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TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE LANGUAGE EDUCATION PROCESS AT PRESENT

Viorica CONDRAT,

PhD, Associate Professor Alecu Russo Balti State University

The demands of the increasingly globalized world have led scholars to rethink the process of education as a whole. New approaches and methods are to be used in the classroom to help educators meet the students' actual needs. This led to the shift in the language teaching paradigm: language educators are encouraged at present to apply the principles of the post-method approach in their language classroom targeting the students' both fluency and accuracy. Similarly, the four basic skills are developed alongside 21st century skills. The article describes the challenges of the language classroom at present. Its aim is to determine the current perceptions both teachers and students have regarding the way the current language education process takes place. The data was collected with the help of a survey and observation at Alecu Russo Balti State University in the autumn of 2023. The results seem to indicate that both teachers and students find it challenging to address the challenges of the 21st century language classroom. They appear to be aware of what should ideally happen at the lesson of English, yet, they seem not to have the resources or motivation to implement the necessary changes.

Keywords: *communicative approach, post-method approach, fluency, accuracy, teacher's role, student's role, learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, ICT, four basic skills, 21st century skills, higher order thinking skills, emotional intelligence.*

VIZIUNEA CADRELOR DIDACTICE ȘI A STUDENȚILOR PRIVIND PROCESUL DE EDUCAȚIE LINGVISTICĂ ÎN PREZENT

Cerințele lumii din ce în ce mai globalizate i-au determinat pe oamenii de știință să regândească procesul de educație lingvistică. Profesorii trebuie sa folosească noi abordări și metode în sala de clasă pentru a răspunde nevoilor reale ale elevilor. Acest lucru a condus la schimbarea paradigmei de predare a limbilor străine: profesorii de limbi străine sunt încurajați în prezent să aplice principiile abordării post metodă, care are drept scop să dezvolte atât fluența, cât și acuratețea la elevi. În mod similar, cele patru abilități de bază sunt dezvoltate împreună cu abilitățile secolului XXI. Scopul articolului este de a determina percepțiile actuale pe care atât profesorii, cât și viitorii profesori de engleză le au cu privire la modul în care se desfășoară procesul de educație lingvistică în prezent. Datele au fost culese cu ajutorul unui sondaj și a observațiilor la Universitatea de Stat „Alecu Russo" Bălți în toamna anului 2023. Rezultatele par să indice că participanții la studiu înțeleg gradul sporit de dificultate în crearea unui parcurs de educație lingvistică de succes în prezent. Ei par să fie conștienți de ceea ce ar trebui să se întâmple în mod ideal la lecția de engleză, totuși, par să nu aibă nici resursele, nici motivația pentru a implementa schimbările necesare.

Cuvinte-cheie: *abordarea comunicativă, abordarea post metodă, fluență, acurateță, rolul profesorului, rolul elevului, autonomia elevului, autonomia profesorului, ITC, patru abilități de bază, abilitățile secolului XXI, abilități de gândire* înaltă*, inteligență emoțională.*

Introduction

The complexity of the 21st century has posed many challenges to the education process that has to constantly adapt its theories and principles to effectively respond to the learners' actual needs. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed: „Change is the only constant in life."

The constantly changing present context poses many challenges that have impacted the education process in general. Hence, educators cannot help feeling increasingly caught off guard. They can feel pressured to adapt to the new reality which has been shaped by the rapid technological developments, on the one hand, and unpredictable events that seem to shake the foundations of modern societies (e.g. Covid-19, wars), on the other.

It has become more and more challenging to get a unified view regarding the way the education process

should unfold in the language classroom. As a result, both teachers and students might feel overwhelmed with emotions caused by uncertainty and fear. Although there is a large body of literature reflecting on how to design an engaging language education process, there appears to be little agreement on what method would most effectively help teachers realize their learning objectives.

Rethinking the language education process

Scholars [2, 14, 15, 17, 20, 22] seem to be in unanimous agreement when it comes to the need of designing the language education process so that it enables the students to use the language appropriately in various real-world contexts. Indeed, the language classroom should center around the development of the four basic skills in order to help students become proficient and confident users of the studied language in any walk of life.

The realization that language is more than its form has led scholars [4, 19] to the conclusion that teachers should not only focus on the development of the linguistic competence in their students, but also on the development of the communicative competence. Tomalin [4] went so far as to suggest including culture as the fifth basic skill to be enhanced in the language classroom.

The need for the reconceptualization of the foreign language teaching became more and more pressing at the beginning of the 21st century. The last two decades of the 20th century saw the rise and popularity of the Communicative Approach (CA) to language teaching. Starting with Widdowson [22], scholars emphasized the importance of learning the language for real communication promoting the idea that students should be engaged in doing various communicative tasks using the foreign language. The assumption was that they will use the same language acquisition processes as those they used when acquiring their native language. That meant that drilling exercises were excluded, whereas grammar would be explicitly dealt with in exceptional cases. Thus, the students were literally expected to acquire the foreign language.

Using CA in the teaching process implied that the focus was on meaning, and not on the form. What happened was a 180 degree turn: a shift from accuracy to fluency, from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness [9]. The teacher was expected to assume the role of a facilitator and encourage the students to take responsibility for their own learning [11].

Yet, scholars started to notice that CA did not yield the expected results. Students seemed to have gained a bit more fluency at the expense of accuracy. Ur [21] stated that there was no concrete evidence proving that one method in foreign language teaching is more effective than another. Hence, CA was not the approach to meet the students' actual needs.

Understanding that the language education process is context sensitive, scholars [15, 20] suggested teachers design the language education process by getting informed from their students' characteristics. Thus, teachers were encouraged to go beyond traditional methods and use those that will help them respond to their students' actual needs. They were expected to choose the optimal strategies for their particular group of learners, which implied the combination of traditional and modern strategies.

Indeed, the principles of Post-Method Approach appear to offer the necessary solution to the problems of the language classroom. Teachers do not have to choose fluency over accuracy anymore; instead, they should look for strategies that will allow them to balance them. They could alternate meaningful drilling activities with interactive tasks.

Such a shift also resulted in the reconsideration of the teachers' role in the language classroom. Harmer [14] identified seven roles of a language educator. If put on an axis, we can see the movement from a more teacher-centered approach towards a more student-centered approach. In addition to these seven roles, Harmer also mentioned the role of an investigator. This can be linked to the present need to correctly identify the students' actual needs and finding viable solutions to the existing problems in the language classroom.

Burns [3] encourages teachers to develop their research skills and do action research to solve their problems and help their students become confident and proficient users of English. To emphasize the importance of teachers' questioning their own teaching and closely observing their educational context in the process, Kumaravadivelu [15] states that teachers should have the role of reflective practitioners.

Indeed, doing action research can contribute to the improvement of students' language learning as the

teacher can design the optimal language education process meant to meet the students' actual needs (Condrat, 2021). In addition, it can help develop teacher autonomy. The assumption is that it is rather challenging to develop learners' autonomy if teachers are not autonomous in their teaching process, i.e. take full responsibility for the language education process [7].

21st century needs and demands

The beginning of the 21st century was marked by a rapid development of information and communication technology, which resulted in the need of reconsidering what formal education should consist of. Although Nichols [16] pointed to the dramatic state of art of higher education due to the rapid digitalization and decline in critical thinking at higher education level, this state seems to characterize all the levels of education.

PISA, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. PISA 2022 results indicate that only 20 countries' performance in reading is statistically above the OECD average. The results of the Republic of Moldova are below the OECD average, and they are lower than they were in 2018 in the all three literacies measured (i.e. mathematics, reading, and science).

It appears that the system of education in Moldova needs to be urgently reformed in order to help prepare students for the 21st context. The decrease in high school performance inevitably leads to the decrease in performance at higher levels of education as well. Although Nichols depicted the context of the USA higher education institutions, the situation in Moldova seems equally, if not more dramatic.

There appears to be no research showing the direct link between these results and the decrease of critical thinking among the younger population. Yet, the 21st century resulted in the need of developing other sets of skills, such as: critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. The demand for these 21st century skills can be, however, linked to the ongoing process of digitalization of the modern world, including the process of education.

The 21st century language classroom has ceased to focus on the development of the four basic skills and the intercultural competence. Preparing students to interact in a more and more globalized world requires the development of another set of skills, which are of a higher ranking. Yet, it should be emphasized that it is rather impossible to develop higher order thinking skills if the lower order thinking skills have not been developed in the learners at all [10].

At the same time, scholars [1, 12, 13] point to the need of rethinking the way teachers approach the education process so that they help students become more emotionally literate, resilient, and flexible to cope with present challenges. Moreover, rethinking as such should become a central part of the learning process. This is what Grant [13] draws our attention to when he states: „With so much emphasis placed on imparting knowledge and building confidence, many teachers don't do enough to encourage students to question themselves and one another" [13, p. 187].

In addition, teachers should create safe environments for students so that learning can happen. Brown [1] believes that teachers have the role of leaders that help learners rumble with vulnerability and become more resilient. She states:

We must be guardians of a space that allows students to breathe and be curious and explore the world and be who they are without suffocation. They deserve one place where they can rumble with vulnerability and their hearts can exhale. And what I know from the research is that we should never underestimate the benefit of a child of having a place to belong - even one - where they can take off their armor. It can and often does change the trajectory of their lives. [1, p. 13]

We can notice that language education has ceased to take on board issues related to the way language is learned. It is at present a transdisciplinary endeavor meant to bring a better understanding of what learning is and how to facilitate the process for students. In addition, it should be viewed not as the preparation for life, but as the preparation for becoming lifelong learners. This is why language educators should be encouraged to consult literature written by applied linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and social scientists.

The second decade of the 21st century also showed that despite rapid technological development, hu-

manity can still be at threat. Covid-19 pandemic turned the whole world upside down, creating havoc everywhere, including in the education system. The challenges faced by teachers are still felt, and have not been entirely solved. Probably the biggest struggle was and still is to help students develop their higher order thinking skills.

During the pandemic it appeared that the development of the students' soft skills is rather difficult to achieve [8]. Yet, the pandemic appears only to point to the issue that had been previously ignored. That challenging period could be regarded as a turning point in rethinking what education is and how it should proceed.

Method

As seen, „complex problems like pandemics, climate change, and political polarization call on us to stay mentally flexible" [13, p. 250]. However, it is rather unclear if language educators manage to do so at present.

This prompted me to conduct a small-scale study to determine what both teachers' and pre-service teachers' perceptions of the language education process are. The research was carried out during 09.10.2023 - 27.20.2023. The qualitative data was gathered with the help of a survey and observations made during the online meetings with the teachers of English who enrolled in the continuous professional development program offered by Alecu Russo Balti State University as well as during the offline classes I had with the pre-service teachers.

The teachers were all women, with varying work experience in the field. It should be mentioned that out of the 27 people who enrolled in the course, around 15 attended the online classes I gave. Each time there was someone new. Yet, there were teachers who never attended any of my five classes. I noticed that there were teachers who previously had taught other subjects (e.g. Romanian or French), and had to refresh their skills as they were supposed to teach English as well. The majority of the teachers came from the northern regions of Moldova and Balti. There was one teacher from Chisinau. She was present at all the lessons, and tried to take an active part in the discussions. The problem was that she was a teacher of Romanian and it was rather challenging for her to speak and write in English, but she showed curiosity and enthusiasm.

When it comes to the pre-service teachers, these were 16 students who agreed to take the survey. This time the group was slightly gender diverse, as 3 out of 15 students were males. The idea was to compare and contrast the perception of the practicing teachers and those of would-be teachers. However, it should be mentioned that from the discussion with the students it became clear 9 students do not plan to become teachers. Another interesting remark was that none of the male students had this desire. Moreover, the remaining 7 students were not totally certain that they would like to become teachers.

The survey consisted of 5 open-ended questions meant to elicit the participants' stance on the teachers' and students' role in the 21st century classroom, the role of schools and technology in the language classroom, and finally the components of a language lesson at present.

The observations were made during the online meetings with the teachers of English. When it comes to the students, they were observed during the autumn semester. The observations were put down in the research journal, and intended to trace the participants' motivation, performance, attention, and curiosity.

Results and discussion

The answers to the first question reflected the latest tendencies in education which view the teacher as a guide facilitating the learning process. 7 out of 15 teachers mentioned the word "guide" in their answer. Five answers reflected the importance of creating a psychologically safe environment for learning to take place. Three answers also mentioned the role of a motivator. Just two answers used the word "teach" as something teachers should do in the classroom. Only 1 answer out of 15 showed a clear preference for a teacher-centered classroom. However, there was one vague answer, in which ostentatious language was used carrying little informative value.

When it comes to the students' answers, the role of a guide was mentioned 4 times. Interestingly enough, the students pointed to the necessity of teaching students, linking the act with skill development (the verb „teach" was mentioned in 6 answers). Just 3 answers mentioned the teacher's role as a support who

manages to create a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom. What was new in the students' answers was the presence of the belief that teachers should spread knowledge (this idea was reflected in two answers). Finally, two answers contained the word "educate", which is interesting as this is probably the combination of teaching, guidance, and action of motivating. The role of a motivator was mentioned just in one answer. Another remark is that one student simply copied some information from the internet, and included it as an answer to the question (this is valid for the remaining 4 questions as well).

These findings seem to indicate that both teachers and students training to become teachers see the role of the teacher as facilitator of the language education process among the most important roles. Interestingly enough, students seem to be more inclined to favor more explicit teaching than the teachers. These results seem to indicate what Ur [20] stated, i.e. the more adult the learners are the more explicit teaching they would prefer. In the scholar's opinion implicit teaching can work best with young learners. A possible explanation can be found in Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory: abstract thinking starts developing when children enter their last development stage at the age of 12. Hence, it is difficult for younger learners to fully process complex abstract notions related to grammar, etc. As a result, they learn the language implicitly through a lot of drilling and game-like activities.

The second question aimed to elicit the respondents' perception of the role of the school in the 21st century. Upon analysis, there appears to be two main views. 11 out of 15 teachers believe that school is preparation for life. Teachers seem to view the 21st century classroom as friendly learning hubs where children are helped to become global citizens able to solve problems and think critically. 4 answers mentioned also that classrooms are still the places where knowledge is gained, and teachers realize their learning objectives.

The students' answers differed. First of all, most of the answers reflected the importance of socialization (8 out of 16). The students seem to see the 21st century classroom as the place that can help learners develop social skills so that they can be successful in building relationships in the society in the future. Some pointed to the importance of developing communicative skills for the same reason. 6 answers dwelt on the role of the classroom as an educational hub, in which learners are helped to gain knowledge. It was interesting to note the two answers mentioning that the 21st century classroom is supposed to prepare learners for life, one even specifying „for real life success". One answer also mentioned that the 21st century classroom is the place in which learners should learn from mistakes.

As seen, the students' answers are more diverse. They seem to articulate the urgent need to focus on the development of emotional intelligence in learners so that they can successfully function as members of a society governed by certain rules and norms. Maybe the teachers included socialization when they viewed the classroom as the places where learners are prepared for life. Yet, it is seen that the students differentiated between these two aspects. It also appears that students tend to see the 21st century classroom more than a place where knowledge is gained, they see it as a place where learners are „educated".

While describing the student's role, the teachers mentioned the role of a learner as the main role. Thus, 8 answers described the way learners should „learn" in order to be prepared for life, become independent, and solve problems. The impression one can get from these answers is that students are still viewed as passive recipients of the teaching process, which seems to clash with the way the teacher's role was perceived in the first answer. One answer expressed the view that a learner should have the role of a friend to the teacher. This is quite challenging to achieve as boundaries can be blurred. However, 6 answers mentioned the student's role as an active participant to the education process.

The answers the students gave were rather similar to those of teachers. Surprisingly, some of them tend to view learners as receivers of knowledge when they describe the student's role as a learner. Thus 6 students believe that this is a student's role in the language classroom. Yet, 9 answers described the student's role as an active participant to the education process, as this is what will help the learners socialize, solve problems, and integrate in the society in the future. It was interesting to note that 2 answers also described the student as the main figure in the classroom. These answers could be interpreted as the desire of students to have more student-centered classrooms.

As seen, students seem to be more in favor of student-centeredness, believing that the education should

center around the student who should be actively involved in the process of education. It also appears that students are more likely to keep healthy boundaries. However, there is not enough evidence to prove this claim.

It became rather challenging to code the answers to the fourth question as teachers did not seem to have a unified view on the role of technology in the language classroom. However, it was possible to place 6 answers under the category of „help”. Thus, these teachers perceive technology as a tool that can help them in the language education process. 3 answers expressed the belief that technology can make the teaching process more interactive, and creative. 2 answers showed a rather negative attitude concerning technology as it was perceived as a „must”, and as something that was meant to make a teacher's job more challenging (the latter answer was accompanied with a smiley face at the end). 2 answers were rather vague, whereas one answer described some of the online tools the teacher loves to use.

The students viewed technology as the main source of information, 6 answers clearly expressed this opinion. 8 answers described technology as a way of making the learning process more interactive. One answer reflected the student's opposition towards the use of technology at the lesson claiming that it is the main source of distraction. Finally, one student simply mentioned the fact that technology makes life easier.

When compared, these answers show that students favor technology more than teachers. This can be due to the fact that teachers have to think how to best integrate technology inside and outside the language classroom, whereas the students simply use it. Yet, the majority of teachers still seem to acknowledge the benefits such an integration can bring to the education process.

The last question was intended to determine what the respondents believe a language lesson should include in the 21st century classroom. Surprisingly, all the teachers gave general answers to this question. The impression one is left with is that they seem to know little about what it should include.

Unlike the teachers, the students were more specific. They believe that a lesson should include the following:

- Interactive activities;
- Various methods and strategies;
- Focus on the development of the 4 basic skills;
- Activities connected with the real-world;
- Socializing activities;
- Humanity;
- Teacher sharing personal experience;
- Teamwork;
- Technology integration;
- Games;
- Presentations;
- Feedback;
- Useful information;
- Clear teaching.

It was surprising to analyze the teachers' answers to the last question. It is difficult to conclude why they avoided mentioning the components of a language lesson. However, it was possible to observe during the online meetings that they preferred to be passive and listen rather than to be actively involved in the process. Out of the 15 teachers, only 4 did the only hometask they were asked to do. Although the results of the questionnaire seem to indicate that they understand the shift in the way language education is viewed at present, they appear not to do what they preach.

However, one of the reasons can be found in the fact that teachers simply feel overwhelmed with the amount of work they are expected to do at present. It should also be mentioned that the majority of the teachers had still to work during the courses. Thus, it could have been difficult for them to stay focused during the classes.

It is challenging to address all the problems language educators face at present. One cannot help noticing the general demotivation felt by teachers and students alike. The cause seems to lie in the general unstable socio-economic context, on the one hand, and in the work overload, on the other. It also appears that

teachers are strongly encouraged to integrate technology without considering to what extent it helps them realize the learning objectives or how it helps them meet their students' actual needs. Students, on the other hand, seem to lack enthusiasm in using technology, finding it rather boring and unnecessary.

Another issue that is quite disturbing is that teachers do not seem to have developed teacher autonomy, i.e. take full responsibility for their teaching. They hold the role of "passive technicians" [15] following the directives from both their administration and specialized books, ignoring the actual needs of their learners. Their reluctance can be the result of their fear of failing as well as their lack of motivation to rethink the traditional ways of teaching. This leads, in its turn, to the students' lack of motivation and absence of autonomous learning.

Conclusion

The results of this small-scale study can be representative of the overall situation in the language education process in the country (PISA results seem to indicate a systemic problem across the basic disciplines in general). Teachers and students seem to share a common prospective vision of how the language education process should ideally be. Yet, the contradictions in both the answers to the survey and their behavior during classes indicate that the majority of the participants to the study is reluctant to take responsibility for their own teaching/learning.

The issue should be further investigated from a broader perspective as the explanation to such a perception may be due to factors related to the socio-economic problems of the country as well as to the instability of the 21st century context. What language educators should prioritize at present is their own contexts and design their language education process in such a way that it responds to their students' actual needs.

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Date despre autor:
Viorica CONDRAT, doctor, conferențiar universitar, Facultatea de Litere a Universității „Alecu Russo din Bălți”.
E-mail: vioricacondrat79@gmail.com
E-mail: viorica.condrat@usarb.md
ORCID: 0000-0002-7779-0587

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