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EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION RESEARCH AND PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: *Fiind o ştiinţă relative nouă, educaţia lingvistică încă încearcă să-şi delimiteze domeniul de cercetare şi modelele sale operaţionale. Convingerile diferite cu privire la natura sa epistemologică au condus la apariţia unor idei uneori conflictuale, întrucât unii cercetători tind să se concentreze pe un anumit aspect în loc să adopte o abordare holistică care va integra cunoştinţele din toate domeniile necesare înţelegerii acestei ştiinţe. Articolul urmăreşte să identifice cadrul conceptual al educaţiei lingvistice şi să determine obiectivele sale. În special, se doreşte delimitarea modalităţilor de cercetăre în acest domeniu, care are drept scop principal de a ajuta elevii/studenţii să îşi activeze facultatea limbajului.*

Key words: Language Education, operational model, language faculty, conceptual framework

There is a tendency to view Language Education (hereafter, LE)as a mere application of linguistics. It is however questionable whether modern educators apply exclusively linguistic knowledge in the process of language teaching. Indeed it is impossible to adopt a purist perspective, as such a process implies more than a mere automatic learning of the system of

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language.If educators were to persist in doing so they would fail to realize their primary objective, i.e. to teach language as a means of communication, which will enable the learner 'to produce *parole*, to ensure performance in a precise situational context' (Balboni 2006: 37).

As a matter of fact, linguistics was applied in the past when teachers used the grammar-translation approach in the classroom. Yet, it proved unsuccessful with the learners 'for whom foreign language learning meant a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabularyand attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose' (Richards and Rodgers 1999: 4).

So it has become evident that LE should transcend pure linguistic rule-based knowledge. As a result there appeared the need for a transdisciplinary approach in the study of this science. It is this transdisciplinarity that will allow to get a better understanding of the primary aims of LE and find the optimal methods to achieve them. Consequently, LE researchers took on board sciences dealing with culture, society, brain and mind alongside with linguistic studies in order to suggest methods that will solve the problems related to the language learning process.

In an attempt to understand what exactly LE deals with and how it substantiates its methods, the researcher must above all understand its object. If we pay closer attention to the very name of the science it becomes clear that the word combination consists of two distinct components: *language*, which encompasses all linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural related issues that make human interaction happen, and *education*, which includes all the aspects of teaching that enhance the learning process, governed by specific psychological and neurological factors.

Language is a semiotic system, where the particular combination of signs makes the communication possible among people sharing one and the same code. What is more, in Noam Chomsky's opinion 'there must be some innate predisposition for language already in the brain from birth' (Whong, 2011: 10).Thus, from a generativist perspective 'humans are innately endowed with a specific faculty or mental module which provides them with a set of procedures for developing the grammar of their native language' (Richards and Schmidt 2002: 289).

When it comes to education, it should be considered as an act. The teacher in the classroom has a definite purpose to do something (i.e. to act). Definitely, the teacher, directed by a specific goal, sets the objectives and thinks of the methods to be used to attain them. Yet, this is not an act of imposition, nor one of transmission. It is rather an act of helping activate a concrete faculty in the learner's mind. In our case, the teacher's primary task is to help activate in the learner the innate faculty of language.

Certainly, Noam Chomsky's hypothesis relates to the native language acquisition process. Yet, his theory has encouraged researchers to assume that this faculty enables people to acquire a second or a foreign language. In the case of teachers who teach the native language, their act is to help learners'systematize and improve the quality of a language which, when the speaker starts his or her formal education, has already been acquired' (Balboni 2006: 13). Whereas the foreign language instructor's task is more complex, as he/she must help the learner acquire a new language with all its formal and culturally regulated systems.

Hence LE should be viewed, at this stage, as a science that will provide the necessary methods based on specific approaches to help enhance the activation of the language faculty. The immediate question that might arise is: what does LE base its knowledge on, i.e. what is its epistemological framework?

LE inevitably takes on board linguistics. As stated above the **object** of study (what?) is the language, therefore linguistic knowledge is compulsory to the understanding of what language is, how it is organized and how it functions.

Yet, language cannot exist outside society governed by specific norms. At the same time, one should constantly be aware of the cultural dimension of a language.The diversity of existing cultures, on the one hand, and the societal differences, on the other, compels us, as researchers, to be aware of the complexity of teaching learners of different ages, or belonging to different cultures. Consequently, LE relies on sciences that study society and culture.

When it comes to the **subjects** of the LE process (who?), i.e. teachers and learners, one should keep in mind the various psychological factors that can either boost or hamper this process. Thus, motivation is crucial for the

acquisition of a new language, especially if it comes from within. But how to develop this intrinsic motivation at students? How to reduce the anxiety of risk taking while speaking in another language? Or how to help learners with brain damage learn a language? These are vital questions to be considered in LE research. That is why LE also relies on psychology and brain sciences.

The fourth and last field LE takes on board is related to education sciences (how?). As learners are not passive receivers of information, teachers should look for the latest educational principles that will help them achieve the set objectives.

As seen, these four sciences (linguistic sciences, socio-cultural sciences, neuro-psychological sciences, and educational sciences) offer implications for the elaboration of operational models in LE. Hence, the methodologists should direct themselves into the direction of answering the following questions:

(1)   What to teach? (e.g. language within a specific society sharing the same culture);

(2)   Who will benefit from it? (e.g. the instructor of the language or the learner);

(3)   How shall the process be organised to achieve the set goals? (e.g. the definite pedagogical principles to be considered for the enhancement of the process).

One should pay great attention to and discriminate between such different concepts as application and implication. Both are mechanisms that allow new knowledge to be based on. Yet, the first relates to the old paradigm of research, where the primary aim was to apply the knowledge from another science to the new one. Something which is difficult to attain without making the necessary adjustments. Whereas, what we should look for are the implications that will help solve the problem of how to help the learners activate the language faculty.

Thus, professor Balboni suggests that: 'LE (*glotoddidattica*) is a science with a well-defined aim to know and solve the process of activating the language faculty; it is transdisciplinary as it uses the needed implications from four sciences.'

Indeed, in order to be able to address the problem of language faculty activation, one should first know what this is. For example, while conducting research on how weblogging can boost academic writing skills, the first step to make is to review the literature on what writing in general, and academic writing in particular, is. Also, it is essential to see in what way it is integrated in the higher education curriculum. As such research is also related to the use of a technological tool, the next step is to know what a blog is and how it works. Then it is necessary to come up with the optimal solutions that will help learners activate their academic writing skills.

Thus, the paradigm for this particular research includes an additional field, i.e. the one relating to the technology sciences. A researcher should integrate the concrete knowledge from this field in order to address the problem. And this does not mean that he/she is to apply that knowledge, as he/she is not a linguist, nor a psychologist, nor an IT expert, but a language education methodologist who tries to offer a possible solution to an existing problem.

Indeed, one should be very careful not to go beyond the 'borders' of LE. Every discipline has its own particular logic and methodology, which can be applied to that particular area. That is why one should always be able to justify his/her choice of using certain implications in his/her research so that the risk of being considered an amateur does not appear.

Another important issue is to understand the internal organization of LE as a science. It is crucial for a methodologist to be able to distinguish between such notions as approach and method. The first relates to theory, i.e. where the primary goal is to know, while the second to practice, i.e. to address a problem (as for example, how to facilitate and enhance the language acquisition process).

Accordingly, the researcher should ask himself/herself whether he/she intends only to know, or he/she is going to offer specific solutions to the problem. Yet, it is possible to stay in the both realms on condition that he/she can clearly distinguish whether he/she is using an approach or a method in his/her research.

In his book, *Teaching by Principles*, Douglas H. Brown makes a brief overview of some definitions of these concepts, in particular he points to the definitions suggested by Edward Anthony (1963) and, then by Richards

and Rogers and offers his own viewpoint, yet, he still views approach as something to be applied in LE: '**Approach**. Theoretically well-informed positions and beliefs about the nature of language, the nature of language learning, and the applicability of both to pedagogical settings' (Brown 2000: 16). An approach in LE should be considered as 'the theory, philosophy and principles underlying a particular set of teaching practices' (Richards and Schmidt 2002: 29).

Generally, LE is analysed in terms of three related aspects: approach, method, and technique. Different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learned (the approach) imply different ways of teaching language (the method), and different methods make use of different kinds of classroom activity (the technique) (Richards and Schmidt 2002: 30).

In order to help the researchers, Paolo Balboni offers the criteria that will help them evaluate the approach used in their studies. Thus, he says:

An approach can be evaluated on
 a) the scientific basis of the theories whose principles it uses;
 b) its internal coherency, by applying the non-contradiction principle;
 c) its capacity to generate methods; an approach which has a scientific basis, and internal coherency, but which has no practical applications, i.e. it does not generate methods, is of no use in LTM, which, by its epistemological nature, is 'to solve problems through knowledge' (Balboni 2006: 25).

The Venetian scholar offers the same criteria and for the evaluation of the methods used:

A method should be evaluated on
a. its ability to make the philosophy of the approach which it is based on operational;
b. its internal coherency;
c. its ability to select techniques which are coherent with the method from the range of teaching techniques available;
d. its ability to identify ways of using technology which are integrated with the other components of the method, and which respect the premises of the approach (Balboni 2006: 26).

Thus, in LE it is essential to distinguish the borderline between these two types of knowledge: philosophical-theoretical and organisational.

While evaluating them the researchers should think in terms of whether it is True or False, Coherent or Incoherent, Old or New, Functional or Non-functional, Efficient or Inefficient. If all these aspects are considered then the researchers will be able to produce valuable contributions in the field of LE that will help solve the existing problems. All of them, however, are in a way or another related to the main task of LE, i.e. to help activate the learner's language faculty.

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