The Didactics of the Curricular Area of Language and Communication: a Model For a Transdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

The need to transgress the borders of more or less related disciplines has emerged since the 1970s when the term ‘transdisciplinarity’ began to be used by researchers such as Jean Piaget (1972), Edgar Morin (1997) and Eric Jantsch (1972). A relevant contribution to the definition of the concept of transdisciplinarity belongs to the Romanian-French researcher Basarab Nicolescu (1999). We shall approach the concept of transdisciplinarity in relation to the didactics of the disciplines from the curricular area of Language and Communication, namely the teaching of the Romanian language (as mother tongue), and the English and French languages (as second, respectively third languages), in the Romanian pre-university educational system. Our aim is to propose a model for a transdisciplinary approach to teaching the Romanian, English and French languages so that these disciplines may become more appealing to students. The model will relate not only to the competences characteristic of each discipline, but also to the transversal competences established in compliance with the EU regulations. We shall focus on teaching-learning-evaluation methods that promote transdisciplinarity among these three disciplines.

Keywords: transdisciplinarity, curricular area, language, communication, didactics.

1. Background of the transdisciplinarity approach

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC) establishes, for the graduates of compulsory education, a “European training profile” defined by eight domains of key competences: Communication in the mother tongue, Communication in foreign languages, Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, Digital competence, Learning to learn, Social and civic competences, Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, Cultural awareness and expression.

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Competences are sets of knowledge, skills and attitudes that should be built by the end of compulsory education and that an individual needs and exploits in personal accomplishment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and getting employment.

In the context of schools and universities constantly reviewing their purpose so as to meet the demands of an ever-changing society, it is essential that steps should be made towards implementing transdisciplinarity by all teachers at all levels of the educational cycle. The greatest challenge with which school is faced in this increasingly technological society is the students’ lack of learning motivation. We believe that a transdisciplinary approach, besides its relevance in terms of rearticulating existing knowledge, is essential to increase the students’ motivation. A transdisciplinary approach also has the advantage of promoting sustainable education (Sterling, 2001). In other words, it encourages life-long learning by preparing students to communicate effectively with peers across disciplines and cultures (Antola Crowe et. al., 2013, p. 194).

The transdisciplinary approach to education is associated with team teaching, of which the four primary forms – as identified by McGregor (2006) – are:

1. monodisciplinary (solutions to a problem are sought from the perspective of one discipline only);
2. multidisciplinary (solutions are found based on the interaction and collaboration between professionals from two or several disciplines);
3. interdisciplinary (problems are tackled through methods transferred from one discipline to another);
4. transdisciplinary (the consideration of complex social issues generates and integrates new approaches).

The growing interest in transdisciplinarity may be accounted for by the possibility to generate new knowledge at the crossroads of disciplinary boundaries (McGregor, 2006; Nègre, 1999; Nicolescu, 1997; Wheatley, 1999). Transdisciplinarity has often been approached and discussed in relation to interdisciplinarity and pluridisciplinarity. According to Nicolescu (1999, pp. 41-52), transdisciplinarity refers to what lies, at the same time, between disciplines and within various disciplines, as well as beyond any discipline; its goal is to understand the existing world, one of its imperatives being the unity of knowledge. The space between, within and beyond disciplines is a space full of potentialities, being characterized by several levels of Reality. Transdisciplinary research may appear as radically different from disciplinary research but, the two are, in fact, complimentary. Without being a new or higher discipline, transdisciplinarity feeds on disciplinary research that, in turn, is clarified by the novel, productive transdisciplinary
knowledge. The methodology of transdisciplinary research relies on three pillars: the levels of Reality, the logic of the third included and complexity. Pluridisciplinarity refers to studying an object from one and the same discipline by approaching it from the perspective of several disciplines at the same time; interdisciplinarity refers to the transfer of methods from one discipline to another (idem). Not only does transdisciplinarity surpass the borders of scientific disciplines, it also helps build a dialogue between science and society in terms of facts, applications and values.

2. A model for a transdisciplinary approach to the curricular area of Language and communication

2.1. The Didactics of Foreign Languages in the Romanian educational system

In Romania, the Didactics of Foreign Languages is a discipline included in the study programme called the Psycho-Pedagogical Module, provided by the Pre- and In-Service Teacher Training Departments that are part of the academic structure of Romanian universities. The Psycho-Pedagogical Module comprises two levels of training for prospective teachers in Romania: Psycho-Pedagogical Training Courses for B.A/ B.Sc. Students (graduation certificate – level 1 that enables students to become teachers for grades 1-8) and Psycho-Pedagogical Training Courses for M.A/ M.Sc. Students (graduation certificate – level 2 that enables students to become teachers for grades 9-12/13). Enrolment in and attendance to the level 2 of the psycho-pedagogical training courses requires covering and graduation of the 1st level. Besides other disciplines included in the curriculum of the levels of psycho-pedagogical training mentioned above, the discipline of the Didactics of Foreign Languages (DFL, also called the Didactics of the Specialization) for the students attending the specializations of the Faculty of Letters, is allotted two semesters, the 2nd semester of the 2nd year and the 1st semester of the 3rd year of study, 2 hours/per week for lectures and 2 hours/per week for seminars. In agreement with the specializations attended by the students at the Faculty of Letters (Romanian-English, English-French and Romanian-French), the DFL includes the Didactics of the English Language, the Didactics of the French Language and the Didactics of Romanian Language and Literature. In the undergraduate teacher education programmes of study, the discipline of Didactics discusses aspects related to the teaching of a certain discipline in terms of teaching methods, teaching aids, evaluation and assessment, class management, types of classroom interaction, the student’s needs, various
approaches to the educational process, conflict resolution in educational settings.

2.2. Goals and principles of a transdisciplinary approach to the Didactics of Foreign Languages

Our model for a transdisciplinary approach to the Didactics of the curricular area of Language and communication is an attempt to meet the requirements of training prospective language teachers in a relatively short time interval, as well as provide them with tools (transdisciplinary methodology) that may support them in their teaching career. In the context of smaller birth rates in recent years in Romania, junior teachers have to accept a teaching position that implies teaching one or two foreign languages, according to the specialization graduated, with one language usually having the greater share of hours from the teaching position and the other language constituting an option to complete the number of hours included in a teaching position. A teaching position includes, for beginners, 18 hours of teaching activity per week. This means that in schools where, due to low number of students, there are not enough classes to make a teaching position just for one language, the teacher will also take classes of another language: for example, a junior teacher who has graduated English-French may have his teaching position made up of English and French classes; or, a beginner teacher who has graduated the specialization of English-Romanian may have his teaching position include classes of Romanian and English. This is why we believe that teaching prospective teachers how to apply a transdisciplinary approach to teaching the disciplines from the curricular area of Language and communication comes forward as timely.

Our model of transdisciplinary approach to the disciplines from the curricular area of Language and communication relies on the principle that disciplines may be taught in relation to each other, as well as in relation to disciplines from other curricular areas, for example Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, History or Geography. Our model aims to support and promote the building, at students, of the key competences from the European training profile, namely: Communication in the mother tongue, Communication in foreign languages, Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, Digital competence, Learning to learn, Social and civic competences, Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, Cultural awareness and expression. It may sound impossible to teach Mathematics during a language class. But, the aim of our model is not to strive for this ideal. Our model aims, first and foremost, to raise awareness
of the many possibilities provided by a transdisciplinary approach during a language class. In this respect, we shall further illustrate our model of transdisciplinary approach by presenting several concrete classroom activities and tasks.

The transdisciplinary approach to teaching the disciplines from the curricular area of Language and communication takes into account the students’ age and level.

2.3. A model for a transdisciplinary approach to the Didactics of the curricular area of Language and Communication

An example of a transdisciplinary activity during the foreign language class is to teach young learners a song in at least two languages: for example, the Romanian song for children Țăranul e pe câmp may be found in the English language as *The Farmer in the Dell* and in French as *Le fermier dans son pré*. Teaching young students the same song in two or more different languages builds different levels of expectations regarding cultural differences. Children will be more open to other cultures, as well as more tolerant and friendly towards people of different nationalities. Children will learn, from a very small age that having a different skin colour or speaking a different language is not a criteria for making friends, working in groups or socializing. On the contrary, children will learn how to turn cultural differences into advantages during collaborative learning (project work, team work, pair work). Translated word games is an effective way to teach idioms and expressions to students as they come across various language problems that they have to solve and that are related to word etymology, idiom origin; solving such word meaning problems makes students explore the domains of history, culture and civilization of the respective countries.

Transdisciplinary teaching implies team teaching where teachers of different disciplines work together and share different roles in the lesson (or course). The teachers from the various disciplines will contribute to the transdisciplinary lesson not only with their scientific knowledge, but also with various teaching strategies, as well as constitute themselves a model for life-long learning professionals. Our next example of transdisciplinary approach to foreign languages may well apply to high-school students from the real profiles. These students have fewer classes of foreign languages than the students from the human profiles. Depending on their specialization, students in the real profile have a larger number of classes in Physics, Mechanics, Electronics, Computer Science, Chemistry, Biology. Because they focus more on their specialization disciplines and due to a smaller number of foreign language classes, students in the real profiles have,
generally, lower achievements in foreign languages, compared to their human profile peers. A transdisciplinary approach to their foreign language classes would constitute support for their achievements in foreign languages as well as their real profile specializations. The transdisciplinary approach may apply to just one lesson, a learning unit or an entire course (a semester or school year). For high-school students with the technological profile the teaching team would include the English and French language teachers, the teacher of Physics, the teacher of Computer science and the teacher of Mechanics. The main aims of such a lesson (or course) would be to raise the students’ scientific knowledge related to the respective disciplines, as well as boost their self-confidence, learning motivation and openness towards new learning strategies and approaches, as already demonstrated by other studies (Clipa, 2014; Dwyer & Peters, 2002; Redden, 2010; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). A concrete example would be teaching reading in French based on a text by Jules Verne that describes a submarine or a space shuttle. The text may be translated into English by the students themselves, with the help of the English teacher, and then their version may be compared with the official translation of Jules Verne’s work in English, as well as in Romanian. The translation method and comparison of translation versions, analysis and comparison of idioms helps students build vocabulary in both languages (English and French). The teachers of Physics, Mechanics and Computer science may contribute by connecting the information, the details that Jules Verne provides in the description of a submarine, ship or flying machine to the vehicles existing nowadays and the mechanical processes, physical forces and digital control involved. Also, the lesson could be conducted in a laboratory where such processes could be better explained and demonstrated. The tasks for the English and French languages are reading-comprehension questions and multiple-choice exercises, listening-comprehension tasks such as producing a written summary of the explanations, demonstrations and experiments coordinated by the teacher of Physics, Mechanics and Computer science, worksheets with the vocabulary related to the topics discussed (e.g. mechanical parts of earth, air and water transportation vehicles, physical forces involved in running an engine, digital control of a vehicle). Depending on the time interval needed to conduct the mechanical, physical and computerised demonstrations and experiments such a lesson could last either 50 minutes (namely, one class) or 100 minutes, or even more. In any case, the homework tasks would give students the opportunity to consolidate the newly acquired knowledge at all the disciplines involved (English, French, Physics, Mechanics, Computer science) and engage the individual in further research on the topics discussed.
Our example of transdisciplinary approach to the teaching-learning of disciplines from the curricular area of Language and communication is also illustrative for a teaching-learning process that is student-centred, in accordance with the communicative-functional paradigm of language teaching and language learning, and also a process whose finalities are related to the key competences established by the European training profile:

- **Communication in the mother tongue**: the role of the mother tongue, namely Romanian, in our transdisciplinary lesson, would be to help the team of teachers and students achieve cohesion, communicate, eliminate confusion and clarify any possible misunderstandings that may arise during collaborative, group work;

- **Communication in foreign languages**: during and after the lesson, students will practice the use of English and French and will improve their speaking, reading, listening and writing skills; the activities will be focused on interaction between students, communication and group work which builds self-confidence, interest in the topic, motivation for learning;

- **Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology**: during the Physical and Mechanical demonstrations and experiments, students will resort to and enrich their mathematical, physical and mechanical knowledge by mathematical and graphical representations of physical and mechanical processes;

- **Digital competence**: the demonstrations and experiments mentioned above will involve the use of computers that will be used for different tasks, namely, to find information and pictures about Jules Verne and his scientific projects as well as images of how those scientific projects have materialized nowadays; computers would also be used to simulate various physical, digital and mechanical processes involved in the operation of an engine;

- **Learning to learn**: team-teaching provides, besides information from various disciplines, also ideas of teaching-learning strategies; group work promotes peer-learning, an opportunity for students to discover not just information that other students know, but also how other students learn and thus define their own learning style.

- **Social and civic competences**: team-teaching provides an example of fruitful collaborative work among professionals from different domains; group work helps students build cooperation, communication and conflict management skills, and also prepares them for working with new partners;

- **Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship**: the teachers’ team-teaching provides an example of initiative and entrepreneurship; group work helps students build initiative and entrepreneurship skills as they undertake various roles within their group (the roles that students may take during group-work
may be, in our case, leader, secretary, treasurer, monitor, inventor, researcher, engineer, pilot, captain etc.);

- **Cultural awareness and expression:** students learn about sets of norms, values and beliefs belonging to different cultural backgrounds by comparing different translation versions of the same text; also, students learn about different ways of greeting and other aspects of interpersonal interaction that vary across cultures; using literary texts as teaching material in the foreign language class promotes tolerance and openness towards diversity.

Savu (2015, p. 133) argues that foreign language didactics is a transdisciplinary science in itself, as it reflects and supports societal structures, namely educational systems and cultural identity; moreover, the shift from traditional teaching strategies to modern ones that focus on training learners how to communicate with people from other disciplines and cultures is also a mark of transdisciplinarity. The desire to communicate with others activates flexibility, being supported by the desire to learn and resulting, eventually, in the capacity to look at things from different perspectives and negotiate and readjust one’s position as a result of the influence of new viewpoints. Intercultural communication implies the discovery of other people’s social identity which requires that students access, directly or indirectly, information from domains such as ethnography, psychology, religion, sociology. How social identity is expressed through language is culturally influenced. Expressing agreement, disagreement, negotiating reflects social categories, gender and power relations. If we relate to our example of transdisciplinary approach to teaching English and French, students will also become familiarized with how scientists, engineers and researchers negotiate and discuss projects in different countries, in terms of what is considered polite and impolite to say, personal distance during a conversation, ways of addressing, ways of expressing agreement and disagreement etc. Again, a transdisciplinary approach to teaching the disciplines from the curricular area of Language and communication provides the ideal setting for such teaching-learning objectives.

### 3. Conclusions

Learning a foreign language does not include only the acquisition of the respective language skills, but also knowledge about the culture of the respective language and knowledge about the world, in general. In an increasingly globalised society, foreign languages become mediators between individuals and communities. In a globalised world, communication across
cultures has become a social issue as mere misunderstandings may generate violent clashes whereas good communication may eliminate conflicts.

A transdisciplinary approach to language teaching promotes research on new ideas, discovery of new concepts, experimentation and exploration of various issues from a variety of more or less related domains. Expansion of knowledge is achieved as teachers and learners work together to identify and share new sources of information, thus reshaping the teaching-learning process. A transdisciplinary approach to language teaching may provide a model for instruction that promotes the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, enhances learner motivation, stimulates creativity and imagination, builds tolerance and openness towards diversity, and a new, wider perspective on the learning content and on scientific knowledge in general.

A transdisciplinary approach to language teaching enhances the cognitive, social and personal capacities of students, recognised as transdisciplinary capacities developed during the teaching-learning of various school disciplines.

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