active involvement in the development of learner strategies in order to speed up the learning process.

Here, we can look at a particular example of two local secondary school English language teachers, whose oral classroom discourse I have analysed during my doctoral research. In my study, I followed the construction of oral communication in the classroom, focussing both on its effectiveness in general and on the interactional aspects in particular, in the context of a form of discourse that is generally considered to display distinctive, characteristic features of institutional discourse (Thornbury & Slade, 2006:242).

The data reveal an imbalance between the linguistic and discourse competence of the two teachers, one teacher’s oral production corresponding to what is expected of a proficient speaker, which is also reflected in the quality of her student’s responses (who tend to give longer, more complex answers both at the level of discourse and linguistic form). This teacher frequently provides extended stretches of language and makes use of numerous multiword patterns considered formulaic language, that is a typical feature of naturally occurring spoken language (Celce–Murcia et al., 1995). In addition to being exposed to such semi-preconstructed phrases (idioms, proverbs), her students are also accustomed to decoding finer nuances of meaning, forms of irony or sarcasm. The other teacher’s classroom discourse can be characterised as less complex, using a narrower range of grammatical forms and lexical variation,
which is reflected in the language his students use. He produces shorter stretches of language, mostly consisting of basic or fragmentary sentences, with a limited use of cohesive devices. Although the classroom language of the students in the second teacher’s class displays the same features as that of their teacher, at the level of classroom interaction, there is evidence of more self-selected turns (students volunteer to speak without being nominated by the teacher, yet students do not own most of the turns), which places this teacher–student interaction closer to the naturally occurring conversation.

However, from the point of view of building interactive competence, neither teacher represents a model to be followed, as the interaction between each of the teachers and their students displays an asymmetrical distribution of turns, with teachers initiating most turns and with a topicalization by teacher (it is teachers who decide on the topic of the oral exchange).

The paradoxical expectation is for students to develop a conversational competence in educational contexts, where actual conversation very rarely occurs. However, Thornbury and Slade (2006:245) claim that it is possible to turn classrooms into contexts where both at the level of task design and curriculum, classroom talk is structured ‘along more conversational lines’, which is why, in the next section, we turn to the educational context and the adopted pedagogical approach to foreign language teaching.

18.5 Foreign Language Teaching Pedagogy in Romania

My claim is that current teacher practices have to be viewed from a historical perspective as the product of a pedagogy, which has evolved in leaps, moving through three major approaches in comparison with the numerous philosophical views and efforts to reform pedagogical practices that characterise other English speaking countries. As I discuss in the following section, Romanian foreign language pedagogy has developed at the level of generally adopted pedagogical approach from Grammar-Translation, through Audiolingualism to the more recent Communicative Approach.

18.5.1 English Language Teaching Before 1989

In a chronological account of English language teaching (ELT) in Romania before 1989, Presadă and Badea (2010) underline the most important moments of foreign language teaching before the 1990s. Thus, in the early 1920s, the study of foreign languages gained popularity and interest in both private and state schools, when, alongside classical languages, the main European languages began to be studied. This new focus led to the employment of various native language trainers of French,
German, Italian and English, turning Romania into ‘a real paradise for teaching and learning foreign languages’ (Presadă & Badea, 2010:134).

However, WWII and the following Soviet domination in Romania acted as a deterrent and brought about changes in both the foreign language curriculum and the linguistic hierarchy. Russian became the dominant foreign language at all educational levels, and in 1948, it became compulsory in all schools, an event which triggered a major inflow of specialists in Russian language and a large scale training of Romanian teachers, to prepare them for the newly created demand. In addition to its newly conquered role of fundamental foreign language to be acquired, Russian language teaching also implied numerous changes in the curriculum, the educational system acting as ‘the perfect tool for communist propaganda [...]. The language textbook dealt with imposed topics and themes. Students had to cope with learning uninteresting, boring materials that emphasised the relationship among three factors, pupil – school – factory, in the light of the supreme ideology, historical materialism, Stalinism [...], while teachers mainly resorted to the old-fashioned Grammar Translation Method. Following the model of the classical languages, teaching was viewed as transmission of a set of grammatical rules, its main criteria being: the medium of instruction was the mother tongue, written exercises helped at practising the target language, translation of written texts into L2 was highly valued, being seen as the supreme aim of foreign language teaching’ (Presadă & Badea 2010: 134–135).

Anton Makarenko, who was seen by Aransky and Piskunov (1965:5) as one of the great contributors to pedagogy alongside John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Johan Pestalozzi, Johann Herbart, Friedrich Deisterweg and K. Ushinsky, based his ideological views on the Marxist teaching, seeing the educational system as embracing all aspects of the student’s life and activity. He placed great importance on developing the student’s industrial skills (productive labour), the collective (‘the school was such a collective, a community of pupils and students headed and directed by the headmaster’, with the students being taught to ‘coordinate their private interests and aspirations with the interests and aims of the collective’) (Aransky & Piskunov, 1965:14,15) and the development of the personality (he promoted the theory and practice of children’s self-governance, ‘which is one of the more effective means of training active and articulate members of society’ (1965:17,18). It was Makarenko’s belief that the educational system should rely on ‘a method – a general, single method, which would, at the same time, give every person a chance to develop his individual traits and preserve his individuality’ (1965:19), which naturally translated into a unique method and standardised textbooks. In Romania, these textbooks were in use until well into the 1990s.

Historically, 1965 marks the beginning of a new era, an apparent shift towards a more liberal regime; however, the communist period under N. Ceaușescu was still a totalitarian regime, but one with a newly defined scope, that of building the ‘new multilaterally developed society’ [my translation]. As Tismăneanu et al. claim in the Report on the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania [my translation], there
was no real change in the Romanian political ideology of the time, no real break from the Stalinist ideology, and according to this report (2006:11). Presadă and Badea support this statement by bringing as arguments the textbooks ‘which continued the model of Soviet pedagogy, [with] topics still praising the communist ideology’ (2010:137), which were used until alternative textbooks were issued in 1995–1996 for elementary schools and only in 1999 for secondary schools. Describing the new foreign language textbooks of 1970s, Presadă and Badea remark that a change was felt regarding the direction of methodology and pedagogy, and Romanian teachers were exposed to works such as B. F. Skinner’s *Scientific Educational Revolution* of 1971, gradually promoting the audiolingual method, when ‘lessons were organised so that listening and speaking could be developed by means of a variety of drills and supported by various audio aids. In some cases, the textbooks were even accompanied by vinyl discs to be used by foreign language teachers in the classroom’ (Presadă & Badea, 2010:138).

### 18.5.2 The changes of the 1990s

The 90s brought about significant changes to English language teaching (ELT) in Romania in the context of an expanding EU and the use of English as the new lingua franca; the result was that the ‘Ministry of Education increased the number of foreign language classes while lowering the age for starting learning a foreign language to seven years of age, and allotted intensive and bilingual classes in quite a large number of town schools’ (Goșa, 2014: 25). Another important factor for the development of ELT was the increased access and exposure to resources in English language teaching methodology and the introduction of alternative textbooks, many of them issued by prestigious publishing houses, such as Cambridge, Oxford or Longman. Most of the new textbooks were written according to the principles of an integrated skills approach and communicative skills were paid more attention, a final rebound after 50 years of standardised textbooks.

As Goșa (2014) confirms, this change was also due to institutions, such as the British Council, the Soros Foundation, USIS, which became more involved with teacher training programmes for the secondary level education, textbook writing and student training. English Language teacher conferences started to be organised and English teachers’ associations such RATE (The Romanian Association of Teachers of English) were founded and took an active part in promoting a change towards a Communicative Approach in language teaching; however, it was only in 2000 that local branches such as TETA (Timisoara English Teachers’ Association), BETA (Bucharest), CETA (Cluj) and MATE (Moldova) were founded.

As Presadă and Badea assert, an important dimension of the new system was a change of the teacher’s mindset, especially with the newly trained professionals.
Admittedly, the old and the new framework co-existed, although there was a certain pressure on the experienced teachers to adjust to the new methods and activities.

‘One of the major outcomes was the increased competition among teachers, who could be divided in two categories: traditional teachers, who had to adapt themselves to the new requirements of the curriculum, and the new generation of language trainers, who, formed in the existing context, embraced the communicative dimension of language teaching. This state of affairs resulted from the change of paradigms, which was intrinsic to modern society; language was no longer viewed as a system of rules and structures, but as perpetual communication [...]’ (2010:139).

However, the educational system of the mid 90s was still searching for a direction, and although there were numerous attempts to reform it, the results were still short of successful. In a 1998 diagnostic study of the Romanian educational system, Miroiu signals that the reform in education had only affected a small group of 200 teachers from different educational levels, which the author calls “a closed circle” which was difficult to join [my translation] (1998:58), this small number illustrating a not very successful reform. Miroiu also remarks on the inculcated mindset that ‘the myth of the “gifted teacher” and apostle of the nation still predominates instead of the professional who possesses good working instruments to resort to, regardless of his/her ‘natural talent’, such as methodologies and training courses’ [my translation] (ibid.).

Miroiu’s worrying conclusion regarding the philosophy of the Romanian educational system of 1998 was that it ‘alienates by its priorities: homework is more important than students, abstract information is more important than the applied knowledge, theoretical-discursive abilities are more important than behavioural competences, information is more important than formation’ [my translation] (Miroiu, 1998:65). The examples that support these conclusions include the remarks on the fact that, with a few insignificant exceptions, face-to-face relationships were only built with the teachers; students in secondary and often in tertiary education mostly ‘see their colleague’s back or profile’ for the period of their studies [my translation] (ibid.). Moreover, most communication is directional (teacher–student), of the ‘sermon-interrogation’ type and communication between students, as well as questions for colleagues are very rare and ‘are rather dependent on dissident practices of some nonconformist teachers’ [my translation] (ibid.). Miroiu (1998) asserts that a main characteristic of the education system of the time was its tendency towards self-preservation instead of progress and change, its conservatism being rather a state of mind than an ideology, which lay in the hands of those who were afraid of change and one might say that in many respects the same tendency continues to characterise the present day educational system.
18.5.3 ELT in Romania in the 21st century

To the best of my knowledge, this period has not been documented yet and my research reveals that the English language classroom profile is that of mixed practices, which co-occur. However, this blend of approaches, methods and activities is not in the spirit of Kumaravadivelu’s (2008) proposed model of the postmethod pedagogy, where the combined methods are suited to tailor the specific needs of the learner, but it is rather the result of the overlying trends and of various inherited practices and mindsets each teacher had been exposed to.

In short, Kumaravadivelu (2008) proposes an entirely new model, which is not based on any particular method or blend, but on three principles and a number of macrostrategies. In fact, he deconstructs the belief that successful language teaching is the result of an exclusive reliance on an approach and argues that the concept of method is surrounded by a number of myths, which need to be acknowledged as such. In his view, at the core of the post-method pedagogical model lie three pedagogic parameters: particularity (uniqueness of each language teaching context, built on a critical awareness of local conditions), practicality (‘involves practicing teachers, either individually or collectively, observing their teaching acts, evaluating their outcomes, identifying problems, finding solutions, and trying them out to see once again what works and what doesn’t’ (2008:172)), and possibility (acknowledges the teacher’s and learner’s identity and personal ideology as an integral part of the learning process; it implies that the ‘experiences participants bring to the pedagogical setting are shaped, not just by what they experience in the classroom, but also by a broader social, economic, and political environment in which they grow up’).

However, in the Romanian state-funded schools, the curriculum dictates the content to be taught, but the teaching methods are not imposed on the teacher, so, there is room for a more ‘principled approach’ (as proposed by post-modern pedagogy). Yet, many of the teachers seem to be stuck in the P-P-P (presentation – practice – production) model of the Audiolingual approach and language classes still focus on building linguistic skills, while the alternative textbooks that are used in schools are aimed at developing language skills in order to communicate effectively in the L2, that is, they deliberately target building a communicative competence.

Although my doctoral research did not focus intentionally on building the profile of the English teacher today, several pieces of information have emerged inadvertently. In an attempt to validate the English language teacher’s familiarity with the activities that are aimed at developing speaking skills, I used Finocchiaro and Brumfit’s index of distinctive characteristics of the Communicative Approach and Audiolingualism (Finocchiaro & Brumfit in Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 66, 67), and I invited two teachers to select the features which best describe what happens/happened in their classrooms, without labelling the two approaches – teacher C. a retired teacher who was active and very successful throughout the 1990s and teacher R., a young professional, with a 15-year experience in the field, who takes an interest
in personal development. Surprisingly, in response to the question ‘which of the following statements best describe your teaching’, teacher C. favours the principles that are mostly shaped by the Audiolingual Approach, while teacher R. has selected mostly those characteristic of Communicative Language Teaching. Although my choice of the participant teachers rests on convenience, I have deliberately chosen Romanian teachers of a different age, who are genuinely interested in the teaching of English as a representative of a generation, in the belief that the older the teacher, the older the approach to which s/he was exposed; their answers have proven true my assumption.

Moreover, teacher R. was one of the participants in a discussion group on the topic of assessment criteria for the student’s performance in an informal debate contest, where most teachers still manifested a strong tendency to assess linguistic performance, rather than communicative Skills, where R. admitted to having difficulty in looking beyond the accuracy of the oral discourse and also confessed to not developing her students’ oral skills in the same way as their linguistic skills.

My assertion that underlying mindsets co-occur is best illustrated by the surprising aspects revealed in the discussion group with the 15 secondary school English language teachers I have mentioned above. This group of teachers was preparing an assessment criteria grid for a particular genre of an open debate contest between candidates from different secondary schools in town and since the means of communication during the contest was going to be English, the selection of the participants also included a language test, or proof of at least a B2 level of English proficiency certificate (Cambridge FCE or CAE being the most popular). Yet, during the discussions regarding performance assessment, topics such as linguistic and lexical accuracy and appropriacy came up and teacher B. (an experienced, open minded teacher) admitted to having considered introducing language assessment criteria in the grid, in spite of the preliminary language test for the participants and the communicative nature of the contest. When I asked for an explanation, teacher B. admitted that the grammatical and lexical accuracy are criteria deeply rooted in the mind of language teachers and that they are not trained to positively look at communicative competence in terms of flexibility, naturalness and precision, criteria which according to the Cambridge examinations should characterise the performance of higher level candidates (C1 or C2 according to CEFR). This is not an isolated opinion, it resonates with numerous teachers, who have confessed to finding it difficult to assess speaking skills, as they mentioned in personal talks during teacher training programmes I have been part of.

Additionally, from personal talks with colleagues in the English Language department at the university, who have monitored lessons taught by secondary school teachers, either as part of the student teachers’ practicum programme or as members of Gradul I examination boards (the highest of the three teacher degrees in Romania), there is a confirmation that there are teachers in the secondary education, who only claim to be using a Communicative Approach in language teaching, but in
reality they resort to a blend of activities which belong to the Grammar Translation Approach or to Audiolingualism, more often than not lessons, including translation exercises. A colleague, C., mentioned the example of a secondary school teacher, who had described his approach as communicative in the submitted lesson plan, but the activities consisted of read aloud fragments followed by their translation. Another colleague, M., mentions an instance when the teacher who was demonstrating a communicative approach gave the students a reading task and then added ‘but don’t worry you’ll be asked to read it aloud in a minute’. M. also adds that teachers most often do not make use of the teacher’s book and this is also why a textbook, which is built to develop a communicative competence, does not, in fact, achieve this goal.

The profile of the 21st century English teacher in Romania is very different from one case to another and it is not so much due to the teacher’s experience; however, the teacher who is successfully embracing a communicative model and assists the learners in developing their language skills so as to be functional in a real-life context, is an isolated case; the majority of teachers follow a combined approach of Grammar Translation and Audiolingualism, although most of the textbooks are written with a focus on language use, rather than language knowledge. What is more, many of these teachers who resist the change of paradigm, knowingly or not, have key roles in the language teacher’s community, being trained mentors for future generations of teachers – sometimes, the opposition towards the approach being not a construct of beliefs, but the result of the teacher’s exposure to a model of teaching that is viewed as successful in terms of learning experience and which they later reproduce. According to fellow Cambridge examiners, there is only minimal development of speaking skills in class and that is why Romanian candidates often do not achieve the highest results in the speaking component of the main suite Cambridge exams; their problem areas being lower active listening skills, difficulty at interacting naturally with their partner and the underdevelopment of arguments and, sometimes, illogicality.

18.6 Conclusions

From the point of view of the current approaches in Romania, it is clear that while linguistic competence still plays a central role, at least in theory, teachers adopt some type of communicative language teaching, although it is arguable whether the approach is correctly understood and applied. The requirements for the Definitivat and Gradul II 2013 state exams (the lower of the three teacher degrees) have only recently (MEN, 2008) changed, while up to the year 2000, the English language teaching methodology topics were rather general – ‘Theories of foreign language learning’ – with often ambiguous phrasing – ‘modern methods, procedures and techniques of foreign language learning’, – communicative teaching – (my translation – MEN, 2000:5). Firstly, the word ‘modern’ in Romanian is polysemantic – it may refer to new/recent.updated or belonging to the period referred to as Modernism; with reference
to language, a modern language is an actively spoken language, and with reference to an educational system, the semantic overtone of modern is ‘which focuses on disciplines in the field of humanities’ [my translation] (Coteanu, 1998). Secondly, with so many interpretations of the concept of communicative teaching and no specific framing, understanding is left to the teacher, and therefore, it may vary from the traditional communicative language teaching to the postmodern understanding of the communicative intent. The 2008 changes added a certain post-modern component, although, at times, the requirements contain topics that reflect nuances belonging to an older paradigm: ‘Theories of language learning and acquisition. A critical approach’, ‘Critical evaluation of different modern methods, procedures and techniques in teaching a foreign language’, ‘Communicative teaching: principles and types of activities’, ‘Integrating the linguistic competence(s) in the English language class’ [my translation, my emphasis] (MEN, 2008:2). The compulsory bibliography has also been slightly revised, but not completely updated (the proposed editions of 1994, 1993, 1989 do not reflect the assertions and the focus of the postmethod pedagogy).

Thus, it is clear that, at present, there is evidence of a certain type of eclecticism in the Romanian ELT pedagogy, which is in keeping with Larsen Freeman’s (2000:177) observation regarding the co-existence of methods in use today, although she admits that ‘they are not equally distributed in classrooms around the world’, but admits that even older approaches, such as the Grammar Translation, have survived for many years and may still be used in schools. However, a line of future investigation is to verify my assertion that this form of eclecticism in Romania is most often not a principled approach, but it rests on the teacher’s personal preference and it is constructed through the accumulation of various individual experiences and information.

Here, we have come full circle to the root of the issue of the discouraged learner, in order to stress again the need for teachers to embrace and adapt to the requirements of a postmodern pedagogy, to adjust to the digital learner’s individual needs, to make use of elements corresponding to various approaches so as to design relevant, engaging learning lessons, where collaborative learning is encouraged, where technology is truly part of everyday learning and teaching, and where learning is continued outside the classroom. Tapscott (2008) admits that old paradigms, embedded in everyday practice in schools, are hard to change, yet he brings numerous examples of schools or programmes, which produced tangible results because of the newly implemented pedagogical practices.

References


