

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHER TALKING TIME (TTT) AND STUDENT TALKING TIME (STT)

Stoica Silvana Diana

Lecturer PhD, National University of Science and Technology „Politehnica” Bucharest

***Abstract:** In my paper I will focus on the most efficient strategies for finding the balance between Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT) during the Romanian as a Foreign Language classes. The groups are composed of 20 students each, the teaching team is up to 6 teachers and the lessons are devised so they cover general Romanian as well as Romanian for Specific Purposes. RFL students study Romanian intensively, for 2 semesters, and at the end they follow their BSc/MA/doctoral programs. Students come from all over the world and their interests are extremely varied.*

***Keywords:** multicultural; foreign; language; strategies; methodology.*

Introduction

In this paper I will focus on the most efficient strategies for finding the balance between Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT) during the Romanian as a Foreign Language classes. My groups are composed of 20 students each, I team up with other 6 teachers and we devise our lessons so we cover general Romanian as well as Romanian for Specific Purposes. Our students study Romanian intensively, for 2 semesters, and at the end they follow their BSc/MA/doctoral programs. Students come from all over the world and their interests are extremely varied.

This is one of the factors which can contribute to ensuring a high level of homogeneity of the intensive courses provided, as the teachers should – and do - have the skills and openness to:

- collaborate closely in designing the course content and structure,
- set up a methodological approach based on modern pedagogical principles, and
- communicate quite closely throughout the study modules in order to adjust/amend course elements with a view to improving its quality.

The permanent concern towards the optimization of the RFL course is generated by an effort of DCLM to contribute to an increase of visibility and prestige of the university – and, not less important – to its ranking among the best ones in Europe.

In response to the Romanian legislation for higher education requirements, the course of RFL is now being under full process of being granted recognition by accreditation (after much debate took place at country level on the manner such a process should be organized).

Hence an increased interest of the teaching team and DCLM management to carry out optimization of the RFL course in an appropriate way, by putting together various methods, among which getting feedback from all the actors in the instructional process is one of utmost significance.

- take advantage of our current teaching potential – and even increase efforts by getting the staff members involved in the RFL course design and organization to do research in order to identify best ways of optimizing it, and share such information with fellow teachers – and this is precisely what we are trying to carry out in this study;
- involve the teachers in the process of getting feedback, with a role of adding precious information and of triangulating the other data, of a more quantitative type;
- monitor the students' progress in learning and their way towards attaining professional success quite closely, and even publicly within our organization – and not only, by Testimonials, RFL Graduate Questionnaires and/or Interviews and so on;

- continue to design feedback obtaining ways and means/instruments and applying them periodically in order to optimize the RFL course permanently, as this is a cyclic amendable dynamic process.

Historically speaking, RFL for Anul Pregatitor has got a long tradition with the POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest. The current teaching team consists of four teachers with qualifications in teaching Romanian as a foreign language and a PhD in Philology and/or Education Sciences; they have gained vast experience in teaching RFL. The UPB - PY welcomes foreign students from all over the world, viz. at least 10 different countries and three continents.

Certainly, as pointed out in the literature - and as the case is in our context as well – there is ‘a great deal of variability between each student’s optimized learning zone’; this is determined of course by the following elements of difference:

- different cultural backgrounds, with potential both linguistic and even cultural barriers;
- different areas of skills – both hard and soft;
- as students are master and doctoral levels, age can also be an element of differentiation among them, too.

The teaching of such a course as the RFL - PY to a variety of students has raised a range of problematic issues, due to the complexity of the situation.

Some of the factors specific to the context, and that increase the challenge to be faced by the instructors are:

- numerous groups of students,
- variety of educational and cultural backgrounds of the students,
- dates of students’ arrivals (due to visa obtaining problems in some cases),
- difference between expectations and factual reality for some,
- difference of mentality (‘I am the paying client, so I am the master here!’ – as a philosophy of some learners, at least at the beginning of the course),
- logistics and organizational matters, related to the transfer of information and course input, on a daily basis, from one teacher to the next,
- pace of reflection vs change, which is different for each teacher, as they are well-defined personalities, with already formed teaching principles.

The main objectives of the course are to help the students to:

- use the language in both a general and an academic context,
- be able to develop all four skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing), and
- adopt a positive, intercultural attitude towards the other members of the team.

The level aimed for the students to reach at the end of course is B2 - CEFR. The expectations of the factors involved in ordering the course, namely: the Ministry of Education of Romania, UPB, the students themselves and the teachers of technical subjects who are going to supervise the master and doctoral candidates dissertations and/or theses, are that by the end of the course the students have attained this level and they would have become independent learners who will be able to continue to study within the Romanian context.

Awareness of the limitations and challenges of the given context is a must. Here are some of the issues to be faced:

as students never arrive at the same time, we cannot form a single homogenous group, but after the enrolment period has been closed, students are split into two or more groups, based on the time of their arrival and the level attained during the first weeks of tuition;

- groups are usually large, and, considering that students come from very different cultural backgrounds, the integration stage may take long at the beginning;
- the students’ low level of English that sometimes can hamper communication in class;

- due to the fact that there are quite few teaching resources for the teaching – evaluation of RFL, teachers always have to adapt materials, design their own course materials and permanently (re)adjust them to the needs of the students;
- teaching multicultural classes comes along with numerous challenges. Teachers need to consequently adapt materials, level their language to the students' level and avoid sensitive topics for discussion in class. It is also of utmost importance for the teacher to be familiar with the cultural background of the students as this will ease the integration process.

Methodology

In any language class, finding the right balance between TTT and STT leads to an effective learning process. Teacher talking time describes the amount of time the teacher spends explaining, giving instructions, asking for clarification during the lesson. TTT is part of the job description for a teacher, as giving instructions, giving tasks or asking for clarification are inevitable.

In traditional classrooms, where teachers are the main protagonists and students mere spectators, reducing TTT is neglected. Students do not realize that by interacting with one another they can learn or reinforce learning.

The time spent by the teacher while giving instructions, clarifying language, setting up tasks should be reduced to minimum. While at lower levels, TTT may be effective when helping students engage in pair work activities, setting tasks and in general and trying to make students feel that the classroom is a safe environment with the T is at the center, in higher levels this should be extremely low. Still, in Romanian classes the amount of TTT is higher than the total amount dedicated to the lesson. So, how should RFL teachers reduce TTT?

If the teacher talks too much, then students are quiet and have very little chance to get engaged in tasks. When students do not feel included in the task, they lose focus and feel their autonomy is at risk. By reducing TTT, students get the chance to take initiative and to learn from and guide their peers.

The class of Romanian as a Foreign Language is distributed in two categories: course and seminar. During the courses, the teacher cannot lecture as in a normal situation as the language level is low and it would be impossible for the students to follow, even if the teacher would level the language. Many teachers prefer to explain grammar issues, but they do in via a lingua franca (usually English) instead of using the target language. Instead of explaining in English, teachers should elicit answers in Romanian. This way, it would be easier for students to follow and get involved in the process.

A very important aspect is how teachers check understanding. Many teachers, while giving instructions, do not consider important to constantly check for understanding and to make sure students can keep the pace.

In a still very conservative educational system, Romanian teachers rarely include games, jokes and mime in the class. Language classes are the perfect environment to unleash creativity and allow students to express themselves. It is recommended to use mime, body language, facial expressions that stick into students' minds more than words. When students are silent, this is a worrying signal for most teachers. This is the time they might need to process the information, to take their time and do things their own pace. Teachers should be attentive to these moments and try to respect them without stepping in and putting pressure on the students. Giving them time to process is more important than the quantity of information they receive during one lesson.

When students cannot come up with an answer, teachers often provide it themselves, thinking they save time. Instead of doing this, they should redirect the question to the students and get students involved. There is always a student who knows the answer. Or even if they cannot provide the correct answer, they feel that they matter. Even with beginner students we can use the target language almost exclusively. By eliciting answers or using words in a context, of using mime, we can help students infer

the correct answer. This strategy allows students to feel independent, to gain autonomy and to be able to use the language confidently outside the classroom.

When the teacher talks too much in class, students become silent, demotivated and reluctant to participate actively. Giving them a chance to speak will make them in control in a safe environment and engage in a more creative manner.

Teachers' ultimate goal should be to encourage students to practice, to participate actively in an engaging environment.

In communist Romania, TTT was about 70% of the lesson. Students had little to no opportunities for practicing the language and interacting with their peers. They used to learn lab languages without any practice. This affected their confidence when confronted with real life scenarios.

Research method

Recent research has shown that excessive TTT influences students in a negative way. In a language classroom, too much TTT limits students' opportunities to literally use the language they are exposed to and it also influences their development of listening skills. Considering that in many teaching contexts, classroom is the only environment for practicing the language, this may have a negative impact on students in the sense that it demotivates them when it comes to using target language with confidence. Luckily, this is not the case of Romanian as a foreign language, since students are surrounded by language outside classroom and they can practice it on a daily basis.

During communist Romania, classes were dominated by the teacher, while students were silent spectators. This method discourages students from expressing themselves, they switch off and cannot focus and it also is extremely disadvantageous to teachers in the sense that they cannot collect feedback. The ideal role of the teacher as a facilitator and monitor and of the student who is encouraged to use the language learned through pair work or working in small groups, asking questions, listening to their peers, all this represents the perfect scenario. This perfection is never to be reached in real life, but still the teacher can listen and monitor, collect examples of good language and errors that later can be discussed in the feedback session.

When tackling TTT and how to find ways to reduce it, it is important to take into account the level of the students. For the students of Romanian as a Foreign Language, this aspect is crucial as they are not homogenous in terms of level and their expectations are different. The cultural aspect is also important, as some students rely totally on the teacher, they expect teachers to lead the show in class, while remain spectators. Still, the lower the level, the more careful should the teacher be at balancing TTT. With beginner and elementary levels, the teacher is expected to speak more, but language must be leveled and reduced to a minimum. Instructions must be concise and clear, the words teachers use must be well thought of as at this level, the language teachers use is the only resource for students.

Reducing TTT in 8 steps.

- **KISS** (keep it simple and stupid) – when addressing young people it is recommended to use simple and concise phrases. Teachers should always give clear tasks, start with an example in order to check if the students know what they are about to do. Collecting feedback from students is also beneficial.
- **Orbit around the student** – with the latest methodologies, teachers have become accustomed to applying more student-centered activities in class, such as pair work, role-plays, group discussions and field trips. Students should be encouraged to infer an answer rather than being asked directly. Using questions that lead the students to the answer is extremely important and enhance their confidence. Group work strengthens a team and gives students the feeling of independence where the teacher is merely a monitor rather than the central key in the class. Thus, teachers encourage students' autonomy in class and it develops critical thinking.

Students learn best through guided discovery where they are actively involved in the learning process and where the teacher, as monitor, guides and encourages them to explore by themselves.

- **Students need time to reflect** – usually, teachers work under the pressure of time and curriculum and they feel there is never enough time to finish what they have planned. But students need time to reflect on their answers, to maybe translate from native language to the target language, they need time to sink in. During this time, teachers must be silent, observant and continuously monitoring.
- **Monitor, do not intervene** – as mentioned previously, teachers should monitor students' tasks without stepping in unless it is mandatory. By doing this, teachers create an environment where students are autonomous and feel in control and thus STT increases.
- **Students can learn from peers** – instead of correcting students' mistakes, as we have been used to do in a teacher-centered classroom, students should be given the opportunity to correct one another. Self-correction is also a great way to reflect on personal mistakes without frustration.
- **Elicit and infer** – eliciting instructions or answers is a great way to involve students in. It gives them freedom, it enhances self confidence and reduces teacher talk. This method is more appropriate for more advanced levels.
- **Give students a voice** – whenever we plan an activity, we assume it will be heartily embraced by students and they will respond immediately in a positive manner. Instead of doing that, teachers could get them involved, listen to their proposals, design and deliver their presentations. In a language classroom, having students record themselves while having interviews with their peers provides good materials for self-reflection and feedback.
- **Involve students in projects** – involving students in projects and presentations is a way to engage them in working in teams and small groups while giving them a full sense of autonomy. In the Romanian language class, I ask them to present their home country or any cultural aspect they might want to present in front of their peers. They can also choose to work together, grouped in members from the same continent/country/region. This provides a wonderful opportunity to discover new things about their classmates, it makes them proud of who they are and of their identity and it shows a great sense of understanding and tolerance from the teachers.

In order to have more effective Romanian language classes, the shift should be made between teacher-centered classrooms and learner-centered classrooms. In RFL classes, the teacher who is at the center and controls everything should allow students to talk more. The less teachers talk, the more chances students have to engage in interesting conversations. This should be obvious especially in language classes, where students expect to be encouraged to communicate.

When the teacher does all the talk, students get demotivated, they become bored and lose interest in learning. Students must be given opportunities to interact and speak in class, irrespective of the many mistakes they make. In Romanian classes with the teacher doing all the talk, students are silent and wait for validation. When working in pairs or small groups, students talk to their peers, the teachers merely monitoring them.

In the last years, the teachers in the field of RFL have started to apply the Communicative Language Teaching (CLR) methodology that emphasizes communication in the classroom, pair work and group activities and it involves students more in the learning process. TTT often implies feeding students with information that they can find easily for themselves, such as grammar rules or definition

of words. So, instead of allowing students to discover these on their own pace, to interact with peers, make mistakes and learn from them, the teacher offers them boring explanations.

Conclusion

In Romanian classes, the teacher takes the dominant role, allocating roles and evaluating comments, while the students' role is only of that of a passive participant.

Based on the annual feedback, students suggested that they need more speaking time, preferably to be monitored by the teacher rather than directly instructed. One interesting fact they mentioned was that they would prefer the teacher to be more interested in them as personalities, in their cultural background rather than mere students in a desk.

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