

IMPROVEMENT OF THE PRONUNCIATION IN A SECOND LANGUAGE THROUGH READER'S THEATRE: ENGLISH SPEAKERS LEARNING THE ROMANIAN LANGUAGE, A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the implications of the use of Reader's theatre on the improvement of pronunciation in Romanian, in the process of learning it by English speakers. The paper presents the case study of English-speaking students who attend higher education in Romania, with instruction in Romanian. The tools used to collect data were the observation and audio recording. In the context of the main difficulties faced by English speakers in learning Romanian, Reader's theatre may be a good choice for improving pronunciation; the reading, comprehension and speech skills also develop.

Key words: *Reader's theatre, theatre in second language learning, pronunciation, learning Romanian language, Romanian language for English speakers*

Introduction

Romanian language learning by foreigners is a topic of great interest, especially for students from other countries who attend higher education courses in Romania. Some universities also offer foreign language studies, most often in English, but

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there are an appreciable number of specializations that can be studied only in Romanian and a number of students who choose to study in Romanian, even if there is an alternative study in a language of international circulation. Most of those we talk about do not know Romanian or have modest skills when they get here. For them, before starting the actual study, there is a year of language training. Their native languages are very diverse. Among them we also find English.

The Romanian language courses in the foundation year address the general aspects of the communication skills, in writing and orally, at an average level, and particular aspects of the language used in the field to be studied. The course manner is generally tributary of the grammar language learning pathway. Pronunciation remains a difficult subject in the learning process.

The case study of this paper advances the hypothesis that the improvement of the pronunciation in Romanian through Reader's theatre can bring important benefits to the English speaker who is studying the Romanian language, both in terms of the competences of understanding and reading a written text, as well as in regard to the oral aspects of the language.

Statement of the Problem

The speech, in Romanian, is subject to the rules of writing and literary pronunciation. There is no standard of spoken language, the report is based on the correct use of the literary language in oral communication, in relation to the grammatical rules, including the phonetic aspects. Learning it as a foreign language is not considered to be very difficult, but there are some impediments to these processes. In oral communication, the pronunciation is a factor that can greatly interfere with the learning process.

For the best results, it is important to keep in mind the native language of the learner. Similarities and, above all, differences are those which must be the foundation of this work. In terms of pronunciation, the Romanian language respects a few rules, which can sometimes be confusing. The most important rule is that pronunciation is phonetic, that is, in a word, every sound corresponds to a letter (of course there are exceptions, but this rule is generally observed). As for the accent in the word, there is no generally valid rule, therefore the accent is considered to be free¹². This does not mean that we can use the accent on the word as we wish. For the English speaker learning the Romanian language, along with the two aspects presented above, it is also identified as important to study the fact that the Romanian language is a flexion language, as well as English, which facilitates the mechanism of understanding the grammar structure but the peculiarities of flexion in the Romanian language may be difficult to understand in many cases. Along with the above mentioned, the existence of sounds in Romanian not found in English is the main factor that greatly influences the pronunciation.

In a synthetic presentation, the difficulties of pronunciation may have the following causes:

1. the phonetic principle of pronunciation;
2. sounds from Romanian language, non-existent in English;
3. the free accent from the Romanian language;
4. flexion.

Literature Review

The specialized literature reviewed, regards the topic from different angles. The pronunciation in foreign language learning

¹² Academia Română, *DOOM - Dicționarul ortografic, ortoepic și morfologic al limbii române* (ediția 2), Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2005, p. L.

contains two aspects: *the difficulty* and *slow progress*. The modest improvements, without notable differences, in a study of 29 adults divided into three groups which received joint training, individual activities or did not benefit at all from extra help regarding pronunciation, were indicated in *Madden's*¹³ study. The most effective strategies for improving pronunciation are, however, the different and individual approaches, on a case-by-case basis, as proposed by *Sardegna*¹⁴.

The *working strategies and methodologies* when using Reader's theatre, take account of the integration of activities into the curricular requirements, broadly, *Black and Stave*¹⁵ show the correlation of comprehension and reading. *Flynn*¹⁶, from the same perspective, regards reading and memorizing. *Rasinski*¹⁷ overcomes the curriculum paradigm and identifies three main goals: correct decoding of words, their recognition and the correct use of oral expression during reading. Lengeling approaches the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, from double hypostasis, non-theatrical, group reading, in class, demi-theatrical, reading in front of an audience, other colleagues who are only

¹³ E. Madden, "The Effect of Training on Pronunciation", *ORTESOL Journal*, 4, 1983, pp. 69-80.

¹⁴ Veronica G Sardegna, "Learner differences in strategy use, self-efficacy beliefs, and pronunciation improvement", *Social factors in pronunciation acquisition. Proceedings of the 3rd Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, Iowa State University, 2012.

¹⁵ Alison Black, and Anna M. Stave, "A Comprehensive Guide to Readers Theatre: Enhancing Fluency and Comprehension in Middle School and Beyond", *International Reading Association*, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, 2007.

¹⁶ Rosalind M. Flynn, "Curriculum-based Readers Theatre: Setting the stage for reading and retention", *The Reading Teacher*, 58, 4, 2004, pp. 360-365.

¹⁷ Timothy Rasinski, Susan Homan, and Marie Biggs, "Teaching reading fluency to struggling readers: Method, materials, and evidence", *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25, 2-3, 2009, pp. 192-204.

spectators and theatrical in which are used both props and costume elements.

The use of Reader's theatre in order to improve communication skills is a common topic frequently approached for the improvement of the fluency in the native language and in the early years of schooling. *Martinez, Roser, and Strecker*¹⁸, in a two-class study of second grade students, observes the improvement of motivation and voice use in oral communication after the workshops held for 10 weeks. After 12 weeks, *Corcoran and Davis*¹⁹ identified an increase of interest in reading and trust of 12 second grade and third grade students with speech difficulties. Improving motivation and fluency improvements is also clear to *Young*²⁰ after weekly hours integrated into the school curriculum, for one year, on second grade students. Larger eighth grade children with reading problems, after a weekly course, for 6 weeks, improve their fluency, is the conclusion of *Keehn's*²¹ individual study or another study in collaboration with Harmon and Shoho also with eighth-grade children, but following 9-week courses.

For learning foreign languages, Reader's theatre can be a useful tool if we are considering *Liu's*²² study with 12 students, following which he has seen progress in oral communication.

¹⁸ M. Martinez, N. L. Roser, S. Strecker, "“I never thought I could be a star”, A Readers Theatre ticket to fluency", *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 4, 1998, pp. 326-334.

¹⁹ Carol A. Corcoran, A. Dia Davis, "A study of the effects of readers' theater on second and third grade special education students' fluency growth", *Reading Improvement*, 42, 2, 2005, p. 105.

²⁰ Chase Young, Timothy Rasinski, "Implementing readers theatre as an approach to classroom fluency instruction", *The Reading Teacher*, 63, 1, 2009, pp. 4-13.

²¹ Susan Keehn, "The effect of instruction and practice through readers theatre on young readers' oral reading fluency", *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 42, 4, 2003, pp. 40-61.

²² Jun Liu, "The power of readers theater: From reading to writing", *ELT Journal*, 54, 4, 2000, pp. 354-361.

Tsou²³, after Reader's theatre activities, for one semester, noticed improvement regarding reading and writing.

From the studied literature *we have not identified studies that have as central theme the improvement of the pronunciation through Reader's theatre*; the subject is approached at a secondary level, sometimes quite neglected. Another neglected aspect is how the improvement of the pronunciation influences the other targeted skills in foreign language learning. Improving pronunciation in Romanian is another unidentified subject in relation to the Reader's theatre. This is why this case study can be a starting point for the development of further studies or approaches different from what we know, from literature, at this time.

The Present Study Method

Participants

The case study presents the results obtained following 1 hour and 30 minutes courses of improvement of Romanian-language pronunciation through Reader's theatre, of two male students, of 20 (A) and respectively 21 (B) years old, native speakers of English, for an 8 weeks period.

Instruments and procedure

The data has been collected by observation and audio recording. Three recordings have been made: at the beginning of the meetings, after the fourth week and after the eighth week.

The evaluation has been made taking into account the four categories of difficulties that English-language speakers learning Romanian can meet:

²³ Wenli Tsou, "The application of readers theater to FLES (Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools) reading and writing", *Foreign Language Annals*, 44, 4, 2011, pp. 727-748.

1. the observance of the phonetic principle during the reading of a text;
2. the non-existent sounds in English, the vowels, the diphthongs;
3. the accent in words;
4. the verbal and nominal flexion.

The structure of a lesson

The lessons begins with preparatory games using the contrastive method, sounds difficult to pronounce in Romanian or nonexistent in English, and English words that contain approximately those sounds (*ă* as in *about*, *ă* as in *church*, *â* as a kind of *hm*), game conjugation of a verb with the wrong examples (*eu pot*, not *eu put*), a game with met problems by confusion (*a ura*, *a urî*), the value of „*î*” in pronunciation (*pomi* - *pomii*), diphthongs, syllabification; reading the text, the Brecht exercise (switching to the 3rd person of the verbs), changing the roles when reading, free narration through simple sentences, reading the lesson again (this was recorded).

The texts used for reading started from a low level of difficulty, Caragiale’s „Căldură mare” (*Big Heat*), to Caragiale „O scrisoare pierdută” (*A lost letter*) (some words have been replaced, I have not used any text in its original form).

Data collection, data analysis and results

Two types of data collection tools are used: audio recording and observation. The texts used for reading were analyzed with word count tool from Word 2010. The evaluation of the phonetic principle and accent in words is based on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching,

Assessment (CEFR), chapter 5.2.1.4 Phonological competence²⁴. The results presented are based on the data obtained from the three audio recordings. They indicate an improvement in the pronunciation of both participants.

Table 1.1 – Evaluation of first recording

| Type of mistakes | Phonological competence / The number of mistakes | |
|---|--|----|
| | A | B |
| <i>the phonetic principle</i> | A2 | A2 |
| <i>accent in words</i> | A2 | A2 |
| ă | 54 | 46 |
| â(i) | 14 | 19 |
| <i>i in final of words</i> <i>the diphthongs</i> | 32 | 48 |

Table 1.2 – Word count of first text

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Text, author | Căldură mare (Big heat), I.L. Caragiale |
| Total number of words | 827 |
| Total number of words with ă | 136 (A=72; B=64) |
| Total number of words with â (i) | 38 (A=16; B=22) |
| Total number of i in final of words | 119 (A= 48; B=71) |

²⁴ Council of Europe. Council for Cultural Co-operation. Education Committee. Modern Languages Division. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 116.

Table 2 – Evaluation of second recording

| Type of mistakes | Phonological competence / The number of mistakes | |
|---|--|----|
| | A | B |
| <i>the phonetic principle</i> | A2 | B1 |
| <i>accent in words</i> | A2 | B1 |
| ă | 58 | 66 |
| â(i) | 20 | 22 |
| <i>i in final of words</i> <i>the diphthongs</i> | 38 | 48 |

Table 2.2 – Word count of second text

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Text, author | D'ale carnavalului (Only During A Carnival) Act I scene 1, I.L. Caragiale |
| Total number of words | 2568 |
| Total number of words with ă | 183 (A=82; B=101) |
| Total number of words with â (î) | 49 (A=23; B=26) |
| Total number of i in final of words | 142 (A=63; B=79) |

Table 3.1 – Evaluation of third recording

| Type of mistakes | Phonological competence / The number of mistakes | |
|---|--|-----|
| | A | B |
| <i>the phonetic principle</i> | B1 | B1 |
| <i>accent in words</i> | B1 | B1 |
| ă | 153 | 106 |
| â(i) | 31 | 33 |
| <i>i in final of words</i> <i>the diphthongs</i> | 61 | 64 |

Table 3.2 – Word count of third text

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Text, author | O scrisoare pierdută (A lost letter) Act I scene 1, I.L. Caragiale |
| Total number of words | 1397 |
| Total number of words with ă | 387 (A=223; B=164) |
| Total number of words with â (î) | 78 (A=38; B=40) |
| Total number of i in final of words | 206 (A=102; B=104) |

The analysis of the Results and Discussion

The preparatory games have been very helpful. The general observation is that they were easier and more accurately done after the third week. It can be considered that the results obtained from the records have been influenced by them. The free narration, by using sentences or short phrases, has also improved.

Table 4 – The analysis of the results

| Type of mistakes | Phonological competence / Percentages of mistakes | | | | | |
|---|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | A | | | B | | |
| | Text1 | Text2 | Text3 | Text1 | Text2 | Text3 |
| <i>the phonetic principle</i> | A2 | A2 | B1 | A2 | B1 | B1 |
| <i>accent in words</i> | A2 | A2 | B1 | A2 | B1 | B1 |
| ă | 75 | 70.73 | 68.61 | 71.88 | 65.35 | 64.63 |
| â(î) | 87.50 | 86.96 | 81.58 | 86.36 | 84.62 | 82.50 |
| <i>i in final of words</i> <i>the diphthongs</i> | 66.67 | 60.32 | 59.80 | 67.61 | 60.76 | 61.54 |

Conclusion

The Reader's theatre techniques for the improvement of the pronunciation of English speakers who are learning Romanian, is a tool worth using. Dramatic texts show a greater interest

compared to the texts of everyday life conversation that can become boring. The improvement of the pronunciation, by insisting on the sounds that differentiate the two languages, along with increased attention to flexion aspects, especially verbal and nominal, implies improved results both in reading and comprehension. The paper opens the possibility of larger and longer-lasting studies.

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