

FOREIGN LANGUAGE DIDACTICS IN 20TH-CENTURY ROMANIA: FROM THE GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD TO THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of didactic paradigms used in foreign language teaching in Romania throughout the 20th century, focusing on the transition from the grammar-translation method to the communicative approach. The study outlines the main theoretical and institutional milestones, highlighting European influences and the specific adaptations to the Romanian educational context. These methodological transformations are viewed as expressions of a shift in linguistic perspective—from language as a system of norms to language as a tool for social action and interaction.

This process was supported by the development of new learning theories and by the emergence of learner-centered pedagogical models that redefined the relationship between teaching, training, and communication. The analysis offers an integrated view of the linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural framework that shaped this complex transition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of foreign language didactics in the 20th century was marked by a major transition: from a model centered on linguistic norm and translation to one based on communication and competence. In Romania, this transformation reflected both the synchronization with European trends and the adaptation to the country's own social, cultural, and educational realities.

Throughout the century, several paradigms succeeded one another: the grammar-translation method, the direct method, the structural and audio-visual methods, and finally, the communicative approach. Each stage proposed a specific view of language and of the roles of the teacher and learner within the educational process.

Methodological changes were accompanied by a redefinition of the status of modern languages in education: they evolved from ornamental and elitist subjects to instrumental and functional ones. At the same time, the advancement of linguistic theory provided a solid scientific foundation for studying the teaching–learning process, contributing to the professionalization of the field.

Language teaching methods have always mirrored broader epistemological shifts within educational sciences, reflecting how societies conceptualize learning itself. The twentieth century thus represents a laboratory of methodological experimentation in which ideas about the learner, the teacher, and language use were constantly redefined. The growing dialogue between linguistics, psychology, and pedagogy fostered an interdisciplinary framework that still underpins foreign language didactics today.

Language pedagogy evolved alongside major intellectual movements such as humanism, structuralism, and constructivism, each leaving distinct traces on teaching philosophy. The search for effective language instruction mirrored broader societal concerns with rationality, efficiency, and human expression. The growing diversification of learner profiles and learning contexts challenged teachers to move beyond prescriptive norms toward flexible and adaptive models. Ultimately, twentieth-century language didactics became a reflection of the dialogue between theory and classroom practice.

2. The Historical and Educational Context of Foreign Language Teaching in 20th-Century Romania

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Romanian educational system followed, to a large extent, the continental European model, in which the study of foreign languages was considered an exercise in intellectual and moral formation. French, in particular, held a central place due to its cultural and diplomatic prestige (Alexandrescu 1997: 84).

After 1948, the communist reform of education introduced a new vision of schooling, ideologically driven and centrally planned. Foreign languages continued to be taught, yet within a rigid framework marked by uniform

programs, memorization, and strict knowledge control. Nevertheless, foreign language instruction remained an area of prestige, associated with openness to other cultures and with maintaining a high intellectual standard (Mavrodin 2001: 17).

This evolution was also influenced by the cultural policies of the time, which oscillated between openness to Western Europe and the protection of national values. In the latter part of the century, the establishment of institutions specialized in training language teachers contributed to the consolidation of didactic professionalism and to the emergence of a distinct Romanian methodological tradition.

After 1989, the liberalization of education and Romania's integration into the Council of Europe led to a rapid reconfiguration of linguistic policies. Documents such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, 2001) became key references in the design of new curricula and in the orientation of language teaching toward the development of communicative and action-oriented competences.

Foreign language instruction was closely connected to the evolution of national identity and cultural diplomacy, acting as a bridge between Romania and Europe's intellectual currents. The introduction of standardized curricula gradually unified language education, but it also limited teachers' methodological freedom. From the 1960s onward, foreign language learning increasingly reflected the state's aspiration to modernize education through scientific rationality and international collaboration.

Throughout the century, linguistic education oscillated between elitist cultivation and mass accessibility, depending on political and economic realities. Foreign languages were often used as instruments of cultural legitimacy, shaping the intellectual formation of successive generations. Institutional reforms redefined the teacher's professional role, shifting from erudite authority to facilitator of linguistic competence. The tension between ideology and openness to European trends remained a defining feature of the Romanian educational landscape.

The teaching of foreign languages was shaped not only by academic developments but also by geopolitical transformations, including wars, regime changes, and shifting alliances. Each political era redefined the symbolic hierarchy of languages, influencing curricular priorities and institutional investment. The postwar decades emphasized multilingualism as both a diplomatic tool and a mark of cultural sophistication. Teachers thus became mediators of intercultural understanding, even in politically constrained contexts. The gradual expansion of access to foreign languages after the 1960s marked a crucial step toward the democratization of education and knowledge.

3. THE GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD: BETWEEN TRADITION AND NORM

Until the mid-20th century, the grammar-translation method represented the foundation of foreign language learning in Romanian schools. It relied on the morphosyntactic analysis of sentences, the translation of literary texts, and the memorization of grammatical rules. Emphasis was placed on precision, rigor, and the cultivation of written expression.

The teacher played a central, authoritative role, while the learner was viewed as a passive recipient of knowledge. Authentic communication in the target language was rarely present; the main objective was mastering grammatical code and developing translation skills (Puren 1988: 45).

This method fostered a strong link between linguistics and pedagogy, turning the language teacher into a classical philologist. At the same time, it instilled a culture of discipline and intellectual effort, developing essential analytical skills for language study.

Although later criticized for its formalism and lack of communicative focus, the grammar-translation method was a necessary stage in the formation of linguistic culture and the transmission of grammatical norm. It helped consolidate a reflective attitude toward language, grounded in analysis and respect for accuracy.

This method exemplified the humanistic belief that language study cultivates logic, memory, and aesthetic sensibility. It promoted linguistic accuracy and deep familiarity with literary models, often elevating grammatical mastery above communicative utility. Its endurance demonstrates the strong attachment of traditional education to textual authority and formal reasoning.

Its pedagogical coherence stemmed from a clear hierarchical conception of knowledge transmission. The emphasis on literary translation allowed students to engage with canonical texts while developing analytical discipline. Grammar was not merely a structural system but a gateway to moral and intellectual refinement. Despite its rigidity, the method contributed to the emergence of comparative and contrastive approaches in later language pedagogy.

Its emphasis on written comprehension reinforced the idea that intellectual mastery precedes practical performance. Learning through translation cultivated a contrastive awareness that anticipated the analytical rigor of modern linguistics. The teacher's authority rested on philological erudition, linking education to classical ideals of discipline and control. Despite its distance from communicative realities, the method fostered a deep

metalinguistic awareness among learners. Its persistence well into the twentieth century reveals the enduring prestige of grammatical order and rational instruction.

4. THE DIRECT METHOD: IMMEDIATE CONTACT WITH THE TARGET LANGUAGE

In the early decades of the 20th century, Europe witnessed the rise of the direct method, promoted by reformers such as Gouin, Berlitz, and Sauveur. It replaced metalinguistic explanation with direct exposure to the target language, using communicative situations, gestures, pictures, and objects. The teacher became a model of speech, and the learner was actively involved through repetition and interaction.

The core principle of the direct method is natural language learning through listening and speaking, without translation. The focus shifts toward oral proficiency and the association of words with concrete contexts. This approach encouraged a new type of lesson in which meaning was constructed through experience and observation rather than through abstract explanation. The notion of the “pedagogical situation” emerged as the core unit of classroom interaction between teacher and learner.

In Romania, the direct method was gradually introduced after the 1930s through university courses and methodological publications (Constantinescu 1936). However, its large-scale implementation was limited by the traditional structure of the school system and by the lack of audio-visual resources.

The direct method encouraged a pedagogical shift from teaching about language to teaching through language. It valorized spontaneous expression, auditory perception, and the learner’s intuitive grasp of meaning. By emphasizing immersion, it anticipated later communicative principles, even though its theoretical foundation remained largely empirical and experience-based.

This method reintroduced the body, gesture, and sensory perception as mediators of meaning, giving a new dimension to classroom interaction. It fostered an early form of experiential learning by situating language within lived situations. Teachers were encouraged to improvise, creating spontaneous linguistic contexts that stimulated curiosity and motivation. The direct method’s intuitive character inspired subsequent reflections on immersion and communicative authenticity.

The direct method responded to the human need for immediacy and expression, breaking with centuries of linguistic abstraction. It democratized classroom interaction by granting learners a more active and participatory role. Its emphasis on pronunciation and spontaneous dialogue brought language learning closer to authentic communication. Teachers were encouraged to use context, tone, and gesture as integral elements of meaning-making. Although the approach lacked a unified theory, its experiential foundation paved the way for functional and cognitive models of learning.

5. THE AUDIO-VISUAL AND STRUCTURAL-GLOBAL METHODS

After World War II, the development of structural linguistics (Bloomfield, Fries) and behaviorist psychology (Skinner) inspired the creation of structural-global and audio-visual methods. These focused on forming linguistic habits through imitation, repetition, and substitution drills.

In Europe, these methods were popularized in the 1950s–1960s by the Saint-Cloud and CREDIF schools. In Romania, their influence became visible in the 1960s–1970s, particularly in universities and teacher-training institutes.

They introduced the concept of rigorous linguistic progression and the integration of sensory channels in learning. The use of visual and auditory materials contributed to a more intuitive perception of the target language and emphasized the oral dimension of communication.

The audio-visual method marked a major innovation: the integration of image and sound into learning activities. Communication was simulated through everyday scenes, and grammar was induced inductively from context. This stage opened the way to a more functional understanding of language, paving the way for the communicative paradigm (Cuq 2003: 112).

These approaches marked a period of methodological optimism, when technology was seen as a tool capable of standardizing and accelerating language acquisition. The notion of linguistic pattern and substitution drill reflected the scientific ambition to model learning as a predictable behavioral process. Although criticized for mechanical rigidity, such methods laid the groundwork for integrating media and technology into classroom practice.

These methods coincided with a period of faith in scientific modernity and in the possibility of standardizing education across cultures. The audio-visual medium allowed for the creation of realistic communicative situations, though often in a controlled, repetitive manner. The systematic sequencing of linguistic structures represented a

step toward more data-driven approaches to learning. Their legacy can be traced in today's multimedia and blended-learning environments.

In the mid-20th century, these methods embodied the optimism of the technological age, aligning language education with modern media. The synchronization of image and sound enhanced memorization through multisensory association. Pedagogical laboratories became spaces of innovation, where repetition was reinterpreted as a path to fluency rather than mechanical drill. The focus on structure reflected the influence of structuralist linguistics and the belief in universal learning patterns. This stage laid the groundwork for data-driven pedagogies that would later merge with communicative and digital approaches.

6. THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AND THE COMPETENCE PARADIGM

In the 1970s and 1980s, applied linguistics and sociolinguistics laid the foundations for a new vision of language: no longer viewed merely as a system of forms, but as a set of discursive practices and social actions. Hymes's (1971) model of *communicative competence* became the basis for the communicative approach, later refined by Canale and Swain (1980).

This approach emphasizes the use of language in authentic contexts, the development of interactional capacity, and the learner's ability to adapt to communicative situations. The teacher acts as a mediator of communication, while the learner becomes an active participant in meaning construction.

In Romania, the adoption of communicative principles was facilitated by curriculum reform and increased international cooperation in education. Modern teacher-training programs promoted the concepts of plurilingual competence and intercultural education, reinforcing the integrative character of the communicative approach. After 1990, the communicative approach was officially adopted in Romanian curricula and influenced textbook design and teacher education. It is now complemented by the action-oriented perspective (CEFR 2001), which defines the *language user as a social actor* (Coste 2002: 44).

The communicative turn introduced a pragmatic conception of language as social action rather than formal structure. It foregrounded meaning negotiation, interactional authenticity, and the learner's capacity to perform speech acts appropriately in diverse contexts. This paradigm also redefined assessment criteria, emphasizing functional performance and discourse coherence over grammatical perfection.

By shifting the focus from grammatical accuracy to meaningful exchange, communicative pedagogy aligned language teaching with real-world communicative needs. Learners were viewed as social actors, whose linguistic performance reflected cultural awareness and pragmatic flexibility. The approach promoted collaborative learning and emphasized the role of context in shaping discourse. Over time, this paradigm opened the way for pluralistic and action-oriented frameworks such as task-based and intercultural education.

The communicative approach reintroduced authenticity and intention as core principles of teaching. It emphasized the learner's capacity to construct meaning, negotiate ambiguity, and adapt language to context. This perspective bridged linguistic theory with social reality, redefining what counted as success in language acquisition. Pedagogical research began to address motivation, identity, and learner strategies as integral to communicative performance. Over time, the concept of competence expanded to include intercultural awareness, mediation, and critical reflection.

7. ADAPTATIONS AND CONTINUITIES IN THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

Transitions between methods were never abrupt. In Romania, each stage involved periods of coexistence between traditional and modern models. The educational system gradually integrated elements of Western methodological currents while maintaining a consistent concern for linguistic rigor and clarity. This synthesis of tradition and modernity has generated a distinctive pedagogical identity, where normativity and creativity coexist. Romanian teachers have learned to adapt communicative principles to diverse classroom contexts, using local resources and intercultural experiences.

After 2000, the emergence of European reference frameworks, Erasmus programs, language centers, and continuous teacher training contributed to the standardization of practices and to the affirmation of a modern, diversity-oriented, and intercultural didactics.

However, significant challenges persist: balancing academic tradition with practical competences, adapting to technological changes, and fostering reflective practice among teachers.

Educational transformations in Romania reflected a constant effort to balance inherited pedagogical traditions with contemporary methodological innovation. Teacher training programs became key instruments in disseminating modern approaches while preserving linguistic rigor. The gradual introduction of technology and intercultural education further diversified instructional practices, reinforcing the plural identity of language teaching.

The gradual modernization of teacher education encouraged reflective practice and innovation within traditional frameworks. Exchanges with European institutions provided access to contemporary methodologies and pedagogical research. Nonetheless, disparities between urban and rural educational environments affected the pace of implementation and resource availability. The resilience of linguistic instruction in Romania stems from its ability to reconcile systemic constraints with a deep respect for intellectual rigor.

Methodological renewal in Romania often relied on creative reinterpretation rather than direct importation of Western models. Teacher communities played a decisive role in disseminating innovations and maintaining high professional standards. Collaboration between universities and schools supported the development of local expertise and materials. Policy documents gradually aligned national goals with European frameworks, reinforcing transparency and comparability. Yet, the process of alignment remained dynamic, shaped by economic constraints and institutional inertia.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of foreign language didactics in Romania throughout the 20th century reflects the complex dynamics between tradition and innovation. From the grammar-translation method, characterized by discipline and normativity, to the communicative approach, focused on interaction and action, a wide reconfiguration of language and learning took place.

These methodological transformations cannot be separated from the social and cultural developments that shaped attitudes toward language and education. In this sense, the history of foreign language teaching also represents a history of modernization, openness, and cultural pluralism.

This evolution was not merely a change in teaching method but an epistemological shift: language came to be seen not as an object of study but as a medium of social existence. Foreign language didactics thus mirrors the broader movement of society toward pluralism, interculturality, and dialogue.

The historical trajectory of foreign language teaching in Romania reveals that methodological evolution is inseparable from cultural and ideological change. Each pedagogical shift represents not a rupture but a reconfiguration of the relationship between form, meaning, and purpose in language education. Ultimately, the twentieth century's legacy lies in its synthesis of cognitive discipline and communicative freedom — a balance that continues to guide modern didactics.

The twentieth century thus stands as a laboratory for evolving conceptions of language learning, from mechanical repetition to creative interaction. Methodological pluralism has become a defining strength, enabling teachers to combine tradition with innovation according to context. This dynamic heritage continues to influence national curricula and teacher training across Europe. The trajectory of Romanian foreign language education illustrates the enduring balance between cultural continuity and pedagogical renewal.

The transformation of language pedagogy throughout the 20th century demonstrates the interplay between intellectual ideals and practical realities. Each methodological shift reveals new conceptions of knowledge, communication, and human development. The succession of paradigms forms a continuum rather than a rupture, embodying education's adaptive capacity. The Romanian experience, situated within this broader European evolution, illustrates how cultural resilience can coexist with methodological innovation. Ultimately, the study of these transitions invites reflection on the ethical and humanistic purposes of language education itself.

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